



getting to utah

commentary by eboni rafus
published 20 august 2004

write of passage | volume 1 • number 3

I took a cross-country road trip this summer. I started the fifty-two hour drive from the 134-freeway entrance, just down the street from my Los Angeles apartment. I took the 134 East to the 210 East and then merged onto the 15 North. I drove through Nevada and Arizona to Utah and, eventually, connected to the I-70 East. The I-70 took me through Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Indiana, Ohio, and West Virginia. In Pennsylvania, the I-70 became the Pennsylvania Turnpike and led me to Waynesboro, where I rested for eight days, visiting friends before traveling north, via I-95, to my final destination—Amherst, Massachusetts.

It was a long trip: five days. I encountered a lot of construction, a few detours, and many, many stops along the way. I was confused at times, but never completely lost. There was a rainy night in the Rocky Mountains when I thought my little Toyota Corolla would surely be crushed under one of the myriad monstrous SUVs speeding by. There was a long stretch through Kansas, where I strained to see something...anything...beyond the fields...upon flat fields of wheat. I swear, there were times when the mirage of a tall skyscraper hovered ahead of me, an oasis in the desert. There was a heartrending moment in D.C. when I realized my car had been broken into—the passenger side quarter glass not quite shattered, but the center caved in and crumbled onto my back seat where my suitcases had once been.

Yes, there were some bad times on the road; but there were also *good* times. There was a sunny day, driving through the red rock of Utah, when I was amazed by the awesome natural architecture. I stopped in a little Colorado resort town called Avon, that was so cute and quaint it looked like a teddy bear village. I even saw the Gateway Arch in St. Louis! The best part? I made the journey completely on my own.

I didn't *plan* to take the trip alone. As a matter of fact, I made every precaution to ensure that I wouldn't have to. The thought of driving solo, almost 3000 miles, scared me. I worried about my car breaking down on the side of the road. I was afraid that, with no one to relieve me at the wheel, I would grow tired, doze off, and crash. Mostly, I dreaded the long hours with no one to talk to. I was frightened by the idea of sleeping in foreign hotel rooms in strange cities all by myself. I definitely did *not* want to drive across the country alone.

I asked just about everyone I know to accompany me. I had a few people lined up to fly out to Los Angeles and drive back east with me. I even had an alternate list of friends to call on in case the original group of friends backed out. It was supposed to be fun. I was ready for the fun summer road trip you always see in movies. But somehow, when it was time to leave, no one was

available.

I cried when I turned off my street towards the freeway. Although I was sad to leave my friends, my job, and my L.A. life behind, I think the tears I shed were more out of fear than sorrow. In my sentimental and admittedly overly dramatic state, I had begun to think of the road trip as a metaphor for the larger journey I was taking in life. The world of graduate school loomed ahead, and there was no one to hold my hand and lead me through this new phase. I was on my own.

Like most major life choices, I had to decide—all on my own—whether to go to graduate school. Of course, I paid careful attention to my mother's reaction when I introduced the notion to her. I mentioned it to my friends in hopes of receiving encouragement and advice. Yet, when it came down to it, I had to decide what schools to apply to, what offers to accept and, ultimately, whether to attend. So, it seemed only fitting that the physical road to graduate school be similar to the metaphorical one: a leap of faith.

The first two hours on the road were hard. I blared my music and danced in the driver's seat as if to fool myself into believing I was embarking on a merry adventure for which I was fully prepared. However, doubts and insecurities crept in between songs and I kept checking the clock and the odometer. Both my boyfriend and my mother rang my cell phone to see how I was doing. I lied and said I was fine. I thought if I kept saying I was fine, my heartbeat would slow down and the death-like grip I had on the steering wheel would loosen.

I don't know when I went from pretending I was fine to actually *being* fine. I stopped for gas outside of Las Vegas, bought a few snacks, and skipped(!) back to the car. I was surprisingly thankful for a traffic jam near The Vegas Strip because it allowed me to take pictures through my car window. Soon, after entering Utah, I was sincerely singing along with the music and dancing in spite of myself. What was *this*? Was I really having fun *on my own*?

I was extremely proud of myself when I finally reached my day's destination: Cedar City, Utah. I knew I had only completed the first day of a five-day trek, but it was good to know that I'd now gone too far to turn back. I was truly on my way.

The next morning, I woke up refreshed and ready to go. The night alone wasn't so bad. It was genuinely, sort of...*relaxing*. I couldn't wait to get on the road. I was *looking forward* to several hours in the car with no one to talk to. It allowed me a chance to think, and dream and, yes, dance to my music. After all, I wasn't *really* alone. I was with myself. And I hadn't spent any time with myself in awhile. I had a lot of catching up to do. My friend Amber called that day to check on me, and this time I didn't have to lie; I *was* fine.

Weeks later, I'm here, in Amherst, preparing to begin my three-year MFA program at UMass. The first two weeks have been hard. Both my boyfriend and my mother have called to see how I'm doing, and I've lied and said I'm fine when, in reality, I'm having mini panic attacks everyday.

I keep myself busy with unpacking, organizing, and meeting new people. However, in between setting up my home and interviewing for a new job, the doubts and insecurities tiptoe in. *Am I a good writer? Will I suffocate in this small town? Did I make the right choice?*

I know things will get better. Once my classes begin, I'll settle into a new routine, make new friends, and start my new job. Shortly, this new life of mine will feel comfortable, and I won't even remember when I made the transition from fear to fun. Whenever I feel that my heart is beating too quickly and my grasp is too tight, I remember my road trip. I think of this new experience as an extension of that one: an adventure I have to embark on *alone*.

I tell myself: If I can just make it to Utah, everything will be OK. I'm a little scared now but, soon, I'll be enjoying this time to think, dream, and dance. I have a long way to go, but I won't think about all the miles not yet traveled. I'm concentrating on my *day's* destination. When I reach that benchmark, I know there'll be no turning back. I can see Utah in the distance, and I know that once I cross that state line, I'll be on my path, indeed.

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