

Travels with Joey in Search of America

By SEAN McGRATH

PART ONE

Entry One, March 15, 3:20 am

I-91 N to CT-15

"Entering Connecticut"

#NP:

Ben Howard - "Black Flies"

Mini Mansions - "Any Emotions"

Spooky Black - "Take the Blame"

Neither of us slept very well - tossing and turning before a few hours of half-sleep and whatthefuckisthatalarm propels us into existence at 1:30 in the cold winter morning. Our respective showers routines etc. Count to 10. Socks, underwear, fuck it. Too much to count. Let's trust ourselves this once.

When I arrive at Joey's he is squeezing tears from his mom with a final hug goodbye. Mike looks on from the living room, it is his 59th birthday. Wisdom will tell him we'll take care of each other... Probably.

Through Connecticut now, moving out of first gear, slowly, and Joey already needs a red bull - if this is any indication, we'll be jacked up on something this whole trip. The plan was for that something to be "the fun stuff" as Joey calls it, but he alerts me before we've even gotten on the highway that he'd taken care of "pretty much all of it" in the few days leading up to our departure.

"Didn't you have two of them?" I ask.

"Yep."

"So how much is left?"

"A pathetic amount, dude."

"Wow" I say, looking at the man who will be

driving for the next however-many days. "Maybe it's better."

Maybe it's better. Better that we're not trying to cover 3400 miles in under a week with two stops in between while hopped up on prescriptions, caffeine, nicotine, and other such medicine. Better that we don't have two bags full of temptation burning a hole in our backpacks as the dawn breaks in Maryland. Better that we don't get ripped for 8 straight hours in Nashville then hit the road and end up strung out on the Texas border worrying about ghosts, spotty starlight, and curious cops. But still, I look at Joey a little concernedly as we haul his life out of Massachusetts. He doesn't look exactly like shit, he never does, but he's got to be shaking somewhere.

"This Greek mechanic told me if I got pulled over they would have towed my car," he says, nodding towards the fresh inspection sticker on the front window.

"Haha, oh man imagine if that happened while we were just in the middle of buttfuck southern Mississippi..." Humor helps us gear up. "They wouldn't just tow us dude, they would give us a full cavity search. Imagine they don't even arrest us either, just leave us on the side of the road. 'Have a nice day y'all queers,' they'll yell, driving away."

"They take our debit cards."

"Cut our licenses in half."

Maybe it's better. Better too that Joey did, after all, get this shitbox Scion registered and inspected before we trailed a 5x8 stuffed Uhaul across the east and south of this great nation. God bless it. And us.

Entry Two, 4:47 am

Tappan Zee Bridge

#NP:

Murakami - "Made In Heights"

Head & the Heart - "Rivers and Roads"

Hippie Sabotage - "Your Soul"

Over the short bridge, the moonlight trickling through the girders aims a constant spotlight on the sole moving car, passes through the driver's window, and washes the faces inside with a sinister youth before settling upon the surface of the Hudson below. The city as seen from the Tappan Zee Bridge is sometimes the city seen for the last time, a first passage towards the wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the west.¹

In "The Fellowship of the Ring," when Sam and Frodo reach Farmer Maggot's land in Eastfarthing, Sam, who carries not a single drop of daring in his DNA, tells Frodo "This is it... If I take one more step this will be the farthest away from home I've ever been." Sam then pauses for only a moment before an encouraging, if a bit naive, prodding from Frodo to take the step (and then many, many more). He then plunges a deep breath in, impossibly unaware of the breadth of the journey the duo are about to embark upon, and moves forward.

Not to pronounce a parallel to the perhaps-most-epic travel story of our century, (which would make me Frodo in this case, ugh) but I do suspect Joey, whose mailing address has never listed a state other than Massachusetts in his 27 years on earth, could relate here to the significance in crossing thresholds and declaring, at least to oneself, intention to move forward. Always forward.

Other quotes, observings, ephemera:

"Ugh, this coffee tastes like dog piss. It tastes like that hippie stirred it with his dick."

"Yooo you guys want any subway in this coffee? What kinda bread you want this coffee on? Sorry I'm stoned."

I-84 to New England WRONG WAY

"You guys know you're going to need to sleep on this trip at some point right?"

"What means 'sleep'."

"We're innocent travelers, honest."

"There are no travelers, only servants of the Dark Lord."

"Just because we're not alone

You echo words you've heard

You let me go just to watch me discern

Just because it feels the same, til the morning comes

Even roads fill the sun so cold"

Entry Three, 6:41 am

I-287 S
New Jersey

Cosmic Fog
A poem for the nicer parts of Jersey

The light creeps in layers
Dusts the shadows
Shapes the snow on foothills
Paints red the entrails
Of last night's dead road flesh

Sunday morning sun,
How many late nights have you stifled,
How many ugly streaks have you stretched
Across the once adored woman
Who has now stolen too much of the bed?

Very few lights dot the hillsides,
Taking color and distinct form,
Branches and limbs like stiff hairs;
When the fog lifts we, too,
may miss Cairo.

#NP:
Diplo and Friends - "Lean On"
Oh Wonder - "Technicolor Beat"

Morning Coffee, an aside

The Americano, which is mostly an espresso with water added to the top, now popular in hip cafes and drip bars throughout the country, was once a semi-pejorative term for the coffee (and the drinkers) American soldiers consumed in Europe, specifically Spain and Italy, during World War II.

Raised on Folgers, Americans were not accustomed to the strength and bitterness of Italian espresso, and so would need to have water added to weaken the effect (hence the name). Imagine: shaky GOPs fighting in the trenches, pulling pins, aiming down the sights of carbines and Springfields, all the while holding in that watery, empty, churning feeling too much caffeine

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makes in your guts. Hey man, next time, put some water on it.

Just some places we passed, and a quip about twps:

Twp of Montville
 Town of Boonton
 Rockaway River
 Twp of Parsippany - Troy Hills
 Twp of Morris
 Whipping River
 Far Hills Borough
 Pluckemin

Twp: Washington Township, Gloucester County,
 South New Jersey

OR

TWP: Tit wank potential. The potential ability
 a woman has to perform a tit wank on a man's
 penis. Usually determined by the size of her
 breasts.

A conversation, as we pass Cokesbury, New Jersey:

"How many people do you think have been compelled
 to do coke solely because they live in this town...
 'You HAVE to do it man... You're in COKESbury!'"

"Yeah man, it's called COKESbury, not PUSSYbury."

Lolzz. Ride on.

Entry Four, 8:10 am

I-78 W

"Pennsylvania Welcomes You"

On cue, the undercarriage protector slaps to the ground and sounds/feels like brakes grinding. The first casualty of the trip: a shoelace from a pair of Joey's Nikes, which he loops around the bumper then through a hole in the molded plastic and ties it off with a pair of double-knotted bunny ears facing frontward. You can tell we were never Boy Scouts.

Did you know: PA is nicknamed "The Independence State"? Lots of history here. Read a book kids.

Entry Five, 9:55 am

I-81 S, somewhere in Pennsylvania

#NP:

Drake and I Love Makonen - "Tuesday"

Despite three red bulls, two coffees, and a dose of prescription, Joey still fights the urge to fall asleep. It could be the slow-rollicking nooks and crannies of the Pennsylvania hillside, the steady volume of the tunes, the young sun buried behind white-tipped clouds, or his two weeks of reckless partying preceding this trip, I'm not sure (hint - the last one), either way, he prepares me to drive, walking me through gear shifting and clutch-braking as he ponders the effects of the Rx on his body and billboards which ask "Heaven or Hell, if you die tonight where will you go?" Maybe he thinks what he might do with "80 million" in Powerball earnings, as another billboard boasts.

A theoretical: if winning the 80 mil meant you had to settle here in the middle of Dutch country for life, would you still want it?

We will pass through five states on the I-81, the longest leg of the first day, and though we have been driving the entire morning, Nashville by sundown seems a far way off.

It's not yet noon, but still we query the state laws for buying alcohol on Sundays. Pennsylvania, or at least Philly, as I recall, has some strange guidelines which allow for the purchase of beer in pizza shoppes and six packs behind bars, which might mean there is no booze time-out while the sun is up today. So even though Joey is still shaking off some cobwebs, we do figure a pop-stop would be merited so we don't have to hit Nashville with much less than a buzz.

Here we are reminded to keep Pennsylvania beautiful; we may recall the geographic immensity of this state compared to the New England frontiers we are most used to traversing; perhaps the immensity of this country itself comes to mind. I draw in a recollection of sympathy for the Joad Family who could be found at the brink of Depression bargaining their way across state lines in jalopies. They hauled their way to the American west as well, from very different origins of course, but likewise prompted by escape and searching.

As symbols are all about timing, on cue, a blue, loadless semi sports a well painted American flag behind its cab, and we are reminded now, despite the odd brown-shaded hills, yellow/blue plates, and highway-route demarcations, all these roads are paid and paved with redwhiteblue blood.

And like that, we've caught our second wind.

Various 'burgs in this state.

Harrisburg (state capital)
 Shippensburg
 Chambersburg
 Churlesburg
 Dennisburg
 McDonaldsburg
 Gettysburg
 St. Petersburg
 Stuffsburg
 Penisburg
 Burgensburg
 Shitholeburg
 Whenwillthisfuckinstatend...burg

Entry Six, 11:19 am

1-81 S, across the Mason-Dixon, a stint in Maryland soon turns into West Virginia

#NP Amber Coffman - "Get Free"

The speed limit here is 70, surely one of many variances from Northern law we might see as we enter into the Dixie states. Some years ago, breaching the border distinguished by the Mason-Dixon would have meant much more than cultural/political conflictions and 5 miles an hour on the highway. One might even be able to imagine the exhausted exuberance that would have washed over a former slave as they crossed that line in the direction opposite us somewhere in the 19th century, only for them to encounter a world invisibly as unfair and insufferable as the one they had just fled.

So we push further south, our irreverent imitations of local dialects turning from inbred Minnesotans to homoracialphobic inbred Confederates. Things you might hear, or see, from us as a fly on the window:

-We don't take kindly to your kind 'round here boy.

-Y'all ain't from around here are ya?
Better loosen up them blue jeans round here skinny boi. We might get a hankerin an take ya ta church.

-What kinda faggey car is that you driving there? A SKY-on? Yall better put some metal nuts on the back of that hitch if YA finney live round dese here parts.

So it goes...

After chasing down a mini-truck to photo-capture real evidence of the redrightwing politicisism that welcomed us into the south in the form of an "OBAMA SUCKS" bumper sticker, Joey veers off the road and into an abrupt exit, then sits at a

green light for a beat too long while messaging God-knows-who and I realize how immune I've become to his text-and-driving. *Mark irony here* if it is the death of us this trip, (Mom, family, girlfriend, I love you), but the root cause of my lack of worry is certainly the inviolable trust I hold in this kid, with whom I joycammed dick-pics at 12 years old during our very first sleepover, with whom I've shared secrets, hurts, girls (literally, sorry Cassie), and even needles (just kidding, but I mean I probably would if I would - I'm talking about tattoos, freaks... jk jk I am talking about heroin. I would do heroin. With Joey. Using the same needle. There, I said it.) Not to mention the numerous other nights where I put my life in his hands as he drunk-drove us home from whatever Irish bar, club or shithole we were crawling out of. So yes, although we're hauling a Uhitch about as big as the dikey white shoebox that is Joey's car and operating on minimal sleep and maximal stimulants, I am totally cool with Joey shoving his head into and out of his phone while pushing this thing XC. And that's awl I hafta say about that.

Explanatory:

At this point it is safe to assume, as a pretext and necessity for textual economy, that the narrator and Joey are and will continue to be under the influence of some variant of stimulant for the duration of the trip, and will likewise be making many pit stops to perform a true Americano unload. These shall go undocumented heretofore.

Notice:

Persons attempting to find narrative structure in this piece will be confused, persons attempting to find humor in this piece will be angered, persons attempting to find clarity in this piece will be demoralized, persons attempting to persecute the characters in this piece will be righteously satisfied.²

Entry Seven, 12:00 pm

I-81 S (fucking still), some way into Virginia

Joey and I banter about Waffle Houses, southern racism, and crudely satirize lynchings from giant iron crucifixes. We ultimately decide to get tattoos of Confederate flags on some visible part of our untanned flesh.

Recall That Movie; An interlude as we move through Cow Country, Virginia:

A father and son, owner and farmhand on a family ranch. Cattle. The son is a ladykiller and real Texas heel. He's moved through near every woman, married or not, in their one-horse town and soon sets his sights on the housemaid, attractive and wise to his ways. The grandson/the Heel's nephew more than loves him, he admires him, and yearns for a few nights out on the town with Heel. The father, meanwhile, is beyond yearning for Heel to reform his ways, and has written him off some time ago, about the time the favored son passed.

A classic tale of tradition versus supplanter; family honor versus brute survival; father versus son. When the lot of the cows contract foot and mouth, the father is forced to watch as his life's work, investments, and pride are herded into an excavated pit, shot and buried. Out of principle, he takes his two prize Longhorns out back and shoots them himself. Soon after, he dies of a broken heart. The woman takes a bus out of town. Likewise, the boy sets off on his own, leaving Heel alone to sit and reflect over the waste that has become of his land and family. A closeup: Heel gives pause as he stares outward (and maybe inward?!) toward the death of all things around him, then, with a slash of his arm, deduces the whole of his world and his part in it with an unprincipled grunt and pops a drink. Credits roll.

"Hud" as he was named in the eponymous 1963 film was as immoral and despicable a character as one would see in a popular protagonist perhaps since Charles Foster Kane, but Paul Newman played the role so beautifully, so unabashedly, that one mightn't help but

feel an inkling of forgiveness for the unfortuitous
rancher stuck in a town too small for his britches. We
love you, late Paul Newman, and all your salad
dressings too!

Entry Eight, 2:46 pm

A touch northeast of Tennessee, our third fill-up

Made a subconscious decision to blare hip-hop the entire way through this state - if they're going to boast red bumper stickers and plot trinities of crucifixes on hillsides, we can certainly bump Toronto, North Carolina and Chicago's finest.

The discography:

Drake - If You're Reading This it's Too Late

J. Cole - 2014 Forest Hills Drive

Kanye West - My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy

Obligatory lyrical indulgence: Kanye West - "Lost in the World"

I'm up in the woods, I'm down on my mind
I'm building a still to slow down the time

I'm lost in the world, I'm down on my mind
I'm new in the city, and I'm down for the night
Down for the night
Said she's down for the night

.....

You're my devil, you're my angel
You're my heaven, you're my hell
You're my now, you're my forever
You're my freedom, you're my jail
Your're my lies, you're my truth
You're my war, you're my truce
Your my questions, you're my proof
You're my stress and you're my masseuse
Mama-say mama-say ma-ma-coo-sah
Lost in this plastic life
Let's break out of this fake ass party
Turn this in to a classic night
If we die in each others arms
We still get laid in our afterlife
If we die in each others arms we still get laid, yeah

Run from the lights
Run from the night
Run for your life
I'm new in the city
Down for the night
Down for the night
Down for the night

.....

Who will survive in America
Who will survive in America
Who will survive in America
Who will survive in America

I'm lost in the world, I'm down on my mind
I'm new in the city, and I'm down for the night
Down for the night

Entry Nine, 4:00 pm

Still in Virginia, a touch further from Tennessee than first thought... Nice work asshole

#NP Nina Simone - "Strange Fruit"

A stop at a general store for gas and a leak saw me confused as to where to put my credit card, then the woman inside dropped her nail in my 6 pack brown bag. I crack one in the car. And another. We get particularly irreverent.

Imagining moments in Virginia: #NoFilter

Scene: A gas stop. The two of us pull up with bass heavy music spilling out of the windows, followed by smoke. Joey starts pumping gas, the door is open, lyrics and beats spilling out.

Forty inch wheels roar in next to us. The man, jeansshirthat, could be a farmer, could be a cop, spits dip through his teeth. Looks right at us.

"Well, lookie what we have here. Couple good for nothing niggers polluting our good air."

Taken aback and partially confused, "Umm, excuse me, dude? You're talking to us?"

"Y'all heard me!"

"Well," one of us says, "not that it even matters, but are you SURE you're talking to us?"

"Oh I'm sure now. If it sounds like a nigger, smells like a nigger, talks like a nigger, well then cod-foundit it's a gosh-darned ni--- hey, what the?!"

Here, Joey starts spouting gasoline on the man. I push in the car-lighter, and when it pops out the man is still in shock about the gasoline he is now drenched in, I grab the red metal and flick it

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onto his person. Joey gets into the car and we roar off. Ace Hood and Rick Ross "Bugatti" blasts from the speakers as, in rear view, we watch the man explode into the flame. Then the whole gas station blows up, the man's shoes fly through the air, just for good measure. Scene end.

Entry Ten, 5:00 pm

1-81, the longest road imaginable on this human earth, but! First sign of Tennessee...
Knoxville: 120 miles.

A cause for celebration. A beer for me. Joey approves, of course. We discuss timeframe again. Will we get dinner in Nashville, *then* shower, or shower *then* get dinner? Who knows?! So many options. So much time. The car is holding up well, knock on glass! Hahahaha.

Oh yeah we're playing music too you fuckers!

Ok ok step back, I was lacking a stretch of the legs and imagination as I berated I-81 above, for that I apologize. It is actually more respectably known as, I'm told, the Blue Star Memorial Highway, dedicated en memoriam for those soldiers who have fought and died bravely for this country. God bless them. God bless the dollar bill, and singularly bless this country above all. May we always be at war within and without.

Now, a spot of history to reflect; as found amongst a selection of brochures and other Tennessee paraphernalia at a rest stop on the TN/VA border:

The Emancipation Proclamation, issued on January 1, 1863, authorized the enlistment of black soldiers. By June, in Tennessee, Gen. Lorenzo Thomas had recruited 3,000 men. By the end of the war, he had enlisted 24,000 soldiers for 22 infantry regiments and 8 artillery units. Nationwide, 200,000 men served in black units known as US Colored Troops (USCTs) and in the Navy.

White officers at first restricted USCTs to support functions such as guarding wagon trains, supply depots, and prisoners. They also constructed forts and railroad, then were posted as guards. Eager to prove their worth in combat, the USCTs soon had their chance. In December 1863, at Moscow, the 61st USCT repulsed Gen. Stephen D. Lee's cavalry as it tore up a railroad

track. At Fort Pillow, on the Mississippi River, USCTs fought Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest's command on April 12, 1864, then were overrun and killed after surrendering. For the remainder of the year, USCTs engaged Forrest at Brice's Crossroads and Tupelo, Mississippi, at Athens, Alabama, and at Pulaski, Tennessee. They fought with distinction in the Battle of Nashville in December. The Tennessee USCTs mustered out of service between 1865 and April 1866, having suffered about 4,500 casualties.³

The Jim Crow Laws would formally begin in 1865, lasting through an indefinite period of the 20th century officially and unofficially.

Entry Eleven, 7:00 pm

I-40 W, pushing in through Knoxville

#NP "Johnny Cash Essentials"
 Breaking Benjamin - "So Cold"
 Shinedown - "45"
 Metallica - "St. Anger"

We do our best to wax country with some Cash as we make trails across Tennessee. A conversation on Folsom Prison, prison security and prisoner censorship is entertained, but, as the sun moves from the windshield to the passenger window and we sense a free hour dusking in the time zone ahead, we make a hard-rock shift into our third gear for the day. The Brewed-in-Virginia six pack is making good suds, so we hold back our bladders, headbang the windows, and floor the gas as travel day one shows its last inning legs.

7 lines:

Sun blanched sky afloat,
 Cut, burned and blinding,
 This city resides a sip away
 From your recalcitrance.
 I've seen lesser roads in the north,
 Where cracks and strays hold sway
 On speed, we flourish now.

5 more lines, but less:

Sun,
 Get the fuck out of my face,
 It is annoying.
 Sincerely,
 Us.

Entry Twelve, 10:00 pm

We finish the ride with a good dosage of downtempo, I get to play my first set of the night, and I'm happy to impress joey - GAYNGS, Friendly Fires are amongst my best, but I have to turn to Pretty Lights, with the sky set 20 degrees past dusk, to make an impact on our most sedated friend. He blinks, laughs, and asks me to run a track back, reissuing confidence that this evening won't end with our arrival at the motel.

Other bands you might have heard:

- Oxides
- Clams Casino
- Robyn
- Fleetwood Mac

We pull up to the Comfort Inn with vengeance and planning. It is the ides. What Colossus might bestride our narrow walks tonight, what Tyrants might sit still in the firmament above, casting eyes down on our backs?

We air-dry after the showers and I ask Joey for hair-advice and some Fiber as he lays out a little pick-up for the evening. Dressed, we hook a right out of our front door, circle back, and sniff out way to center city before midnight.

Entry Thirteen, March 16, 3:45 am

More Jack and coke. We've been up 24 hours now. Joey asks me if I love the idea of me and girlfriend more than I love girlfriend herself. We recount the evening until sleep hits us like a light switch.

Nashville, Tennessee, a summation

Nashville is the city of music. Every year, more singers and musicians flock to the state capital for a shot in the country music business than anywhere else in the US of A. Walking down Broadway, one of the main arteries and attractions in the city, twangy lyrics and folk acoustics spill out from just about every bar and restaurant. It is Sunday night, but the place has the feel of a weekend, couples and singles young and old are out, drawn into this bar or that by the sound and energy of the music and neon signs.

One can see how alluring this place must be to young artists - the crowds are lively and supportive, spurred on no doubt by some Tennessee whiskey - on the stage, they know they are the main attraction, even if only for a few hours at a small venue. When their set is done, a member of the band walks the bar with a collection bin and, as if at church, most guests are compelled to drop in a few bucks.

Nashville also boasts larger venues for star performances, including the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum which has a number of different spaces, with seating from 200 to 1000. For true celebrity performances however, one should look to Titans Stadium, home of Tennessee football and house to up to 10,000 fans. The late Johnny Cash, Nashvillain (my own word), has his own museum off Broadway street, and the city has also seen the likes of Billy Ray Cyrus, Lady Antebellum, Diamond Rio, Old Crow Medicine Show, and Lonestar rise to stardom from within the ranks. Ke\$ha, Paramore, Red, and Young Buck have similarly found national success out of the Nashville music scene, but this is truly a country town.

A fan of neither country music nor Jack Daniels whiskey, however, I am out of place in the city. In skinny levis and white sneakers, the doormen who stamp

my hand on entry are not surprised when they see my Massachusetts license. But they are polite and warm, and one even wishes me a late birthday, emblematic of the type of hospitality one has come to expect in the south. I find myself seeking a place with nice cocktails and whiskey samplings, but end up slurping down Jack and coke out of a plastic cup.

We dance and look at girls, content to see legs and bellies on display for the first time since late summer in New England. Things get blurry quickly, and before we can fill the backs of our hands with bar stamps, we are sound asleep at the Comfort Inn, the first day of travel behind us.

PART TWO

Entry Fourteen, March 16, 3:49 pm

I-40 W

#NP Daft Punk - Random Access Memories

Full tank. Semi-full recovery. 28+ hours of driving, vibing, and then drinking before a full night of sleep and some BBQ. We apply sunblock, drink a coffee, snap a selfie, and move on to Austin. As he turns on the AC, Joey looks over and says "so glad I'll never have to turn the heat on in this car again." And so begins part two of this journey.

Snippets from Nashville:

Lyrics: "I got my six shooter on and I'm ridin on a pony.."

Bartender: "We're out of Makers, we got Jack."

Doorman: "Happy belated!"

Man in convenience store, to clerk: "when's your birthday, I'll getcha a knife... July? July what man, July fourth? I'll getcha a knife on July fourth.... What kinda knife ya want?"

Gas station attendant: "You gotta put a shirt on if you wanna buy that beer, sir."

We merge onto I-40 and get boxed in next to a 24 wheeler and behind an 18 wheeler. Then a hearse pulls up behind us. We pull off the highway, shake off the omens, then pull back on. Let's try this one again.

"Lose Yourself to Dance," the 8th track on the Daft album, comes on and we brush off the haze from the previous night and pull out of neutral. Random Access Memories, released in 2013, was ubiquitous that summer. Pharrell lended his voice to two tracks on the album, "Get Lucky" being the

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hit that catapulted it to huge commercial success, but "Lose Yourself" is the real winner in my book. In terms of commercial success, replayability, and innovative production and engineering I can't think of more successful albums these past 5 years than Random Access Memories and Kanye's aforementioned Dark Twisted Fantasy. As I finish up this entry, "Get Lucky" comes on and, even though I've heard the track probably a thousand times between clubs and radio, I still can't help singing and nodding along. Fuck you if you don't like it.

Entry Fifteen, 7:07 pm

Memphis, Tennessee

#NP Disclosure - Settle

We take a dinner stop in to the Tennessee rivertown before crossing into Arkansas. What we know: Memphis is home of the NBA Grizzlies and is one of the most dangerous cities in the US... not much else. With low expectations and a wary eye, we exit I-40 in search of a light meal and a few new sights. We almost hit a pedestrian who stumbles a little too far off the sidewalk, then get another surprise at the sight of a horse-drawn carriage crossing the middle of the road. "That's their form of public transportation here," we agree.

The city turns out to have more culture than we thought. The quaint carriages abound, carrying romantic (or lazy) couples to whatever nearby destination they choose. Brass pipes out from a speaker stationed on a lamppost, and I am reminded that Memphis, Tennessee's largest city, is considered to be the home of blues music. Perhaps as importantly, Memphis is home to Graceland, the home of the late, great Elvis Presley, who probably had some pretty dope parties in his day.

We eat flatbreads on the patio of The Majestic, a refashioned theater-turned-restaurant. It's been the first time we've eaten outside since a Sunday brunch last fall and, in T-shirts and jeans, it would be hard to throw us out of comfort. It is a quick stop in. We make plenty homophobic remarks as we pass Gayoso Street (and talk in Mexican accents for some reason) and are back on the road by 8:30.

As we traverse the Mississippi by bridge, I look back and envision a real rivertown some centuries ago, a key port along the trading highway linking east and west, the settled and the great frontier. From our birds eye, the river registers as a deep

black expanse, and I envision a small raft housing
a runaway duo, navigating south in blindness.

Entry Sixteen, 8:40 pm

I-40 W

#NP Beck - Morning Phase

On to Arkansas, "The Natural State." This is the west now, and Bible-belt country. We don't pass much besides trucks, strip clubs and scripted billboards. Here is a state I never imagined spending much time in. Nonetheless, it will be about 500 miles and 8 hours before we are through it. Joey takes his medicine and preps mentally for another long haul. He worries that we might run out of gas if stations aren't open in the early morning, but I reassure him we will be fine, and that even if we break down, the worst that would happen is mutant inbreds will creep out of the woods and steal us into the dark.

Beck's album is chill, and instrumentally echoes Pink Floyd at points, but the 12 track Grammy-winner is short and steady and never really grabs our attention. Joey puts on Cat Stevens and we move out through the long, flat night.

Entry Seventeen, 10:30 pm

Little Rock, Arkansas

#NP London Grammar - If You Wait

As we switch interstates, Little Rock rises up out of the night and fills the car with light. Buildings and bridges are lit with greens, light reds, and yellows, and London Grammar's luminous voice sets the perfect soundtrack for this vista. There are many wonderful sights in our world, natural and manmade, but none seem to me more magnetizing than a city as seen through a passing vehicle. Here, all you need is a set of open eyes to take in the shape and form of a pulsing metropolis which, through its candescence and sprawl, vaguely hints at the life energy that buzzes in the towers, bridges and streets, the factories shops stores speakeasies, the alleys and tunnels and the lights the lights lights lights flickering flooding filling in the empty space while the wind, wisened by history and memory, whispers through it all - life, the city is imbued with it, imbues it, and back again.

Elmore Leonard wrote, much more effectively than my paraphrase, about the geography and aesthetic of the city - how some cities, attractive enough on their own, fill out easily, while others, as he says, "have to work for a living," like Detroit for instance, or my own Springfield, a derelict employee I'm sure. As we pass through Little Rock I recall this quote, thinking how this southern capital is putting in a shift at this very moment. As the vista closes and the lights reach out from behind us, I keep my head turned, knowing the city always turns and looks back.

Entry Eighteen, March 17, 12:41 am

I-30

"Entering Texas"

#NP Kavinsky - "Nightcall"

The highway lanes double as we enter the Lone Star State, where the speed limit is 75 and the left lane is for passing only. We now spend some time reflecting back on our stint in Arkansas.

Things on Arkansas

Arkansas, Texarkana, Arkadelphia... buncha creative masterminds in the naming process here.

A lot of deer on the side of the road, like a shit ton, every mile or so, little guys, groups, gangs. Don't you do it little deer, don't you even DEER! Lol get it, like.. Dare. Classic.

Good thing we got all these trucks playing lead blocker for us in case a deer does decide to run out. They probably don't even feel the things when they send their guts a hundred feet into the air.

Discussion of our deaths by decapitation if we were to get sandwiched between two trucks.

Lots of trucker/hooker murder jokes.

Talked to one person in the entire state, a clerk at a gas station/Chesters chicken. She told us we could use the women's restroom because the men's was closed. Joey took a shit in it.

Saw a ghost, wished him peace.

Saw a shooting star, forgot to wish.

Entry Nineteen, 3:24 am

I-635 S, through Dallas

#NP Mackenzie from LA's soundcloud playlist, various house

As we pass through yet another major metro, I turn back to Leonard's previous musing on cities. Here it is in full, as taken from a 1986 article in the Chicago Tribune, which is worth a read if you like summative syntheses on cities written by native residents:

There are cities that get by on their good looks, offer climate and scenery, views of mountains or oceans, rockbound or with palm trees; and there are cities like Detroit that have to work for a living, whose reason for being might be geographical but whose growth is based on industry, jobs.

The man is right. Reflecting on my own Springfield, MA, we see the same thing: a town built on industry, except guns not cars, whose population doubled with the availability of jobs, welcomed immigrants, mostly European, filled up, bustled for a few decades before economic comfort allowed the upper classes to move to the suburbs, filled up again, boosted developments in low-income housing, went through two recessions, got some bad press, policed and policed poorly, and now sits as the murder capital of New England and the 2014 winner of America's worst place to live. What should be its biggest attraction, the Basketball Hall of Fame, stands disconnected from the main of downtown east by a six-lane interstate and catches wafts from Bondy's Island, a waste treatment plant, on its west. Great feats of urban planning, no doubt.

But we are now a far way from home and we, like cities, have the ability to reinvent our identities. Springfield is waiting for an MGM to come in and turn things around, which is kind of

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like hoping dating a rich guy will fix all your problems, while we trek to the Gold Coast, one in search of sand and sun, the other for something of greater substance.

Entry Twenty, 4:26 am

I-35 S

#NP Lil Wayne - Best of The Carter Albums

Drake - "Successful"

Signs:

Martin Luther King Jr. Highway

President George Bush Interstate

"DWI hangovers don't go away. 427 deaths in Texas last year from drunk driving."

"Pornography promotes sex slave trading. TURN IT OFF. Your no could save a life."

Entering: Paris

Entering: Italy

Conversation:

"You think one Italian guy just came here and was like, fuck it, I will call it Italy."

"Ha no no, some Texan probably came in after the Italian guy left and couldn't pronounce the original name like 'what... This place has like three z's in the name... Yall.. Can we just agree to call this place Italy? Yea.. And while we're at it we'll call that Frenchy place up north 'Paris' ... Agreed?"

"Yap, and if those guys ever come back here and complain we'll just shoot em dead... that's how we do things in Italy, motherfucker!"

Entry Twenty One, 6:40 am

Fifth Street. Austin, Texas,

We arrive at destination two after piling through to dawn. St Patrick's day and SXSW. Jugghead will house us until Wednesday. No idea what he has for accommodations, but I'd fall asleep on a kitchen table about now.

Austin, Texas, a summation:

For us, Austin seems a city to live in, for a day at least. In fact, if our host weren't flying out to North Carolina for March Madness and the inflated hotel prices, we would stay another. We are a bit spoiled in our visit by the presence of South By Southwest (SXSW, or "South By" if you're local), a two week long film, technology, art and music showcase that spans across the Texas capital and sees the city triple in population and business for the duration; but even still, looking objectively at Austin I can't think of a reason not to live there: the city streets are well-planned, clean and safe, it is a foodie haven, boasts a burgeoning music scene, is affordable, diverse, and temperate.

Austin is pale blue oasis in the middle of Conservative Christian Texas. It is as if the state decided to corral all the academics and artists into one area and let them operate freely but within Texas State Law. The result: an abundance of local colleges, including U Texas-Austin, Concordia College, and the Art Institute of Austin, great newspapers, a thriving bar and coffee scene, trendy clothiers, salons, saloons, Ubers, pedal-cabs, and amazing, expansive fetes like SXSW that draw more and more people into the city every year.

As we make our exit, we see at least four major constructive undertakings, from sidewalk revamping to high-rise remodeling. Part of the draw must also be the lack of a state income tax and the city's outsize economic performance during the recent recession. But Austin has its issues too - residents are worried about the looming threats of gentrification and suspicious of

newcomers affecting the socio-economic demographics, and there is generally uncontrolled and unmanaged growth in the area. The "Texas Miracle" model of limited government, limited taxes, and light regulation seems to have its limits.

Joey and I leave the city with, admittedly, too few stones turned over and too few memories, but in our 28-hour stay we each drive away with a different perception of (at least this part of) The Lone Star State.

St Patty's Day 2015, A whirlwind recap:

A phone alarm goes off sometime around noon and Joey and I, on the same couch, have no clue where in the literal fuck where or who we are. I grab my dick to make sure I am still human flesh, Joey opens up the balcony and bagpipes and skylight trickle in. We shower, jerk off (not together), and jump into our outfits for the day.

We meander along under a hazy sky and fight foot traffic for ten blocks until we find a decent place to grab a drink. It's the Irish Holiday and Jugghead gets off work at 5 and we plan on being sloshed when he finds us. We order Texas Mules at "Moonshiners" and meet our first strangers in Austin, who've overheard that we've driven down from Mass. They're from Lowell, a husband wife and daughter. Her cowboy hat is misleading, but we take their word for it. She is in town writing for some Massachusetts media outlets, and has a media pass on her wrist for all the SXSW music events, which she says was "harder to apply for and get than getting into college." Her card says Boston University; I consider chopping her hand off like in "Snatch" and pulling off the wristband, but that would mean only one of us would get into the shows, so for that reason (and that reason alone) we part ways peacefully.

We do some research and end up at the Spotify House on 6th Street, only a few blocks from our host house, and realize how truly unprepared we

were for this city - we have no passes, no tickets, no drugs, and no willingness to wait in big lines. We end up sneaking behind some food trucks and standing on a ledge along a fence behind stage. I pour whiskey into coke bottles and before we can finish our first drink there are 20 more people standing on the ledge with us, passing bowls and enjoying our free, backstage view. Music. Headbobbing. Clapping. Business as usual.

We walk a 12 pack back to the apartment, running into Ryn Weaver and Jeremy Piven along the way, and missing probably a handful of other great artists or celebrities who walk around unabashed on this high-energy day. Jugg gets stoned and works on his golf stroke out on the balcony while we break into the craft beers we bought for our host and ex-classmate, who is out here working in pharmaceuticals for a month.

We tell stories, get carbombs, eat Po' Boys, watch some more free music, get pulled this way and that by the promise of more free shit: music, or art, or drinks, or pussy. We go with the art, and Joey ends up buying a 20 dollar piece off a hottie named Devan, who he instantly follows on Instagram. Devan and I apparently graduated from the same college, but I can't even remember my graduation year and she stops talking to me. We walk back to the apartment again so Joey can drop the piece off; Juggy smokes, I do some pull-ups and knock out for 5 minutes, and wake up ready to kick the night into a new gear.

We leave a bar without paying for 3 of our carbombs, harass some girls, dance to some jukebox tunes, see some thongs while girls ride a seesaw, get tequila, end up in restaurant eating chili dogs and drinking Bloody Mary's at the stroke of midnight. Wake up at noon and hit the road.

1300 miles, TX to CA. Will we do it in one go? Will we stop at a campsite? Will we hit some cows, or maybe swerve off the road and die? Will we run

out of medicine? Will my heart explode? Will we buy coke in Mexico and meth in New Mexico and piss into the Grand Canyon? Will I wax existential for entries at a time? Who's to say?! Keep reading, y'all.

PART THREE

Entry Twenty Two, March 18, 9:48 pm

I-10 W, West Texas

#NP Elle King - "Ain't Gonna Drown"

It's been a day and dusk of uneventful driving. We hit the El Paso County line on our last stretch of the nation's biggest state some hours into the dark. 80 miles seems a cinch at this point. To our left, south, we've been paralleled with thin layers of yellow lights that, on first seeing them, seemed akin to a small city skyline. As they stretch on alongside us for miles, and even appear on the horizon before us at times, it becomes clear that they can be nothing other than demarcations of the Mexico-US border. A multi-billion dollar investment, America has been beefing up its border fence and security in both official and unofficial capacities for decades.

As we ride along, Rx'd, buzzed, speeding, littering, texting, documenting, and capturing, we can perhaps be thankful here of our own uninhibited world. Traveling with complete autonomy, we can't even think of a time we've been questioned (or harassed) by anyone but our bar and restaurant servers. This is our white American privilege at its best and worst. At times, we dwell in blissful ignorance of the ease of our travels, while at others, we seek to ponder the other.

At its closest points, the border is nearly a literal stones throw away from our highway road, yet the dark expanse of unsettled desert that buffers the lighted wall on either side seems to stir with a secret, elusive life.

As we move further, the lights are layered, no longer representing a singular wall but rather acres upon acres of settled land. Here, we make out towers and high rises shrouded in smog. Yet, all of our maps turn blank once below the Texas

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border, as if the world falls off once one departs this country, and we are left guessing which city skyline it is lighting our night on the left.

Entry Twenty Three, 9:48 pm

I-10 W, El Paso, Texas

An hour passes, yet the clock is unmoved. We enter El Paso, and, for the first time, the world outside the car is louder than the world within. The final city in Texas and the first city in Mexico, El Paso and Juarez, join together to our south and, for a beat, they are one in our purview. And as we enter a new time zone, we know we are gaining much more than an hour here, on the road. That amongst our lunacy, our starry eyed inebriations and dementias we've been piecing our souls together, Joey and I, not just to one another, or to the dusty roads and city lights, not even to this one country, but to every other madman who has hastened his or her way through this too-big world in eternal searching and longing for enchantments as numerable as the bumps in the blacktop, each one we bounce over beckoning us forward, forward, never back.⁴

Entry Twenty Four, 10:20 pm

I-10 W, New Mexico

#NP Faith No More - "Motherfucker"

New Mexico smells like shit.

Entry Twenty Five, 11:32 pm

I-10 W, Forever

Rain comes in through the roof,
Melts our hair, we speed through
Clouds like ghosts,
Souls in travel everywhere.

Entry Twenty Six, March 19, 1:34 am

Somewhere off I-10, Vail, Arizona,

New Mexico isn't much but rain and dirt in the night, and Arizona so far has just been a gradual incline. I sense we are at about a mile elevation. I start seeing things, road signs are wolfs eyes, a pack of runners, dinosaurs at a fruit stand, a billboard that isn't there... Is it possible the speed limit is 800 mph? This is the last tough push, once we reach Tucson and come down from elevation it should feel like the home stretch.

Entry Twenty Seven, 2:50 am

I-8 W, first sign for San Diego

#NP Angus and Julia Stone - "Heart Beats Slow"

There has been rain, and we can smell the desert coming to life around us, an early spring shower prompting so many leaves and blossoms to stretch away from their roots just a little more; in the morning, when the sun rises, a few sprouts will poke their heads through the sand for the first time.

Entry Twenty Eight, 5:02 am

I-8 W, closing in on CA

#NP Explosions in the Sky - "The Moon Is Down"

There is a stretch for about an hour on the I-8 Westbound that we do not see a single other vehicle, not a truck, not an emergency, not even a passerby moving eastbound across the divide. As of yet, in these 3,000 miles we've put behind us, we have not experienced any such isolation. It is here when Joey turns to me and says "wanna see something cool?" and shuts off his lights.

The swell of black that crashes over is so full I can't make any difference between being open eyed and closed, and for a moment, blind at 70 miles an hour in the stark night, I'm not sure where my eyes are at all, so that when he flashes on the high beams, the world in front of the windshield teems with life.

The oldest battle of all existence, light versus dark, the same story rehashed and retold across the millennia: there was once only darkness.

Entry Twenty Nine, 6:25 am

I-8 W, through California hills

#NP Pretty Lights - Color Map of the Sun

It rises, as always, as it has and will, whether
at our necks or noses, it illuminates the path,
and when we come down through the hills we quite
know there will be golden bluffs and lasting
shores.

Entry Thirty, 8:00 am

I-8 W, California, destination imminent

#NP Royksopp - "Thank You"

Till the Rhythm Breaks - "Romeo"

The hills give way to mountains give way to fog
clouds give way to civilization and San Diego
proper. I imagine how the first travelers felt
traversing these mountains, how endless the peaks
and valleys and red sands seemed but they spurred
on nonetheless by the wonder of discovery and the
understanding that the world could not be
unbounded, that they would soon reach a fixed
point to declare their own. They, certainly, came
to witness sights smells sounds vastly different
than ours as we now sit through commuter traffic,
but if we share at least a measure of that
pioneering wonder as a new world manifests afront
us, then we might be kindred.

Entry Thirty One, 8:27 am

Mission Bay, San Diego California

We cross a bridge, water splays out on either side and it doesn't matter what's playing now because we are fucking yelling, cursing, spitting, raging in exhaustion, disbelieving anything that happened before and that Boston/Springfield was less than a week ago. We drive down streets named Crown and Vacation and Pacific Beach Drive and prepare to enter a fucking coma as soon as we fall to flat unmoving ground.

Joey keys into his new place. We arewhelmed, too sedate to be over or under. There is carpet, windows, standards. An unplugged fridge. An uncurtained shower. Posterless walls.

"Carte blanche, Joey."

"What, dumbass?"

"I said 'I like your place.'"

"Who asked you?"

We down the steps to the car just outside with intentions to unload.

"You know we never even opened this thing the entire trip," I say as we approach the Uhaul.

"What's in it anyway?"

"What do you think?"

"Shoes. Drugs. A dead hooker. Your girlfriend. Elvis. More drugs."

"Fuck it, we'll unload it later," he says, grabbing the cooler from the backseat. "Let's celebrate getting here alive."

"Let's get fucked up!"

Travels with Joey

"Let's sleep."

"Sleep."

Catharsis

Two days later

Monday, March 23, 12:00 pm

San Diego International Airport

I go through TSA, grab some snacks, find my gate, and drop my bags to the floor. I'm sweating, hungover, my tank is emptied. It strikes me how we continue to pursue the highs of life, even though we know the lows can be brutal. What is a static life? What is a life carefully planned? Safe, non-committal, steady. In a volatile world, I, too, burst from restraint, I chase the highs, no matter how fleeting, at home, across this nation, fully prepared to bear the brunt of the lows. What is a world without risk, without joyous love and hollowing pain, eruption and causality, companionship, breakage, silence and conversation?

Joey and I hug when he drops me off on a 70 degree day. He turns around and boards the unloaded Scion into his next chapter now, while I return to one I left in Massachusetts. The doom of work looms over me in the near future, yet the memories of this past trip will linger, a soundtrack of joy and exhaustion, but I do my best to stay still in the present. Someone plays a piano.

A plane roars skyward, a truck pulls a load of baggage, a cute girl reads and a young man orders a Bloody Mary. Each and every present moment is a chance to change, to embrace the newness, to chase a high, a love, a dream. Might I remember this all on the east coast, where more and more of my friends continue to escape, where there is always steady ground, where a girl awaits, yet where I, too, must some day depart.

¹ Syntax inspired by Fitzgerald, F Scott, *The Great Gatsby*

² Notice and Explanatory inspired by Twain, Mark, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

³ "Tennessee USCTs." Virginia Civil War Trials, Inc. Communication Designs. Richmond, VA. 2015

⁴ Syntax inspired by Kerouac, Jack, *On the Road*