

Following Where the Road Leads

Art Taylor

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When I first wrote “Rearview Mirror,” the opening story in my novel in stories *On the Road with Del & Louise* (currently a finalist for the Agatha Award for Best First Novel), I had no idea that these characters would have life beyond that initial adventure. The goal in my mind was to finish a single story, not to start a whole book.

Even when the story was published in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine* and earned some positive attention and accolades (including my first Derringer Award), it still took me several years to begin wondering about Del and Louise’s life further on down the road: What happened to them next? Where were they now?

As I wrote more of their adventures toward the eventual novel—six in all, woven together to form a larger narrative arc—I went back and revised the original story for a couple of reasons: first, simply because I *never* feel like I’m done revising and I *always* find more troubles each time I reread something I’ve written, and second, because I needed to smooth out some continuity issues that had cropped up putting that story alongside others. But in the process, what surprised me was how much the first couple of pages—without my conscious advance planning—held some of the seeds for the larger, longer storyline that had never been part of my original thinking.

Here are the first two pages, in full, of *On the Road with Del & Louise*:

I hadn't been thinking about killing Delwood. Not really. But you know how people sometimes have just had enough. That's what I'd meant when I said it to him, "I could just kill you," the two of us sitting in his old Nova in front of a cheap motel on Route 66—meaning it figurative, even if that might seem at odds with me sliding his pistol into my purse right after I said it.

And even though I was indeed thinking hard about taking my half of the money and maybe a little more—literal now, literally taking it—I would not call it a double-cross. Just kind of a divorce and a divorce settlement. Even though we weren't married. But that's not the point.

Sometimes people are too far apart in their wants—that's what Mama told me. Sometimes things don't work out.

That was the point.

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"Why don't we take the day off?" I'd asked Del earlier that morning up in Taos, a Saturday, the sun creeping up, the boil not yet on the day, and everything still mostly quiet in the mobile home park where we'd been renting on the bi-weekly. "We could go buy you a suit, and I could get a new dress. Maybe we'd go out to dinner. To Joseph's Table maybe. Celebrate a little."

He snorted. "Louise," he said, the way he does. "What's it gonna look like, the two of us, staying out here, paycheck to paycheck, economical to say the least"—he put emphasis on economical, always liking the sound of anything above three syllables—"and suddenly going out all spiffed up to the nicest restaurant in town?" He

looked at me for a while, then shook his head.

“We don’t have to go to the nicest restaurant,” I said, trying to compromise, which is the mark of a good relationship. “We could just go down to the bar at the Taos Inn and splurge on some high-dollar bourbon and nice steaks.” I knew he liked steaks, and I could picture him smiling over it, chewing, both of us fat and happy. So to speak, I mean, the fat part being figurative again, of course.

“We told Hal we’d vacate the premises by this morning. We agreed.”

Hal was the man who ran the mobile home park. A week before, Del had told him he’d finally gotten his degree and then this whole other story about how we’d be moving out to California, where Del’s sister lived, and how we were gonna buy a house over there.

“Sister?” I had wanted to say when I overheard it. “House?” But then I realized he was just laying the groundwork, planning ahead so our leaving wouldn’t look sudden or suspicious. Concocting a story—I imagine that’s the way he would have explained it, except he didn’t explain it to me but just did it.

That’s the way he was sometimes: a planner, not a communicator. Taciturn, he called it. Somewhere in there, in his not explaining and my not asking, he had us agreeing. And now he had us leaving.

Several of the elements that drove the initial story also ending up driving the full narrative: relationship issues and questions of long-term commitment (“a divorce and a divorce settlement. Even though we weren’t married”); economic troubles and a backdrop of middling seediness (“the mobile home park where we’d been renting on the bi-weekly”) combined with aspirational tendencies (“We could go buy you a suit, and I could get a new dress. Maybe we’d go out to dinner”); different approaches to what we want and how we plan (“What’s it gonna look like...?”); and some even more blunt breakdowns in communication (“Somewhere in there, in his not explaining and my not asking, he had us agreeing”). And then there’s Mama. What seemed a little bit of a throwaway line when I drafted those opening paragraphs ultimately emerged into a presence that loomed constantly over Louise and her decisions, a presence that eventually grew to the point of stealing scenes she wasn’t physically in. And then when she did appear in the final stop along their journey...well, everyone needed to watch out.

Thinking conventionally about how an opening might grab a reader, I guess it’s hard not to zero in on the first line—“I hadn’t been thinking about killing Del”—because of the immediate talk of murder and then the layering of suggestions and questions there: So even if she hasn’t, is she thinking about it now? Has she already killed him or is she going to? And why?

Beyond that, there's the direct address to the reader—"you know how sometimes"—which I hoped might build some immediacy and some connection. And then the action itself that builds more dramatically, more tangibly, on the musings that opened the paragraph—Louise “sliding his pistol into my purse.”

I hope all of that served its purpose, but what pulled me along was Louise's voice, which permeated each of those steps: the conversational tone, the folksiness of it maybe, and the immediacy. Not much of my fiction is voice-driven like this, and I'm not entirely sure where Louise came from to be honest. But once that voice was in my head and then down on the page, all I had to do was try to follow where she led me, one adventure after another. It was a ride I enjoyed taking, and I just hope that readers have ultimately enjoyed the journey too.

Art Taylor is the author of *On the Road with Del & Louise: A Novel in Stories*, currently a finalist for the Agatha Award for Best First Novel. His short fiction has won two Agathas, an Anthony, a Macavity, and three consecutive Derringer Awards. Stories have appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*,



in the Chesapeake Crime anthologies *This Job Is Murder*, *Homicidal Holidays*, and the forthcoming *Storm Warning*. He teaches at George Mason University and contributes frequently to the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Independent Review of Books*, and *Mystery Scene*. Check out his website at <http://www.arttaylorwriter.com>.