**Highways and a Hero**

Chapter One

I was leaving town on a recently-purchased used motorcycle. I barely knew how

to ride it, so I wanted to get out on the open road before the evening traffic.

I rushed about my room, rubbing my hands across my freshly-buzzed head

as I searched to find what I needed: three pairs of pants, five shirts, six pairs of

socks, a sweatshirt, a toothbrush, a stick of deodorant. I grabbed my camera from

the bare mattress and picked up two empty notebooks, a handful of pens, and a

nationwide road atlas. I stuffed everything into two black backpacks.

The phone rang. I didn’t answer. I’d stopped returning calls a week ago.

Friends had been leaving messages of concern. One of my old mentors called to

say I was a “confused young man.” The words echoed between my ears over and

over again. I was not a confused young man. I’d made a clear-headed decision to

abandon the life I’d been living—even my name.

My former life had been one of vicarious athletic glory as a benchwarmer on

a champion college baseball team. It had been a life of regimentation too, with

the Navy paying my way through school as part of the ROTC program. I never did

make my commission though. The hectic schedule of division-one baseball had

all but made me a scofflaw within the Navy unit; albeit a very well-liked scofflaw.

But by the time graduation came, baseball injuries had so damaged my back I

couldn’t even pass the military’s medical boards. What was left for me was

perhaps to continue on in the sports world as a coach, perhaps while extending

my undergraduate studies into a master’s degree of some kind. All my life though,

I’d madly aspired toward just two professions: Major League Baseball player and

Navy SEAL. Both dreams had always been statistically improbable but knowing

now that they were downright impossible, the thought of staying at the university

seemed an absolute bore.

On my knees in the center of the one-room studio, I filled the two backpacks

with the few remaining things I had. I’d pawned everything the day before—the

furniture, the stereo, the television, the microwave, my textbooks, even my NCAA

National Championship ring; anything I could sell. Earlier that morning I hawked

my car and sold most of my clothes to a secondhand store.

The unsellables—the dishes, the sheets, the old pairs of boxer shorts, my

worn baseball and Navy uniforms, old photographs—they’d remain in the

apartment stacked on the counter or the floor. My landlord would have to dispose

of them.

I’d decided that I would live the story of a lifetime—an odyssey, an epic

adventure, the stuff of boyhood dreams. I’d take to the road with a few dollars in

gas money. I’d drive that motorcycle across the entire country, rub the soil of my

homeland into my skin, absorb its people’s sweat. Somewhere along the way I’d

find a new life and a new identity that would command fame and fortune. I’d be

strong and brave, bookish and street-smart, defiant but kind and generous. As I

saw it in my mind, my years on the road would teach me a unique and valuable

skill-set which could somehow help both mankind and myself. That was my

destiny. I was stupid enough to be certain of it.

I just needed to leave. And now, before I lost my nerve.

I took one last look around the room, picked up my gear, and headed out,

slamming the door behind me.

The landlord’s yellow lab ran to my feet as I slid the apartment key into the

mail slot. I gave her a pat on the head while ripping a note from my journal to

leave on the apartment door. It was just a few words to explain my

disappearance—the only ones I could think of.

“Left . . . to discover America.”

Outside, the sun reflected off my navy-blue motorcycle helmet—its silver star

stickers and its red-and-white strips of reflective safety tape shining and

mirroring the sky. I was cloaked beneath a sweat-steeped t-shirt. Between the

sun’s heat and the humidity, I was covered with beads of perspiration from my

face to my forearms, even to my feet, but I was too preoccupied to care.

I tried over and over to shift gears without stalling, all while trying to

maintain my balance atop the motorcycle’s leather saddle. It was futile. Right

when I finally found the correct speed at which to release the clutch, my sweatslick

hand slipped off the lever entirely, jolting me a few feet forward as the bike

and I fell to the asphalt.

For a moment, lying there on the hot pavement, I realized that I must be

full-blown crazy. Either that or I’d painted myself into a real corner.

In any case, I was too emotionally invested to quit at this point, and I was

undeniably too short on time to worry. So I climbed back to my feet and back

onto the motorcycle. I fired it up . . . and putzed out of town in first gear, stalling

at every stop sign, getting passed by speeding cars, and doing my best to balance

the two backpacks crudely roped to my rear seat.

The two-lane highway curled between gold-capped wheat fields below thinlystretched

burnt-orange clouds, purple skies peeking through them.

Along the roadside, farmers rode tractors, cattle grazed in the sun-beaten

grass, dilapidated wooden barns kneeled far away in fields, aged brick buildings

lined the Main Street of an old cow town.

At a roadside filling station, a bearded man fueled his pickup truck. Miles

down the road, a teenage kid fixed a flat tire while a second boy sat dumbly in the

passenger seat.

Down a roadside trail, a young woman walked a horse, its hooves caked in

mud and clomping with each step.

I wondered about these people’s lives, wondering over and over how it

might feel to be them, what life meant to them, what significance they sought in

their lives, what gifts and curses they derived from their homeland. Could I live

someone else’s life? Even for a little while? Maybe, but only if I could abandon

myself.

As I saw it, I was at the beginning of a new life and as such I had to try to

forget all my old friends and histories. Those things had been wonderful and I

already missed them. But if I was ever going to fully steep myself in new

experience, it made sense that I’d have to expunge my soul of all previous life, as

thoroughly as possible. That’s why I’d kept my departure a secret. I’d planned it

for months and had hit the road with only a few goodbyes. I would be the person

all my old friends would wonder about. ‘Whatever happened to him?’

I stalled out six times during that first day, and I crashed the bike three

times, losing my balance at slow speeds. With some new holes in my jeans and

some new dents in the bike, I had managed only about a hundred miles of

progress. The sun was already low in the sky, and it was time for me to find a

place to sleep.

I turned onto one of the highway’s unpaved offshoots. At my back, the sun

sank in the sky. Ahead of me, a walnut orchard looked like a promising place to

drop a sleeping bag. I turned onto a gravel path, grimacing as the motorcycle

crashed to the ground again. The left rearview mirror snapped off, and both

backpacks came untied from their ropes, slamming me in the back of the helmet.

Lying in the gravel, I surveyed my surroundings and let my ears unring.

Barbwire cattle fences shouldered the narrow path, “No Trespassing” signs nailed

to every tall post. America was owned, every piece of it. I had to be a fool setting

out like I was. Perhaps the America of adventure for which I yearned was a thing

of the past.

The trip I hoped for was starting to look like little more than a fantasy. I

didn’t know how to ride a motorcycle, first of all. And second, sleeping outside

seemed fine in theory, but now that I was actually about to do it, it felt incredibly

dangerous. Any passerby could have his way with me, and it wasn’t like I’d have

the police on my side. The sinking feeling in my spirits seemed to be telling me

that my only asset was having nothing to lose. Perhaps I’d survive by putting my

hands to labor. I didn’t have any special skill or service to offer, just as I had no

material goods to sell. What if I had to make my living on the fringes? In any

case, turning back was not an option.

I dusted myself off and mounted the motorcycle again.

In the distance, the freight cars of a long train stretched along their tracks. A

boy sprinted toward them as they began their slow crawl into motion. He

appeared from a nearby farmhouse surrounded by walnut trees, a green John

Deere in its dirt driveway. Over his shoulder, the boy carried a sack that bounced

with each stride he took.

I was too far away to see what happened next, and lost sight of him through

the walnut orchard’s screen of branches. I didn’t see him climb onto the train, but

I’ve always assumed he made it. I wanted to believe it, even though it’s possible

he didn’t. And it’s also possible he was only pretending—simply play-acting the

part of a runaway, maybe for the hundredth time.

I can see it in my mind, just as he may have imagined it too . . . the boy

throws his bag on the car mid-stride and takes one more step before leaping

toward the boxcar’s open door. He strains to pull himself all the way in and

crawls to his feet on the dusty floorboards. The boy stands and watches from the

door as the familiar surroundings disappear.

Later, he lays down, using his sack for a pillow, knowing that when he wakes

he’ll be in a new town with new people. The breeze of the open door ruffles

through his hair. The miles roll away below his head. He feels like he left his old

life behind, like he’s transformed into a new, blank self. He wonders what will

become of his life. Then a smile appears on his face. He is on the move—as free as

the air in the sky.

I woke up in my sleeping bag in some roadside field, the motorcycle at my side, a

rock beneath its kickstand to keep it from sinking into the soil.

I knew I crossed into Arkansas. I had spent time watching people, listeningin

on conversations at roadside cafes, riding on back roads trying to figure out

exactly how I would provide for myself.

In a northern Arkansas pizza joint, I inquired about a help-wanted sign in

the window. I was immediately turned away; they said they only wanted someone

who’d worked in a restaurant before.

That made me realize the importance of having a powerful story. I could try

to continue convincing people that I could do the work . . . or I could move them

to help out an adventurer in the middle of an odyssey . . . or, hell, I could tell

them anything they wanted to hear. If I was friendly enough and framed myself

well and told a good tale, and found some legitimate way to add value to

someone’s day, I could probably land a different job in every town. I could be a

janitor in one place and a sales clerk in another. I could be all sorts of different

folks. All I needed to do was weave enough yarn to score some jobs. I could go

everywhere, be anyone. I could live a life of infinite experience. It was an idea, a

philosophy of sorts, which I embraced without question.

It’s around this point that my mind starts to get fuzzy, not from any lack of

remembrances, but from a surplus of disjointed scenes. Whether these memories

are real, or embellishments, or complete fabrications, I may never know for sure.