

HOW TO LOVE YOURSELF AND THE HUMAN RACE IN SEVENTEEN DAYS  
(OR LESS)

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## ABSTRACT

### HOW TO LOVE YOURSELF AND THE HUMAN RACE IN SEVENTEEN DAYS (OR LESS)

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Presented here for your consideration is a multimedia, genre-bending creative experiment in the form of a comedic travel memoir. Utilizing conventions from several creative genres including memoir, fiction, screenwriting and stand-up comedy, this work will take you on a journey through the psyche of a self-identified stoner as she takes an impromptu road trip across America. Included are several original pieces of visual art designed to represent and emphasize particular moments from the journey and to give the reader an even more intimate glimpse into the creative mind. Functioning also as a hilarious tell-all, this work will call into question values held by our society, especially America's conservative views on sex, drugs and rock and roll and how these things can aid a person's development, when applied properly, rather than working as vehicles of destruction. This is intended above all to entertain, because joy is an ideal unto itself, the ultimate human ideal and if my paltry words can help but one person experience it, I would consider this work a success.

## INTRODUCTION

Almost two years ago, during the summer of 2010, I took a solitary road trip across country for no other reason than I could. I also did it so that I would have something to write about. I have long considered myself a writer, but for many years I considered myself only a poet. I had a hard time sustaining longer narrative work. I fell into a psychological trap by assuming a general lack of experience on my part hindered my creative development.

What I truly lacked was training. I gained both over the course of the same year. During the spring of 2010, I took my first graduate creative writing course, Fiction Writing with Ron Rash. During the summer, I took my road trip. And during the fall, I became a Professional Writing major with a creative focus and poured myself into studying the craft of writing, both fiction and nonfiction.

In one year, I went from admiring authors who did things like travelling spontaneously and writing about their adventures to becoming one. The writers I have most admired were the experimental ones: e.e. cummings, Allen Ginsberg, Hunter S. Thompson. Taking a cue from them, this memoir is also experimental in many ways. I play with narrative, with form, with genre, even with reality.

### **Craft and Process**

To say that I play with reality may seem to imply that parts of the memoir are less than true. Indeed, when I sat down to write it, I thought I would write a fictionalized account of my travels, à la *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. What came pouring out,

however, was the truth, the whole truth and almost nothing but the truth. When I say almost, I mean that the narrative strays into the realm of fantasy on more than one occasion. This is a side effect of the subject of the memoir, my solitary road trip. During the drive, day dreams and nostalgic ruminations naturally occurred. The vast majority of the narrative is focused on memories of my past dredged up by the sights and smells of the road, such as in the following passage:

“At night, the air in some parts of Texas smells like a mechanic’s garage. I must be driving past the famous Texas oil fields. There are lots of industrial compounds, twinkling in the distance like tiny cities... they remind me of the stretch of highway between Bainbridge and Colquitt...

The air smelled the same there, too. Like motor oil and pesticides, with an irony undercurrent that was no doubt the result of chicken slaughter. I know that doesn’t seem particularly appetizing, but I am shocked to discover I can’t get enough of it. It smells like home, like my childhood and I hadn’t even realized I’d missed it (89-90).”

In other parts of the memoir, I direct the narrative into the realm of magical realism, such as in this passage wherein I attempt to kidnap the Grand Canyon. I personify the canyon and treat it as a character to set up this somewhat unconventional scene:

“I get a sudden vision of me and the Grand Canyon, shrunk down to person size and wearing a hoodie, cruising down the highway. She’s asking me lots of questions about North Carolina, about my place, where’s

she going to put her stuff? And I'm asking her what she really has hidden in her pockets. Is the missing link in there? The Ark of the Covenant? Mummified aliens? Petrified Viking ships (174)?"

The Grand Canyon is not the only inanimate object to be personified throughout the course of the memoir. I also treat the GPS system I took like a character, with whom I converse, argue and share a complex love/hate relationship. The main reason my GPS and other inanimate objects became characters is that the road can be monotonous, especially when one is alone. For all of my nostalgia and ruminations on the past and pop culture, eventually I just got tired of myself and started personifying the things around me. These mental gymnastics helped keep me from getting dangerously bored or stir-crazy in my car and I hope they add a level of quirky appeal to the narrative. If I got tired of myself and began inventing characters to keep myself occupied, I thought a reading audience might start to feel the same way. As essayist Steven Harvey said, "Any voice—no matter how adorable, witty, brilliant, or miraculous—becomes dull over time" (Perl & Schwartz, 73).

Simply put, someone's voice besides mine is needed and even though the voice of my car is still technically my invention, my vehicle serves as an antagonist, an arguer, offering any hypothetical reader solace from the dominance of my voice for a while.

The conundrum that most memoirists face is reassuring their audience that they have told the truth. Textbooks such as *Tell it Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* call it the "pact with the reader."

“The reader needs to know he won’t be deceived along the way, led to believe something that turns out to be patently untrue. Philippe Lejeune, in his seminal work ‘On Autobiography’, calls this the ‘pact with the reader’... Good writers can also establish this pact through their skillful manipulation of the techniques that make for vivid writing... If we know we are in the hands of a literary artist— one who won’t let us down with clichés or a weak infrastructure— then we’re usually willing to go wherever he or she leads.” (32-36).

In other words, when an audience knows nothing about the reliability of a narrator, trust is built first and foremost by the craft and care that the writer puts into the narrative structure of the work. If the audience can learn to trust the narrative voice of the author, trusting what the author writes naturally follows.

My memoir uses a two-tiered narrative to tell not only the tale of my road trip, but the tale of how I came to be the person taking this journey. The over-arching narrative is that of the journey, the passing scenery and various pit stops, such as my two-day tour of the Grand Canyon or my day in Los Angeles, California. There is also a second narrative that delves into the past and gives the reader a sense of my character: who I am and from whence I have come. This two-tiered narrative occurred organically during the writing process. To merely tell about the physical road and the pit-stops made along the way would only be half of the story anyway. The magic of a solitary road trip lies precisely in the many hours one is left alone with one’s thoughts. I took a journey through myself as

well as a journey across America and this memoir reflects both my inner and outer journeys.

There is, of course, no way to quantify or prove that I actually day dreamed what I said I had on the road and what you're reading could very well have been added after the fact. Memory is not perfect. As Miller and Paola put it, "If your work is rooted in memory, you will find yourself immediately confronted with the imagination. Memory, in a sense, is imagination: an "imaging" of the past, re-creating the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches" (45).

I experienced the fallibility of memory for myself while writing this thesis. In Chapter 17 of the first two drafts, I mentioned driving through an empty roadside attraction that featured several Redwood trees with drive-thru holes in them. While writing, I remembered this incident as having taken place about two years before my solitary road trip, on a vacation I had taken with an ex-boyfriend. While doing research for the memoir, I came upon advertisements for the "scenic Redwoods" near Santa Cruz, where I stayed for several days on my road trip. Still, I did not make the connection.

My committee pointed out to me that this Chapter 17 seemed a bit out of place in the middle of this memoir. Most of the memories I sifted through on the road were from childhood and the memory of that particular vacation seemed removed from the rest of the work. I included the chapter because I feel that I was on the road trip in the first place as a result of that relationship, the effect it had on me and my subsequent liberation from it. I had to either choose to alter the chapter dramatically, or to extend it, to build the idea that the road trip was a result of the relationship before Chapter 17 and put references to

the relationship throughout the memoir from the beginning, which I have done in my final revisions.

Then one night, I awoke from sleep at three in the morning and remembered that I *had* driven that tree park by myself, on my road trip. It was outside Santa Cruz and it caught my attention as I was leaving California for Nevada. Like many of the stops I made on the road trip, it was a last minute decision made simply because a road sign caught my eye. In the year that passed between the road trip and writing this thesis, the memory of driving the park by myself had infused itself with my other vacation through the redwoods two years previously. I had edited my ex-boyfriend into the memory over time. It was only after several revisions that the truth came back to me.

Even with certain inevitable mix-ups such as the one just described, I wholeheartedly believe that what you are about to read is the truth, both the actual facts of the trip and the emotional truth of what I discovered while I was out there and how it changed me as a human being. I kept extensive journals while on the road trip, sometimes pulling over onto the side of the road to scribble something in a flip notebook I kept next to my gear shift. While writing, I tried to recreate the road trip as closely as possible. When writing about a specific destination or stretch of the road, I would listen to the same music or comedy albums I listened to while I was driving, using my notes to guide my thinking.

Although my memoir may not seem to have the potential for controversy, being about a solitary cross-country road trip, I was, at first, reluctant to call it a memoir precisely because of certain controversial subjects that are discussed. My original intention was to write a modern day version of *On the Road* by Kerouac, a mostly true

depiction of my travels disguised as a novel. I wanted to do this to protect myself and my immediate family, as I discuss our familial history with the drug, cannabis. I have grown up not only thinking, but knowing, that cannabis is not as dangerous as public service announcements would have us believe it is because I was raised by habitual cannabis users. My aunt and my mother have been habitually smoking cannabis since the mid-nineteen sixties. Both led successful nursing careers, from which they have since retired.

Even though they are retired, they have long feared discovery. Today, roughly a third of Americans favor the legalization of marijuana (Mendes, 1). However, this level of acceptance is a relatively recent cultural development. In rural Georgia in the 1990s, being known for smoking weed was not a good thing. My mother once told me if anyone outside of our family unit knew, “they” would take me away from her. Today, she still worries that if her landlord knew about her habits, he would evict her.

In other words, telling the truth came with a price and not just for my family. While my relatives are retired and are not in danger of losing their careers over the content of this memoir, I was not so sure about my own standing in this regard. I feared my academic career could be threatened by admitting to being a self-proclaimed “stoner” while attending graduate school, indeed while writing my graduate thesis. I have completed my course work and this thesis is all that stands between myself and a Master’s degree. To be rejected after coming this close because of my chosen lifestyle terrified me. Even though I wrote a non-fictional account of my road trip and family history, I intended to call it fiction, in order to protect myself and my family members.

That, however, would have made a liar out of me and out of the institution that published this work. After consulting with my committee and some long and careful

thought, I have decided to call this work what it actually is: a memoir. A *nonfiction* memoir.

Cannabis, too, was a large part of the road trip and how I experienced it. It was also an integral part of the writing process. I saved some of the marijuana I smoked while on the road trip and smoked it while writing, which aided in the vivid recall of my road trip memories. Cannabis breeds nostalgia, which is part of the reason I spent so much time sifting through memories on the road. Smoking while writing allowed me re-access to these memories. While on the road trip, I stored the marijuana I carried in a can of coffee, because I had read that drug smugglers will hide marijuana in coffee to cover the smell. This resulted in a can of coffee that smelled like marijuana. I discovered that it also tastes like marijuana when brewed. I'm not sure if the coffee is actually potent, or if the high I feel while drinking a cup is purely psychosomatic, but I will say this: it tastes just like *The Road*, just like my memories. While that may not be a particularly academic thing to say, it is no less true that drinking cup after cup of this coffee as I wrote was essential to the development of this work.

According to Miller & Paola in their textbook on the craft of nonfiction, "...to be memoir, writing must derive its energy, its narrative drive, from exploration of the past" (96). That is, in fact, almost all my thesis does, as the previously mentioned passage about the highways of Texas indicates.

For the first several chapters, I sift primarily through childhood memories. Driving through Alabama brought back a particular set of memories, like the first car accident I was involved in, which took place in Alabama. On the physical road trip, I

stopped by the hospital I was born in and on the way, I took a brief internal tour of my childhood in southwest Georgia, where I was raised. Texas at night reminded me of southwest Georgia so much that the memories and ruminations were impossible to stop. I had often heard the Flannery O'Connor saying that 'if you live past age five, you have enough to write about for the rest of your life', but I had never truly believed it. I thought my childhood was boring and had so loathed living through it myself that I couldn't understand how anyone else would want to read about it.

Driving through Texas, however, I soon realized that my childhood was kind of fascinating. I was raised by stoners, had an uncle who wrangled alligators and I grew up in one of the most secretly haunted small towns in Georgia. The first half of this memoir could almost be considered my origin story, as I explore the most vivid parts of my childhood, searching for connective tissue between the child that I was and the woman I am now.

These first chapters focus primarily on my experiences growing up in the rural South. Southern literature, at its most basic, "...concerns itself with the significance of family, a sense of community and one's role within it, religion and the burden religion often brings, land and the promise it brings and the use of southern dialect" (Robertson, 1). While sifting through my southern upbringing in the sandbox of memory, I certainly muse upon most of these subjects. If, as author Rick Bragg once facetiously wrote, the connective tissue amongst southern writers is that they all seem to include dead mules in their plots, I just missed the mark (Bragg, par 5-6). In Chapter 10, I recount my exploits riding, or rather battling, a mule at the Grand Canyon.

“Every time I try to snap a picture with my camera, my mule, Supai, dips her head into the brush to eat and I spend the next ninety seconds locked in an epic struggle. Girl vs. Beast! Who will emerge the victor? (153)”

Fortunately, Supai did not die and so my thesis remains devoid of dead mules. Am I still eligible to join the ranks of so-called southern writers? I am certainly a writer who lives and writes in the South and indeed much of not only this work, but all of my work is inspired by and informed by my experiences as a southerner. But this memoir is not merely an attempt at southern literature, or even a purely southern memoir. A person who picked up a copy of my memoir expecting a charming glimpse into a southern childhood would probably be very surprised to read a frank analysis of the sexual connotations of the word “daddy” in chapter six, or a tell-all of my experiences contracting genital herpes as a sophomore in college in chapter fourteen.

This memoir is not a sexy tell-all, either. There are, in fact, few things less sexy than genital herpes. I did not merely ruminate upon my small town childhood out on the road. I ruminated on many things such as attempting to understand myself as a sexual being and close analysis of my various sexual mistakes and mishaps. I felt compelled to write about these things because I have long been ashamed of them. Frightfully ashamed. I lived with a dread so heavy that I inevitably broke down in tears whenever I had to confess my condition whether to a potential lover or on a medical history form at the doctor’s office. On my road trip, however, as I was driving down some empty stretch of road, mourning my condition as tears poured down my face, I thought, “*nobody ever even told me head was dangerous.*” And then I started to laugh. Suddenly the whole

thing seemed very funny. Quietly dreading my condition in secret is part of what made it so horrible. After I got home, I told a few friends and not long after, a server that I worked with contracted the disease in much the same manner that I had. I told her about my experiences with it and made a couple of light jokes. Soon, she was laughing through her tears too. This experience encouraged me to write about it, to put it out there in hopes that it will help someone else dreading a secret that probably isn't so bad after all.

In fact, somewhere around Chapter 7 (of twenty-one), I leave ruminations of childhood behind altogether and move on to more adult concerns, such as the inherent contradictions represented by Route 66 gift shops, the finer points of marijuana legislation and why dead celebrities are the only acceptable celebrities to stalk.

I work with craft in many ways throughout the memoir. In the prologue, I open with a conversational tone, narrating the drive from my apartment in Sylva, North Carolina, to my mother's home in Marble, North Carolina where my true journey would begin. The reader is first alerted to my playful tendencies as a writer at the end of the prologue where I officially begin the tale with the lines, "Cue the music. Roll titles," as if the memoir is a movie. The rest of the work is likewise sprinkled with such movie lingo and during some of the more dramatic moments, the narrative takes the form of a screenplay.

In order to visually convey the full drama of certain situations, such as one instance in which I feared my vehicle would be searched at a road block, I wrote the scenes as they would appear in a screenplay, or, that is, how they would appear in a movie. Screenwriting is one of the most visual forms of storytelling, as screenplays are

the blueprints for movies. Certainly, there are ways to use narrative prose to tell a story visually, but while I was in the roadblock situation, I viewed the situation as a person might a movie. Turning myself into an observer of the situation helped me to not panic or act particularly incriminating. Sharing the experience with the reader using screenwriting conventions may alienate those readers who are not screenplay literate, but screenplays are designed to elevate the reader above the written word and into the action. I have taken great care with the scenes that I have manipulated in this fashion, moving between screenwriting conventions and standard prose to create a sort of hybrid narrative that shows the reader what it is like to be caught in a road block, while eliciting the empathy that narrative prose is capable of bringing out in a reader. The result, I hope, is a dynamic reading experience.

Also, I just wanted to try it, to see if I could incorporate screenwriting convention into the narrative, because sometimes I do like to imagine my life as if it were a movie. The drive to experiment is simply what drives certain writers. *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac was one of the most experimental novels of its time when it was published, employing a kind of jazzy, spontaneous prose that readers were not used to (Theado, 54). Yet, Kerouac felt the need to revisit the story nearly two decades later in *Visions of Cody*, which uses an even more experimental writing style that attempts to convey the energy of real-life Neal Cassady rather than the linear story of the time Kerouac spent with him (Theado, 73). Poet e.e. cummings began his career writing fairly traditional sonnets with playful language. His poems remain the gold standard in poetry that usurps expectation, plays with poetic conventions, capitalization and punctuation and even visual form (Cohen, 71). Working outside of known convention, pushing the boundaries of what has

been done to what has never been done is one of the most exciting parts of being an artist. As far as I know, the sort of blending of screenwriting and narrative prose that I attempt in my memoir has not been done outside of an instructive capacity such as the kind that occurs in how-to screenwriting books. I believe that I have created a new way of storytelling; one that I look forward to honing in the future.

The screenwriting terms and tropes may also be considered roadside attractions of the memoir. My actual road trip had its fair share of strange and interesting places to visit and I wanted the narrative to read like a road trip itself, so that the experience of reading about the road trip could mimic taking a road trip as closely as possible. All journeys need their pit-stops, their fun and random distractions. The point of taking a road trip is so that you might see things you wouldn't ordinarily see, to visit places you may never visit again. I would like reading about my road trip to recreate the feeling of taking the journey for yourself. The narrative is the road that guides you through the journey, but every once in a while there is a place to rest, or a place to visit that is not like the others.

Another unconventional scene occurs in chapter sixteen. The bulk of this chapter reads like a stand-up comedy performance. These past two years have been about discovering myself as a writer of many things. I have shared a life-long love of stand-up comedy, often memorizing stand-up bits to entertain my friends at parties and gatherings, all the while wishing I could write jokes even half as funny for myself. My road trip afforded me an opportunity I rarely have to visit a variety of comedy clubs throughout the nation and witness stand-up comedy in its raw, unpolished, untelevised form. There is a big difference from the stand-up comedy performances one sees on DVDs and television specials and the sorts of performances that take place in clubs every night around the

globe (Oswalt). The televised performances are the culmination of all of those smaller performances, for instance. The comic knows he or she is being televised and has spent countless hours in front of countless audiences honing and perfecting the jokes for the televised special (Oswalt). Most live comedy performances are like drafts, except that the draft sometimes heckles.

Far from depriving my audience from the experience of getting to witness some live comedy, especially after reading about it in three separate chapters, I finally give them a taste of the experience to the best of my ability.

This memoir could also be considered a comedic memoir, if the part about the imagined conversations with my GPS weren't already an indication. The narrative definitely has a tongue-in-cheek quality throughout and most of my observations are snarky. For much of Western civilization, comedy has served as a funhouse mirror for society as well as entertainment for the masses (Stott, 4). One aspect of comedic history that particularly intrigues me is that comedians may be the original outlaws, as Aristotle pointed out in his deconstruction of the Greek roots of the word:

“...outlying villages [are called] *kômai*... the assumption being that comedians were so-called not from the revel or *kômos*, but because they toured villages when expelled from the town in disgrace” (Stott, 4).

Of course, in the original Greek sense, a comedy was merely a play with a happy ending, usually a feast or a marriage scene (Stott, 2). Interestingly, the content of those plays exhibited early intimations of what stand-up comedy would one day become. Early Greek comedies were usually social satires that lampooned government officials and

politicians, offering exaggerated versions of popular scandals (Stott, 5-6), which sounds an awful lot like an early version of *Saturday Night Live*.

Like George Carlin, Bill Hicks, Patton Oswalt and Tina Fey before me, sometimes when I look around at the American political landscape, I get angry. Many of the places I visited on my road trip were American landmarks, like the Grand Canyon, Route 66 and Mount Rushmore. All three of these locales offered paradoxical and conflicting views of American culture, all three were subtly but thoroughly politically charged and, coincidentally, all three are also popular tourist destinations for foreign visitors, so these locations also serve as physical snapshots of America. There may be instances in which all a foreign tourist sees are these destinations and the towns surrounding them.

The Grand Canyon is adorned with plaques explaining the scientific names of its geologic formations, all given by white scientists in the past two hundred years and only one plaque offering only the briefest of nods to the Canyon's eleven-thousand year history with the native population. The original Native American names of the many buttes and geologic formations of the canyon, if they are known, are not displayed. The tourist shops and cafes dotting what is left of Route 66 offered an idealized and nostalgic version of the nineteen-fifties, with nary a mention of the rampant racism and gender bias of the era. This is to be expected, of course. Racist or misogynistic post cards are something of a niche market and are not typically the sorts of things a gift shop would advertise. Mount Rushmore is called the Shrine of Democracy, according to informative plaques found at its entrance, meanwhile the Black Hills upon which it is carved are technically stolen and there are broken treaties to prove it (Perrottet, 2).

One of the things that graduate school taught me, for better or for worse, was to always question the reality being presented to you, whether it is a reality created by an advertisement, a book, or a roadside attraction. Once one reaches this level of education, especially if one has taken a rhetoric course, one quickly realizes that nothing is ever as it seems. While I was wandering around many of the stops on my road trip, I was struck by the duality between the historical reality of a place and the shiny, happy version presented by the gift shops. It certainly makes sense that Mount Rushmore would not necessarily want to advertise the long standing tension between the monument and the nearby Native American population, but it did not hesitate to present an almost hyper patriotic reality that I thought might be off-putting for a foreign traveler or a Native American visitor. It was off-putting to me as an American. Currently, Mount Rushmore has one of the first Native American superintendents and when I visited, there was a display of authentic Native American teepees and a demonstration as to how buffalo hides were stretched and cured to make them, so attempts are being made to bridge the gap between the history of America as the Native Americans might see it and the one presented to a predominantly white society. I felt that in order to present a full account of the places I visited and how I experienced them, writing, however briefly, about some of the more political issues surrounding these areas was necessary.

The writing of my inspirations, the Beats and Hunter S. Thompson often when hand-in-hand with the politics of the day. "America," by Allen Ginsberg is a poetic snapshot of the politics of the late nineteen fifties, for instance. One of Hunter S. Thompson's great works, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* was, as the title indicates, about Thompsons's experiences following the George McGovern campaign

against Nixon in 1972. My favorite comedians also tend to be the ones who prefer political material, such as Bill Hicks, George Carlin and Jon Stewart.

My writing, therefore, is naturally as political as it is funny. In my graduate studies and sometimes just for fun, I like to research the various political reasons for things that are wrong with the world as I see it. I am especially interested in the natural hypocrisies presented by American politics, specifically the tensions created by a political propaganda that advertises our country as the freest in the world, meanwhile the citizens of several European countries enjoy more rights than many American citizens, vis-à-vis gay marriage and marijuana legislation. It is my belief that it is essential to be aware of the hypocrisies of your society if there is any hope of ever overcoming them.

It is also my belief that humor is the best tool to use to point out said hypocrisies. As Andrew Stott points out, comedy has long been a means of expressing political discontent. Comedy is a strange and interesting psychological device that takes that which is infuriating and turns it into something laughable. Some researchers now believe laughter is an evolutionary reaction to danger, or rather, a signal that it has passed (Brain, 3). Long before this theory had formed, Mikhail Bakhtin wrote of laughter as a means of fighting oppression (Stott, 131). Laughter has long been considered, philosophically and critically, as a weapon of the common people, of the uneducated masses (Stott, 130-140). It was once considered vulgar of an “educated man” to laugh at all (Stott, 134). While comedy still does not enjoy a wealth of critical respect, there is now at least a tradition of educated stand up comics, such as Bill Hicks, George Carlin, Eddie Izzard and Russel Brand who were and are known to quote obscure philosophers on stage, who deconstruct the Bible and who offer well-worded and rhetorically viable criticisms during their acts.

My beliefs are most closely aligned with Bakhtin. While it is also argued that comedy points out holes in the social system while allowing it to remain in place (Stott, 128), pointing out those holes, the things that are laughable, also makes room for change, however slow and subtle the change may be.

In addition to the narrative tools I use, I have also tried my best to create something of a cerebral 3-D document. While nothing literally leaps off the page at the reader, I have tried to make the work as lively and as alive, as possible, as I explained while defending my use of screenplay conventions. I have also incorporated a series of visual art collages that function as visual punch lines to the narrative.

Collaging is my “other” form of self-expression, aside from writing. I make them out of, essentially, garbage. I fastidiously save product labels from candy, sodas and other food products, as well as movie tickets and the inserts that come with CDs and DVDs. As more and more of my media library goes digital, I also save cassette tapes, videotapes, CDs and DVDs and use this assortment of what would otherwise be garbage to create art, usually art that comments upon our culture of consumerism. For example, I covered a canvas with candy wrappers in quilt-like design and entitled it “How to Make an American Quilt.”

For the purposes of my memoir, however, these works of art serve as commentary on the road trip itself, as well as visualizations of some of the highlights of the journey. For example, while driving through the Petrified Forest, I couldn’t help but feel a bit of childish disappointment that the national park was not a “real” forest, that is, a vertical one. Using post cards, pamphlets, maps and pictures I took on the road, I created what the Petrified Forest would look like if I were responsible for it. The result

can be seen on page 150. All of the collages were made out of materials gathered on the trip.

### **Influences, Literary and Otherwise**

It makes sense that I set out to write a travel novel and ended up with a nonfiction memoir. The most famous works of my primary prose influences were not exactly works of fiction. *On the Road* by Kerouac (while it is praised as the “classic novel of the Beat generation) is a memoir disguised as a novel. During the nineteen fifties, when *On the Road* was written and published, there was not the market for memoir and autobiography that exists today. While Kerouac has often and publicly stated that *On the Road* rarely deviates from the truth (Theado, 53-55), it likely would not have occurred to him to try to publish it as a memoir. During this era, creative nonfiction did not technically exist, as the literary movement did not really get off the ground until mid 1960s (Moore, 8). The concept of the memoir is several hundred years old, but in Kerouac’s day the memoir as we know it today, if it existed at all, existed mostly as autobiography. Autobiographies were still something former presidents and politicians wrote. *On the Road*, in many ways, is a progenitor of the modern-day memoir, only it is studied as fiction. Yet, all critical looks at the book take pains to draw parallels between Kerouac’s experiences and the lives of the real-life characters. Much ado is made about Neal Cassady, the real-life Dean Moriarty, the spirit he embodied and the admiration that the Beat writers unanimously had for him. Indeed, *On the Road* would not have existed without Cassady; nor, perhaps would the seminal Beat poem *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg (Prothero, 209).

Publishing his primarily factual tales as novels, which implies fiction, was not merely the most marketable strategy for Kerouac and the other Beats, it was the only strategy. Calling his work a novel, a book, added a layer of mysticism and dignity in the 1950s literary world. Novels were simply what writers wrote (Theado, 54) and the debate over genre categorizations (such as that which surrounded James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*) had not yet begun. Fortunately, I am writing for a market with endless possibilities. Not only must I determine that my work is a memoir, but I must seek to define what kind of memoir. I have not merely written a travel memoir or an experimental memoir or a growing-up-southern memoir, or a feminist memoir, or a protest memoir but a culmination of all of these things. *On the Road* was not a typical novel, but was a philosophical introduction to a new way of thinking, a new form of spirituality and a new way of writing about life and its myriad experiences (Prothero, 211). My memoir is likewise experimental in many ways, such as the aforementioned hybridity between screenwriting conventions and narrative prose, the stand-up section in chapter 16 and the inclusion of visual arts. I present a new form of multimedia storytelling that differentiates from other forms of multimedia documents in that it does not contain a digital component.

One of Kerouac's primary influences and mine, William Burroughs, called this kind of true fiction "factualism" (Theado, 54). Burroughs wrote a primarily nonfiction account of his experiences with drugs in a book called *Junkie* that also shares the categorization of novel, rather than memoir or essay. A case may be made that Burroughs' more famous work *Naked Lunch* is not entirely fiction, too, as it chronicles

the exploits of a heroin addict attempting to evade capture and sometimes succeeding. Certainly Burroughs knew a thing or two about that.

Another challenge that *On the Road* faced was how unconventional it was. It remained un-published for the better part of a decade because of Kerouac's spontaneous prose, his wholesale disregard for punctuation and precisely because he told the raw truth in an era of rampant conformity (Prothero, 206).

Both Kerouac and Burroughs changed the names of those involved to protect the innocent, or in Kerouac's case, because the publisher told him to (Theado, 55). Kerouac prefers quasi allegorical names such as *On the Road's* Salvatore Paradise who seeks salvation through experience (Theoda, 69). Even Dean Moriarty, the name given to real-life Neal Cassady in *On the Road* has its allegorical components. Dean never stops and yet his last name has its Latin roots in death. Perhaps it is a constant awareness of his mortality that drives Moriarty to become the perpetual-motion hero of *On the Road*.

Burroughs, on the other hand, was fond of giving highly stylized names to his characters, such as the Gimp and the Vigilante. In this tradition, I call one of my mother's past boyfriends simply The Vet (he was a Vietnam veteran). My cousin, who is a Scorpio, takes the name of Scorpio and her daughter Brooklynn becomes Queens. I have changed the names in my memoir not only to protect the innocent and to protect myself from the guilty, but have chosen to stylize the names as a homage to Burroughs and a nod to the "factual" fiction that inspired my nonfiction prose.

These highly stylized names add a layer of quirk. Truthfully, I am a quirky person. I can often be found dancing in the aisle of Wal-Mart at three A.M. or simply staring into space, filling out the details of some daydream. Many of the stylistic and

artistic choices I make as a writer stem from the fact that I am, simply put, weird. Much of the first few chapters dealing with my childhood also explore themes of weirdness, of how I have always managed to end up set apart from the other kids and what it is/was about me that sets me apart.

The philosophies and general pop culture observations in my memoir may not stand out much in today's generally accepting social climate. Today, women often speak out about their sexual urges and some even speak out about drug use. Portraying drug use in positive light is still very much an action of the counter culture. Although I only deal with cannabis use in my memoir (and cannabis is the most widely "abused" and widely accepted illegal drug) even those mainstream films and books that talk about cannabis, seemingly in a positive light, still tend to end with the moral that cannabis is destructive or should be avoided if one wishes to be a "productive" member of society.

For example, the 2008 box office smash *Pineapple Express*, while it is one of the first "stoner" movies to become mainstream in many years, still seems to be encoded with the message that marijuana use will lead to terrible things. The movie is the story of two average stoners who become embroiled in a conflict between criminal rivals. Over the course of the film, the protagonist is mistaken for an elite assassin, his girlfriend and her family must go into hiding, the main characters engage in elaborate fist fights, a car chase and a firefight. In short, general chaos ensues, all because of cannabis.

The movie is hysterically funny and the chaotic plot serves mostly as a springboard for the elaborate fights, car chases, gunfire and explosions. In other words, it is everything a summer blockbuster should be. Although, one could easily also say that

the movie pokes fun at the sort of hyperbole created by Public Service Announcements when warning against the dangers of marijuana. The movie itself could be seen as an extended parody of an anti-drug PSA. However, while the main characters remain stoners at the end of the film, the subtext is that cannabis use only leads to trouble.

Recent fun loving memoir about a year spent growing marijuana, *Growgirl: How My Life After the Blair Witch Project went to Pot*, by former actress Heather Donahue also subtly works to convince the reader that the taste of cannabis is sour, especially where growing is concerned. This is present even the title, with its play on the phrase “went to pot,” which has traditionally negative connotations. Published earlier in 2012, this offbeat memoir uses Beatesque prose to describe a year in the life of an actress-turned-marijuana farmer. The opening line, “Today is the last day of a same that will never be the same again” instantly alerts the reader to expect the unexpected, or at the very least, to expect the mildly convoluted (3). First, Donahue explains how she went from being an actress in one of the most successful indie movies of the late nineties (and of all time, so far) *The Blair Witch Project* to becoming a pot grower. She spends the next two hundred and seventy-odd pages describing her exploits in the pot game with chickens who are eventually picked off by foxes, a new boyfriend whose allergies are stimulated by cannabis plants and a puppy who is probably the reincarnation of her grandfather.

Certainly, farming the federally illegal substance marijuana is far more dangerous than simply smoking it, especially when one is growing for a profit rather than merely for personal consumption. Donahue’s memoir does portray imbibing cannabis in a mostly positive light, as she stresses its medical uses and struggles to navigate the murky waters of cannabis legislation in California. The memoir may also be considered an attempt to

humanize growers in a media climate that loves to depict them as criminals and members of violent drug cartels.

Donahue attempted to remain an autonomous marijuana grower—the only female of the bunch—with varying degrees of success. Eventually, however, in order to write about her experiences, she left the business of growing. She could not risk exposing the Community, or herself, while growing. While some marijuana growing is permitted under California state law, it is still very much illegal federally and any talk about imbibing and especially growing, can attract unwanted legal attention (Collis, 78). In the end, she has said in interviews, she left not only to write, but out of a growing paranoia of the dangers of growing and so her parents “wouldn’t have to lie to friends about what their daughter was doing” (Collis, 78).

It seems that no matter where you look, the message is the same: marijuana only leads to trouble.

My memoir, while it considers the negative consequences of cannabis use, portrays it in a mostly positive light. I did take cannabis on my road trip, I smoked it frequently and nothing bad happened. I did not crash my car or end up in jail. The only bad thing that happened as a result of my cannabis use was the healthy dose of fear I received when I approached a couple of road blocks where vehicles were being randomly searched: once at Hoover Dam in Nevada and again at the California Agricultural Inspection at the border of California.

During these moments, I wax philosophic about the consequences of my actions, turning them over and over in my mind, even deciding that I am ready to be kicked out of graduate school for my sins and take on the full-time job of activist. But, my car was not

chosen to be searched. I was never pulled over by a police officer. I lost nothing and gained an experience I will remember for the rest of my life and not merely because I wrote a book about it.

This is another similarity between my memoir and *On the Road*: None of the usual consequences for so-called “bad” behavior are present. In *On the Road*, Sal and Dean experience the usual moments of loneliness and being beat-down that go along with being transient, but for the most part, they enjoy their adventures and experiences without much regret. So, too, did I risk it all to carry roughly a half an ounce of weed across the country with me and while I had a brush with the social consequences of my actions, I returned home free, unscathed and without much to regret.

In my memoir, cannabis functions very much in the same way it functions in the real world. It is just sort of there, in the background, not causing any trouble, but adding to the overall experience.

This memoir could only have been written in the modern era, not only because of the abundant genre-bending that takes place within the narrative, but also because it is built on a literary tradition that prizes spontaneity and a sense of living on the fringes of society. If Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and later Hunter S. Thompson had not taken the risks with their existences and art that they did, the philosophical groundwork to propel me to take the risks that I take would never have been built. Screenwriter Joss Whedon said, while accepting his Emmy for *Dr. Horrible's Sing Along Blog* in 2009, “The greatest expression of rebellion is joy.” Whedon co-wrote, produced and directed *Dr. Horrible* for distribution over the internet during the infamous 2007-2008 Writers Strike

that brought most television production to a standstill. Whedon and company skirted tradition and created an experimental film and distributed it in a whole new way. Not only was it a new mode of storytelling, it was also well-written, thoughtful, inspiring and poignant. With any luck, this memoir is like that. Above all things, it is what *Dr.*

*Horrible* set out to be: a joyous rebellion.

I hope you enjoy the journey.

## PROLOGUE

“She needs wide open spaces. Room to make a big mistake.” –The Dixie Chicks

U.S. 74 winds through the fog-draped Nantahala Gorge and my car dutifully follows. This is the journey before the journey. I have left my tiny basement apartment in Sylva, North Carolina behind and am on my way to Mom’s house in Murphy. It is her birthday tomorrow. I am twenty-five, but it makes sense that this journey should officially launch from her house. We are a team, Mom and I. One of those single mom-and-daughter buddy movies with the two of us taking on the world together. I have a brother, too, but he comes and goes. This is a recurring theme with males in our lives.

Only our movie has no jump-cuts. Life never cuts. That, I’m beginning to think, is the hardest thing about it. All the seconds and minutes and hours you have to live through to get to the big moments. The laugh lines. The spot lights. All that in between stuff can drag on, can’t it?

I could use some movie magic right about now: short tracking shot of me driving through the misty Smoky Mountains, jump-cut to me pulling up Mom’s drive-way, commence joyful reunion scene.

Speaking of the Smoky Mountains, they are in their full smoky glory today and the budding Appalachian writer in me wants to say something mystical and poetic about them, about how after a good rain the mountains whisper with fog, like the smoke signals of ancient, dead tribes. This is the reason, after all, they are called the Smoky Mountains.

(Although, Tommy Chong has a pretty good joke about an altogether different reason for the moniker.)

“This is the reason they are called the Smoky Mountains.”

I would use this phrase many times a day after, or sometimes during, a good rain at the canoe, kayak and tube rental where I used to work summers. The tourists loved it.

“Oh, is that so?” they would say.

Or: “Oh. Ha-ha-ha. Yes, I see.”

Or, (my favorite): “Uh-huh.”

It seemed like a clever thing to say. And maybe it was, when it wasn't being a total cliché. But, like I said, the tourists loved it. Tourists are very appreciative people. I never really saw what everyone else had against them. For the most part, they were respectful and nice and, most importantly, they tipped well. Way better than the locals. Of course, that was back before the economic bubble popped, before I left that job for love and pizza.

I try to set my cruise control so that I may slip deeper into reverie without having to worry about my speed, only to find that no matter how long I hold the button down, it never catches. This is an ominous sign indeed. I tend to run a little hot behind the wheel of a car and cruise control has become a very close and vital friend of mine. There is not quite enough marijuana in the coffee can in the back seat for a felony, but there is enough to give me trouble should I be pulled over and searched because the officer insisted that he smelled something suspicious. I pick up the bottle of Auto Febreeze in the passenger's seat and give the air a good spritz, just in case. Then I check my speed and let off the gas until the needle drops back to sixty, the exact number of the speed limit. I try the cruise

control again, hoping that it was just playing a little prank on me, as friends do. Still nothing.

The dark specter of my ex boyfriend, lets call him Debt, rises in my mind for a moment before I shoo him away. He would not approve of my road trip, especially the way I am doing it, that is, with minimal planning. If he were still here, we would have a regimen, an itinerary and a folder full of directions to each exact spot we planned to visit. We would wake up at specific times in the morning and there would be great concern over Making Good Time and how much money I am spending.

I am unconcerned with nearly all of these things. I have a budget and two hotel rooms booked, but other than that, the road is the wide-open expanse it should be. There are nothing but possibilities out there and I aim to meet them with open arms and no prior engagements. I have set twenty-one days aside for myself to simply be free. It's more than most people get these days.

I am the tourist now. Soon I will be hearing oft-repeated local catch phrases and chuckling good-naturedly at humorous adages whenever I need information. I will be supporting local economies by spending too much on post cards, pens with customized logos on them, or that most elusive of tourist items: customized lighters. Or, rather, I will be, the day after tomorrow and every day after that for twenty days. It is July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010 and I am on my way to find America.

Cue the music.

Roll titles.

CHAPTER 1  
LEAVING HOME

“How far would I go? How long would I stay?

To see it all, to carry it all back with me again.” –Bowling for Soup

So it begins. I’ve gone to look for America. I know my mother will worry, but my mother will always worry. If I didn’t do everything my mother didn’t want me to do, I never would have left home to go to college. No, indeed, I would live with her and be safe forever.

But, those who would sacrifice liberty for safety deserve neither and so here I am. Looking for America. Looking for myself, whatever that means. Right now, I am looking along U.S. 74 which will join up with I-75 and take me to I-59 through Alabama. I’m not sure why I am going to Chattanooga to join up with I-75, since I could easily cut through Georgia and join up with it in Atlanta. Mostly, I go because Google maps and my mother told me to. This route will take me completely around Georgia. I will not have to trifle with that god-forsaken state at all and that is probably the real reason I have chosen this route.

I have decided to get to Baton Rouge today. I won’t, of course, but I don’t know that yet. Twelve hours didn’t seem like a lot at first. *Why, that’s only half the day*, I thought. *There will still be twelve hours left when I get there*. I didn’t think about sleep, or how long twelve hours *feels* when spent behind the wheel of a car. But, when this trip was still just a series of Google maps and a movie in my head, jump-cutting through

twelve hours was easy enough. Here though, the hours wind out before me like the road itself and my folly will make itself apparent soon enough.

Alabama reminds me a lot of Georgia and with the first official joint of the road trip comes heaps of nostalgia, thick, rich and powerful.

But first, the ritual. The CD slides into the car stereo with a familiar hum. The windows are cracked, providing ventilation. The A/C turns on with an audible whoosh just before the music starts. Then, the fire. Finally, a breath. And here they come, all the reasons I left flat lands and pine trees behind in the first place.

Whether I truly have lived my life as an insane person, or if, as a child, I was already an artist or a comic that did not yet have a language or context with which to express herself, I will probably never know for sure. The other kids avoided me and the title *weird* followed me wherever I went. I probably earned it. I talked to trees and dangled from monkey bars with skirts on. I watched horror movies and recounted their plots in creepy tones and graphic detail, sometimes to the delight of a crowd, sometimes to the, well, horror. Perhaps that is when I first began to learn to be a storyteller.

It *was* when I first learned to be used. They, the collective They, as in everyone around my age that wasn't me, didn't want me around unless I was telling a story or making up a game. I came up with the best games, They all agreed on that. "Jason," or more aptly, "Serial Killer on the Loose" was their favorite. It was like Hide and Seek, only if you were caught, you didn't become It, but you had to act out whatever gruesome death your captor could come up with, purely for her/his amusement.

To be fair, I didn't want Them around unless they were listening to my stories or playing by my rules anyway. I was happier talking to the trees. At least the three bushy cedars in the corner of the playground never made fun of the gap in my teeth.

I touch the tip of my tongue to the long-hated gap and take a deep breath of pine-scented air. Alabama isn't much better than Georgia. In fact, Georgia is probably more progressive than Alabama. The last recorded public lynching in Georgia was in 1946, for example. Alabama had a highly publicized lynching as recently as 1981. Not that people aren't murdered in both states regularly for being the wrong color in the wrong place at the wrong time, but at least these murders are quiet now and usually have the full backing of the state judicial systems behind them. Make no mistake, it is still illegal to have brown skin in certain parts of Georgia and Alabama and in areas where people with brown skin are the local majority, no less. I can't even imagine how betrayed some of the good old boys I grew up around must have felt the day Barack Obama won the election for the United States' presidency, but the thought never fails to put a smile on my face. I can't wait 'til we get a woman or a gay in the White House. Or, even better: a Hispanic-American. If a Hispanic lesbian ran for president, she would have my vote, even if she ran on a platform to make baby brains our primary energy source as a nation. I'm not really big on babies, anyway.

Right now, for me, Alabama is preferable to Georgia. I didn't grow up in Alabama. I haven't seen her ugliness for myself, or lived next door to it, or dated it once in high school. To me, she is the girl I grew up next door to, that I had sleepovers with every few weekends or so. We would look for arrowheads in the field behind her house during the day and watch scary movies at night, after which we would talk until we fell

asleep without ever admitting that we had to keep talking because the movie had made us too scared to sleep. Then, as we got older, we had a falling out over something stupid like whether the Backstreet Boys were better than Hanson (they weren't) and recently reconnected on Facebook. So now I'm going to see my old friend Alabama, albeit briefly. We will have lunch and talk about our childhood and then I will be on the road again.

The joint went out in between remembrances. I use the mirror to help me relight it. Memories come flooding back, rich and full like Alabama sunlight. I have a sense of rightness, like this is exactly what I should be doing. It feels a little bit like coming home.

"Life's a Dance" by John Michael Montgomery plays and I am nine years old again. My grandfather is still alive and my mother is about to leave the only man to ever successfully lay hands on her. Well, no. She won't leave him—she's going to make him leave us. With a bang.

Let's call him The Vet. He's the one who turned me on to country music in the first place. He refused to listen to anything else, like most people where I come from. Except that he's not from where I come from exactly. He lives in Alabama and my mother and I go to stay with him over the weekend sometimes. This is how I got acquainted with Alabama in the first place. It was the field behind his house that I would comb for arrowheads. Every time it rained, new ones were brought to the surface. They rested on dirt mounds like jewels on tiny pedestals, waiting for me to come find them. Going to Alabama is like a mini-vacation for me. An adventure even.

At any rate, The Vet refuses to listen to anything other than country music, especially rock music. I don't think any other types of music exist for him. R&B and rap are for black people, or so he has said on several occasions and jazz was a popular

exercise craze a few years ago. There is only country and rock, with the possible exception of Skynyrd. He loves the song “Sweet Home Alabama,” as any resident of Alabama would be expected to do, but he prefers the cover by the country band Alabama. I do too, personally.

Today, a palpable wave of fury washes over me whenever I hear Skynyrd’s “Sweet Home Alabama.” Not necessarily because of its connection to The Vet, but mostly because it is the South’s most beloved ode to Reconstruction-Era racism since “Dixie.” Seriously, Google the lyrics sometime. My favorite verse?

“In Birmingham they love the Governor (Boo! Boo! Boo!)

Now we did all that we could do

Now Watergate does not bother me

Does your conscience bother you?”

The governor in question is none other than segregationist extraordinaire George Wallace, who will probably be the only Alabama governor to ever be studied by students outside of Alabama. Which is unfair to Alabama really. She must have had at least one governor who was famous for something other than being a tyrannical madman. And even if, as the song’s writer Robbie Van Zant himself has said, you choose to interpret that part of the verse as being anti-Wallace, what about the line about how Watergate doesn’t bother him? You remember Watergate, right? The reason Richard Nixon will go down in history as the paranoid, election stealing, wire-tapping, power-hungry delusional he was instead of Reagan Mach I. I get that, by the time the song was penned in 1974,

Van Zant was maybe just tired of hearing about it, but you could also read this statement as asking what the big deal is? I dunno, Robbie. What is the big deal about a political system where a candidate can literally steal an election using subterfuge, sabotage and good old fashioned money? *Taxpayer's* money, no less. Not that the American political system wasn't hopelessly corrupt before Nixon ever had a chance to get to it, but this was one of the first times the President was caught red-handed in the midst of real political corruption—not fingering Marilyn Monroe on the presidential desk or other harmless antics that ultimately didn't affect the average citizen, but an all-out hijacking of the entire election. I'm talking about stealing the average voter's voice and then bragging about it on tape. That was Watergate, baby<sup>1</sup>.

Maybe I just prefer the Alabama version because they changed that verse and made it about football instead. Which takes the tune from racist to just downright wholesome. Country: 1, Rock: All the other points.

I was born a rock and roll fan. Rock is the first music I remember and my first favorite band was Poison, something I brag about ironically today. Okay, no. Let's cut the bullshit. I'm totally proud that I was a Poison fan back when Poison was still relevant, *Rock of Love* notwithstanding.

Around age nine, however, I flip-flopped, mostly out of self-defense. Mom only liked a genre of music homogenously referred to as “oldies,” and The Vet only listened to country music. In true southern tradition, that means that Mom and I started listening to only country music, at least when The Vet was around.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*, which chronicles the campaign of Nixon opponent George McGovern during the election I have been talking about. See also *The Great Shark Hunt*, which is a collection of works by Hunter S. Thompson and includes several companion pieces to *Campaign Trail*, including articles he wrote during the Watergate scandal and subsequent fall-out.

I'm one of those "go big or go home" people. When I attached myself to country, I did it with a voraciousness that would have made any Fox News correspondent proud. In becoming pro-country, I became anti-rock, disavowing Poison and all the other music I'd ever loved. Where I used to watch MTV for hours on end, waiting for a Poison video to play (even though, by 1994, nobody was playing Poison anything anymore), I started watching CMT for hours on end. I wasn't waiting for any particular video, but absorbing all of them into the newly blank state of my consciousness. I memorized "Achy-Breaky Heart" and learned to line dance. I never wore a cowboy (cowgirl?) hat, but I decided that when I grew up, I would drive a big red Chevy pick-up truck.

Special note: I do not drive a big red Chevy pick-up truck and probably never will, unless I win one or something. On this trip, I drove a black Saturn Ion '05 that I didn't know had been recently recalled for electrical problems. Don't worry, that doesn't affect this road trip in the least, except for all the times I mention my cruise control mysteriously not working.

I also decided, along with the rest of the Christian Conservative world, that rock music was not only the antithesis of country, its natural-born nemesis, if you will, but also that it was satanic and that listening to it endangered one's immortal soul. Which meant that if I knew someone who listened to rock music and I claimed to love or even like that person, I had to at least try and rescue her/his soul from the evil clutches of electric guitars and three-chord progressions.

Have you ever had a nine-year-old try to "save" you? It's pretty hilarious. Not only did I not entirely grasp the concepts that I vehemently supported, but I also viewed them through an impossible black/white filter. I would have made a fine politician. It was

during this time that people were fond of telling me I should grow up to be a lawyer. Unfortunately, I grew up.

“Chattahoochee” by Alan Jackson plays and once again I am nine, riding down an Alabama highway in a beat-up red Chevy pick-up truck with The Vet at the helm. We drive over the Chattahoochee River at sunset as Alan Jackson’s ode to it plays on the radio as if a sound director were involved. I turn to grin at The Vet and he grins back. Together, we belt out the chorus. I always giggle at the line “It gets hotter than a hoochie-coochie.” I know this means Something Dirty, even if I do not grasp, what, exactly, the reference is. Still, I always get that special thrill that all kids get out of cussing. If you don’t know what I’m talking about, find some nine-year-olds and play a song with some variation of the phrase “kiss my ass” in it and wait. Trust me, it’s totally adorable. (Not just nine-year-olds, mind you. Adults get the same kind of thrill from this sort of thing, as Garth Brooks’ live version of “Friends in Low Places” will testify.)

I am proud to be riding in a Chevrolet because Chevys are better than Fords. Chevys and Fords are, of course, the only two types of truck whose existence I acknowledge at this time, despite the fact that my grandparents’ unnaturally reliable farm truck is a Dodge. (Seriously, they bought that thing in the mid-80s, used the shit out of it and I’m pretty sure it’s still running to this day. It didn’t look like much and like all vehicles from the mid-80s, it had a busted air conditioner, but it would still safely haul a truck bed full of farm equipment or laughing children, depending on what the day called for.) My grandparents get a free pass on committing such a travesty as owning a truck that is not a Chevy or a Ford on the basis that they are related to me. Anyone else who

commits such an offense is shunned. I don't know anything about the makeup of their engines or their crash-test ratings, or even how many more pounds one can haul than the other, but Chevy uses Bob Seger's "Like a Rock" in its advertising campaign and that's the kind of forward-thinking engineering I can get behind. Even at nine years old. This also proves, I think, that I never truly abandoned rock n roll, not in my heart of hearts, anyway.

The Vet thinks Chevys are better than Fords, too and is probably more responsible for my opinion than Bob Seger. He has been sleeping with my mother for a year or maybe more. He asks her to marry him nearly every other day, but she always says *no*. I encourage her to say *yes* because, like any good little girl, I can't imagine anything more romantic than a wedding. My mother, who has been married twice before, feels differently. Some day, I will understand that their relationship was primarily sexual and that there are a multitude of reasons my mother did not wish to share her last name or her finances with this man. One of the most notable reasons being that he is a psychotic Vietnam vet who is prone to fits of enraged shouting when he drinks too much. He is also prone to slightly inappropriate declarations, such as when he tells me that a flat, pink rock I found earlier in the day is as smooth as the skin on my mother's ass. I am not quite old enough to be completely disgusted by this remark yet, but I will grow into it.

My mom is not with us. She drove back to Georgia around mid-afternoon. I forget the reason I wanted to stay behind to ride home with The Vet, perhaps because I wanted to keep looking for arrowheads. Perhaps because I wanted the thrill and pride that only riding in a Chevrolet pick-up truck could provide. I remember Mom telling him not to drink.

Darkness gathers as we drive east into the coming night. When the sun finally disappears behind us and the stars begin to emerge for their nightly show, I keep craning my neck to see them through the windshield. Every time I see an airplane moving like a shooting star through the sky, I squint and look real hard for a red light where the nose of the plane would be.

The Vet shouts. The wheel jerks and the world becomes a rocking, whirling combine of confusion. Tires squeal and the truck rolls. I see The Vet and The Vet sees me. It is like a shot in a movie of the inside of a car accident, his body rolling end over end in front of my eyes like a shirt in a dryer. I imagine this is what laundry feels like and I would know. My cousin put me in a dryer once and her friend turned it on for a laugh, but only for a second. I remember turning around in there like I am now.

The truck finally stops rolling. The good news is that we are both miraculously uninjured. I'm pretty sure I wasn't wearing a safety belt. The bad news is, we are upside down and The Vet smells gas. He starts kicking at the door, which is stuck. I think he knows that if he lets me blow up in his truck, my mom will kill him. I don't think it even occurs to him this means he will have blown up, too.

He kicks furiously at the door, grunting with the effort, until it comes open just enough for me to slither through. The crack doesn't have to be very big, because I have always been small for my age, especially as a kid. We will find, later, that he kicked the window out long before he got the door open, but in his wild desperation to get us out of the truck, he didn't notice.

I do not remember the process of getting out of the truck. I merely remember being out and standing next to it. A truck stops and a man gets out who looks like Clint

Black. He approaches me slowly and gingerly, as if I were a fawn in the woods and could sprint away at any moment. He kneels before me and asks if I am okay. I tell him I think so. I point to the truck and tell him The Vet is still inside. I tell him, also, that The Vet smelled gas. A car pulls up behind the truck and a couple gets out to help. Everything after that is a blur of unfamiliar faces and blue lights.

The police arrive and at some point they get The Vet out of the truck. I never see how because one of the people who stopped took me to their house, which was close by and gave me pretzels. After a while, the phone rings and shortly thereafter they take me back to the accident. My mom is there. She hugs me very, very tightly. An officer kneels before me and asks if I saw The Vet drink anything. I earnestly do not remember the beer, not the case he chugged steadily all afternoon after Mom left, not even the one I watched him finish and toss aside right before we climbed into the truck. I tell him the only thing I've seen him drink is a milkshake from McDonalds. The officer and my mom look at each other, but he nods and my mom puts her arm around me. I crane my neck back and look up at the stars again. I see a moving white light up there and squint, looking for the red glow of Rudolph's nose. I hope Santa won't skip me this year because of all this. I'm sure he understands I'm not in bed right now for a good reason.

It is Christmas Eve.

I shake off the memory as Alan Jackson's twangy guitar riffs fade out. I haven't thought about my first automobile accident in years, much less the drunken perpetrator of it. I don't remember the Christmas morning that followed the incident. I imagine it took place at my grandmother's house and there were plenty of disapproving looks passed

from my grandmother to my mother. Grammy always disliked The Vet, or any man my mom ever became involved with. I imagine her dislike solidified into downright hatred after he *Could've Gotten Me Killed*. To my grandmother's credit, my mother does have chronically bad taste in men. She has never managed to find one who was not an emotionally damaged alcoholic. Mom blames her nursing career for her taste in wounded vultures.

For The Vet, I blame Vietnam and the woefully insufficient mental health care provided by of the Department of Veterans Affairs after it was over. In fact, I still feel a defensive kind of suspicion to this day whenever I meet Vietnam Vets. I'm always waiting for them to snap, or call me a fat-ass (another charming habit The Vet had). It's ironic, because I wasn't even around when The Vet finally did snap.

I'm not sure if he'd ever tried to lay hands on my mom before the incident, but I tend to doubt it. My mom is not exactly the kind of woman you lay hands on. She doesn't make much of an imposing figure: standing at 5'4 at her tallest and in the '90s rarely weighing more than a hundred pounds. But she's tough, with the energy reserves of a can of Red Bull and the temper of a real bull. Seriously, don't wave red flags in front of my mom.

I do know that the night he left was also the same night that my very favorite TV show *Are You Afraid of the Dark* came on at 9:30. I was at my grandmother's house, who didn't have cable, waiting for Mom to come pick me up. I knew she was at home, because as the clock ticked down, I kept calling and asking when she was coming to get me. She, meanwhile, was fighting The Vet tooth and nail and couldn't have been less

concerned about *Are You Afraid of the Dark*, considering a psychotic Vietnam Vet was trying to choke her to death and every time she got the upper hand, the phone would ring.

Whatever happened that night, I know that she got the shotgun out of her closet and backed him toward the door with it. She pointed it steadily at his chest until he climbed into his Chevy pick-up that now had a plastic bag for a driver's side window and drove away. After his truck was gone, she put the gun back up and came to get me. We made it back home just in time for the opening titles.

And that, in a nutshell, is how much my mom loves me. And how fucking selfish and oblivious I can be about it.

I haven't thought about The Vet in years, partially from an eagerness to leave the ugliness of a not-great childhood in the South behind, but also because, until this moment, I have always viewed him with a child's eyes. He was this intrusive force in my life that I literally had no control over. He came, went and treated my mom like shit as he pleased and I never had any real say in the matter. I didn't understand anything about why he was the way he was and that always made him scary to me.

Now I get it. He was a mentally traumatized alcoholic, which pretty much explains every scary thing he ever did, like the accident, or the time he woke me up to scream at me for leaving dirt on his side of the bed. He was sure I'd slept in the bed with my mom while he was gone that week and he could tell because I'd left my filthy child dirt all over my mother's sheets (or something). It could have been worse. He could have been the molestation type, like most of my friends' step-dads, "uncles," and biological fathers. Yeah, the South can be a tough place to grow up for an independent-minded

young rascalion such as myself, but it's even worse for a beautiful teenage girl who is forced to share a house with a lecherous pervert who coincidentally has total dominion over her. This happens more often than anyone cares to admit.

Holy morose epiphanies, Batman. I've only been on this road trip for about four hours and already I'm making personal discoveries and re-evaluating my childhood through a more balanced, adult filter. This trip was such a good idea.

I pass by a hitchhiker and think, very briefly, about pulling over and giving him a ride.

*I pull over and roll down the passenger's side window. I ask if he needs a lift. He asks where I'm headed.*

*"California and back again," I say. He chuckles. He has to get in the back seat because of the cooler in the front floorboard. He has a tawny red beard, bedraggled clothes and a green ski cap. He smells terrible. I roll my window down farther.*

*He sniffs the air and asks what I've been smoking. I laugh it off and say nothing. He tries to wheedle me into giving him some.*

*"Come on. One toke?"*

*I shake my head and tell him I don't have any. I'm nice, but I'm not that nice.*

*I make idle chat as my foot settles on the gas pedal.*

*I have not even gotten very far when I discover he has a knife at my throat. He asks me how much money I have on me.*

*“Are you afraid to die?” I ask.*

*“Huh?” he says.*

*“Cuz I’m not,” I say and jerk the wheel. He is thrown across the backseat. The knife flies out of his hand. I pull the car over and punch the hazard lights. I pull my own knife from beneath the seat and before he can recover, I have it pointed squarely at his throat. He swallows.*

*“This is not how you treat people,” I say. “The next time somebody offers you a ride, you take it and be grateful. No more of this robbing people shit. You hear me?”*

*His eyes widen. I see he thinks I’m crazy. But he nods.*

*“Get out of my car,” I tell him. He does.*

*My tires screech as I pull back onto the highway. I immediately call the cops and tell them what happened, give them a description. They tell me I’ll have to turn around if I want to press charges. I tell them that won’t be necessary and to tell him to apologize to his mother for turning out like such a shit head.*

None of that happened, of course, but I day-dreamed it did for a good half an hour after passing the hitchhiker. Even though I am on my own, my car is surprisingly full. There is a cooler with water and my favorite alternative fuel, Mountain Dew, in the passenger side floorboard. My CDs and notebook rest on the seat next to me. I’ve taped two photos to the dashboard: one of my mom when she was in her early 20s and one of

my grandparents on their Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary Road Trip, standing in front of Mount Rushmore (which I plan to visit). That's right. For my grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, they went on a cross-country road trip together.

There are several other totems of the world I'm temporarily leaving behind situated throughout the front seat. From the rearview mirror hangs a stuffed black kitty cat key chain I found on my friend's floor while helping him move. Next to Kitty Cat hangs Leonard, a multi-colored rubber band dude who looks like Cousin It on LSD. My friend Spring gave him to me for my twenty-fifth birthday. On the head rest of the passenger's seat, is Baby 'Roo, a photo of my best friend behind the wheel of a car when he was a baby. I carry my world with me, however far from it I may stray.

My trunk, too, is full. It holds the essentials of a road trip: tire changing equipment and spare tire, a can of Fix-A-Flat that I will come to regret, a gas can, a gallon of water, a case of Mountain Dew, a case of bottled water, a crate of books, probably about \$1500 cash and my luggage. Thinking myself very clever, I have taken my money and split it up so that if I lose any one thing, at least I won't lose it all. I keep about \$100-200 on my person, a few hundred dollars in my duffel bag, a hundred dollars in one of the books in the crate, a couple hundred in the glove box, etcetera. If somebody takes off with the car, they get most of it, but at least if I am mugged or one of my bags is taken, I won't be stranded in the middle of America, penniless. I know my mom would wire me money if I needed it, such as the time the ATM ate my bank card in Greece, but she is on a fixed income these days and an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure any day.

Basically all splitting up the money does in the end is make me scramble to remember where I put my last two hundred dollars when I'm getting toward the end of the line and fills me with the hope that I will some day find a one hundred dollar bill when going through my books or cleaning my car.

Fortunately, for once in my life, I will not have (many) money woes on this road trip, besides the extravagant cost of gasoline in California and of novelty pens everywhere I go. Besides the aforementioned Greek adventure, I have also been mugged, in Valdosta, GA, with an eyeglasses screwdriver. If that reads like a dollar-store reproduction of *Clue* to you, congratulations, you have the same wacky sense of humor as God.

Everyone likes to think s/he is a badass. It is very rarely that one's badassery is actually tested in the real world. Well, mine was, at the tender age of nineteen and I failed utterly. I was sitting outside of a closed bus station at 2AM waiting for my friends to pick me up on their way home from a concert. So far that day I had fought with my mom, run away from home, hitchhiked through three counties with a roller suitcase while managing to avoid any danger whatsoever and ridden on a Greyhound bus from which a drunk man had literally been thrown not two hours before I came to be sitting outside of a closed bus station in Valdosta, Georgia.

A crackhead<sup>2</sup> in a green sweater wandered by and asked if I had a cigarette. I told him I don't smoke. Suddenly, he was in front of me, gripping my shirt and demanding my purse. I looked down to see a tiny, tiny screwdriver pointed at my belly. My mind froze and I told him I don't have anything. He demanded the purse again and I gave it to

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<sup>2</sup> I have no real way of knowing whether or not he was an actual crackhead, but he did mug me across the street from the police station, indicating a strong sense of hard-upness and the police also speculated this was the case when they showed up later.

him. Not only was there a police station across the street (which I was not aware of), there was a pay phone behind me (which I was aware of). He took my purse and told me if I screamed, he'd shoot me as he ran away.

Instead of utilizing either the phone or the police station, I promptly forgot that calls to 911 are free and took off walking down the road, not wanting to remain at a place where I just got mugged. While usually this would most likely just lead to more mugging, it's probably a good thing that I did, because my friends were having trouble finding the bus station. But they did find me wandering around downtown. They picked me up and I told them what happened. We called the police and they brought dogs and a detective, but my purse was never seen again.

Thinking back with the rose-colored glass of memory, I think that I probably could have taken him. I'm about 99.9% positive he did not have a gun, as nobody with a gun is going to rob somebody with the least intimidating screwdriver in the world. At the very least, I wish I'd turned around and called 911 on the pay phone, because I probably would have gotten my purse back that night if I had. At the most, I wish I'd punched him in his crackhead face, taken his tiny screwdriver and then called 911, maybe lecturing him on the woes of crack and messing with the wrong bad-ass chick until the police could arrive. I would have also told him to apologize to his mother for becoming a crackhead who robs vulnerable young girls.

Instead I lost \$150, an REM CD and my copy of *The Sun Also Rises*. Oh and I wasn't killed. So there's that. I *did* gain a sense of wariness of places that are closed after 2AM and a burning sense of injustice to nurse for years to come. I was handed one of the most incompetent muggers on the planet on a silver platter and still managed to lose my

money, property and a good chunk of my ego. If someone ever tries to mug me again, I'm probably just going to get myself killed trying to fight back. Better a dead hero than a live coward, though, right?

Nah. Being a live coward isn't so bad really. If I were smart, I'd go back and edit the last two paragraphs into an empowering tale of a young, frightened woman overcoming a hostile environment and triumphing over evil. Fortunately, I am probably not a pathological narcissist, as I do not feel the compunction to re-paint my major failings as victories so that people think I'm cool. I'm not cool. I want desperately to be cool, which is no doubt one of the remaining vestiges of my adolescence or a symptom of my obsession with pop culture, but I pretty much fall just short of coolness every single time my ability to be cool is tested.

"Is beating up potentially dangerous muggers cool or just ill-advised?" you ask. Ask any Hollywood blockbuster ever. Beating up bad guys is decidedly, officially cool. I am not. But at least I've never been stabbed to death with a screwdriver.

The first wooden, hand painted religious sign I notice just says John 3:14, which I assume is the bastard second cousin of the much more famous John 3:16.

John 3:14, "Just as Moses lifted the serpent, so must the Son of Man (Jesus) be lifted up." Which is fairly non sensical without the next part, John 3:15, "so that everyone who believes in him can have eternal life." Then 3:16 comes along and says it again, "For God so loved the world, etc."

These signs are all over Western North Carolina, where I live now and Georgia, where I come from. I'm sure they are all over Alabama, too, but I don't notice them until

I'm a few dozen miles from the Mississippi border. WNC and North Georgia have shaken up the format by putting up billboards with pity quotes, supposedly spoken by God himself. A brief list of my favorites:

“Nice wedding. Don’t forget to invite me to the marriage. –God”

“Have you read my bestseller? There *will* be a test. –God”

“What part of ‘Thou Shalt Not’ didn’t you understand? –God”

“Will the road you’re on get you to my place? –God”

The next one I see is another one of my personal favorites. It is a simple piece of wood nailed to a tree with “Jesus is the Answer” emblazoned upon it. Many comedians who have traveled through similarly religious areas have already commented upon this one, specifically how easy it is to mess with. I always want to put signs a few yards in front of this one.

“What is the square root of 17?” (Jesus is the Answer)

“How can I increase the fuel efficiency of my vehicle?” (Jesus is the Answer)

“Who lives in a pineapple under the sea?”

“Who put the bop in the bop-she-bop-she-bop?”

“How do I get my vibrator to stop dying at the worst possible moment?” (Jesus is the Answer). Then, a few feet down the road, “Because if Jesus can’t go all night, who can?”

“What happened to the Happy Birthday Barbie I lost in 1995?”

Jesus, as usual, is the Answer. Jesus, you scamp. Ever the prankster, this guy. Like that time my grandmother was dying and I was all, “Please Jesus, not yet,” and then she died anyway? Ha!

Actually, that's pretty dark. But, it's a common complaint amongst those who have lost a loved one. Religion is supposed to comfort us with the whole mansion-in-the-sky thing, but mostly it just pisses us off. I don't much care that Grammy lives in a mansion and has tea with Jesus every afternoon at 2PM. I miss her and am constantly heartbroken by all the things she knew that I'll never know now, because I didn't have the presence of mind to ask while she was still around. Of course, I know her death wasn't God's fault, or Jesus' either. It was cancer. Ovarian cancer, actually, despite the fact that she'd had a hysterectomy about thirty years prior to her death. Also, it was her fault.

My grandmother was a nurse. She experienced her first brush with cancer when she was in her thirties? Forties? And battled it non-stop for the next forty or fifty years. She lost an eye to it, her womb and underwent dozens of surgeries, not to mention radiation and later chemo. It made her miserable for years and I think that, when she started experiencing symptoms again when I was in my late teens, she just ignored them. I think she was tired of fighting. By the time she finally did see a doctor about her chronic stomach pain, it was too late. The cancer was everywhere and they gave her a couple of months to live. That was in June of 2002. She died August, 2002, a few days before I started my senior year of high school. I missed the first two days of my senior year for her funeral and memorial services.

After she died and Mom and I were going through her things, I found a greeting card she'd bought. I don't know when she bought it. It read: "Congratulations, Granddaughter, on your Graduation!"

She hadn't signed it yet, but I kept it as if she had. I don't know if she anticipated being there or not being there, but either way it had been bought for me. It was too modern to have been bought for my cousin Scorpio's graduation over a decade before and my grandmother has no other granddaughters.

I wept when I found it. I didn't keep any of the other Congratulations! greeting cards I received from the living upon actually graduating. This foresight on my grandmother's part eclipsed them all.

I stop for lunch at a Waffle House near the border. On every table is a placard for a book about growing up Southern. The book gratuitously mentions Waffle House, which appears to be how it came to be that Waffle House gives this guy a lot of free advertising. One of those mutual back-scratching things you hear so much about on television.

Alabama meets me there and we drink coffee and reminisce about the past. I talk to her about The Vet and she sympathizes. She's full of psychotics and alcoholics. We commiserate over the politics of immigration.

"Quit Playin Games with My Heart," by the Backstreet Boys plays and she gets really into it.

"You remember this song?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say. I withhold that I don't really like it anymore now than I did back then. A few of the hated pop hits of my teeny bopper years have wormed their way into my heart using the vehicle of nostalgia, but this isn't one of them.

“Don’t tell me you still think Hanson was better than the Backstreet Boys,” she says.

“At least they wrote their own songs,” I say. Then I get up, pay and leave.

Not long after Waffle House, I feel the need to visit my favorite nation<sup>3</sup>. I stop, originally, at an Exxon. The Exxon had an extension built onto the gas station so that the formerly outside bathroom became an inside bathroom. Unfortunately, the toilet was backed up and the walls were covered with graffiti and various sundry stains, the origins of which I am probably better off not knowing. It was like getting the full outside bathroom experience without having to borrow a key.

Though, it would hardly be a road trip without the occasional shitty gas station bathroom. Instead of hovering above the hopelessly backed up toilet, I decide to move on, where I find Tannehill State Park.

Tannehill State Park is an old Civil War iron and steel works that has since been turned into a roadside stop. Mostly, they made iron for the Civil War effort, or, as we call it in the south, The War Between the States. Because the South had seceded, you see and even though the federal government never officially recognized the sovereignty of the South, the South sure as hell did and resents to this day that the conflict continues to be referred to as the Civil War by most people. I don’t really see how War Between the States is any different, but pro-South historians do.

It is hilly and covered with slender pine trees populated by fat, brave squirrels. The restrooms are big, cozy log cabins that fit in with the rest of the outdoor décor of the

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<sup>3</sup> Urination.

historical site. There is also the occasional cannon cemented into the landscape with a plaque telling you it was built there.

Once in the restroom, what I think at first is a woman in the next stall packing cigarettes against her hand and then removing the cellophane from a fresh pack turns out to be the Biggest. Fucking. Hornet I've ever seen throwing itself against the fluorescent light Right. Above. My. Head. I become very, very still and hope to finish my business before the thing notices me. When I do finish my business, hornet-sting free, wash my hands and walk around the side of the bathroom cabin, I notice a hornet's nest under the eve.

Even with the Big. Fucking. Hornets, this bathroom is still far nicer than the Exxon up the road. Tannehill is a lovely place to take a piss and walk around for a bit, admiring cannons and enjoying the antics of fat grey squirrels. And did I mention the Big. Fucking. Hornets? They were pretty fucking big.

Tannehill is the last stop I make in Alabama before sailing seamlessly across the border and into Mississippi. So long, Alabama. Hanson Rulez 4 Ever!

## CHAPTER 2

## LOUISIANA

“It’s been a long night in New York City. It’s been a long night in Baton Rouge. I don’t remember you looking any better, but then again, I don’t remember you.”- John Mayer

I cross over into Mississippi as dark begins to gather. The air is rich and spicy, smelling almost of paprika. I wonder if it is the Cajun air drifting over from Louisiana, though it is most likely some sort of chemical pesticide. Poetry, poison, or both?

Just as I begin to despair of reaching Baton Rouge, My Folly asserts himself, laughing.

“Baton Rouge, huh?” he says and just cackles.

“Shut up,” I grumble and start to look for a sign for a Motel 6, except that, as luck would have it, I am on one of those stretches of dark, lonely highway that doesn’t even have road signs.

I would like to take this moment to extol the virtues of one of the few useful features on the average GPS system. Mostly the features are useless and confusing, but a couple of them are worthwhile, especially the feature that allows you to search hotels in a hundred mile radius of your current location. This feature was particularly useful when I found myself exhausted, in the middle of nowhere. This is precisely what happened that first night. I was in the middle of Mississippi, it was only ten o’clock and I was falling asleep at the wheel. I hadn’t seen a road sign in I-don’t-know-how-long and was beginning to despair. So, I fired up the Garmin I borrowed. I touched the *Hotels* button

and discovered that I was only about fifty miles away from Hattiesburg which has several slumbering options, among them, a Motel 6. Mom told me to be on the lookout for Motel 6s, so I choose it for my first location.

I would also like to extol the virtues of Motel 6. They are the masters of keeping costs down. When you get a room at a Motel 6, you get a room, possibly a TV, a clean bed with bleach-scented sheets, a bar of soap, a towel and a rag... and that's it. No sewing kit or toothbrush or basket of overpriced goodies. You can purchase more accoutrements from the front desk, but for the Gal on the Go who only needs a bed and a roof over her head, it is ideal.

Best of all, their check-out time is usually 11 AM, meaning I can sleep until 10:45 the next day. And I do. I have spent years training myself to be up, dressed and ready to go within ten minutes of waking. I am a huge fan of the last minute.

I go to IHOP for breakfast. It must be Sunday, because everyone is dressed in their Sunday best and the crowd has all the signs and symptoms of the after-church rush. I am seated quickly because I am by myself. So begins a long line of solitary dining experiences, of listening in on the private lives of strangers without seeming like I'm listening in on the private lives of strangers, of receiving sympathy looks from other patrons and most importantly, of trying to keep syrup off my notebook.

When I get back in the car after breakfast, all thoughts of my impending loneliness fades, especially after I spark up my first joint of the day. I get on the road to Baton Rouge.

I'll be honest. I chose Baton Rouge because of John Mayer. Austin, too, though I had more reasons for going to Austin that I'll get into later. I chose Baton Rouge so that I could *relate*.

When I finally got a copy of *Battle Studies*, I listened to it every day for weeks, just as I had with his previous albums, not to mention every bootleg live song I could legally get my hands on. (Because downloading music is wrong, kids.) Everyone loves to talk about what a jerk John Mayer is, especially after his infamous *Playboy* interview, but if you listen closely, he's been honest about being a jerk since *Continuum*. "I Don't Trust Myself with Loving You," for example. He's even more honest about it on *Battle Studies*, specifically on the tracks, "Perfectly Lonely," "Assassin," and "Who Says."

I love everything about "Who Says." Who says I can't get stoned, indeed? Or that I can't re-write my history? My life has been a twenty-five year exercise in rewriting history. I have gone through many transformations, from a nine-year-old fire-and-brimstone spouting Baptist to angry fifteen-year-old atheist to a twenty-two year old Jewish/Shinto/Hindu/Pagan/Muslim. Of course, those two in the middle there mean, literally, "to be Japanese" and "to be from India," of which I am neither, but I was experimenting, learning, becoming a spiritual being. As if one can become something that one already is.

And that's just the religious stuff. There are many dimensions in the Tiffverse and all of them are in a constant state of upheaval. With every transformation, I look back, not so much with 20/20 hindsight, but with a hindsight tinted (tainted?) by my present experience. I find clues in my past that prove *this* was the place I was moving toward all along. Even when I was a Baptist, for instance, I didn't get the whole persecution of the

gays thing. In fact, when my church boycotted Ellen, I boycotted church. Even when I was a self-righteous, angry atheist, I would still have days when I would stop, look around and think to myself: *But wait a minute. That can't be right. The world is simply too beautiful to not have been crafted by some skilled and loving hand.* Then I would witness something ugly and tell myself to shut up, there's no Maker here. There was never any shortage of ugly things in southwest Georgia. Of course, there's no shortage of ugly things anywhere. Even the Bahamas, some of the most beautiful beaches in the world, are adjacent to poverty-stricken ghettos, the ugly remnants of imperialism.

This road trip itself is a way of rewriting my history. I am trying to become someone new, someone who is free instead of trapped. I am looking for answers, for people and for a reason. I mostly want a reason to write, but I will settle for a reason to live.

Long story short, I related to "Who Says," in every way except two of the locales mentioned in the choruses. I have had many long nights in New York City, but I had not yet been to Baton Rouge or Austin. Both locations were on my way, so I decided to include them in my great journey across America, so that I could own the song fully. A great deal of my life has been spent trying to own songs fully.

Very soon, I plan to do the same thing with the song "I've Been Everywhere" by Johnny Cash.

Even so, I do not spend a long night in Baton Rouge. I spend part of an afternoon and not even in Baton Rouge, but at a Firestone Tire & Lube just outside of Baton Rouge.

I was trying to find Saturn of Baton Rouge. Garmin also has a feature that allows you to search for car dealerships in any given area, something I thought would be a lot

more useful than it is, as I have a book of coupons that entitles me to a free oil change at any Saturn dealership. I did not, however, get the memo that Saturn had recently gone under and their dealerships are being systematically shut down, including Saturn of Baton Rouge. (G.E. has taken over the job of honoring things like free oil change coupons, but I don't know this at the time.)

Any idiot could have told me to get an oil change before I left on my road trip, but I am also in desperate need of a front-end alignment and the one place in Murphy, NC that provides this service was booked up for weeks. I was sort of banking on a dealership to be available to me, especially because of the aforementioned coupons, but Firestone does alignments in addition to full lube service, so I settle for it. It is also in the place Saturn of Baton Rouge was supposed to be. After yesterday's fourteen hour marathon of non-stop driving, it is nice to settle down in an air conditioned tire and lube center for an hour or so, anyway.

Before pulling in, I take some cares. I spray the car down with auto Febreze and make sure there are no visible signs that marijuana has been smoked recently in this car. I tell myself there's no reason for anyone to go through my things, so the bag of joints buried in the coffee can in the bag in the back seat is sure to not be discovered. Still, when I am asked if I want my vehicle vacuumed (a complimentary service they provide with each oil change), my resounding *No* is a little too emphatic.

I end up driving through downtown Baton Rouge so I can say I've been to Baton Rouge and I keep going.

The momentum is building, I can feel it. When I am behind the wheel of my car, I do not want to stop. I want to go forward to the next thing, but once I reach the next thing, I long to once again be in my car and on The road.

I don't realize it at the time, but the anxiety issues that are very much a part of my genetic inheritance are starting to manifest themselves.

Soon I am driving through the famed swamp land on the heel of the foot that is Louisiana. Cypress rather than pine starts to line the highway and the air takes on the smell of skunk cabbage, not to be confused with skunk weed, which is a euphemism for marijuana. Skunk cabbage is a plant that grows in wetlands and swamps and smells about how you'd expect something named after a skunk to smell. It's a familiar smell to me. Some derivation of skunk cabbage is found along most hiking trails in western North Carolina, a fact most stoner hikers are thankful for and I grew up on a swamp myself.

My grandparents owned seventy-two acres in Colquitt, Georgia, which is just about in the most southwestern corner of Georgia that you can get without straying into Alabama or Florida. These acres were adjacent to untamable swamp land and for years, Mom and I lived in a house on this property. One of my uncles also owned property on a swamp, which he used to store and breed alligators. He was the Alligator Man around Colquitt. He was the guy you called whenever an alligator turned up in your backyard, or your pool, or blocking traffic on Main Street. He would also remove other reptilian pests, mostly snakes. His home was decorated with alligator skulls, alligator teeth, diamondback snake skins and the rattles carved from his captures. One of his most

impressive pieces was the full, intact skin off a six-foot-long rattler. It was stretched over one of the windows of his trailer, like a shade.

At family reunions, all the kids wanted to go visit the Alligator Man. We were endlessly attracted to his trailer full of curios and especially the old bathtub in the backyard that was home to a baby alligator at any given point in time. One of the braver children was allowed to hold it while the rest of us ran our fingers along its hard, scaly back. Alligators, like most things, are far less scary when they're babies. Their tiny, piranha-like rows of teeth are almost adorable and tickle more than they hurt. It is hard to believe that some of those same teeth will grow to be nearly the size of my hand and will possess the power to sever limbs from my body when used with the full power of the gator's jaws.

Still, seeing, touching, holding this remnant of the dinosaurs as a baby, helpless and vulnerable to even our children's hands, helped take some of the dread out of the reality of alligators for me. There are not many things more feared in swamp lands than a gator, one of man's few natural predators and notorious devourer of beloved household pets. (Though, despite my home's proximity to the swamp, I never lost any furry friends to a renegade gator... that I know of. There were animals that disappeared, but they could just as easily have simply run away, or in the case of two very large, very good dogs, been stolen.)

The Alligator Man brought a live alligator to one of my elementary school classes once. Its powerful jaws were duct-taped closed and it was probably sedated, but when my uncle agitated it enough to lunge at him, all of us gasped.

Basic alligator safety, including how to get away from an angry alligator in the wild (or your backyard or swimming pool) was simply part of the curriculum for a student in Colquitt. I used to practice running in a zig-zag with my cousins, or scampering up a nearby tree and out of reach of bone-crushing jaws.

Visiting New Orleans last year for the first time was more like coming home than I expected it to be. Maybe it was the ever-present smell of the swamp, or the proliferation of alligator skulls and snake skins, but I'm pretty sure it was the voodoo. Perhaps a better word to use would be magic, as modern-day practitioners of voodoo in Colquitt, Georgia are sure to be few to none. There probably is some rural swamp-dweller who's into Santaria somewhere in the depths of the county, but I can't say for sure.

There is magic where I come from, though. Perhaps this is the part where I lose my credibility with some, or pique the curiosity of others. The South is a superstitious place, generally and I grew up believing an entire mythology of ghosts, haunted places and mysterious creatures, much like those who grow up in southern Louisiana believe in the *loup-garou*, the power of voodoo and ghosts.

Colquitt was a weird town. Bubbling underneath the racial tension, political corruption and sundry small town secrets was the kind of deep fear and superstition that exists inside every human heart. Except it didn't stay inside the hearts, but floated around in the air, palpable.

The most haunted place in Colquitt was White's Bridge, a name that sends a small shiver down my spine and fills my stomach with icy dread to this day. Several phenomenon have been associated with White's Bridge and almost every urban legend

seems to have happened to it. There were the cries of the infant that had been tossed into the icy waters below. There was the tortured scream of the abandoned lover who threw herself off the bridge that could only be heard on a certain day, at midnight. Nobody seemed to know which day, exactly. There were blood mirages on the road and spirit lights that danced upon the water. There were spectral children, women in white, chain-laden slaves and disfigured Native American warriors that could be seen wandering the area around the bridge.

Overlooking the bridge is a little white clapboard church, erected in the 1850s. Behind the church is a graveyard, where the spirits of an elderly couple supposedly dance together through the night. Behind that graveyard, down a barely perceivable trail, is an old slave graveyard.

As comedian David Cross has commented, the segregation of the old south was so ingrained, old southerners literally took it to the grave.

Only the dancing elderly couple has a logical explanation. In the graveyard, there are two enormous statues, one of an elderly man and one of an elderly woman. When headlights come around the curve and bounce off of them just right, their shadows do indeed seem to merge and dance.

White's Bridge was the pulsing supernatural center of Colquitt. Everybody knew two or three different ghost stories about it and many people had ghost stories of their own.

"When *I* was there, I heard the baby crying."

"When *I* was there, I saw the White Woman."

"I heard children laughing."

I've been to White's Bridge many times. It's just down the road from my grandmother's house and there is very little else to do in Colquitt besides scare yourself at White's Bridge. I imagine it gets crowded there on Halloween and Friday the 13ths.

It's a creepy place, to be sure. I've heard voices, laughter, footsteps following me on the road. I've felt ominous presences and have even heard a full-on gospel choir start up in the middle of the slave graveyard in the dead of midnight. Whether these experiences can be attributed to the supernatural, or the ethereal sounds that water gurgling under bridges tends to make, or my own paranoid, superstitious mind, I will probably never know. I have also spent many happy summer days splashing around in the water beneath White's Bridge, floating along atop the current, scaring the catfish beneath that were supposedly some of the biggest and most delicious in the county.

I do believe, with all my heart, that there are places in the world where, as Stephen King said, "the lines are thin." The lines between this reality and the next. I don't necessarily think this is a kooky idea, either. Quantum physics allows for the possibility that there are realities besides our own and infinite dimensions. Most things we now consider paranormal are probably just traces of a science we haven't discovered yet. People used to think seizures and Tourette's were demonic possession. Maybe what we think of as ghosts is just human energy, burned onto the surface of time in a way we aren't capable of understanding yet.

When Debt and I visited New Orleans a couple years ago, I spent as much time absorbing the voodoo culture as possible. I went to the voodoo museum and every store in the French Quarter that sold voodoo curios. I went to voodoo bookstores, hoping I

would find some enormous, dusty book clad in leather that turned out to be human skin, with spells and chants designed to open the gateways between this reality and the next. Instead, I mostly found cheery paperbacks titled *Ghosts of New Orleans!* I went on a ghost tour and visited the famous graveyard where Marie Laveau is interred. Debt followed along behind me, trying to seem politely interested. I can't help but wonder now if I'm just his crazy ex-girlfriend who believed in things you can't see.

Most of my wanderings around New Orleans were voyeuristic tourism. They don't pull out the real stuff for the tourists and I knew this going in. But you can feel the magic everywhere if you stop and try, even on crowded Bourbon Street. The atmosphere in front of the notorious Ursuline Convent crackles with it, especially at night, when the stark whiteness of the structure floats out of the darkness to thoroughly unsettle passers-by.

Every time we headed across the dark waters of Pontchartrain to the place we were staying in Mandeville, LA, I expected something creepy to happen. Spirit lights on the water or ghost ships in the distance. Mostly, I expected the bridge to crumble beneath us or for a spirit storm to encourage the choppy waters below to rise up and reclaim the man-made structure stretching across its belly. When the car's wheels were safely on land again, I was on the lookout for loup-garou or one of George Rodrigue's little blue dogs.

Unfortunately, nothing creepy happened to me in New Orleans, but I did taste the best Bloody Mary I've had before or since. And plenty of creepy things happened to me on the edge of the swamps in South Georgia, so maybe the spirit forces were giving me a break.

I glance at my side view mirror and notice a bright red, brand new Mustang convertible coming up on my right. I imagine the driver will be young, blonde and muscular.

Instead, he turns out to be thin, bald and eighty. He is also rocking dark black wrap-around-your-entire-head style blocker shades.

Well. Rock on, post-life crisis guy.

A commercial comes on the radio for something called the E-Z snore pillow. Their tag line turns out to be, “Stop snoring forever!” Which is a little ominous, considering their product is a pillow. I wonder what the instructions are. I imagine they go a little something like this:

Step 1. Remove from package.

Step 2. Apply directly to snorer’s nose.

Step 3. Press hands firmly against pillow until snoring stops.

The speed limit fluctuates and I readjust my cruise control, which happens to be working today. Unable to find anything but cheesy commercials on the radio, I pop in my Road Trip Usuals mix. “Life is a Highway” plays and I can no longer be held responsible for my speed. Cruise Control is like my best friend in situations like this, because I sincerely doubt, “But officer, I fucking *love* this song,” would get me out of any tickets.

But soon it starts to rain and Cruise Control can no longer help me. It’s just a light drizzle at first then faster and faster until my windshield wipers are on high and still my windshield is an impenetrable sheet of rain. I would pull over and wait it out if I could,

but I am in heavy traffic, on a bridge crossing the bayou into southern Texas. I can just make out the taillights of the car in front of me and I let them guide me.

By the time the rain clears up, I am across the state line.

In Texas.

## CHAPTER 3

## AUSTIN

“Texas is the root of all evil.” –Suzanne Raether, author

My first destination in Texas is Austin. I chose Austin not just because of John Mayer, but because I’ve heard from multiple sources that it is the only cool place in Texas. Comedian Patton Oswalt calls it a little “bubble of cool” in the midst of an unforgiving, conservative wasteland.

I have no reservations anywhere. I fire up Garmin again and ask her if there are any Motel 6s in the area. She finds me one at the same time that I see a sign on the highway advertising one for \$39.99/night, next exit.

After locating the Motel 6, Garmin promptly directs me to turn left—into a concrete wall. This baffles me so much that I miss the actual turn into the Motel 6 parking lot and have to double back. Naturally, I become hopelessly lost and drive frantically around the outskirts of Austin for a while before finding the sign and the exit again. Ha! Suck it, Garmin.

I make the turn into the parking lot and am greeted with the sight of a bright white Cadillac raised up on extra large tires with enormous chrome spinners. Best of all, the car has Truck Nuts dangling from underneath the back bumper. I have never seen anything like this car before.

My instinct is to worry about my surroundings. I know I’m probably in a not-great part of town and the many signs declaring how not responsible the hotel is for items

left unsecured in your vehicle do nothing to put me at ease. The couple yelling at each other across the parking also doesn't help.

I check in and get a room key. My room is around back, the perfect place for a Single White Female such as myself to be chloroformed and dragged away. Gripping the spike on my keychain, I key into the room. My keys have a spiked blunt instrument on them, specifically designed to help fend-off would be attackers. My brother gave it to me. Its intended use is to subdue unruly prisoners in a corrections facility by careful application to specific pressure points. (My brother was, at one point, a corrections officer.) I figure jamming it as hard as I can into somebody's eye hole will work just as well.

The room smells like weed and all my apprehensions dissipate like so much smoke. I smirk to myself and settle in. I take a shower and feel no reservations smoking a joint afterward.

Most of the good things I've heard about Austin, I've heard from stand-up comedians. I decide I must check out a comedy club while I'm here. There is one not far from the Motel 6 with a show tonight. I will have plenty of time to explore downtown for a couple of hours, grab dinner and head out to the show.

Once downtown, I wander around for a while until I get hungry. I stumble upon the Jackelope, a dive bar. *Silence of the Lambs* is playing on all four big screen TVs inside.

I order a black and blue burger and when I get it, it's the biggest burger I've ever seen. And delicious to the last bite. Juicy but not too juicy, brown all the way through and smothered in a generous helping of crumbled blue cheese. The bun doesn't last as long as

the burger and I must turn to my fork for help with consuming all of it. After it's gone, I feel like the guy in that ancient antacid commercial: I can't believe I ate the whole thing.

After eating, I wander around some more, eventually coming upon the Museum of the Weird. It's almost kismet, considering that I've so recently been musing on my superstitious past.

I'm still pretty high, so I gladly pay the entry fee and proceed to spend the next hour and a half looking at *everything*. I read every placard, from the shrunken heads to the Fiji Mermaid. The Museum smells like aging taxidermy. If you've ever been close enough to either a really old or improperly preserved stuffed dead animal, that's the scent I'm talking about. The canoe and kayak rental I worked for had an improperly preserved rattle snake which fell apart the first time I moved it for cleaning. I had to spend the next hour sweeping decomposing snake out of a display case. The smell stuck with me and I remember it again in the Museum of the Weird, even though most of the formerly alive samples, such as the shrunken heads, are behind glass. Nothing lasts forever, I guess.

It's comforting to know that superstitions similar to those I was raised with exist in most cultures, in most parts of the world. People are always trying to see beyond this reality and into another, but it turns out the lizard boy's scales are always greener on the other side.

Part of me wants to linger on Sixth Street. To wait until the sun sets and the neon lights come out. The music scene here is legendary, but ultimately I decide to go with the devil I know and that's comedy.

I smoke most of my pre-show joint on the way there, but arrive far more quickly than I thought possible. I park between two SUVs and try to stay low as I finish it. I notice two Mexicans in a van across from me, elbowing each other and pointing at me. I sink lower and mentally tell the Universe that *yes, I know I'm not sneaky in the least*. Eventually I pretend to be rifling through my floorboard for something as I finish off my joint. I spritz myself down with Auto Febreeze, sure that I'll be fooling no one, but banking on the fact that workers at a comedy club are certainly no strangers to the smell of marijuana to keep me out of trouble. I hope most of them partake themselves.

Paul Varghese is the headliner. A comedian of Indian descent (India-Indian, not American Indian), I expect to hear a lot of jokes about how backward his parents are in a stereotypical Indian accent. Instead, he does virtually no jokes about his Indian heritage, which surprises and pleases me. There are a couple, of course, because your heritage is often the source of more pain and humor in your life than any other factor. But mostly his set is comprised of solid, observational jokes. If you were to Google Paul Varghese today, however, almost all that turns up are jokes about being Indian, which leads me to believe they are his most popular jokes. Most ethnic comedians could speak volumes about the many ways in which they have to perform their culture as much as they perform their jokes. There is an expectation that if you're a Latino comic, you will throw in a few Spanish words, but only ones a mainstream white audience will understand, like *esse* or *mañana* and you will make several humorous observations about the differences between white people and Latinos. Indians are expected to do jokes about what spend thrifts Indians are and how amusingly frustrating it can be to be mistaken for someone of Arabic descent, especially at an airport. Arabic comedians are expected to do jokes about not

being terrorists, but being mistaken for terrorists. Irish comedians are expected to do jokes about how much they drink and British comedians are expected to joke about the Revolutionary War.

Even though almost all you see on Comedy Central and other televised, sponsored comedy specials are ethnic jokes from ethnic comedians, the live shows are often a different story. The unrecorded show at the comedy club is where a comedian gets to be himself. He doesn't have to perform his culture because some producer wanted to hear more about how funny it is to be Indian in predominately white America. He can tell the jokes he wants to tell, about the strange habits of old roommates, picture day in middle school and Atomic Fireball candies.

My favorite Varghese joke of the night: "Can you imagine giving this candy to a Japanese person? How insensitive is that? It's like, oh, you know that devastating event that killed thousands of people in your country? Yeah, we named a candy after it. Here, have one. Oh and here's a second one, for absolutely no reason."

The two-drink minimum leaves me a little tipsy. I drive very, very carefully back to the motel and impress myself mightily when I don't miss the turn this time.

Still giggling at the comedian, I undress and prepare for bed. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and suddenly remember another famous Austin landmark from this afternoon: Leslie the Transvestite.

I was wandering around Sixth Street when I saw her-him. S/he has the grizzled, grey-bearded face of a long-time hobo or wizard fallen on hard times. S/he has the body of a thirty-five year old pregnant lady. A hairy pregnant lady in a tube top. And miniskirt.

No matter how liberal or think-you've-seen-it-all you are, seeing Leslie for the first time is almost guaranteed to make you do a double-take.

Let's go over it again. Grizzled, bearded face, huge tits barely contained in a bright pink tube top, huge protruding pot belly complete with furry grey happy trail, topped off (bottomed-off?) with a miniskirt and, I must say, a very nice pair of legs.

So yeah, today in downtown Austin, I saw an old homeless dude with nicer tits than me.

Way nicer.

Not that it's difficult to have nicer tits than me. My breasts are a sad state of affairs. I've got the classic one-bigger-than-the-other thing going on, on top of the fact that only one of them fills out an A-cup.

It's safe to say that I hate my breasts. They have been a constant source of disappointment to me. No one's ever outright rejected them or anything. I've never been about to get busy with a guy only to have him take one look at my breasts then suddenly have somewhere else to be. But, in the back of my mind, is always the nagging feeling that male attention would be a lot easier to get if Tweedle So-Not-D and Tweedle Dumb filled out my shirts better.

Breasts are everywhere. Or, more specifically, beautiful, bouncy, C-cup or larger breasts are everywhere. Guys, universally, seem to love the shit out of them. I think they're kind of gross, honestly, but that's probably just because mine suck.

I've thought, more than once, that if I ever came into a substantial amount of money, I'd get a breast enlargement. Not crazy Pamela Anderson Triple Gs or anything, but maybe a nice, perky, *even* B.

Like my mom did.

To look at my mom, you would never suspect she has fake breasts. In fact, when I was eleven and my cousin told me that my mom's breasts were fake, I called her a liar. When Mom confirmed later, I cried. I don't know why I cried. Something about feeling like I'd been lied to all this time, but really, when *is* a good time to tell your kid something like that?

Obviously, I've come to terms with it now, to the point of total empathy. Mom says getting the boob job did make her happier, that it helped soothe the insecurity that comes with being a breastless girl in America.

So why do I care so much about male attention anyway? Well, mostly because I really enjoy getting laid.

Should I have a deeper motivation than that? According to every teen movie ever made, the life of the average American guy revolves around getting laid and this is somehow considered a noble pursuit. Put a girl in the same position and somehow she's considered a slut. Even in the twenty-first century when women are supposed to be all liberated and stuff, it still seems to come as a shock when a woman presents herself as a sexual creature.

Unless you're Chelsea Handler. Then you build a multi-million dollar empire on being a sexual creature and make it easier for insecure girls everywhere to feel better about their boob jobs.

It's only ten o'clock, when I settle into bed, but tomorrow is a big day. Part of me wants to say "fuck it!" and see what the downtown night life is like after all, but the prospect of trying to navigate the city streets slightly drunk convinces me to stay in. I

have to leave early anyway and certainly do not want to be hung over or overly tired for what's coming next.

## CHAPTER 4

## VICTORIA

“Fathers, be good to your daughters. Daughters will love like you do.” –John Mayer

I went to Austin purely because I wanted to. I go to Victoria because I made plans to meet my aunt today.

My mom and dad got divorced when I was four. He was an alcoholic type and eventually, my mom couldn't afford him anymore. Also, he threatened my brother with violence on more than one occasion and Mom decided it best to push my dad out of the picture before he could follow through. I haven't seen him since.

When I was nineteen, though, I got really curious about his side of the family. Mom couldn't tell me much because she'd only met them once and my dad didn't like to talk about his family.

He had two sisters. I had their names and an internet connection. I cold-called a lot of strangers before I finally found Aunt Grace. When I did, the connection was instantaneous.

Aunt Grace, is, in a word, awesome. She's everything my dad isn't. Strong and nurturing, she is the matriarch of her own healthy, thriving clan. She has children and grandchildren and even great-grandchildren, I believe and I assume they all adore her.

The first time we talked, we talked for two hours until the batteries on both of our phones started to die. She was funny and sweet and intuitive and *so much like me*. We got each other. We kept in touch over the years, usually trading calls on major holidays and

birthdays and when I told her I was thinking of taking a road trip out west, she jumped at the chance to meet me.

She sells cosmetics in malls. She's sort of like an elite Avon lady, taking her wares from mall to mall and selling them at kiosks in department stores.

She is also short. Slightly shorter than me, even and I, too, am short. Yet, the more I get to know her, the taller she grows. There's a whole lot of personality packed into her small frame.

We are both visibly nervous, each of us talking maybe a little too loudly and laughing too often at nothing in particular. We meet a friend of hers and go to lunch. She wanted to have a friend with her, "just in case," and I completely understand. There are a thousand things that could have gone wrong with this scenario, especially if I turned out to be too much like my dad, who, in his heyday, was no doubt as manipulative as he was charming. He was exceedingly good at talking women into supporting him, financially and otherwise.

I did ask about him. Curiosity has always been more of a burning need in my brain than a suggestion. My dad is more or less off the grid today. He lives in an inherited camper on inherited land, wearing second hand clothes Aunt Grace provides him. She supported him financially more than once during his life, but says she refuses to do that now. Still, he is her brother and she loves him. So, she takes him her husband's clothes when he tires of or outgrows them.

She will also take him the occasional meal.

My dad was always handy. I think he was a mechanic or something. He drove trucks and many truck drivers inevitably become truck mechanics. He does a bit of work

here or there when he can get it, only making enough to buy himself beer and the occasional steak and potato.

Both of her parents were also alcoholics. One of them, the male one, was abusive, physically and verbally. Their mother was also abusive, but more toward the verbal end. Aunt Grace assures him, however, that her mother was funny. That she, quote, “Thought in funny.” No matter how inappropriate the situation, my paternal grandmother could never stop herself from making a joke.

I can relate.

They have both passed on and she brought me a picture of their grave site, hoping I wouldn’t find that too macabre.

Now, when I show this picture to people, I always use the set up, “Hey, do you want to see the most recent picture of my grandparents?”

I usually follow this up with, “Bwa-ha, get it? ‘Cause they’re dead?”

I like to think my grandmother would approve. Sometimes irreverence is the best way to honor a memory, especially a memory you never really got to have.

The unpleasantness of the past finally dispensed with, Aunt Grace tells me about her family, the one she started with her husband. I quickly get lost in a sea of names and how they relate to each other. She knows every person, every detail of her branch of the family tree, as one would expect a proud mother-grandmother-etc to be. She asks about my mother and my brother, whom she hasn’t seen in two decades. She even gives me gifts for them.

Then, of course, she asks me all about me.

Lunch is over far too soon. Aunt Grace must get back to the cosmetics kiosk and her friend must go her separate way as well. I have the full expanse of Texas before me on my way to Elk City, Oklahoma, where I was born. It strikes me as important, in an abstract way, that I stand at least once on the soil where I was born, even if I was moved from that place long before it had time to impress itself fully upon my consciousness. (Mom moved back to Georgia when I was one, taking my father along with her.)

Aunt Grace and I take pictures together and hug many times. We can't get over how wonderful each thinks the other has turned out to be. We attempt to make tentative plans for our next encounter, but nothing that has yet panned out.

In a way, I am glad that this is all we got, this snapshot of time together. It's a lot easier to impress another person in an hour than to disappoint, especially if all parties involved happen to have witty, sparkling personalities. But I'm glad I did not overstay my welcome, letting some viewpoint too liberal slip out or some truth too damning for her to accept. I wonder, for instance, what she would think if she knew I habitually smoked marijuana. Would she fear for me? Would she pity me? Would she care?

What if she knew that Jesus Christ was not my personal Lord and Savior? This truth, I worry, may be too much to bear.

Or perhaps I give her too little credit. She, too, is well-traveled, having recently returned from Italy and planning a trip somewhere else soon, on top of being a travelling saleswoman. Perhaps there is room enough in her heart for me to be educated, driven, funny and a stoner with goofy-at-best spiritual leanings.

Just to be careful, I don't smoke my first joint of the day until I am heading away from Victoria. Then the arduous task of processing what has no doubt been a monumental experience in my young life and the information this meeting has brought me.

The drive away from Victoria gets me to thinking about my dad, which I anticipated. What I did not anticipate was the ziplock bag full of pictures from my father's misspent youth that Aunt Grace handed me across the table.

My teeth ground together as I tried to keep my face passive against the battalions of emotions that immediately went to war within me. I smiled. I nodded. I flipped through the pictures quickly, but not so quickly as to arouse suspicion, to get to the pictures that weren't of him.

Tingles and shame sweep through my head, my heart and a slightly more southern locale even now as a piece of the Tiff puzzle falls firmly into place. In the photos, my dad is blonde-haired and blue-eyed in a couple of the photos, hazel-eyed in others. My eyes change colors, too. He has sharp, angular cheekbones, pouty lips and a cocky swagger that shines through the decades so brightly I understand immediately what my mother saw in him despite everything I know about what happened after.

In one picture, he wears a leather jacket and is the perennial Bad Boy.

He is everything I find physically attractive in a man and I didn't even know it until today, as if his genetic memory implanted itself on my psyche in a concentrated effort to fuck me up as much as possible. The pictures I already have of my father are nothing like this. In those, he is bald and his cheeks are full and his lips are certainly not pouty. In this moment, I hate him, hate Freud, hate blonde hair and blue eyes and sharp

cheekbones. Most of all, I hate Excelsior (the nickname I have affectionately given my lady parts) and the psychological baggage I have spent the last twenty-five years dodging.

His sister had been frank over the phone. I shouldn't expect to meet my daddy. I told her I had no interest in that. It was almost true.

I was twenty-five and so over my father. I had finally gotten it. It wasn't *me*. My dad was an alcoholic. He didn't care about anybody, unless they had alcohol and they were willing to share. Sometimes being an alcoholic means you are able to sustain a half-life, to have relationships with people who put up with you a lot longer than they should. Sometimes, it means nothing matters but the drink and that's the kind of alcoholic my father is.

My aunt didn't say it explicitly, but the sadness in her eyes, the nervous way her hands fluttered and the empathy dripping from her voice told the tale. I wonder if he knows who Aunt Grace is when she takes him the occasional bag of clothes or plate of food. I wonder if he even remembers he has children. I think the real reason I should not have expected to meet my daddy was that Aunt Grace wasn't sure he'd know who I was and wasn't sure if I was strong enough to bear such abject rejection in person. She certainly didn't want to put me through it, even if I was.

I am. With or without the experience of having your father ask you who you are to your face, I've been living with that kind of rejection for years. Some people have it worse. Some people have parents who loved them ask them who they are with the onset of dementia or Alzheimer's. Some people had to actually grow up with fathers like mine; fathers who blew the family's entire income on whiskey, lashed them with belts when

they protested and will still some day stare their children angrily in the eye and ask who they are. Some kids take on the burden of trying to purge their parents of their demons and spend their entire lives toiling under this burden. I am not one of those. My father can rot and die in his little trailer, for all I care. I don't even know if my aunt would call me if he died. I don't know if I would want her to.

Daddy.

It's a word that has alternately sent chills down my spine, thoroughly disgusted me and utterly overpowered me.

When I was in middle school, the phrase "Who's your daddy" became insanely popular, seemingly out of nowhere. Maybe it had always been around and I just hadn't noticed it. Maybe it's just the sort of semi-vulgar slang that really appeals to the 11-14 crowd. Whatever the cause, I hated it. I would shudder with disgust every time I heard it and that was before I found out it was a sex thing.

It was around this time, too, that the fact that my father wasn't in my life really started to bother me. For the first twelve years of my life, I didn't think about him. My world was what it was and I had no control over the players or the game. When the hormonal storm of pubescence began, "because" was suddenly not good enough anymore. Where was my father? What happened to him? Hadn't he loved me? Why did he leave? Was it me? It was me, wasn't it?

I was consumed with thoughts of my father, his whereabouts and the inadequacies within myself, real or imagined, that had driven him away. As a consequence, I couldn't

not separate the phrase “Who’s your daddy?” and my actual daddy. I knew who he was, but I didn’t know where.

Yeah, yeah, I know. It’s an all too typical story these days. Deadbeat dad, broken home, probably even the part where the uninterested parent lives within walking distance. (Turns out, my dad was more or less right down the road for most of my childhood. We just ran in different circles.) Still, knowing there are thousands of other miserable kids out there just like you, overcoming the same odds, doesn’t really make it easier. But the thing is, for a long time, I didn’t know there were thousands of other miserable kids out there just like me. In my rural neck of South Georgia, people didn’t get divorced unless adultery was involved, even in the early nineties. I was one of the only kids I knew with a single mom. Even the kids of divorced parents that I knew did the whole joint custody thing and their parents remarried quickly, providing step-fathers and step-mothers and step-siblings. Other children of divorce seemed to have it all.

As a child, I found myself having to explain that I didn’t know what my dad did for a living because I didn’t know where my dad *was*. He was gone. Out of the picture. No, he wasn’t dead; he just wasn’t around. No, I didn’t know where he went. No, he wasn’t coming back. Why? *He doesn’t care about me*. That’s why.

I was also taught that family was more important than everything but Jesus. Family didn’t abandon you and you didn’t abandon your family. No matter how bad things got, God had stuck you together by blood and you would damn well stay together. I saw other families stay together through ridiculous things. Drugs. Abuse. Rape. Shoot-outs between brothers and clawing, spitting fights between sisters. Other families stayed

together through my father's vice, alcohol, too. Hell, all families stayed together through alcohol. There was no way around it.

But my mom was a little smarter than the rest of them. I never resented her for divorcing him. In my mind, the blame was all his. After all, there was nothing stopping him from seeing me. Mom gave me the list she'd given him. He could see me, but he couldn't come drunk, with alcohol on him, or with alcohol in the car. He wasn't interested in those conditions.

When I was in the throes of adolescence, I couldn't imagine why anyone, anywhere would ever want to mix familial relations and sex. Wasn't there a whole section of the Bible dedicated to that sort of thing? Weren't we still in the rural, religious South? I didn't get it. Of course, that was before I found out many of my female acquaintances had to fend off, usually unsuccessfully, sexual advances from family members. Incest is huge in the South. Maybe it's huge everywhere, but southern writers are the only ones brave enough to talk about it. Either way, I knew a lot of girls who grew up in perpetual fear of their uncles or their fathers. You could always tell which ones. They either hid themselves under long sleeves even in the midst of stifling southern summers, or they dressed provocatively, especially for twelve-and-thirteen-year olds, thinking the kind of attention they received from older males at home was the kind of attention they should seek. Some female survivors of incest learn early what it takes most of us years to figure out: sex is powerful and you can use it to manipulate the world of men. Women, too, actually.

“Who’s your daddy?” he asked, voice rough, his hand twisted and buried in my hair. Something older and fiercer than love filled every particle of me and I shouted to the wild moon *yes!*

Later, while my body hummed and sang (for *hours* it hummed and sang), my mind raced a million miles a minute. I kept saying sure I was okay, yes, I was fine. Nothing was the matter. No, it wasn’t too rough.

I couldn’t articulate at the time that the just-rightness of it was what bothered me so much. Why *that* word? Why *then*? I was twenty-one, five hundred miles away from my childhood stomping grounds and thought I’d left my daddy issues back in Georgia. Now here they were, as the phrase I’d hated so much in middle school had new and entirely unanticipated effects on me.

He was a smart guy. He figured it out and never asked me who my daddy was again. I’m not sure I ever forgave him for that. He was like my other boyfriends, before and since, in that he hated my silence. I have all kinds of silence. Usually my silences are reserved and cold, a palpable *fuck you* to whoever I’m not talking to. Sometimes they are contemplative and far away, an indication that Tiff is no longer in the room. Her body may be here, but her mind is in some fantastic Wonderland, busy working out the kinks in a poem or painting a universe. I’ll be back soon. Please leave a message at the tone.

My silence that night was shocked. There were no other thoughts but the eternal binary. *No*, I would think. *No, no, no, no, no!* Then, on the heels of that, *yes. Oh, god, yes. Please yes. More, yes.*

*NO!*

*Maybe?*

*yesyesyesyesyes!*

**NO!!! THAT IS GROSS!**

The *nos* had it, by the end of the night and I spent the next several years denying myself something that, deep down, I craved.

“Don’t pull that who’s your daddy shit with me. I don’t go for that,” I would tell them, way before the sex could even happen and my id would wail in protest.

A story about a kinky billionaire who had an affair with his daughter-in-law that did it. A highly erotic story with dialogue like, “Take daddy’s cock,” and “Come in me... daddy.” Which might sound gross to you, because it totally is. You’re absolutely right. It’s bad and dirty and *wrong*.

Make no mistake, I would never have actual sex with my actual father. Not even if I had a time machine that could take me back to when he was young and handsome. For me, the whole Daddy thing isn’t even about him. It’s about power.

And it’s not even just the power dynamic represented by the father/daughter relationship, though that is certainly most of it. It’s a basic submissive/dominant thing. But the word “Daddy” holds an enormous amount of power over me because of the absence it represents, a void that I, deep down, long to fill. Not just with dicks, but with love and acceptance and trust. Being able to submit in the way that I must in order to call a man *daddy* during sex means putting an enormous amount of trust in him. I am exposing a raw nerve, perhaps the rawest one I have and asking him to love it.

Sex is an art. A high art, one that takes ten thousand hours to become an expert in and years to master. We, as spiritual possessors of human bodies, have pretty much always known this to be true and yet we keep forgetting it. Either that, or some buzz kill

comes along and starts preaching monogamy and the sanctity of sex and that's all well and good, but eventually sex goes from being sacred to being private to dirty to altogether wrong.

Or worse, someone comes along and starts preaching that sex should never move from the realm of the functional to the realm of the pleasurable. This is an especially prevalent idea amongst Christians that I have always failed to understand. I get that science has only recently been able to provide hard facts about sexual pleasure, such as letting us know the female clitoris possesses around eight thousand nerve endings and the head of the penis roughly half that, so trying not to enjoy sex is more of a challenge than trying to enjoy it.

But you know Christians. They love their shame.

Despite the fact that we are not born with the intricate knowledge required to sexually pleasure another human being, we sort of act like we are. Every American teenager or former American teenager knows exactly what I'm talking about. You're supposed to come into high school just knowing how to give a proper hand job or cause earth shattering orgasms in people you'll probably never really get to have sex with anyway. It sounds unreasonable because it is. You're still just a kid. You've barely figured out how to masturbate and now you're expected to know how to make somebody else come, ostensibly somebody with completely different parts and instructions than you? (Though, even if you are attracted to someone of the same sex, that doesn't necessarily mean you'll have an easier time figuring out which buttons to press to better enhance sexual pleasure.)

If you've never seen a teen movie, most of the premises revolve around some teenage virgin trying to make other people believe he is a stud, so that when he finally loses his virginity to the coolest girl in school, she will suffer the maximum amount of disappointment possible. Nah, that's how it would work in real life. In the movie, he's magically good in bed with no former training or practice.

Being good at these things does take training and practice, though. Nobody can just fly into sex blind, expecting their rushing endorphins to carry them through. All that's going to lead to is premature ejaculation, tears and failure. This is where pornography would ordinarily come in handy, except that most pornography is either bouncing, depressing tits or violent documentaries on how exactly *not* to treat a woman. It's all deep throats and cum shots and anal drilling. There is never an excuse for anal drilling. Never. Also, more tits. Where are the glistening abs? The gorgeous, erect cocks? The gentle caresses and murmured encouragements that actually bring women to climax?

Side note, if you think glistening abs and gorgeous cocks are to be found in gay male porn, like I did, you're wrong. There's just more anal drilling.

Oh and to anyone male who may be reading this, no woman likes cum in her face. If your girlfriend tells you she likes it, she's lying, because she knows you're into it, because you saw it in a porno once. But you should stop it, because she dies a little inside every time. Every. Time.

Watching pornography for educational purposes is about the worst thing you can do, especially if you're in the throes of puberty and have no idea how sex works yet. Pornography is like a funhouse mirror of sex. It's all the worst things about sex distorted to ridiculous proportions and reflected back as the real thing. The thing is, not everybody

realizes they're in a funhouse when they're watching porn. It's not real. It's just a ride. This is absolutely not how you should act in the real world.

Reading erotic literature, on the other hand, while it clings desperately to archetypes, provides a much better map, at least where the pleasure of women is concerned. Probably because most romance novels are written by women and pornography remains a male-dominated industry, except for the actresses. Finally, I found step-by-step instructions on how to properly treat a clitoris and how to give a blow job. Best of all, you can take erotic literature anywhere. Even if you have one of the cheesier novels with some half-naked Adonis posing proudly against a sunset, most people don't associate books with pornography. Not even people who read pornography. Even when I see someone reading a romance novel, I don't think, *Oh, shit, that girl is straight dirty, just reading that sex book in public right now*. No, I think, *Oh a person reading a book. How common and normal and not related to sex at all*.

Of course, not all romance novels are explicit. Some of them are like PG13 movies that suggest sex with a slow pan to the fireplace rather than giving all the dirty details. Some of them literally use phrases like, "They had sex. They had sex against the door and she came, wailing his name." Then, of course, you have all the actual plot in between sex acts. Most romance novels, even the really descriptive ones, are probably 85% plot, 15% sex. And that's probably a liberal estimate.

I sort of hope Aunt Grace never reads this, or at least the part about taking daddy's cock, anyway. Sorry I put the gross sex hang-ups in the chapter about meeting you (just in case).

## CHAPTER 5

### THE REST OF TEXAS

“Oooh. God bless Texas.” –Little Texas

I find lunch at a little roadside diner that looks like it just Quantum Leapt out of the Old West. It was right off the exit from the interstate, but you could tell that once this had probably been a well-used-but-not-too-well-used state road. It had probably been a short cut from somewhere important to somewhere else important and had been devoured by the interstate system, probably sometime in the last decade or so. It sat nestled in between the on ramp and the off ramp, a wooden structure on a tiny patch of green in the midst of grey concrete steaming in the July sun. The location had to be good for business, anyway, even if it wasn't so great for atmosphere.

I stopped because I saw a hand-made sign proclaiming free wi-fi and that was really what sealed the deal for me. It probably doesn't seem like any big deal, now. Everybody and their mother has wi-fi these days (even *my* mom has wi-fi, though she doesn't really know what that means or how it works). At the time, I remember finding it so charmingly unlikely that this old-timey building should have wi-fi that I really only browsed the internet while I ate because I could. I felt I was experiencing the convergence of the past and the future. Soon, every ramshackle diner in the world will have free wi-fi, even the ones in Ghana or Kiribati.

If you don't know where Kiribati is, don't feel bad. It's an atoll in the equatorial Pacific and is one of the most remote locales on Earth.

When I pull back onto the interstate, I perform my usual road-top ballet. I try to find a speed fast enough to suit my itchy pedal foot, but slow enough to keep me away from most other traffic. When I find a nice stretch of empty interstate, I tentatively try the cruise control. Today, it works. I've had good luck ever since my failed attempts to set it in the prologue.

I spark up my after-dinner joint and start to think about consequences. I keep a wary eye on my surroundings for cops because I have often heard it said that Texas is one of the few states that is wholly unsympathetic towards marijuana users and tends to show very little leniency, even in cases of minor possession.

The penalty for possession of up to a pound of marijuana in this auspicious state is six months in prison and a fine of anywhere from \$2000 to \$10,000. Being caught smoking behind the wheel could also get me a DUI charge, which is the same, so I could be looking at up to a year of jail time and anywhere from a four-to-twenty-thousand-dollar fine. Because I would be a first time offender, I would automatically be sent to a drug treatment program and put on probation.

Every time I do spot a police cruiser, a state trooper, or even a tow truck with its lights on, the icy hand of fear sinks its claws into my belly and grips tight. My heart pounds, my upper lip sweats and I instinctively review protocol in my head. I turn on the AC and crank it up to high. I roll my window down. The Febreeze is in the passenger seat. The weed is in the coffee can in the bag in the backseat. There's a joint in the cigarette pack that is really just a cover for my joints. The roaches are in the secret compartment beside my wheel.

Fortunately, Garmin chooses for me a route of mostly state roads, avoiding the major highways and interstates. With cruise control in charge of my speed, all I really have to do is keep the car straight.

At one point, I end up on some dusty road in the middle of Texas, heading north to Elk City, Oklahoma, my next destination. I stop at a random restaurant in the middle of nowhere. *Silence of the Lambs* is playing again on the flat-screen inside. I order chicken strips and water. The movie is exactly where I left it in Austin, which strikes me as hugely coincidental.

A man in an army uniform comes in and sits down. The guy who runs the place strikes up a conversation with him and it becomes apparent that this is a familiar scenario for the both of them. This guy probably has lunch here every day. It also becomes apparent that I am about to drive straight into an army base.

Thanks, Garmin. What, are you trying to get me caught?

I sweat through my lunch, positive I smell like weed, positive Army Man is going to sniff the air and start asking questions about it.

He doesn't. He doesn't say anything to me. Something happens outside and he helps the owners deal with it.

I pay my tab, tip generously and start driving in the opposite direction Garmin had me heading. I demand she choose a new route for me, one that doesn't include Army bases.

Each time, I pass the vehicle with lights on top, whatever it may be, without incident. I take a deep breath. Then I usually re-light the joint.

A lot of people don't know the founding fathers smoked weed, but they did. Thomas Jefferson's diaries make several references to smoking herb or hemp out of his pipe. Entries in George Washington's diary that suggest he bred hemp specifically for strength while being smoked. It makes sense. They were hemp farmers. The United States of America was sort of founded on hemp, just as much as it was founded on cotton and tobacco. Most kids don't learn about that in elementary school. I didn't, anyway.

Up through the 1920s, actually, one could purchase elixirs containing cannabis extract for pain relief, most notably for female menstrual cramps, or cannabis candies to calm overactive children. That's right, pot candy was the original ADD medication.

So what happened, you ask? Well, first the ship industry evolved, as industries do. Before, hemp had been an important crop because it produced the best material for rope. Ropes used to be essential to all ships, because the steam engine hadn't been invented yet. After it was and wind ceased to be the only way to get your ship to move, sails and thus rope became almost obsolete. Granted, sailboats did and still do exist, but the rope industry was devastated by the invention of the steam engine and metal boats that could propel themselves.

Hemp could also be used to make clothing and some damn fine paper, but the process of pulping hemp was backbreaking and all around awful. And after slavery ended, well, you simply couldn't pay someone enough to do it.

Cotton had the cotton gin, but hemp had no similar invention. Processing it from its raw state into something useable remained frustrating, primitive work. Until the decorticator came along, a machine that could turn hemp into pulp with the turn of a

crank. This device stood to revolutionize the paper industry and then some, as it would soon be discovered that hemp could be used to produce plastic polymers.

Enter William Randolph Hearst, who owned most of the newspapers and the trees in the U.S. and the DuPont Chemical Company, which sold sulfuric acid (essential in pulping wood) and had just invented a synthetic type of rope called Nylon.

“Marijuana” is the Spanish term for “cannabis,” or, the Mexican-Spanish term, anyway. Cannabis sativa is the type of plant that, when bred one way, can become hemp, but when bred in very different ways produces buds that, when smoked, will get you high. A great deal of cannabis that is smoked recreationally today may also be Cannabis indica, which is just a different breed of plant that happens to contain THC, which is the chemical that causes the high effect in our brains. Hemp that is grown for industrial reasons, like paper production, while it can produce buds, does not produce very strong ones. Hemp itself contains very little THC. Also, cannabis that is grown for recreational purposes creates slender, branchy plants that would not be very effective producers of pulp.

Back in the early days of the twentieth century, marijuana and hemp were essentially the same. It grew wild in Mexico just as it did here. The main difference was that Mexicans had learned to breed it for recreational smoking as well as for rope or paper production and they produced a stronger version of the herb than American hemp.

The campaign against cannabis started in the American southwest, in the border states. Mostly Texas. William Randolph Hearst began running stories in his multitude of papers about some Mexican devil weed called marijuana. According to most Hearst papers, Mexican workmen would smoke it and transform into raging, raping psychopaths.

Every week or so there would be an article about a Mexican workman, crazed on marijuana, who attacked someone without provocation.

Fear began to spread about this dangerous new drug. A few politicians who were either related to or had recently married into the families of certain newspaper or chemical magnates decided to champion public safety and render this horrific new substance illegal and therefore impossible to acquire. I mean, what if American children were exposed to this stuff?

The government-sponsored movie *Reefer Madness* explored the now-hilarious-seeming consequences of “reefer” (marijuana cigarettes) on a young mind. Spoilers: everyone dies. In 1937, the Marijuana Tax Act was passed that made it illegal to possess marijuana (or hemp) without a stamp and you couldn’t get the stamp without bringing your marijuana to an official stamp-issuing place, which you were not allowed to possess. And thus the hemp industry more or less disappeared.

The term “marijuana” was used to re-frame this pillar of American society as a foreign Mexican influence that was corrupting our youth. It’s sort of like if corn was re-branded “Evil on the Cob” and suddenly made illegal in all its forms because some brave soul with no regard for oral safety had bitten into the leaves and found out they get you kind of high for a couple of hours. (The leaves of the corn plant have razor-sharp ends and are covered with a layer of fine, barb-like hairs. Seriously, don’t bite into one. I’m pretty sure nothing good will happen and you will cut the shit out of your mouth.)

If my life were a room, there would be a fine haze of cannabis smoke lingering in the air above it. I grew up in smoky living rooms, watching the ritualistic procession of a

joint as it made its way from one relative to another and eventually, after I started smoking, to me.

The three musketeers of my family have long been my mom, my aunt, my cousin and me. Wait, that's four, you say? Well, there were four in the novel, too. Three Musketeers sounds punchier than Four Musketeers. It's just the way it is. In this instance, I'm the one that came along after they'd already named themselves the Three Musketeers and they weren't changing all those business cards just for me.

My aunt isn't really my aunt, but my mother's brother's ex-wife. As Mom and I like to say, "We got rid of him and kept her."

Uncle Snake is the kind-of paranoid hippie burn out who is only amusing for about five minutes of screen time and then you kind of want to punch him in the mouth. He is charming, manipulative and just as likely to steal your money as he is to tell you an amusing anecdote. He carries a gun on him at all times and I have seen him pull it out during more than one supposedly casual conversation. When Mom and I picked him up from a small regional airport once, we had no sooner gotten back to the car, than he ripped open a Styrofoam cooler that had been duct-taped closed and dug down into it to retrieve his pistol, which he then loaded and shoved into his pants. My mom and I didn't say anything, because it was so bizarre and dangerous the best thing to do was to pretend it wasn't there, like a cobra in our midst.

Mom accidentally introduced Aunt L and Uncle Snake when Uncle Snake visited Mom at nursing school. She and Aunt L. were in the same class. Before long Snake and L. were married and Uncle Snake had sequestered her away in Montana or somewhere. Eventually, they conceived a daughter, Scorpio. Aunt L had always been told she

couldn't conceive, due to an extremely inverted cervix or something equally mysterious involving her lady parts. She's always called Scorpio her miracle and it was Scorpio who gave Aunt L the strength to leave Uncle Snake, who was far less than an ideal husband.

Aunt L. and Scorpio endured many more hard times after that, but by the time they came to be in my story, the choppy waters of their lives were calming down. Aunt L and Mom were both nurses, both living in Colquitt, both single mothers raising daughters, both very close friends. We were always over at each other's houses and with sunset inevitably came the evening living room ritual. The living room was always smoky because Mom and Aunt L. smoked cigarettes, but once or twice an evening, one of them would produce from her pack of Basics or Marlborough Lights a different kind of cigarette. Thinner. Hand-rolled. It always smelled a little different and afterwards, Mom and Aunt L. would talk, trading stories, filling each other in on the parts of their lives when they were apart, or just rehashing the events of the day.

The murmur of their gentle voices provided a sound track to my childhood. Those smoky living rooms were like ports in an otherwise stormy sea.

Scorpio was like a big sister to me, and the epitome of cool. To her, I was like an oversized doll. She would dress me up, do my hair and make-up and we would perform fashion shows for Mom and Aunt L. I followed her around everywhere and rather than resenting this fact, she welcomed me into her life, taking me with her when she hung out with her friends, letting me spend endless hours just hanging out in her room.

Scorpio started smoking, cigarettes and weed, when she was a teenager as most teenagers in impossibly small towns are wont to do. She hid it from her mom until she was well into her twenties. Aunt L. was adamant about Scorpio not smoking or drinking

until she was an adult. Scorpio did both, of course, but took pains to hide it from her mother. Scorpio is eleven years older than me, so I was an early teen when she joined the circle. I had long been sitting by her side as she smoked thin, hand-rolled cigarettes behind the back of the house after midnight, or packed into the car with her friends, as they drove along back county roads, passing a joint around my tiny head.

Nothing bad ever happened to me around weed. The people I knew who smoked it were content, talkative, serene. The smell of it has always been comforting to me, like coming home.

Alcohol, on the other hand, has always served as the Yang to Marijuana's Yin. Both of my mother's brothers, just like all of her husbands and all of my aunt's husbands or boyfriends and more than one of my cousin's husbands are alcoholics. The smell of beer, or more specifically, beer breath fills me with nausea and fear. It is the smell of a fight breaking out, of harsh voices and overturned tables. It is the smell of running as fast as I can and hoping no one follows me.

Even though cannabis was offered to me many times, by Scorpio, by her friends, and by my "peers" in high school, I didn't try cannabis for myself until I was nineteen. It didn't interest me until then. I knew most of the rumors about it weren't true, the exaggerated D.A.R.E. facts (It kills brain cells! Lots of them!) and the Public Service Announcements that showed teenagers smoking one joint one time and proceeding to shoot each other in the face. I knew smoking marijuana wasn't a big deal long before anyone tried to brainwash me into thinking it was. Maybe it's for precisely that reason that I never felt compelled to try it until I was, as they say, ready.

I knew exactly who to go to. I was living with Scorpio and her two kids at the time. I mentioned to her that I'd been thinking about trying it.

“Do you want to try it?” she asked me.

“Yeah, I want to try it.”

“Okay. This weekend, we'll try it.”

“Do... do you want any money?”

A look that told me not to be stupid was her only reply.

Later that night, Scorpio rolled us a joint and nothing really happened. We watched the movie *Dude, Where's My Car?*, which I had loved when I was fifteen and thought would be hilarious, “on weed.” She just put up with it because it was my first time and everything. I don't think she was thrilled with the choice.

The movie turned out to be disappointing. For the first time, I saw it as cheesy, contrived and kind of immature. This wasn't how weed was supposed to work. Where were the fits of uncontrollable laughter? Where were the conspiracy theories? I didn't even get the munchies. Scorpio and I did have fun making fun of the movie, though.

“Well, did you like it?” she asked me after the movie and she didn't mean the film.

“I don't know. I don't think it did anything.”

“Yeah,” she said.

A lot of smokers will tell you nothing happened the first time they smoked weed.

Persistence is key, so we tried again a few weeks later and with something a little stronger. Scorpio had come into possession of a cube of hash. She didn't have a bowl at

the time, so she rigged up a mountain dew bottle to serve as a pipe. Stoners are craftier than MacGyver when presented with cannabis and nothing to smoke it out of.

We watched *Without A Paddle* and it was one of the most hilarious films I had ever seen<sup>4</sup>. I ate an entire bag of potato chips and drank four bottles of water. I giggled non-stop for four hours and went to bed knowing that I had experienced the phenomenon known as “being stoned.”

The rest as they say, is history. For a while I only smoked every now and again. I was like Jon Stewart’s character in *Half-Baked*; I wanted to try everything “on weed.” By “everything” I mostly mean comedy films, albums on vinyl and food. Eventually, though, I wanted to try everything-everything on weed and learned that with a little will power, I could do my job on weed, go to class on weed and even study...on weed.

So now, I’m driving my car across the country...on weed.

Meanwhile, back on the road, the night air in some parts of Texas smells like a mechanic’s garage. I must be driving past the famous Texas oil fields. There are lots of industrial compounds, twinkling in the distance like tiny cities. Sometimes, I’ll see the lights ahead and get a little excited, thinking I am coming upon a town. Even if I don’t particularly want to stop, these lights are a nice break from the monotony of dark farmland. I’m not sure if they’re oil refineries or what, but they remind me of the stretch of highway between Bainbridge and Colquitt, where both the Cagle chicken factory and some sort of power plant was located.

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<sup>4</sup> It holds up surprisingly well, too.

The air smelled the same in Georgia, too, like motor oil and pesticides, with an irony undercurrent that was no doubt the result of chicken slaughter. I know that doesn't seem particularly appetizing, but I am shocked to discover I can't get enough of it. It smells like home, like my childhood and I hadn't even realized I'd missed it. I roll down the windows and breathe huge lungfulls of it. Sparking up a J only adds to the nostalgia, as I remember countless drives home from Grammy's house, my mom firing up a joint as soon as we were outside the Colquitt city limits, unable to even wait until we got home for the sweet, smoky release to take the edge off of another evening spent with my grandmother.

My grandmother lived a drug-free life, even alcohol-free for at least the last eighteen years, so there are no substances to blame for her cold behavior. I think that she was eaten alive with anxiety. Nobody called it that at the time, because I don't think anybody realized that's what it was. Looking back with the 20/20 vision that hindsight provides, I realize that the "everything in its place" arrangement of her home was a manifestation of the same kind of anxiety that threatens to overcome me on a daily basis—until I smoke something.

I loved my grandmother and I miss her every day, but she was a hard woman. She was critical, judgmental and difficult to be around if you were not, inexplicably, her favorite grandchild. She was always muttering under her breath or making little noises of disapproval, often in the middle of a conversation, which lead us all to believe that she was unaware she was doing it.

I'm not sure if my grandmother's anxiety was genetic, a result of being a housewife in the notoriously neurotic '50s, or if it stemmed from her disappointment in her children and the guilt that feeling disappointed in one's children inevitably brings. She appeared to let her sons walk all over her while she focused her disappointment in them on my mother. Her sons, Snake and The Baptist came and went as they pleased. They moved around a lot, using my grandmother's house as a base camp, bank and home cooked meal generator. She never seemed to criticize them about their lifestyles or find fault with their nomadic ways or tendency to use her as a personal ATM.

Mom and I lived up the road until I turned twelve and we moved to the next town over. I spent afternoons and weekends at Grammy's house while Mom worked and Mom was always there whenever Grammy needed her. Mom helped Grammy get through the years when Grannup's mind fell apart from Alzheimer's and Grammy couldn't bear to put him in an institution. Mom was there after Grannup died. Actually, Mom was there the night that Grannup died. Grammy called us in the middle of the night, in the middle of Hurricane Opal and Mom and I drove the ten miles to her house much faster than was safe at the time. Mom swerved around the highway, dodging tree branches the hurricane had flung into our path. Later, we all agreed he'd died in the middle of a storm on purpose.

It must have been midnight, because I watched *Space Ghost: Coast to Coast* while Mom went to confirm that Grannup's vital signs had ceased.

Despite all of this, Mom could do no right. She didn't discipline me enough. She disciplined me too much. Why did she work in this hospital and not that one? Why couldn't she marry someone *nice*? Why did she dress like that? Why did she dress me

like this? Most of the things I heard Grammy say to my mom were critical. It used to make me angry, especially once I got old enough to see the differences between my mother and her brothers, specifically how dutiful my mom remained to her mother, while my uncles mostly used her.

Now I see that my grandmother was taking the pain inflicted by her sons and putting it on my mom, because mom was there and they weren't.

Sometimes Grammy's fingertips used to tap against her steering wheel in a very specific kind of rhythm when she drove. Then her lips would start twitching and her brow would furrow. Soon she would be mouthing words and I could tell she was having silent conversations with herself. Mom would do it, too, her fingers tapping out the same invisible rhythm, her face contorting into the same expressions as she soundlessly expressed whatever was running through her brain.

Now, here I am, driving through northern Texas and I catch my fingertips tapping a rhythm that was genetic all along on the steering wheel as I start to realize that my grandmother probably left me with a mild anxiety disorder, too. It is my instinct to judge people by the same impossible standard she held them to, even though I in no way live up to her expectations, either.

For starters, I am a twenty-five-year-old woman with no marriage prospects and no desire for any. I smoke copious amounts of illegal drugs every day and the only sex I've ever had was out of wedlock. Sure, I graduated college once magna cum laude and am pursuing a Master's degree now, but besides that, I'm sort of half-assing it through life and I know it.

I'm sure she would balk if she knew what I was doing right now, namely driving across country by myself for no other reason than because I want to. In her day, young ladies didn't go anywhere unchaperoned and those who did were likely to find their reputations ruined when they returned. So I'm doing this more for her than anyone. I have freedoms she never even dreamed of, freedoms she probably would have chastised herself for dreaming of. I can be as bad as I wanna be and I don't even have to feel guilty about it, because the standards for being bad have changed. Used to be, if a woman thought for herself or wanted a career instead of a family, she was a bad girl, a nonconformist, a rebel against society and a constant source of shame to her family. Oh and those were all very bad things to be, rather than potential fodder for punk music.

Today, I don't think there's much I can do to make my mom stop being proud of me. I still feel a certain amount of societal pressure to "settle down," to want to want the husband and the children and the house with a little white picket fence. But it is all too easy to resist that pressure, to, in fact, say "fuck you," to that pressure and proceed to drink and fuck and smoke my way through life the way only men used to be able to do. Gender roles grow more useless by the day and I couldn't be happier to see them go.

Mom's anxieties probably come from never being able to live up to what her parents expected of her, despite the fact that she was only one of their children that even tried. Neither Grammy nor Grannup ever officially told her they were proud of her and that still gets her down.

My anxieties probably come from growing up around Mom and Grammy, forever in the middle of their tense relationship. Grammy doted on me as much as she criticized my mom. I imagine some of my anxieties come from having a template constructed for

me, for my life by my grandmother and every day I break a little bit more of it by becoming myself and not her.

Garmin's anti-interstate routing system, coupled with the simple enormity of Texas also means that I spend a lot of time in the middle of nowhere. I prefer this, except for when gas starts to get low and I'm honestly not sure if I'll come upon a town in the next thirty-to-fifty miles. It is also inconvenient when I'm looking for a place to stop for the night and there's nothing much in sight.

This is emerging as something of a recurring theme and a slow sinking feeling starts in my stomach as my eyelids droop and the only things around are trees, fields and the lonely inexorable highway.

Garmin offers no help, either. The nearest hotel is over a hundred miles away according to her. The thought of driving another hour and a half just makes me more tired than I already am.

Something white catches my eye on the side of the road and I glance over just in time to read a hand painted sign advertising rooms for \$35/night. I find a turn off and double back, thanking The Road for this offering.

Until I pull around to the back where my room is. I don't know what it is about cheap motels and putting single, young girls in the dimly lit back, where everybody knows is the most likely place for crime to occur. So far I'm three for three.

This place looks like the Bates Motel, only scarier. The white paint is grey with age, that of it that isn't flaking off like horror movie dandruff. The metal railing around the second floor is not merely rusty, it is made of rust. One lonely, flickering street light

illuminates the parking lot. Or, the five feet of the parking lot closest to it. I swear I hear a wolf howl in the distance as I climb the stairs to my room. I've seen enough B-horror movies to start to worry if I'll make it out of this night alive, or if it turns out this hotel is run by the family from the Texas Chainsaw Massacre and I'll wake up in the morning chained up in their underground lair while Leatherface makes himself a new lampshade out of one of the other guests.

Inside, it's as bad as you're probably thinking it is. Brown carpet so splotted with mysterious stains, I am afraid to walk bare foot on it (and didn't). Five locks on the door, three of which are busted. The water in the shower runs brown for a solid thirty seconds before finally clearing up and then proceeds to spit dirty brown water in my face periodically. I check and double-check the lock to the bathroom door, not eager to play my part in any reenactments of the most famous scene from *Psycho*. I stay quiet, which I usually don't do in the shower and keep an ear out for any little sound, especially ones that sound like a deranged man in a dress coming to stab me. The water continues to spurt brown when I brush my teeth afterward, causing me to play dirty water dodge with my toothbrush and the spigot.

I have brought a king-sized sheet, a blanket and my own pillow for just this occasion. I was looking forward to finding cheap, rundown highway motels, such as the ones located on the fringes of every small town I've ever lived in. I also know about bed bugs and that dead bodies get found underneath motel beds all the time. I don't peek under my bed in this room, because I don't want to know.

I go instantly to bed, exhausted from the road and not wanting to electrocute myself on the ancient television that has had the knobs torn off. There are no pliers handy

to turn it on, much less to change the channel. It also has long silver rabbit ears that snatch at my shirt when I pass by.

I form a cocoon out of the sheet, pull the blanket over my head and spend the rest of the night convincing myself that every little sound I hear isn't a poltergeist or a serial murder going down next door. Or the poltergeist of a serial murderer looming over the bed, just waiting for me to peek my head out.

Blankets are like magic talismans against ghosts. Everybody knows they can't get you as long as the blanket is over your head.

I wake up, still cocooned in the sheet and blanket, at 9:30AM. I'm alive and not chained up at the mercy of psychotic cannibals. My apprehension from the night before suddenly seems kind of silly. Still, I dress quickly and get the hell out of there, eager to be back on The Road.

## CHAPTER 6

## ELK CITY

“Oklahoma, where the wind comes sweeping down the plain. And the wavin’ wheat can sure smell sweet when the wind comes right behind the rain.” –Rodgers & Hammerstein

I cross into Oklahoma around mid-afternoon. Elk City, Oklahoma is a stop I both fear and eagerly anticipate. Will I remember it? Will it feel like home? Will it have any effect on me whatsoever? It was only ever a name to me, before. A dot on the map with no other significance than *my birthplace* attached to it. I have no physical memories of it. The only photos we have from Elk City were taken inside a nondescript house-or-trailer with brown carpet.

I had plans, for once. I was going to go to the hospital I was born in, talk to any nurses there who used to know my mother, maybe track down the site of the trailer she lived in that first year of my life. I was going to stay the night. But, I am already behind schedule, what little schedule there is and if I want to spend the prescribed four days I set aside for the Grand Canyon and get to the hotel room I booked for myself in Las Vegas on the thirtieth, I have to cut Elk City short. Texas took a lot longer than I anticipated, but Texas will do that.

I am not terribly bothered by this prospect, especially as soon as I see the town. I’m tired, already, of exploring my lost childhood. I left it behind when I moved to North Carolina and haven’t really looked back since. My life has always been about forward

momentum. I rarely look backwards, this road trip being a rare exception. I hated being a child. My childhood was fraught with nothing more than the usual traumas.

I just hated the powerlessness of being a child. My mom had a hard enough time telling me what to do before I turned eighteen and got a job and she sure as hell hasn't been able to do so since then. She's been able to give advice, but nobody has any real say over anything I do today. I prefer it that way. I work, tirelessly, to keep it that way. I excel at work so that my bosses will have neither the need nor the desire to give me orders. I have become an expert at anticipating what needs to be done to keep whoever's above me in the hierarchy off my back because I hate taking direction. On the rare occasion that someone tells me I should join the Army or Air Force to help pay for college, I smile (smirk, really) and tell them I can't do that; I have problems with authority. And I do. My life is mine. My own. My precious. I spent eighteen years listening to what the world wanted me to do with it and then I promptly said "fuck that," and started cutting my own path through the dense jungle of life. And here I am today, all by myself in the middle of America, looking for the hospital where I was born.

Because I want to.

As soon as I am sure that I am in Elk City's city limits, I stop at a gas station to ask directions. I ask the certified grumpy old man behind the counter how to get to Elk City Hospital. He asks me which one.

"I'm not sure. The one that would have been here in 1985?"

"You from here?"

"I'm from here, but I haven't been here in twenty-four years."

He doesn't get the joke, which is that twenty-four years ago, I was an infant.

"You remember where Third Street is?"

"No."

He sighs and gets grumpier. Then he gives me directions like the unfamiliar out-of-towner I am.

As I drive through town looking for the hospital, I try to recall everything I know about it. I have been handed down a set of myths and lore about Elk City, Oklahoma, too, though unlike the tales surrounding White's Bridge back in Colquitt, these stories are based more or less in fact.

Mom worked the E.R. at Elk City General Hospital for a few years. Her juiciest stories from her thirty-five year career come from here. My favorite is the Tale of the Scary Bikers.

Two leather-clad, tattooed-covered bikers came in to the hospital for a blood drive. Mom got one of them set up and stuck (what nurses call putting the needle in the arm that will draw the blood from the vein and lead it into the bag), then turns to retrieve a needle for the other. Apparently, the room had a Bible verse on the wall and while Mom's back was turned, the Biker who hadn't been stuck yet noticed it. He grabs the railings on the portable bed he was reclining on and shakes them, demanding at the top of his voice:

"WHO IN HERE'S A CHRISTIAN?"

Mom, who was ninety-nine pounds soaking wet, didn't even bat an eye before turning around and, giant needle in hand, informed him:

“I am. Why?”

“Oh, we are, too. We’re Bikers for Christ, on our annual cross-country road trip to raise money for Christian ministries around the world. That’s why we’re here giving blood today, in fact. Would you like to donate to the cause?” came the immediate and comparatively demure reply.

Mom burst into laughter and told the Biker that he’d just scared the shit out of her, after which they both shared a good laugh together.

When Mom first told me this story, I was a little kid, with the same prejudices she and the whole world seemed to have at the time. Christians were good and Everybody Else was bad. Christians looked and spoke and acted a certain way. Big Scary Bikers covered in leather, chains and tattoos were almost certain not to be Christians but Satanists. This little anecdote of Mom’s was one of my first lessons in how appearances could be deceiving, in not judging books by their covers. It was also one of the first times it occurred to me that one could have tattoos and a freaky appearance and still be good on the inside. So really, Mom only has herself to blame for my own tattoos, the eyebrow ring I had for years and my penchant for dying my hair an array of interesting colors whenever my budget and job security allow for it.

The other Elk City stories are darker... No pun intended.

One is not about Elk City but about a “town close by.” Apparently, there was an even smaller town than Elk City in the nearby vicinity that boasted a sign at its city limits that read, “Niggers: Don’t let the sun set on your head here!” And one time, a black man’s car broke down inside the city limits and he had to wait until the next day for the part. A sheriff’s deputy stayed stationed outside of his hotel room (that the sherrif’s

deputy had gotten for him) to make sure the local lynch mob didn't get him. In some versions of the story, they don't get him. In some versions, though, they do.

Now that I'm older, I recognize this as the kind of urban legend all rural areas have. I'm sure at some point in time the same tale was told about Colquitt, Georgia, even though Colquitt has always had a sizeable minority population. I wonder now if the tale about the small, racist Oklahoma town is true, perhaps the only true version, or if it is mere legend. My mom heard it from someone she trusted who no doubt believed its veracity as much as she did and she passed it on to me. And anybody else who ever asked her about Oklahoma.

The third tale is darkest of all. One night while Mom was on duty on third shift with two of her close friends, Holly and Noelle, the hospital began receiving bizarre and threatening phone calls. The caller was male with a low voice and would always ask for one of the three nurses.

"I'm going to get you," he would say, or, "You're going to die tonight." He called each of them by name.

At first.

The calls became more graphic and disturbing as the night went on, as the caller began to describe how he was going to murder my mother and her friends. He was going to slit their throats.

He harassed them all night, until third shift ended the next morning.

They involved the police pretty quickly and the police attempted to trace the calls. They were coming from a series of pay phones around Elk City, so he was smart, whoever he was.

At the end of the shift, officers escorted each of the three nurses home, with strict instructions. Federal agents somehow found out about the caller and were dispatched to Elk City to investigate. They arrived mid-afternoon the next day, but were told not to go to my mother's and question her. My mom's grumpiness upon being disturbed from sleep was so famous, not even Jehovah's Witnesses bothered her. She had a sign taped to her door that said, "If you ring this doorbell before 9:00 AM, I will cut off your hand." Friends, neighbors and co-workers knew my mother's temperament so well they passed it on to the FBI. The agents were told if they knocked on her door while she was still sleeping, after the night that she'd had, she was likely to shoot them through the door first and ask them their business later. And miraculously, the FBI complied and let Mom get her much-needed sleep.

The agents didn't have to contact my mom. She called the police to find out if there had been any new developments as soon as she woke up. Yes, there was a new development. They asked her to come in, to answer some questions for the agents and they would tell her the news in person.

Noelle had been found in her vehicle outside the city limits with her throat slit.

The federal agents never caught who did it, although a few years later, a man was put away for a drug bust that most locals believe to be the murderer.

Today, however, I find the hospital. I walk inside to find that it is surprisingly nice. A wide, open lobby encased in glass with stairs in the middle of it. It looks more like a mall or corporate office than a hospital.

I introduce myself to the woman working there. Her name is Eva. I tell her I was born in this hospital twenty-five years ago and I have come to check it out. I'm on a road trip I hope to turn into my graduate thesis. She is very impressed by this. Elk City, Oklahoma is one of the few places left where an education still means something. She probably thinks it means I am either rich or a hard worker. I don't think she's aware that bachelors' degrees are a dime a dozen these days and I will be very lucky indeed if my Master's degree opens up any more doors than my B.A. in English did. Of course, we are still a year away from the Occupy movement and the brutal truth that an education and three fifty will get you a cup of coffee, but not necessarily a job, at Starbucks.

Anyway, we start talking. I tell her about my mother. Eva didn't work with my mom, but she's heard of her and is friends with Holly. *The Holly*<sup>5</sup>. She's off today. Eva tells me a few stories from her own nursing career. I tell her some of the stories my mom told me about her experiences in this hospital. I mention the stalker who killed Noelle. Eva knows exactly what I am talking about and tells me her part of the story, how she hadn't been on duty that night, but knew what was going on because the police called to ask if she'd received any threatening phone calls. They dispatched an officer to make the rounds around her house, as well as the homes of the other nurses that night and she was questioned by federal agents. She knew Noelle. They all did. She tells me how the chalk

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<sup>5</sup> Holly is also the person who suggested I be named Tiffany.

outline of the body remained on the highway for months before a rain finally came and washed it away.

I find out that Eva has something in common with Bobby Darin and Jack Nicholson. She lived her entire life thinking that her biological mother was her sister and that her grandmother was her mother. She found out after her brother had open-heart surgery. She also found out that she had four half-siblings she'd never met by a father who was no longer in the picture. She recently reconnected with them on the internet.

I tell her I, too, have brother and sister from my father's previous marriage who I've never met. She tells me to keep looking. She looked for nine years. I have already given up looking, but I don't tell her.

She tells me a couple of requisite Nursing Tales of Horror. All nurses have these. It goes along with the territory. Both of hers involve men in uniform going crazy shortly after a car wreck.

In the first one, a Naval Intelligence officer had an automobile accident and was brought to the E.R. He was put into a security room because of his high military ranking and the fact that he'd apparently suffered head trauma. When Eva was performing her routine check-up on him, he demanded she give him a lighter or he'd kill her. She didn't have one on her, but she knew someone who did: Holly. He let her leave to go find Holly.

Here's the thing. She found Holly and got a lighter from her. Then she took it back to the naval officer, instead of using this as an opportunity to escape and never go near him again, that is.

He still went beserk and orderlies ended up having to restrain him. She said the entire time he kept yelling about how God wanted him to kill his wife.

The other story she tells me is about two guys headed to basic training at a nearby army base. They were involved in an automobile accident and brought into the E.R. While in recovery, one of them hung himself with the nurse call cord. The other had to be held and treated for depression.

Note to self: Don't get into an automobile accident in Elk City.

I am there for maybe fifteen minutes and I learn some of the most painful and intimate details of her life. My mom is the same way. I wonder if it's a nursing thing, an Oklahoma thing, or a woman of my mother's generation thing.

I also find out that the wing of the hospital I was born in has since been torn down. I forget the reason why. Maybe there was a fire. Maybe there was asbestos in the ceiling. Now, there is a tree growing upon a well-cared for expanse of lawn, replete with flowering bushes instead of a former OB wing where Baby Me drew her first official breath and wailed her lungs out to greet the world.

I walk over to the tree and put my palm on it before I get back in my car and go to find a late lunch.

It is right, I think, that on the spot where I was born, a garden now blooms. I approve, universe.

Just remember to do the same thing when I die.

I can't get Rodgers & Hammerstein out of my head as I drive through the rest of Oklahoma, mostly the part about the wind on the plain. The trees here grow bent over because there's so much wind. I fight the car to stay on The Road the whole time and when I see a storm start to gather in the distance, my heart skips a beat.

The sky darkens to a deep plum and the clouds start to light up as lightning gathers. The world is mercilessly flat out here. You can see for miles and miles and miles. So if, for example, a tornado were to touch down somewhere out on the horizon, I would be granted a great view as my windy death tore across the world toward me.

I suddenly remember Mom's stories about tornadoes, too, how common and sudden they could be. How she even slept through one once. Driving down this stormy Oklahoma highway, fighting the wind and begging the sky not to get any darker, I can see how someone from here might live in constant fear of tornados. I don't even know if it is tornado season, but somehow I don't think it would matter. The sky bears down on me and seems so much closer here than in North Carolina. How can you trust the land when at any moment the sky could come crashing down on you like the wrath of God? How can you love it? How can you love anything?

I bet they do though. I bet there are people all around me who love this land, tornadoes and all, with the same intensity with which I love the mountains. Or more intensely. It is those same cyclones of destruction that probably binds their love and strengthens it.

After all, most parents (though they admit it rarely and begrudgingly if ever) love their problem children more, because they have to work so much harder at it. Mountains are easy to love because they are beautiful and they tend to protect their valleys from things like tornados, even hurricanes. They hold the frothing skies at arm's length when the storms come, using the grey clouds like feather boas, after which no one can really take them seriously. They are quick to remind you of the fertility and grace that nature possesses, at least in the Appalachians. In the spring, everything is green and bursting

with life. Even in winter, there are so many evergreens, winter berries and chirping birds that the bounty of the other seasons never seems far away.

Here, though, land and sky are so close together, they seem in constant danger of clashing together and, well, destroying everything. I can easily imagine being pinned underneath a tractor as the awful breath of God ravaged my fields.

However, I hear the wavin' wheat can sure smell sweet when the wind comes right behind the rain. I don't really stick around to find out. Instead I outrun the storm. Before long, I find myself back in Texas.

## CHAPTER 7

## WHERE I FOUND MY KICKS

“If you ever plan to motor west, take my way, it’s the highway that’s the best.”-Bobby

Troup via Chuck Berry

I stop in Amarillo around sunset, mostly because I see another hand-painted sign advertising rooms for \$35 a night. This one is closer to civilization than the last hotel I found, with equally cheap motels surrounding it and a trailer park behind them for local flavor. The room isn’t great, but it isn’t gross, either. Its main shortcoming is that it is small, by American standards, anyway. It looks just about right compared to the few European hotel rooms I’ve been in. It’s probably been here since the 1950s, when rooms were smaller. I think it may have been an old Route 66 motel, since Route 66 is the well-worn two-lane road that this motel sits only a few feet away from. I find the two-lane road odd at first, before I find out it was Route 66 the whole time. The motel and this remnant of the old route are practically underneath the interstate.

The room has a giant tube TV in a hilarious mount that I have to dodge on my way to the bathroom and this is probably my favorite thing about it. It makes me smile to think of this set-up pissing off uptight tourists, the kind who do not appreciate idiosyncrasies in their travel plans.

For dinner, I drive down the road to a quaint old diner that is probably an old Route 66 diner. The food’s not great, honestly and the water is dirty, but I drink it anyway and I tip generously. *Everybody gets five*, is my internal motto. Five or more,

depending on the price of the meal and attentiveness of the server, of course. A server has to really piss me off to get less than five dollars.

I remember the last time I gave a shitty tip. It was at IHOP in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. There were eight of us, each with a separate check, which I understand is frustrating for a server, but is hardly unexpected, especially during Spring Break in a beach town like Myrtle. In fact, it often means that you will get eight tips instead of one. The eight smaller tips you get are almost certain to add up to more than 18% of the whole thing put together. Still, our server was visibly unruffled by our mass descent upon her and when we confirmed her fear that we did, in fact, want separate checks, she sighed and rolled her eyes.

You've all had this server: the one who doesn't seem to know how the whole restaurant thing works. She's annoyed that you even walked in the door and now you want drinks? And food? She emits a hard breath if you order water because she thinks that's going to cut into her tip—a tip she wouldn't have the potential to earn if you hadn't walked in the door. She takes your tip for granted and to be fair, she should.

Behind the scenes, she's probably only making two or three dollars an hour, with the institution she works for depending on tips she earns to add up to minimum wage or higher. Sure, the restaurant is supposed to pay her minimum wage if she doesn't earn it from tips and most places (especially chains like IHOP) have computerized systems to help keep track of server tips to ensure they are making at least minimum wage. She clocks out and the computer asks her how much she earned in tips. If, however, a server makes more than minimum wage in tips and tells the computer so, she will not receive a pay check from the restaurant. And if she doesn't make minimum wage, the restaurant

has to pay her more than her prescribed hourly wage, which can mess with the percentage paid out for labor, which can affect profits. Therefore, a lot of servers are forced to claim minimum wage even if they did not earn it. Few servers claim more than minimum wage. I know all this, because I served, off and on, for a good five years. I say off and on, because when I wasn't serving, I was a manager.

Still, you'd think this crazy system would offer extra incentive for servers to want to earn tips. If they don't, they could end up making only two to three dollars an hour. But honestly, a job is a job and work is work. Serving is one of the most thankless jobs available, so the kind of person predisposed to do as little work as possible while at work is certainly not going to be incentivized by our country's shitty server rewards system.

This particular IHOP server turned out not to be a bad server, however. We had a portly gentleman with us who ordered an expensive amount of food. To him, she was attentive, kind, even doting. The rest of us, however, might as well have been chopped liver. Our waters remained unfilled while he received glass after glass of sweet tea. Our coffee decanter ran dry and stayed so despite several requests for another. Any little thing Mr. Big Spender wanted, she was on top of. The rest of us could pretty much go fuck ourselves and we knew it.

The absurd thing was, there were seven of us to his one big ticket. She could have had seven awesome tips instead of one big one and a bunch of sarcastic fuck yous to her fine service.

I left her a napkin that said Tip: Be a better server.

She chased us out, screeching that she was a good server and she did this twelve hours a day every day and she had kids to feed and blah blah blah.

My very mature reply was, “No, actually, you suck.”

One of my friends reminded her that she’d gotten eighteen percent off every ticket, because we were a party of six or more. Then he pointed to a sign that said, “Parties of six or more will have an automatic eighteen percent gratuity added to their ticket.”

So she went to the register and dug out her eighteen percent gratuity and tried to give it back to us, just to prove how much she didn’t need our shit. We wouldn’t take it back. I think it ended up on the ground as she marched away, trembling, to have a cigarette and we sauntered off, laughing, to enjoy another day at the beach.

My server the first night in Amarillo, however, is a fine server. I can tell she’s a little annoyed with my late-night walking in (at 9:00 PM), but she tries hard to overcome it. She smiles at me, but makes sure I see her rolling silverware and doing other end-of-shift things.

Her, I tip generously for the trouble. She’s in her fifties and I understand right away that she probably could have gone home early to her family if I hadn’t walked in at the last minute. But she keeps my dirty water refilled, asks frequently if I need anything and offers me a box when I ask for the check.

She calls me *sweetheart* when she tells me to have a good night.

I wake up at 9:45 the next morning in plenty of time to return my key by 10:00 check-out. I have Garmin direct me to the nearest Denny’s. At a stoplight on the way there, a Latino gentlemen gestures at me from his vehicle. He keeps pointing down. I furrow my brow and roll down the passenger window.

“I think your tire’s going flat,” he says.

“Thanks,” I say and pull through the light. Fortunately, Denny’s is straight ahead.

I park and survey the damage. The tire is going visibly flat, though not quickly enough to have damaged the rim.

No problem. I pop the trunk and pull out the can of Fix-A-Flat I bought for just this purpose. I’ll just apply this now, go inside and call my Triple-A knock-off service (Safe Ride or something like that) and get it to the nearest Saturn dealership, where I can get it patched or, at worst, use one of my free tire coupons.

I spend thirty minutes on the phone with a Safe Ride representative finding out that Saturn of Amarillo no longer exists, but there’s a Firestone Tire nearby. They probably won’t honor my Saturn tire coupons though. I call Firestone and tell them I’m coming.

The Fix-A-Flat is great in that it let me drive my car to the Firestone Tire Center. It’s not so great in that it turned a \$20 patch job into a \$108 new tire. So, folks, if you’re in the middle of civilization when your tire starts to deflate, just add some air to it or get it towed to the nearest tire place for a patch. Save the Fix-A-Flat for those lonesome country roads in the middle of the night when you have no other choice.

As if to make it up to me, The Road introduces me to Route 66. Or maybe this is why I got the flat tire in the first place. The Firestone I went to is a little bit on the fringes of Amarillo and when I leave, I catch sight of a sign that says Route 66, with an arrow. On sheer impulse, I follow it.

I've heard about Route 66 my whole life. Every American probably has. I wore Route 66 jeans from K-mart when I was young and poor in Georgia and Chuck Berry's "Route 66" is on a road trip mix CD I made just for this trip. I didn't intend to drive Route 66, originally, but it's a classic road trip song, so I included it.

As soon as I get on the Mother Road, however, I fall so deeply in love with it, I almost never want to drive anywhere else.

Route 66 waxes and wanes in America's collective memory just as it waxes and wanes in physical reality. Across the Texas Panhandle, little of it still exists and what is there is dilapidated and deteriorating. Dedicated followers will have to jump on and off I-40 to cruise its historic pavement, often at a moment's notice and every so often that notice comes from pure instinct rather than any kind of road marker.

Most of Route 66 across the panhandle is mere feet away from the interstate, which is a disorienting experience. Ahead of you, there is nothing but empty highway; to your right, gorgeous Texas scenery, all rolling hills and big blue sky and fluffy white clouds. Glance to your left, however and you are confronted with the sight of I-40, rushing past you at breakneck speed.

The speed limit on Route 66 is 55, which is fine with me. Its aged pavement lends itself to lower speeds and if there's one thing cannabis is good for, it's helping drivers adhere to speed limits. If anything, you are in danger of driving too slowly when stoned behind the wheel and becoming one of those Sunday drivers that pisses off everybody trying to get somewhere.

Back home in fact, police are as likely to pull you over for driving too slowly as they are if you drive too fast, especially if you are young. Everybody expects the elderly to drive slowly, so much so that the subject has been thoroughly explored by most stand-up comedians and was even the basis for an episode of *South Park*. Young people driving slowly is suspicious, especially in a state where cannabis use is prolific but not necessarily legal. Advocates in North Carolina make a push for medical marijuana every year, but the bill always gets sequestered in committee until time runs out. In other words, no state congressman has the political cajones to stand behind it. That doesn't stop North Carolina from producing the second- highest quality recreational cannabis in the country though, according to High Times magazine. I believe I've already mentioned the Tommy Chong joke about why they call the mountains of Western North Carolina "the Smokies."

I wonder what my local law enforcement must be thinking every time they pull someone over for not quite reaching the speed limit: "Look at that person driving slowly and carefully! I bet they're on pot! I better get 'em."

I understand that cannabis smokers are easy targets. It's all too easy to detect, what with its signature smell. I also understand that stoned smokers are technically driving under the influence of a perspective-altering substance. Many studies have proven that it affects your sense of time and space. Time tends to move slower and things that seem far away may not be as far away as you think, so that in a driving context, stopping short may be problematic. In actuality, this usually just means that when you're driving 35, you feel like you're driving 55 and when you're driving 55, you feel like you're trying to steer a rocket ship through the asteroid belt in *Star Wars*. A benefit of driving

slower means that you often see any stops long before they come, but you might also get pulled over by a cop who promptly asks you what that smell is and could you step out of the vehicle while he has a look around?

Here in Texas, however, I have cruise control to keep me going an even 57. Not too fast and not suspiciously slow. Or I would, if it wasn't back up to its old tricks. The first time Route 66 veers away from the interstate and I try for a cruising speed, suddenly the Cruise won't catch. I try a variety of different tactics, leaving my foot on the gas pedal for varying lengths of time as I push down on the cruise control button. I try holding the button itself down for a long time, for a short time and eventually I try typing SOS in Morse code. All to no avail.

Fortunately, I am all alone, no cops or anybody in sight to pull me over for being too careful or too careless. I mostly keep my eyes on the scenery to my right, but every so often I glance over at I-40 and wonder what everyone's problem is. Why would they want to be involved in that four-lane chaos when they could be over here where they could actually enjoy the road?

Oh, right. Most of them probably have Somewhere To Be. They are probably trying to Make Good Time in order to keep some Itinerary. Most of them probably don't even know the disused frontage road running alongside them is famous. Most of them probably don't notice this little two-lane highway at all.

Every so often, however, Route 66 will abruptly end and I will be forced back onto I-40 for long stretches. Sometimes the frontage road reappears in between exits and I wonder how I could have missed the way back onto it. I stare longingly at the empty two lanes as I am pushed and bullied along this 70 mph hell by SUVs and big Texas

trucks. My car rattles in the wake of semis. Traffic is such that cruise control is useless to me, even if I could get it to work. I am caught in a frantic dance of speeding up and slowing down, weaving through the lanes as I try to find the space to just set my speed and relax into the drive. There are too many other people heading west. This is, after all, why I-40 was built in the first place. I try to imagine all of this traffic on the empty, charmingly narrow two-lane adjacent to it and I simply can't. The road would be an exhaust-choked stand-still all the way to California. Snails could race you there and win.

Still, Route 66 will beacon to me like a mischievous lover. *You know you wish you could ride this*, she'll say, her pavement winking in the sun while I desperately search the green space in between us for a way back on. Maybe there are parts of her that are available for display only.

Soon, she relents and I see another arrowed Route 66 sign. I eagerly take the exit and instantly reduce my speed, grateful to be back at this pace, with no semi wakes to rattle in and no SUVs urging me to ever-higher speeds, like the Bad Friends in an after school special. *Come on. Go faster. You know you want to. I know the speed limit is 70, but 80 is so much more fun. What are you, a coward? Chicken? Pussy? A cowardly chicken's pussy? Speed up, chicken pussy!*

On Route 66, I can breathe. It's easy to sink into nostalgia. I keep expecting to see old jalopies or Corvettes coming toward me in the other lane. Every time I see a modern car, I am a little disappointed. I wonder if my '05 Saturn Ion has the same effect on my fellow tourists. It's easy to think that this is the way it used to be, back when there were fewer motorists. It's easy to think that everybody must have had the road to themselves

back then, but the truth is that Route 66 became so congested at one point that it was given the charming nickname of “Bloody 66.”

Texas has the least preserved stretches of the Route in the southwest. Amarillo is one of the only Route 66 towns left in Texas that isn't a ghost town. On the few parts of Route 66 that shy away from I-40 and dig a little deeper into the countryside, all you see are crumbling diners and gas stations in the same space-age kitschy shapes that leap off the road with such color and vivacity farther down. Where Seligman, Arizona will pop and crackle with the full energy of the Route, Glenrio (which is technically on the border of Texas and New Mexico) offers a sobering counterpoint. Its diners and motels are inhabited primarily by weeds and raccoons, where they haven't been vandalized into near nonexistence.

Texas does boast the MidPoint Café, the site of the original midpoint between Chicago and Los Angeles just outside of Adrian, where I stop for lunch. The MidPoint is a sight for sore eyes in the midst of so much desolation, with two brightly painted and fully restored classic cars parked out front. I don't know if they belong to fellow tourists or if they're part of the décor of the MidPoint itself. Still, seeing classic cars fills me with a child-like joy. I literally clap my hands together eagerly before taking a few photos of them.

Route 66 is in a kind of limbo today, especially the fraction of it that runs through The Panhandle. Technically, it doesn't exist anymore, having been officially decommissioned in 1985, the coincidental year of my birth. Modern maps don't include it and nearly every account of where it used to be varies. It went through several configurations when it was still serving as the main artery for travel across the U.S. and

travel guides on the internet offer four or five different variations for you to try, some of which are only accessible to experienced drivers with four-wheel drive. Most of the confusion comes from motorists trying to piece together the old road using fragments of what was left behind after the interstate was built. In many places, I-40 was built over the top of it and there is no hope of recovering the original two-lane quaintness of it without building a new Route 66. “Withered and died,” is the most popular way to describe what has happened to those places Route 66 used to run through before the interstate by-passed them.

But Route 66, or the idea of it, is currently going through a resurgence in popularity, thanks mostly to the Disney Pixar movie *Cars*, which was largely inspired by the route and the series of small towns it runs through. Most of these are in Arizona, which boasts the best preserved stretches of Route 66. Several federal grants have been issued in the past few years to restore and preserve famous motels and diners along the route. Route 66 Preservation societies exist in all of the states it passes through and they are very active, constantly lobbying towns to protect old establishments from destruction. Almost every original Route 66 business in operation today was bought and restored by a wealthy, eccentric tourist who fell in love with the route and the storied past it represents.

Nostalgia is rampant on Route 66. Every diner and motel sells the requisite post card replicas from the ‘50s and a range of items emblazoned with the famous Route 66 logo. Everything written about Route 66 says its charm comes from reminding us of a “simpler, better time,” when people “moved a little slower” and “stopped to chat.” Older Route 66 residents love to tell you about how everyone along the Route knew each other and knew the tourists who would drive the road year after year.

I fall under the spell of nostalgia, too. Maybe it *was* better back in the 1950s, when everybody got along and these small sleepy towns welcomed strangers with open arms and gentle tongues.

The 1950s, the one decade in history I am the most grateful for having avoided, even more so than the 1290s, when the Black Plague began to sweep through Europe. It was the Atomic Age, when my mother was shown videos in school of what to do in the event of a nuclear attack: get under your desk and wait for it to all be over, but don't worry, you'll totally be alive and unharmed afterward. The era of McCarthy, my least favorite former Congressman, and the era of segregated bathrooms.

Suddenly, I am wondering how many of these diners and motels once sported signs declaring, "No Dogs or Coloreds Allowed." Or "No Dogs or Irish Allowed." Or "No Dogs or Jewish Allowed." I wonder if there was ever a plain white sign with black lettering that said, "No Dogs, Coloreds, Irish, Jewish, or Really Anybody but Upper-Middle Class White People Allowed." Although, being that this is the American Southwest, Irish would have been replaced by Indian and Jewish would have read Mexicans.

All of the postcards feature shiny, happy, white travelers. All of this "authentic" American culture is a performance, with Wigwam Motels in the shape of Tee-Pees, not wigwams and giant sombreros adorning billboards and diners. But don't worry, folks. There are no *actual* Mexicans here. The parallels between all of the things that were wrong in America during the 1950s and the glamorized version Route 66 offers us are never drawn, never mentioned. Well, except for every once in a while, when you see a blatantly racist caricature of a Native American serving as the unifying theme for a motel,

diner, or in some cases, an entire downtown. One downtown, whose name I didn't bother to learn after seeing it, is all tee-pees and billboards of big-nosed Native Americans, and there's even a motel with a sign that says "How" on it as a greeting to tourists. I feel like I am driving through the song from Disney's old Peter Pan cartoon, "What Makes the Red Man Red?"

One of the diners I stop at is owned by a Latino family. Another appears to be owned and operated by Native Americans. These two establishments are not adorned with ethnic icons, but stick mostly to '50s kitsch. I love kitsch. It's one of my favorite things. Kitsch happens when funny people are allowed to design things. It is colorful and loud and basically everything the '50s wasn't. Where Route 66 memorabilia embraces '50s rock culture, even puts it up on a pedestal, it forgets that the actual adults of the 1950s fought rock n roll tooth and nail. A lot of people thought rock n roll was sent up from Hell by the Devil himself to corrupt our youth. It was viewed as a sign of the Apocalypse. "Rock Around the Clock" was the trumpet-sound declaring the End of the World.

And in a way, it was. One world did die when Rock n Roll was born and the world we live in now was delivered unto us in its place. Rebellion became an acceptable form of self-expression and slowly, slowly, America started to change.

The song "Route 66" was written by an American soldier named Bobby Troup who was as smitten with the Mother Road as I was. Its most famous performances, however, were by black men. First, by that vanguard of the old listening establishment, Nat King Cole and second, by one of the bona-fide founding fathers of rock n roll Chuck

Berry. Berry's is my favorite version, because it represents the most possible instances of cultural clash available. Here is a black guitar god, singing over piano rather than his signature guitar riffs, about a travel route he would almost certainly be unwelcome on due to the racial tensions of the time. He gives us a little taste of his guitar skills during the break-down in the middle, but mostly the cover is a slightly faster version of the easy-listening version preferred by the world's grown-ups at the time. It sounds tame and old-fashioned to us now, but back then, the world had never heard something as fast as Chuck Berry, except of course for any given southern bluesman.

Crossing into New Mexico, Route 66 gets even trickier, sometimes bounding across I-40 kamikaze-like to spit right in Eisenhower's face. *That's right, interstate system. Kiss my windy, two-laned ass.*

Everywhere she goes, I follow, even when she becomes a one-lane gravel drive through what appears to be a cow pasture, complete with cows sitting complacently in the middle of the road. They move out of my way reluctantly, even sulkily. They eye me like a trespasser as I disturb their peace and I know that this part of Route 66 is probably avoided by all but the most devout followers of the road. I keep an eye out for bulls, because I've heard of them charging cars. Besides angry beasts of burden, I don't worry much about damage to my vehicle. Yes, this is a terrible road, as rutted as it is rocky and as storm clouds gather in the distance, my foot presses as hard as it dares against the gas, lest I be caught out here in a rain. I shudder to think of the muddy morass this road would become in a rain. The word impassable comes to mind. In fact, when I am looking up the

Route later, the internet strongly advises you only travel this particular stretch in good weather, unless you're driving a jeep, or a boat, or a jeep-boat.

The sky, like, turns out to be another tease. The clouds threaten and frown all day, but never unleash. Sometimes I see rain reaching down to the horizon ahead, but by the time I catch up to it, it is gone, a few rapidly drying puddles the only evidence it was ever there to begin with.

The gravel smoothes back into pavement and the road is lined with sunflowers taller than me. The only appropriate word for the countryside is *idyllic*. Route 66 is dotted with magic in places like this. For a moment, 2010 drops away and I can see myself behind the wheel of a Model-T, bouncing down the road at an incredible twenty miles an hour as sunflowers wave at me in the breeze.

Soon, however, intersections and signs nosing me back toward I-40 reappear and I am so reluctant to rejoin the whizz-bang of the interstate, that I end up on a narrow country lane lined with waving sunflowers that I have convinced myself is Route 66. When I end up in the middle of a Native American pueblo, with dark-eyed inhabitants staring at my car like an unwanted intruder, I realize my mistake. I roll down my window and ask a white woman on a ladder if this is Route 66. She furrows her brow at me and tells me that no, I'm way off base. I need to turn around and head back. I note that going forward was not presented as an option.

My second day in New Mexico, I do get caught out in the rain. Here's a tip to my fellow travelers: Don't visit the desert in July and think it won't rain. It will. Oh boy, will it. It's Louisiana all over again. A slight drizzle which becomes a pounding rain which

becomes a torrent I can't see through. I see signs warning against flash floods and hit the gas. At one point I look in the rearview and swear I see the road filling with water behind me. Whether this is a mirage or a flood I've managed to outrun, I'll never know for sure.

There is nowhere to pull over. This is, I later learn, Tijeras Canyon, one of the most beautiful and challenging portions of Route 66. I am driving a winding trail over cliff and under dale and I can't see any of the beautiful scenery or mesas. I climb upward with rain sheeting down my windshield and hope it will be clearer at the top. It is just clear enough for me to see how precarious my condition is, winding around narrow buttes with very little margin for error. A slight miscalculation in my location could cause me to plummet over a non-barricaded cliff to my death.

The way down is rainier and more terrifying than before. I fear splashing down into a flooded plain, with no way of knowing I am headed into disaster until my car is water-logged and I am drowning.

I make it through, pull over at the first gas station I find and wait for the downpour to pass. Naturally, this only takes about five minutes, after which the sun emerges, twinkling with laughter at my plight and the puddles begin to dry. I think about going back and re-driving the no-doubt magnificent stretch of Route 66 I just missed thanks to the rain, but no. There is nowhere to go but forward. Onward. Ahead.

I pull back onto the mischievous Route and wind my way toward the future and Arizona.

I was going to go to Four Corners and Roswell, originally. I have been fascinated by the thought of Four Corners ever since I learned about it in elementary school. It's a

spot where the corners of four states come perfectly together, so that you can stand in four places at once. When I was a child, I imagined it would look on the ground the way it looked on the map, with the lines drawn out for you, so you could see the convergence of boundaries. I think part of me still expects to find this. I chose Roswell because any true fan of the supernatural would. The myth of Roswell, New Mexico has been blown up so big, it's almost like the town didn't exist before 1947.

I abandon these locales to stay with Route 66. Route 66, I find, will lead me all the way to Flagstaff, which is a great place to stay while you visit the Grand Canyon. It will also lead me through Albuquerque, which I always mentally pronounce Al-ba-qoi-kee, thanks to Bugs Bunny. Fortunately I manage to avoid doing this out loud.



Figure 1: Get Your Kitsch on Route 66!

Out west, there are a lot of trains. In New Mexico, especially. Maybe I just noticed them more, because Route 66 was built more or less alongside the old railroad arteries that criss-cross the American Southwest. The story of American roads out West goes something like this: First, there were cattle routes, then there were railroads, then there were roads. Then the interstate by-passed all of the above, because it's cool like that. Everything has its expiration date. Some day monorails and sky by-ways will take the place of interstates. I wonder if Route 66 will still exist in this hypothetical future and who will drive it.

Anyway, there are a lot of trains. There are so many trains, for one, that they are noticeable. Think about it: When was the last time you saw a train while cruising down the highway? If by some chance it was recently, when was the last time before that? Seeing trains is pretty sporadic these days, as air and truck freighters are preferred. Unless you live in the American Southwest, that is. Or New York/New Jersey.

For some reason, all these trains captivate me and I start taking pictures of them. It becomes like a game. Every time I see a train, a sense of child-like excitement overtakes me and I fumble around the passenger's seat for my camera... from behind the wheel, of course.

Yeah, I know. Not very safe, but to be fair, I am alone out here. If I don't take the photographs of Route 66 and trains, they won't be taken. And I can't just stop every time something picturesque happens by; I'd never get anywhere. So, I take my life into my own hands and dare to snap pictures with a four-year-old digital camera. There's a pause between when you press the button and when the picture takes, so I don't get most of the shots I want, because I waited too long to press the button and by the time the camera

took the picture, I had already whizzed by what had caught my eye in the first place.

That, or I kept forgetting about the delay and moving the camera just in time for it to snap a tilted, blurry shot of whatever I was trying to photograph.

Seeing if I could actually get a shot of the train before I or it passed was most of the fun. Judging by the abundance of pictures of trains I ended up with, I'd say I succeeded more times than I missed. Or, there were even *more* trains than I remember.



Figure 2: Trains!

## CHAPTER 8:

## WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT, THE TERM PETRIFIED FOREST IS MISLEADING

“Anything I tell you very well could be a lie. I’ve been away from the living but I don’t need to be forgiven. I’m just waiting for that sun-cracked, coal black soul of mine to come alive.”-The Refreshments

Route 66 passes through a picturesque and well-traveled part of the Painted Desert known as the Petrified Forest. My grandparents spent a day in the Petrified Forest on their fiftieth anniversary road trip. When they first told me about it, I imagined towering trees of stone, capped with canopies of green. I thought it was a proper forest, like the forest I played in every day on my grandparents’ farm, still thriving with birdsong and rustling leaves. Even when a national park ranger brought examples of petrified wood to my local library to introduce us to the wonders of geology, I held onto this image. If anything, it helped to reinforce my childhood imaginings by giving me a concrete image to build my forest from. The park ranger brought logs, some almost as tall as me. The stone was in the shape of bark, the rings of the ancient tree were still etched into its core, offering more proof that it existed than I will probably ever leave behind.

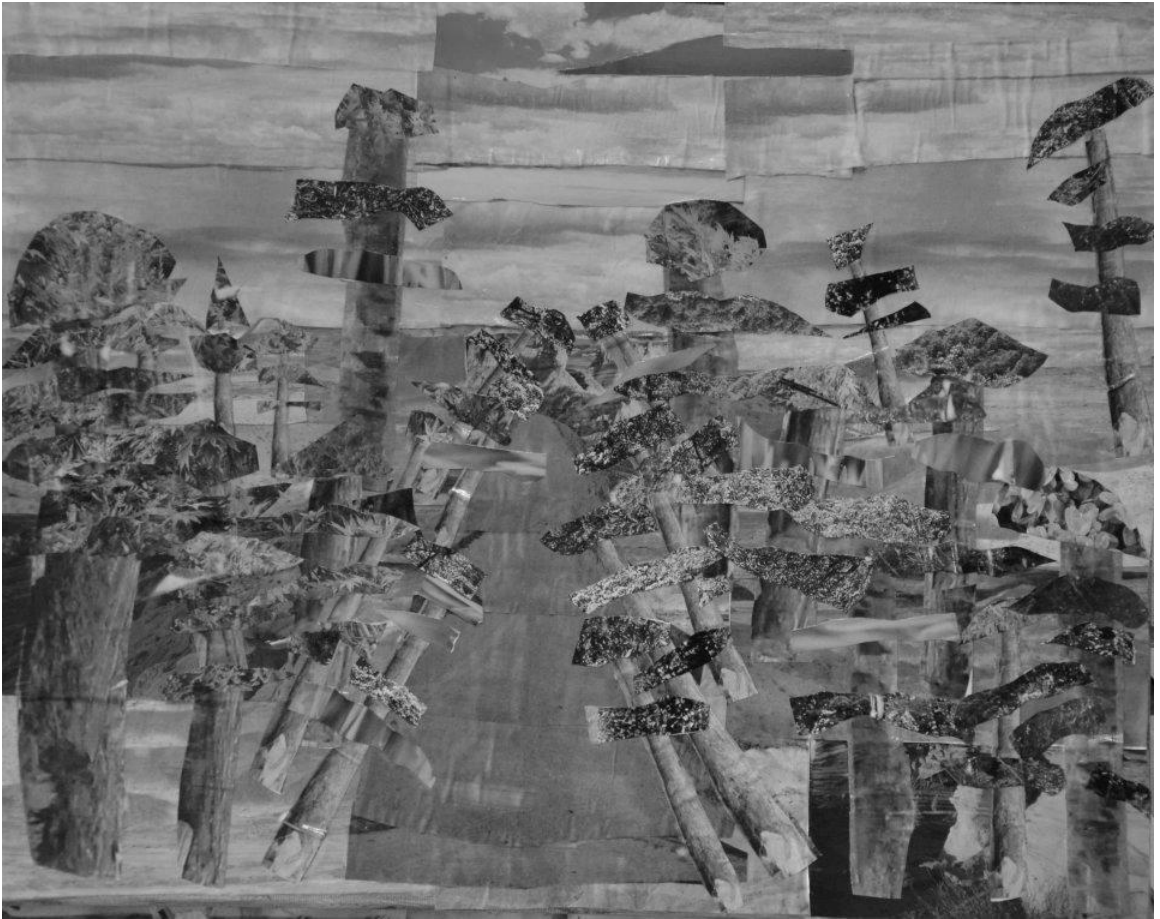
Even now, as I drive into the entrance to the Petrified Forest, I am a little disappointed that there are no standing trees. There are trees, of course, in chunks, lining the desert floor along the road. This forest is horizontal, not vertical. Petrified logs are cast about the desert. Their arrangement seems careless, though I’m sure it’s anything

but. I'm sure the Park Service has chosen these locales as the final resting places of these ancient, immense stone logs for very specific reasons.

Or maybe not. Maybe they were just dumped here back in 1950-whatever to give the tourists something cool to look at and just haven't been moved since. Either way, here they sit. And to make sure they stay there, the Park Service cheerfully invites you to narc on anyone you see picking up stone or gravel or anything, really. Even the sand. You are given a yellow slip of paper when you drive into the entrance and pay the fee that invites you to write down anyone you see attempting to take home an unsolicited souvenir. If you want petrified wood, there's plenty you can buy from the official gift shop, or any of the number of "unofficial" souvenir shops just outside the boundary of the National Park. In fact, most of those souvenir shops are probably selling petrified wood poached from this very park and are probably why the narc slips are needed in the first place.

I guess the Painted Desert and Petrified Forest are like the Coliseum in Rome in that they are all three being carried away, year by year, in tourists' pockets. I remember when visiting the Coliseum how many different times I was urged not to take any stones away, as tourist erosion is becoming an issue.

Of course, I took some pieces anyway. Maybe if the Coliseum had narc slips, I wouldn't have, because I do not attempt to poach petrified wood from the Painted Desert on this day. Mostly because I don't want to give anyone a reason to search my vehicle. Perhaps if I had been holding at the Coliseum, I wouldn't have taken any rocks, either, out of the same fear of being searched. Cannabis saves national monuments, too... for now. It won't protect the Grand Canyon from my prying hands, but the Grand Canyon doesn't have narc slips either.



**Figure 3: My Petrified Forest**

Even though this is a more touristy section of the Painted Desert, there's a lot of space out here. The Petrified Forest National Park covers several miles and I rarely encounter another vehicle on my ride through. There are people clustered at the many pull-overs to view the Desert or walk through a Petrified Wood Grove—little trails the Park has built that are lined with particularly viewable examples of petrified logs. One such trail goes by the famous Tree Bridge.

You've seen the picture: a white, petrified log stretched over a small chasm between two desert buttes. A Polaroid exists of my grandparents standing in front of it. There are kids walking on it when I approach. I kind of wanted to tell them not to, but at the same time, I kind of wanted to walk across it, too. Actually, I'd like to sit upon it and stare out into the middle distance, maybe scribble something in my notebook about the magnificence of the desert for later use. I'd like to ask someone to take a picture of me sitting on it. I don't dare, not because I worry about the instability of the structure, or out of any reverence for future generations of fellow tourists, but because it might as well be a tightrope to me in my stoned state, even though it is a sizeable log. I got vertigo earlier looking off into the distant, unforgiving desert, trying to imagine what it would be like to be lost out there. I got dizzy and had to look away and take a drink of water. I had to look at the air-conditioned safety of my car, with its three-quarters of a tank of gas and remember that I was not in a desperate situation here, would never have to be in a desperate situation like that, if I stay smart and follow the road and don't go off hiking through the desert because it seems like a good idea at the time. That was when I was standing on solid ground, with a guard rail protecting me from the Badlands. Just

thinking about trying to balance myself upon the Tree Bridge makes my head spin a little, even if it would make a bitchin' photo.

A storm brewing, threatening to come barreling in on my good time with the Painted Desert. I can see rain in the distance, like a veil falling across the face of the desert, as if part of it is going into mourning.

I pull over to walk one last trail before I leave the Petrified Forest behind. It is longer than it seems and as I crest a hill, I can no longer see the parking area where my car is, where safety is. I look across into the desert and see dark storm clouds heading my way. No, rushing my way. Lightning strikes the earth in the distance. The little hairs rise up on my arms, terrifying me. I've read about lightning strikes, how the air sizzles and smells right before you're struck.

I walk at a brisk pace along the trail, hoping I get back before the storm sweeps across the desert and wraps around me like a deadly cloak. I grasp my cell phone in my pocket, squeeze it, feel its weight. It, too, represents safety. Help is just a phone call away, no matter where I'm at, as long as I have service. Here, in the Painted Desert, I have five bright green bars. That's right. Fuck you, storm! I'm prepared for disaster, so come and get me!

I round a bend and see other people, both ahead of and behind me and am instantly comforted. At least I will not be out here alone if a storm hits. I also assume the Park Service would have people out looking for stranded tourists, in the event of a storm. It probably happens all the time. I'm sure we'll be seeing the reality show version of this very instance any day now: *I Shouldn't Be Alive: National Park Edition!*

I make it back to my car in plenty of time to beat the storm out of the park. I even have time to browse the various gift shops for probably an hour or more. Time tends to go wonky when you're high and shopping. I could have missed a storm, with my nose buried in fragments of petrified wood and other fossils. You can read the geological history of the desert, indeed of Arizona herself like a novel, if you know the language of rocks. I do not, but for these lost minutes in various gift shops, I pretend I do. Really, I am like a child paging through a picture book, not yet understanding the words, but knowing they have something to do with what I'm seeing. I put the story together myself. A dinosaur scratched its back against this one, that one was part of a mighty redwood that housed a thousand exquisitely designed, now-extinct species. This one is actually a remnant of the Ark of Noah, because why not? A crystallized piece of the Ark is just as likely to turn up in a gift shop in Arizona as it is anywhere else.

The scenery starts to change as I get closer to Flagstaff. The mountains start to look more like pyramids than mesas. Ponderosa Pines start to line the road, their green needles splotched with dead auburn blight—the result of the Pine Beetle, a famous and sinister villain in this area. There is information at every tourist trap decrying it, informing helpless tourists of the damage it causes on a daily basis. Perhaps there's some sort of foundation you can donate to help combat this ravenous pest. I'm not sure, but I do know that I spend most of my time in northern Arizona feeling really bad for the trees currently being ravaged by this foreign invader.

Once in Flagstaff, I find the local Motel 6 and settle in for four nights. The room isn't much. The carpet feels greasy when I risk putting my bare feet on it and the whole

room visibly sags in the middle, but I sort of love it. The water runs clear, so it's already way better than the Bates Motel back in Texas. It's nice to have a base of operations, temporary though it may be. Here is a room for me to come back to after my adventures, so at least I don't have to depend on random chance to find me a bed. Although, random chance has been doing pretty well so far, brown water and all.

## CHAPTER 9

## THE GRAND CANYON PT. 1: THE SOUTH RIM

“The wonders of the Grand Canyon cannot be adequately represented in symbols of speech, nor by speech itself. The resources of the graphic art are taxed beyond their powers in attempting to portray its features. Language and illustration combined must fail.” -John Wesley Powell

The first time I see the Grand Canyon, I don't really even see it. I catch a brief glimpse of it from the shuttle bus window. All the same, my heart drops down into my stomach and I must grip the bus seat beneath me. I have never seen anything so enormous up close, not even through a bus window.

The Park Service teases you, of course. They have to. The magnificence of the Canyon demands some sort of fan-fare and since it would be impractical for them to blindfold every one of the roughly thirteen thousand tourists that arrive every day, lead them to a vista and reveal, they instead built the main hub(s), where the shuttle takes you first, quite a distance away from the canyon's edge, so that there is an anticipation-building walk of several yards before you stare into its depths.

When I approach the canyon, I am behind three coffee-colored women in bright saris. One pink, one yellow, one lime green. They cling to each other and giggle as they walk to the canyon. I don't know who these women are or where they come from. I do know when they see the canyon for the first time because all three of them raise their arms in the air, tilt their palms to heaven and begin shouting “Allahu Akbar! Allahu

Akbar!" *God is great! God is great!* They laugh, a silver tinkling sound like clear rushing water.

Our post 9-11 culture has taught us to fear such Islam-isms, especially in crowded tourist areas, but as I watch them run toward the canyon as if running into the Arms of Allah Himself, I know that *their* Allah is a jovial presence. When He looks at America, he sees the Grand Canyon, not our unethical CEOs. Let some angry city worry with terrorism; here, we are one.

They laugh, a silver tinkling sound like clear rushing water. It envelops me like the visible wind in a Disney movie and soon I am laughing, too. I look off to my right and could almost swear I see an adorable little blue bird wink at me. My excitement grows and I increase my pace, ready to see the canyon for myself, already.

When I see it, it paralyzes me. All the air is sucked out of my lungs and the word *breathtaking* is made real to me at last. I stand, rooted to the cement trail the Park Service has built along the canyon's edge. My heart drops back into my stomach and my head spins. Vertigo, the mischievous friend I always greet at the top of great heights, returns to my side. *Don't fall*, he whispers in my ear.

The Grand Canyon.

It is so big.

It is so beautiful.

In this moment, I am so certain that there is a God, a genuine, artistic God who loves us, that when I get back home and take Post-Colonial Lit, which could also be called Genocide from *Around the World and the Literary Traditions it Inspires*, I will try

so desperately to remember *this* feeling, *this* certainty. Facing the canyon, I forget how ugly the world can be, how blind God can seem.

Here, God is an artist and land is His medium.

Someone bumps into me, jolting me out of Heaven and back into Arizona. I mumble an apology for stopping in the middle of the trail and thus in the way, but whoever-it-was is too distracted by the canyon to hear me.

I rush up to an empty ledge and peer down into the abyss, despite the vertigo. For the first time in my life, I wish I wasn't so stoned. The cannabis twirls in my head, whispering to me how very high up I am, how windy it is, how clumsy I am and how I could stumble or slip and plummet to my painful death at any given moment.

I step away from the ledge and close my eyes. I cannot look at it from this close up. I'm not ready yet. I have to steady myself, ready myself for total insignificance. How can anyone feel significant next to it? Enormous, ancient, this canyon saw the birth of my species; of all species, probably.

The canyon, like the Petrified Forest, is a tome; a novel telling the geological history of the world. There are plaques and plastic charts everywhere telling you exactly how old everything is. Every butte and pinnacle of it has a name and an age. All the names were given by white scientists, of course, but I assume they all have older names, too. Names I will never know.

Despite its popularity, there are many parts of the canyon that remain largely unexplored, by any notable white explorers anyway. I assume the Hualapai, Havasupai and the ancient Puebloan people have all explored it; have lived in it and know all its

secrets, but these are things they will never tell us and why would they? All we have ever done with their secrets is exploit them for financial gain.

Grand Canyon is beautiful, but it is also deadly. It could cook you like an oven or freeze you like an ice box and both in the same twenty-four hours. While there are plenty of hiking trails into its interior, the vast majority of its terrain is hostile and impossible to navigate unless you have wings, or hooves. There are signs everywhere warning hikers of the most obvious dangers: do not hike into the canyon without water or food, try not to hike between the hours of noon and three p.m, or if you must, make sure you have lots of water and food. And never, ever leave the trail. The difference between ever being seen again or not can depend on whether or not you stay on the trail. Even so, the death toll of the canyon remains low. Only a couple hundred people have died here since the late 1800s. The small town I come from doesn't have statistics that good. Of those couple hundred, over a hundred of them died at the same time, in a mid-air collision between two airplanes. Laws regarding the air space around the canyon were modified after that. Now it is more or less a no-fly zone and even the helicopters that sell tours of the canyon are under restrictions to reduce noise pollution.

The signs also love to tell you the canyon was discovered shortly after America, right next to plaques telling you how old it is, using numbers like *250 million*. How can something 250 million years old have remained undiscovered until 1540? Most people will not question this discrepancy. Of course, in the newer pamphlets they give out with admission, a brief run-down of the Native American history of the canyon is presented, wherein people dwelled within its walls, hunted in it, even built and left behind ruins that can now be visited by tourists and all long before 1540. Things went downhill for the

Native American in general after 1540. Of course, I know America wasn't discovered, either. It just changed hands. Most people know these things now and yet that word keeps coming up: Discovery.

The canyon is lucky that it is not only beautiful, but also devoid of anything early explorers considered "valuable," or it likely would have been mined out of existence by now. Actually, it is rich in several minerals and mining was begun in parts of it before it was declared a National Park by Theodore Roosevelt, but the terrain of the interior of the canyon kept most prospectors at bay. No one could get the heavy and expensive equipment in needed to strip the canyon of its resources. Trips through the canyon today remain perilous and take days. As the brochures are quick to tell you, there are no one day river trips through the Grand Canyon. There are barely one day hiking trips. It is simply too big to be conquered by us.

Everywhere, people are praying to it, from the Allahu Akbar women earlier, to Christians with their hands clasped in prayer, to Hindus literally singing its praises. Science and religion rub up against each other comfortably here. They lay sleeping together in this corner of America, like a cat and dog who have learned to get along. I'm sure there are some days that these two animals claw and bite at each other with all the viciousness of FOX News correspondents, but on this particular day, there is peace.

Many of the rock formations that make up the canyon are called "temples," and were named after pantheons of gods considered long-dead and some gods that still thrive, such as the cluster of buttes named after Hindu gods. Religion was brought into the naming on purpose, by a sardonic agnostic. The signs tell you up front a sardonic

agnostic named them on the informational plaques located at a pavilion where these formations can best be viewed. There is Vishnu Temple and Shiva Temple and Krishna Shrine. I notice there are an awful lot of tourists who appear to be Indian, as in, from India. I wonder if they have come here to see the rock formations in America named after their gods. I wonder if the Grand Canyon is now an Indian holy place, thanks to some long dead sardonic agnostic geologist. (It is.)

There are non-Hindu names, too, like Zoroaster Temple and Temple of Isis. The Temple of Isis comes with its own conspiracy theory, involving a pyramid reportedly hidden within the canyon's depth and a cave filled with mummies and misplaced artifacts from the ancient Egyptians. None of this has ever been verified by more than internet hearsay, however.

Whatever gets them here, God or Snark, hardly matters. A Hindu might tell you that the gods put their names in the mouth of a sardonic agnostic, to get more people to see the canyon and to worship it. Of course the Grand Canyon is a holy place to the American Indian and has been for quite some time now. *God is* here, smiling in the rock formations, swirling around in the air, winking and waving at us all. But then, a Hindu would also tell you that God is everywhere.

I, too, am pleasantly surprised to see Vishnu here. He's all over the place. Besides Vishnu Temple, one of the most prominent pinnacles found in the Canyon, there are the Vishnu Basement Rocks lining the bottom of the canyon, some of the oldest rocks in the world. You see, Vishnu is my God, too. I have an altar to Him in my room and His visage is tacked to my doorway. I kiss His feet before I exit and when I return, or I try to remember to. When something good happens to me and I am at home, I rush to Vishnu,

kiss His feet and thank Him. When something good happens to me and I am not at home, I kiss my palm and offer it to Heaven. I chant Om Namah Shivaya and whisper *thank you, Lord* over and over.

It's a little weird, I guess, especially for a southern American white girl who's never been to India, hasn't even read the Vedas properly and can literally never be Hindu, as Hindu means *of India*. I know white people like Julia Roberts and Elizabeth Gilbert get made fun of for saying they're Hindu spiritualists, but I assure you, I didn't ask for this. No, Vishnu showed up unannounced in my Eastern Religious Traditions class one day and tapped me on the shoulder.

"You and me, kid. We're going places," He said.

"What? Okay. Should... should I bow or something? Should I be bowing right now?"

"Nah. But if you build It, I will come."

"I've never actually seen *Field of Dreams*. You want me to build a baseball field in my back yard? I don't have a back yard. I live in a dorm."

"No. An altar. Build me an altar. Geez. I'm not going to be spelling everything out for you like this from now on."

"Fair enough," I said.

My eyes snapped open, Vishnu was gone and the professor was talking animatedly about Buddhism, clearly his religion of choice. Nobody was looking at me strangely or seemed to have noticed that a God had just been in their presence, or that I had been sleeping in class.

Later that day, I printed out a picture of Vishnu and set up a small altar to Him in my room, much to my conservative Christian roommate's chagrin. She never said anything about it, because I was the stronger personality. All battles against me were losing ones. I tried to be innocuous about my new faith, to never discuss it unless she asked, to observe my rituals of prayer, meditation and attending to the visage of Vishnu when she was out of the room. I wouldn't want her confronting me with her religion, either and she didn't. But her nose would wrinkle when she looked at the altar and I'm sure she spent many fervent moments praying for my immortal soul. I think Vishnu kept trying to tell her I was covered in that respect, but she wouldn't have listened even if she could hear Him.

The Hualapai Tribe owns a section of the canyon some two hundred miles away from Grand Canyon National Park where they have built the famous Sky Walk, a giant glass walk-way over a part of the chasm of the canyon. It's a rip-off, by the way, but you should go anyway. Paying \$70 just to walk out onto the Sky Walk and then another \$20 or more for the subsequent photo should go a long way toward assuaging your white liberal guilt for their people's plight. You know, the one where our ancestors raped and drove their ancestors off of their fertile homelands and onto the most arid patches of Wasteland they could find? Your cultural heritage wiped clean for just \$99.95<sup>6</sup>

I didn't go, mind you. I read in the pamphlet that it would cost \$70 just to walk out onto the thing, you couldn't take a camera and then you had to pay an unlisted price if you wanted the picture they take of you while on the Sky Walk. Also, it was two hundred

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<sup>6</sup>Basic Package.

miles out of my way. Sorry, Hualapai. I'll have to literally pay for the shitheadedness of White People some other time. But I do agree with you that we're total shit heads, generally speaking.

I'm a shit head. I take pieces of the Grand Canyon home with me in my pockets, from both the South and the North Rims. In fact, I don't just pick up pebbles from the side of the cement trail designed to stop erosion. No, I abandon this trail almost as soon as I know it exists, deciding instead to walk along the canyon's edge. There is a well-worn walking path, from before the cement trail was built. I'm not the only shit-head walking it, but I'm one of very few. Of course, walking where they don't want me to walk makes me feel like a bad ass. I soon realize it's been a few hours since my last joint in the parking lot. I take a quick look to my left, a quick look to my right and I climb down off the trail onto a ledge. And down onto another ledge. Then I hide behind a scrub tree and light up. I spend most of the time worrying about the smell and hoping no park rangers come sniffing around. All I leave behind are ashes, which I also make sure are scattered in the wind. I save the roach, of course. I can crumble it up in a bowl later. Leave no trace.

While here I spy a spire off to the side. At first the spire appears to be as free standing as the others, but then I notice a little pathway to it, a bridge over the gap between my ledge and it. I decide it would be good for my sense of adventure to traverse the bridge and maybe grab some stones from the spire. Vertigo has wandered off somewhere; I am finally used to seeing the canyon before me, in all of its immensity. I never get tired of it, not for one second in the sixteen hours total I spend staring at it, but I

do get used to being stoned and on the edge. I feel confident in my ability to make the journey.

I will give a couple of these stones to a friend of mine, saying, “In an alternate dimension, I died getting you these rocks.”

Depending on which quantum physics theory you prefer, it’s probably true. I did slip, climbing my way back up onto the ledge. My hand-hold crumbled beneath my fingers and for a split second, I dangled in the air, my feet touching nothing, one hand clinging desperately to the sheer rock face as I tried to regain my footing. In this dimension, clearly, I made it.

There is probably a dimension in which I was arrested for smoking pot at the Grand Canyon, too. In that dimension, I like to think I am a marijuana activist and people wear “Free Tiff” T-shirts in protest of my wrongful incarceration. In reality, there would probably just be a hefty fine and maybe some community service. Arizona is a medical state, after all. But in this dimension, I don’t have to find out. I am just sneaky enough to avoid detection and am able to enjoy the glory of Grand Canyon while as high as I want to be. Besides, many Native American peoples once considered cannabis to be a sacred herb and used it during religious rituals, as did their Indian counterparts in Asia. The canyon is a sacred place, so technically, I am upholding tradition, a long, storied tradition of using the more cerebral effects of cannabis to better appreciate the Great Outdoors and I don’t think it gets much greater than this.

I want to stay until sunset, of course. There’s almost no point in going to the Grand Canyon if you aren’t going to stay and watch the sunset. Grand Canyon sunsets are legendary, absolutely the best sunsets to be found anywhere on earth. I hear the sunrises

are pretty good, too, but I don't have the discipline to catch a Grand Canyon sunrise. I have only seen a handful of sunrises since I graduated high school and no longer had to get up before the sun rose to catch the bus. A sunrise is a very special occasion in my life and means I have been up all night. I used to tell myself, while watching the sun rise as I waited for the school bus, that later in life I would get up early every once in a while, just to watch the sunrise.

But I don't.

Some people might make an exception for the Grand Canyon and those are better people than me. Catching the sunrise at the Grand Canyon would mean waking up at four in the morning and since I have never managed to get to sleep before two in the morning that I can remember, I don't even try. Maybe some day when I can afford to stay in one of the few hotels located in the park. Of course, if I plan to do this any time in the next five years or so, I should go ahead and make a reservation now. Unfortunately, my five-year financial plan isn't looking very promising right now.

Sunset on this particular day is at 7:05 P.M Mountain Standard Time. At 6:45, the sky fills with slate grey storm clouds and begins to dump buckets of rain into the canyon and onto every single tourist waiting to watch the sunset. At 6:30, I happened to see the storm moving my way. The wind whipped up and scared the shit out of me, in my present location standing out on a ledge I probably wasn't supposed to be on anyway. I had a vision of myself being blown into the canyon like a giant, screaming tumbleweed and sought the safety of the cement trail, well away from the ledges. I did manage to snap a picture of a double rainbow before heading back to the shuttle and I consider this a small victory.

I haven't missed my opportunity to watch a sun event at the Grand Canyon. The Grand Canyon National Park spans both rims. The South Rim is the most popular tourist destination spot, because it's the easiest one to get to, especially for people visiting the Painted Desert and Petrified Forest. The South Rim was the first rim that supported tourism and was the first one to have a railroad and later, an automobile road built to it. The North Rim is more remote and is close to the border of Utah. Although it's only about ten miles across from the South Rim as the crow flies, getting there by road requires you to drive about three hours and two hundred and fifteen miles, well, north.

The North Rim is also the only place you can get a mule ride on short notice. There are mule rides available at the South Rim, but they fill up about a year in advance and I didn't even know I was going to be taking this road trip a year ago. But I decided when I was a kid that if I ever went to the Grand Canyon, I *would* ride a mule. So I'm going to the North Rim.

## CHAPTER 10

## THE GRAND CANYON PT. 2: THE NORTH RIM

“Music has always been a matter of Energy to me, a question of Fuel. Sentimental people call it Inspiration, but what they really mean is Fuel. I have always needed Fuel. I am a serious consumer. On some nights I still believe that a car with the gas needle on empty can run about fifty more miles if you have the right music very loud on the radio.” – Hunter S. Thompson

Two days later, I make it to the North Rim just in time to catch the last round of mule rides. These mules won't be going down into the canyon proper, but just sort of wandering around in the woods at the top of the canyon. The last minute for catching a mule ride into the canyon was twelve p.m., right about the time I was parking the car. Well, if I had gotten up at 6:30 instead of hitting the snooze button until 7, maybe I could have taken a perilous mule ride down a narrow stone trail, but I didn't.

Once I am on the mule, I will cease to be disappointed in the least and instead grateful that I do not have to put my life in the hooves of my mule. The mules are safe, make no mistake. But you cannot truly understand the phrase “stubborn as a mule” until you are trying to wrest the head of an animal that is, in every way, stronger than you out of the weeds it has determined to eat. Of course they put me with the stoner mule who spends more time getting distracted by what to eat than following the trail. The Guide has to keep yelling back at me to jerk its head, to not be gentle with it, just jerk it right on out of there, show it who's boss, etc. I honestly have no problem being rough with the

animal. I jerk the reins above its stubborn, thick neck as hard as I can, to pretty much no avail. What makes my humiliation all the more acute is that there are two boys, aged ten and eight, who own their mules like experienced cowboys. I know from the shuttle ride to the head of the trail that the boys were raised around horses. Their mom is obviously an experienced cow girl. She has the hat, first of all, but also official riding boots, thick jeans and chaps. She talks about her ranch and how long she's been around horses on the shuttle ride. This familial trio is now near the front of our expedition, chatting it up with the Guide. I'm near the back with two Asian guys who keep falling behind. The Guide also has to keep shouting back at them to keep up, to lash their mules with the rope attached to the reigns.

I am just as distracted a driver on a mule as I am in my car. The main difference is that my mule knows when I'm distracted. They are incredibly intelligent creatures, which most people might not know. People think stubborn means they're stupid, too, but they're not. My friend Moriarty has a mule that has out-smarted every lock they have put on its gate, except for a combination lock. Moriarty says it's only a matter of time before the mule cracks it, too. Apparently, the mule will move the knob with its tongue, mimicking how people turn the lock when unlocking the gate for themselves. I eagerly anticipate the day I hear that the mule has cracked the combination, or at the very least has simply kept at it so diligently that it happened upon the combo.

Every time I try to snap a picture along the trail with my camera, my mule, Supai, dips her head into the brush to eat and I spend the next ninety seconds locked in an epic struggle. Girl vs. Beast! Who will emerge the victor?

The beast would totally emerge the victor if the commanding voice of the Guide didn't slice through the air, pricking the ears of Supai. Supai knows that voice.

Reluctantly, she obeys that voice. She shakes her head and slowly, petulantly, pulls her head out of the weeds and gets back on the trail.

So I stop trying to take pseudo-artistic pictures of me holding the reins and try to drive. The Guide will fall silent and the slow clop-clop of the mules' hooves will lull me into a false sense of security. I get caught up in the scenery and drift off a little. My mule slows to a halt and dips her head into the weeds.

Girl vs. Beast! Who will emerge the victor?

Halfway through the mule ride it occurs to me that this is probably the most work my thighs have done in quite some time. They will probably ache for days after this (they will). The Guide and the Cowgirl Mom must have powerful thighs, capable of crushing Coke cans, probably. Especially the Guide, who does this in thirty-minute installments, all day, every day. Except for the months of October through May, when the North Rim is closed due to snow, unless she has some other mule-riding related job during the winter.

When I get back to the canyon proper, I have a light lunch at the cafeteria-style place right next to the canyon's edge and hit Bright Angel Trail, a rocky pathway along one of the canyon's famous craggy outcroppings. It's wide enough for several tourists at a time to walk up and down it at the same time, but layered and craggy enough that the braver tourists can climb down off the official trail and onto less populated, solitary edges and cliffs. There are a lot more shit heads getting off the trail on this rim of the canyon

than there were at the South Rim. Although here, the atmosphere is much more laissez-faire. Fewer people visit this Rim and it is closed for roughly half the year, so tourist erosion isn't quite the problem here that it is on the South Rim. Even kids are jumping from rock to rock, exploring the edges, to the horror of their on-looking parents. The only Park Rangers around just look on with bemused smiles. Only two deaths a year, on average, occur at the Grand Canyon, usually a male between the ages of 18 and 25 who is trying to get, like, a totally extreme pic dude. Sometimes someone jumps, or drowns on a river trip through the Class V rapids at the bottom of the canyon, or gets off the trail and dies of dehydration before rescue can occur. Sometimes murder is afoot, but only about twenty-five times in the past two hundred years. The canyon is probably one of the safest places in America, despite all of its terrifying drops and hostile interior.

I didn't have to leave my car in the nearest town and ride a shuttle into the actual park today, like I did at the South Rim, so Scott (my car) is only a five-minute walk away. To be fair, I didn't *have* to leave my car anywhere at the Grand Canyon. I could have driven in, but it was the difference between twelve and twenty-five dollars. And, when I come to visit the North Rim, they don't make me pony up the additional twelve dollars for driving here, which is good because instead of sneaking around the park, I go back to the car to smoke up after lunch. The after-meal smoke is a stoner tradition, one that I have so-far upheld regardless of locale.

At the South Rim, I stayed in motion, hiking the edge all day, except for the few minutes I stopped to take pictures, or smoke a joint, or to just stop and stare. Here, at the North Rim, I pick a secluded ledge and sit. I talk to the canyon. I whisper a litany of beliefs, of ruminations and petty personal issues. I marvel at her beauty. I cry into it, I

laugh into it, I sing to it. I sigh the heavy sigh of one perpetually unable to catch one's breath.

I sneak away from my ledge around six or so. Everyone is already gearing up for the show, the heavens and the canyon included. Her pinks and reds are starting to sparkle and pop and tourists are buzzing around like bees, searching for a good spot from which to watch. I don't think I'll make it all the way to the car and back before it starts, so I sneak down into some trees for my pre-sunset half-joint.

I see a park ranger almost as soon as I emerge from beneath the tree line. Unfazed, I approach him and ask him where the best place to view the sunset is located. He smiles and tells me. It's the ledge I had been hanging out on all day.

"Thank you, sir," I say.

"You're welcome," he says and I make my way back to Bright Angel Point.

I don't go back to the ledge I sat on all day, though. No, I climb up the highest spire I can find. There's a well-worn climbing path, so I know I'm not the first brilliant tourist to get this idea. At first, the other tourists watch me climb, some of their faces filled with worry, some filled with intrigue. Then, others follow. I have perched myself upon a huge rock and four or five other people poke their heads up from beneath and ask if they can join me.

"Of course. There's plenty of room," I say.

A photographer with a really good camera takes a picture of me sitting in the center of the rock, gazing west. Some day, I hope I come across this photo. He also gives me an idea. I ask a couple of the other tourists around me if they'd mind taking a picture

of me. They enthusiastically agree and get a couple of great shots. I take some pictures of them.

Photographs are a kind of gentle currency when you're a tourist in America—or anywhere, really. If you take my picture, I'll take yours. The thing about being on the road by yourself is, there's nobody to take pictures of you, so you end up with a lot of pictures of stuff, but no evidence that you were actually there. I try to take a lot of pictures with my arm extended in front of me and the canyon behind me, but it rarely turns out very well. The shots are too close. So one of my solutions is to take a picture of whatever I want a picture with, say, the Grand Canyon, or the sign at the Louisiana State Border. Then I take one of my arms-out-close-shots. My idea is to Photoshop the close-up of me superimposed onto the larger picture. I don't have the Photoshop computer program, but one of my friends, a photographer himself, does. Whenever I take a terrible close-up shot of myself with some unrecognizable totem of the road, I just tell myself I'll get 'Roo to fix it in Photoshop. This becomes a mantra of mine: *'Roo will fix it in Photoshop.*

Long before this moment, I wish I had 'Roo with me. He is quite the budding photographer, having proudly taken the Facebook profile pictures of everyone he knows. The downside of having a photographer for a close friend is that you never really feel the need to learn how to take good pictures yourself. That's what 'Roo is for. It's not until I'm out on the road that I regret my decision not to learn my way around a camera. I figure it out pretty quickly, but most of my pictures are painfully amateur.

I never do get 'Roo to fix my pictures for me in photoshop, though. Instead, I end up Photoshopping my pictures the old-fashioned way: with scissors and glue.



When the sun starts to set, I call it God's IMAX. Light and shadow-play are everywhere. The geological stripes on the canyon burst out at you in 3-D and you can literally watch the passage of time like in an old silent film. Everyone stops. Every single tourist formerly zigging and zagging about just stops and stares.

I won't try to describe it to you. You have to see it for yourself.

After spending two combined days staring longingly at so much beauty, I wish there was some way I could take it home with me. Not a picture of it. Pictures don't do it justice, but the actual canyon itself, or at least this portion of it. There's two hundred more miles of it so surely they won't miss this little bit. Sure, transportation might pose a problem, but I'm resourceful. I'll figure it out.

I get a sudden vision of me and the Grand Canyon, shrunk down to person size and wearing a hoodie, cruising down the highway. She's asking me lots of questions about North Carolina, about my place...where's she going to put her stuff? And I'm asking her what she really has hidden in her pockets. Is the Missing Link in there? The Ark of the Covenant? Mummified aliens? Petrified Viking ships? Sanskrit instructions for how to grow *real* God bud?

She tells me to calm down, there's mostly just arrowheads and fossilized troglodytes in there. I hope she knows I have every intention of going through them, once she's all situated in my backyard. I hope my landlord won't be pissed that I brought the Grand Canyon home. If anything, it'll drive his property value up.

Before I can get far, blue lights in the rearview. I toss the joint out the window while Grand Canyon rolls down her window and frantically sprays us down with

Febreeze. The cop approaches the window and I try to act cool. He doesn't ask for my license and registration. He doesn't ask me anything at all. He looks straight at Grand Canyon.

“Did you really think you'd get away, Grand Canyon?” he asks.

“I had to try,” she says.

“Come on. Out of the car. I'm taking you back. And the next time you try this...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Grand Canyon says as she gets out. “Aw, do you have to use the cuffs?”

“You know I do,” the cop says. He leads her back to his car and pulls away. He doesn't cite me or warn me or tell me not to do it again. He just leaves, taking Grand Canyon with him.

Guess I don't have to worry about my landlord after all.



Figure 5: God's IMAX

There is one gas station at the North Rim of the Grand Canyon and the gas there is, as you would expect, expensive. Like, California expensive. More so, probably. All the brochures tell you to fill up before you go. I had half a tank before I left Flagstaff and I get pretty good mileage. All the same, my car dings three times and LOW FUEL pops up in digital letters before I'm out of the park. So I pull over to get some gas before leaving the park. I only drop in fifteen bucks, thinking that I'll fill up when I get back to civilization, where gas is reasonable.

Garmin tells me that I'm driving through a great, empty expanse on the map when my car dings three times and LOW FUEL pops up once again in digital letters on my dashboard. I ask Garmin to locate the nearest gas station for me.

She locates a cluster of them. Citgo, 55 miles. Exxon, 55.4 miles. BP, 55.5 miles. At the time, I am under the impression that my fuel gage lets me know I am low when I have about a gallon of gas left. My car will get about 35/mpg on the highway. Doing the math, I realize there is a very strong possibility I will end up stranded in the middle of nowhere on this night. I think about what I should do. I could try calling Safe Way, my generic Triple A that's going out of business. They offer free towing and would take me to a gas station. Or I could call 911.

I run through a script in my head: "Yeah, this isn't exactly an emergency, but I was wondering if you could help me. I ran out of gas on Alt 89. Coming back from the Grand Canyon, yeah. I have a gas can. Can you send an officer out here to run me to a gas station? Is that something you guys do? What are my options here?"

Of course, some pleasant 911 dispatch officer would probably interrupt me before I could get half of that out and explain my options to me. I give up a silent thanks for the invention of the cell phone, even if they might cause cancer.

I remember a quote from the late Hunter S. Thompson about music being fuel.

This is a job for The Who.

I pop in a CD and crank the volume up. I lean over my steering wheel like people in car chases do in the movies and try to keep myself from pressing the gas pedal too much. The last strains of “Baba O’Reilly” fade out just as I steer into the Citgo and sidle up to one of the pumps. Gas is a very reasonable three-something a gallon. Reasonable for 2010, anyway.

I swear I hear my car sigh as the gas starts to flow. The engine clunks contentedly. I send up a few more thanks, for all fuels, physical and literary. *Om Namah Shivaya.*

CHAPTER 11  
METEOR CRATER

“This is Major Tom to Ground Control. I’m stepping through the door and I’m floating in a most peculiar way. The stars look very different today.” –David Bowie

I stay in Flagstaff for four nights and three days. On the first and third day, I went to the Grand Canyon. On the day in between, I decide to visit Meteor Crater, just outside of Flagstaff on old Rt 66, also accessible by I-40.

I have this thing with roadside attractions. I blame Neil Gaiman and his novel *American Gods* for making them seem a lot more magical than they actually are. At this point in the trip, I’m starting to think roadside attractions aren’t all they’re cracked up to be. Route 66 is Roadside Attraction City, but most of the attractions are just diners or gift shops. While most of the diners do offer pretty good food, I find myself asking *Where’s the magic?*

Of course, the magic on Route 66 is all in the road itself, in the emptiness of it, the kitschiness of it, even the falling-down ramshackle parts of it. If I wanted magic, I should have pulled over and explored some of the ghost towns of Route 66. It takes strong magic indeed to push people out of a place they have decided to settle. Magic, or an interstate a few miles away, taking the tourist commerce elsewhere. It’s probably better I didn’t, anyway. I can imagine that conversation now.

ME:

But officer, I was looking for magic. Or ghosts. Either one would do.

OFFICER

Are you high?

ME

...little bit.

OFFICER

Come with me.

CUT TO:

Me being “helped” into the backseat of a police cruiser as dogs bark at my car, indicating that there are drugs inside.

No, I actually haven’t gotten out of the car much at all, except for my day-long expeditions at the Grand Canyon. And anyway, diners and abandoned diners aren’t really proper roadside attractions. *The Museum of the Weird* in Austin was a proper roadside attraction. So is Meteor Crater in Arizona.

Our planet is in constant danger from space. If you weren’t already afraid of nuclear power, global terrorism, global warming, 2012, WWIII, or the coming robocalypse (robot apocalypse, where all machines become sentient and rise up against their fleshy masters; it’s only a matter of time, trust me), there’s always Outer Space to fear. Gamma rays and other forms of cosmic radiation are constantly bombarding our atmosphere. There are super novas and black holes and a multitude of terrifying deep space events that could end life on Earth at any given second. There are, in fact,

travelling balls of cosmic radiation larger than our planet just free-wheeling around out there. Most of them are outside of the Milky Way galaxy, which is just one tiny patch in the rather enormous quilt of our Universe, but scientists aren't exactly sure how fast they can go or if there's any discernible patterns to their movements. So, some day one of them could wander into our solar system and basically destroy everything.

A little closer to home, if one of the stars that can be viewed from a lovely rural night sky were to explode, the resulting radiation could negatively affect life on our planet. A large enough solar flare could give an entire population cancer, if not drastically affect our tenuous climate. Eventually, our sun will explode anyway, consuming Mercury, Venus, Earth and maybe part of Mars in the resulting blast. Some day, a space event will consume this planet, rendering our entire species, its history and culture completely extinct, unless we've figured out space travel by then and abandoned ship. NASA would be working on it if it hadn't been shut down due to a shitty economy. Maybe the Russians will crack it.

Sometimes, just to remind us of our precarious and not-at-all taken for granted place in the Universe, space will lash out at us in the form of meteors, meteorites and asteroids. I like to think of meteors as bricks hurled through our window by the Space Mafia, not-so-subtle messages to never forget who's really in charge around here. Scientists are pretty sure it was an asteroid that caused the extinction event that killed all the dinosaurs and just about everything else, too. Our planet has been taken back down to almost zero by space before and it can damn well do it again if it wants.

As a result, Earth is pock-marked with evidence of abuse from the owner of the building she rents her tiny room from. They are called craters. Some are larger than

others. Some are hardly noticeable, or have long since disappeared from record. Some, like the Chixulub Crater off the coast of Mexico, can be seen from space. Scientists believe it may be the crater from the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs. Of course, all paleontology, geology, or any other disciplines that try to solve history's more ancient mysteries are always going to be half guesswork. Human memory only goes back so far.

The meteor that caused Meteor Crater hit 50,000 years ago, leaving an indentation in the earth's surface 4000 feet wide and 700 feet deep. Which isn't so big, really, when you've spent the previous day staring at the Grand Canyon. So, out of respect to Meteor Crater, I would strongly advise visiting it *before* Grand Canyon. It's not that the crater isn't impressive, or very, very big. It's just that nothing really measures up to Grand Canyon. It's like fighting a komodo dragon after you just took down a real dragon. Sure komodo dragons are huge and sufficiently terrifying, with flesh-rending claws and powerful jaws they can unhinge to swallow something as big as a goat whole. But real dragons fly and breathe fire. So does the Grand Canyon<sup>7</sup>.

The information center that has been built alongside of Meteor Crater, however, is a full-blown roadside attraction, filled with interesting information about meteors, asteroids and other things from outer space that are prone to bumping into our little planet. There are activity centers and videos and basically anything an eleven-year-old space enthusiast could want in a fun-but-educational experience. Or, a stoned twenty-five year old woman with a thriving sense of novelty and humor.

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<sup>7</sup> At present, there is no evidence to support this claim, but that doesn't matter as long as you *believe*.

The fun begins on the observation deck built on the rim of the crater. Ordinarily, you can take a tour into the crater, but they take a couple of hours and were shut down the day I was there due to a high probability of thunderstorms. Again, don't go to the desert in July and expect there will be no rain. There is so much rain. Violent, loud rain filled with atmospheric fire fights that sometimes reach Earth. On this day, however, the storms keep their distance.

The observation deck boasts a row of telescopes from which you can view some perspective-building totems inside the crater. The various telescopes provided are labeled with what can be viewed through them. So the telescope through which you can see the six-foot-tall wood cutout of an astronaut at the bottom is labeled "6' TALL ASTRONAUT & 5 X 5 FLAG". This is meant to give you an idea of how deep it is, especially since the wood cut out is not visible, at least to me, from the rim. It is also meant to help you visualize how small you might feel at the bottom. Another telescope is marked HOUSE SIZE ROCK, because through it you will see a house-sized rock on the far rim that the impact from the meteor flung up out of the earth's depths and onto the surface. The owners have built a scale wood cutout of a house next to it.

Other telescopes have more questionable labels. They make perfect sense if you read the informational pamphlet given to you at entry before you approach the observation deck that explains the extensive attempts at finding the original meteor by a former owner of the property. But the pamphlet is three pages of small black and white type and tends to end up littering the grounds outside. So when I see the quasi-sexual sign titles having not read the brief history of the mining of Meteor Crater, I giggle like a

twelve year old. MAIN SHAFT. THRUST FAULT. DRILL HOLE A. RAISED STRATA. WINCH AND BOILER. HOUSE SIZE ROCK.

Okay, so I already explained HOUSE SIZE ROCK, but it's sort of sexual, too. It's almost like some kind of dirty Mad Lib.

The 6'TALL ASTRONAUT & 5 X 5 FLAG bought a WINCH AND BOILER with a RAISED STRATA for his HOUSE SIZE ROCK so he could THRUST FAULT his MAIN SHAFT into DRILL HOLE A.



Figure 6: Experience the Impact!

After snapping pictures of all the signs with the intention of arranging them in a filthy order later on, I am in a sufficiently juvenile temperament to truly enjoy Meteor Crater Learning Center.

First of all, this place hasn't been updated, as of 2010, since probably 1996 or so. There are a series of videos you can watch about meteors and space research and Meteor Crater itself, but to listen to them, you have to pick up a series of home telephones from the early-to-mid 1990s. You know the ones with the long, curly-cued cords? The kind that cell phones are slowly driving to extinction? Even most home phones are the cordless kind these days. Soon, the corded telephones at Meteor Crater might be the only examples of their species left in captivity.

The information is equally outdated. The general stuff about the make-up of meteors and how they impact the earth's surface hasn't changed much since the videos were made, I don't suppose, but they also tell you about innovative new breakthroughs in space research, like the Hubble Telescope. They cut to a state-of-the-art telescope from the 1980s with wires hanging out of it that probably can't "see" any farther than the solar system. We have satellites out there right now sending back images from the edge of our galaxy and beyond.

There is also a video about the dangers of meteors and asteroids and how we don't have to fear, because now NASA has computers scanning the heavens, making sure we will have plenty of notice before some fiery hunk of destruction plows into our planet. Then they cut to a shot of the old, chunky desktop PC from 1992 running the DOS program responsible for our planet's safety. If I had been drinking something, I would have done a spit-take. I really hope the computer responsible for warning Earth against

Space Invaders has been updated since this video. Maybe that's why some fourteen year-old with a telescope in the disaster movie always discovers the asteroid rocketing toward Earth before the actual scientists who are paid to do that sort of thing. To compound the irony, the video is shown on a modern flat-screen plasma television.

Further inside the Learning Center, there's a replica of the six-foot-tall astronaut at the bottom of the crater that you can take your picture with. There is also a backdrop of the bottom of the crater itself that you can take a picture with so that you can trick your friends and family into thinking you were at the bottom, I guess? Really, it's just a fun thing to do with the kids, but in my semi-sardonic state, everything here is a joke. There are no other tourists milling about while I explore the three rooms of the learning center, so I have to take more choppy close-ups of me with both the astronaut and the crater backdrop.

*Don't worry, I tell myself. 'Roo will fix them in Photoshop.*

There is also a short film depicting what scientists think the impact that Meteor Crater would have looked like. After the cheesy telephone videos and just before the high from the joint I smoked in the parking lot wears off, it's *awesome*. Not as awesome as the Grand Canyon IMAX movie, but that had two things going for it that this film does not. 1) The Grand Canyon, 2) IMAX. But for a ten minute educational film shown on an old school pull-down screen in a tiny theatre that I'm sure is crawling with baby pee (mostly because it smells sort of like baby pee), it's not bad.

This is the kind of roadside attraction I've been looking for. There has to be magic here, because I have some of the most fun amongst these outdated videos and cardboard cutouts that I will have on my entire trip. A sense of child-like glee fills me at every

moment and I can't wait to press every button, view every screen and see the universe through Meteor Crater's eyes. I hope the magic is strong enough to hold. Especially in a world of ten-year-olds who can look up more current info about the crater on his iPhone Jr. than the entirety of Meteor Crater Learning Center has to offer. I'd hate for the world to pass Meteor Crater by the way it has much of Route 66, simply because it hasn't purchased an educational video about space since the new millennium began. I mean, we've sent a camera to Mars since then. The vistas of knowledge about our universe grow daily, but according to the Learning Center, Meteor Crater stopped caring sometime in the mid-90s.

Later, as I look back through my choppy, if not laughable arms-length close ups with nearly everything in the Learning Center in the motel room, I think there would be a market for something called the Pocket Photographer: a holographic image of a photographer you can activate when you're on a road trip by yourself, or with your family, but you're tired of not being in any of the pictures. I can imagine the infomercials now. **CALL in the next TEN MINUTES and get TWO POCKET PHOTOGRAPHERS, a \$400 value YOURS, ABSOLUTELY FREE!**

CHAPTER 12  
THE HOOVER GOD-DAMN

“I have never been so scared, or so ready to take on the U.S. Government single-handed in my life.”-Text from me to ‘Roo, July 30, 2010

I decided before I left North Carolina to make it to Vegas by the thirtieth. It is one of two hotel rooms I reserved before leaving home. I just didn’t want to be stranded in Vegas without a hotel room. It seemed like a bad idea. So, I leave Flagstaff ten minutes before check-out and head toward Nevada, still trying to follow the mercurial and ever-dead-ending Route 66.

I’m not sure what took me to Hoover Dam. I don’t know if it was Garmin or a road sign or if I ever had any other choice while attempting to drive from Flagstaff, Arizona to Las Vegas, Nevada.

“Look, Tiff, one of the engineering marvels of the modern age!” I probably said to myself. “Let’s check it out!”

“Okay!” I said back.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. SATURN (CAR) – DAY

I’m sitting behind the wheel, sweating buckets. Literally buckets. You can see the sweat dripping off my head like I’m a cartoon character. I am also frantically spraying a bottle of Auto Febreeze on every available surface, mostly me.

CUT TO:

INT. HIDEAWAY COMPARTMENT IN SATURN – CONTINUOUS

A spritz of Febreeze coats a cache of roaches sitting in the compartment.

CUT TO:

INT. SATURN – CONTINUOUS

I roll down the windows and crank the A/C up to full capacity.

EXT. SATURN – CONTINUOUS

WIDEN to reveal the Saturn in line at the checkpoint at the entrance to Hoover Dam. There are several lanes, each one presided over by a white-gloved officer in uniform. One vehicle is being searched by two officers. They are tearing it apart.

CUT TO:

INT. SATURN – CONTINUOUS

ZOOM IN on a reusable grocery bag in the backseat with an old-fashioned Jack Daniels coffee can sticking out of it. A special effect will reveal the bag of joints hidden in the can.

CUT TO:

EXT. SATURN – CONTINUOUS

The car inches forward, ever-closer to the check point.

I consider my options as I roll the windows back up, hoping the car has been aired out enough. If my vehicle is chosen to be searched, that's it. I'll be taken into custody and fined at the very least. There may be jail time. I type up a text telling Andy to look up the best possession lawyer he can find. Just in case. I mentally prepare myself for this to be

what my life becomes about. From graduate student to full-time marijuana legislation activist. I will be the face of wrongful incarceration due to unfair federal laws. I may get my “Free Tiff!” T-shirts yet. I start to work out speeches in my head.

I’m not doing anything wrong. I should not have to be afraid, half-ounce of weed in the back seat or not. The marijuana is for personal consumption. I’m not trying to sell it to kids, or anybody else. It’s not even good weed. It’s compressed mid-grade that doesn’t get me stupid-high or anything. I’m perfectly capable of operating my motor vehicle safely under its influence. Safer than without it, even.

I used to be a little bit of a speed demon and I’ve always been a daydreamer who’s way too into music. Add these three things together behind the wheel of a car and you get two totaled vehicles (really the same vehicle totaled twice) and enough speeding tickets to get my license revoked for six months.

It’s been about five years since I put anything on my driving record, but when an officer looks up my record, everything is there. I have to point out my last ticket was in 2005 for them to notice the dates. I smoked my first hash-cube in 2004. I settled down and became a daily smoker in 2005.

It slowed me down and introduced me to the pleasures of driving. Before driving was just a way to get from one point to another. Driving high is an adventure, a journey, a way to see the world. I became slightly less accident prone once I start smoking-and-driving for fun, too.

All of this is anecdotal and it should not be assumed that it will work for everyone. Some people can’t drive high. But to assume driving high is anything like driving drunk is to fundamentally misunderstand the substances being considered.

The law, however, feels differently about the subject. A DUI is a DUI, regardless of what is influencing you.

My car approaches the white-gloved officer who will decide my fate. Will I finish graduate school or will I lose my financial aid over the conviction I could be about to receive? Will I become a professional writer of some sort or is my life about to rocket down a much more radical path? Will I make my mother proud some day or will I embarrass her, totally and completely, right here, right now? I am ready for any of these. For all of them. I take a deep breath and crack my window.

She has brown skin, the color of maple wood. Her hair is thick and curly. She looks kind of like Whitley from the old TV show *A Different World*, only she's browner. She glances at the interior of my car and waves me through.

Every part of me exhales with relief. My muscles slowly uncramp themselves. Then the shaking begins, so bad I have to pull over for a second.

I don't get out of the car. I don't even see the Dam. Fuck the Dam. As soon as I can gather myself enough to keep driving, I drive as far away as fast as I can without attracting the attention of the many, many police cruisers dotting the highway.

I do spend the next several miles thanking God.

I do stop at a Dairy Queen in the next town and get a milkshake. Comfort food.

Most of all, I breathe.

## CHAPTER 13

## ONE NIGHT IN VEGAS

“Gonna sell my car and go to Vegas, ‘cause somebody told me that’s where dreams would be.”-Sara Barellis

I am driving through the desert, my cruise control set firmly at 70 mph, smoking my second joint of the day. I would be smoking the second half of my first joint, if I hadn’t Febreezed it earlier in my mad dash to avoid checkpoint detection. Que Sera Sera.

I suddenly feel the spirit of Hunter S. Thompson and switch from CDs to radio, looking for a song that was maybe on the *Fear and Loathing* soundtrack. The billboards for the city start about two hundred miles out and I think once again of *American Gods*. According to Gaiman, the more billboards a roadside attraction has—and the farther away from the attraction they start—the more magic the place has.

Of course, Las Vegas is a city and not a roadside attraction *per se*. It is, however, the ultimate adult playground. I’m sure there’s something here for kids, too. People live in Vegas after all. You wouldn’t know it to look at the billboards, though. Nearly all of them advertise various ways to lose money and indulge oneself in pleasure. Drink specials! Gambling Specials! All You Can Eat Buffets! Shows! (And, of course,) Sex! Some billboards tell you about places where you can get all of the above and you don’t have to travel down any shady alleys or wear dark sunglasses and hats to cover your identity. No, pretty much any of the brightly lit casinos along the strip will happily provide all of these services for spectacularly low prices. All you can eat steak and

shrimp for \$9.99? There's got to be a catch. The kind of catch where you spend the bulk of the following day in the bathroom, no doubt.

And always nestled in between the most graphic billboards, are messages of salvation. Some simply say "JESUS" in one neon color or another. Some are gambling addiction hotlines. Some are messages of a fiery hell awaiting *you*. Yes, *you*, sinner. I lift my joint to one of these in a smoky toast.

I come upon the city during the full heat of the day. My rearview mirror with the temperature gage tells me it is 104 degrees. Ouch.

First of all, when I finally come off the interstate and into the city proper, Garmin tells me to drive down a street that is blocked off and not merely with orange and white plywood temporary roadblocks, in which case I may have just been crazy enough to follow Garmin's instructions and carry on anyway. No, this street is blocked off with rounded metal poles firmly cemented into the concrete.

I am briefly reminded of Austin, where Garmin insisted I turn left into a wall four times before telling me she had lost satellite signal, outside in the middle of the day and shut down, leaving me to navigate a strange city on my own. Fortunately, two minutes later I drove right past the Motel 6 I'd been looking for and told Garmin she could eat shit, bitch, because I was *here*. Garmin and I have a complicated relationship.

I shrug and ignore Garmin's pleasant but insistent commands to *turn. Left*. I start looking for the name of the street I'm staying on. Finally, I roll down the window and ask a passerby if he knows where the Las Vegas Hotel & Casino is. He gives me a special look and points up at the building behind him. I thank him with an embarrassed smile and pull into the entrance to the parking garage. The wrong entrance, as it turns out. My car

sits there, staring down angry counterparts attempting to leave through the exit I am now blocking.

*Oh boy.*

I maneuver my car out of the way and into what looks like a parking space. There are long white lines drawn onto the cement about the same distance apart as a vehicle, anyway. I just ignore the fact that my car is in the space backwards. I pull out the Auto Febreeze and give everything the spray-down again, self included and pop some gum in my mouth. Once again, the distinct impression that I will not be fooling anybody comes over me.

Immediately, an older black man comes up and asks me what I'm doing. He's not very friendly, but I did just sort of park my car in the middle of everything, so I feel appropriately cowed by the harsh tone of his voice. I tell him I haven't checked in yet. I babble something about being on a road trip and not being able to drive down Fremont Street and Priceline.com and he tells me to go on in. I ask him if he's sure, tell him I can move my car if he wants... and he interrupts and says, no, it's fine. There's a smile on his face and I know that he knows.

I imagine he thinks I am a silly little white girl, high as a kite. He is so right.

I stand in line with my laptop under my arm. I didn't have a printer when I made the reservation, but I have a copy of the Priceline screen shot saved to my computer. I figure I will pull that up if I need to.

I don't, of course. The gentleman behind the counter never asks for it, so my laptop is just a cumbersome addition to my checking in process. He give me my parking

pass and explain how to connect to their wireless internet. He points to an open archway and tell me that to get to my room, I just go through there and walk straight until I see the elevator for the second tower. *Seems easy enough.*

I refuse valet parking, mostly because of how suspicious my car no doubt smells. I park on the fifth level and make a concentrated effort to memorize what's around the car. I have parked right before you go up onto the roof and the elevator is right around the corner. Still, the next morning when I come back to my car, I will get turned around. I will go around the wrong corner and walk almost out into the desert sunlight on the roof before realizing I am going the wrong way.

I hide anything that looks valuable in the trunk and lock the car. I look for a place to throw away my half-eaten warm milkshake. The desert is hotter than I expected, but they're right. It is a dry heat. Later that night, a comedian will describe it best: "Yeah, it's a dry heat. So is *fire.*"

I roll my suitcase over to the elevator. I ride down to the lobby. I step off of the elevator and... stop. Before me is an non-navigable maze. I don't see any elevators for the second tower straight ahead. I see several rows of folding chairs pointed at an empty stage with a giant screen pulled down over it, playing a screensaver to the tune of very loud radio pop from the 1970s. Off to one side, I see flashing lights and hear the ka-ching of slot machines. There are also security guards in every corner and I become very paranoid about looking suspicious. Then I remember I'm in fucking Vegas and they'd probably much rather deal with a slightly stoned 115-pound girl in the middle of the day than, say, a raging 250-pound drunk who just blew his savings at 3:30 in the afternoon. Or Hunter S. Thompson, tripping mescaline and freaking out over lizard people.

I wander around. I find the elevators for Tower One easily enough. They're right next to the parking deck elevators. But the elevators for Tower Two are not straight ahead, or off in any corners that I can see. I walk through the back row of chairs in front of the stage, feeling very conspicuous. I wander into the casino proper a little bit, peer around the slot machines for an elevator. Finding none, I go back, little purple suitcase rolling faithfully behind me. I decide not to wander into the restaurant to my right, thinking surely they wouldn't put the elevators in there. I ask one of the security guards. She points off into an indiscriminate direction. When I walk to where she seemed to be pointing, I still see nothing. I turn around in a circle. I shake my head. Finally, after asking someone else, I find the elevators behind a wall. Kind of like when you walk into a restroom and they have those privacy walls leading up to the door? It was like that. A secret elevator alcove.

*Jesus*, I mutter and finally get on the elevator. I ride up to my room and get online and try to find comedy shows nearby, tonight. I find one, change clothes, dressing up a little. I ditch the touristy looking travel pouch and load up my pockets. I make sure I carry a knife, just in case. The mace won't fit anywhere, but I've got the spike on my keychain. That's my best line of defense, anyway. I crack open the window and smoke another joint.

My stomach grumbles. I remember that I haven't really eaten today. The show is in about an hour and I know I don't have time to sit down in the restaurant at the hotel. I decide to just go. I'll wing it.

The Fremont Street Experience is around the corner from my hotel. I walk out, turn a corner, walk a couple of blocks, make a note of where I'm going, street names,

etc... and suddenly I'm on a blocked off street (the one Garmin wanted me to take earlier) that is covered, from one end to the other, by a giant television. The sky is a television. And it's playing commercials. Also, there people are *everywhere*. I smell funnel cake and feel like I am ten years old again, at the little country fair they used to hold in the American Legion parking lot.

I find the casino where the comedy show is. I navigate through the casino hosting it, much more easily than my own hotel and find the ticket vendor. The internet made it seem like it might be sold out already, but it's not.

An obnoxious drunk is already in line in front of me, trying to tell the guy behind the counter a story. I can not discern what the story is about, even though I try very hard to follow it. Finally, money is exchanged and it is my turn. The drunk stands off to the side and pretends to talk on his cell phone while also attempting to inform both me and the ticket vendor that he has seen this comedian before and he's hilarious. He ain't no sell out, neither. I smile conspiratorially at the vendor, who is kind of cute and make light, undrunk, polite conversation, hoping to remind him that there are still nice, sober(ish) people in the world, even in Las Vegas. I wonder if I smell like weed. Once again, I bet he'd rather deal with me, even at my most stoned and rambly, than the large man to my right who, by the tone and volume of his voice, gives off a volatile vibe, ss if he could go from the abrasive joking around he is doing to throwing his fits at the merest hint of a wrong look from either me or the vendor. I purposely do not take up any more of the vendor's time than I need to. My stomach grumbles again and I decide I need to eat to prepare for the two drink minimum. But, now I only have half an hour or so.

I find a street vendor selling soft pretzels right outside the casino. I order one and it takes fifteen minutes. Meanwhile, The Mad Hatter is walking around taking pictures with people and accepting a free DVD from a Christian group that is there protesting Sin. There are a few other characters walking around and I feel a little bit like I'm at a con, only I know if I ask to take my picture with any of these guys, they'll expect me to give them money. So I don't.

I get my pretzel (with mustard) and a water and go wait in line for the comedy show. It takes me a long time to eat the pretzel and although I don't feel full afterward, I feel better.

There's a VIP line and a regular person line. I get the distinct impression that all of Vegas is structured around this concept. They let in five to ten VIPs, then one "regular" person. I could have gotten a VIP ticket. It was only about fifteen dollars more and with it you get all you can drink. I'm pretty sure the two drink minimum is all I can drink, especially after having only eaten a pretzel for dinner. I also have a limited amount of money and so I decide to slum it with the other regular Joes (and Janes), daring to be moderate in the midst of easy excess. I hear a familiar voice to my left and there in line next to me, is the volatile drunk with his arm around a young woman, about my age. She wears a smile on her face that seems to be begging everyone around her to get her away from this guy.

The guy working the ropes asks me how many. I say one. He asks one? I say, just one. I'm getting used to this, confidently announcing my aloneness to strange looks and general disbelief, as if a companion will materialize if a person stares at me hard enough. Rope Boy takes it upon himself to pair me up with some other people, so I won't be

alone. I'm sure there is a policy on the books somewhere that instructs people who work VIP ropes to do this. On the bright side, it means I get to sit at a VIP table. On the down side, I have to share it with the volatile drunk and his girl.

Rope Boy realizes he has not done me a favor as soon as he seats us and the drunk tries to order a drink from him, despite the fact that the drink he is holding is half full. I swear Rope Boy looks at me apologetically before walking away as quickly as he can.

I make light conversation with the girl and realize quickly that she is also very drunk. I listen to her talk about how hard it is to find a man and silently thank god when the show starts. A hunched over waitress takes my drink order. I get a Gin & Juice (cranberry) and tip her a dollar. I worry whether or not it's enough.

Ever the one to go above and beyond, I order three drinks throughout the course of the show, partly because it's the only way to tolerate the loudmouth next to me who is determined to be a part of the act rather than a simple observer, partly to keep up with everyone else. I order a water when the first two hit me really fast. I have to ask three more times and do not get it until the end of the show. I wonder if there is a policy against serving water, á la *Coyote Ugly*.

The comedians are funny, especially the headliner, but I don't remember their names now. One of them was a Latin King of Comedy. This is my second comedy show with a non-white headliner and white supporting acts. Maybe the world is changing. Then I remember I haven't seen any comediennes yet. Change comes slowly or not at all.

I stumble out of the casino, what's left of my third gin & juice in one hand, what's left of my water in another. My head is spinning slightly and KISS is in the sky telling

me to *shout it, shout it, shout it out loud!* I bump into an elderly black lady and my water sloshes onto her leg. I do not realize it until she is chastising me. Angry words pour out of her mouth in a babbling stream. Eventually I get the gist of what she is saying and now she is flanked by two black men about my age, maybe younger. I stutter an apology, tell her I'm drunk, I'm sorry, Vegas, right? Check out this crazy TV screen up there. She seems to figure out that I'm not sober and non-threatening and leaves me with some parting words about being more careful. I assure her, with utmost certainty, that I will be.

I start to walk back in the general direction of my hotel, thinking I am too drunk to be on the streets. Yeah, I'm a light-weight. I see a sign inside another casino that says *Ladies Drink Free*. I feel drawn to it, like it is some sort of lady magnet. I feel sure that I will probably die if I go in there, so I turn and flee, as quickly as possible without running, back to the safety of my hotel. In my hurry, I forget my hunger, which I will greatly regret in the morning when my grumbling stomach and not the alarm on my phone wakes me up. I will regret it even more when the first thing my head does is spin continuously on its axis until I stagger down to the hotel restaurant and order something.

I don't remember much about the trek back to the hotel except that it happened quickly. One moment I was staring, transfixed, at the *Ladies Drink Free* sign and the next I was curled up in the fetal position in my bed, under the covers, with my eyes closed tightly against television screen skies. I unfurled from the fetal position long enough to attempt to masturbate for about ten minutes before realizing that I was not going to accomplish anything. But, I was in Vegas and had already consumed Drugs and a little bit of Rock N Roll. Some version of Sex seemed necessary.

So, to summarize, I went to Vegas and I did not visit The Strip or gamble. I didn't have a one night stand in a public restroom with a stranger. I didn't even throw a mattress off a hotel roof. I didn't jump into any fountains, naked or otherwise, nor did I trip acid or get kicked out of any place. I didn't even try one of the famous all-you-can-eat-buffets. I also did not get mugged, raped, kidnapped, beaten up, injured, stalked, scared, or any other nasty thing only my mother could dream up anyway. I got high, went to a comedy show, had too much to drink and went directly back to my hotel. I also drunk texted one of my friends no less than five times.

Also, what happened in Vegas didn't stay in Vegas... You don't think they enforce that policy, do you?

CHAPTER 14  
A BRIEF INTERLUDE  
OR  
SEX AND CONSEQUENCES

“Why is it called a vagina? Vagina sounds like a disease. Like you’d call your boss and say, ‘Yeah, sorry, I can’t come in today. My vagina’s acting up. Yeah, it’s all over my face. It’s terrible.’ But it’s one of the most amazing things ever and don’t you think it’s time the name reflected that? Shouldn’t it be called something epic and amazing? Like... Excelsior!”-Unknown Comedian

Leaving Las Vegas is easy, as simple as finding the interstate out of town. I see a lot less billboards for sex and gambling and a lot more for Jesus and Gambling Hotlines on the way out of town, as if to remind you that no matter what the ad campaign says, your STDs and excruciating debt will follow you home.

In my case, all that follows me out of Vegas is a mild hangover and a semi-dissatisfied sense that I did it wrong. I was in Vegas and all I did was go to a comedy show. Maybe I should have gone a little wilder, flirted with a stranger, tried out a slot machine. My hotel gave me ten gambling dollars, free. But I didn’t even do that.

I remember thinking as I approached that maybe I would pick somebody up—have an affair in Vegas. That’s what it’s for, right? Doing things you don’t normally do, fucking people you wouldn’t normally fuck. I hear it’s really easy to get laid here.

But in the end, I wouldn't even know how, even if I had taken this impulse seriously. Having sex with a stranger is a concept that's foreign to me. I have to know somebody before I let them, you know, inside me. I don't have to know them particularly well, but there seems to be a minimal three-day waiting period before I'll have sex with a guy. I don't know where this policy came from, but I've always enforced it.

Our culture tells us having sex with strangers (or at all) is dangerous because of STDs. Well, I don't have to worry so much about that, because I already have two and not any of the convenient ones you can get rid of. I am dangerous. I'm a loaded gun, walking around, ready to shoot you in the dick. (Sorry, ladies. You're just not my style.)

Not AIDS or HIV. Not even the other silent slowly-killer<sup>8</sup> Hepatitis. I'm not *that* dangerous. More of a minor annoyance, really. One is called Human Papillomavirus and the other Herpes Simplex I. Or, as I like to call them, Annie Oakley and Calamity Jane.

First, the one you might not have heard of. Called HPV in regular parlance, it has only recently entered the greater culture's consciousness due to a vaccine that was released a few years ago. Two weeks after I found out I had it, actually. Ha! Irony.

Even more ironic is the fact that men can carry HPV, but it in no way affects them and there is virtually no way for them to be tested for it. Even doing a blood test for it is difficult and often inconclusive. Therefore, one in three women ends up with it, if not vaccinated. Actually, it can cause genital warts in men and women alike, but this is a very rare occurrence and, like, a million more men<sup>9</sup> have it than ever present with genital warts.

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<sup>8</sup> You are extra cool if you get which comedian I'm referencing right now.

<sup>9</sup> Not an accurate figure.

I don't have genital warts, fortunately, or my *down there* would be a pretty fucked up area, thanks to the Herps.

No, what HPV does for me is scare the hell out of me every three years or so when my pap smear comes up abnormal. It also means that every three years, I get to drop five hundred bucks to a grand on a colposcopy to make sure the virus hasn't randomly mutated into cervical cancer. Oh yeah, HPV is the only virus that can randomly mutate into cancer, just any time it decides to. Did I mention that?

So there's a bomb ticking on my cervix. No biggie. My grandmother fought cancer. My mother fought cancer. Every aunt and uncle I have has fought cancer. I fully expect to some day fight cancer. At least I have a heads-up on the most likely battleground. Maybe I won't be blindsided like all of my relatives were, but I probably will be. Cancer always blindsides you.

Now the one you probably have heard of. If you are educated enough to know the difference between Simplex I and Simplex II, my empathy is with you. Simplex II is what people usually get on their genitals. It is, quote, "Genital Herpes," of French Whore fame. It's the one they're talking about in all those Valtrex commercials of women riding horses and happy couples.

"I have it," she says.

"I don't," he says.

Big smiles.

Simplex I is what adorable little kids get on their lips in winter. One out of every five people you see walking around has a cold sore, because one in every five people has Herpes Simplex I. They just don't usually get it on their genitals. I was not so lucky.

Here's the thing. I wore protection. He didn't have any, but I did. I insisted on that shit. I could tell he wasn't happy about it and I insisted on it anyway. Just like Health Class told me to.

I also let him go down on me, because that's awesome and not a lot of guys offer this service up front like that. How many guys do you know who would turn down a blow job, even on the first date? How many guys would be expected to? They never told me getting head was dangerous, mostly because they didn't want to admit head existed and even if they had, I probably wouldn't have cared. Until I found out the hard way.

Yeah, I won the fucking STD lottery with that one. I guess the guy had recently had a cold sore or was about to have a cold sore. It doesn't matter. One week later, just in time for finals, my lower case broke out in fiery, spotted hell. All was pain. All was misery.

I cried and studied and sat in bed for three days except to go to the bathroom because moving was too painful. I ate crackers. I made an appointment with the Health Department for an STD test. HIV included.

I wrote suicide notes.

I went to my appointment. The doctor, thankfully female, took one look at me and knew. I could tell by her face it was bad. She prescribed me something that would ease the outbreak and gave me some powdered substance for the pain. Prescription BC.

I passed out in Wendy's getting lunch. Somebody called an ambulance. Tears leaked from my eyes the entire time. I don't think I'd stopped crying since the first bump appeared.

When the paramedics asked me if I had any preexisting medical conditions, I choked out “Herpes,” and sobbed. And sobbed. And sobbed.

They tranquilized me. They asked me if I had insurance. The first time anyone frowned at me was when I said no. They didn’t give a shit that I had herpes. Dealing with diseases is what they do at hospitals. But telling them I had no health insurance... well, I might as well have just told a sexual prospect I had herpes.

They gave me a sandwich and dropped me back off at my car. Thirty minutes after tranquilizing me. Without giving me any kind of psychological evaluation. (It was kind of a shitty hospital.)

I didn’t try to kill myself, even though I thought about it a lot. I did miss a final due to the hospitalization, but had a pretty good excuse. The professor let me make it up. I aced it. And all the others, for that matter. But acing tests is sort of what I do. Contracting herpes wasn’t going to get in the way of that. If anything, it made studying easier, because at least I had something to think about besides the pain and how ruined my life was. I started another suicide note.

I went back to Wendy’s the next night.

“Hey, if you pass out in Wendy’s do you get a free burger?” I asked, jokingly. The girl behind the counter went and asked. The manager walked out and I recognized her as the person who had been taking orders when the world tilted upwards, just before I woke up on my back with a crowd of strangers standing over me.

She gave me a free Jr. Bacon Cheeseburger. Somehow, it was like the sun breaking through the clouds. This small human kindness, this recognition that I needed a

small comfort, even though I'm sure she had no idea what I was dealing with, put the spring back into my step. If it hadn't hurt too much, I would have skipped out of there.

I went back to my dorm and started dealing with it. I took my prescription and looked up how other people dealt with their outbreaks. I got tips like salt baths to dry up the sores so they heal faster and not to use lotions or creams during an outbreak, because it would agitate the area and spread it around. Thankfully, I didn't have a roommate that semester. Whoever it was supposed to be never showed up, so I never had to deal with the harrowing prospect of being interrupted while I checked out the damage down below with a mirror, which is something I did frequently. Twice a day, at least and every time I checked, the landscape had changed in some subtle way. I became very close with my vagina that year. I named her Excelsior, because she handled the situation like a champion.

Dealing with your first-ever herpes outbreak in a dorm setting comes with its own set of problems, from trying to walk to the bathroom like your entire lower half isn't on fire, to trying to figure out how to get salty water on your vagina without a bathtub or prompting any of the other girls to ask why your bathroom caddy has a can of Morton salt in it. Also, an external STD feels that much more gross when you have to bathe with flip flops on. I took special care not to lean against the walls in the shower. I put toilet paper down on the seats in the bathroom, out of fear that I would leave my disease behind somewhere and give it to the whole dorm and somehow it would be traced back to me. They would come after me with pitchforks and rocks, screaming "Dirty Girl!" as they dealt with me Old Testament style. I feared public exposure, as if I was the only real witch in Salem.

That was my sophomore year of college. Now, eight years later, I'm still dealing with it. I wouldn't call it easy. I still sort of expect people to come after me with pitchforks and rocks. I dread the day I tell a potential lover and he reacts with revulsion, as would be his right. It's a heavy load to lay on someone's shoulders. Being with me means taking more than the ordinary risks. I leave behind a permanent imprint. Being with me means that some day you could wake up with open sores all over your dick. Being with me probably means hating me for the rest of your life, if things end badly. How could I blame anyone for not being up to the challenge? Before it happened to me, I wouldn't have been up to it. I'm still not sure I am, sometimes. My outbreaks still kind of make me want to kill myself.

I *would* call it a constant source of anguish and embarrassment, especially during the Christmas season when stress is at its all-time high, my immune system is at an all-time low and those sleigh bells ringing also signifies that I can be expecting a bumpy, burny little present from my misspent youth. Sometimes, the embarrassment blindsides me, such as the time I was sitting with four other people at a comedy show and the comedian recited the statistic about one in five people having herpes. As my friends looked at each other, I could see them doing the math. Five of us, which one was it? I tried to stop the heat flooding through my face by sheer force of will. I tried not to make any indication that it might be me. What was guilty behavior in this situation? I forced a laugh.

But part of me wanted to raise my hand. To steal the joke away and make it mine.

“Yep, it's me. That's me guys. I have herpes so you fuckers don't have to. *You're welcome.*”

Example #2: A guy at a party takes a sip out of my cup and hands it back to me.

“Do you have herpes?” he asks.

For a moment I am frozen, like a deer in headlights, my mouth already open to say, *yes*. Then something grabs my brain, shakes it, asks me why that question? Why now?

“Y-Why would you ask me that?” I ask.

“Because you do now,” he mumbles.

It was a joke. I was supposed to say *no* so that he could say, “Well, you do now!” From where he’d sipped my drink, you see. Of course, I could have explained that it doesn’t work like that. He didn’t have a cold sore on his lip, so he probably wasn’t in a communicable stage. And besides, the virus doesn’t survive outside the body for that long.

Someone without herpes might not know these things. Someone for whom the joke was intended.

“Ha!” is what I said next. Then I walked away, thinking *he knows he knows he knows he’s going to tell EVERYBODY*.

He didn’t know. And he didn’t tell anybody. And still, I was ashamed.

I would also call it armor. It’s definitely made me stronger, carrying it around everywhere I go. It protects me from making more bad decisions, like the one that got me in this situation in the first place. I am ultra-careful now. And I hate it, the same way I imagine medieval soldiers must have hated laboring under the weight of their suits of armor while fighting similarly clad and hard to kill tin soldiers. And yet, they knew it was

for the best. My herpes has done a lot for me. It has humbled me. It has tempered me. It has taught me a lot about cultural perceptions of sex and its consequences.

The impression I always got from my small town health class was that if you get an STD, you have done something wrong. You are dirty. You are bad. The punishment fits the crime, because sex is wrong, unless you're married. Then none of these horrible things can happen to you.

I feared sex. For years, long into my teens. I didn't even self-explore until I was seventeen for fear of it. If anyone I knew had sex, they diminished in my eyes a little bit. I came from the kind of puritanical religious tradition that values virginity above all other qualities in a woman (read: wife) and only focuses on all the bad things that can happen to you if you have sex. If purity rings had been a thing when I was a teenager, I would have worn one. I used to tell everyone I would *never* have sex until I was married. Sunday School teachers admired my commitment and used me as an example of an exemplary young woman with exceptional moral fiber. I was pretty obnoxious about it.

Then I started masturbating and it's true what they say, your pastor and various disapproving nuns. It does whet the appetite and put you on the road to sexual discovery. Or eternal damnation, as the church likes to call it. After finally making out with a boy, I was forever corrupted. Feeling the physical manifestation of another person's excitement for the first time turned a key in my brain, the key to a very complex set of locks that would slowly click open over the next several years, like the glass walls in that house from *Thirteen Ghosts*. It was power and I had it, in ways I never dreamed possible.

Sex would be had, though I managed to stave off this eventuality until after high school. I'm not sure whether I regret that or not. I used to be really proud of it, having

bought into the whole prizing of the virginity thing, when really I could have gotten a head start on all of it. Whether this would be better or worse for me now, I'll never know.

Then I started having it. The first time was a disaster. Nothing worked properly. Only one of us was ready and in a modern twist on an old classic, it wasn't him. The relationship didn't survive our one and only attempt at intimacy. It was our two-year anniversary. I was so sure he was the one. I was nineteen.

The second time, I got herpes. Every other girl I knew was twice as promiscuous as me and the bitter unfairness of it burned. I fumed. I raged. I shook my fist at God and demanded some sort of answer.

The answer I got, with time, was this: being uptight about sex is useless and makes you act kind of like a prick to your friends. I don't know if getting herpes was simple irony or karma for years of silent (and not-so-silent) judgment of the more sexual females in my inner circle, but if anything, it forced me to have to think long and hard before I judged anybody for anything.

And that's made me a better person, I guess.

I am jolted out of the mire of my sexual past by a sign proclaiming the California Agriculture Inspection is just ahead. Then the dotted white lines in the lanes turn to solid white lines and I find myself being herded into another checkpoint.

*Jesus, what is this? I ask myself, in my best inner Hunter S. voice. What am I headed for? Is the entire border of California like this? Are there any places I can sneak across?*

I get a vision of me and my car tiptoeing across the border to California in the middle of the woods somewhere while a cartoon cop scans the highway, looking for us. But we're too sneaky for him.

The conspiracy theorist in me sees the word *agriculture* and automatically assumes they're looking for me, or people like me, but on a much larger scale. Weed traffickers, that is.

Of course, all they're really trying to do is what U.S. Customs does at all our borders—keep foreign pests out that can, will and are destroying the fragile California ecosystem as we speak. They are probably also trying to catch drug traffickers of all sorts. Drugs are their own industry in California, Marijuana especially. California was one of the first states to legalize marijuana for medical purposes and it has always been one of the largest suppliers of black market weed, worldwide. California Kush is some of the best cannabis you can smoke, probably third in the world behind BC bud (from British Columbia, Canada), or weed grown in Amsterdam, where they have a reputation to protect.

It is because California is such a powerhouse producer of marijuana that I am not terribly worried about being chosen for inspection. After Hoover Dam, I am mentally prepared for it. I have come to terms with the consequences of being caught and am ready to face them. I might also be a little cocky after Hoover Dam. If they didn't get me there, I can probably sneak by them here.

I briefly imagine being chosen, my vehicle being searched. The officer opens the coffee can, finds the bag of joints and the bag of weed.

“Did you really think you'd get away with this?”

“I- I- I.”

“Ma’am, this is California. You can’t just bring this compressed mid-grade bullshit into our state. It’s embarrassing. What if somebody smelled this? This state has a reputation to uphold, you know. I’m going to give you the number of my cousin Hector; he’s going to hook you up.”

“Are you serious?”

“Am I serious? Yes, ma’am. We here in California are very serious about our weed. Now get out of here before I cite you.”

“Can I have my bag back?”

“No. We’re going to throw it in the incinerator, where it belongs. Call my cousin Hector. He’ll get you some real weed.”

“But... my mom rolled me those joints.”

“Do you want a ticket today, ma’am?”

“No, sir. I’m going.”

Instead, they wave me through, even though there’s a cooler sitting in the front floorboard. The luck of the Stoner is with me today.

## CHAPTER 15

## SO AT LAST: SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

“So at last, Southern California, sunsets like a long goodbye. I’ve been dreaming about it for days but I don’t ask why.” –Butch Walker

For once, I get everything right. The music, the setting, the directions. I pull off the interstate and into Los Angeles at precisely sunset as “So At Last” by Butch Walker plays. The song tells the story of someone who packed up the trunk of his car and left, chasing his dreams to Los Angeles, California. It is a secret fantasy of mine, running away from home to chase the elusive phantasm of Fame. Even though my trunk is not full with all of my most treasured possessions, I am here. Southern California. At last.

I even maneuver my way off the interstate and into downtown to the hotel room I booked months ago. Garmin, miraculously, does not attempt to send me flying off any overpasses into a right turn that doesn’t exist, but gives me meticulous, helpful directions.

Even when a festival has the original route blocked off, Garmin finds a new one for me, within seconds. In Las Vegas, where she was apparently unaware that Fremont Street was now strictly a pedestrian area and no longer open to thru traffic, instead of finding me another route, she just sat there and calculated until I asked somebody. Garmin does not like it when I don’t follow the script, even if following the script would result in the destruction of my vehicle and my tragic death.

In this instance, however, she rolls with the changes and comes through beautifully.

“Good job, Garmin,” I tell her, before I surrender my car to the valet. They won’t let me park it myself here. I tell myself the Hispanic gentleman parking my car really isn’t going to care if it smells like weed.

I make sure to ask if I’ll be able to get back in my vehicle myself later, for additional luggage and what-not. Of course I will. The valet seems bemused by my question, but I honestly don’t know how it works before this moment. I’ve never had my car valet-parked. Valet parking isn’t really a thing that exists where I come from. I was aware that it existed, of course. You see it in movies all the time. I’ve even been in places where the service was offered, but I’ve always refused it, mostly due to the lingering smell of recently smoked pot. This is the first situation where I don’t have a choice. Apparently, the parking situation at this hotel is so complex, it requires a paid professional to navigate it.

No, really, it is, as I see for myself when I do go to my car later to smoke a joint before heading out to dinner. The cars are squeezed in together so tightly, I’m sure the owners of the glossier Escalades and Porsches would have palpitations if they saw how close their cars are to other cars. Dirtier, poorer cars.

The vehicles are packed so closely together I don’t know how the valets get in and out of them. Do they wish themselves out once parked? Maybe the valets here are like cartoons who can flatten themselves in order to squeeze between door cracks.

I don’t have to worry about dinging up some producer’s Hummer while getting into my car to smoke drugs, not that I would. If my car were parked next to a Hummer, I would ding its doors on purpose. Right after I put toothpicks in the air valves of its tires and left a note on its window that read: “You’re hurting the world. Stop it.” Anyone who

pays over fifty grand for a vehicle that gets 5-10 miles to the gallon, especially in California (where gas has been over \$4/gallon for going on a decade now), deserves to have their tires flattened by angry hippie stoners. There's just no excuse for dick moves like that when a Jeep gets at least 25mpg, can handle the same "rugged terrain" as an H2 and is cheaper to boot. I don't want to get up on (any more of) an environmentalist high horse here, but anyone who buys a Hummer is only buying it because it's expensive and most people can't have them. They are not the best at what they do. Although I've never even been inside one, I've heard they handle like shit and their seats are uncomfortable. They are simply the most expensive at what they do. In our culture, the more expensive something is, the more owning it makes you better than other people. Or that's the reality they sell you. Usually, it just means you're stupider than other people, or at the very least, much more gullible.

Maybe I just don't understand the luxury market.

But, my car is not expensive. In fact, after my trek through the desert, it's looking pretty dusty and worn around the edges. I feel a surge of affection for my dirty, humble car. If somebody dinged my door, I probably wouldn't even notice because Saturn doors are made out of ding-resistant plastic. Saturns are for everyday use, not for accessorizing a material lifestyle. I think the car looks better with a fine sheen of dust settled over its body. It gives Scott sort of a ruggedly handsome demeanor.

I don't have to worry about dings or scratches, though, because my car is by itself, in a little compact car alcove, with walls around it, so anyone driving into the parking lot can't see inside. I wonder if, somewhere in the recesses of the valet's subconscious, he

put the car here to make it easier for me to smoke in privacy. Maybe it was the five dollar bill I slipped smoothly into his palm, as if I'd been tipping valets my whole life.

The room is surprisingly nice, considering I only paid \$45 for it. The toilet doesn't flush correctly, or at all, so I go down to tell the guy at the counter. First, I have to wait for ten minutes behind the Hardest Couple in the World to Please. They want a wake-up call at 7:15. Not 7:05, not 7:30, 7:15. It's very important. The last hotel they stayed at gave them their wake-up call at 7:30 and caused some minor catastrophe that is far more mundane than they give it credit for. What, exactly, did the Continental Breakfast include? Was there soy milk for that? Because The Wife has allergies. Do the maids wash the bedspreads between guests, because the bedspreads really should be washed just like the sheets and they would like a clean bedspread, please. And on and on until they finally wheel their Prada suitcase away, leaving a shell-shocked desk attendant.

I almost feel bad telling him my toilet's broken. I briefly consider trying to fix it myself, or taking my poos elsewhere, but it's finally my turn in line. He says he'll send somebody up to fix it and apologizes a lot.

"It's cool, man," I tell him. My laid-back attitude seems to be a pleasant surprise.

There's a wedding party or something going on, taking up most of the hotel. I fantasize briefly about crashing; putting on something nice, helping myself to the free bar and chatting it up with anyone and everyone, making up a new story for every person.

*Hi, I'm Susan, I'm with the groom. It's not a wedding? This isn't the Smith wedding? Oh. Oops.*

*Hi, I'm Lauren. I'm Linda's fourth cousin twice removed on her father's side. Which father? Does she have more than one? Oh, right, the adoption. And the step-father. Of course. Whichever one is the right one. That's the side of the family I'm from.*

*Hi, I'm Tiff. I'm not supposed to be here, but I'm on this road trip adventure thing and heard there was a party going on and thought to myself, why the hell not, you know? Would you like to hear about some of my adventures? If I leave quietly you won't have me thrown out? Okay. I'm going.*

Every possible scenario ends in disaster in my head, so I decide to just play it safe. I kind of hope that some day I'll be brave enough to crash a fancy event I wasn't necessarily invited to. Theoretically, crashing has so much to offer. The excitement and danger of being somewhere you're not supposed to be without any real consequences, other than the public humiliation of being thrown out if caught and/or considered a nuisance. A semi-intimate look into someone else's life, into someone else's story, live and in person. Unedited, uncensored, un-produced life. Low-tech reality TV. Not to mention a prime opportunity to bolster your storytelling skills (read: lying).

But not this day; not this trip. This journey is about me, after all. I'm looking for myself, or whatever. I still don't really know what I'm doing out here, other than I wanted to go and I got tired of waiting. In any case, I don't feel like dressing up and playing pretend. For once, I feel like being myself.

'Roo, my cohort in pop culture trivia and personal photographer, tells me I should eat at Kate Mantilini's. Jenna Fischer, or Pam from *The Office*, was a server there. The booths lining the main dining area are reportedly the site of many a shady Hollywood deal amongst producers. More careers have probably been destroyed by an

executive having lunch at Kate Mantilini's than by all the eight balls of cocaine in L.A. Okay, maybe not that many.

I take a cab because I'm not sure where it's at and after today's earlier successes navigating this notoriously difficult city, I don't want to push it.

Forty dollars to go eight blocks down the street from the hotel later and I wish I had driven. This is just sort of my luck. I might have gotten ripped off, especially considering I ordered a cab to drive literally down the road. For the sake of the citizens of Los Angeles, I hope so. It must cost two hundred bucks to get across town at those rates.

They don't put me in one of the famous, notorious booths, but at a small table in the middle of the restaurant, like they're punishing me for being by myself.

*For one, you say? Well, right this way, where we'll sit you under this lovely burning hot spotlight. Just a second while we turn on this flashing neon sign over your head here. Hmm? Yes, it does say Loser.*

While there is no actual neon sign proclaiming me a loser for all to see, the spotlight part isn't so far from the truth. The table I'm seated at is directly underneath a light fixture that must have been lifted off a movie set for all the heat it gives off. Either that, or somewhere, a McDonald's french fries are going cold.

As if eating by yourself isn't awkward enough, it appears to be the policy of most restaurants to put singles out in the middle where they can be pitied by the couples surrounding them. I experienced this phenomenon in Flagstaff, too, when I stopped at a probably-too-nice-for-my-budget restaurant after Meteor Crater. I was led to a table right in the middle of the restaurant, where my server proceeded to pay as little attention to me as possible. I left her a good tip anyway, because in her defense, I was wearing

sunglasses after sunset and writing furiously in my journal the entire time. In that instance, I might as well have had a neon sign over my head flashing *Leave Me Alone*.

I sort of wish I'd had a *Leave Me Alone* neon sign at Mantilini's. Not only was my server what could almost be considered over-attentive, but every so often a very polite gentleman in server garb would approach the table and attempt to make light conversation with me. I do the best I can in these instances, but I'm mostly off-put by it. I'm not sure why. Something about how it seems like a pity gesture because I'm by myself. I don't need their pity, even though I spend most of my dinner trying not to feel insecure about being by myself, but that's probably just because I'm sitting out in the middle of the restaurant. If they'd put me in a booth, I wouldn't feel so exposed. I could relax and enjoy my meal. I might even be able to carry on an easy conversation with the guy they pay to pay attention to me. I wonder what his job description is. Is he a server? Or is his only job to walk around and talk to people? I wonder if he is a reflection of the narcissistic culture of L.A. and how everyone demands to be recognized as special because they all share the same collective dream of movie stardom. I wonder if I'm just being cynical.

It also doesn't help that I forgot my security blanket—my notebook. A notebook or a book are excellent signs that a server is welcome to check on you sporadically; that you do not need much attending to. It is an invitation for them to have a cigarette break instead of fretting over you. Something like that would sure come in handy right now.

I do have a scrap of paper with the hotel's address on it in my pocket. I do not have a pen. I beg one off the server and use it to scribble a dense series of musings which may be found in its entirety at the end of this chapter.

Finally Walk-Around Guy leaves me off his route and I can feel conspicuous in peace.

I make sure to leave the pen behind on the table when I leave. I know nothing is more frustrating to a server than to have her pen stolen by a customer, especially a customer who bogarted your pen for the duration of her meal.

After my big adventure going to dinner by myself, I am too tired for further exploration. I am disheartened by the expense of the cab and mentally exhausted from two checkpoint scares in a row. I head back to my hotel room and the time-honored tradition of late night basic cable. Except that it's not late at night. It's ten, which is still early evening in L.A. Before I can even make it to *The Daily Show*, however, sleep has overtaken me.

I spring out of bed fifteen minutes before checkout, as usual. I ask the concierge if I can leave my car in the hotel's parking lot for the day. Sure, for thirty bucks I can. I pay it so I don't have to worry about not finding another place to park Scott later.

First I try walking. After walking a good two hours and not getting *anywhere*, I finally decide to decipher the bus routes. Public transportation is relatively inexpensive in L.A., although not a lot of people seem to use it or even know it exists. I decide to checkout Beverly Hills. I picture myself strolling past the gates of the Playboy Mansion, or seeing Meryl Streep take out her garbage. I don't know where the Playboy Mansion actually is or if Meryl Streep is even in town, so it's unlikely that I will find out. (I won't.)

So I pick a nice-looking neighborhood and wander around. I admire the architecture, of which I know nothing. I admire the extensive privacy bushes and the front gates. Every once in a while, a bus will pull up in front of a house and a bunch of people will take pictures of it. I sort of wish one of the celebrities would come out, middle fingers raised. But, I guess having your house photographed by tourists is part of the movie star package. Hence, the privacy bushes.

Once I get tired of nice-ass houses, I hop the bus to Hollywood Boulevard to check out the Walk of Fame and Grauman's Chinese Theatre, where all the famous foot and hand prints are. I make that sound a lot easier than it actually went. The first bus I got on was the wrong bus. I was the only person on it, so the bus driver asked me where I was going. I told her Hollywood.

"Oh, no, no, no, sweetheart. You're on the wrong bus. You need to be going that way," she said, pointing in the opposite direction of where we were heading, as she pulled the bus over to the side of the road.

"Oh. Okay," I said, utterly unsurprised that I had gotten on the wrong bus.

"I'm gonna let you off. You walk back to that bus stop and get on the number blah blah blah. Now, you've already bought your ticket, but I'm gonna sign off on this one, so there shouldn't be any problem. Okay?" she said, taking my bus ticket from my bewildered hands and scribbling her signature on it.

"Yeah, okay. Thanks."

"Okay, you have a good day, baby," she said as she pulled the door release handle.

"I will."

I board the next bus, ready to explain to the driver about the wrong bus and the signed ticket and how I need to go *that* way.

“I—,” I say.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” the bus driver says, not even looking at me and I just go take a seat. I don’t want to start the rumor that bus drivers in L.A. are psychic, but they might be.

The famous sidewalk outside of the Chinese Theatre is so filled with people that I don’t even try to cross the street. I would call it a throng. I’ve never seriously felt the need to use the word *throng* before, but now, it is the only word that seems appropriate. It is a throng. They have flocked here, hoping for even the merest brush with Fame. They will settle for a weather-worn, long empty handprint, if that is all L.A. will give them.

The Walk of Fame is pretty crowded, too, but it appears a lot more navigable than the throng. It barely is. There’s a person stopped in front of nearly every star, taking a picture of it, so I must bob and weave as I make my way down the street in a concentrated effort to get the hell out of there. On both sides of the street, guides selling bus tours of celebrity homes shout at you to buy a ticket. They’re aggressive about it, like hustlers.

“Houses of the Stars! Come see the houses of the Stars! Come on, you know you want to!”<sup>10</sup>

When I walk by one guy without acknowledging that he’s trying to get my attention, he calls me stuck-up, cementing my desire to never climb into a vehicle with

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<sup>10</sup> Actual pitch I heard.

one of these Tour Hustlers. I imagine the bus rolling to a stop in front of one of the bush-ensconced mini-palaces I strolled by earlier in the day.

*“Everybody,” the Hustler announces, “this is Steve Guttenberg’s house. You remember Steve Guttenberg, right? From every movie made in the eighties<sup>11</sup>? Anyway, he lives here. Hey, I bet if we yell real loud, he’ll come out for a picture!”*

I pity every celebrity on his route. How they must loathe these guys.

Every once in a while you’ll see a group of people with cameras following somebody around, their white flashes like the strobe lights of a very small, very lame, rave. You usually can’t see who it is past the photographers. I came here hoping to see celebrities, too. I’ll admit it. Not that I plan to approach them, or even try to snap my own \$10,000 photo or anything, but seeing somebody I admire in human form instead of just on television, out and about interacting with the world seems a novel idea. It’s like seeing proof that they’re human, just like me. They are not, in fact, demi-gods and kings. They eat. They shit. They get lipstick on their teeth and garlic breath. *Just like me.*

There is one celebrity tour that catches my eye. It is a Death Tour, that takes you around to various places where celebrities have died, like the hotel where John Belushi OD’d and the Viper Room where River Phoenix also OD’d. I anticipate there will be stories about the ghost of Marilyn Monroe and cursed studios. At least these celebrities can’t be bothered by my intrusion into their lives, or lack thereof. It’s still voyeurism, but of a slightly more harmless nature than the kind that leads to Maps to the Stars and dead princesses<sup>12</sup>. I’m not interested in seeing Will Smith’s bunny slippers when he goes outside to pick up his paper or in peeking into the living room of the new Captain Kirk,

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<sup>11</sup> Maybe not *every* movie. I’m sure there are some student films from this era that do not feature Steve Guttenberg.

<sup>12</sup> Diana. Never forget.

but seeing where Marilyn Monroe died cold and alone, the very thing she feared the most, placing an eternal cherry on top of the tragically insane standard she felt held to, now *that's* entertainment.

Oh, wait, no. I'm confusing entertainment and human tragedy again. It's an easy mistake to make in L.A. Just ask Lindsey Lohan; it happens to her all the time<sup>13</sup>.

I just want to go on the Dead Celebrity Tour to hear the stories, really.

Supernatural tour guides tend to have a flair lacking in your general interest tour guides. Probably because they spend all day talking about things that may or may not exist and this sort of intellectual tightrope walking calls for a little flair. Alas, the Death Tours are by appointment only. The bookshop owner who tells me this is openly hostile about it, as if I should have known. No, he doesn't sell the tickets. I point out that the flyer says to get your tickets here. Well, they're not running any more tours today.

Whatever. I'm going back to Beverly Hills and the quiet serenity of the Nice-Ass Houses. At least they don't holla at me or treat me like some asshole tourist. I may be a tourist, but I try very hard not to be an asshole about it. Maybe the guy has fundamental problems with the exploitation of tragedy for financial gain, which is legitimate. But maybe he shouldn't work at a book store plastered with advertisements for Celebrity Death Tours, Tickets Here!

I don't take a lot of pictures in L.A., especially while walking around the residential areas, mostly because I don't want to be *that guy*. L.A. is a town obsessed with pictures. I get the sense there is a line drawn. On one side of it, people with cameras, on the other, people without them. People with cameras are either tourists or paparazzi and

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<sup>13</sup> You should, under no circumstances, approach Lindsey Lohan, not that you could. She probably has body guards that prevent that sort of thing. Plus, if you start throwing around high concepts like human tragedy and cultural voyeurism, you're probably just going to confuse and anger her.

both are sort of the enemy. People without cameras are the residents, the people who respect privacy, or the proud owners of iPhones. ‘Roo would fit right in, with his ever-present Nikon and yet he falls on neither side of the line. Photos are his art; his life’s work. He looks at the world and he sees potential pictures. I don’t know if he would actually even see L.A. without his camera.

My camera, just too large to fit in my pockets, dangles from my wrist like a badge indicating which side I’m on. Only in this instance, I am not the Jew. I am the Gestapo.

But I’m one of the nice Gestapo who used his power to help get Jews to freedom and put gum in Hitler’s hair. I wish I’d brought a bag or something to toss the camera into. It makes me feel conspicuous as I harbor the secret fear that someone will walk out of one of the houses and demand to know what I’m doing there.

“Just walking around, looking at stuff,” is the answer I have prepared.

I imagine Someone’s eyes zeroing in on my camera. Her eyes narrow and she looks at me and I know what she’s thinking—*You’re one of them*. I lower the camera to the ground slowly, put it down, put my hands up and back away from it, saying *I’m not the bad guy here. I promise*.

Day stretches into evening and I decide I should actually *do something* before I leave town. I already know where I’m going. The UCB theater, one of the most influential little comedy enterprises in L.A. UCB stands for the Upright Citizen’s Brigade. The original Brigade started in Chicago, but is now in New York.

Coincidentally, Chicago, New York, and L.A. are one of three places you have to go if you want to succeed in comedy.

The UCB in L.A. holds three or four shows per night, for \$5 to \$10 a ticket. Each show is thirty or forty-five minutes long. I ask the ticket vendor if I can buy tickets for more than one show and she tells me to just get back in line after each show ends.

The first show, the early one, doesn't have a terribly long line in front of it, so I think getting into subsequent shows will be no problem. I sit down to enjoy a Robot Christmas Social. The concept is that the audience are robots at a factory that builds robots and every year, the scientists in charge throw the robots a Christmas party. In July, because robots don't know the difference. The improv actors proceed to perform a series of skits that, quote, "Robots would enjoy." They ask us to beep and boop in lieu of laughter. A few people actually do it, myself included. We are the ones who *get it*.

A timer goes off mid-sketch and the cast wraps it up right then and there, telling us to come back exactly one year from today to see how the sketch ends. We laugh. The lights come up. We file out.

The sun has set while we were inside and there is a line that wraps around the block to see the next show. With a heavy sigh, I trudge to the back of the line. Then, just before tickets go on sale, they open the doors for people who bought advanced tickets. I see a few people from the earlier show. I wonder when and where they bought their tickets. I assume there's some sort of online system, or that the girl at the ticket booth earlier just screwed me.

They sell out with three people to go. I'm the third. A concerned looking woman tells us the show has started, but we can see it if we'd like, if we're willing to stand in the back and enter quietly.

"Yes, I will do that," I say before she can even finish her sentence. The other two follow suit.

The three of us enter five minutes after the show has begun. Everyone is already laughing. I look at the stage and watch a skinny, awkward kid with black-framed glasses and thick curly black hair fumble around the stage, dropping the mic, getting wrapped up in its cord, tripping over the mic stand, picking it up, dropping it, trying to sit on a stool, falling off of it, etc. He keeps it up for another twenty-five minutes. I laugh until there's a stitch in my side and I can't breathe anymore. He falls down for thirty minutes, all Ed Grimley arms and wiggly legs, only he never says a word. He lets his body do the talking and his body is hilarious. He's one of the best (and only) physical comedians I've seen in a long time.

Eventually, he gets his mic set up and actually launches into a routine, which is so equally hilarious that I deeply admire and deeply envy him by the end of his set.

"I saw a sign for a gambling hotline. It said 'Have a gambling problem? Call this number.' I think it should have said, 'Have a gambling problem? *I bet* you won't call this number.'"

His name is Josh Fadem. A three-minute version of his thirty-minute routine can be found on You Tube.

What follows is sort of a comedy variety hour. Josh shows some videos he made with his friends, then he brings another stand-up comedian on stage to do ten minutes, then Fred Armissen of SNL fame comes on stage and performs some musical comedy.

It is here, at this moment, watching the hour unfold that a key turns in my brain. *I could do this, I think. I could make funny YouTube videos with my friends and charge five bucks to see them<sup>14</sup>. I could put together a comedy variety hour.*

All too soon, the timer runs down and the line outside for the next show is twice as long as it was for this show. I give up and find the subway back to where my car is being held.

“Smoke weed! Not cigarettes! Smoke weed! Not cigarettes! *Te Amo!* I Love You!” a homeless man on the subway chants like a mantra all the way to my stop.

Preach.

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<sup>14</sup> But I still haven't.

That's a full bodied champagne. @ Kate  
 Mantilini's. Keep telling self it's not to see famous people  
 as Elvis' "Rubbernecking" plays in back of mind. There are  
 sunglasses on my hat and I ~~look~~ feel super conspicuous all  
 by myself in the middle of restaurant. Wish 'Roo was here.  
 He'd have a famous name for everyone. Would be excited  
 like kid. This is city I should take him to. Should make  
 really good female friend & take to Vegas. See  
 Chippendales Show & get shitwrecked & dance & not get  
 laid. Actually gamble. Can't believe forgot notebook.  
 Thank sever for pen. Prob. annoyed I borrowed as pens are  
 hot commodity w/servers. Ordered chicken pot pie +  
 champagne. Good choice, I think. Better than more freakin'  
 calendars<sup>15</sup>. Just ate whole mushroom. Recession gives me  
 low self esteem. Feel its rude to ask about price, price, price  
 all the time but have to b/c \$\$ is limited. Despite aloneness  
 am glad I'm here. Think I've seen guy across from me on  
 TV. I have bad posture. Trying to correct<sup>16</sup>. Have mom's  
 hands. Not sure how I feel about that. She has nervous  
 hands. So do I. Wonder if I would have same tics if had not  
 grown up with her. Like Nancy Botwin<sup>17</sup>, too. Nervous

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<sup>15</sup> I have no idea what this means. I couldn't make out what I actually scribbled. I assure you, I ate no calendars on my road trip.

<sup>16</sup> Still no success.

<sup>17</sup> Fictional main character of TV show *Weeds*.

hands. Actually, really good chicken pot pie. Chicken isn't all gross, rich sauce. Pie is chewy and delicious. Thumbs up. The more I eat—guy whose job it is comes up to talk to me. I do not prove to be very good conversationalist. Did I make him nervous? Is that possible? I'm just so fucking weird. Wish I could figure me out. Getting to point where eating bites is like choking down sand. Is delicious but just don't want more. Have barely eaten ½. Don't want to be one of those girls. Can't afford it. Tell self to relax. Chill. Enjoy. I have to tell myself these things. Be zen w/moment. Put on shades if u need to hide. Me & my old school phone. I bet I look poor. Wonder if smell like weed. Get idea to include ???<sup>18</sup> in book but haven't saved many. Can't save now. Not enough paper. Think about what to do next. \$20 to get back. Go write? Explore? Afraid of being by self in big city, frankly. Tired of being afraid. But what to do besides spend \$\$? 'Roo reads my mind from 3000 mi away. Think I finally saw something he wanted me to see.

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<sup>18</sup> Could not for the life of me decipher what it said here.

CHAPTER 16  
FINDING MY FUNNY

“A girl oughtta have a sense of humor. That’s one thing you really need for sure when you’re a Funny Girl.” –Barbara Streisand

Comedy has been an integral part of my life and of my experiences on the road. Not only have I gone to a comedy show in the three major cities I’ve stopped in, but I’ve listened to almost as many comedy albums as their more musical counterparts. I have comedy albums that I’ve listened to so many times, I can say the joke along with the comedian, like singing along to my favorite songs. I didn’t know, for instance, that the transvestite I saw in Austin had a name or that s/he was semi-famous until Robin Williams mentioned Leslie in a bit about Austin on the audio recording of *Robin Williams Live: On Broadway*.

I’ve been listening to stand-up and actively loving the comedy genre above all other genres pretty much my entire life. I’ve always wanted to be funny, but I think I’ve always fallen a little flat. I never understood what made one thing funny and another thing not-funny.

My senior year of high school I was in a British comedy of errors put on by my local community theater. I got to play the comic foil of the piece, a chamber maid of the hotel where two couples wake up in bed, each with the wrong person on the morning of one of the couples’ wedding. Fate pushes my character into a whirlwind of mistaken identity and she takes the opportunity to inadvertently bring simple misunderstandings to

a critical mass, all while speaking with a thick, hilarious cockney accent. I got laughs. The phrase “stole the show” was batted around by people who weren’t even my mom. An actual British couple, visiting from actual England came up to me after one performance and asked me what part of England I was from. When I replied in my still-rough-around-the-edges southern drawl that I was, in fact, a native of Georgia, they told me my accent was very convincing.

The timing came naturally to me, but I was still using someone else’s words. I understood what was funny about the jokes and how to get the most mileage out them, but I couldn’t write my own.

I always envied the class clown, the person who was naturally funny. The guy (and it was usually a guy) who could drop a quip and have the whole class disrupted, who could hold a conversation and have you laughing so hard you’d be holding your side by the end. I would try, every now and again, to say something funny. To get the laugh. I was routinely met with awkward silence and cricket chirps.

Something about producing comedy, manufacturing it in my own brain, just never worked. If I ever did get a laugh, I would repeat whatever I’d done too eagerly and too often, until it became obnoxious.

I just wasn’t funny. And it killed me.

After L.A., I decide I’d like to stop at the beach for a few days. It is California, after all. Also, I’ve never seen the Pacific Ocean. I didn’t visit any of L.A.’s famous

piers, not even the fake end of Route 66 at Santa Monica Pier<sup>19</sup>. Honestly, I forgot L.A. had beaches. Also, getting over there from where I was staying probably would have been an all-day affair of getting on and off the wrong bus, dodging clumps of photographers and photographees, only to arrive at the beach without even a swimsuit. I wasn't trying to explore the greater Los Angeles area. I really only wanted a passing glimpse of where the movies and TV shows that have so shaped my existence came from.

I pick a place along the coast, Santa Cruz, and get a cheap room for a few days. Walking along the craggy rocks of the California coastline, there is suddenly a new voice in my head. I don't know if it's the comedy albums I've been listening to, the comedy shows I've been going to, or my recent experience at the UCB Theatre, but a floodgate opens in my brain and jokes come flooding out. I spend most of my time walking around, muttering to myself, giggling and scribbling in a flip-notebook. Other people look at me strangely and openly avoid me. They cross the street to get away from me. Waitresses at the restaurants I go to approach my table with caution, clearing their throats to wrest my attention away from myself. They speak gently to me, are over-polite, no doubt fearing some sort of schizophrenic outburst.

"I'm not crazy," I want to tell them. "I'm a comedian!"

But I'm not sure they would understand the difference.

One night in my hotel room, I practice with a hairbrush, providing the voice of the announcer and the audience alike, by pushing strained air out through my open mouth in

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<sup>19</sup> Route 66 really ends at a cross street on a busy intersection several yards away from Santa Monica Pier, but there's a sign at Santa Monica Pier proclaiming it the end of Route 66, because it makes for a better photo opportunity. This is L.A. in a nutshell.

that way the sports nut in the movie does when he's imagining himself making the winning goal of the big game in his backyard:

So if you will please join me in welcoming to the stage... Tiff!

APPLAUSE

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm, uh, Tiff. Like the announcer said. So, I think there's, like, a fifty-year-old man who lives inside my head, because every once in a while I'll have a thought that only a fifty-year-old man would have. I'll give you an example.

"Three-fifty for a small coffee? Oy, why so expensive? I remember when coffee was ninety-nine cents a cup. What is it made out of these days, gold?"

Or,

"These people, they drive so fast. Why do they have to drive so fast? They should slow down and enjoy life."

Did I say fifty-year-old man? I should say sixty-five-year-old man from 1974. I don't want to offend any fifty-year-old men in the audience who might be mid-life crisising it up right now. I know what you're thinkin' buddy. *Fuck you, lady. I drive a cherry red convertible at high speeds while my twenty-one-year old girlfriend blows me, which she can do, thanks to Viagra! I don't give a fuck about the price of shit, because she's only blowing me because she thinks I'm rich.*

That's great, sir. Please keep your voice down. This is my time, right now, okay?

Thank god for Viagra, right? I love Viagra. I think science really had its priorities together on that one. Cure cancer? Cure *anything* for the past fifty years? Fuck that, we

have to keep these old men hard. Seriously, E.D. is fucking depressing. Way worse than cancer or Parkinson's or whatever.

Thanks to Viagra, the probability that I might some day kill a man with my vagina goes up at least 70-80%. You know how bad-ass that makes me feel? Every time I'm fucking some old dude who has no business having sex with a twenty-five-year-old woman and he starts breathing all hard, then he starts wheezing, you know how they do. Then he gets all shaky and I get real excited, right? This could be the one. This could be the difference between having a regular pussy and having a killer pussy. I'll rename her James Bond and introduce her as such. Hi, I'm Tiff and this is my vagina, Bond. James Bond. And yes, she does have a license to kill.

Then I meet Roger Moore's Bond, specifically from *Moonraker* and he's all, *Already a better Bond than me*. But Daniel Craig's Bond is all, *No, I'm James Bond and has a really intense air fight with it*. Sean Connery's bond just fucks it. *A pussy that's also me! It's everything I've ever wanted*. The next day the headline reads, "Killer Pussy Strikes Again!" Because Sean Connery is old as fuck. He should absolutely not be fucking young, energetic women. I bet he does all the time, though.

"Sean Connery's the best Bond."

I dunno, Larry. I liked Daniel Craig. Remember in *Casino Royale* when he actually respected Vesper? I appreciated that.

"I don't understand you young people."

But no, I'm kidding. I don't fuck old men. That's gross. Not that I'm hating on the fifty-plus crowd who goes fishing for poon-tang amongst college sororities. I plan to spend my fifties fucking the shit out of twenty-five-year-old Adonises who like me

because they think I'm rich. The only E.D. I have to worry about is vaginal dryness and I hear the tongue of a twenty-five year old Adonis is a very reliable natural cure for that. I can't wait to be a cougar. I'm going to have the most epic mid-life crisis ever, because why should middle-aged white guys have all the fun? I'm going to rent a yacht and staff it exclusively with young strapped men in banana hammocks who fan me with palm fronds and feed me grapes. I'll walk, barking orders like "Dance for Mama," and "Put more baby oil on your pecks, Randolpho. I want those bad boys to *glisten*." And every single one of them will know exactly what a whore he is, because I'll throw my plate on the ground after I'm finished with my dinner and shout, "Clean that up, whore!" I'll order my drinks by shouting, "More whiskey, whores." My life will be like a rap video starring Zsa-Zsa Gabor.

Why? Because if Brett Michaels, former lead singer of Poison, can have a *game show* to pick his girlfriend out of forty different contestants... for three years in a row, then *fuck it*. And not even the same forty women, but every year there are forty *more* women competing for Brett Michael's Hepatitis-riddled cock. I'm not going to try for equality in that kind of climate, I'm going for broke. Cruise ship staffed with hot young men I degrade on an hourly basis. Somebody has to pay for *Rock of Love*.

So, I was walking down the beach the other day and I took my flip flops off, because I like to feel the sand between my toes. Up pops Larry.

"Do you think it's safe to walk on the beach without shoes on?"

Safe? What the hell are you talking about Larry? It's the beach. You're supposed to be barefoot.

"There could be hypodermics."

Come on, Larry. It's 2010. Nobody shoots up anymore. They smoke meth. If anything, you should be worried about broken crack pipes.

I should have listened to him. Yeah, I'm addicted to heroin now. It totally sucks. It's really expensive and every time somebody tries to tell me something important, I nod out. But it's like, the best diet ever. I've lost like, thirty, forty-five pounds. Yeah, I'm down to seventy pounds. I hope to hit sixty-five by beach season.

Okay, clearly that joke's not true. But a really dark part of me wants to lose an unhealthy amount of weight, just so that 1) I horrify my audiences. 2) Make people terrified to walk barefoot on the beach and 3) maybe a rich guy will want to fuck me. They love it when you're all emaciated and skeletal. I don't get why. It seems like that would just hurt, but that's who rich guys always show up at premieres with.

We have impossible standards of beauty in this country. We do. I blame the make-up industry. I haven't paid for make-up in over a decade because not only is eighty-five too much to pay for three ounces of dyed lard to make my lips look pouty on Saturday night, but all they're going to do with that revenue is spend it on advertisements designed to make me think I look like shit until I smear my face with their chemicals. I mean, I enjoy a good smoky eye effect as much as the next girl, but I don't want to have to have a complex about it. I also don't think it's good for your eyes to put coal on them all day, every day. Call me crazy.

The make-up industry is like the loud Jewish mom from bad 90s sitcoms.

“What? How do you expect to get a man looking like that? You're getting wrinkles around your eyes and your eyelashes aren't long enough and you've got blemishes. You've got to cover that stuff up, sweetheart.”

But, Ma, I want a guy to like me for me. Because I'm interesting and fun to be around. You know, my personality.

“Personality? Tck. A man looks at you, he doesn't see a personality. He sees those thin, chapped lips of yours.”

So, you slather your face with this shit in order to attract a mate. That's the idea. That's what the ads say. But then you get a mate and usually you just end up disappointed and crying. Seriously, guys, how difficult is it for you to learn how to make a woman come? There's no excuse anymore. Google that shit. “Female Clitoris.” The answer will not be “is a mythical creature that only appears every third moon of the second month of a Druid worship cycle.” You will, in fact, find several informative websites with detailed instructions on how to find and stimulate the elusive clitoris. Don't get distracted by the porn, because I will never, not ever, no matter how much you beg, let you come in my face. I have sensitive skin and I don't like things near my eyes, because *nobody likes things near their eyes*. Nobody wants viscous fluid projected into their face. You asking to come in my face is the exact equivalent of me asking if I can fill a squirt gun with shampoo and squirt it at your eye sockets. No? But I think you look *so* sexy with your eyes squinting against the pain as tears stream steadily down your cheeks. It's totally hot.

Maybe it's the kind of guys I usually hang out with. I'm kind of a nerd, so my circle of friends tends to be nerdier guys. Like, the kind of guys that don't lose their virginities until they're twenty-three because before that they were too busy playing Magic: The Gathering to meet women. There's a little bit of an experience difference. Don't get me wrong, I'm no stud. I didn't get laid in high school at all, despite multiple attempts, but unfortunately, real life isn't really like the plot of *American Pie*, no matter

how many apple pies you defile and believe you me, it is a lot harder to fuck a pie with a vagina.

But summer before college, I got that shit taken care of. So by now, I've been around the block a few times. I know the neighborhoods, where to stop, where to keep going. But some of these guys are visiting for the second or third time and maybe it's been a while since they were here. They know they need to ask for directions, but they don't want to seem like they don't know where they're going, so they just wander around for a while until they prematurely ejaculate.

Its sort of like, when you were a kid and you were at the beach and you saw somebody selling ice cream, but your mom was all, "We have ice cream at home." Maybe you were poor or something. I don't know your life story. It's a hypothetical. Stay with me, people. So you wait all day and by the time you get home you're hot and tired and there's sand in your ass and the only thing in the world you want is ice cream, but then it turns out you don't even *have* ice cream. Your mom's on this health kick now and all you have is frozen yogurt? And not even frozen yogurt, but regular, goopy, disgusting yogurt. Plain yogurt. And sure, you could put it in the freezer, but it'll still take another hour or two to freeze and even when it's frozen, it's just gonna taste like a frozen asshole instead of a cold, runny asshole. And you just want to scream at the top of your lungs, What the fuck is this? I waited all day for *this*? Are you trying to poison me? Fuck you, Mom!

That's what sex is like for women, roughly half the time. And, I really hope there are some nerdy guys out there in the audience getting mad at me for assuming that the nerd community sucks in bed.

“Whatever, Tiff. I play Magic: The Gathering every Thursday and I’m awesome in bed. I *always* find the clitoris *and* the G-spot, which is also not a myth.”

Very good, sir. *That’s the way it’s supposed to be.*

Of course, I’m going to require proof, so if you’d like to meet me around back after the show, I’ll be the desperate, sexually frustrated comedian that looks like me.

All right, that’s my time. You’ve been great.

APPLAUSE

## CHAPTER 17

## LOVE LIKE A DESERT

“You thought that I’d be weak without you, but I’m stronger. You thought that I’d be broke without you, but I’m richer. You thought that I’d be sad without you, I laugh harder. You thought I wouldn’t grow without you but I’m wiser. You thought that I’d be helpless without you but I’m smarter.” –Destiny’s Child

After my three days in Santa Cruz are up, I am so unwilling to turn my car back east, to begin the journey back home. Home, where I know all the correct freeway exits and country back roads and tourist traps. I know what’s real about the tourist traps back home and what isn’t. I used to work at a tourist trap, where I would regurgitate the same interesting factoids several times a day, every day, all summer. Home seems so blasé, so static. Out here, the lonesome, crowded West is so exciting, so dynamic. I don’t know where anything is or even where I’m going half the time. I don’t care if the portrait I see as a tourist is a lie, a veneer shellacked over the ugly reality so that people will pay to see it.

I was going to stave off the eventuality of heading back by driving up through wine country, revisiting the redwoods of Humboldt County, maybe trying to explore what I could of the marijuana culture there. I was going to visit San Francisco again and actually go to City Lights this time, track Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti and Kerouac through history. I brought *Coney Island of the Mind* and *Howl* along to read as I sipped gin in

Vesuvio's. I was going to go up into Oregon and visit Ken Kesey's Acid Bus. I was going to rewrite my history.

But, I discover that I'm running out of money and I'm in the state where gasoline is most expensive. Wine country is not only expensive, but also full of judgment-impairing wine, available in one ounce increments, sometimes even for free. Driving through wine country would inevitably mean lots of upscale establishments I can't afford and poor purchasing decisions. I'm one of those people who feels bad if I enter an establishment of commerce and I don't buy anything, no matter how over-priced the wares. I also have a tendency to be broke.

My grandparents visited the redwoods on their Fiftieth Anniversary Road Trip and I am sort of following in their footsteps here, however often I may meander off the path. They went to the Petrified Forest and the Grand Canyon. I went to the Petrified Forest and Grand Canyon. They went to Yellowstone and Mount Rushmore, so I am going to Yellowstone and Mount Rushmore. They also went to Yosemite, which they reached via Denver, Colorado, whereas I got distracted by Route 66 and Vegas. I also forgot about Yosemite until I was out of California and it was too late to turn back.

On my way away from Santa Cruz, I spot a sign advertising a park for drive-thru trees. *Come drive thru the redwoods!* it beckons. There's supposed to be a fee, but there's nobody around to collect it, and the road is also not blocked, so I cruise right in. There's a loopy, windy stretch of road that circles through several, mostly dead redwoods with huge squares carved through their trunks that are not quite big enough for a car to get through. Fortunately, the roads go around the trees as well as through them.

I have been to the Redwoods once before, though. Highway 101 through Northern California, otherwise known as the Avenue of the Giants, is sort of like a Route 66 spin-off. The highway boomed with tourism throughout the fifties and sixties, but appears to be in a slow decline, thanks to an interstate bypassing it. Everything there is kitschy, slightly out-dated, touristy and *majestic*. Redwoods are another thing pictures don't do justice to, even the ones with perspective-giving clues, like people who look like ants next to them, or cars parked in tunnels carved through their middles. What photos can't capture, also, is the stillness of the Redwoods. The silence of them. There's no bird song and the only noises are the ones you make, which you try not to do. The enormity of them, the long ages they stand as a testament to, compels you to silence.

The word "cathedral" is thrown around a lot in Redwood country, because it is just so damn appropriate. You feel hushed in a Redwood grove, even though there is no severe priest admonishing your squeaky shoes with his eyes. Something comes over you, pulling a reverence out of your depths you never knew you had.

Even when families unpacked themselves from their minivans and came before the trees, there was silence. Their dogs didn't bark, their children didn't squabble, their parents didn't nag. The only sounds are the cracking of twigs underfoot and the occasional breathy, "Wow."

You crane your neck back and you stare and you stare and you never see all of it, whichever one you look at. They are too big to be seen with our tiny eyes and it hurts our insignificant bodies to try.

If you come out of the Redwoods and you do not have a kink in the back of your neck, you did it wrong. Please return and try again.

The Redwoods have magic circulating in their ancient trunks. They are a roadside attraction with power, in Humboldt County at least. The sad little tree park I drive through outside of Santa Cruz is a stark contrast to the redwoods farther north. Most of the trees with holes sawed in them were killed in the process, leaving behind a series of jagged stumps. The stumps are taller than most trees, but they are nothing compared to the redwoods I've seen before. Still, I prefer my company in this tree park better.

Glancing at the Polaroid of my grandparents at Mount Rushmore taped to the dash, I remember the other Polaroids I could have brought. There is one of Grammy and Granup wearing matching amused grins as they stand on either side of their rental car, which is parked in the middle of a Redwood. When my ex boyfriend Debt and I visited, the redwoods of Humboldt County, he and I took pictures with the rental car parked through the same tree my grandparents posed with.

There will be no Fiftieth Anniversary for Debt and I. There was barely a second anniversary. I point the car toward northern Nevada instead of Northern California, a place I haven't been yet. It's time for me to stop rewriting my history and to instead face it, drive headlong into it, wrestle it to the ground and decide once and for all if I am going to make history or if history is going to make me.

We visited Seattle, Portland and San Francisco on the mini-road trip along the Pacific Northwest Coast. We also made a side trip down to San Juan for the Winchester Mystery House. I don't remember much of the landscape up there, though. I spent most of the time sleeping, dreaming of anybody but Debt.

I remember the cities and the Redwoods vividly. It was on this trip that “add it to the tab” would become part of our lexicon.

I guess my first real mistake was letting him help me with my car. I didn’t need the down payment, really, but he insisted. It would make it easier to get a loan, they would be more willing to sell, blah blah blah. It was fine. I could owe him.

We didn’t know it at the time, but Saturn was going under, even then and would have been happy to lease me a car, down payment or no. Then, when I asked him, in my youthful naivety and desire to look not-poor, if \$300 a month was too high for a car payment, he said no, that sounded about right. These two things together would cripple me for the next two years. Sometimes I wonder if they were calculated moves on his part, a lasso he wove to keep me tethered to his side. A lasso that slowly became a noose.

It’s kind of complicated, telling the whole thing. It started with the house.

I worked summers at an independently-owned canoe and kayak rental owned by The River Man. I’d been there five seasons and was the owner’s right-hand. Often, I was his only employee.

The River Man was something of a curmudgeon. His favorite thing to call the tourists was “Idiot,” to their faces whenever possible. His nickname for me was “Hottie,” and he never called a woman by her proper name that I ever heard. He always called us “babe” or “darlin’” or some variation on that theme. I was never in the job for him. In fact, he made me want to quit on an almost weekly basis. No, I was in it for the river, for the grounds, for the tourists and the long hours I would spend every day, weeding his many gardens, washing down his many canoes, sweeping the ever-dusty floors of his shop.

I grew there, nourished by the river and the fresh mountain air. Visitors liked me and my way with words. I liked them and the tiny fragments of their lives they would share with me as I shuttled them from one end of the river to the other. The River Man was like a shadow over my growth, a cloud that would sometimes block the sun. I was emerging, from caterpillar to butterfly, from ugly duckling to swan. The mountain sun browned my skin and the physical nature of the job kept me fit and healthy. The River Man was a former five-star chef and I also learned a lot about food; how to make it, how to enjoy it and how to moderate it.

I think he wanted to make a protégé of me. Whether it was actually me or just the timing, I don't know. His health started to go downhill while I worked for him. A mass was found on his kidney and there was an operation. I think it shook him. He'd been denying his age and his own mortality for so long that a real brush with it made him sort of frantic. He offered me a commission on each canoe and kayak we rented (a dollar per boat) and, staggeringly, he offered to build me a little house that I could stay in, rent-free on the property if I promised to stay five more years. I believe he meant to groom me for taking over.

Of course I said *yes*. Who wouldn't? Not a lot of people are going to offer you a free house.

Then the deal started to seem less and less appealing. I would have to keep it clean, of course. He would want to see that I was keeping it clean so he might drop in every now and again. I could decorate how I liked, as long as I didn't use nails or thumbtacks. He chose the plans of the house. He chose the color schemes. When I asked if I'd be able to paint the walls, he acted like I'd just asked if I could set it on fire. I could

tell he was uncomfortable with the prospect of Debt moving in with me, but he didn't forbid it, knowing I would have told him to forget it, then.

I started to realize it was never going to be my house. It was going to be his house that I was allowed to stay in, under a strict set of terms and conditions. I could already imagine him visiting often and commenting on what he did and didn't like. I knew what standard of cleanliness I would be held to. His apartment above the shop looked barely lived in, with minimalist décor and nothing was ever on the floor or out of place. I have never been a minimalist, especially when it comes to décor. I treat my walls like collages, arranging various assortments of pictures and decorative items as chaotically as possible. The more things to distract the eye, the better.

I don't think The River Man would have stood for it. I suddenly saw the deal for what it was: The River Man's attempt at maneuvering me under his thumb, to transform me from interloper in his kingdom to subject. Ours would be a feudal relationship and I was not so sure he would make a good king. I did not want to swear my fealty to him.

So I bailed on the deal. Conversations with The River Man became strained. I started applying to every salary-and-benefits job I could find. One day, in lieu of nothing, The River Man approached me and said my attitude was horrible and to go home and think about it. He handed me that week's pay.

The sign outside Pizza Hut said NOW HIRING DAY SHIFT SERVERS as I drove home. The river job only ran from April to October, so during the winter, I'd find temporary work. I'd just finished a winter serving at Pizza Hut, so I stopped by to ask about the job. The manager who'd hired me before asked when I could start.

“Tomorrow,” I told her. She told me to come in two days. It could have been sheer luck or a literal sign from the universe that it was time to leave the River and The River Man. Either way, I have never looked back, nor spoken to him since. That chapter of my life is closed and I have moved so far away from it that every new day seems a testament to why not taking the deal was the right decision.

Debt and I still had to move out of his studio apartment.

He was having troubles with his landlord and we had to be out by the end of the month. Today, Debt would probably tell you it was all my fault—mine and the cat’s. What Debt wouldn’t tell you is that he has a tendency to aggressively exacerbate minor conflicts until they become lawsuits.

My cat probably did start it, but it was Debt’s idea to hide the cat—and me—and the fact that we were living with him. Then he attacked the landlord for invading our privacy when the landlord inevitably found out about me and the cat. When the landlord demanded some sort of compensation for our presence, Debt countered by threatening to turn the landlord in to the INS for hiring illegal immigrants for his construction business, thus pissing him off enough to evict us and keep the deposit, which Debt tried to sue him for. So the landlord counter-sued for damages to the apartment, including a flea infestation.

There were no damages, of course. Debt had put a lot of tacks in the walls, but we plastered and painted over them ourselves. Debt was a meticulous house keeper and the place was in better shape when he left it than it had been in when Debt took it. That didn’t stop the landlord from spending a thousand dollars on the most expensive paint he could find to repaint the whole apartment and try to pin the bill on Debt. The landlord

claimed we broke the toilet, but I used it before we locked the apartment behind us for the last time. He also had a receipt for an exterminator for several hundred dollars. It was a hand-written receipt from a local exterminator who was also a friend of the landlord's.

But the landlord had a lawyer and a southern accent. Debt had no lawyer, a very Jersey accent and a hot temper that the landlord's lawyer played like a fiddle. Debt lost his suit and was ordered to pay the landlord an additional thousand dollars, supposedly for the damages, but I think it was more of an asshole tax. By the time the lawsuit actually happened, I, too, believed he deserved it.

We went to the West Coast before the lawsuits went to court, before The River Man sent me home to think about my attitude, but after I bought the car. Debt had been accepted to present at some huge conference pertaining to his line of work. Something to do with statistics and computers and the financial planning of the university. I never really understood for sure, despite hearing him describe his job several times, visiting his office and listening to him and other coworkers discuss their work in detail. What he did was complex and involved large amounts of math. My brain refused to understand.

The conference was in Seattle, a city I'd always wanted to visit. The school was going to pay for his hotel room, so I went with him and we made an adventure of it.

The conference itself was three days long and he had vacation time saved up. We made it a two-week affair. We rented a car, launched from Seattle, drove down to Portland (which we'd heard great things about from a friend), then drove down to San Francisco, hitting up the redwoods on the way and hopping down to San Juan for the Mystery House. I only had about twelve hundred dollars of fun money saved up. Not

enough for half the hotel rooms, rental car and food, much less souvenirs or anything else.

That was fine. He could afford it. I could owe him for my half.

The half-rule was my fault and I accept that. I was one of those young feminists who thought equality meant paying my own way. I was adamant about picking up half the check for dinner, lunch, whatever. It had been such a corner stone of our relationship that I don't think he ever thought twice about applying the formula to our trip out West. Of course I should pay for half, even if I couldn't afford it at the time.

It became sort of a record shop road trip. All three cities we visited were known for their excellent taste in music. One thing Debt and I shared was a passion for the vinyl record. We were both building collections. It was mostly records that I added to my tab. Only some of them were worth it.

We came back to a very angry landlord and accusations that our apartment was infested with fleas. He'd keyed in without telling us to look for the cat and any evidence thereof. The cat was at my mom's place, along with all his stuff. I think that pissed the landlord off more than finding the cat would have.

We also set off a bug bomb before we left, just to be sure. It was summer, Hare Krishna *had* been scratching lately and we expected such an invasion of our privacy when we left. Still, the resulting confrontation led to our eviction.

There *were* fleas when we got back. The neighbor had gotten a dog, a loud, yippy dog whose presence couldn't have gone unnoticed by the same landlord who had discovered a cat who only meowed on very special occasions.

I still blame the dog for the fleas.

Eventually, I would dread anyone asking about the landlord or the lawsuit, or even mentioning the word *apartment*, because I knew the next hour or so would be monopolized by the *Why Debt is Right Variety Show!* He'll fume! He'll whine! He'll complain! Watch as he carries the conversation *way too far*. He will *never drop it*. We guarantee it, folks.

We had to find a new place to live and fast. The idea of having a house appealed to us, mostly because I have a lot of stuff, so Debt would probably blame me for the house, too. Everything Debt owned at the time, he bought for the studio. He'd lived with his parents until college, then in a dorm until he graduated and got a job in North Carolina. He rocketed through college, graduating with a double major in statistics and computer science within three years. He was exactly one year older than me, was halfway through a Master's degree in Psychology, which he was doing more or less for fun and he earned sixty grand a year working for the administration of the university I was still attending when I met him. I always felt so unaccomplished next to him. That was probably part of the problem, too.

It wasn't merely the extra room to put things he desired; it was the ability to be the undisputed master of his own domain and he got it.

After The River Man's deal fell through, I thought we were just going to find a house to rent. Then Debt had the idea to buy a house. I suggested the time constraint we were under might make that a tad... unreasonable. But he was soured on the idea of landlords, for obvious reasons. I think he might have been paranoid that his current landlord, who did have a wide social network, might blackball him from being able to

rent a place. He never expressed such a thought, but the manic fierceness with which he attacked house-buying suggests a little more than my master of his own domain theory.

He did it. He bought a house in under a month. He thoroughly investigated all of the available options, too. We drove around the county for two frantic weeks, looking at house after house. Debt kept asking me what I thought and I kept telling him it was going to be his house. I knew the score, even then. I would have no stake in it. I wasn't going to be able to help pay for it, the way I'd been paying half the rent.

My grace period before I had to start paying back my school loans was drawing to a close and even though I'd had several interviews and even one re-interview, I still hadn't acquired a real job. I hadn't started graduate school, yet. The GRE was yet ahead of me. Day shifts at Pizza Hut didn't provide much as far as tips go.

So I went from the prospect of living in a house that was mine in name only to living in a house that wasn't mine at all. I traded a king for a dictator, but I didn't know it until it was far too late. Debt let me pick out the colors we painted the walls, though. He sort of made me, actually. I have an artistic streak a mile wide, but Debt had no artistry in him whatsoever. The house probably would have been beige without me. He was forever trying to make me be creative for him, as if he could experience the transformative magic of art by proxy. I resented that, though I couldn't tell you why.

The living room ended up an autumn orange. The bedroom was a sexy red. The extra room/office became spring green. The bathroom was painted purple. I loved the house. I hated him.

I picked out the colors. He painted them. When I painted, I was too messy, or I didn't add the coat thick enough, or I wasn't holding the roller right, or this or that until I

just let him do it himself. He remodeled the back two bedrooms, replaced the stained, dog-scented carpet with hardwood flooring and tore out the cheap wood paneling lining the walls and replaced it with drywall. He let me hold things for him. He let me hold up wall tiles while he nailed them into place. But whenever I tried doing any actual work, it was the same as with the painting. I wasn't doing it right; couldn't do it right.

I had traded one control freak for another.

He wanted help paying for all this stuff, but our trip out West had bankrupted me and my new job wasn't refilling the coffers. Literally all my money went to bills: my car payment, financial aid loan payment, cell phone and half the utilities. I didn't have enough left over for food. So he started shouldering the responsibility of groceries, too.

And then he started charging me for it. Half the Wal-Mart receipt started going onto The Tab. Then, when I didn't have the money to eat out anymore, but he did, he started adding the half of the bill I couldn't pay to The Tab. He started an Excel spreadsheet to keep up with it. I only saw it once, but he kept me up to date on the latest balance.

He had expensive tastes and a sixty thousand dollar annual salary to help him pay for them. I made less than twenty thousand a year, but he held me up to the same standards he wanted for himself. I learned a lot about the economics of relationships from Debt. Eventually, I would start telling him I couldn't afford it when he suggested we go to this restaurant or that one. When he said he could add it to The Tab, I told him I didn't want to add it to The Tab. Instead of paying, we ate fast food or whatever I brought home from Pizza Hut.

Oh, interesting sidebar: on the rare occasion when I was able to buy groceries or pick up dinner, he didn't take money off the chart. There were no credits to my account, only debits.

Even when I gave him my entire tax refund one year of several hundred dollars, he claimed it was my half of something, either the new floors or the new windows; things he'd decided upon and had asked me what I thought. Same answer as always, *it's your house*. Even if I had disagreed or been adamantly against his home improvements, it wouldn't have mattered. He was the one with the money. He made the decisions, then he paid for them. I sat by and watched. And apparently paid for it.

For a while, I was a passenger in my own life. He hijacked it and took it for a spin through some pretty rough neighborhoods. I was a ghost in my own body. The butterfly folded in on herself and forgot that she had ever been a butterfly. She was still a caterpillar. She deserved to crawl. The swan laughed at herself derisively. She wasn't a swan. She wasn't even a duck. She was nothing, really.

He started cranking up the pressure on me to get a different job, or to get a second job. Suddenly, my pot habit became a problem. I smoked too much which meant I spent too much on weed. And how was I going to get a job if I couldn't pass a drug test? Was I even taking my job search seriously? Shouldn't I be applying for jobs *right now*?

He stopped smoking. I was actively trying to get a job at Wal-Mart, where they not only drug test, but they also test to see if the urine has been treated, so I quit smoking, too. Temporarily.

Temporarily turned into a year. He put my bowl into a trunk and locked it so I would have to ask for it if I ever bought weed again. Or I would have to buy a new bowl, which is what I eventually did.

Sometimes, I would stand in the bedroom, taking deep breaths, my heart pounding in my chest as I tried to work up the nerve to tell him I was leaving. No, I didn't know where I was going. No, I had nowhere else to stay. But I was going, anyway. I would pay off my debt as soon as I could. I thought he would sue me over it if I couldn't make the payments he wanted me to make.

Once, in the middle of yet another fight about money and how terrible I was at coming up with it, I started packing a bag, announcing my intention to go crash on a friend's couch. He begged. He pleaded. He cried.

I caved.

He let up about the money, but not for long.

His love was like a desert. Desiccating and unforgiving. I was stranded in it and I had no water. I could not get out. I could hear drums, drums in the deep. I could hear demons and scarab beetles scuttling around in the darkness. They were coming for me. I could not get out.

According to Paul Simon, there are 50 ways to leave your lover. I knew of a another way. A final way. I thought I would never escape. I was dying anyway, might as well make it official.

He didn't know about the first attempt. I went out for a drive. I bought a garden hose. I found a secluded little spot to park in. I ran the garden hose from the tailpipe to

my window. I laid in the dark and cried and cried and cried. I didn't want it to end this way, alone and miserable, my final memory the smell of car exhaust.

I packed it in and headed back. I would live to fight another day. Or to drown.

He caught me in the midst of the second one. I'd heard catnip could get you kind of stoned and it wouldn't show up in a drug test. We'd just bought some for my cat and I asked if he'd unlock my bowl so I could try it. It had been months since I'd smoked marijuana or even mentioned how much I missed smoking marijuana. I'd started smoking Black & Mild cigars regularly, which he hated as much as my weed habit, but was helpless to stop it. Cigars are legal.

He exploded, calling me an addict. He thought I should be ashamed of wanting to smoke my cat's catnip. Would I eat my kid's birthday cake, too?

"Probably," I told him. "I can't be trusted with cake. You know that."

He didn't think it was funny. He couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe *me*. How could I joke around about my crippling marijuana addiction? How could I be so *awful*? He went to his office and slammed the door.

I drank a glass of wine and began drowning in my thoughts. I had another glass. I watched an eagerly awaited comedy special and derived no joy from it. The jokes could not penetrate the thick cloud of disappointment, of how-did-I-get-here that hovered over me. Laughter died in my throat.

I had never been in so dark a mood that comedy could not wrest me from its clutches. Laughter *was* the best medicine and my favorite. Now it had turned bitter. I wondered if I was dead already, an animated corpse limping through the wasteland of my

life. Was this the way it was going to be? Drums. Demons. A loud-mouthed little crow, sitting on my shoulder, forever squawking about my flaws? I could not get out.

I'd had enough.

CUT TO:

A purple bathroom. An open medicine cabinet. A Dixie cup filled to the brim with a cocktail of over-the-counter medications. Aspirin (thirteen, to be precise. I counted because, in the words of Katt Williams, "You take thirteen of those motherfuckers and it'll be your last headache."), Ibuprofen, Advil, Tylenol PM. He had prescription-strength killers, but I didn't dare touch them.

CUT TO:

A red bedroom. A girl with a blank expression, swallowing pill after pill between sips of dark wine.

CUT TO:

The purple bathroom again. An open toilet. The girl vomits as a boy holds her hair, rubs her back.

## DEBT

Do you think you got it all? Are you sure you don't want to go to the hospital?

She's sure. Sure she can't afford the emergency room fee. Sure she doesn't want any more debt. She secretly hopes the liver damage gets her and it may yet<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> So far, so good.

He didn't ask any questions. He told my mom and called some kind of suicide risk hotline and found me counseling in our area. I was diagnosed with manic depression, which I already knew about myself. Still, it was nice to have professional confirmation that I was, in fact, crazy.

The counseling center was state-funded. I outsmarted it. I convinced everyone the economy was making me depressed, not my boyfriend. I convinced them he was supportive and wonderful and just so right for me. Maybe that's what I believed. But the money thing was a symptom, not the cause.

I also took the G.R.E. and got into graduate school. With graduate school came financial aid. I paid him off with a three thousand dollar check and the stormy waters of our relationship experienced calm.

Graduate school brought other changes, too. The second class of the semester, two different girls walked in smelling faintly of my very favorite scent. I sniffed the air like a dog. I think my mouth watered. I might have almost said something stupid out loud like, "Hey, do ya'll smoke weed? You know where I could get some?"

They sat across the room from each other.

The next class, they were sitting next to each other, the only occupants of the boardroom-style table facing the teacher and they were drenched in it. I strongly suspected they had gotten high together right before class.

The next class I sat at their table, but a few seats down from them. I didn't know them. They didn't know me. I didn't want to bust up in their space, asking questions about illegal drugs. That's just not how it's done. Mostly, I just wanted to smell them.

Half the time, I wouldn't even be paying attention to the professor, but trying to re-imagine what being high was like.

Once, when one of them took off her hoodie, I remember staring at it and thinking, *God, I'd like to bury my nose in that.*

*What? Tiff, don't do that. That's weird and completely socially unacceptable.*

*What's wrong with you?*

*I miss that sweet Mary Jane, me.*

*I hear you.*

I missed it. God, I missed it. I was *smelling people* because they smelled like weed. I was out of debt and I had expendable income for the first time in almost a year.

It was time.

As soon as I'd decided, Debt had one of his mini hookah parties. Yeah, Debt had a hookah. He wasn't against smoking in general, just when I did it. I never really understood why. When we first met, we would pack marijuana into the hookah's shisha almost every time. One day his opinion of weed simply changed and mine didn't.

There were three or four people there. I didn't really know them. One of them pulled out a bowl and asked Debt if it was cool. Eyeing me, he said it was.

When it came around, I reached for it. I didn't look at him as I lit it, inhaled, exhaled. Passed it on.

The next time it came around, he hit it, too. I didn't say anything. Now, the memory makes me angry. I want to reach back in time and punch him in the mouth. He didn't approve, not in the least. He was trying to look cool in front of the company. Later,

when I started buying it again, he asked me not to do it in the house. I replied by lighting a bowl. In the house.

But at the time, I was too busy getting high for the first time in a year to care about his bullshit. It was everything I remembered, only better. I felt calm. Harmony and laughter flooded back into my life, live and in color. I hugged everybody goodbye when they left. Twice. I was *back*. I didn't even know I'd been gone. The universe had lit a torch on my dark, rocky path. I finally saw that I had been trapped in some sort of cave system, deep below the surface. The torch illuminated the way out.

It even made me amorous, which I hadn't been since the suicide attempt. Something about having no will to live really kills the sex drive. The opposite of death *is* desire and I finally felt it again. He was too disappointed in me to reciprocate, which made me so disgusted with his hypocrisy that I never wanted him again. I took one of my long showers.

"Have fun?" he asked me when I got out, his tone acidic.

"Yeah," I said, flaunting my post-orgasmic afterglow. *Could've been you*, I let my smirk say.

The relationship ended then. But we held on for almost two more months. Fortunately, I had graduate school to distract me from my shitty life. The pressure on that front was cranking up as I started to realize I didn't know what I was getting myself into. School had always come easy for me. There's a formula to it and I figured it out early. I learned how to give the answers they wanted me to give. Public school is as simple as that. It even worked in my undergraduate studies.

Now, however, my formula wasn't working anymore. There were no answers, really. Now I was being graded on my ability to think for myself and although this is something I'd always prided myself on being able to do, I was realizing that I'd never really done it before. Suddenly, I was held responsible for why I was giving the answers I was giving and not just the answer itself. I was ashamed to admit that more often than not the reason why was, *Because some textbook said so. That's the way this works right?*

I had a crisis of faith. Was I the free-thinking idealist I'd always imagined myself to be? Or was I just another brick in the wall? When had I become a brick? How could I get back to being the hammer? Had I ever been a hammer?

Unlike Peter Gabriel, I did want to be a sledge hammer. Realizing what an automaton I really was depressed me. It was also infuriating. How dare they do this to me? How dare I do this to myself? Why hadn't I dug deeper? Why had I settled for the answer they wanted? Why hadn't I tried to find my own answers, or to understand why they wanted the answer they wanted? I was the whole goddamn world's puppet, I always had been and I finally saw the strings. Graduate school helped me start to saw through them. They are always thicker than you think.

If I hadn't had cannabis back in my corner, I never would have made it. Cannabis helped me make the connection between regurgitating an answer I'd looked up and understanding why the answer I found was the right answer, or if it was the right answer and if it wasn't, why it was being presented as such.

Now I, too, started showing up in class smelling faintly of weed. Suddenly, there were nods of recognition from the other two, sly looks back and forth, snatches of

conversation before and after class. And finally, at the end of the semester, what I'd hoped for at the beginning.

“Hey, do you want to come back to my place and smoke a bowl with us?”

Yes. Yes I did.

On Halloween, we exploded, Debt and I. I blew us apart, as decisively and definitively as I could. There would be no question about how over we were.

I didn't set out to do it. I just set out to have a bomb-ass party. My old friend 'Roo and I were talking one day, lamenting about how parties in real life always fall short of the parties in movies. So, we decided we wanted to throw the kind of party you see in the movies. We got everybody in on it.

And we did it. That party was legendary. People still ask me when we're going to do it again. There was a weed room and two kegs and my famous punch and five bottles of champagne. My famous punch had two gallons of one hundred proof vodka, a fifth of rum and five quarts of Juicy Juice. And four Five-Hour Energys. Everybody said it was my punch that did them in, pushed them over the edge of sanity. This was exactly as I planned it.

There were fireworks and drag queens and games and epic costumes. I went as rapper T-Pain, specifically, T-Pain as he appears in the “On A Boat” music video by The Lonely Island. I didn't put on blackface or anything, but I put on a tux and a top hat, white shades and topped it off with some bling and an ever-present bottle of Santana champagne, the entire contents of which I consumed by myself, with the exception of a sip or two.

Debt didn't know what he wanted to be. He wanted me to make the decision and I didn't want to. I gave him a multitude of options. Go as a member of The Lonely Island. Go as David Bowie. Be my mermaid<sup>21</sup>. Merman, if he'd prefer. None of these options appealed to him. In a last ditch effort to hold my interest, he went as Spike, a character from the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. He hated Spike. His ex-girlfriend had been eerily obsessed with the character, as was I. He hated the show altogether, for that matter. He thought he was doing it for me.

Instead, his decision repulsed me. His utter inability to think creatively for himself finally broke me.

*Fuck this*, I roundly decided.

I spent most of the night evading Debt as I dragged 'Roo around to make out with him. I had to betray Debt. It was the only way he'd ever let me go. His ex-girlfriend was also a cheater and therein lay the release valve to this awful relationship. Also, I was drunk and fed up and 'Roo was dressed as Tony Stark, with an arc reactor he'd built himself. He adopted Tony Stark's swagger for the night and I have always been a sucker for swagger.

Debt, I later heard, spent the party walking around frantically looking for me. Everybody used the same word to describe his behavior: *crazy*. When he finally caught up with me, I was hopelessly drunk and just so tired of his face.

"We're done. It's over. I'm bored. I'm—I'm just bored," I half stuttered, half-slurred.

"What?" he said.

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<sup>21</sup> In T-Pain's verse of the song "On A Boat," he recites the lyric, "I fucked a mermaid." It's kind of a silly song.

“Yeah, we’re over.”

This was the real me. Irreverent. Rebellious. Decisive.

He sped off in my car. My head spun and I was suddenly tired, like I had just stormed the beaches of Normandy and after hours of bitter fighting, I had finally emerged victorious. I crawled into the backseat of ‘Roo’s car for a nap.

Debt called me. I answered. As soon as I heard his voice, I had to throw up. I launched myself out of ‘Roo’s car and into a nearby bush. I held the receiver to my ear as I threw up, very loudly, in his ear. Then I hung up on him and turned off my phone.

A friend asked if I was okay.

“Yeah,” I called out to her. “Just broke up with my boyfriend. I’m great.”

Then I threw up some more.

She brought me some water and found ‘Roo for me, suggesting maybe he take me home.

“Debt stole my car,” I told him on the way to his place, not mine.

“What? Is he going to give it back?” he asked.

“He better.” (He did.)

‘Roo had two friends from out of town staying in his one-room apartment, so nothing came of the making out. Except, of course, for the Liberation of Tiff.

So now I was homeless, single, shell-shocked from the relationship I’d just barely survived, struggling against my puppet strings, buried in school work harder than I’d ever dreamed possible and Debt was threatening to light my stuff on fire if I didn’t find a place to put it besides his house.

The universe lit another torch. A coworker and his girlfriend broke up. He needed a roommate, fast. I needed a room. His girlfriend had taken most of the furniture with her. Most of the furniture in Debt's house was mine. He had a cat. I had a cat. He was also a stoner. It was perfect.

I found a place to stay. I started to find my place in the world.

I think that maybe I'm out here, on the road, because of Debt. There was a time I thought I couldn't survive without him. Now, I'm thriving without him. I'm doing this by myself to prove that I can, without a plan or anything. I can even do it high. I can run out of money half-way and still be okay. The butterfly is unfolding her wings. The swan is stretching her neck, gliding gracefully over the pond of America.

"Fuck you, I *am* a swan!" she shouts at a memory of a time when she thought she wasn't.

CHAPTER 18  
MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO

“I’m going one-on-one with who I’d like to be.” –Robin Thicke

Nevada flies by and I start to climb up with the land. I start to feel the familiar push of gravity on my car as the lonesome, crowded West gathers up itself and heaves forth the Rocky Mountains. I skirt their edges. I briefly considered Colorado, following Neal Cassady, Hunter S. Thompson and my grandparents up Denver’s famous mile.

But honestly, I always thought Neal Cassady was kind of a womanizing jerk-off and Hunter S. settled elsewhere in Colorado. I also think about Utah, Zion National Park, the Great Salt Lake. But the money is running out fast and I have two more for-sure points of interest I’d like to see before I have to book it home. This is no time to get distracted by Utah.

Looking at the map now, I don’t know how I ended up in Idaho. I was headed for Yellowstone and Garmin took me through Idaho. I surrendered to her whims without question. I was up for anything. I was willing to go anywhere, as long as it was on the way home.

Idaho smells like potatoes, which is pretty much what you’d expect. It’s also fucking beautiful, which you might not expect, if you didn’t know anything about Idaho. There are picturesque little cabins and water-wheels dipping into crystal-clear water almost everywhere you go. Idaho had to be beautiful to get my eyes ready to see Yellowstone. It’s like a preamble in a lot of ways. You can’t just drive headlong into

something like Yellowstone without being prepared for it and if that's what you did on your road trip, well, you're probably not reading this because your brain probably hemorrhaged from all the sensory overload, killing you instantly. You chose a hell of a way to go, though.

The sign for Mesa Falls catches my eye as I wind through Eastern Idaho. The road has been a worthy guide so far; the best I could have hoped for. So I stop.

There are two Mesa Falls. The Upper and Lower. The Upper Falls are 110 feet of pure watery fury, pounding over a cliff. A boardwalk has been constructed so visitors may safely experience and photograph the full power of it. Standing on the boardwalk is like standing inside a Kodak moment. I take my photo and start looking around for someone to take a picture of me with the fall.

Movement catches my eye along the riverbank below, where people aren't supposed to be. Expecting to catch sight of some native Idaho wildlife, instead I find the Kayak Guys: three men in wet suits with bright yellow kayaks who are trying to find a good place to launch.

"There's another fall down river," a man shouts down at them.

"Yeah, we're going over it," one of the Kayak Guys shouts back.

I turn and run to my car, suddenly in a race against time. The road has graciously scheduled a free show for me today and I will not miss it.

The first time I see the Lower Falls, I think that I am about to watch three people die. Not only is it an eighty-five foot vertical drop into a no doubt icy river, giant rocks jut into it that the kayakers will have to somehow dodge. It's the kind of waterfall that the

comic trio plunges over after losing their way on their camping trip in the Big Summer Comedy. The Kayak Guys want to go over such a fall fully aware and *on purpose*. Maybe to them, kayaking is like a video game and this is the expert level. After many hours spent conquering everything else, this is what they must do to win. *At life*.

Maybe, in some parts of the world, in some cultures, propelling yourself over an eighty-five foot waterfall in a tiny plastic boat isn't a big deal.

A small crowd has gathered on the overlook, abuzz with talk of the Kayak Guys.

"Have they come over yet?" I ask Somebody.

"Not yet," Somebody says.

"What?" A Lady asks.

"Three guys are about to kayak over that waterfall," I say.

"What?" A Lady repeats.

"Yeah," I confirm.

"Oh my," she says.

This conversation repeats itself, verbatim, with every new person that arrives at the overlook, but with different actors saying the lines.

The casual conversations start up as we wait, like a murmured symphony. Ah, yes. I know this number. I heard something like it waiting for sunset at the Grand Canyon. I wonder if they have the same composer.

A firefighter from Montana saved a burning trailer. A photographer from Wyoming's father was a sailor. A school teacher from Idaho complains about testing regulations. A late-comer arrives with news that the Kayak Guys are on the river. Some

people try to calculate an ETA based on time/distance, but nobody has the right measurements.

A hush descends as one of the kayaks emerges upriver from the fall. He plummets over, paddle whirling and we cheer. Buttons click. Flashes go off. The other kayakers come tumbling after. The third Guy turns up before the second Guy and we search the water anxiously, one person wondering aloud if we should call 911, until someone else spots the kayaker already on land. He found the shore outside our vantage point. We breathe a collective sigh of relief and immediately start recounting the wonder of it, the excitement, how worried we were for a minute there.

We head to our cars.

As I drive away, I'm still in awe of the Kayak Guys. I could never do something like that. I've been kayaking; I know what it's like. The thought of tumbling over a fall that large, the rushing, icy water, the adrenaline, the impact... just the thought makes my heart want to explode.

It's so *dangerous*.

Some day, people will tell me what I'm doing now was dangerous. I will tell them it was necessary, that they should try it, too. In a way, I am tumbling over a cliff as I snake along an Idaho highway, paddle whirling, waiting for impact.

I flip on the radio and see if anything interesting catches my ear. I stumble upon a sermon of some sort and decide to see what the Christians are up to these days.

The radio preacher is halfway through a speech about the Golden Rule and obeying the Word of God when it hits me, hits me so hard I have to pull over and get out of my car and shout.

There is a God. There totally is and He or She or Whatever has been trying to get through to our tiny pea brains ever since we crawled up out of the primordial soup and developed reason. There's a Message being transmitted to us, every day. Every once in a while somebody writes it down and the book it goes in ends up being worshipped more than the One who said it, or It itself. Sometimes the Message gets obscured by louder, more controversial topics. But the Message is there, in every single religion that I've studied and I've looked into most of them, searching for a reason why they exist, trying to find proof that they are the man-made constructs I've always suspected them of being. And they are. Religion is man-made, but they always start with a Breath. A Whisper. A Message.

There is only one way to live in this world and be happy and it is both the easiest thing and the hardest thing in all the world to accomplish. Ready?

*Treat others the way you want to be treated.*

That's it. But you have to do it to everybody, whether they're black, white, orange, straight, gay, bisexual, nice, smart, dumb, or that guy at work that really pisses you off. Even if it's some asshole who's never nice to anybody, especially you. Even if it's a murderer or an arsonist or a thief. Even if it's a serial killer or Hitler.

The god-damn Golden Rule. In Hinduism, it's Karma. In Buddhism, it's self-denial. In Daoism, it's The Way. In ancient Greece, you were supposed to treat everyone

as if they could be a god in disguise and that's part of it, too. It's everywhere. It's all God wants, for us to be nice to each other.

Somehow it keeps getting distorted. Sure, treat other people the way you want to be treated... as long as those people believe what you believe or are the same color as you or come from the same place. All those other people over there that you don't know? Fuck those guys. In fact, let's enslave and murder them! They will make a worthy sacrifice to our God, indeed.

God. Palm. Face.

Okay, so maybe it's not so impressive to you, but for me, it was one of those moments where the veil of Maya lifted and I saw that the illusion of the world is pain and suffering and the reality is love. I didn't even need LSD, although I was pretty high on cannabis. The World is beautiful. God is loving. Life is what I make it and I can make it great.

Most importantly, we are all in this together. Borders and colors and backgrounds and orientations really do not matter. A human being is an endlessly complex thing, capable of so much good and so much evil and both at the same time, always. To know one of us is to love us. To know me is to love me. To know you is to love you.

So, if you're reading this and you're human, I'd like to tell you something:

Smoke weed, not cigarettes<sup>22</sup>! *Te Amo!* I love you<sup>23</sup>!

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<sup>22</sup> I guess you can smoke cigarettes, too, but they're totally bad for you.

<sup>23</sup>“ And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.”-The Beatles

## CHAPTER 19

## F\*CK HOLIDAY INN, SLEEP INN

“I’m learning to fly, but I don’t have wings. Coming down is the hardest thing.” –Tom

Petty

It’s a travesty what I do to Yellowstone. I don’t chip any rocks off its formations or remove any pebbles from its grounds or anything like that. I just drive through it. Straight through. And by the time I even make it through and into Grand Teton National Park, it is dark and I don’t even see the Tetons.

Yellowstone National Park. The crown jewel of The West and some of the most heart-achingly beautiful country you ever would care to see. I enter the park with maybe an hour to go before sunset and catch a brief glimpse of it before I lose the light. I drive a couple of waterfall loops and walk part of a trail through one of Yellowstone’s many geothermal phenomena. The land is littered with little potholes of bubbling water. Some of them are crystal blue. Some of them are muddy. Some of them look like watery geodes, sporting a multitude of colors in surprisingly geometric patterns.

It’s prehistoric. The air smells like sulfur and there’s steam rising out of the ground like a scene from an apocalyptic wasteland. I wonder if this is what the world was like before people and grass, back when the earth’s surface was mostly lava and rocks were the coolest new geologic trend. I half expect a dinosaur to come loping by, even though dinosaurs did not exist in the primordial soup. They came quite a bit afterwards.

It's so weird, so against what you expect to see when you look around outside, that early reports of phenomena like this were written off as hearsay and tall tales. I wonder what early Native Americans must have thought of the bubbling streams and eerie cloud of ever-present steam.

I want to walk more of one of the trails, but the sun is setting fast and I want to be able to see Old Faithful when it erupts, so I get in the car and book it to the world's most famous geyser.

I arrive with ten minutes to spare. Old Faithful has a trail around it from which you can see a few more bubbling pot holes and steam vents, so I walk it in the meantime. I make it back around just in time for Old Faithful to explode up into the air with a roar.

There is a Polaroid of my grandparents with Old Faithful, too. I didn't get my picture taken with it, though. I was still coming off the trail and there were no other tourists around. The Pocket Photographer would have come in handy right about then.

The sun sets as Old Faithful sputters to a stop for another ninety minutes. It is a long walk back to the parking lot in the dark and I somehow end up on a trail that leads me to the opposite side of the building from where my car is.

I'm hyper-alert, walking a narrow trail in the deepening twilight by myself. I grip my spike and keep a sharp ear out for anyone behind me.

I don't run into another soul, however, so my worry is needless. Old Faithful is close to the main visitor's center, a converted Yellowstone Fort, where the U.S. Army once defended Yellowstone from such threats as Native Americans trying to use the same hunting grounds their people had been using for eleven thousand years. Sorry guys, your

homeland is a national park now, but would you like to hear about one of our fantastic reservations?

Everywhere I go, there are two stories: the story they put on plaques for tourists and a story of pain and upheaval.

When I get back to the Visitor's Center, I wander around the gift shop for a bit, looking for a reason to linger. I know I won't be able to see any of the famous scenery when I start driving, not now that it's dark. I will only get impressions. Darkness imposed upon slightly less darkness in vague mountain-and-tree shapes. None of the pictures I take with the digital camera after dark ever turn out. While browsing, I spot a brown leather chair. I recognize the chair immediately because I have a Polaroid back home somewhere of my grandfather sitting in it.

I take one of my Fix-It-In-Photoshop pictures with it. When my grandparents visited, my grandfather reportedly "wandered off," giving my grandmother "quite a scare." It is my belief that he merely walked the same trail around Old Faithful that I did. I wonder if he is still out there; if I went back and walked the trail in the dark if I would find him, waiting for me.

"Well, what do you think?" he'd say.

"It's gorgeous. The geysers are pretty cool. I'm glad they preserved all this."

"Yeah."

"I wish I'd known you better."

"Don't get maudlin."

"Okay."

We'd stare out into the darkness, just enjoying each other's company for a while. My grandfather had a lot in common with Don Draper from the TV show *Mad Men*, except that he was a hospital administrator instead of an ad man.

After dark, I drive and drive and drive. Every website in existence says you have to book a hotel room in this area pretty much a year in advance. I knew that going in and yet here I am, trapped out in the dark. Around three in the morning, I pull around behind a full roadside motel, pull the blanket and pillow out of the trunk and sleep fitfully for a few hours. I wake up just before sunrise, freezing. The temperature is in the high forties. In early August. I crank up the car and the heater and start driving again. Might as well. I don't know when the next gas station will be, so I don't want to waste gas sleeping behind a motel I can't get into.

Dawn peeks over the distant mountain ranges to say Good Morning. I greet her with a tired scowl and she rises grey and surly that day, devoid of the pink and orange hues that usually make sunrise so worthwhile.

"I'm not the one who told you to not show up at Yellowstone until 5PM. If you had asked, I would have told you to get a room after lunch, but no. You just have to keep going, going, going," she says.

*Yeah, yeah, yeah,* I reply.

I enter Wyoming and come upon civilization faster than I thought I would. I'm not sure what town I'm in, now. I'm too tired to care. I just hope there's a hotel with some vacancies nearby. Around 6AM I find what I'm looking for: a Holiday Inn with

vacancies. My spirits soar. I'll pay anything, I don't care what my budget is. I just want to sleep in a bed.

But they won't let me. Yes, they have rooms, but they don't rent them until mid-afternoon, after checkout and subsequent cleaning of rooms by maids. I'm welcome to come back at 2 P.M.

It's the same thing at the Sleep Inn down the road. I didn't know you couldn't get a hotel room at seven in the morning, even if you explain to the concierge that you've been driving all night and you are sincerely afraid of dying behind the wheel if you don't find a place to sleep.

"What am I supposed to do?" I ask the person behind the desk at Sleep Inn, my eyes filling with exhausted tears.

"I—I don't know," she says.

"Fuck," I say and leave.

I pull over at the next rest area and sleep in the backseat. I wake up at 10 A.M., sweating. It's way too hot by now to keep sleeping in the car. I run into the rest stop to brush my teeth and wash my face. I look in the mirror and I look terrible. My skin is sallow and there are dark circles under my eyes.

"You're an idiot," I say to my reflection.

"Yeah," it says back. No argument there. I should have planned Yellowstone better, but I didn't and here I am. In Wyoming, exhausted and shut out from the comfort of a hotel room until two or three in the afternoon. At least I have an excellent excuse to come back to this area, so I can see it with fresh eyes.

I decide to keep going. Might as well. Nothing better to do but swelter in a rest area parking lot.

I find a town with a Motel 6 and decide to give it one more try. It's only eleven in the morning. In the hotel world, checkout has just taken place and now rooms are being cleaned. I expect to receive the same answer I've gotten twice before.

But I don't. There's a room *and* I can have it, off schedule. I cry and thank the woman behind the desk way too many times. I babble my incoherent story. Caught outside of Yellowstone without room. Denied entry by two other hotels. So tired.

"That's awful," she says. "And unsafe."

"I know, right?" I say, so happy to be agreed with.

"Well, we've got a room for you here."

"*Bless you,*" I say.

This is not a phrase I usually use unless someone has just sneezed, but in this case, it seems no less than a miracle that I am being allowed to pay money to stay in a room at an establishment that exists only to provide rooms for people willing to pay for them.

I take a shower to wash the long, dark night away. I slip between the crisp, white, bleached sheets and I *sleep*. The best sleep I got on the whole trip.

All-nighters can be rough on the body, but good for the soul, I think.

## CHAPTER 20

## THERE AIN'T NO BLUE SKIES OVER BADLANDS

“There ain’t no blue skies over bad lands, even if it ain’t raining in the mornings. But you don’t need to fly to understand it. Just understanding.” -Matthew Good.

I arrive in South Dakota as if by magic. Wyoming flies by and soon I’m there. I’ve been noticing the motorcycles since Casper, where the merciful and benevolent Motel 6 was located. I don’t give them much thought. It is motorcycle season, after all. Autumn will be coming on soon and those who ride will have to put their more exposed modes of transportation away for the winter.

Little do I know, I have somehow decided to visit Mount Rushmore in the midst of Sturgis, the largest motorcycle rally in the United States, on its seventieth anniversary. What this means for me is that I spend over a hundred dollars on a fifty dollar room and my fellow tourists tend to be more of the leather-clad, wild-haired type than your usual fare. Which suits me just fine. My quiet, pot-fueled rebellions are far more likely to go unnoticed when all eyes are turned on the bikers, who have an even worse reputation than stoners. Also, bikers are cool and I’m happy to share my adventures with them.

There are several points of interest in the Mount Rushmore area. The world-famous Wall Drug is located about an hour away. If you’ve ever seen a bumper sticker that says “Where is Wall Drug?” the answer is Wall, South Dakota, sixty miles from Mount Rushmore.

If you've ever seen a bumper sticker asking "Where the heck is Wall Drug?" and wondered why you were being asked that, it's because Wall Drug is famous for its hundreds of kitschy road signs that start several hundred miles away from the store itself. Depending on where you're going and how you get there, you could see dozens of Wall Drug signs and never see Wall Drug.

The story of Wall Drug is pretty inspiring actually. A young South Dakota pharmacist, Ted Hustead is imbued with the entrepreneurial spirit and buys a drug store on the outskirts of the South Dakota Badlands. For the first five years, his store struggles, barely surviving on the support of the town's three hundred and twenty-six inhabitants. Then, while trying to nap in their house built closer to the highway, his wife has a brilliant idea: they should put signs on the highway for free ice water at Wall Drug.

They do it and by the end of the day, it's worked. Dozens of people traveling west or to Yellowstone or driving by to see the in-progress Mount Rushmore stop by for free ice water and to buy lunch and ice cream.

The rest, as they say, is history. It's a true American success story. Intelligent go-getters with big dreams strike commercial gold and nurture their business until it becomes an enterprise. Now there are hundreds of road signs, in addition to the original twelve and the store even stayed in the family. Hustead's son, Bill, took over when Ted wanted to retire. Today, it is a sprawling complex of novelty stores, candy shops, gift stores and restaurants vigorously decorated with a wide variety of curios. There are animal heads lining the wall from deer to elk to bear to jackalope. There's a giant T-Rex standing in a corner. There are graphic "Old West" murals of cowboys and Indians gleefully killing each other. There are mannequins acting out a poker game gone awry,

with one of the mannequins standing over a disrupted poker table, brandishing a gun at a player he has accused of cheating. There are those little quarter-operated horsie rides for the kids, as well as huge wooden dinosaurs they can climb on. There's more than one stuffed bear, standing upright in a corner or a doorway.

There's a giant plastic dinosaur outside that can be seen from the highway and a giant plastic Jakalope in the parking lot.

In a word, it's perfect. It's the kind of Roadside Attraction I've been waiting to see and it's more or less free. They still even have the free ice water, on a counter lined with ice-laden pitchers. You don't have to pay anything to see Wall Drug or walk around inside it, but the likelihood that you'll buy lunch at its diner or purchase some of its souvenirs, novelties, or candy is high enough to make it an extremely profitable business.

It's a total tourist trap. It's also weird and magical and totally politically incorrect (r.e. the murals). I could have wandered its strange collection of things to look at for hours and still not seen all of it. As it was, I probably didn't even see half. But, evening is coming on and I'd better hurry if I want to see any of Badlands National Park, roughly thirty miles away.

I'll be honest. I didn't even know there was a desert in South Dakota. I am hopelessly uneducated about the geography of my own country, but I am learning, taking the hands-on approach. Desert, mountain range, arroyo, plateau, river, valley, even geyser. They were all just words until I saw them for myself. Language so often falls short when describing natural scenery, natural beauty. How can it not? The earth is so enormous. We are so tiny next to it. And we call ourselves its master. No one trapped in a desert at mid-day with no water and no way out considers himself a master. In that

instance, you are the victim, the walking dead, waiting until Earth is merciful enough to end your suffering. The more I see, the more I know in my bones that in our roughly two hundred thousand years of existence as a species, we have mastered nothing.

In this instance, I'm trying to get to the Badlands after dark. I was given some information at my hotel advertising a ranger-led stargazing program. When I approach the entrance, there is an enormous billboard outside of the Badlands commanding incoming tourists: "Do not touch Prairie Dogs. They carry *PLAGUE!*"

Whoa, okay, South Dakota Badlands. Thanks for letting me know. I definitely won't try to make any lovable prairie dog friends on this visit.

There's supposed to be an entry fee, but I never pay it. I think I get lucky and enter from the wrong side, or at least from the end that is usually used as an exit. It is unmanned by park rangers and I shrug as I drive by the empty ticket booth, thinking, *Okay. Guess I pay at the other end.*

The Badlands of South Dakota appear to be a ghostly white color in the dwindling light of evening. They are the bone to the Painted Desert's rosy flesh. I'm not sure which is older, but I wonder if some day the American Southwest will be bleached white like this. Maybe it is not so white under the light of day. Maybe there are hues and shades, reserved for when tourists come at a reasonable hour, such as when the sun is out. I feel its whiteness is its way of admonishing me for driving through so many beautiful places when there is not adequate light by which to see their beauty. Perhaps a sharper-eyed soul would still have been able to enjoy Yellowstone's natural wildness, but I am sort of night blind, which is another reason why what I did to Yellowstone was a travesty. I tell myself

it's just the way it worked out, but it could have worked out differently, with a little foresight.

I tell myself that foresight isn't really humanity's thing. We are ever so much better at looking back than we are at looking forward. Something about the unknown and the unknowable versus what is known and what can be learned. If we had foresight, we would have come up with a much more viable way to power our motor vehicles than the black bile produced by pressure, time and our dead ancestors.

Do we know that's what we're doing, I wonder? Powering our present with the literal remnants of history, remnants we know will run out eventually? Remnants we must go to increasing lengths to dredge up from the Earth's interior, risking her life for it. I know the score. I know that if oil were discovered beneath them, it would only take one capitalist-minded Congress to tear up the entirety of the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone and all the American deserts to get to it. All the conservationists in the world couldn't save them. God, how I hope some new way is invented, is allowed to be invented, before I have to witness much more destruction. And how glad I am that I have caught even a passing glance at these things before some commercial enterprise eclipses their beauty in the mind of America and they are sacrificed to the gods of Profit.

It's warmer in the park than outside it, but as the sun sets, the white desert rocks start to release their heat with an almost audible hiss. The darkness gathers around them like a soothing balm after the ravages of the day's harsh sunlight. The rocks glow with affection in the pale light of the moon.

"Ahhhhh," it seems to sigh in relief. "I've been waiting for that all day."

Night settles in quickly and I drive through Badlands National Park, the deep purple of the landscape punctuated occasionally by white dunes, like the bleached bones of Time itself have risen to the surface. When I come to the ranger station at the other end, there is no one there. If there was a stargazing demonstration, I either missed it, or it was canceled. I even pull out my Mag-Lite and wander around behind the building a bit, seeing if I can find a trail or a group of people craning their necks under the direction of a park ranger. No luck.

I'm disappointed, but I can look at the stars by myself. I even know what a few of the constellations are. Driving out through the other end of the park would spit me out on the highway two hours from my too-expensive hotel, so I turn around and drive back to the other end of the park. Halfway back, I pull over in a viewing area. I pull a pillow and blanket out of the backseat and set up camp on top of the car.

The sky is clear and bedazzled with a million stars, or more. A hundred million, a thousand million. A million-million. Old favorites like Orion and the Dippers are hard to find in the chaos. There are even shooting stars. As I lie there, staring up at them, something ominous starts to happen. Tendrils of cloud, thick and reaching, stretch into view. Soon the tendrils are a blanket of cloud cover, darker than the deepening night. Fear grips my heart and I sit up, knocking my bowl off the roof of the car.

It gets caught up in the windshield wiper instead of breaking on the pavement below and I breathe a sigh of relief. Until I look back up into the distance and see the storm, the most likely reason there was no stargazing program tonight.

An electrical storm is raging in the distance. Lightning strikes over and over again, each new bolt larger and more surprising than the last, as if the gods are having a

contest to see who can create the best display and I am the unlikely judge. Thunder rumbles above it all, not so much threatening as adding ambiance. Still, my heart shudders every time the low growl of it can be heard.

The hairs on my arm stand straight up in the air and I think back to the Painted Desert, to my fear of being caught out on the walking trail as a storm rolled in on top of me. I was comforted by the daylight, by the other tourists, by my cell phone. Here, there is no daylight, no other tourists. The ranger station is closed and there may be one Park Ranger rattling around the empty desert, making sure no one is foolish enough to get trapped by it and my phone does have five bars. There is also the car, my chariot to safety if things get bad.

I am terrified, make no mistake about it. More terrified than I have ever been in my waking life. There is real danger dancing before my eyes, one of nature's most efficient and hot-tempered killers. But it is so beautiful. I sit on my car and watch it, smelling the electric sizzle of disrupted ions, feeling the flashes of heat caused by atmospheric disruption. Every muscle in my body is tense, ready to bolt if the storm moves closer. But I make myself stay. I make myself watch. I force a confrontation with my terror.

*This is your life, I say to myself. Live it.*

There are, after all, people who chase storms for fun.

When the wind becomes gusty and brings with it a chill and fine mists of rain, I decide it's time to go before I am caught out in it. Reluctantly, I leave nature's firework display and head back to the hotel.

Once back, I fall asleep to the steady hum of motorcycles and I wake up to them the next day. I check out of the hotel and grab a complimentary apple and Styrofoam cup of coffee before heading to the real reason I have come to this swarthy patch of South Dakota. In the midst of the Roaring Twenties, somebody decided the Black Hills of South Dakota could use a little punching up. Or blowing up, as the case may be.

A sculptor named Gutzon Borglum who set his sights on the epic had just designed an enormous bas relief Confederate War Memorial in my home state of Georgia on Stone Mountain. He was not, ultimately, the one who finished the Stone Mountain carving, as his work was dynamited off the mountain face to make way for a different artist after Borglum had a falling out with the Daughters of the Confederacy. He was also an active member of the Ku Klux Klan. Back in 1920s America, that wasn't quite the big deal it is today and he was mostly doing it to impress the Daughters of the Confederacy. Still, you don't hear about Borglum's opinions on racial superiority in the Mt. Rushmore gift shop and that's probably for the best.

After the Stone Mountain debacle, Doane Robinson, then-state historian of South Dakota, approached Borglum about sculpting some rock formations in the Black Hills into the visages of famous people. Borglum had the idea to carve presidents, but in some alternate dimension, Mount Rushmore is probably an icon of pop culture or commerce, adorned with the faces of Charlie Chaplin and John D. Rockefeller. Hearst probably would have gotten himself up there, too, as he provided some early financial backing. It's probably better they went with presidents.

To rub salt in the wounds of America's total inability to get its shit together where brown people are concerned, the Black Hills themselves were deeded to the Lakota in perpetuity by one of the many (bullshit) treaties drawn up by the U.S. Government during the 1800s, but that didn't stop a bunch of white guys from dynamiting the shit out of one of its sacred mountains and carving the visages of four dead white guys into it. Borglum was crazy about America, especially American expansion and chose each of the four presidents of Mt. Rushmore for their uses of Manifest Destiny. Washington was chosen because he was first. Jefferson for the Louisiana Purchase, Lincoln for "keeping the nation together," by winning the Civil War, and Roosevelt for the Panama Canal. There is sometimes talk of adding more faces.

To the Lakota, Rushmore was *Six Grandfathers*. Now it's Four Presidents. The math of the American Indian never quite comes out right. What is land worth? How many lives? How many dead constitute a genocide? How much of what is taken constitutes theft?

When I first approach from the highway and see the four faces staring stoically across the American landscape, it looks smaller than I thought it would and I text home saying so. Also, when you first see it from the highway, Roosevelt and Lincoln look kind of like they're crammed together in an elevator and are pretty uncomfortable about how close they have to stand to each other. Either that or they're playing Gay Chicken<sup>24</sup> and Lincoln is winning.

I pull into the complex maze the Park Service has erected to temporarily store the vehicles of the two million annual visitors that Mt. Rushmore receives. I almost end up in

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<sup>24</sup> Gay Chicken is when two straight people, usually dudes, see how close they can get to kissing without actually kissing.

the lane that will carry me right out of the parking deck and back onto the highway, but catch my mistake before it is too late. the road is teaching me and for once, I am learning.

I smoke a joint in the parking deck, ducking my head below the dash to pretend I'm looking for something in the floorboard whenever someone happens by. Then I get out and approach Rushmore in person.

It's not smaller than I thought it would be. In fact, the breadth and enormity of it is quite impressive, especially when one considers the comparatively primitive means with which it was created. Dynamite and chisels and precarious slings hung over the side of an unforgiving, stolen mountain.

Mt. Rushmore was begun in 1927 and completed in 1941, with a remarkable number of zero deaths caused by the act of carving the mountain. Borglum died just before its completion from an embolism. You'd think such an obvious *fuck you* to the Native American would be cursed, but no. In this case, it seems that God *is* an American. At least they didn't put Andrew Jackson or Martin Van Buren, the Trail of Tears presidents up there. It's bad enough Jackson got the twenty dollar bill, despite having been a violent, duel-prone racist who, in his spare time, was crazier than a shithouse rat, but he threw keggers on the White House lawn and if there's one thing America loves, it's a president you can have a beer with.

Oh country, my country. Sometimes I hate you as much as I love you. O beautiful, for spacious skies and amber waves of prejudice, exploitation and open persecution. Just because most nations have pasts as dark as ours doesn't make it right. Nothing will ever make these things right. Not even the formal apology to all Native

Americans signed by President Obama in 2009, with an addendum that said apology does not ratify or honor any previously broken treaties, of course. A lengthy description of the many travesties committed against the Native Americans over the past five hundred years was also removed.

“We don’t need to go over all that again, do we, baby?” Congress said. “I said I’m sorry, already. But sometimes you just make me so mad. Maybe if you didn’t make me so mad, I wouldn’t have to hit you. It was for your own good, you know.”

Meanwhile, most Native Americans look around at their desolate reservations and long history of being whacked over the head with the short end of the stick, wishing there was a way they could divorce us once and for all, but the law is not in their favor.

Is this unpatriotic? To see these stone faces as a mask covering a brutal, ugly face? How we love to believe our country is the light of the world, but hate to admit that warm, suffuse glow is also a funeral pyre. I don’t think so. I think seeing these things is essential, especially if we’re ever going to stop doing them. Knowing and recognizing the hypocrisy of America doesn’t make one unpatriotic. It makes one aware of the cost of all our ease and luxury. People suffered for this “Shrine of Democracy<sup>25</sup>”, for all shrines to democracy.

Cynicism aside, Mt. Rushmore is pretty cool. Smooth and detailed, you forget you’re standing outside looking at a mountain for a moment. You could just as easily be in a museum, admiring the legacy of Michelangelo. There’s hardly any wear on it, even after sixty-nine<sup>26</sup> years of weather. There is even a sparkle in Washington’s eye.

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<sup>25</sup> Their words, not mine. This phrase is all over the gift shop and official website.

<sup>26</sup> My brotha.

The granite scree below the sculpture itself is just as much a part of the Rushmore experience as Rushmore itself. Granite rocks that look like gravel from a distance, but are actually about the size of automobiles tumble down the rock face like crumbs the presidents forgot to brush away after many, many dinners. There are signs asking you not to take any rocks, but I do anyway, this time as an active act of rebellion. *How you gonna tell me not to steal, federal government, when that whole mountain is hot? Those rocks don't belong to you, either.*

A recent addition to the Mount Rushmore tourist complex is a Native American display of teepees, buffalo hides and art. There are real-life Native Americans giving craft demonstrations and educating tourists on the spiritual significance of the Black Hills to the indigenous Lakota. So, at least there's some attempt to bridge the gap between what America does and what it says. I really want to sneak off and climb to the top, but there are gates and security shacks and even though I don't have any weed on my person, it's probably a good idea not to press my luck. It would take longer to get up there than I think and I'd end up abandoning my pursuit out of dehydration and general boredom anyway.

I get a benevolent stranger to take the requisite photo of me on the pavilion in front of Rushmore, where my grandparents stood when they came. When the joint starts to wear off, I leave.

Leaving Rushmore, I see a billboard for something called Cosmos Mystery Area, something that sounds right up my alley. I have lunch and head to it.

It's another roadside attraction, the kind advertising magic. Come experience a mysterious phenomenon where the laws of physics have gone beserk! Enter a topsy-turvy world and feel the sensation!

It's pretty weird, I'll give it that. There are two log shacks right out of a horror movie. They are warped and stand against the mountain at odd angles. The trees that grow around the shacks bend dramatically toward the earth in a circle, as if pulled down by some mysterious force. A tour guide explains that strange gravitational forces are at play in the Mystery Area. It was discovered by two campers in the 1950s, who felt strange sensations when they entered the area and found the original shack in the warped state you see it in when you visit and built the second shack to see if they could recreate the effects. And it worked.

The tour guide will then perform a series of demonstrations, like making a tennis ball roll uphill and pouring water that flows up out of a cooler instead of down. Then she'll take you inside one of the shacks. Inside, perspective is slanted. You stand straight against a wall and have no balance or support. You feel you may fall over at any second. You stand parallel to the wall and feel perfectly normal. Everyone in your tour group sticks out from the floor at odd angles. Some people reach out to the air in front of them for support, as if they know they shouldn't be able to stand at this angle. There's a "Truth Chair" that balances on its back legs if you sit in it, as long as you tell the truth (or the guide doesn't discreetly apply any pressure to it).

There are other demonstrations, involving levels and short people who are miraculously taller than tall people when standing on a supposedly level plane. A level is

provided to prove how level the plane is. When I'm there, I let myself get carried away by the wonder of it.

*How is this possible? What mysterious supernatural force is responsible? Lakota curse? Alien technology? Giant magnet? Special minerals found in the mountain's interior? Shouldn't there be scientists studying this place?*

I think that maybe I've finally found a roadside attraction where the magic is real, palpably real, even though I know that magic is magic precisely because you can never catch it.

When I ask the guide the question she must dread most, "Why?" she replies with a shrug.

"Nobody knows."

*Bullshit.*

And it is bullshit, all of it, but it's good, clean bullshit. Knowing that something so weird and impressive can be manmade makes it more impressive than attributing it to alien magnets or ghost curses, anyway.

How do they do it? Spoiler Alert! The Cosmos Mystery Area puts more effort into it than most, with two cabins and the bent trees, but ultimately it's all an optical illusion involving a lot of tedious landscaping and probably affixing ropes to the trees when they were still saplings so they'd grow down. The entire area is an uphill slant built on a larger downhill slant, or the other way around. There are mystery hills and gravity hills everywhere, where what appears to be a sharp downward slope is actually a larger uphill slope, creating the gravitational anomalies. Murphy, North Carolina has one,

though you can only really try it out late at night. You park at the bottom of a particular hill in the middle of an intersection and put your car in neutral. Within a few moments, the car starts slowly rolling back uphill. More famous counterparts are found in Boone and Blowing Rock, North Carolina. Blowing Rock has a mystery house of its own. There was also the Mystery Spot back in Santa Cruz that I wish *The Road* had brought to my attention before I moved on, but alas.

Don't let knowing stop you from checking out a mystery area if you come across one, though. Walking at impossible angles to the floor is pretty cool, no matter how the attraction owner made it happen.

"You guys must have crazy strong legs," I tell the guy behind the counter while buying my postcards in the gift shop. He laughs.

I move on.



Figure 7: Cosmos!

Like a bookend to my breeze through the Painted Desert, I find a smaller, much less impressive petrified forest outside of the Badlands, too. It is some guy's extensive private collection of petrified wood from around the area for which he charges five dollars a ticket to see. It looks like an ancient graveyard, with the logs just sort of scattered about a grassy fenced-in area. One conglomeration of rocks looks like a Satanic shrine, with a bovine skull in the middle of a circle of rocks. There are hand-made, carefully lettered wooden signs adorning the area, such as a sign proclaiming one massive log to be the largest ever found in the Badlands area. There is one sign explaining the geological process wood undergoes to become petrified, using measurements of time like sixty-five million years. Right next to it is a Biblical Time Chart, proclaiming the world to be six thousand years old, that men used to live nine hundred and fifty years and longevity slowly declined and how all of these geological formations were made by the pressure of the flood of Noah.

I guess that's fair. This is the first place that's even tried to present, much less rationalize, the creationist view of things. Also, it makes the more sciency point of view look better by being, well, insane. Especially the part where it takes the whole Noah thing seriously. Yep, two each of the literally millions of species in existence today, some of which we haven't even discovered yet, all fit on a wooden boat built by a guy who was already seven hundred years old and floated around for just over a year before the waters receded and Life hit the Restart button. Whatever gets you through the day, I guess.

I mean, I believe the world exists because a loving blue god dances the dance of Preservation for it and on the day the music ends, this universe will end and a new one will begin, so I can't really judge anyone else on their crazy beliefs, but at least mine is

more of a beautiful metaphor and I'm not petitioning any schoolboards to present my view as an equally valid alternative to the weights-and-measures rationality of field tested science.

To each his or her own, though. If the road has taught me anything, it's that you can't tell anybody anything. We, each and all of us, have to find our own way. We will insist on finding our own way, even if you try to present an easier alternative. God knows I have.

It's the American way after all.

CHAPTER 21  
HOME AGAIN, HOME AGAIN

“Lucky to have been where I have been, lucky to be coming home again.”-Jason Mraz &  
Colbie Caillat

Leaving South Dakota, I watch the sun set from a rest stop that has a memorial plaque to the Lewis and Clark expedition, which apparently passed through here. I have accidentally wandered into the footsteps of another ancestor, William Clark. As a child, I would attend the Clark family reunions, the annual gathering of the local descendants of this famous American, or more likely, of one of his nine siblings, but all the Clarks want to claim William as their progenitor. There are more relations of his in Colquitt, Georgia than you'd think. Saying I was related to him was always my favorite tidbit to offer up in history class.

After South Dakota, the \$300 mad dash home begins. That's what my budget is down to. I put as much distance between myself and the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally as I can in search of a cheaper hotel room and surely enough, they go back down to the thirty-five to fifty-five range.

In Missouri, I get to wave goodbye to Route 66 one last time as I jump across it heading east. There's a big, kitschy store selling fifties memorabilia and I wander around it for a while. I buy several pairs of costume sunglasses. I get back on the road.

In Illinois, there's a dusty little town named Metropolis. Whether it inspired the comic, or whether the comic inspired it, I don't know. I know that it is not New York City, the real place Metropolis was based on, but they do have a huge statue of Superman downtown, a wood cutout of Superman's body you may take a photo behind, so that it looks like your head is on Superman's body and a Superman Supercenter.

I wonder what this town would be without Superman. Probably just another Colquitt, a small town people accidentally pass through on their way to somewhere else. That's what Metropolis, Illinois is, anyway, but at least now it's got a sense of humor about itself and a bunch of novelty Supermans all over the place. That's the kind of pop culture capitalization I can get behind.

In Tennessee, I pass through Nashville and stop to eat at the historic Loveless Café. I pull into the parking lot with Patty Loveless' "Blame It On Your heart" playing, another thing I get right. The food is extraordinary, serving the tastiest sourdough biscuits you're likely to find. I don't see any country stars, but then, I probably wouldn't recognize most of them even if I did. When I get back to my car, there's a religious tract under the windshield wiper. I'm almost home.

Singing along to my country past as I leave, I think that maybe I would try to be a country singer, if I didn't think I'd be boycotted for not being a Christian.

I get home by way of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which I've actually never been to, despite living next door to it for almost six years now. It's like coming home. The overcast skies, the mysterious fog, the lush green canopies and twisty,

windy roads, the smell of skunk cabbage and oak, even the mountain tunnels. They fill me with electricity. *Almost there.*

Naturally, ten minutes after entering the park and about a hundred miles from my front door, I pop a flat. The tire travels over the white line and gets snagged on a ragged chunk of pavement. POP. BANG.

I stop.

Well. It looks like I finally get to learn how to change a tire. By doing it. I've popped a flat before, not just in Amarillo, but on another mountain pass, in my early twenties. Someone stopped to help as I fumbled with the jack.

And history repeats itself. As I fumble with getting the jack in the right place, an older couple stops to help. I chat idly with the lady, telling her about my trip as the gentleman changes my tire. She can't get over the fact that I'm by myself, was by myself the whole time and survived being by myself. I assure her that all three are true.

I thank them profusely and they wish me luck on the remainder of my journey. The gentleman advises I pull over as soon as I can and put some air in my spare. (I do.)

Staring across the familiar gentle rolls of the Appalachian foothills, I think of how far I went, how far I've come. How far I have left to go.

I turn smoothly on to exit 85 down Asheville Highway to the stop light. I turn left. As I pass Pizza Hut, the sign says,

WELCOME BACK

TIFF NABOOMIE<sup>27</sup>!

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<sup>27</sup> The Naboomie part is a long story.

I burst into surprised laughter and tears. My co-workers evidently missed me. I'll say my tear-filled hellos later. Right now, I have a burning need to be back at my apartment, that same port of refuge I found after jumping ship from Debt. I roll up the driveway as "Lucky" by Jason Mraz and Colbie Caillat plays. 'Roo, my friend and current roommate (the other guy moved to Tennessee), walks out of the front door to meet me.

"How was it?" he asks.

"It was awesome," I say.

This journey may be over, but I can't wait to get back on the road.

Roll credits.

End Titles.

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