ROADS

DRIVING AMERICA'S GREAT HIGHWAYS

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I WANTED TO DRIVE the American roads at the century's end, to look at the country again, from border to border and beach to beach. My son, James, a touring musician who sees, from ground level, a great deal of America in the line of duty, says that when it isn't his turn to drive the van he likes to sit for long stretches, looking out the window. "There's just so much to see," he says, and he's right. There's just so much to see.

From earliest boyhood the American road has been part of my life—central to it, I would even say. The ranch house in which I spent my first seven years sits only a mile from highway 281, the long road that traverses the central plains, all the way from Manitoba to the Mexican border at McAllen, Texas. In winter I could hear the trucks crawling up 281 as I went to sleep. In summer I would sit on the front porch with my parents and grandparents, watching the lights of cars as they traveled up and down that road.

We were thoroughly landlocked. I had no river to float on, to wonder about. Highway 281 was my river, its hidden reaches a mystery and an enticement. I began my life beside it and I want to drift down the entire length of it before I end this book.

Other than curiosity, there's no particular reason for these travels—just the old desire to be on the move. My destination is also my route, my motive only an interest in having the nomad in me survive a little longer. I'm not attempting to take the national pulse, or even my own pulse. I doubt that I will be having folksy conversations with people I meet as I travel. Today, in fact, I drove 770 miles, from Duluth, Minnesota, to Wichita, Kansas, speaking only about twenty words: a thank-you at a Quik Stop south of Duluth, where I bought orange juice and doughnuts; a lunch order in Bethany, Missouri; and a request for a room once I got to Wichita. The development of credit-card gas pumps, microwaves, and express motels has eliminated the necessity for human contact along the interstates. It is now possible to drive coast to coast without speaking to a human being at all: you just slide your card, pump your gas, buy a couple of Hershey bars, perhaps heat up a burrito, and put the pedal back to the metal.

Some years ago Mr. William Least Heat Moon wrote an appealing travel book in which he described the travels he had made in America on the blue highways—that is, the small roads that wind like vines across the land: the local roads, not the interstates. In the same spirit the novelist Annie Proulx has been known to travel as much as two thousand miles around the American west using only the *dirt* roads. These are real achievements, but achievements I have no desire to emulate. I intend to travel mainly on the great roads, the interstates: my routes will be the 10, the 40, the 70, 80,

and 90; or if I'm in the mood to go north-south, I will mostly use the 5, the 25, 35, 75. The 95 I intend to ignore. I will, from time to time, switch off the interstates onto smaller roads, but only if they provide useful connectives, or take me to interesting places that the great roads—whose aim is to move you, not educate you—don't yet go.

It may be that Annie Proulx and William Least Heat Moon are successfully—if a little masochistically—probing America's heartlands. I salute them, but that's not what I want to do. I merely want to roll along the great roads, the major migration routes that carry Americans long distances quickly, east-west or north-south. What I really want to do is look. Indeed, I would have called this book *Just Looking* if John Updike hadn't already used that title for a collection of his essays on art.

Three passions have dominated my more than sixty years of mostly happy life: books, women, and the road. As age approaches, the appetite for long drives may leave me, which is why I want to get rolling now.

As background I should say that I own three thousand travel books, have read them, and given them a certain amount of thought. I began to read travel books in my youth, out of an interest in the places traveled to, most of which were beyond my purse. Then I got interested in the travelers who had felt the need to go to these often inhospitable places; and finally, now, I've come to have a critic's interest in travel narrative and have turned again to the famous travel writers—Burton, Thesiger, Doughty, Robert Byron, Cherry-Garrard, and others—in the hope of seeing how travel books are made before I attempt to make one myself. Does the route dictate the method, or vice versa? And why do the worst journeys make the best books?

I have also read a fair amount about the great roads or routes of old, the famous caravan routes, particularly the Silk Road out of Asia and the spice and salt routes in Africa, mainly out of an interest in nomadism itself and in the desire humans seem to have to migrate, even though the routes of migration are hard. Trade has usually been the motive for travel on the routes, but the need to be on the move may be an impulse deeper than trade.

Though the interstate highways began to crisscross America in the late sixties, it was the seventies before they became the great roadways that they are now. Not far from these roads lie the remains of earlier, once heavily traveled routes: highway 1, up the east coast (often swollen into a multilane highway now), route 66, U.S. 40, and the rest. When I first started driving around America in the mid-fifties I drove, of necessity, on many of these roads—narrow, cracked, crowded two-lane affairs. I doubt that now I'll feel much interest in following what remains of these old, difficult roads. Route 66, the most famous of all, parallels for much of its route what is now I-40 (not to be confused with U.S. 40, the so-called National Road, which runs through the heartland well to the north of I-40). In Texas and New Mexico one can pick up route 66 memorabilia at almost every gas station and Quik Stop. Not many of the oldsters who drove route 66 in its heyday will be apt to wax nostalgic about it, for it was always a dangerous road, with much more traffic to carry than it could carry safely. Dead bodies in the bar ditch and smushed cars on wreckers were always common sights along old 66.

My aim in recording these journeys is simple: to describe the roads as I find them and supplement current impressions with memories of earlier travels along some of the same routes. I'm

driving for pleasure, and will consider myself quite free to ignore roads I don't like (that is, the 95) or to switch roads if I come to a stretch that bores me. My method, to the extent that I have one, is modeled on rereading; I want to reread some of these roads as I might a book. I recently reread *War and Peace*, skipping all of the Freemasonry and most of the philosophy of history. In the same spirit I expect to skip large chunks of the 10, the 40, and so on. Conversely, just as there are passages in Tolstoy of which I never tire, there are stretches of road whose beauty I can never exhaust, an example being the wonderful stretch of rangeland south of Emporia, Kansas, on the 35, where dun prairies stretch away without interruption to very distant horizons, with not one tree to violate one's sight line. Here there are even bovine overpasses, bridges over the 35 that lead to no highway but just allow cattle to graze both sides of the road.

On the other hand there are parts of this same highway, the 35, that I never want to drive again, the principal one being the long stretch from Dallas to San Antonio—an old, crumbling interstate that passes through endlessly repetitive stretches of ugly urban sprawl.

The repetitiveness of that particular stretch of highway, with the same businesses clustered at almost every exit, tempts me to advance one modest thesis, a counterargument to the often expressed view that because of the chain businesses, America all looks the same. But it doesn't, and it won't, no matter how many McDonald's and Taco Bells cluster around the exits. There are, after all, McDonald's in both Moscow and Paris, but few would argue that Russia and France look the same. In America the light itself will always differ; the winter light on the Sault Ste. Marie, at

the head of the 75, will never be like the light over the Everglades, at the bottom of that road. Eastern light is never as strong or as full as western light; a thousand McDonald's will not make Boston feel like Tucson. Cities and suburbs and freeway exits may collect the ugliness of consumer culture, but place itself cannot be homogenized. Place will always be distinct, and these notes will show, I hope, that America is still a country of immense diversity—the north ends of the roads I'm planning to drive will never be like their south ends, nor will the east be like the west.

I have only a few days each month in which I'm free to drive, and want to disclaim right now any intention to be comprehensive when it comes to American roads. I may, for instance, skip the east entirely. There was a time when, like the heroine of Joan Didion's novel *Play It As It Lays,* I took a certain interest in the differing character of America's urban freeways; I could, then, have discoursed at some length about how the San Diego Freeway differs from the Long Island Expressway. But the days when the swelling out of our great urban freeways excited me are long past. Now I'd rather be almost anyplace on the planet—always excepting Rock Springs, Wyoming—than on the Long Island Expressway at rush hour. People who complain about congestion on the Los Angeles freeways have mostly never been on the freeways of the eastern corridor at the wrong time of day—which, increasingly, is *any* time of day. To see the Culture of Congestion at its most intense, just go east of Cleveland, north of Richmond, Virginia, south of Maine. There are still lovely drives to be found in New York State, in Vermont, in Maine, but getting to them nowadays requires a passage through a Calcutta of freeways and I'm not sure I'll want to trap myself on those roads again.

In general I think my preference will be to drive from worse to better, which usually means going from the north to the south or from the east to the west. If I decide to investigate I-90, for example, I would probably start in Boston and head for Seattle, rather than vice versa. If it's I-75 that interests me, I'd probably go from northern Michigan to southern Florida. Generally I'd rather be heading south, toward warmth, or west, toward bigger skies and stronger light. It's always uplifting to me to watch the opening of the land and the widening of the skies as I drive west, out of the forested country. This feeling, I suspect, is testimony to how determinative one's primal geography is. I had a plains upbringing and something in me responds to the plains as to no other landscape.

As a reader of many travel books, I have been impressed by the extraordinary stamina of the real explorers, from Mungo Park to Wilfred Thesiger. In contrast, I hardly feel that my little spurts along the interstates deserve to be called travels at all. Ney Elias, the English official who surveyed so much of central Asia, made quite prodigious journeys lasting several months, while receiving little recognition for these splendid efforts from his government. In the course of writing his great study *Siberia and the Exile System,* George Kennan (the nineteenth-century traveler, not his relative the twentieth-century diplomat) bounced around Siberia for so long, in conditions of such great discomfort, that he permanently damaged his health. In the twentieth century a host of explorers and travelers to all points of the globe—the poles, the deserts, the jungle, the great peaks—managed to find an abundance of hardships against which to test themselves. Even within the last few decades, James Fenton, Bruce Chatwin, Redmond

O'Hanlon, Colin Thubron, Dervla Murphy, and others have habitually managed to get themselves to places where comforts were scarce, though all of them, in the stiff-upper-lip tradition of such predecessors as Peter Fleming, Ella Maillart, Evelyn Waugh, Robert Byron, and Graham Greene, are casual and even airy about the annoyances and dangers of their journeys.

I am not of this company. Hardship is not something I seek, or even accept. I cheerfully confess that if the Hotel du Cap in Cap d'Antibes were a chain, I'd stay there every night, though I can be tolerably content with the more modest comforts afforded by the Holiday Inns, of which I've now stayed in about two hundred. I don't think I would enjoy the Silk Road, particularly—if I remember correctly, S. J. Perelman didn't like it very much, and he was a man whose tastes accord fairly closely with my own.

But the vanity of suggesting that my sails along the great roads amount to "travel," in the accepted sense of that term, can be well illustrated by the absurd brevity of my first little trip. I wanted to drive the 35 south from its origins in Duluth, Minnesota, and so flew north and spent an evening in a comfortable hotel looking down on Lake Superior. I left Duluth the next morning at 6 A.M. and by noon the next day was back in my bookshop in Archer City, checking my mail. I had come eleven hundred miles south in a day and a half, and I didn't even have to drive after dark. I left Duluth a little before first light and was comfortably installed in a Marriott in Wichita, Kansas, 770 miles to the south, well before sunset—and this was in January, when the sun still sets reasonably early. On the 35 my 770 miles didn't even feel like a hard day's drive. I was in a sensible Buick, drove at only modestly illegal speeds, and could easily have gone farther, had there been any reason to. What made it possible to travel that distance in an easy day was the great road itself, a highway designed for just that type of travel. I never had to go more than one hundred yards off the highway for food, gasoline, or a rest room. I had to slow only slightly for the cities I passed through, those being Minneapolis–St. Paul and Kansas City. (Des Moines was bypassed so neatly that I didn't have to slow down at all.)

The question that might be asked is, if that's all there is to driving the great roads, then what's to write about?

To answer the question I would look for a moment at history. It is my belief that the true predecessors of the interstates were not the little roads mentioned earlier—U.S. 40, route 66, and the like. The great roads of nineteenth-century America were the rivers of the Americas: the Hudson, the St. Lawrence, the Delaware, the Susquehanna, the Monongahela, the Ohio, the Arkansas, the Columbia, the Red River of the North, the Rio Grande, and of course, the Missouri-Mississippi. Most of those were navigable for much of their length, but even the rivers on which navigation was chancy or impossible still provided paths through the wilderness. The Missouri took Lewis and Clark a long way on their journey to the western ocean. For each of these rivers, as for the other great rivers of the world—the Nile, the Yangtze, the Volga, the Amazon, the Danube, the Niger, the Ganges—there is an abundance of travel narratives, some of them by explorers who had struggled up the rivers seeking their source—think of the Nile and its literature—and others by travelers who merely floated down the rivers, seeing the sights.

What I want to do is treat the great roads as rivers, floating down this one, struggling up that one, writing about these river-

roads as I find them, and now and then, perhaps, venturing a comment about the land beside the road. For the road, like a river, very often merely passes through long stretches of countryside, having little effect on the lives of people who live only a few miles from it. When I lay abed as a boy in our ranch house, listening to those trucks growl their way up highway 281, the sound of those motors came to seem as organic as the sounds of the various birds and animals who were apt to make noises in the night. The sounds of cars and trucks blended in naturally, it seemed to me then, with the yips of coyotes, the lowing of cows, the occasional bellow of a bull, the whinnying of our horses, the complaints of the roosters, the hoot of an owl, and so on. The sounds of the road were part of the complex symphony of country life. Yet we had little to do with that road. I never went farther up it than Wichita Falls, twenty-eight miles north, where there was a cattle auction. I seldom went south on it at all. The road was just there, as it is to millions of Americans who live beside roads great and little. The roads are just there, routes to migrate along, if it's time to migrate.

Of the many downriver books I have read my favorite is *Slowly down the Ganges,* by the English traveler Eric Newby, about a twelve-hundred-mile trip he made in 1961, with his wife, Wanda, down India's holy river, from Hardwar to the Hooghly at Calcutta. Eric Newby has written several good travel books, one of which, *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush,* is on the whole funnier than *Slowly down the Ganges;* but the latter is richer, in part because the life along the great river—that is, the life of India—is so rich.

Slowly down the Ganges is a book I've read many times. Usually, when I travel, I take it with me as a talisman, in the Penguin Travel Library edition. It has a quality very seldom found in travel

books, and that quality is wisdom. In the main the great travelers, male or female, tend to be obsessed people; only obsession would get them across the distances they cross, or carry them through the hardships they face in the deserts, in the jungles, on the ice. They seldom attain and could perhaps not really afford wisdom, since wisdom, in most cases, would have kept them from ever setting out. Thus their narratives, particularly the greatest—of Thesiger, Burton, Lawrence, Doughty—are apt to seem to the reader to be the cries of solitary souls: exciting cries sometimes, joyous sometimes, weary and despairing at times, but always the cries of essentially solitary men working out the dilemmas of their solitude in lonely and difficult places. Though these travelers almost always have companions on their journeys, there is only one voice that we really hear, and only one character that counts: the travelers themselves, characters so powerful, so twisted, so packed with sensibility that even the very striking places they travel through frequently have trouble competing for our attention.

Eric Newby is not quite so obsessed, and more important, he has a wife, the devoted but by no means docile Wanda, the woman who saved him from the Nazis in the Apennines during World War II. Wanda sounds like a great wife, but she is certainly, so far as that book goes, a great character, and it is the fact that there are two characters interacting with each other and with the cultures they encounter that causes *Slowly down the Ganges* to seem as much roman-fleuve as travel narrative, particularly since there is the *fleuve* itself—a great river holy to millions—to make even a third character. The book often makes the point that I just made about American roads: that the river and the country it runs through constitute two different realities. The Newbys soon dis-

cover that villagers living only a mile or two from the Ganges know almost nothing about it, while the river men are similarly ignorant of conditions even a little distance up the shore. River and village, roadway and forest are two realities that seldom merge, however close they may lie to each other geographically.

Slowly down the Ganges, insofar as it is both the story of a journey and—at least in part—the story of a marriage, has textures that most travel books lack.

I would like some of those textures for this book, but it is doubtful that I can achieve them, because I have no Wanda. I know many ladies, some of whom might like a little trip now and then, but I know no one who would be likely to enjoy sitting in a car with me while I plunge eight hundred miles down a highway in a single day, not equipped with a Zagat and *not even stopping for museums. Particularly* not stopping for museums, the acquisition of a broadened cultural awareness not being the point of these trips at all. (Just today, counting only Kansas and Oklahoma, I zipped past quite a few museums: the School Teacher Hall of Fame (Emporia), the National Four-String Banjo Hall of Fame (Guthrie), the Southern Plains Indian Museum (Anadarko), the Museum of the Great Plains (Lawton), the Cowboy Hall of Fame (Oklahoma City), and of course, more serious establishments in Minneapolis and Kansas City.

The inconvenient—even distressing—lack of a Wanda means that I'm apt to be writing a one-character book, the one character being someone I have only modest and flickering interest in: myself. In travel books such as Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana* or Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia* there is a kind of dance of sensibility going on, one energetic and vigorous enough to hold

our interest. Robert Byron's interest in Persian architecture is so keen that it engages us, though perhaps not so strongly that we feel obliged to rush off to Iran and inspect his favorite building, the great tower called the Gombad-I-Kabus, whose brickwork Byron found so wholly admirable.

Similarly, even though we may be less interested than Bruce Chatwin in the last days of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, his investigation of their forlorn end—if it *was* their end—gives his story a kind of a ringing motif as he makes his way through Patagonia.

The challenge of the solitary traveler is always the same: to find something *out there* that the reader will enjoy knowing about, or at least, that the reader can be persuaded to read about. Usually, if there is no one but themselves in the narrative, the great travel writers rely on the extremes to which the environment forces them to produce the interest: Antarctica, and the failure of Scott to beat it, in Apsley Cherry-Garrard's *The Worst Journey in the World,* or Arabia's Empty Quarter and the ability of the Bedouin to *just* beat it, in Wilfred Thesiger's *Arabian Sands.*

I don't think I'm likely to encounter anything so extreme as the snows of Antarctica or the dunes of Arabia along the American interstates. At least I hope not. But I want to drive them anyway, even Wandaless, just to see what I see. I merely want to write about the roads as I find them, starting in January of 1999 in Duluth, Minnesota, at the north end of the long and lonesome 35.