

Wanderlust

Where faith becomes love



Dave Cenker

Wanderlust
By Dave Cenker

Adventure is not outside man. It is within.
~George Eliot~

Dedicated to my beautiful wife and amazing son. Their unconditional love and acceptance always has been and always will be my sweetest inspiration.

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Ellie is a thirty-eight year old woman who has never been able to fully come to grips with her past. The caustic memories associated with her mother's addiction to alcohol and the effects they've had on her life prey on Ellie's sense of self-confidence to the present day.

It's not until she is forced to return to her childhood home for her mother's funeral that Ellie discovers a much deeper emotional scar, one that she has subconsciously buried due to the pain it has caused in her life because of a choice she failed to make in her formative teenage years.

Through a reflection on the past and a timely meeting with an old friend, Ellie discovers what it means to come home.

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One

The Key

D*rip, drip, drip, drip.* The rhythmic sound of water hitting the porcelain sink was not soothing – not now. Damon was seated on his bed, laptop open, headset secured over his right ear, awaiting the quarterly communications meeting that never seemed to occur at a convenient time for east coast employees.

Damon had made this small northeastern seaside town his new home less than a year ago. He would have been perfectly happy to remain in the one bedroom apartment he had taken residence in since his cross country relocation. As was the case for most of his life, however, he gave in to the desires of others too easily.

The one constant in Damon’s life for the past ten years had been Gryffin, the golden retriever now curled up beside him on the bed. Apartment policy had dictated that pets would no longer be permitted in the complex without an exorbitant surcharge imposed on the monthly rent payment. Instead of opposing the injustice injected into his life, Damon cowered to pay the additional amount until it became too much for him to afford.

That’s how he found himself in this drafty abode with creaky floorboards, dripping sinks, and a leaky roof. The abandoned house on the edge of town was the epitome of a fixer-upper. The real estate agent had advised him that the house had not been occupied in over fifty years and had many problems. In a moment of unprecedented stubbornness, however, Damon ignored the warnings and purchased the property – as much an attempt at portraying a resolute personality as it was the need for a place to live. The fact that his monthly mortgage payment would be less than his rent payment, it was easy to rationalize the decision.

“Welcome to the third quarter communications meeting,” came the voice through the monotone speaker secured over his head. As the voice lagged behind the slides displayed on his laptop, just enough to annoy him, Damon sighed and double checked that his microphone was muted. The company had registered a banner quarter with

revenues increasing in a way that had Wall Street advising investment in his company much more aggressively.

If only the company would invest in their employees the same way, thought Damon. Over the course of the next fifty minutes, the buzzwords were casually tossed into every other sentence – alignment, sustainability, exit strategy, paradigm shift, and organic growth. If he had been playing buzzword bingo, Damon would have won five times over, the prize being an invitation to yet another quarterly meeting three months from now – another six paychecks in his checking account, another twelve weeks of his life lost to the aspirations of others.

As the meeting concluded, Damon closed the lid of his laptop, and set the headset on top while simultaneously reaching for the brown head of tousled fur next to him. Closing his eyes, Damon slipped into a meditative state – almost. *Plop, plop, plop, plop*. The cadence of the improvised musical composition had changed. Instead of water meeting porcelain, water was now meeting water.

Walking into the bathroom adjacent to his bedroom, Damon found the leaky faucet now dripping into a puddle accumulating in the basin. He knew there would be work to do. He didn't expect it to be the day after he moved in. He had only used the sink to shave and brush his teeth in the morning. The leaky faucet was one problem he would have to address later, but the clogged drain could not wait. With the rate that it was filling up, Damon would have an overflowing sink and wet floor by the next morning.

Resigning to the immediate task at hand, Damon found his way out into the living room. Digging through the unpacked boxes, he located the one labeled “garage” in black marker and ripped it open. The assorted tools inside would become his best friends over the next several months. Right now, he just needed the pipe wrench. Retrieving it from the box along with a few other tools, just in case, he returned to the bathroom with Gryffin following behind, tail wagging.

Placing a bucket beneath the area he would be working on, Damon placed the wrench around the pipe and tightened it. The whole time, Gryffin sat there watching as if he would surely jump in and help if only he had been blessed with opposable thumbs.

Damon treated him as he would a father his own son, explaining everything he was doing as if Gryffin might actually be able to help at some point in the future.

Loosening the coupling joint, Damon removed the pipe as the trickle of water began to drain into the bucket beneath it. Steadily, the pool of water from the basin above fell into the bucket. The clog had not occurred between the drain and the point where the pipe was disconnected. Reaching into the other side with his index finger, Damon felt something. Unable to pull whatever it was out with his hands, he grabbed the pair of pliers, secured them around the object and pulled it out. With a wet thud, the ball of coiled string fell to the floor, landing on the aging wooden floorboards of his bathroom.

Perplexed by the appearance of the finely wrapped twine, Damon grabbed the end and began to unravel it. Inches turned into feet, until the final few wraps revealed an object embedded in the coil. The brass skeleton key had two numbers emblazoned on the side. As if to prove canine instincts were sharper than that of humans, Gryffin gave an abbreviated bark. Rising to attention, Gryffin began to wag his tail more animatedly, his panting becoming shallower. As Damon twirled the key in his fingers, he couldn't help but feel the same way.

Two

Plus One

The numbers inscribed on the brass key filtered through Damon's consciousness. As the initial adrenaline rush of the discovery diminished in magnitude, the gears began to turn in the dormant recesses of his mind. Initially searching for a pattern in the numbers that simply wasn't there, he stumbled upon an idea. Racing back to his laptop sitting on the bed, his loyal golden retriever, Gryffin, was following closely behind.

Lifting the lid and opening a browser window, Damon typed furiously into the search engine box. Upon submitting his request, the results staring back at him confirmed that his suspicion was indeed correct. The map shown on the screen after typing in the numbers on the key – *35.6109, -83.4250* – displayed latitude and longitude coordinates. It pointed to a location just off the Appalachian Trail, a sixteen hour drive from his present location.

High in the Smoky Mountains on the North Carolina/Tennessee border resides a scenic overlook named Newfound Gap. Its name – Damon was researching – had originated from the newly found pass through the mountains in the year 1872. Even though more than a century had elapsed since this discovery, Damon felt as though this site held at least one more discovery waiting to be revealed.

As he rotated the key through his fingers, Damon came to a metaphorical fork in the road – remain on the safe path towards another record quarter of revenues in his admittedly unfulfilling position, or throw caution to the wind and embark upon a quest filled with uncertainty. Damon knew what he should do – he should stay exactly where he was and keep on the well-paved path. Whether it was the curiosity of his awoken mind, the feel of the cold brass against his skin, or the animated actions of his canine friend, the endorphins began to flow freely. Cutting a piece of the wet twine that was previously clogged in the drain, Damon looped the key on to it like a necklace and hung it around his neck.

Gryffin could sense what this meant. Whether it was his canine sixth sense, or simply a recognition of the aura emanating from his master, he began to wag his tail vigorously and jump upon Damon in anticipation. Truth be told, Damon felt the same way inside. He just wasn't quite ready to release that excitement outside of his protective shell yet.

The first night in his new home left Damon sleepless. The drafty crevices exposing the cold exterior, the dripping sink, and the wind blowing untrimmed branches against the windows kept him awake for most of the night. His second night would also be sleepless, but for a different reason – anticipation. If he thought that a twenty-four hour period could change his perspective so abruptly, Damon wouldn't have believed it. With plans to leave at daybreak and break up the sixteen hour journey over two days, he didn't bother with any more than a cursory email to his boss requesting an undisclosed number of vacation days to take care of some personal business.

With the sun rising in the east, Gryffin darted out of the house, waiting by the pickup truck while Damon locked the front door. It was a crisp, fall morning – a perfect day for a road trip – similar to the ones that Damon recalled from his college days. Somewhere along the way since those carefree days, he had adopted a more conservative attitude towards life. Even this slight departure from the norm, taking the metaphorical road less traveled on this particular morning, left Damon filled with a healthy dose of euphoria that would carry him two hours farther on his journey than he expected on the first day.

With daylight fading and his night blindness providing a high degree of anxiety towards attempting to drive after sunset, Damon exited the interstate and found himself on a county road running through rural Virginia. The road signs had indicated dining and lodging options available off this exit. He wasn't buying it. After about a three mile drive down the road, Damon was ready to turn the truck around, return to the interstate, and try again one exit to the south. It was just then he saw a light on the side of the road up ahead. He muttered to Gryffin next to him, as if looking for validation, "We'll turn around up there if we don't find anything, okay buddy?"

The building coming into view resembled a diner. There was another structure behind it, a bit taller, that could pass for some sort of lodging option – in a horror movie, maybe. The venti sized cup of coffee he had consumed since his last pit stop was beckoning for attention. Talking to himself and not Gryffin this time, Damon offered up, “Well, at least I can see if they have a restroom.”

Walking through the front door of the establishment, Damon was surprised. The old adage – don’t judge a book by its cover – was certainly appropriate here. It wasn’t a highly sophisticated diner, but it was clean and had quite a few eclectic decorations scattered around the restaurant.

“Hi darling,” came a voice from behind the counter, “take a seat wherever you like.” The waitress offered up a greeting as if it was perfectly normal for guests to be coming through the front door. Based upon Damon’s experience, he was wondering how anyone ever found this place. Glancing at his truck parked outside, Gryffin was seated in the driver’s position, keeping watch through the windshield. With a cool breeze blowing through the rolled down windows, he would have been happy to remain parked there the entire night.

Damon took a seat in the booth closest to the door, just in case he found the need to depart quickly. He’d seen enough movies to know how plots unfold on desolate rural roads. Approaching from behind the counter, ponytail bobbing back and forth, the waitress introduced herself with a smile, “Name is Jo, can I get you something to drink while you look over the menu?”

Damon replied, still uncertain as to the peculiar surroundings, “Um, how about a lemonade ... and, um, do you have a restroom I can use?”

“Sure,” Jo replied, “just around the right side of the counter there, second door on the right.” His gait coming back from the bathroom was more relaxed, due to the relief in bladder pressure as well as his increasing acceptance of this odd location, seemingly in the middle of nowhere.

Sitting back down in the booth, Damon realized that his lemonade had already been delivered. As he perused the menu, he decided that he would just order a burger. That should be safe, he thought. As Jo returned, she inquired, “Ready, honey?”

“Yeah, I’ll have a burger, well done please, and an order of fries,” replied Damon.

“Lettuce, tomato, and onion?” asked Jo. “Yes on the lettuce and tomato, no on the onion,” retorted Damon. This was all pleasant, cordial, non-confrontational, and expected communication between waitress and customer.

Damon ventured a little beyond the expected into the unexpected, as much out of curiosity as it was to make sure his hamburger was going to be ground beef and not some variant of back-country squirrel. “So, what is this place? I mean, I know it’s a diner, but it doesn’t seem like it’s really along the main drag if you know what I mean.”

Jo’s shoulders drooped just a bit, a sort of resignation to her position here. “This place used to be a plantation long, long ago. It’s been in my family for generations. My great grandfather converted it into a diner and motel about forty years ago. It’s not really on the map, per se, but it’s well known by a lot of the truckers that come through this area. All the artifacts you see laying around are from the original plantation.”

Damon was fascinated and now felt more comfortable about the safety of his burger. It was then that Jo responded with a question that would trigger an acceleration of his heartbeat.

“So, what’s the key around your neck?” asked Jo.

As if by protective instinct, Damon reached down and grasped the key to make sure that it was still, in fact, there. He rubbed it between his fingers before replying. The funny thing about Damon, he was never very forthcoming with people close to him. However, put him in a conversation with a complete stranger and he was ready to bare his soul. Perhaps it was the lack of scrutiny from a stranger’s eye that permitted him to be so open with his communication. Or, maybe it was Jo’s charming and homey personality that led Damon into a detailed account of the previous twenty-four hours.

“It’s funny you should ask that,” began Damon. The hamburger he ordered didn’t arrive until much later. As he began to tell his story – and that was something he was really good at – the words and emotions began to flow effortlessly. When he finished his tale and returned from the fantastical land of adventure in his mind, Damon gazed across the table. Jo, now seated in the booth directly across from him, was utterly captivated by his words.

“Really,” inquired Jo, “you are headed to the Smoky Mountains?”

Damon hadn’t even realized he had told the entire story. It was like some surreal experience recalling the events of the past day. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s where I am supposed to end up. I have no idea what, if anything, is waiting for me there.”

Jo, somewhat sheepishly, replied, “I know you’re gonna say these are coincidences that only happen in the perfectly plotted movie or novel, but this is the honest truth. I don’t own a car. I have been trying to find some way to get down to that area for the past six months.”

“Oh yeah, what for?” asked Damon.

Taking a moment to gather her thoughts – and composure – Jo responded, “Let’s just say it’s some personal business I need to take care of.” Damon could tell she would not provide any further information, so he let it rest.

Something inside tugged at Damon. And even though he didn’t formulate the words in his own consciousness, they nonetheless emerged from his mouth, “I have an extra seat in my truck if you don’t mind dogs.”

The response from Jo came quicker than either she or Damon expected, “I love dogs.”

And so it came to be, Damon without overtly asking, and Jo without explicitly answering, that the pickup truck continuing its journey south the next morning would carry Damon and Gryffin – plus one more – each with their own agenda, even if they didn’t yet realize that their intentions were all one and the same.

Three

The Seed

Gryffin couldn't help but feel slighted. Now relegated to the makeshift back seat of the pickup truck, he didn't have nearly as clear a view out the front windshield. Nor did he have the occasional scratch behind the ears from his master.

Nope, the front seat was now occupied by Damon and his new human companion, Jo. Merging back on to the interstate, Gryffin got comfortable with his new surroundings, head resting on his two front paws. The flurry of chatter coming from the seats ahead of him was evidence of the budding rapport being established between his master and Jo. Damon shared the details of his adventure – as much as he knew anyway. He really wasn't quite sure what he expected to find at his destination marked by a set of coordinates just off the Appalachian Trail.

Jo reciprocated the conversation by sharing some of the fascinating history in her family – the origins of their plantation from more than a century ago, the story about how her great grandfather fought as an advocate for the abolition of slavery even though it was against the mainstream way of thinking, and how it ultimately compromised his status in the community.

It was pleasant conversation, and perhaps necessary for two people who had known each other for less than sixteen hours. The topics provided a safe haven in which one person could become comfortable with the other, to feel each other out and begin to understand their way of thinking. They might as well do so since they would be spending the next ten hours or so together in a truck en route to the Volunteer State.

After about the first hour on the road, however, the conversation had begun to dry up. The silence was becoming more uncomfortable with every passing mile marker. Jo decided to take a courageous leap into slightly more tumultuous conversational waters.

“So, do you have a significant other in your life?” She attempted to catch herself from spewing this inquiry into the space between them, afraid that it would come off sounding like a pick-up line, but she failed miserably. It was now out there to be answered, even though the intent behind her question had a much different meaning than it may have initially sounded.

If Jo was worried that the question would be interpreted the wrong way, her fears were quickly assuaged when Damon responded with a chuckle, “Yeah, I have someone special in my life. He’s sitting right behind you. It’s always been Gryffin and I for as long as I can remember.”

Jo stared ahead, eagerly anticipating the question she expected would be returned to her. And just as she had given up hope that it would be asked, Damon replied, “How about you? With the significant other thing.”

Jo cracked open this door – on purpose – and now she was committed to pushing it wide open and inviting Damon inside, even if neither he nor Jo were quite ready. She had been desperately searching for an unbiased individual to share her story with, and she finally came to the realization that this may be her best opportunity.

And so began the story of Jo and her boyfriend – well, ex-boyfriend now, she presumed. It wasn’t a story that Damon was expecting to unfurl with a question as simple as “How about you?” But, each passing minute and empathetic exchange led the two passengers to become more than simply riding companions. They began to understand that they shared something in common, even if their situations were dramatically different.

Jo’s boyfriend had treated her quite well – initially. But, there had to be something extra going on behind the scenes. Excuses began to pile up when Jo proposed a getaway weekend together. And it probably wasn’t a coincidence, Jo realized, that the frequency of his visits decreased as her monetary contributions to his undisclosed business venture began to approach critical mass. It was a secret he had promised to share with her when the time was right. Apparently, that right time had never arrived.

And it never would, for one morning when Jo worked up the courage to confront him at his apartment, she found it empty. She felt exploited, neglected, and abandoned. Jo reached out to several mutual friends. Each swore they were not privy to his business secrets. She had discovered, however, that there were rumors he had moved to precisely the location they were now headed. That was Jo's personal business and ultimate reason for hitching a ride south – to discover the truth.

Despite the differing circumstances, Damon felt the same emotions inside – abandoned and taken advantage of in his professional endeavors. He didn't feel it justified to compare the delicacy of these emotions in a relationship to his own situation, but he felt a connection to Jo's emotions nonetheless.

There are times when an individual gets into a flow state. Things begin to occur in a sort of surreal manner. Time both seems to stand still and speed by in an incomprehensible manner. That must have been what transpired between Damon and Jo, for they found themselves rolling into the outskirts of town just north of the Smoky Mountain National Park. More than four hours had passed since Jo initiated this conversation. Both were silent now with the same notion occupying their thoughts. Neither was prepared for the abrupt separation that would come to pass if Damon dropped Jo off in town, not after the conversation that had just materialized. The newly fashioned bond between these two riding companions turned friends was undeniable.

The ball was in Jo's court, and she wasn't quite ready yet to make a decision. So, she decided to stall.

“How about I help you find your ... well, whatever it is you're looking for,” offered Jo. Part of her was curious. Part of her wasn't ready to confront the truth about her boyfriend. Perhaps the biggest part of her wasn't prepared to sever ties with Damon at this point.

“You're more than welcome to tag along. I really have no idea if and what I'll find. It might very well be anti-climactic, but I do have a key,” he smiled as he grabbed hold of it and held it up in his left hand.

So, three riders remained in the vehicle, more than just disinterested passengers now. Each of them seemed to have some vested interest in the outcome of the situation in their own peculiar way. As they wound their way up the solitary park thoroughfare, the switchbacks and tight curves had Gryffin sliding to and fro in the back seat.

As their truck arrived at the summit of the pass bordering on the Tennessee and North Carolina state lines, the setting sun provided a stunning backdrop for the vista greeting them. It left them speechless with an awe-inspiring smile reflecting the beaming rendition provided by the landscape itself.

Opening the back door, Gryffin jumped out and began dashing along the path, as if he had the destination coordinates locked in his canine brain. Damon and Jo, for just a brief moment that seemed like forever, forgot about the coordinates. They stared out over the majestic landscape so eloquently painted by Mother Nature, and were held captive by her innate beauty in some unseen metaphysical world. Looking down, Damon and Jo both noticed the plaque that was serendipitously positioned directly in front of them:

Man has created some lovely dwellings – some soul-stirring literature. He has done much to alleviate physical pain. But he has not ... created a substitute for a sunset, a grove of pines, the music of the winds, the dank smell of the deep forest, or the shy beauty of a wildflower. ~ Harvey Broome, Naturalist

Damon and Jo looked at each other, smiles still etched on their faces. No words were exchanged. None were needed. They had just shared a moment together. The wet feeling on Damon's hand brought him back to the physical world. Gryffin was slobbering all over him, anxious to continue, almost understanding that something special was awaiting them.

Damon turned the dial on his watch to GPS mode and began to walk towards the trail head that he had seen depicted on his laptop screen less than forty-eight hours ago. It felt like so much more time had elapsed. So much had transpired in such a short period of time.

With the cooler weather and waning sunlight, Damon, Jo, and Gryffin found themselves alone on the mountain crest. The sun was descending below the horizon quickly. They would need to expedite their pursuit to have any chance of discovering whatever it was they were looking for before daylight escaped them.

Damon was assuredly happy that Jo was with him – to take part in whatever was to be discovered, and to help drive back down the mountain in darkness. He began to wonder what would happen when they returned to a lower elevation. Would Jo’s sense of adventure recede? Would she ask to be dropped off in town, never to be seen again?

While contemplating these questions in his own mind, Damon found himself navigating on autopilot to the exact coordinates indicated on the brass key around his neck. He looked at the inscription on the key again, then back at his watch to make sure they matched.

Looking around the area, nothing seemed to be out of place. Everything seemed to be undisturbed, to the human eye at least. Gryffin must have been a bloodhound in a previous life for he started to bark gruffly at a spot right behind the tree where Damon and Jo were standing.

“What’s up boy?” asked Damon.

Gryffin retreated back to his companions, and then turned around to return to his previous spot as if to say *follow me*. Both Damon and Jo picked up on the cue. At the base of the tree were a collection of leaves that had been displaced by Gryffin’s investigative efforts. What laid beneath those leaves was a large burrow. If anyone else had revealed this burrow, one would have thought it was the home of a wild critter. Everyone in its presence now suspected otherwise.

Getting down on his hands and knees, Damon reached his hand and arm – slowly – into the hole up to his elbow. “I feel something,” he said with a tinge of excitement in his voice. Pulling his arm back out brought with it a small container. It looked like an

antique jewelry case. And on the front panel was a keyhole that looked to be just the right size.

He quickly, but carefully took the key around his neck and inserted it into the keyhole. Jo squatted down next to Damon, peering over his shoulder in anticipation. As he turned the key and opened the lid, he wasn't sure what he would find. But, what he did find surprised him nonetheless.

Sitting in the box was an acorn and a rolled up parchment. Unrolling the leathery material, slightly yellowed with age, he found the following quote transcribed in beautiful penmanship:

Man is wise and constantly in quest of more wisdom; but the ultimate wisdom, which deals with beginnings, remains locked in a seed. There it lies, the simplest fact of the universe and at the same time the one which calls forth faith rather than reason. ~ Hal Borland

Below the quote were three numbers. Two of them didn't need decoding. The exact location denoted by the new set of coordinates was unknown, but Damon did know he would be next heading somewhere north and east of his present location. The third number was more mysterious and required mental contemplation. Damon was, however, becoming less concerned with the meaning of the number and more concerned with whether he would have a kindred spirit accompanying him on the next leg of his journey. Straddling the Tennessee/North Carolina state line, he was simultaneously straddling a state of mind. As he massaged the acorn between his fingertips, Damon reminded himself that new beginnings do indeed require faith. The metaphorical seed had been planted – the nurturing process had begun.

Four

Step by Step

With the sun hastily sinking below the horizon, Damon slipped the acorn into his pocket, giving it a small caress as a sign of appreciation for the wisdom it had recently bestowed upon him. He draped the brass skeleton key around his neck and placed the parchment back into the soil covered box that had just been discovered in the concealed burrow. Together with Jo, Damon retraced his steps to his truck in the parking area. Gryffin was following closely behind.

“What do you think those numbers mean?” asked Jo, referring to the three inscriptions on the parchment below the quote about new beginnings.

Damon knew the exact meaning of the first two numbers. Like the previous set of digits etched on the key now hanging around his neck, the numbers were coordinates to a new location, north and east of their present location. The third message etched below the first two, 811 E42F – 26, left both Jo and Damon befuddled.

Damon’s night vision had always been suspect. He had made every effort in the past to restrict his driving to daylight hours. This was one time when he was happy to have made an exception.

“Jo, would you mind driving us back into town. I’m not all that comfortable with night driving, especially on these mountain switchbacks,” Damon pleaded.

“Sure, no problem,” responded Jo. She had responded without really thinking, as if she was in some sort of hypnotic daze. Her thoughts were obviously elsewhere. Damon wondered where her preoccupied musings were leading Jo.

Damon had a secondary reason for asking Jo to drive. The night blindness pretext was just a veil to conceal his real motivation. He knew that Jo was on the cusp of diverging from their joint venture once they reached the base of the mountain. She had hitched a ride with him from her hometown in rural Virginia to locate her ex-boyfriend who had relocated – with a good chunk of her money – to the town just outside the park

boundaries. Having Jo behind the wheel would put her in the driver's seat, both literally and figuratively.

The signature chime originating from the dash of the truck spoiled Damon's well laid plan. "Looks like you better get some gas when we get back into town," offered Jo.

And just like that, the ball was back in Damon's court. He wasn't encouraged by her use of the word *you* instead of *we*. Maybe she would just grab a taxi from the gas station and disappear from his life in pursuit of her original objective. The thought of how he was going to handle the situation left him feeling quite awkward. He felt something more than a superficial companionship in Jo's presence. He wasn't ready for their newfound friendship to dissolve so quickly, but he didn't want to appear desperate for asking what he really wanted – for her to accompany him on the next leg of his journey. As it turned out, Jo made the decision for him.

"That quote, the one you found on that piece of paper," began Jo. "It's really made me think." She carefully kept her eyes on the road ahead of her. With the road curving left and right every couple hundred feet, it was a prudent decision. However, she was doing so more because she wasn't ready for the rejection that may come with her next request.

"I've always been one to go with my gut, and the quote on that paper you just discovered about new beginnings was a wakeup call. There's something inside telling me that I should continue travelling with you, and forget about whatever story is unfolding as a result of my past decisions ... if you will have me."

Damon couldn't help but smile, just a little bit. "It wasn't I who discovered that piece of paper, it was we," responded Damon. And right on cue, as if to take partial credit for the discovery, Gryffin echoed a bark of approval from the back seat. "And you are certainly more than welcome to join me. In fact, I would rather like that."

With the emotional distractions resolved, Damon's attention returned to the logistics of the hours that followed. "Maybe we can find a couple hotel rooms in town, get some rest, and start fresh in the morning?"

"Where to, though?" asked Jo.

“I think maybe we should find a hotel with a business center. With access to a computer, we can figure out where these coordinates are leading us,” responded Damon.

Upon reaching the outskirts of town, Jo pulled into the parking lot of a gas station with a convenience store attached to it. While Damon began to fill up the truck, Jo headed inside to get some local knowledge on a good place to stay for the night.

When he had finished topping off the tank, Damon had noticed that Jo had yet to return from inside the store. He gave Gryffin a reassuring scruff behind the ears, uttered “Be right back buddy”, and headed for the front door. Inside, Jo was at the front counter with a pre-wrapped sandwich, bag of chips, and soda.

“I thought maybe we could get a bite to eat and brainstorm about that last number,” interjected Damon before she passed her money over to the clerk. He wasn’t quick enough. Jo had already paid, but she responded back, “It’s not for me.”

“It’s for the guy sitting on the curb outside,” she continued.

Damon hadn’t seen anyone outside. Who exactly was she talking about? As he craned his neck to see out the front window, he now noticed the disheveled man huddled over on the curb. *Am I that oblivious to the world around me?* thought Damon. He was slightly embarrassed, at himself at least, that he had filtered another human being out of the equation of his life so easily.

While contemplating these thoughts, he didn’t realize that Jo was already exiting the store. “You coming?” came Jo’s voice with one foot already out the front door. Following her over to the curb, Damon watched as Jo leaned down and offered the man her purchases. It would have been a mere snack to Jo or Damon. To this gentleman, however, it appeared to be a feast. And although the only two words that emerged from his mouth were “Thank you”, the genuine look in his eyes spoke a thousand words of gratitude.

“There’s a small hotel, up ahead on the right. The guy inside said it looks sorta like a dive, but it’s a great deal and they are pet friendly. And yes, they have a computer,” smiled Jo as they returned to the truck.

Sitting at the hotel computer, each was digging into a carton of take-out shrimp lo mein. “You know,” voiced Jo between bites, “I had a different idea in mind when I said I’d like seafood for dinner.”

Damon stirred through the sea of noodles with his wooden chopsticks, searching for the sparse shrimp which evidently had all been consumed. “Yeah, I’m right there with you. I guess beggars can’t be choosers. Seafood and mountains don’t necessarily fit in the same sentence now, do they?”

Placing his uneaten portion on the table next to the computer, Damon looked over at Jo who had found one last shrimp, and offered, “If we ever get the chance, I’ll treat you to some proper seafood.”

“Promise?” grinned Jo. Without hesitation, Damon responded with his own smile, “Yep, I promise.” Returning to the business at hand, Damon punched the new set of coordinates into the browser’s search engine. It felt like turning that brass key again, opening another treasure box.

The map on the screen contained many familiar landmarks. It was obvious where they would be headed next – Washington, D.C. More specifically, the exact coordinates pinpointed a particular building in the District of Columbia – the public library. It was at that point in time, almost simultaneously, that both Damon and Jo looked at each other and shared a collective chortle of recognition. They immediately understood the meaning behind the third inscription on that parchment.

Five

Hope

Although difficult to sleep with anticipation of another day filled to the brim with adventure and uncertain discoveries, the physical and emotional demands of the day allowed Damon, Jo, and Gryffin to receive a modicum of rest before the sun rose again on the following morning. At the crack of dawn, they were headed north towards the nation's capital.

Jo had responded to the entire situation with the homeless man like it was completely natural. Damon always felt he was a benevolent and altruistic individual. And yet, he walked right by someone who was obviously in need. Maybe his perception of self was askew. He had wrestled with it in his mind in the moment right before falling asleep the previous night. About an hour into their trek north, Damon broached the subject engrossing his mind. "That was very kind of you, what you did for that guy at the gas station last night," he offered.

"It's something I've always done," replied Jo. "Learning about the history of my ancestors, especially my great grandfather who took such a firm stand against slavery, it has sorta become a part of me. I seem to always look out for others in need and do what I can to help them."

Damon was consumed with a feeling of hope – not for finding some profound meaning in the completion of this quest he was on, nor for the wish that his professional endeavors would take a turn for the better. No, he was feeling hope for humanity, that there were still individuals in society who genuinely cared for one another, who realized that we are all in this together, and who didn't feel compelled to vie for the last piece of pie. There was plenty of love and happiness in this world to go around – when we choose to share it. One of those rare individuals who embodied this very essence was sitting next to him, and Damon suddenly felt fortunate to have been blessed by her presence.

Damon did some mental math and realized that he would need to adopt a heavier foot on the accelerator pedal in order to reach their destination before closing time. Fortunate to avoid rush hour traffic through the heart of D.C., they arrived at the library with a mere thirty minutes to spare. Racing up to the entrance, they were stopped by the security guard at the front door.

“Sorry sir, no pets permitted in the library.” Damon looked quizzically at Gryffin and then Jo, trying to figure out a solution that would work out for everyone involved. Jo chimed in, “You go ahead. I can hang here with Gryffin. You can fill us all in when you figure it out.”

“But ...” began Damon. Jo cut him off before he could continue any further, “Get in there and figure this thing out. Gryffin and I will be right here waiting for you.” Realizing that resistance was going to be futile, and because he was running out of time with every passing second, Damon agreed, “Okay, I’ll be right back.” As he plunged into the depths of the library in search of his destination, Damon mentally refreshed his memory with the important inscription – *811 E42F 26*. Upon reaching the dark corridors of poetry in section 811, Damon quickly began to comb each shelf in search of the desired volume. Running his index finger over the spine of each book, he could almost feel the energy of the poetry within each book, yearning to be heard. More than likely, however, his feeling was one of hope in finding a book with the call number E42F. With head tilted sideways to better read the print, Damon finally discovered what he had been looking for – *The Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot.

Glancing down at his watch, he had less than ten minutes before the front doors of the library would be locked. He figured it would take them at least twice that much time to actually find him in these dark recesses of the library where far too few souls roam. Flipping the book open and fanning to page 26, Damon could almost smell the age of this book published more than a half century ago. There on the page was an unmistakable message that he knew was meant to be seen by his eyes. From the poem *Little Gidding*, the highlighted passage read:

We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

Scribbled in the margin was another set of numbers. Damon knew that his next destination would be the final one on this journey. He wasn't quite sure how the adventure would conclude, but he was quite certain that he would be enlightened by whatever was ultimately revealed – his recent history had proven that fact to be true. With less than five minutes until the doors locked for the evening, Damon reached the front entrance of the library, greeted by an anxious face and a wagging tail that were clearly discernible, even in the diminishing sunlight. He couldn't wait to share his findings. Partly for the information itself, more so for the person he would be sharing it with.

Six

Home Again

Damon had a suspicion the numbers he found scribbled in the margin of that book by T.S. Eliot would be the last ones he'd encounter on this memorable journey – because he recognized them. There were no other clues to be deciphered, just the coordinates that would lead him back to his home in a seaside town just outside of Portland, Maine.

As he exited the public library, the two facial expressions staring back at Damon from the base of the marble steps held a look teetering back and forth between enthusiasm and anxiety. One was human, the other canine. Jo, the co-owner of a restaurant in rural Virginia had her eyes locked on the exit door in anticipation. Gryffin, Damon's loyal golden retriever, began to tug on the leash when he caught a glimpse of his owner. Jo allowed Gryffin to lead the way, although not entirely by choice. She began to stumble as Gryffin pulled her along towards Damon, the distance closing quickly.

As they reached audible range, Jo not wanting to wait any longer, called out to Damon, "Did you find it? What did it say?" Gryffin followed suit with an imploring bark. The semi-confused look on Damon's face left her with a feeling of apprehension. Damon was still attempting to process what he was supposed to do next, other than return home. "Was there nothing there?" asked Jo hesitantly.

"No, no. There was definitely something there. I'm just not sure what to do next," responded Damon.

"Well, lay it on me. We'll all figure it out together," urged Jo.

"There was another quote – in the book, that is. It was highlighted and in the margin were a set of coordinates that lead back to my new house," offered Damon.

"What was the quote?" asked Jo.

"It was by T.S. Eliot – We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

Damon recited the quote from memory. It had already been catalogued in his mental library.

“Well, am I missing something?” asked Jo. “It seems pretty obvious that you’re supposed to return home.”

“Yeah, I get that part,” responded Damon, “I’m just not sure what I’m supposed to do when I get there.”

“Hey, remember that parchment that came with the acorn?” asked Jo. Damon reached into his pocket to grab hold of the acorn, making sure that it was still there. Jo continued, “There was an important word in that quote. Remember it? Faith. Let’s just have faith that we’ll figure it out once we get there.”

“So, you still want to continue on with us?” inquired Damon. “I wasn’t sure if you would just want to return to the restaurant. It’s only a couple hours away.” Damon couldn’t believe that he was even proposing something so far against what he actually desired, to have Jo accompany him on the final leg of this journey back to his hometown. He chided himself internally for allowing something so foolish to escape his lips.

“No way, compadre, you’re stuck with me now,” smiled Jo. “I was serious about new beginnings back on that mountaintop. My sister can take care of the restaurant. It was always her special project anyway. This is *my* new beginning. I’m not sure where it’s going to end up, but I do know the next stop on the journey.”

With the sun beginning to set on another day filled with fortuitous discoveries, the driving duties were transferred back to Jo. With a desire to close the gap slightly between their present position and final destination, the truck and its three occupants began to head north on the interstate. The conversation was quiet as the speakers streamed uninterrupted tunes from the satellite radio. After about three hours, somewhere near the New York border, Damon shook his head slightly as if to keep his eyelids from involuntarily shutting. Looking over at Jo, he could tell that she was beginning to show signs of exhaustion too. It had been a long day.

Damon reached over, turned down the volume, and proposed one final layover on their journey. “How about we find a place to get some rest? We can get on the road first thing in the morning and be back in Maine before noon.”

“Sure, that sounds good,” said Jo as she allowed a yawn to escape mid-sentence. As if the offer of rest had provided her second wind, Jo felt compelled to share something. “You know, these last couple days, they have been a lot of fun.”

“Yeah, same goes for me,” replied Damon. “I’m just not quite used to so much spontaneity in my life.”

“Funny,” chuckled Jo, “I think that’s one of the things that made it so enjoyable for me.”

“Maybe you’re right,” smirked Damon, “I never thought about it that way.” Finding a pet friendly hotel just off the interstate, the last thoughts Damon entertained before succumbing to sleep left him with a smile in his heart.

The following morning brought with it an intense feeling of anticipation – the three travelers just weren’t sure what they were anticipating yet. The remaining few hours of their journey passed quickly. Damon had beaten his estimate by a good hour as he rolled into his hometown a little before eleven o’clock.

As he coasted into the driveway and turned off the engine, Damon stared ahead at the front door in front of him, “Okay, now what?”

“Well, you could give me a tour, you know,” said Jo smiling.

“Sure, right, where are my manners?” replied Damon. Gryffin was at the front door waiting to enter with his tail wagging excitedly. Damon guided Jo through a brief tour of the old house, boxes still strewn around each of the rooms they walked through. “It’s not much yet, but it has a lot of potential,” offered Damon somewhat defensively.

As they entered the bathroom attached to his bedroom, a thought occurred to Damon. The coordinates led him to his house. That was obvious. There was another clue in that library, one that he didn’t consider too closely until now. He recalled the quote once again, whispering it to himself – *We shall not cease from exploration. And the end*

of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

Where we started - that phrase stuck with him. This was the exact location beneath the sink where everything began. This is where the brass key still hanging around his neck was found wrapped in twine.

He stood there, motionless, for a few moments before he recalled the dull thud that sounded when the ball of wet twine made contact with the wooden floorboard beneath the pipe. Damon returned to that floorboard, got down on his hands and knees, and looked at it a bit more closely.

Jo, sensing that Damon was on to something but not wanting to disrupt the flow, bent over to look but remained silent. The nails securing this particular floorboard were missing. Reaching his fingers into the tiny gap between the wall and floorboard, he noticed that he was able to pry back the piece of wood quite easily. There was a sealed container built into the space beneath the floor. Placed inside it was another piece of parchment rolled up and tied with a red ribbon.

Rising back to his feet, Damon untied the ribbon and unrolled the sheet with Jo standing next to him. Together, they silently read the quote etched in the same perfect penmanship that they had come to know so well.

I don't believe people are looking for the meaning of life as much as they are looking for the experience of being alive. ~ Joseph Campbell

Damon just smiled. Of course. Had he known that the final piece of his journey was right under his nose when he discovered the brass key, he would have most likely jumped to the conclusion straightaway. And look what he would have missed out on – adventure, friendship, lessons in giving, receiving, and perhaps most importantly – love. Love of others and love of self.

“Wow,” offered Damon to Jo, “this certainly wasn’t what I was expecting.” And then he smiled and continued on, “But, you know what, I think that’s what makes it all that more special.”

“I guess I’m rubbing off on you,” smiled Jo as she bumped shoulders with Damon. “Hey, you know what,” said Jo with an intriguing twist in her voice, “I just thought of something. How do you spell your name?”

Damon wasn’t catching on quite yet, but he played along, “D-A-M-O-N,” replied Damon. “Why, what does that have to do with anything?” he continued.

“I was just thinking. Reverse the letters of your name, and what do they spell?” offered Jo.

“N-O-M-A-D. You’re a nomad, a wanderer. And what you have chosen to do over the past week has been exactly that – you have wandered from place to place for the sake of wandering, to explore, to be alive.”

Damon was beginning to appreciate this woman more and more with every passing minute. Maybe he was living life up until this point as his name – backwards. But he had more than a fleeting clue now. He had a revelation, and he certainly felt alive, more alive and vibrant than he had in his entire life.

Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved the acorn and placed it on his bathroom sink – a constant reminder to embrace new beginnings. “How about some lunch? I know this great seafood place just down the road. It sits right on the water.” Winking at Jo, Damon continued on, “I did promise, and I always do my best to keep promises.” An endearing grin spread across Jo’s face as she replied, “I’ll have to remember that.” As Damon took Jo’s hand in his own, another seed was planted in this wanderer’s life – one that he knew would flourish given time – and faith.

~The End ~



If you enjoyed Wanderlust and would like to share it with others, I invite you to click the image above to Tweet it to your followers. Thank you, and as always, stay inspired!

Author's Note

Thank you for taking the time to read Wanderlust and for giving me the opportunity to share my love of telling stories with you!

If you enjoyed this story and would be interested in receiving more just like it that aim to touch an emotional chord, I invite you to [join our community](#).

If Facebook is more to your liking, I invite you to join our open Facebook group, [Caffeine For The Soul](#) – where readers interact and discuss that which nurtures the soul. After all, inspiration is caffeine for the soul.

As a small token of my appreciation for signing up, I will send you Homecoming, an award-winning short story, as well as some thoughts detailing the inspiration and insights behind the development of Wanderlust. Thank you, and as always, stay inspired.

About the Author

Dave was born just outside of Chicago, IL but doesn't remember much about the Windy City as he was only there until he was four years old. He grew up in Eastern Pennsylvania and lived in New Jersey for a few years before migrating south to the Sunshine State where he now lives with his beautiful wife, amazing son, and four cats (the real monarchs of their house).

Dave discovered writing on a whim when he began blogging about his unique perspective on daily occurrences in his life. He always searched for the extraordinary in the seemingly ordinary.

After dipping his toes into the pool of fiction, Dave was smitten with the enchantment of telling stories that convey deep sentiments and connect with his readers on an emotional level.

His four words – inspire and be inspired – guide him in his writing and daily life. You can connect with him at his website, www.davecenker.com.

