

Recollection Road Trip

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I used to live in rural Missouri right on the Arkansas border, smack dab in the middle of the state between Oklahoma and Kentucky. It's easy to tell where Missouri ends and where Arkansas begins. The blacktop ends right at the state line and quickly morphs into more of a reddish brown pavement than the usual Missouri gray. I guess the Arkansas Department of Transportation has different tastes than Missouri when it comes to color schemes.

The town I'm from is called Thornfield. I'd bet you couldn't even find us on a standard map of the United States, and if I was a betting woman I'd be rich. In fact, if you're on your way into Arkansas for some ungodly reason, don't blink or you might miss us. In fact, let me show you how to get there. Buckle up because we're going on a road trip, kids.

So I'm going to assume that we're starting from Saint Louis, because everyone knows how to get to Saint Louis, right? Right. So, from Saint Louis you're going to take I-44 South to Rolla. It's about 100 miles from Saint Louis to Rolla. There's a road sign that says so, so it must be true. For those of you not keeping score, 100 miles is about 2 hours. At least, when I drive it's about 2 hours. If you've never ridden in a car for that long, I guarantee you're going to need a rest stop. Sooner rather than later, I'm assuming.

I told you to go to the bathroom before we left, didn't I? "But Chelsea," you say, "I didn't have to go then!" Well you should have at least tried. So we're going to stop in Sullivan, Missouri because they have a really nice Flying-J truck stop. The bathrooms have minimal urine stains and the food only half tastes nasty. I think the soda fountain has Coke and Pepsi, if you were concerned about your soda choices. Go ahead, take your pee break. I'm going to grab some sunflower seeds. The big bag, because this is going to be a long trip.

So, now let's hit the road again. Hop back on 44 and drive until you see exits that boast Rolla on them. Take exit 186 to get on Missouri State Highway 63. This is going to take you through the heart of downtown Rolla, with its many fast food joints and gas stations. We should be good on gas, I mean, it's not like this is one of those environmental terrorist machines—I mean, diesel engines. As we get to the center of town, we should pass a few larger stone buildings that say Missouri S&T, Rolla. Right outside the college, there is a replica of Stonehenge. Knowing the smarty pants who go to school there, it's probably to scale. In case you didn't already know, the S&T stands for "Science and Technology" and it's a school for know-it-alls. And by that I mean, they probably know it all. They have high IQs, okay? Don't even think of applying there. Unless you want to go to school there. Follow your dreams, buddy.

A little down the way, we're gonna come to a Wal-Mart on the right. That's pretty much the last Wal-Mart you're going to see for a few hours. I know, sucks, right? After you pass the Wal-Mart, it's pretty much a straight shot to 63 from there. Just stay on the road

you're on until you pass the Sonic to your right. You're going to want to get in the left lane because the right lane ends in about 1000 feet, forcing us to turn right. We don't want to do that. Don't do it! Ahem, I mean, please change lanes. Make sure to check your mirrors first!

Now you're on 63, where there are passing lanes every couple miles so you can pass the inevitable 90-year-old who probably should have had his or her license taken away years ago. Watch it though, sometimes people get really offended when you try to pass them. I think it's a pride thing. When you try to pass the jerk with a lift kit on his extended cab Chevy, he's going to speed up. Don't let him fool you though, he'll slow it back down once the passing lane ends. Pass him. Drive like you've never driven before. Oh, you've never driven before? Oops, guess I should have checked earlier.

So, as you drive on 63 you'll pass through Houston, Licking, and Edgar Springs, also known as the only towns between Rolla and Cabool. Don't forget to take a minute and appreciate what a beautiful place Missouri is. Of course, there is a whole lot of nothin' in Missouri too. If you look to your left, you'll see nothing! And if you look to your right, you'll see more nothing! Look back to your left and you'll see...you guessed it! Nothing! And some cows. Always with the cows, this place.

Besides nothing and cows, there are some interesting things to see. In the fall, when the trees are shedding and the leaves are nearing the end of their lives, it's a beautiful sight. The oranges, yellows and reds roll over the hills for miles and miles and miles and at sunset, I could swear the hills were on fire. The colors of the fading daylight and the fading season are the most striking sight you will ever see. Appreciate this, because when you get back to St. Louis, you'll miss the beauty and mystery of endless forest.

Of course, nothing can stay gold, Ponyboy. There are multiple areas that have seen better days and one too many wild nights. Rusted junkers line the highway in some areas, broken fences and would-be scrap yards as far as the eye can see. Why do those people always seem to own goats? Oy, with the livestock already.

When you get to Cabool, take a right onto Highway 60 and drive to the first stop light you see. You'll pass a Casey's General Store, a Cabool State Bank, a seemingly abandoned garage to the right where it appears the last time it was open was 1976. Once you reach the stop light you should see a grocery store to your left. If you pass a second Casey's, you've gone too far and should be ashamed of yourself. At the light take a left onto Highway 181. You'll pass over train tracks once you've passed the once busy full-service gas station, now abandoned. It's sad really, how time forgot about this place. It looks like something right out of an episode of the Andy Griffith Show. Sorry, I'm getting nostalgic. Where were we? Right, crossing the train tracks.

So, after you've crossed the tracks you'll see a Dairy Queen to your left and an on-ramp to your right. Unless you really want a soft serve ice cream, take the on-ramp onto Highway 60. "But Chelsea," you say, "weren't we just on 60?" Why, yes we were, my little observant friend. We were just on Business 60, now we're getting on regular 60. "But that's so confusing," you say. Trust me, little buddy, I know. Just keep driving until you see

exit signs for Mansfield, but wait there's more! Take the second exit for Mansfield/Ava, not the first, which will take you to Hartville. We don't want to go to Hartville because the only thing Hartville has to offer is exceedingly boring scenery and nothing of what we're heading for. Once you pass the first Mansfield exit, do not, and I must stress this, do not miss the second exit. There isn't another exit for another twelve miles. That would add almost half an hour on to our trip. We've already been on the road for twelve hundred years—or four hours, but who's counting?

When you exit, hang a left at the stop sign and that'll put you on Highway 5 South. When you hit the four-way blinking red light in Mansfield, don't make any turns and head straight down 5. A word of caution, my heavy-footed friend: the good ol' boys from the Missouri Highway Patrol have a passion for writing tickets to anyone driving above 60 miles per hour, otherwise known as the speed limit. Try not to get pulled over please, I've got warrants out for my arrest. Maybe I should have driven.

Continue on 5 all the way to Ava, don't worry you can't miss it. 5 Highway cuts right through Ava. Shortly before you get to town, there will be a roadside park at the bottom of the hill, named after one of the few docs in Douglas County, Dr. Gentry. This is a great place to stop and stretch our legs. On a sunny summer day it's nice to take off your shoes and socks and dangle your toes in the small stream that runs parallel to the highway. The few tiny fish nibble at the underside of your toes but, don't worry, they don't really bite—their mouths aren't big enough. This really is a very serene place, even with the occasional traffic up on the road trying to break the silence. In the fall, the fire-leaves fall off the trees that surround the tiny rest area. Park is a bit of an over exaggeration. This place is big enough for a boulder and a picnic table, but not much else really. In the winter time, when all the trees are barren, a light dusting of white settles over the ground. In the spring, Easter lilies bloom all alongside the stream, their bright yellow color is impossible to miss, even from the road.

When we get back on the road, you should note that when you get to the stop light, we'll have reached Ava. On the left you'll see a McDonald's—newly renovated! Or so they tell me. On the right there is a Wal-Mart Supercenter. It used to be a regular Wal-Mart until they built a new building next to the old one. The former Wal-Mart building is now "Cooper Lumber," it's a True Value store. When the light turns green, stay on 5 highway. In about three miles you'll come to another stop light—this one is a blinking red so pay close attention. My mom got into a car accident at this stoplight when she was pregnant with me. Come to think of it, maybe that's what's wrong with me. Let's move on because that is a can of night crawlers you don't want on your fishing trip.

After you pass the light, stay on 5 highway out of town. One thing about this road is, you'll find that one particular straight stretch always seems to smell of the undeniable pungent odor of polecat. This may be an impoverished area, but we're sure rich in road kill. If only you could make a living off of squashin' varmints under your tires. At most, you'll make a couple bucks every once in a while, but nothing more than the cost of a bottle of pop at the store.

On down the road, you're going to come across a sign that says Thornfield at the

junction of 5 and JJ. Don't take JJ. Don't do it. It's bad.

Just kidding, it's just really curvy and takes longer. Keep driving for another five minutes or so and you'll come up on the junction of 5 and 95 Highway. Take a right onto 95.

On (and around) 95 Highway is where I've had some of the best times of my life. Right at the corner of 5 and 95 is the Y-store, where I used to go park to catch the school bus as it was headed to some out-of-town sporting event that I happened to be playing in at the time. The store itself is closed and has been for quite some time, abandoned in favor of greener pastures. Literally, the owners moved to California because they favored the weather. Apparently, bipolarity is not favored as it concerns the weather. After they moved off and left the Y-Store to quite literally rot, people just used the area as a convenient area to meet up with people and to park their cars.

Much caution, friend, this road is extremely curvy and has caused its lion's share of accidents in its day. Usually I'm a proponent of speeding, but on this highway it's better to take it slow. I do like all of my limbs firmly attached to my body and my bones unbroken, so don't crash the car please. A few miles down the road is Thornfield R-V Elementary, home of the Tigers. Let's stop in and say howdy.

I grew up in that school. I had fights in that school. You see, I was what they called a trouble student, as in I caused a lot of trouble. In my defense, the other guy started it. I didn't have a lot of friends to begin with, but for some reason, what little group of friends I had accumulated deserted me in fourth grade. Maybe it's because I had an affinity for kicking the other children out of the tree house. I mean, I literally kicked people in the face as they were coming up the ladder. It was my tree house, don't look at me like that. Or maybe it was because I used a word I didn't understand to hurt one of my dearest friends out of jealousy.

When I was in Mrs. Daugherty's fourth grade class, a new girl moved to town and I didn't like it. She was tiny with big ears and black eyes and she was a threat. Don't ask me why, my fourth grade self was a bit eccentric. Her name was Carissa Willhite and she loved ferrets but more importantly, she stole my best friend. My friend Samantha and I were tight, but I guess we weren't that tight. Sam started hanging out with Carissa and they liked to exclude me from things. They used to do that really bitchy thing where they would whisper in each other's ears while casting side glances my way and giggling. After a while, my nerves and my patience wore thin. And then one day it all changed. I remember having recess in the gym because it was raining outside. Sam and the Wicked Witch of the Midwest were walking around the gym and I was sitting in a corner by myself, slowly boiling away as I watched them having fun without me. I tried to let it go, but I just couldn't. I stood slowly, my fingernails digging into my palms as I slowly approached them. When they noticed me they got really quiet. I must have looked pissed because they looked slightly shocked and kind of afraid. I only uttered one word, and I swear that word still rings in my ears clear as a bell, even ten years later. *Slut*. I didn't know what it meant, all I know is that it was a word I wasn't supposed to say and I wanted to hurt them. More specifically, I wanted to hurt Sam. I hurt her alright, and in the process, I hurt myself. I still

feel guilty about the incident, hurt from the outcome, and unadulterated hate for Carissa. I took responsibility for my actions a long time ago, but Carissa denied any wrongdoing. She moved away in seventh grade and I couldn't have been happier. I'm petty like that.

The experiences we have growing up shape who we will become. We are a product of the society we grow up in, and I grew up in sadness and hate. It took a long time for me to become the hilarious and gorgeous personality you know today. I wallowed in self-pity for a long damn time but when I finally picked myself up I was better for it. I won't say I grew up, because I haven't, and Heaven help me, I never will.