

Time for a Short Drive

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The grumbling sound of gravel crunching beneath my tires fades as the car coasts to a stop. I turn off the engine and listen to the silence. I glance in the rear view mirror noticing the long misty cloud of dust that seems to be the only thing to have followed me down this lonely country road. The sun has not yet risen and as it climbs toward the horizon, the sky glows an eerie shade of purple. I set the parking brake, crack the door, close it softly and inhale the violet morning air, still soaking wet with last night's dew. I walk to the front of my car, which I swear was designed to be more like a lazy-boy recliner and less like a windshield and hood, and allow my half-asleep body to slouch into its familiar resting place.

Repeatedly, my head droops slowly as I nod off, and jerks suddenly back to life as I awake again. The sun is still below the horizon, yet there is light enough now to confirm that I am perched atop a small hill, the highest point for miles. I have found the right spot, although I am confident that my car could find this place on its own, having been here so many times.

The "middle of nowhere" some might call it. But I'd rather refer to it as my "spot." From here a vast expanse of open land extends to the horizon in every direction. The road stretched out in front of me separates two distinct worlds.

On one side is corn. Corn an arm taller than my outstretched arm, as far as I can see, golden tassels shimmer in the light breeze. The rough-edged leaves scrape and tear against one another in an endless melody of white noise, the skinny stalks swaying back and forth. In a month or so, machines larger than small houses will churn and grind and tear their way through these fields in fiery clouds of dust, reaping the success of a sunny,

hot, and wet summer. The golden crop will feed cows, pigs, and chickens, which will in turn feed me. This half, occupied by corn, is the Southern hundred acres of the field. The North is being reconditioned with something smaller in size, but even larger in use.

Here, on the other side of the road, are soy beans: the wonder crop of the Midwest, a meager bush, smaller than a breadbox. The tiny beans from this field will find themselves all over the world, being processed into nearly every commercially produced food we eat, as well as other products like plastics and fabrics.

If all goes well for the farmer this year; the sun shines most of the time, the rain doesn't fail to come, and the first frosty night holds off until the harvest, the land will yield a crop worth just enough for his family to survive the winter. Not a penny more. Soy beans don't pay quite as well as commercial property, or real-estate development, at least for the farmer. But for some residents of his land, this crop is worth infinitely more than money.

Sneaky little villains, the Canadian geese, have come to raid the farmer's crop before his rooster alerts him to the new day. I can't help but crack a smile listening to them continuously babble at one another; a babbling gaggle of geese. I wonder, sometimes, what they talk about; this year's meager crop, the dreadful weather, or maybe the new houses being built in the distance. Whatever it is, they sure have a lot to say, and with such poor manners: always talking with their mouths full of something.

The flock startles, my head jolts to attention, and in a flurry of feathers, the geese take flight, up into the now crimson sky. There is a stampede. Well, not quite, but it seems almost so, as a huge whitetail buck emerges from the cover of the corn and clears

the road ahead of me in a single bound. A smaller buck and a few doe follow him across, defying gravity as they bounce along. One young male lands, squarely, in the middle of the road, with a loud thud, followed by a slipping sound as his smooth hoofs slide out from beneath him on the hard packed gravel. I shutter. The herd pauses. The buck shakes his head, startled. He stands, and the group makes their way into the field. They bounce through the beans, past the white farm house toward the river on the far side of the field.

There are but two manmade structures that I can see from here. One is the small farmhouse behind me, at least a hundred years old, and home to the family that has tilled this soil for generations. The other is a duplex with a very tall, steeply slanted roof, the peak of which I can barely make out over the horizon to the West for the first time, today. It has not been there before, though I know from the geese's gossip that its neighbors have been multiplying for some time, creeping ever closer. This roof is the proverbial tip of an iceberg, belonging to one of the hundreds of identical homes being crammed into a subdivision a mile or so away.

It seems to me that neighborhoods out here are capable of moving, crawling their way from place to place. But in reality, they don't move, they grow. They grow like the desert, hundreds of feet a year, consuming the lush land over which they scrape and tear, leaving nothing but driveways, basketball courts, and SUVs.

The encroachment of the houses is a slow process though, and, luckily, not one I have to worry about this morning. However, I notice that the sun is now well above the horizon, and it is growing late. It's time for me to go.

I climb back into my car, reluctantly turn the key, and wince as the growling engine tears through the silence of the morning. The stones on the ground bid me farewell as they chatter under my tires, and the cloud of dust awakes once again, does an about face, and follows me away. The steep roof of the duplex grows larger out my window, signaling my departure from this pristine setting, and my arrival at a paved road, and civilization.

By the time I arrive in the school parking lot, I have driven through two hundred years of human ingenuity and development. The gravel roads and fields give way to brick buildings and street signs, and again to modern homes and traffic lights. I have driven from the 1800s into the year 2001, and the change is remarkable. But life seems the same. People are on their way to work, heading out to put food on their table. They drive the same streets, paved now. They eat the same food, though they buy it at MacDonald's now. Their goals are the same as the farmer's. But the world in which they live is different. There are no deer here, no geese babbling in the parking lots, no fields of gold stretching endlessly.

I make my way into school, wondering what life would be like if I couldn't go back in time 200 years in a ten minute car ride. If I couldn't spend a wet fall morning in a corn field, by a river, I wonder if I would appreciate its stillness and serenity. I wonder how long I will be able to.