

# **The Endless Road**

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It was a hectic day in the office because the phones didn't stop ringing. It was the same story every year before the April 15<sup>th</sup> tax deadline.

"Jonathan, Mr. Goldman wants to speak with you," Dianne, my executive assistant, told me when she entered my office.

"Transfer the call," I told her, despite the fact that I didn't look forward to speaking with him knowing he was upset about the amount of money he had to pay.

"Good morning Mr. Goldman," I said the minute I picked up the phone.

"It's not a good morning. You have to do something about my tax returns."

"I took as many deductions as I could. We can't take a chance of your being audited again. Your account has a red flag attached to it after last year's audit."

"I knew you'd say that but there must be a way to lower my tax liability."

"If you get audited again the penalties will be higher than last year's."

"I'm unhappy, but I'll take your word for it.

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I was lying in bed unable to fall asleep. I kept thinking about my clients' phone calls and was sorry I chose a career as an accountant. Upset, I got out of bed, went to my home office, and turned on my laptop to surf the internet to look for photographs of National Parks. It brought back painful memories, remembering the month's camping vacation Judith and I were going to take after I got my MBA from Columbia University. The beautiful scenery upset me because the vacation never happened, so I turned off the laptop and went to bed.

I fell asleep and dreamed that Judith and I were camping at Two Jack Lake, located in Banff National Park in the Canadian Rockies. I stood near the lake looking at the turquoise blue water and the mountain tops covered with snow, despite the fact it was

mid-July. All of a sudden, I saw a big English Spring Spaniel jump into the lake and swim like a duck without splashing water. The owner, who was my age when I got my MBA, stood nearby photographing the beautiful lake with the mountains in the background.

“I’m surprised your dog swims in the freezing water,” I told him.

“You can’t keep Brandy out of the lake. She feels all the water in the world belongs to her.”

I woke up upset thinking about the camping trip Judith and I never took and told myself, *I can’t continue doing what I do. I must change my reality and fulfill my old dream of camping in the National Parks.*

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The next morning, I was getting dressed while anticipating another hectic day at the office and not looking forward to getting my clients’ calls. I looked at my tie selections and debated which one I should wear with the dark striped gray suit and white shirt I had chosen. Judith gave me a concerned look and said, “Jonathan, what’s wrong with you today? You just spent the past half hour putting on ties and taking them off.”

“I can’t make up my mind which one to wear.”

“Why are you all of a sudden concerned about what tie you should wear? For the past fifteen years it was never an issue. Anyway, every time I bought you a tie you made me return it because the pattern or the colors were too modern.”

I ignored her and looked at the mirror which was reflecting the cherry tree in the backyard that was covered with snow. I wished I were skiing in Bear Mountain instead of having to face my clients. Not looking forward getting the phone calls I told Judith, “I might take the day off and relax.”

“You can’t do that. It’s tax season and you need to be in the office early.”

“I’m tired of working eighty hours a week.”

“It’s the reality accountants have to face this season.”

“I wouldn’t have this problem if I were a college professor.”

“Why bring up the past again? It serves no purpose.”

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I stood on the train platform anticipating another bad day in the office. When the train doors opened, realizing no seats were available, I decided to drive and walked, preoccupied, through the snow-covered parking lot. I was ready to open the car door when I stepped on a sheet of ice, losing my balance. At the last moment I managed to gain it back by grabbing the roof rack. *The day is starting off wrong*, I told myself as I got into the car and turned the car radio to station WQXR. It played Vladimir Ashkenazy's Chopin Etudes. The music lowered my stress and more relaxed, I decided to drive on the Grand Central Parkway, remembering past experiences of finding the Long Island Expressway one big parking lot. I enjoyed listening to the music until I saw the traffic jam ahead. The police car's revolving lights and the tow truck next to it indicated that there had been an accident and it would be a while before the traffic started moving.

*I should have taken the train*, I told myself while opening the sunroof. The blast of cold air made me wish I was in the country skiing instead of driving to work. Upset that the day was going from bad to worse, I picked up my cell phone and called the office. Dianne picked up the phone and asked "Where are you?"

“I’m stuck in traffic and will be late.”

“You got three urgent calls from...”

“There’s nothing I can do about it now. I’ll call them when I get to the office.”

Before she was able to reply I hung up, sorry I had phoned. I didn’t need the additional stress of hearing that my clients were already calling. The traffic jam lasted thirty minutes before the accident was cleared. I was preoccupied and passed exit 10W on the Grand Central that would take me to the Midtown Tunnel and ended up on the Triborough Bridge. My anxiety level increased when I saw the East River Drive sign that would have taken me to Manhattan and told myself, *Instead of going to the office, take*

*the day off and head to Bear Mountain where you'll be able to relax and won't have to deal with annoying clients.*

Having new plans, I picked up my phone and called Dianne. Her voice was anxious.

“Where are you? Mr. Rosenberg just called and said he must speak with you as soon as you get to the office.”

That confirmed it – I made the right decision.

“I don't feel well and won't be able to come to the office today,” I lied.

I hung up before she had a chance to reply and turned the phone's power off.

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When I drove over the George Washington Bridge I changed my mind about going to Bear Mountain. Instead, I took Route 80 West and drove fast, enjoying the cold air that came through the open sun roof. My mind drifted to thinking about my current reality and I asked myself, *Why did you become an accountant instead of getting your PhD and teaching history in college?* At that moment my father's voice rang in my ears. “*You won't be able to make a decent living teaching history. You should become an accountant and join my firm.*”

I was obsessing about listening to him and didn't realize how much time had passed until I saw the sign ‘Welcome to Pennsylvania.’ *Should I turn around and go home?* I asked myself. However, I heard the small voice say, *You always wanted to have a sports car. If not for family obligations and the mortgage, you would have been driving a BMW model Z3 two-seater convertible instead of the four-door Acura with a sun roof.*

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I was getting tired so I decided to find a place to stay for the night and drive home the next morning. On the right side of the road I saw a Marriott Suites Inn vacancy sign. I

pulled into the parking lot, picked up my cell phone to call Judith to tell her where I was when I realized it was turned off. After I turned it on I saw the missed call indicator blinking. I figured Judith must have called. *'You have one new message,'* the metallic voice told me. I entered my security code and heard Judith's panicky voice, *"Jonathan, where are you? I called the office and they said that you didn't feel well and decided to go home. Please call me as soon as you get this message."*

My hand shook as I held the phone, trying to make up my mind if I should call and reassure her that I was okay. After a slight hesitation I told myself, *Call Judith after you get settled in your room.* Relieved, I pulled into the available parking spot near the office. The slim, attractive young blond woman behind the reception desk gave me a warm smile and said, "Welcome to the Marriott Suites."

*The dark blue suit matches the color of her eyes* I told myself before replying, "I would like to get a room for the night."

"That will be \$150. How would you like to pay for it?"

"With my American Express card."

\* \* \*

I was in my room when the small voice told me: *You better call Judith and tell her that you won't be back before next weekend.*

My heart was throbbing when I pressed my cell phone speed dial "4" that had my home number programmed into it, afraid to hear what Judith would say. I disconnected the line after hearing the first ring. I just wasn't able to explain why I didn't plan to come home. Not knowing what to do with myself, I decided to surf the internet and check Google's job agency listings that advertise for outsourced accountants for businesses. After finding a couple of agencies, I emailed them my credentials and turned off the laptop. Upset about not being able to build my courage to call Judith, I decided to take a hot shower, hoping it would relieve my anxiety and help me make the call. I was drying myself off with the large towel that was hanging on the bathroom rack when I asked myself in a loud voice, *Am I making a mistake staying here for a week?*

I was in my room watching the nightly news, glancing often at my cell phone and hating myself for not being able to make the call. The news bored me and I fell asleep dreaming that I was driving a light gray BMW convertible model Z3 on a curvy dark road in the country with the top down and the cold wind blowing in my face.

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In the morning I woke up disoriented, not knowing where I was. After taking a hot shower, I turned on the cold water hoping it would help me build my courage to call Judith. Of course, I realized that she must be panicking about what happened to me. Ready to call, I picked up the phone and pressed the speed dial 4 that had my home number programmed into it. Before it rang I changed my mind and disconnected the line, asking myself if I had made the right decision to stay another week. I contemplated what I should do when I heard the small voice, *Let Bruce, your partner, respond to the emails.* Satisfied with my latest decision, I deleted them and cleared the “deleted emails” folder, eliminating the temptation to reply later.

After I checked out of the hotel I sat in my car, looked at the map, wondering how Judith was doing. Without realizing it I picked up the phone and dialed my home number. The minute I heard the first ring the little voice told me, *Hang up before Judith picks up the phone. She'll tell you to come home. Remember the family's weekend activities and the stress in the office. Judith doesn't experience financial hardship. She has her bank branch manager salary. You're finally able to fulfill your old dream to travel without being saddled with family and business obligations.*

For the next ten minutes I stared at the phone, unable to make up my mind if I should call or not. I finally decided to continue with my trip knowing that if I didn't I'd always regret not achieving my dream.

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On the way to Yellowstone's northern gate I passed Bear Tooth Pass and stopped at Bear Lake. The glacier lake, with its turquoise Caribbean color surrounded by mountain tops covered with snow, made me wish I had my family with me. I took out my cell phone and called home. Judith picked up the phone on the second ring and said "Hello." Hearing her voice made me sad. Unable to say a word, I hung up as I felt my heart pounding. At that moment I wondered again if I was making a mistake, but realized I couldn't go home to the stress in the office and the weekend obligations.

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After spending a week at Yellowstone, I headed for Bryce Canyon. The Canyon's soft chalk rocks contained iron ore that the wind and water made look like a giant chess board of multiple colors. When the sun, a big orange ball, was setting over the horizon it gave me the illusion that the rock formations were on fire.

At the gift shop I bought a beautiful postcard of Bryce Canyon's rock formations that was taken at sunrise and was planning to mail it to Judith. After staring at it for a few minutes I wrote, "*I'm visiting Bryce Canyon. When I return home, I will explain everything.*"

I wasn't able to drop it in the mailbox and told myself, *I'll mail it tomorrow*. I sat in the car staring at the postcard for a few seconds before placing it in the glove compartment. Every morning, after starting the car engine, I looked at the card but couldn't mail it. After obsessing about sending it for a week, I took it to my hotel room, ripped it into small pieces and flushed it down the toilet.

\* \* \*

I was sitting in the hotel restaurant staring at the menu, unable to decide what I should eat, when the hostess walked over to my table with Bruce, my partner and best friend.

"How did you find me?" I asked him, unable to hide my irritation.

“You’ve been followed by a detective since the office received your first American Express bill. He was ordered not to contact you and kept our managing partner and Judith informed about what you were doing. She wanted to contact you a couple of times but decided not to, feeling you would come back when you’re ready.”

I told Bruce where I had been and what I had seen, avoiding why I had chosen to make such a drastic move.

“You must be wondering why I came,” Bruce said.

“I wish you hadn’t come.”

“The reason I came is because David’s Bar Mitzvah will take place in March. Judith asked if you’re planning to be there.”

My mind raced before I was able to speak.

“I know my disappearance caused everyone great agony. The reason I used the American Express card was to leave a paper trail behind me. I’m aware of David’s Bar Mitzvah. Please tell Judith that in a couple of days I’ll start my trip back. I need the time to get used to the idea of returning home.”

“What happened? It’s not like you to behave like this.”

Not knowing where to start, I ordered a cognac for both of us, trying to postpone answering why I left the way I did.

“When Judith told me you didn’t come home it scared the hell out of me.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t plan it in advance. I was driving to the office when I realized that I couldn’t face another day preparing tax returns and hearing my clients’ complaints. I also realized that I was forty years old and I felt that I had missed something out of life.”

“We’ve been best friends since childhood and never kept secrets from each other. Why didn’t you speak to me about it?”

“As you know, I was in graduate school when Judith and I got married. After I got my MBA we were supposed to take a month’s camping vacation to the National Parks when Judith surprised me with her pregnancy with David. Before I even got used to

being a father, we had Rachel. Despite the fact that we had spoken about having children, I was surprised how it affected our lives.

When I got to the train station in the morning, I realized I couldn't board it and decided to drive to the office, hoping it would relieve my anxiety. Without realizing it I ended up on Route 80 heading west. After driving a few hundred miles, I decided to pursue my unfulfilled dream."

"I remember that you didn't look happy when you told me that Judith was pregnant and I wondered how it was affecting you. You always spoke about visiting the National Parks but I didn't think you'd leave everything behind and run away. I hope you'll come back to Judith and rebuild your life."

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The trip back was difficult. *Call Judith and tell her that you can't come home*, the small voice told me. Despite this I kept driving, telling myself I could no longer escape from my responsibilities. When I visited Gettysburg Memorial Park I called home and heard Judith's taped voice on the recording: "*We're not home, please leave a message and we'll return your call.*"

I felt my heart throbbing when I spoke.

"I'll be home tomorrow night and will explain everything. I hope you'll understand."

As soon as I hung up I heard the small voice say, *Don't go home. You'll be returning to the life you ran away from.*

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It was dark when I arrived in our neighborhood. All the houses' windows were lit and I visualized the families having dinner. I entered our driveway, fighting the desire to turn around and drive back to the National Parks where I had found my happiness. Unable to

get out of the car, I left the engine running. Judith saw the headlights and expected me to come in. When I didn't, she came out of the house and stood on the porch looking at me. We stared at each other and neither of us moved. After a few moments she walked down the steps and came to the car. I lowered the window and looked at her, unable to say a word. She stared at me and hesitated for a second before speaking

“Are you planning to come in or stay out all night?”

Her words increased my anxiety level. Not knowing what to say I just stared at her, unable to respond. Judith, realizing I couldn't make up my mind, turned around and slowly walked back to the house. I closed the car window, backed out of the driveway and drove away. By the time I reached the Grand Central I visualized Judith sitting in the living room with David and Rachel, explaining why I hadn't entered the house.

*I must go back and explain to Judith what happened,* I told the small voice that encouraged me to keep driving. At the Triborough Bridge I sat at the toll booth staring at the toll collector, unable to continue driving.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, surprised by my behavior.

“I missed my exit and need to turn around.”

He got out of his booth, stopped the incoming traffic and waved his hand for me to turn around.

I sat in the driveway, once again staring at the house. Judith saw the car headlights and stood by the large living room window looking at me. I turned off the engine and forced myself to get out of the car, climb up the porch steps and enter the living room. We looked at each other when I forced myself to speak.

“My disappearance had nothing to do with you or the children. When I got to the train station I realized that I couldn't face another tax season.”

Judith didn't respond, turned around, set the table with two plates, forks, knives and napkins and placed the food on the table. I stared at her feeling I was looking at a stranger.

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The next morning, after having a sleepless night, I drove slowly to the train station. I kept questioning whether or not I had made the right decision to come home. When I arrived at the station, I wondered what I should do and sat staring at the car clock that told me that the train would arrive in fifteen minutes. I unfastened the seat belt, took out the ignition key and opened the door but wasn't able to get out. The train whistle made me decide to drive to work. I wasn't in the mood to meet people who knew me on the train, knowing I would have to explain to them where I had been.

Convinced that driving was a better option, I left the parking lot and headed toward the Grand Central. This time the traffic moved fast. I opened the sunroof, enjoying the air blowing into the car, and listened to WQXR playing Chopin's Nocturne. Ahead I saw the sign for Exit 10W that would take me into Manhattan and heard the small voice say, *Don't go to the office. Cross the Triborough Bridge and head back to the National Parks where you found your happiness.*

These words reminded me of the seven days rafting and camping trip that I took on the Colorado River. I could envision the sunset that painted the large rocks orange red and wished I was back in the West. *Should I head back to the National Parks or go to the office?* I asked myself, trying to ignore the voice that kept telling me to head West.

Unable to make up my mind about what to do, I crossed the *Triborough Bridge* and saw the sign for the East River Drive that would take me to Manhattan. The small voice kept urging me, *Keep driving and head to the National Parks where you'll be happy.*

*Should I fulfill my promise to attend David's Bar Mitzvah or drive to the National Parks,* I asked myself, staring at the FDR Drive sign that would take me to my office.