



Good Read

Notes from a Road Trip

ON A CROSS-COUNTRY DRIVE, THE DAYS ARE LONG, THE PLEASURES ARE SIMPLE, AND YOUR MIND EXPANDS TO CONSIDER INFINITE POSSIBILITIES, WRITES J. Courtney Sullivan.

THE FIRST TIME, we made the journey for the love of the dog.

Six years ago, my husband, Kevin, and I (not yet married then) had recently adopted a retriever mix named Landon. With plans to visit Kevin's family in Iowa and no one to watch the dog, we decided to drive the 18 hours from our home in Brooklyn, New York, so we could bring him. Ever since, three or four times a year, we've traveled halfway across the country by car. Our family and friends think we are slightly nuts to do so. But we like having the dog along once we reach our destination, and really, I think there's a lot we like about the journey itself.

We usually do it in two days, taking turns driving, staying somewhere along I-80. There is no need for GPS. The route is basically 1,100 miles in a straight line. But we leave the GPS on anyway, for the sense of accomplishment as we watch our destination draw near.

The beginning is always exciting. The snacks uneaten, the audiobooks queued up. Before we even make it to the end of our block, Landon will migrate from his bed in the back to my lap in the passenger seat, where he'll remain for several hours. Once we get through the Holland Tunnel and leave the New Jersey traffic behind, a sense of freedom washes over us.

There is so much to behold. The food alone! On the road, we abandon our organic sensibilities. We eat Dairy Queen and Jimmy John's and whatever else we want. May I recommend the J. Zapata food truck, across from a gas station

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in Drums, Pennsylvania? (On our last visit, the sign boasted MEXICAN FOOD SO AUTHENTIC, TRUMP WILL BUILD WALL AROUND IT.)

I am 35 years old. Kevin is 40. But we still feel a childlike sense of excitement at the sight of grazing cows. And Landon is always good for a happiness infusion. When the first winter snow falls, a dog will roll in it and be joyful whether he's in the middle of a bucolic meadow or in the Wawa parking lot off exit 277.

The singular mission to get from A to B is meditative. It's impossible not to be taken up by it—and to let go of whatever small things were troubling you back home. Passing by trailer parks, truck stops, abandoned farms, cornfields and wheat fields, malls and mega churches, you get a sense that you yourself are pretty insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

There are lives being led everywhere that have nothing to do with us. I love peering in on them. Coming across Amish women in long skirts, playing volleyball at the side of the road. Or the teenage girls behind the counter at McDonald's, deep into romantic gossip, unaware that I even exist as I pass by to use the bathroom.

On these drives, we've come up with ideas for screenplays and solved thorny family problems. I once plotted an entire novel while Kevin slept, though unfortunately, the fact that I was driving prohibited me from writing anything down, and I forgot most of it.

Of course, there are downsides to every road trip. Once, the dog rolled around in roadkill, and the smell stayed with us for the next seven hours. I get annoyed when Kevin is driving and bored and starts treating me like Siri, asking me to Google whatever strikes his fancy: Soccer scores. Book reviews. The retail price of humidifiers. For his part, Kevin would prefer that I not drive 15 miles over the speed limit at all times.

One night, in a snowstorm, we made it only as far as Newark, New Jersey, before our windshield wipers broke. But that was actually kind of



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. Courtney Sullivan wrote the *New York Times* best-selling novels *Commencement*, *Maine*, and *The Engagements*. Her newest novel, *Saints for All Occasions*, was published in May.



fun. When I tweeted that the dodgy garage we'd ended up in reminded me of the one in *Adventures in Babysitting*, superhero/mayor Cory Booker himself replied with his cell phone number and an offer to help.

Most dog-friendly hotels on the interstate are underwhelming at best. But I still have my favorites. There's one behind a truck stop in Pennsylvania with a secret Irish bar inside. The La Quinta Inn in Toledo, Ohio, has a school field out back, where the dog runs while we sip coffee in the dugout. Wherever we land, we generally find that there are few problems with a room that can't be solved by delivery pizza.

Over the two-day drive, our usual high expectations shift. Our only goal of the day is to carry on, as opposed to most days, which are full of errands and meetings and to-do lists that never, ever get completed. On the road, there is no rush. We can breathe. We appreciate the small things. Humor need not be sophisticated to make us double over laughing.

(I'm looking at you, sign for Fangboner Road at the overpass in Fremont, Ohio.)

I'll confess that no matter how well the trip is going, somewhere around the WELCOME TO INDIANA sign, I begin to lose it. While listening to the fifth episode of the *Men in Blazers* podcast, I remind myself that we could have flown direct from LaGuardia to Des Moines International in three hours. But too bad. There are more miles behind us than ahead. The only thing to do is keep going.

If we flew, we would not have in our possession photographs of our dog in front of Michael Jackson's childhood home in Gary, Indiana, or at Niagara Falls, where we stopped the one time we drove to Iowa not from New York but from Maine. We would never have seen so many magnificent Ohio sunsets.

Your perspective changes on the road, and when does that ever happen? A four-hour drive to see my family in

Boston feels like an eternity. But when we are four hours from our Des Moines destination, it feels like we're practically there. After motel sheets so stiff and thin they may as well be construction paper, the bed in my mother-in-law's guest room feels like a cloud.

Once you've made the journey as often as we have (around 20 times at last count), you begin to feel like you've laid down tracks. You find that you've left pieces of yourself all across this country. In an otherwise nondescript place, something reminds you: *I've been here before*. Take the Quality Inn in Milesburg, Pennsylvania. It's where, a year and a half ago, I decided, while my husband and dog were sleeping, that I really wanted to have children someday. Back again last month, I remembered this. Kevin and Landon were outside running in the snowy parking lot just beyond the window. I was inside, three months pregnant, waiting for the pizza to arrive. ■



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