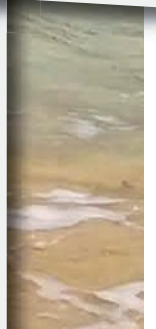
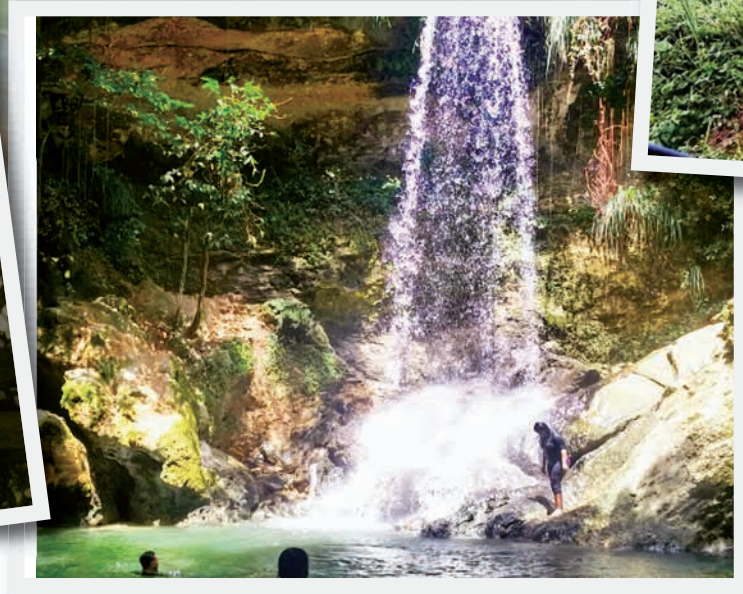


# WE ARE NOT LOST



*Navigating the uncharted territories of a father-daughter relationship.* BY SHIRA LEVINE

“AA will never find us!” my dad exclaims, banging the console in frustration as I make a sharp left to ascend the narrow, winding country road. We just took another one of those extreme blind turns where you have to honk several times to alert potentially oncoming cars.

“How do you know we’re going the right way?” he asks for the umpteenth time.

I’m used to repeating myself. With little emotion and a touch of impatience I remind him: “The little blue arrow is still following the blue line on the GPS. We’re not lost!”

Hopefully. It’s just me and my dad on the road. As the navigator on this father-daughter trip, I decided that we would take La Ruta Panoramica (Puerto Rico’s equivalent of Route

66) across the mainland at this point in our eight-day bonding adventure.

The paper map we got from Diana, the fantastically helpful concierge at The Vanderbilt Condado, slips to the sandy rental car floor. We’ve snaked our way pretty deep into Puerto Rico’s backcountry, along local roads. But we are *not lost*.



The decadent comforts of the historic Vanderbilt feel far behind us, even though we checked out only 24 hours ago. Two pampered nights in one of the capital city's poshest hotels, where the pillowtop beds, the cantilevered oceanview balcony, and the quiet walks along the shoreline collectively set the stage for my dad and me to dig deeper—to finally see one another as whole, heartfelt people for the very first time.

Now on La Ruta, caught somewhere between states of semi-relaxation and technological defeat, my dad casts his gaze out

the window. Low-slung clouds veil the mountainous La Cordillera Central. Fallen jungle brush untidies the U.S. military-paved roads traversed by chickens, roosters, horses and dogs. "Symbiosis," my dad had acknowledged earlier, when we e y e d a w i l d h o r s e w a l k i n g



alongside a cattle egret.

Teaching my dad to chill out, trust in technology and enjoy the open road is challenging. This is totally outside the comfort zone of my hardworking 73-year-old father. Yet I am determined. After all, my dad had never slept on a feathertop mattress, but he seemed to enjoy

that. And it had meant the world to me to give him the king-size bed with 300-thread count Rivolta Carmignani linens while I took the fold-out couch.

Finally, "Why are you so calm?" he demands, incredulous.

"Because the blue arrow is following the blue path on the GPS," I explain, again. "It's telling me the way." Since I'm behind the wheel, we're doing it my way: seeing everything and anything whenever we felt like it, *inshallah*. I don't want my dad to spend his time driving, a burden he associates with commuting to work. *It's more about the journey than the destination* is my

“  
*Since I'm behind the  
 wheel, we're doing it my  
 way: seeing everything  
 and anything whenever  
 we feel like it.*  
 ”

repeated mantra. That's how we discover the remote cove in Manati and the petroglyphs beyond Barceloneta.

"I really like the destination!" he tries to encourage, "but I prefer those nice, big, w e l l - p a v e d highways!" As the days progress, however, he focuses more on what we are passing and

less on where we are going and when we'll get there. He is suddenly game to drive an hour out of the way just to check out a beach or a waterfall.

"Country road, take me home!" Dad spontaneously sings somewhere south of our Airbnb in Utuado. "Do you know who John Denver is?" he asks.

Eager to impress him, I (unsafely) use my

right hand to scroll through Spotify. "Almost heaven, West Virginia, Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River..." emotes my iPhone.

"That's coming from your phone?!" he asks, impressed. "And the GPS? At the same time? You're amazing! How do you know this stuff?"

"Your driving is good," he then proclaims. When I say this is a massive compliment coming from him, it's an understatement. (At 17, I was ticketed three times within two weeks for extreme speeding. The latter two tickets were issued in different states, within 45 minutes of each other. To this day, my mother won't let me even sit in the driver's seat of her car, much less touch her keys.) "I'm going to tell Mom," he adds, unprompted. "We've been wrong all these years. We should trust your driving."

Once nestled in Culebra six days into our trip, my dad finds himself spending more hours of the day relaxing than worrying. Sure, he still insists on carrying all of his cash at all times in his fanny packs (yes, packs, plural—he wears a bigger one outside his shorts and a flatter one against his skin), but he had willingly surrendered his suitcase to our rental car trunk and repacked a smaller duffel for the 15-minute flight to our last stop of the trip. Once there, he even surrenders to culinary adventures, trying an acai bowl at Vibra Verde, mofongo at Mamacita's, and utterly non-kosher pork ribs at Dinghy Dock.

One request my mother made before we left was that I help get my dad more interested and comfortable taking pictures with his phone. This had seemed impossible; he can't remember which button was the shutter and often positions his finger over the lens. But on our last day in Culebra, while driving back from Zoni beach to our studio apartment, we come up over a steep hill along the Carretera 250 and find ourselves at a striking overlook of Culebra Cemetery.

"Hey, can you stop?" he suddenly asks. "I want to take a picture." An astonishing request from someone who is rarely inclined to bother.

A few weeks after we return from Puerto Rico, my dad calls. He begins reminiscing about what a "special, great trip" we'd had, one he'll never forget. And then: "I really admire you, Shira. The way you handle yourself, how you connect with people. I'm really proud of you."

Ironically, these are all traits I get from him. Listening to his words, seeing how he really noticed me in ways parents seldom do, brings me to tears. As I got to know my dad more closely on this trip, my dad had also started to get *me*.