Folded Directions

I learned Canada from the back seat of my dad's Honda.

Not the postcard version—no canoe silhouettes, no perfect snowflakes caught on eyelashes. I learned it in exits and errands, in little instructions spoken with the seriousness of a kid holding an entire family's day between their teeth.

"Okay," my dad would say, already inching toward the lane change. "What's next?"

And I would tell him, because I always did.

Growing up, only my dad had a phone. It wasn't a casual thing. It wasn't something you scrolled on to kill time. It lived in his pocket like a tool—important, expensive, not to be touched unless necessary. And it definitely wasn't for maps.

We also didn't have data like that. Not the kind where you could pull up directions whenever you wanted and let a calm voice guide you. If we needed to go somewhere unfamiliar, we did it the old way: before we left, I would write directions down on a piece of paper.

A real paper, with a pen that sometimes skipped ink. My handwriting too big at first, then smaller as I tried to fit more.

Left at the second light.
Right after the plaza.
Exit toward 401 East Toronto.
If you see the big sign, you went too far.

I folded that paper twice, then twice again, until it became a small square that fit perfectly in my palm. That little square was our GPS, except the voice wasn't robotic and calm.

It was me.

And we were never alone. I had two younger siblings in the backseat during all of it, always. The three of us squished between their car seats and our big puffy winter jackets. One starting fights. The other suddenly starving the second the car moved. The car wasn't quiet enough for fear to feel dramatic; everything happened under the sound of crinkling snack bags, my dad's old '90s Punjabi music, and "stop touching me."

Hamilton and Brampton are two different kinds of loud. Hamilton feels colder and rougher, wind in your face, slush and salt on the roads, everything kind of industrial, like the city is working even when you aren't. Brampton feels busy. Plazas and parking lots, traffic and lights, signs in a variety of languages, and families moving in and out of stores like the day never really slows down.

In both places, we were always going somewhere that needed a number, a form, a signature, a decision.

And always, me in the back seat like a tiny manager, with a scrap of paper and a pen mark under my thumbnail.

I didn't just translate language. I translated the country.

At home, the letters would arrive—brown envelopes, white envelopes with windows, headings that looked angry even when they weren't. My parents would stand behind me while I read them out loud.

Payment due.
Notice.
Required.

I learned to soften bad news before it hit the room. I learned to announce good news like it was a prize. I learned to make my voice steady even when my stomach wasn't.

But in the car, my job was different.

In the car, I was the map.

Dad drove. Mom kept track of the time, the bags, the kids. The kids turned the backseat into a moving argument. And I sat up with my folded paper, trying to be older than I was.

I learned to speak in warning times.

"Not this light—next one."

"Stay right."

"After the plaza."

My dad trusted my voice against the chaos of roads and signs. That kind of trust is intoxicating when you're a kid. It makes you feel important. It makes you feel like you matter in a way school never taught.

It also makes every mistake feel like you ruined the entire day.

Because a missed turn in our family wasn't just a missed turn.

It was "See? This is why we shouldn't come."

"Now we are going to be late."

“Why didn’t you say before?”

“You never listen.”

And underneath all of it—quiet, heavy, buckled in—was guilt. Like if the road went wrong, it meant you went wrong.

Still, I got good. I got *so* good.

There were days when my dad wouldn’t change lanes without my blessing. Days when I knew the highways like gossip—who merged where, which ramps were cursed with construction, which exits always backed up for no reason. I knew the rhythm of a route the way other kids knew song lyrics.

And after the errands—after the paperwork, the talking, the pretending you weren’t stressed—there was one thing that made the whole day feel survivable.

Tim Hortons.

Not as a treat in the dramatic way people imagine treats. Not fancy. Not a reward you posted about. Just warmth. Sugar. A small moment where everyone softened.

Tim Hortons meant we made it. Tim Hortons meant the day didn’t win.

That’s what I told myself on errand mornings: if we can just get through this, we’ll get Tim Hortons.

One Saturday, my mom announced we had errands. She said it like it was a category of life, not a list.

The full loop: ServiceOntario, TD Bank, groceries, something about a bill—and then Tim Hortons, because we were allowed nice things sometimes and because my mother understood that a family needs something to look forward to.

The day was grey and slushy, the kind of winter where the snow isn’t pretty, it’s just tired. The windshield wipers smeared salt water across the glass. My siblings were already arguing.

“He’s touching me.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Are we there yet?”

My mom handed back snacks without looking. My dad turned the music down the way he always did when he needed to focus. That small gesture made the car feel like a test.

I unfolded my paper.

“Okay,” I said. “We go this way.”

My dad nodded, serious. “Tell me.”

First stop was ServiceOntario. The place with the number machine and the chairs that always felt damp, like they had absorbed years of stress. The place where people held folders like shields and stared at the floor like eye contact might cost extra.

My dad hated it. Not just the waiting—the feeling of not having the right words quickly enough.

“You talk,” he said to me, not unkindly. Like he was assigning a role in a play we’d performed a hundred times.

Inside, my siblings swung their legs and complained about the boredom like it was a personal betrayal. My mom shushed them. My dad sat still in that tight way adults sit when they’re trying not to look nervous.

When it was our turn, the employee smiled with tired kindness.

“Hi. How can I help you today?”

My mom started speaking quickly, wanting to get it right. I stepped in and translated—renewal, address, ID—my voice suddenly smooth, like I’d been practicing a different version of myself.

We got through it. We walked back out into the cold and my mom exhaled like she’d been holding her breath the whole time.

“Next,” she said, counting on her fingers. “TD.”

The bank always made the car quieter.

TD was where adulthood felt official. A place of lines and forms and questions that could change your week depending on how you answered. Even the pens were chained down, like trust was something you could lose.

My dad parked and sat for a second before getting out.

In the backseat, my siblings were still squirming. One was suddenly desperate for the bathroom. The other had invented a new complaint just to feel alive. My mom adjusted zippers, fixed hats, told someone to stop making that noise. Life didn’t pause because the adults were stressed.

Inside, the teller smiled.

“Hi there. What can I do for you today?”

My dad slid papers forward. My mom added something too fast. Then both looked at me.

I translated—chequing, savings, statement, fees, bills, ID—switching between languages like it was a reflex. The teller asked a question, and my dad hesitated, just for a second, and I felt that old familiar heat in my chest.

The moment where hesitation can turn into embarrassment. The moment where the air changes.

I filled the gap quickly.

“Sorry, one second,” I said, and then in our language: *He means this one. The number is here.*

My dad nodded, relieved. My mom’s fingers tightened on her purse strap. The teller typed and smiled again and said something like “No worries,” in that Canadian way that feels like a door opening.

Outside, the wind slapped us awake.

“Grocery,” my mom said.

The grocery store was bright and loud and full of decisions. My mom held a flyer like it was sacred and compared prices like she was solving a math problem that determined our whole week. We chose the bigger bag because cost per unit mattered more than aesthetics. We said no to things we wanted. My siblings begged anyway.

And still we laughed.

In the cereal aisle my dad made a joke about a box like he couldn’t help himself, and my mom laughed too loud, and for a second it felt like we weren’t a family trying to survive a country.

We were just a family.

After groceries, we had one more stop—something my parents discussed in low voices while I pretended not to listen. The kind of stop that meant nothing to kids but everything to adults. A bill. A form. A “we have to” thing.

Back in the car, I unfolded my directions again.

My paper was creased from my hands. The ink had smudged on one line where my thumb had rubbed too long. The folded corners were soft now, tired.

My dad asked, “Okay. What now?”

I scanned the page. My eyes jumped. I lost my place.

In the backseat, my siblings were arguing again, louder this time—an argument about nothing that somehow sounded like the end of the world.

“Stop.”

“No, you stop.”

My mom snapped, sharp. “Enough!”

My dad was already merging. A green sign came up with two arrows and a name that didn’t land in my brain fast enough.

“Wait,” I said. “Stay right—stay right.”

My dad moved right.

The exit came too fast.

“Not—” I started, but my thought snagged. My voice lagged by one second.

One second was all it took.

We took the ramp.

For a moment the car was just tires and breathing.

My dad’s voice wasn’t loud yet, but it had the shape of anger in it. “Is this correct?”

I stared out the window at buildings I didn’t recognize. My folded directions didn’t tell me what to do when I was already wrong. That little rectangle of handwriting was built for certainty, not detours.

“I think…” I said.

My siblings went quiet in that immediate way kids do when they can feel the air change.

“We’re not lost,” my mom cut in, fast. Not as comfort—more like a rule. Lost meant helpless. Lost meant new. Lost meant you didn’t belong.

And in our family, we didn’t ask for help.

Not because we didn’t need it. Because we didn’t know we were allowed. Because asking strangers for help felt like making your weakness public. Like admitting you weren’t built for this place.

So, there was no pulling over. No walking into a store. No “excuse me.” No kind voice offering directions.

There was just me.

Nine, ten, eleven, whatever age you are when you’re too young for authority but somehow have responsibility—trying to rebuild a map inside my head.

“Okay,” I said, and forced my voice into calm. Calm was part of the job. “Okay. We’ll keep going and find the main road again.”

My dad didn’t answer. He just drove.

I leaned forward, squinting at every sign like it could confess. I started collecting clues the way I collected words: the shape of the lanes, the names on the green boards, the way the road curved, the direction the sun would’ve been if it ever showed itself in winter. I looked for anything familiar—an on-ramp, a bus stop, a plaza sign, a landmark that could forgive me.

My mom shushed my siblings with a voice that meant *not now,* like even their childhood had to be quiet until the route was solved.

I made a decision.

“Take the next right,” I said, before doubt could catch up. “Then left at the lights.”

My dad signaled and turned like he was testing whether he still trusted me.

My heart thumped so hard I could feel it in my throat. I kept talking anyway, because silence would’ve admitted we were lost.

“Okay—straight. Straight. We’re fine. We’re going to get back.”

I wasn’t sure.

But I sounded sure.

That was the skill.

A few minutes passed. Maybe it was only two. Maybe it was ten. Time stretches in cars when everyone is waiting to see if you’re wrong.

Then I saw it—something that clicked. A name. A sign. A shape of road I recognized.

“There,” I said too quickly. “There—see? We’re back.”

My dad exhaled, long and quiet, like he'd been holding his breath for the same amount of time I had.

Nobody apologized. Nobody said thank you. We didn't do that with things like this. We just moved on, as if we hadn't all felt the moment where the day could've cracked.

The errands continued. The family continued.

And then—because my mom always kept promises, because she understood what a small warm thing can do to a day—she said it.

"Tim Hortons?"

My dad's face softened immediately. "Yes. Tim Hortons."

We never did drive-thru. That felt like a whole other language—too fast, too many chances to mess up, too much pressure to sound confident through a crackling speaker. Inside was safer. Inside you could read the menu twice, point if you needed to, take your time without feeling like you were holding up a line of cars.

So, we parked. We all went in together—winter jackets, cold air following us through the door, my siblings suddenly wide awake like Tim Hortons was an event.

The smell hit first: coffee, sugar, donuts, wet mittens. The line moved in polite inches. People stared up at the menu like it contained instructions for how to live here properly.

My dad looked at the board, then at me. Not because he couldn't order—but because this was our rhythm. Roles. Muscle memory.

"Say it," he murmured.

I stepped forward and ordered like I'd done it a hundred times—because I had.

"Two medium double-doubles," I said, counting in my head like it mattered, like getting it wrong would undo the whole day. "Three small hot chocolates. And ten Timbits."

The cashier repeated it back, and I repeated it back again, just to be sure. There was comfort in that loop—call and response, confirmation, proof that we were understood.

When the tray came, the cups fogged the air between us. The Timbits box was warm through the cardboard, like a small, contained sun. My siblings started negotiating ownership before we even reached the door.

Back in the car, everything softened.

Hands wrapped around heat. Sugar did its job. The day stopped feeling like a test.

My dad took the first sip of his double-double and exhaled like something heavy had finally been set down.

“See,” he said, smiling like he’d won. “Good day.”

I looked at my parents—tired, resilient, joking, alive—and I thought about what people mean when they say heritage. They imagine history as something behind you, something carved into stone.

But my heritage was smaller and closer.

It was paper directions folded into a square. It was learning to speak calm when your heart wasn’t. It was two younger siblings in the backseat and my mom passing snacks like peace offerings. It was my dad turning the music down and trusting my voice.

It was the fact that when we got lost, we didn’t ask for help—we recalculated quietly and kept moving anyway.

Years later, when people say “recalculating” like it means failure, I think of my family.

Detouring. Adjusting. Laughing anyway.

It means you didn’t fail.

It means you’re still moving.

It means there’s another way.

And somehow, I learned that too—from the back seat.