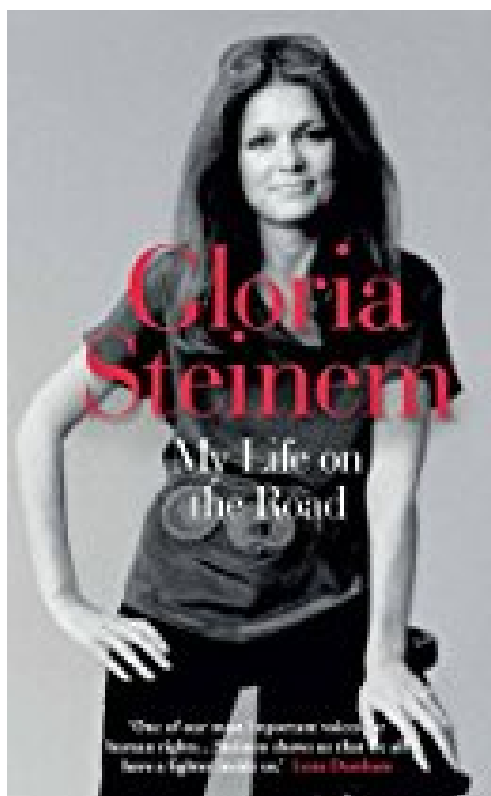




My Life on the Road



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My Life on the Road

Gloria Steinem

My Life on the Road Gloria Steinem

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304 pages

Extrait

I.

My Father's Footsteps

I come by my road habits honestly.

There were only a few months each year when my father seemed content with a house-dwelling life. Every summer, we stayed in the small house he had built across the road from a lake in rural Michigan, where he ran a dance pavilion on a pier over the water. Though there was no ocean within hundreds of miles, he had named it Ocean Beach Pier, and given it the grandiose slogan "Dancing Over the Water and Under the Stars."

On weeknights, people came from nearby farms and summer cottages to dance to a jukebox. My father dreamed up such attractions as a living chess game, inspired by his own love of chess, with costumed teenagers moving across the squares of the dance floor. On weekends, he booked the big dance bands of the 1930s and 1940s into this remote spot. People might come from as far away as Toledo or Detroit to dance to this live music on warm moonlit nights. Of course, paying the likes of Guy Lombardo or Duke Ellington or the Andrews Sisters meant that one rainy weekend could wipe out a whole summer's profits, so there was always a sense of gambling. I think my father loved that, too.

But as soon as Labor Day had ended this precarious livelihood, my father moved his office into his car. In the first warm weeks of autumn, we drove to nearby country auctions, where he searched for antiques amid the household goods and farm tools. After my mother, with her better eye for antiques and her reference books, appraised them for sale, we got into the car again to sell them to roadside antique dealers anywhere within a day's journey. I say "we" because from the age of four or so, I came into my own as the wrapper and unwrapper of china and other small items that we cushioned in newspaper and carried in cardboard boxes over country roads. Each of us had a role in the family economic unit, including my sister, nine years older than I, who in the summer sold popcorn from a professional stand my father bought her.

But once the first frost turned the lake to crystal and the air above it to steam, my father began collecting road maps from gas stations, testing the trailer hitch on our car, and talking about such faraway pleasures as thin sugary pralines from Georgia, all-you-can-drink orange juice from roadside stands in Florida, or slabs of salmon fresh from a California smokehouse.

Then one day, as if struck by a sudden whim rather than a lifelong wanderlust, he announced that it was time to put the family dog and other essentials into the house trailer that was always parked in our yard, and begin our long trek to Florida or California.

Sometimes this leave-taking happened so quickly that we packed more frying pans than plates, or left a kitchen full of dirty dishes and half-eaten food to greet us like Pompeii on our return. My father's decision always seemed to come as a surprise, even though his fear of the siren song of home was so great that he refused to put heating or hot water into our small house. If the air of early autumn grew too chilly for us to bathe in the lake, we heated water on a potbellied stove and took turns bathing in a big washtub next to the fireplace. Since this required the chopping of wood, an insult to my father's sybaritic soul, he had invented a wood-burning system all his own: he stuck one end of a long log into the fire and let the other protrude into

the living room, then kicked it into the fireplace until the whole thing turned to ash. Even a pile of cut firewood in the yard must have seemed to him a dangerous invitation to stay in one place.

After he turned his face to the wind, my father did not like to hesitate. Only once do I remember him turning back, and even then my mother had to argue strenuously that the iron might be burning its way through the ironing board. He would buy us a new radio, new shoes, almost anything rather than retrace the road already traveled.

At the time, I didn't question this spontaneity. It was part of the family ritual. Now I wonder if seasonal signals might be programmed into the human brain. After all, we've been a migratory species for nearly all our time on earth, and the idea of a settled life is very new. If birds will abandon their young rather than miss the moment to begin a flight of thousands of miles, what migratory signals might our own cells still hold? Perhaps my father—and even my mother, though she paid a far higher price for our wanderings—had chosen a life in which those signals could still be heard.

My parents also lived off the land—in their own way. We never started out with enough money to reach our destination, not even close. Instead, we took a few boxes of china, silver, and other small antiques from those country auctions, and used them to prime the process of buying, selling, and bartering our way along the southern route to California, or still farther south to Florida and the Gulf of Mexico. It was a pattern that had begun years before I was born, and my father knew every roadside dealer in antiques along the way, as a desert traveler knows each oasis. Still, some shops were always new or under new management, and it must have taken courage to drive up in our dusty car and trailer, knowing that we looked less like antique dealers than like migrants forced to sell the family heritage. If a shop owner treated us with too much disdain, my father was not above letting him think we really were selling our possessions. Then he would regain his dignity by elaborating on his triumph once he was back in the car.

Since my parents believed that travel was an education in itself, I didn't go to school. My teenage sister enrolled in whatever high school was near our destination, but I was young enough to get away with only my love of comic books, horse stories, and Louisa May Alcott. Reading in the car was so much my personal journey that when my mother urged me to put down my book and look out the window, I would protest, "But I just looked an hour ago!" Indeed, it was road signs that taught me to read in the first place—perfect primers, when you think about it. coffee came with a steaming cup, hot dogs and hamburgers had illustrations, a bed symbolized hotel, and graphics warned of bridge or road work. There was also the magic of rhyming. A shaving cream company had placed small signs at intervals along the highway, and it was anticipating the rhyme that kept me reading:

If you

don't know

whose signs

these are

you can't have

driven

very far.

Burma Shave

Later, when I read that Isak Dinesen recited English poems to her Kikuyu workers in Kenya—and they requested them over and over again, even though they didn't understand the words—I knew exactly what they meant. Rhyming in itself is magic.

In this way, we progressed through rain and sandstorms, heat waves and cold winds, one small part of a migration of American nomads. We ate in diners where I developed a lifetime ambition to run one with blue gingham curtains and bran muffins. In the car during the day, we listened to radio serials, and at night, to my father singing popular songs to stay awake.

I remember driving into the pungent smell of gas stations, where men in overalls emerged from under cars, wiping their hands on greasy rags and ushering us into a mysterious and masculine world. Inside were restrooms that were not for the queasy or faint of heart. Outside were ice chests from whose watery depths my father would pluck a Coke, drink it down in one amazing gulp, and then search for a bottle of my beloved Nehi Grape Soda so I could sip it slowly until my tongue turned purple. The attendants themselves were men of few words, yet they gave freely of their knowledge of the road and the weather, charging only for the gas they sold.

I think of them now as tribesmen along a trading route, or suppliers of caravans where the Niger enters the Sahara, or sailmakers serving the spice ships of Trivandrum. And I wonder: Were they content with their role, or was this as close to a traveling life as they could come?

I remember my father driving on desert roads made of wired-together planks, with only an occasional rattlesnake ranch or one-pump gas station to break the monotony. We stopped at ghost towns that had been emptied of every living soul, and saw sand dunes pushing against lurching buildings, sometimes shifting to reveal a brass post office box or other treasure. I placed my hands on weathered boards, trying to imagine the people they once had sheltered, while my parents followed the more reliable route of asking the locals. One town had died slowly after the first asphalt road was laid too far away. Another was emptied by fear when a series of mysterious murders were traced to the sheriff. A third was being repopulated as a stage set for a western movie starring Gary Cooper, with sagging buildings soaked in kerosene to make an impressive fire, and signs placed everywhere to warn bystanders away.

Ever challenged by rules, my father took us down the road to a slack place in the fence, and sneaked us onto the set. Perhaps assuming that we had permission from higher-ups, the crew treated us with deference. I still have a photo my father took of me standing a few feet from Gary Cooper, who is looking down at me with amusement, my head at about the height of his knee, my worried gaze fixed on the ground.

As a child who wanted too much to fit in, I worried that we would be abandoned like those towns one day, or that my father's rule-breaking would bring down some nameless punishment. But now I wonder: Without those ghost towns that live in my imagination longer than any inhabited place, would I have known that mystery leaves a space for us when certainty does not? And would I have dared to challenge rules later in life if my father had obeyed them?

Whenever we were flush, we traded the cold concrete showers of trailer parks for taking turns at a hot bath in a motel. Afterward, we often went to some local movie palace, a grand and balconied place that was nothing like the warrens of viewing rooms today. My father was always sure that a movie and a malted could cure anything—and he wasn't wrong. We would cross the sidewalk that sparkled with mica, enter the gilded lobby with fountains where moviegoers threw pennies for luck and future return, and leave our cares behind.

In that huge dark space filled with strangers, all facing huge and glowing images, we gave ourselves up to another world.

Now I know that both the palaces and the movies were fantasies created by Hollywood in the Depression, the only adventures most people could afford. I think of them again whenever I see subway riders lost in paperback mysteries, the kind that Stephen King's waitress mother once called her "cheap sweet vacations"—and so he writes them for her still. I think of them when I see children cramming all five senses into virtual images online, or when I pass a house topped by a satellite dish almost as big as it is, as if the most important thing were the ability to escape. The travel writer Bruce Chatwin wrote that our nomadic past lives on in our "need for distraction, our mania for the new."¹ In many languages, even the word for human being is "one who goes on migrations." Progress itself is a word rooted in a seasonal journey. Perhaps our need to escape into media is a misplaced desire for the journey.

Most of all from my childhood travels, I remember the first breath of salt air as we neared our destination. On a California highway overlooking the Pacific or a Florida causeway that cut through the Gulf of Mexico like Moses parting the Red Sea, we would get out of our cramped car, stretch, and fill our lungs in an ontogeny of birth. Melville once said that every path leads to the sea, the source of all life. That conveys the fatefulness of it—but not the joy.

Years later, I saw a movie about a prostituted woman in Paris who saves money to take her young daughter on a vacation by the sea. As their train full of workers rounds a cliff, the shining limitless waters spread out beneath them—and suddenly all the passengers begin to laugh, throw open the windows, and toss out cigarettes, coins, lipstick: everything they thought they needed a moment before.

This was the joy I felt as a wandering child. Whenever the road presents me with its greatest gift—a moment of unity with everything around me—I still do.

Another truth of my early wanderings is harder to admit: I longed for a home. It wasn't a specific place but a mythical neat house with conventional parents, a school I could walk to, and friends who lived nearby. My dream bore a suspicious resemblance to the life I saw in movies, but my longing for it was like a constant low-level fever. I never stopped to think that children in neat houses and conventional schools might envy me.

When I was ten or so, my parents separated. My sister was devastated, but I had never understood why two such different people were married in the first place. My mother often worried her way into depression, and my father's habit of mortgaging the house, or otherwise going into debt without telling her, didn't help. Also, wartime gas rationing had forced Ocean Beach Pier to close, and my father was on the road nearly full time, buying and selling jewelry and small antiques to make a living. He felt he could no longer look after my sometimes-incapacitated mother. Also, she wanted to live near my sister, who was finishing college in Massachusetts, and now I was old enough to be her companion.

We rented a house in a small town, and spent most of one school year there. It was the most conventional life we would ever lead. After my sister graduated and left for her first grown-up job, my mother and I moved to East Toledo and an ancient farmhouse where her family had once lived. As with all inferior things, this part of the city was given an adjective while the rest stole the noun. What once had been countryside was crowded with the small houses of factory workers. *Revue de presse*

"This legendary feminist makes a compelling case for traveling as listening: a way of letting strangers' stories flow, as she puts it, 'out of our heads and into our hearts.'"—**People**

“Like Steinem herself, [*My Life on the Road*] is thoughtful and astonishingly humble. It is also filled with a sense of the momentous while offering deeply personal insights into what shaped her.”—**O: The Oprah Magazine**

“[Steinem’s] new book is a lyrical meditation on restlessness and the quest for equity that has taken her from the women-only rail cars of India to myriad university campuses where she has helped generations of women and men rally their collective voices. . . . Part of the appeal of *My Life* is how Steinem, with evocative, melodic prose, conveys the air of discovery and wonder she felt during so many of her journeys. . . . Whatever one’s politics, such candor draws you in. And as the country continues to struggle with painful questions about race relations, reproductive rights and the plight of immigrants, the lessons imparted in *Life on the Road* offer more than a reminiscence. They are a beacon of hope for the future.”—**USA Today**

“*My Life on the Road*, Ms. Steinem’s first book in more than twenty years, is a warmly companionable look back at nearly five decades as itinerant feminist organizer and standard-bearer. If you’ve ever wondered what it might be like to sit down with Ms. Steinem for a casual dinner, this disarmingly intimate book gives a pretty good idea, mixing hard-won pragmatic lessons with more inspirational insights.”—**The New York Times**

“Steinem beautifully illustrates how her perpetual motion has shaped her professional life. . . . [She] has gained wisdom from cabdrivers and fellow airplane passengers, and gotten story tips from strangers at rural diners and truck stops. . . . Steinem’s life has been so remarkable that her memoir would have been fascinating even without a central theme, but her decision to use travel as a thematic thread was a smart one.”—**The New York Times Book Review (Editors’ Choice)**

“Steinem rocks. *My Life on the Road* abounds with fresh insights and is as populist as can be. . . . Honoring its title, *My Life on the Road* ranges around subject-wise. One minute Steinem is writing about stewardesses on the shuttle, the next women who taught Gandhi. Now she’s railing against Betty Friedan, whose focus on white middle-class feminism Steinem argues damaged the movement. Still later she’s celebrating her friendships with Native American women, whom she sees as guides into the future. . . . Go, Steinemite!”—**The Boston Globe**

“In person and in her writing, Steinem exudes a rare combination of calm, humility and honesty about her weaknesses that explains all she has accomplished and why she’s become the figurehead she has. . . . Her secret appears to be a surprising willingness to be open to learning from her incredibly varied audiences. . . . [This is] a memoir—but really, it’s a lens through which to see a great many people, a vessel for their stories, a mouthpiece to share them.”—**Jezebel**

“It’s amazing to have a lifelong heroine who is also one of my favorite writers. Gloria Steinem is a deeply revolutionary woman. She steered us through the contentious years of the women’s movement without losing her humanity or her wonderful sense of humor. She changed America in a fundamental way without being damaged by it or losing her joy. *My Life on the Road* is filled with beautifully told stories of the people she has spoken with and listened to, been changed by, helped organize, got radicalized by, could get lost in, could get found in. It is soul material, human and political, funny and touching, deeply spiritual. I began it again the day after I finished.”—**Anne Lamott**

“Rarely do women have the opportunity to travel as Steinem has done—living a life full of radical adventure. Everywhere she goes, she carries with her the vitality of democracy, of freedom for women and men, and her profound love of justice. Now she offers us the good fortune of journeying with her. *My Life on the Road* is an inspiring work, a call for action. Steinem shares her life as a global freedom fighter, inviting readers to

continue the journey—and the struggle.”—**bell hooks**

“*My Life on the Road* is a personal, beautiful look at the deceptively radical act of travel and how it formed one of our most important voices for human rights. By delving deeper into her own thrilling story, Steinem shows us that we all have a fighter inside us—we need only pack our bags and follow her.”—**Lena Dunham**

“Countless times, I had to put Gloria Steinem’s new book down and allow an explosive truth she had just revealed to roll through me. And they all arrived—page after page—in the most personal, unexpected ways. I won’t be the same person after having read *My Life on the Road*.”—**Jane Fonda**

“Gloria Steinem’s new book is a lightning rod to the head and heart: stimulating, no, shocking us to get up out of our easy chairs and do something meaningful with our lives—to *hit the road*. Women will read *My Life on the Road*, but men must.”—**James Patterson**

“Gloria Steinem’s lightness of being combined with her complete seriousness, her love for words and her call for actions, remind us to celebrate her as one of the most important women of our time.”—**Diane von Furstenberg** Présentation de l’éditeur

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • Gloria Steinem—writer, activist, organizer, and inspiring leader—tells a story she has never told before, a candid account of her life as a traveler, a listener, and a catalyst for change.

ONE OF O: THE OPRAH MAGAZINE’S TEN FAVORITE BOOKS OF THE YEAR | NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY *Harper’s Bazaar* • *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* • *Publishers Weekly*

When people ask me why I still have hope and energy after all these years, I always say: Because I travel. Taking to the road—by which I mean letting the road take you—changed who I thought I was. The road is messy in the way that real life is messy. It leads us out of denial and into reality, out of theory and into practice, out of caution and into action, out of statistics and into stories—in short, out of our heads and into our hearts.

Gloria Steinem had an itinerant childhood. When she was a young girl, her father would pack the family in the car every fall and drive across country searching for adventure and trying to make a living. The seeds were planted: Gloria realized that growing up didn’t have to mean settling down. And so began a lifetime of travel, of activism and leadership, of listening to people whose voices and ideas would inspire change and revolution.

My Life on the Road is the moving, funny, and profound story of Gloria’s growth and also the growth of a revolutionary movement for equality—and the story of how surprising encounters on the road shaped both. From her first experience of social activism among women in India to her work as a journalist in the 1960s; from the whirlwind of political campaigns to the founding of *Ms.* magazine; from the historic 1977 National Women’s Conference to her travels through Indian Country—a lifetime spent on the road allowed Gloria to listen and connect deeply with people, to understand that context is everything, and to become part of a movement that would change the world.

In prose that is revealing and rich, Gloria reminds us that living in an open, observant, and “on the road” state of mind can make a difference in how we learn, what we do, and how we understand each other.

Praise for *My Life on the Road*

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