

Bye Bye Gators

I wasn't exactly certain what I wanted or needed, but I was totally certain what I didn't want; and I didn't want the University of Florida. It looked just like a big, sprawling high school. It was everything I feared, and it gave me the creeps. As I drove around I came to the conclusion that I wasn't going to go. I wasn't going to just bump along to grade thirteen and not go to a real school where I'd be roughed up and challenged.

By the time I parked my car and entered the admissions officer's cubby, I was determined. The lady who met with me was very nice. She shook my hand and welcomed me to the college. She gave me a little booster bag full of university items: a mini orange football with a Gator logo, a Gator car decal, a Gator hat, a Gator hand towel, a Gator mug, and a rubber Gator for the top of my car antenna. I thanked her for the items and set them down by my feet.

I was trying to come up with a way to tell her why I decided against attending the school. I suddenly wanted to blame it all on the Gator mascot, but knew I needed more than that, and more than just a gut feeling that the place was all wrong for me.

Then she sealed the deal while pointing out a few freshman rules. "... and you have to dorm on campus for the first two years, and during that time you cannot have a car."

I stared at her. I debated silently if I should tell her I loved my car— needed my car— and that I had been living on my own long enough to never want a roommate. But I kept my thoughts to myself. I smiled. We chitchatted a bit and I left, and on the way home I felt a huge weight lift from my shoulders. All the way down to my toes I knew I had made the right decision. But I didn't know entirely why. I guessed I would find out later. It was a good guess.

Chapter Four Pair of Jacks

Like every guy, I had read *On the Road* by Kerouac and wanted to cut loose and carom from coast to coast as he did without thinking of money or trouble or anything but the great freedom that awaited me like a ship heading to sea. I was looking for a change. I wanted to see something beyond high school and the King's Court and a grocery-store aisle lined with canned vegetables. And I was especially itchy to feel new things, to shed my skin and grow. I couldn't explain myself to anyone because I was only full of excited urges and notions and desires, kind of like the Hulk before he transforms. Plus, I had a strong sense that I needed to snap off my past in order to have a future. All year, I had worked hard to keep myself together. I held my job, managed my own money, kept passing grades, and stayed out of deep trouble. But now my accomplishments just seemed like survival routines, and I wanted to move on to more romantic turf and find out who I was and what might happen to me when the rubber met the road.

And, of course, I wanted to write.

I figured if I crisscrossed Florida from coast to coast as if I were tying up the laces on a high-top sneaker I would eventually stumble on something juicy to write about. I was full of hope. I had been reading constantly. I kept up my daily journal-writing routine, logging my favorite quotes and building my vocabulary. And now it was time for me to stop being a chippy high-school writer and to challenge myself. So I began to shut down the “Bad Attitude Clearing House.”

I gave away all my thrift-shop furnishings to whoever would take them. I gave my suit and jacket and striped shirts and club ties and wing tips to a young guy who was looking for work. I kept my T-shirts and jeans and sneakers. I rounded up the little kids and passed out all my candy stash, which they gleefully devoured. They didn't save one piece for later. And as I watched them prance and dance around the parking lot like sugared-up puppets, I told myself to stop rationing pleasure as if it were a paycheck. It was time to cut loose and have fun, and not worry about tomorrow. I wanted my candy, too.

Reading *On the Road*, I felt more like Sal Paradise than Dean Moriarty. Sal was in love with everything and everybody. His eyes were as wide open as his heart. He recorded what he saw and what he felt in equal amounts, as if he were balancing the great scales of observation and reflection. But Dean confused me. He just wanted to consume everything. He had to keep moving like a shark, and in the end he was a tragic ghost of a person instead of a stream of milky way jazz under open highways. I wanted to move like Dean, but I wanted Sal's heart and soul.

Unlike Sal and Dean, I didn't have years to string out a trip. I had just over two weeks for a mini-On the Road adventure. I knew I was going to join my family in St. Croix. But first, I figured I'd drive up to Jacksonville, see Stephen Crane's house, then work my way down the state to Key West and Hemingway's home, and finally drive back to Miami to ship the car. That was all the structure I wanted. As Kerouac

wrote, “I was a young writer and I wanted to take off. Somewhere along the line I knew there’d be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me.” I wanted that pearl.

I had spoken with my dad and told him I was putting off college and instead would help with his new company. I wasn’t any good at construction, but I could drive the truck to pick up the crews and deliver supplies and work odd tasks in between. I told him I’d be home in a few weeks. He said he was counting on me, and it felt good to be needed by him. We could spend some time together after such a long break, and I could save money for a college that was a better fit for me.

I called a shipping company and made a date to ferry my car to St. Croix out of Port Everglades. I booked an air ticket for myself and thought that helping my father, saving a few bucks, and writing on my own was all the purpose I needed.

Then, out of the blue, something happened that I hadn’t planned on. My friend Tim Scanlon called. He wanted to visit. He graduated a year ahead of me and had been going to Florida State to study medicine on a full scholarship. He was a smart guy and I knew him only because we had worked together at the grocery store. I didn’t know any of his other friends and he didn’t know mine. The only reason he wanted to stay with me is he didn’t want his parents to know he was in town. He wanted to have some fun before he settled in with them for the summer. I told him he could hide out at my place for a few days, but then I was leaving. That was good enough for him.

I picked Tim up at the train station. He had changed in the last year. His hair was down to his shoulders. He wore a pair of ripped-up jeans and a Hendrix T-shirt. He looked like he hadn’t slept in a week, and by the time he got to my car he had already lit a joint. “Want some?” he asked.

I hesitated and started the engine.

“I’m in pre-med,” he said. “It can’t hurt you.”

I took a puff, then another. After a few minutes, I fell silent and all my thoughts seemed big, *very* big, so endlessly BIG I couldn’t get out of them. My brain hummed along as one thought segued into another. The concentration was incredible. If I had been reading a book, each page would have been the size of a Kansas wheat field. The space inside my mind seemed endless.

After a while he tapped me on the shoulder. “Good stuff,” he remarked.

I forgot I was driving. “Did I run any lights?” I asked in a panic.

He grinned. “I don’t know,” he replied, and shrugged. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

I had already quit work, so we just lounged around my room for a few days. We were so high we hardly went out. The weed dazed us until we got hungry enough to drift down the street to a pizza parlor, where we’d order two-for-one large specials and burn sheets of skin off our upper palates on the first bite. Then, with food in our bellies, we’d straighten up a bit and go back to the room and smoke a joint and settle down to talk up a storm.

He liked my books. “I guess you read a lot,” he said, digging through the open boxes. “You ever read *Hallucinogens & Shamanism* by Harner?”

“Never heard of it,” I replied.

“He’s incredible,” he said. “He believes that hallucinogens are the way we get in touch with our animal past. That in our DNA is stored genetic memories of when we were an evolving species and when you take the stuff the Indians of Brazil take you’ll access your genetic library all the way back to cellular experience.”

That seemed impressive to me.

He talked about a lot of books I'd never heard of. Scientific books on animal communication. Studies on dancing bees by Karl von Frisch. Reports on enzyme exchange communication between termites. And a book called *Insect Societies* by Edmund O. Wilson that linked human behavior to animals from apes to insects. "All behavior is chemical," he said, getting so excited he stood up and paced the room and beat his fists against his thighs.

I pegged him as my Dean Moriarty and was happy he showed up with his wild genetic ideas.

"Your memory is just chemistry. Your motivations. Your everything. You have to read the stuff I read," he insisted. He wrote out a frenzied list, and with each title he let out a hiss of excitement, pushed the hair out of his eyes, and pronounced each book better than the last. "This stuff on bio-communication is the future," he said. "It will take you back to the *WHY* of everything. Remember when you were a little kid and kept asking why and your parents gave you some half-baked answers? Well, these books get you down to the root of the why. If you understand this stuff you will understand everything— religion, politics, psychology, art — the history of all human desire is *entirely* in our chemistry."

He knew great stuff about biology and chemistry and medicine. I knew something about literature and what people plotted in their hearts and thought and suspected, but he knew the secret *why* behind each thought. I only knew how it looked once it happened, once it went *splat* in my face, and suddenly I wanted to know the *why* to everything. It seemed the most important desire I'd ever known.

"You have to read more science, man," he encouraged. "It's opening doors on behavior. I mean, literature is good. But the literature of the future is going to be based on genetics, not on environment. Believe me, the stuff we are learning is heavy."

Right away I was disappointed that I wasn't going to college. I had always believed in the maxim that the best way to predict the future was to create it. Now, the future appeared inaccessible to me. Without science, I was just another stimulus-response cave dweller howling at the moon. "I got lousy grades," I said, feeling as if I had already wasted my entire life.

"Don't sweat it," he sneered. "You could go to any college in the world. You've got more than grades, you've got brains."

"But no money," I concluded. "Which is actually worse than being an idiot."

"Well, I can help you *there*," he started. "Let's sell some weed and make some cash." He ran his hands through his long blond hair. "We'll drive up to Tallahassee and cop from the guys in the lab there. They grow the most potent stuff — hydroponically. None of the throat-burning yard twigs you cop from hippies which makes you jumpy. The lab stuff is mindblowing — better than Thai stick."

"Yeah," I said. I was totally caught up in his vision. He knew things I had never considered, had never heard of. He was on a roll, and I was ready to roll with him. "Let's hit the road," I said.

It took me about a minute to load my car. I trotted over to Davy's place and turned in my key and gave her a big hug and a gift I'd been saving for just this moment.

She peeled off the wrapping paper. It was a signed photo of Fess Parker, who had played Davy Crockett on the TV show. I'd found it in a thrift store. "I love it!" she hooted. "You always have a place here, so keep in touch."

As much as I loved Davy's, I left the King's Court feeling some vague relief that my high school year in a motel was over, but before I could consider what that relief meant I was swallowed up by the

excitement of the adventure. I drove directly to the grocery store and cashed a check for three hundred dollars, which was half of my savings. I gave Tim two hundred for the score. By the time we got up to Tallahassee, it was dark. We checked in to a motel and he made a few calls.

“We’re in luck,” he said, setting down the receiver. “They’ve just dried a fresh crop and are plucking off the buds.”

I drove him over to the school lab and dropped him off. He had a student ID and could hang out there until the dope was ready. I went back to the motel room to wait for his call. Four hours later I was still waiting, and I began to think that something went wrong. Maybe he wasn’t coming back. Maybe he’d been arrested. Maybe he’d ripped me off. I watched TV until I fell asleep.

At sunrise, I tried to drive onto the campus, but without a student ID I was stopped by security at the front gate. I returned to the motel and waited in my room until checkout time. Then I went down to the lobby and sat there all day trying to read the newspaper, but every time the phone rang, which was every few minutes, my head jerked toward the clerk, who was sympathetic enough to shake his head, “no, no, no,” with each call.

At dusk, I told myself I would leave at sundown. At sundown, I told myself I’d give it just a little more time. I left at nine, when it was pitch-black out. I did the best I could to rub him and the rip-off out of my mind by returning to my original plan.

I got in my car and kicked my butt straight across the state to Jacksonville. I was charged up with a renewed desire to write. I hopped in my car and blew out of Jacksonville and drove all day in the rain like a maniac toward the Keys. I stopped in Melbourne to get some gas and thought of Jim Morrison singing about how people are strange. I looked

around the gas station — they sure were. I jumped back in my car and got going.

Once I passed Miami, I began to see a steady stream of cars coming the other way, and I noticed no one but me was heading for Key West. I fiddled with my radio until I found a report that an early tropical storm was shifting north from Cuba and might hit the keys with hurricane force winds by nightfall. I gunned my car and sped down the causeway, skipping from key to key until I arrived in Key West. It was already raining sideways and the palm trees were wagging their leaves at me. I laughed out loud. It was thrilling. The whole place was boarded shut and taped up, but nothing could stop me from being there in the middle of it.

I found a motel made of cinder blocks and checked in. I got a good rate. Then I went down to a gas station store and bought what candles, water, and food were left. When I returned to my room I flicked the TV to the storm report and watched the ‘almost-a-hurricane’ head our way. It never developed into more than a gale with eighty-mile-an-hour gusts. It passed over us in the night, dumping a foot of rain and blowing down the weak trees. The greatest damage was done to the tourist industry. The vacationers had fled. Of course, it didn’t help that the TV stations played Key Largo on one channel and a documentary on the “Great Hurricane of 1935” on the other. That hurricane had killed over eight hundred people who were fleeing by rescue train when a twelve-foot surge of water, whipped up by two-hundred-mile-an-hour winds, swamped the passenger cars and took them all away. When the bodies were finally collected, they were burned in tall pyres like Hindus on the Ganges. And when the rescuers ran out of driftwood, they buried the rest in mass graves.

In the morning, when I emerged from my room, the locals were out and about cleaning up the mess, and a few drunken tourists were still celebrating their victory over nature. But the rest had fled and left the

place to me. But nothing could blunt my happiness. Fate, it seemed, had brought me down to Key West. Fate brought the storm. And I felt fated to write. I still didn't have anything significant to write about so I just smoked another joint and recorded observations and reflections.

I wondered what had happened to Tim Scanlon, so I called his home in Plantation, Florida. His mom answered.

"Is Tim there?" I asked.

"You aren't Jack, are you?" she asked harshly.

I told her I was Dave, "his other friend."

"Hey," he said when he came to the phone, "what's goin' down?"

"What happened, man?" I asked. "I waited forever at the motel."

There was silence. I thought I could hear his mother close a door. Finally, he replied, "It was awesome. I had to sample the crop. It was like pure THC and sent me into a total genetic high. I couldn't tell where I was. Finally, I walked around the campus in a trance until security picked me up and called my folks. They had to drive up and get me, and now they're royally pissed."

"What happened to the weed?" I asked.

"Oh, well, the good news is the security people were potheads and they just kept the stash. But the bad news is we lost all your money."

I took a deep breath. Money wasn't easy for me to come by.

"I'll pay you back when I get working," he said. "Promise."

I didn't listen to much after that, and when I got off the phone I didn't know what to think. But I dried my eyes and after a few beers and a couple of joints around back I imagined the great books I might write. Of course, I didn't write a word. It was easier to smoke joints and have someone deliver drinks than it was for me to deliver sentences.