

TRAVELS WITH DORIS

Jessica Wynne Lockhart

We would go north, it was decided.

It's a warm July morning when we finish loading up the Pleasure-Way. A small recreational vehicle about the size of a cargo van, it has everything we'll need for two weeks on the road: a queen-sized bed, barbecue, and library books crammed into every spare storage space. The plan is to drive from my hometown in northeastern Alberta, Cold Lake, up towards Yellowknife, in the Northwest Territories.

My dad stands in the driveway, watching us. His nervousness is palpable. It's been years since he was left alone in the house for this long. Hands shaking, he asks me, for the third time, if I know how to use the navigation system. I nod, trying to ignore the telltale smell of his breath.

And then we're off, waving as we pull away.

Not even 20 minutes later, my mom starts fiddling with the GPS.

"How do you set this thing up?" she asks.

The question grates on me. She's lived in northern Alberta for 35 years. Like any good Prairie girl, she could tell you what cardinal direction she was facing even if she was blindfolded, drunk, and had just got off one of those teacup rides at the fair.

"Mom, this is northern Alberta," I retort. "There's only one road and it goes north."

I yank the cord out of the cigarette lighter. The system sputters, its light slowly fading away—and with it, the last bit of control my dad has does too.

I try to change the subject.

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“I’m sorry I’m so quiet,” I say. “Mark and I have ended things.” This gets her attention.

“So he’s single then? Maybe you should set him up with Chloé?” she suggests, referring to one of my friends. She’s entirely unaware that she’s missed the beat.

My knuckles whiten against the steering wheel.

She needs this, I remind myself. We need this. We stop for the night in High Prairie, sleeping in a campground beside the highway. After dinner, I go out for a run, the heat of the day still heavy in the air. I fly alongside deep ditches filled with foxtails; past the car dealerships, their lots full of half-tonne trucks; and down the empty main street. The sun sits low in the sky, casting long shadows. I’m a child again, trying to outrun my darker self.

It’s the first run of many. Over the next two weeks, it will become my nightly ritual; an act that serves three distinct purposes: First, to listen my own music. (Early on, I’m forced to veto Santana. I don’t find Rob Thomas particularly smooth.) Second, to escape the mosquitos and black flies. This far north, they orbit around everything warm-blooded, settling on every inch of bare skin the moment you stop moving.

And lastly, the runs are an excuse to get away from my mother.

I was 18 when I first moved away from home, making the pilgrimage to the city over three hours away. By the time I was 20, I had put even more distance between my parents and I—3,394 kilometres to be exact—by transferring to university in Toronto. But even before I left Cold Lake, my mom and I were never what I’d describe as close.

She was a pragmatic parent. In stark contrast to the parenting norms that dictated the ’90s, praise was not a given.

One day in fifth grade, I came home from school, worried that boys liked my best friend better than me. My mom, in response, explained that it was likely because Shannon was prettier than me.

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Everything that I excelled at—from getting scholarships to being published in a national magazine at the age of 17—was unexceptional.

“Why should I get excited?” she said. “These are all things that I expect from you.”

Brutal honesty, a hatred of organized sports, and an unwillingness to bolster her children’s self-esteem: These were the key tenets of my mother’s parenting philosophy.

So, when I announced that I was going to spend my summer vacation with my 61-year-old mother, driving thousands of kilometres into northern Canada, more than a few eyebrows were raised. But although the trip didn’t have a specific destination, it wasn’t without a purpose.

Earlier that year, my friend Andrew’s mom had a sudden brain aneurysm. She survived, but her memories died.

“There’s a lot of things that I always wanted to ask her, but now I’ll never know,” Andrew told me. “It makes me sad because how can we really understand our own history if we don’t understand our parents’?”

Andrew’s words stuck with me. I had started to realize that I had questions for my own mom. I knew so little of her life before I was born and there were things I didn’t understand. For example, why did my mom, who was friendly and outgoing, not have many friends? Why didn’t she get her degree in library science? Why did she wait until she’d been with my dad for nearly a decade to have kids? And, most importantly, did she even want to have us?

It’s maybe this last question that weighs on me most. I’m 29, the same age she was when she had my older brother. A year ago, I ended a long-term relationship to a man everyone thought I was going to marry over this very issue (he wanted kids; I didn’t) and now I’m in the process of reframing what it is that I want my life to look like.

But it’s an uncomfortable conversation and one neither of us is ready for. Instead, in the Peace River lowlands, somewhere near

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the hamlet of Guy, we push in amongst the bristly canola flowers, pollen clinging to our clothes. The brilliant yellow expanse spreads out in front of us.

Ten thousand years ago, the glaciers retreated here, flattening and dotting the landscape with lakes.

Ten minutes ago, I posted my mom's first selfie to Instagram.

As we get closer to the 60th parallel, I keep waiting for a dramatic shift in the landscape. But it never comes. Canola fields give way to the familiar forests of tamarack and white spruce, not unlike those found just north of Cold Lake.

I want to feel something foreign, something that will make me forget myself. The only thing that changes is that the bugs are now thick enough to form Rorschach patterns on the windshield.

I've long mythologized the north, an obsession fuelled by the relics from when my dad worked in the Northwest Territories. In our family room, a seal pelt was draped over the back of the couch (I'd tell friends that it was a cowhide; seals were much too cute to die) and tufted fur owls sat on the mantle. In my parents' bedroom, Inuit carvings of seal hunts hung on the walls. The furnace room was filled with rickety metal bookshelves housing dozens of dog-eared Agatha Christie novels—my dad's reading material of choice when he lived up north.

Dinnertime was punctuated by my father typing out Morse code on the kitchen table; a tic brought on by the desire to impress his know-it-all children. It was important, he insisted, that we should know SOS, in the same way that it was important that we should know how to call mayday on a CB radio. These were useful skills, he determined.

This was the time before GPS. This was the time before he started drinking. This was the time before my mom became his caregiver.

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We stop when we see our first herd of plains bison north of High Level, grazing in the ditch. I pull over, not bothering to signal; we haven't passed another vehicle in hours.

"It's like they're posing just for us," mom says, excited and laughing. Her capacity to laugh and smile even in the worst of circumstances is one of her best qualities.

Yet, still stinging from my most recent relationship failure, I'm like a sullen teenager beside her. I pull further in towards myself while my mom happily chatters away.

Then, we're on the open sea. The pink-hued road rolls with frost heaves, skirting around the edge of Great Slave Lake and guiding us into Yellowknife. Mom puts on Neil Young's *Harvest Moon*, singing along off-key.

She was an unknown legend in her time...

Beside her, I'm quiet. I don't know what I was expecting. A movie-worthy montage of mother-daughter scenes? A non-stop stream of deep and meaningful conversations? Why did I think that two weeks in a vehicle would change the dynamics of our relationship?

And really, it was a perfectly good relationship. We both enjoy animals and obscure historical facts and music and long road trips and even each other's company. Why couldn't that be enough?

It's a relief when we finally get to Yellowknife. After days of just each other, we're suddenly surrounded. At Folk on the Rocks, Yellowknife's annual music festival, I pay for our tickets and we find a spot on the lawn. But instead of watching the stage, my eyes wander to the young families playing with their children, years before the teenage disdain sets in and years before brain aneurysms are capable of wiping the slate clean, erasing history.

Beside me, my mom lays back in the grass and smiles. She closes her eyes and 30 years slip away.

Once, when I was a teenager, she asked me if we were friends. For her, it was a rare moment of vulnerability, a rare moment where she was seeking affirmation for her parenting skills.

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I knew exactly what she needed, but I responded with the same brutal honesty that I had learned from her: “You’re not my friend. You’re my mom.”

She didn’t bat an eye.

I had meant it as a compliment.

We spend two days exploring Wood Buffalo National Park. At the salt plains, I take off my shoes. The remnant of a sea from 390 million years ago, Grosbeak Lake is littered with smooth boulders and bear prints. Clay encrusted with crystallized salt pushes up, oozing warm between my toes. Afterwards, we drive to Pine Lake, where bison tracks cover the beach. I swat away horseflies and dive deep into the aquamarine blue. On the horizon, forest fires burn.

On our last morning in Fort Smith, we drive to Rapids of the Drowned. We climb down on the rocks, coffees in hand. My mom sits watching pelicans dive for their morning breakfast, and I sit watching her.

I think of the time my mom took my brother and I to see Joni Mitchell at the Edmonton Folk Festival. I was only nine, but she let me go dance at the front of the stage amongst the barefoot hippies. I was wild and free, my tiny arms and legs flailing to the beat. But by the time the music ended, the sun was gone. I wandered the hillside, looking for her, lost in a crowd of people larger than the population of my hometown.

When she finally found me at the lost kids’ tent, I had tears streaming down my face. But I don’t think she was ever worried. She knew that I’d find my way to a safe place—and that she’d find me there.

As an adult, I travel alone. I’ve lived happily without electricity and running water. I’m not afraid of spiders or snakes and I’m reasonably (although not entirely) comfortable shitting in the

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woods. I am, by my own standards, fearless and self-reliant. I am these things because of my mom.

I may never get the answers to my questions. But what I did know was enough. I didn't need praise and affirmations; I needed someone's unwavering belief that I was capable of growing into the woman that I was meant to become. And that, I decided, was more than enough.

Finally, it's time to head south.

As we do, the skies darken and the rain starts to fall. And, just as suddenly, an outpouring of another kind begins. Somewhere between Hay River and Manning, my mom begins telling me the story of her life before me.

*Originally from northern Alberta, **Jessica Wynne Lockhart** is an award-winning freelance journalist who splits her time between Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Specializing in ethical and adventure travel, her writing has appeared in Outside, The Globe & Mail, The Toronto Star, and Air Canada's enRoute. She's the Contributing Editor of Verge Magazine, a publication devoted to "travel with purpose," and the author of the forthcoming Frommer's New Zealand guidebook. Follow her @WynneLockhart.*