

The Crooked Road

A short story about separation, reunion, and the long, twisting path of a marriage.

By Jack Wallace

I first met Daniel Chavitz at a holiday party at his house. He was a creative writing instructor at Western Carolina University and the author of two critically acclaimed novels set in the Appalachian Mountains. Raelene, my wife, was a professor in the English Department. She often car-pooled with him to campus and raved about his talent, so I was curious to meet him, even though I usually avoided her faculty gatherings.

I felt overdressed in a blazer and collar, the expected uniform of an Episcopal Rector in our North Carolina town. Daniel wore jeans and a faded chambray shirt with rolled-up sleeves revealing muscular forearms. Dark hair and a neatly trimmed beard added to his casual arrogance.

Standing in the oak-paneled den with an elbow on a carved mantel and a dry martini in his hand (Hemingway's favorite drink), he held court. Guests gathered around him as if lemmings, mesmerized by his talk of Updike, Faulkner, and Whitehead. My wife stood next to him, her eyes focused on his face.

"Updike didn't deserve a Pulitzer," he pontificated. "His work was mundane next to Faulkner's."

I edged closer, pulling Raelene to my side.

"I find John Updike fascinating because he was the rare writer of renown that wove Christian theology throughout most of his works," I said.

Heads turned. Daniel shot an impatient look at my interruption.

"Updike's work was known for its sexuality and sensual detail," he said. "The man was hardly an uptight theologian."

Later in the evening, I watched from across the room as Daniel whispered something in Raelene's ear. She touched his arm and smiled up at him, and I wondered for the first time if my wife was unfaithful.

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A week later, she confirmed it.

"Why? Why would you do this to me?" I asked, my gut aching as if she had landed a stiff punch.

She shrugged and shook her head.

"I don't know why. I wasn't looking for someone. He stirs something in me I didn't know was there."

I flung my arms out and stomped around our kitchen.

"I've been faithful to you, Rae. I've never wanted another woman."

She looked at me with pitying eyes.

"You're a good man, John. And I've been a good wife and mother. But now I want something different."

Beads of sweat pearled above my lip.

"I know you put your career on hold for a long time," I said. "But you've been a professor for three years now." I tried to speak in a calm tone, but I could hear my voice getting louder. "Your life's goal. Your dream job!"

"It is, but I want more. I want to travel. Sip champagne beneath the Eiffel Tower, lay naked in the sun on a beach in Rio!" Her eyes flashed. "I'm done with being a minister's wife."

I took a deep breath and tried to control my anger.

"We've been married for 30 years, Rae. Don't throw all that away." I forked my fingers through my hair. "Tell me what you need. We can work it out."

She shook her head.

"I'm not a good wife anymore. Not for you." She brushed my face with her hand and walked out of the kitchen. I collapsed against the counter, tears running down my face, the touch of her fingers lingering on my cheek. The following week she moved in with her lover.

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A few days later, I paid Daniel a visit. He stood in his doorway, filling the space, and said, "Reverend Hudspeth, what can I do for you?"

"You broke up a good marriage," I said.

"Really? If it was that good, why was it so easily broken?" he replied.

I had no response at first, as I stood quivering, my fists clenched.

"You're an arrogant son of a bitch. You better treat Raelene with respect."

I turned and left. It was a conversation I played in my head on a steady loop, sometimes choosing different words, different endings, sometimes even throwing a punch to the man's nose.

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I was dazed by the loss of my partner and lover, and I obsessed over how I let it happen. We often slept in different rooms, but I thought that was because of our different circadian rhythms. Sex was still a part of our lives, though not as often as even a few years ago. When did the passion fade? What needs did she have that I didn't meet? How did I let it all drift away? I needed answers.

Raelene agreed to meet me at the White Duck Café. I ordered coffee and waited at a corner table in the back.

This cafe was where, 15 years ago, she told me she was pregnant. At first apprehensive, we grew excited. Raelene a mom again at 40, me a dad again at 42. We sat for two hours and planned the baby's future, only to suffer the disappointment of a miscarriage two weeks later. And this café was where, two years later, she told me she wanted to go back to graduate school and get her doctorate.

Now she breezed in, dropped in the chair opposite me, and asked if I wanted a divorce, in a tone she might have used to ask me if I would like to go to Asheville for dinner.

"Are you planning to marry this guy?" I asked with a bit of heat in my voice.

"His name is Daniel, not *this guy*," she said, looking at me over her raised coffee cup. "As for marriage, who knows? I'm four years older. He sees cute coeds every day. I'm not foolish enough to think I'm his forever and ever."

"Rae, are you sure you want to do this?"

She set down her cup.

"We can wait on divorce, but I'm not coming back to you. I'm done with that life." She waved her hand as if to make it all disappear. "You can keep the house and most of the furniture. I want my writing desk and a few pieces of art. We'll split the retirement and savings."

My throat tightened.

"You've got it all figured out," I said, shaking my head. "Fine. Take what you want, but you must tell Sarah. I'm sure she'll call me, freaking out over all this."

She tapped her fingers against the table.

"Sarah's busy with her career and marriage. She'll get over this sooner than you think."

I lifted my coffee cup to my lips, then set it down before taking a sip.

"It shouldn't be this easy to unravel a marriage. It feels too hurried."

"I just want my freedom." She tossed her hair back over her shoulder like a flirty girl. "I want to fuck whoever I want."

I slapped the table.

"Who are you?" I said, my voice rising. Two people at a nearby table turned and stared. My cheeks burned with shame. Why had we settled on such a public place for a private conversation? I lowered my voice. "Go ahead! Fuck who you want. But explain to me where this is coming from. I thought we had a good sex life."

She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe for you."

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At a Wednesday night church meeting, I announced our separation to the board. The chairman of the vestry patted me on the back and said to let him know if I needed anything. Soon after, the women of the church began delivering chicken casseroles to my door. Few mentioned Raelene's name, as if hearing it would be too much for me to bear. I took a short two weeks of leave before quietly resuming my duties as Rector, reassuring my congregation I was fine.

Ours was a small town. The store owners and clerks where I often shopped knew me. Where once they were effusive in their greetings, now they seemed hesitant to approach me. Their glances slid away as I spoke to them as if my new bachelorhood was unseemly.

One Sunday after church, Blair Dixon, my friend and personal physician, told me of an awkward conversation he and his wife had with Raelene and Daniel at a restaurant.

"I didn't know whether to congratulate her or say I'm sorry," he said as we stood in the chancel. "I didn't recognize her at first. Streaked hair, a little too much makeup. She seemed to be into her new life with no looking back at her time as a minister's wife."

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At night, I pattered around the house, usually landing at the front window, staring into the dark. Memories floated up, clouding my view.

Raelene and I met in a seminar on medieval literature at Vanderbilt University, where we were both grad students. In the middle of a lecture, she poked my shoulder and whispered, "I think Dante must have been on some sort of hallucinogen." I turned around and stared into pale blue eyes. I was immediately smitten with the tall, poised young woman with long blond hair. She was just starting on her Master's, and I was in my second year of Divinity School. Six months later, we moved in together, and hurriedly married the following spring when she became pregnant with Sarah, our only child.

Over the years and several ministerial postings, Raelene somehow managed to finish her MFA, postponing her goal of a Ph.D. until Sarah left for college. Was that when the marriage began to

crumble? Had I not paid attention to the drift in our relationship? In my eyes, Raelene had remained the beautiful and brainy woman I'd married. With my thinning, almost white hair, and my small paunch, I wondered if she had lost all physical attraction to me years ago. I vacillated between anger at her leaving and a deep, aching sense of loss.

I sought solace in scripture. I read Hosea, the Old Testament story of the prophet who longed for his unfaithful wife. Settled in my chair with my Bible open on my lap, the ancient words rang with a familiar hurt. The prophet was willing to take his wife back despite her adulterous ways. God taught Hosea that love is more than a word. It is what you do. I'd always loved the idea of forgiveness. I wondered if I could now find the courage to practice it.

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A year later, I sold our house at the edge of town and bought a condo downtown so I could walk to church. My parishioners felt sorry for me, but I heard rumors that a few wondered if there was more to the story. Friends tried to play matchmaker, and women years younger invited me for coffee or dinner, but I always declined. Rumors spread. Maybe the Rector was seeing someone in Asheville. Maybe he was gay. The simple truth was I missed the companionship and the intimacy of being with a woman. Mostly, I missed Raelene. I continued to avoid the finality of divorce.

I occasionally stopped at the White Duck Café for lunch or a mid-morning coffee. I would sit near the window, wondering if Rae would drop in, dreading and hoping she would, not necessarily to talk, but just to see her, to know she was okay. While having a late lunch on a Saturday, I saw her walk by with Daniel, arm around his waist, his arm on her shoulder in a possessive way. I heard her familiar laugh, but it seemed higher pitched, like a teenaged girl's. She looked skinny, and her jeans rode low on her hips. She'd added a streak of pink to her blonde hair. They walked at a fast pace as if chasing a mirage or hurrying away from something. Old age, maybe.

When Sarah visited that first Christmas, Raelene arranged for us to meet her for dinner at a restaurant and then go to my place to exchange simple gifts. Raelene gave me a book by Rick Bragg, telling me breathlessly about meeting the author at a literary conference. She and Sarah gave each other candles and fragrant soaps. Raelene gushed about the romantic trip to Paris she had taken with Daniel the previous fall, giggling as she reminisced about the two of them singing drunkenly in front of Notre Dame.

When her mother left at the end of the evening and went back to her lover, Sarah turned to me, teary-eyed.

"I love you both, but I don't want to be around Mom much," she said. "She talks like we're best friends. I want my mother back."

Raelene and I rarely communicated, except when Sarah visited. Two Christmases later, Raelene gave me the same book by Rick Bragg and told again the story of meeting the author, as if it just happened. Sarah said later she didn't know whether to be mad at her mother's thoughtlessness, or to be worried about her. Then I found out she had reason to worry.

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On a snowy day in late February, Daniel called me.

"Raelene and I are splitting up," he said. "She won't tell you, but I think you need to know why." There was a catch in his throat. "She has early-onset Alzheimer's."

I held the phone in a vice-like grip.

"What? How do you know?"

"Doctors confirmed it," Daniel sighed. "But the signs — the forgetfulness — hell, they were all there a couple of years ago. She was missing deadlines, meetings. I told her to keep better calendars and reminders on her phone and computer, but it got worse."

"Someone told me she left the university last year, but I didn't know why."

"Her personality, it's changed," Daniel said. "She's always been a free spirit, and sometimes overly emotional, but she started arguing more, showing more frustration, losing her temper, and yelling at students. She had to resign, or they would have let her go."

My face heated up.

"So, after getting the news, you decided to break it off with Rae?"

"It sounds like I'm a selfish asshole, and maybe I am," Daniel said. "The first three years were pretty good, but we've done nothing but argue for most of this past year. We're both ready to end it."

"So, what's going to happen?"

"I don't know. Raelene says she'll be fine living by herself." Daniel choked up, then added, "John, she gets lost easily. I'm not sure how much longer she should drive."

"I need to talk to her," I said. "When can I see her?"

"She probably won't be happy to see you."

"I need to see her," I said through clenched teeth.

"Fine. I leave around 8. Come over after that."

The following day was bitter cold, but I was at Daniel's door soon after 8. When Raelene answered, she stepped back, her eyes wide. At first, I thought she would slam the door.

"Raelene." I reached for her, not knowing what else to say. Her expression broke, and she collapsed against me, breaking into gasping sobs.

"Oh, John. I'm so sorry. I'm such a wreck."

I held her, wordless. Her tears soaked my sweater.

Two days later, I borrowed a truck, met Daniel, loaded up her clothes and her few pieces of furniture, and moved her into my extra bedroom. After a few hours of loading and unloading, we shook hands at the truck, neither bothering to say goodbye. It may have been my imagination, but the other man's steps seemed lighter as he walked back to his front door.

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My condo was a new and strange place for Raelene. I'd read that people with Alzheimer's are more comfortable in familiar surroundings, so I found places for her favorite pieces of art, her writing desk, and her books, which I hoped would make her feel at home.

Raelene had always been a night person, staying up late reading and writing in her journal. I was a morning person, treasuring my coffee and quiet time before the sun came up. Despite four years apart, we easily slid back into that familiar routine. Except this time, we were roommates, sleeping in separate rooms.

One morning, I heard the crash of a pan against the floor. When I hurried into the kitchen, I found her staring at the frying pan, hands on her hips.

"Rae, what happened?" I asked. She looked at me with tearful, frustrated eyes, pointing at the pan.

"What am I supposed to do with that?"

I picked up the skillet and replied, "Let's make breakfast." I turned the gas burner on, and with me guiding her, she scrambled two eggs and toasted a slice of bread, even though she couldn't remember what to call the toaster.

As I was drifting off to sleep one night, my bedroom door opened. The light from the hall cut across the bed, and Raelene crawled into bed with me. She kissed me, pulled at my pajamas, slid out of her nightgown, and climbed on top of me. In the middle of our lovemaking, she gasped and called me Daniel. I stopped and rolled away. She snuggled against me, her face against my neck. I felt my throat tighten with anger. I hated that man, but I loved my damaged wife. Sadness overwhelmed me, and salty tears rolled down my cheeks.

"Why are you crying?" She brushed the tears from my cheek. I couldn't talk. She pulled me against her bare body, offering skin-to-skin comfort. I wondered if I could ever again make love to her, or if I would be left impotent with the worry that she thought I was Daniel. But the next time she snuck in my bed, God help me, I put that fear aside as I pulled her nightgown off and caressed her breasts and slid a hand down her thigh. Was I crossing an ethical line by making love to a woman who might think I was someone else? With Raelene's body against mine, I didn't care.

Her night visits continued for several months, and then they ended almost as suddenly as they had started. No explanation, just no more sex. Back to sleeping alone. Rae was barely responsive

to my morning kiss. We became like many old married couples, sleeping in separate bedrooms. It wasn't what I wanted, but it was what I had.

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"John, this disease is awful. It will not end well for Raelene," Blair Dixon told me after he finished my annual physical and we sat together in his office. "Not to get too clinical, but Alzheimer's is a shitty way to die."

"Yes, it is. I've seen her mind fading over the past few months. She forgets names of people and familiar places."

Blair ducked his head and looked at me through bushy eyebrows.

"The changes in her personality back when you separated might have been early manifestations of the disease."

"Yeah, I wondered if that could be the case."

The physician shook his head.

"She'll probably start to wander out of the house. Eventually, she'll need help with routine tasks. You'll have to be on duty all the time. Anyone able to stay with her, give you a break?"

"Some of the ladies at the church stay with her when needed, but I rarely ask them. She's a late sleeper, so I usually go to the office for a couple of hours in the morning. I'm two years away from retirement. If I need to leave the parish sooner, I'm prepared to do that."

"It's a bad hand you've been dealt, my friend. You're going to experience caretaker fatigue. Find a way to treat yourself to something special now and then. Go for a hike. Get a massage. Do something that makes you happy."

"I'm not looking for happiness."

"What are you looking for, sainthood?"

"No, but something other than happiness."

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Raelene retreated into her interior space for long periods. She would sit for hours watching TV, then, without explanation, leave for a walk downtown. I worried she would wander off and get lost, so I made a habit of following her.

One fall afternoon, she stood at the front door brushing at her ash blond hair as she checked herself in the mirror, then left without saying a word. I stood at the bay window and watched her walk down the sidewalk and turn right on Main Street. I shrugged on a corduroy jacket and followed.

She walked past the White Duck Cafe, our favorite for lunch in the downtown area of our little village. She stopped only to stare at the tools, small appliances, and local crafts in the store window of Trenton's Hardware, placing both hands on the glass as a small child would do. Raelene's dad owned a hardware store in Greenville, South Carolina, for most of her childhood. I smiled, thinking of the sweet child Rae must have been. This part of her almost daily walk was familiar, but she continued past the downtown area.

Raelene quickened her pace as she turned on Jackson Street, winding past First Baptist Church, First United Methodist Church, and then Saint Paul's Episcopal Church, where I served as Rector. At Laurel Branch Road, she turned right and followed the narrow, crooked road which hugged against Laurel Branch Creek like two lovers spooning. A row of cottage-style homes was up a slight rise, most with low, wrought-iron fences that separated neatly manicured lawns from the sidewalk.

As I realized her destination, my heart started beating faster, and I could feel the sweat on my brow. I shook my head. How could this be happening again? I thought this past betrayal was long buried.

Stopping at a white house with green shutters and a yellow door, Raelene jiggled the gate's latch and pushed it open. She knocked at the yellow door. Daniel appeared, and she put her hand on his arm and followed him inside.

I waited down the street, pacing, unsure what I should do. When Raelene came out of his house, he pointed her in the right direction. She started toward downtown, and I ducked behind a thick hemlock until she passed. I needed to talk to Daniel. I knocked on his door.

"Believe me," Daniel said. "I was reluctant to open the door when she showed up here." He fidgeted, tapping his crossed leg as he sat in his leather chair. "She stared at me as if trying to understand who I was and why I was in this house. When I spoke, then she seemed to remember me."

Daniel paused and looked around his living room. "She spent most of the hour walking around my house, examining my books and photos. She seemed to be searching for something, but when I asked, she just shrugged."

He turned to me with a worried look. "She said she would be back. What should I do? Should I let her in? Should I walk her home?" His voice had a plaintive tone.

"I usually follow her on her afternoon walks," I said. "If I think she's coming to your house, I'll text you. You can let her in or not. Up to you. I'll wait at the coffee shop down the street and make sure she gets home safely."

As I walked home, I wondered how long Raelene harbored desires for a different life, subsuming her needs and wants under her role as wife and mother until finally grasping for that other world through her affair with Daniel. Even as she slipped into the fog of her dementia, she was still searching.

I remembered a quote from Aristotle on the two paths to happiness. The ancient Greek philosopher said there was hedonic happiness or the pleasure-seeking way, but there was also the eudaemonic path to happiness. It came through finding your purpose and living in it. I'd always believed the latter was the ultimate goal and the highest human good. Raelene, when she left me, had chosen pleasure-seeking over purpose, which still shocked me. This was not the woman I had known for over 30 years. Was her shallowness an early symptom of her disease rather than a flaw in her character? I clung to that possibility.

She walked to Daniel's house again a few days later, and he opened the door. As I waited at the coffee shop, I wondered if she was sorting through her relationships. She'd only had two. Daniel, and me. Maybe he met needs that I didn't meet. Maybe he was a better lover. I wondered if they were having sex while I drank a latte and read the newspaper. I decided that if they did, and it brought her pleasure, I could live with it. I wondered, as her mind continued to fail her, if Daniel and I were merging in some way. Perhaps, together, we were the husband she wanted.

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Raelene's visits to Daniel faded away as the weather turned chilly. Most afternoons, she wandered outside to the end of our front walk, sometimes to the end of the block, but no further. I watched her, and I wondered what she hoped to find on those short sojourns as she shivered in the cold wind, wearing no coat, at the end of the sidewalk.

Some days I asked if she wanted to go for a walk downtown. We'd bundle up and press into the cold, holding hands. We'd discuss the changing storefronts through the festivals of fall and the approaching holidays. We would stroll through the art galleries and antique stores, usually stopping at the White Duck Café for tomato soup or coffee. Old friends often stopped and spoke to us, but Raelene never answered. I knew she didn't remember them, so I smiled and answered for her, and they would pat her hand and touch my shoulder as they walked away.

Small towns don't keep secrets well but know how to share communal pain. I found comfort in the little touches and unspoken words.

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Fall is sliding into winter. We sometimes take a drive on the Blue Ridge Parkway, not far from our little town. We park in the pull-offs and gaze across valleys at the distant mountains. I marvel out loud at the seasonal colors turning from the orange, red, and brown of fall to the gray and dark green of winter. Raelene seems to follow but does not comment. I remember how she once had been obsessed with color and the pleasure she took from exploring the palette of options when painting a room. She'd vowed to take up landscape painting someday.

I've learned her new rhythms as we live out our long goodbye. Most evenings now, she seems content to sit in her favorite chair and watch an old movie. I don't know if she finds pleasure in me watching with her. It occurs to me that throughout our marriage, I'd spent many evenings immersed in a book or my ruminations. Although she hid whatever frustration she may have had with my retreats, I suspected they left her feeling the outsider, as I often feel now.

Sarah calls each week to check on me.

"I don't want to talk to Mom, and I feel guilty about my frustration and lingering anger with her, when she's so sick," she says.

"It's okay, Sarah," I respond. "Her memory is too far gone to realize that you've not talked to her in a while." Sarah promises to visit soon.

We have two large wooden bowls on the table in front of our sofa filled with photographs from our life together. As Raelene pores over the contents of the bowls, I sit next to her, telling her about each photo. I find myself reminiscing about our life together, beginning in our 20s and now in our 60s. These memories are lost for her, but I still find joy in them. I reach for her hand, remembering my lovely gal through those unforgettable years. She squeezes my hand back, her eyes softly searching mine, and I'm grateful to have the opportunity to help ease the sadness of the final miles of her journey, no matter how crooked the road may be.