

Road Signs

Trevor Mouw

As I waved to passing cars and tried to get semi-trucks to honk, I realized that since Iowa State hadn't started classes yet, technically, I could still mark this as the worst moment of my shitty summer. My neck ached. The mouth hole and the eye holes on the chicken head were perfectly placed so that I had to either strain my neck up or scrunch it down in order to see out. The temperature was in the high 80s and, like all good chicken-suits, there was almost no ventilation. With the two hours I had left before I could go back inside the Pizza Ranch, I thought about the only bright light in my otherwise dim summer: Canada. However, I quickly realized that part of that vacation had been my previous worst summer moment, too.

It hadn't taken long for me to turn from loving Canada to hating it. When we entered British Columbia, I had been immediately struck dumb by its awesome beauty. In the middle of July, there might not be a more impressive place to visit than B.C., Canada. The entire province is basically a mountain range. Every mountain is dressed in lively green pine trees, and every valley holds a picturesque lake. Unfortunately, because of these mountains, no road is straight or well maintained, which makes things difficult when you want to get somewhere quick.

"How do you get out of this stupid country?"

My friend, VP, shrugged in response and threw the map on top of our suitcases in the cluttered backseat of my Mazda hatchback. That was his way. When in doubt, find your own way out. While I had been studying for tests at the small college in the same small town where I grew up, VP was on a boat along the coast of Africa, shipping relief aid with the Navy.

"We should have accepted Heidi and Christina's offer to stay with them in Portland," he said. "Then we could have followed them. It would have been a win-win situation." VP looked for adventure in every opportunity, and it was driving me nuts.

"If we did that, we would have to drive 24 hours straight to make it back to Omaha in time for you to catch your flight back to Virginia."

VP had lost his license, so "we" driving 24 hours really meant "I" would be driving 24 hours.

"Besides, we would have found our way just fine if it weren't for those forest fires. Are we even on the right road?" I asked, reaching behind the seats and grabbing the map back. "I'll never know," I answered myself,

“because none of these roads have any frickin’ signs! In America, there’s a new sign every mile cheering me on. Hey Trevor, you’re going the right way. Destination City is only 235 miles away! Keep it up.”

VP laughed. “Who needs signs? We’ll just drive south until we run into Washington somewhere.”

“I need signs, ok? I need signs.”

I pulled over in an Old-West-looking town that we had definitely driven through earlier. I went in and asked for directions at the saloon, or whatever they called it. Getting directions wasn’t my manliest move, but I was sick of being manly. All week I had been manly. In fact, it was probably the manliest week of my life. Marcus was our third musketeer, although we don’t call ourselves the three musketeers; that would be dorky. He lived in Vernon, B.C., and it was for his wedding that we took the 26-hour road trip from Iowa. We went early to participate in the six-day-long bachelor party, the theme of which was beer, babes, beef, and beer. We went camping in the bush and chopped down a tree for Pete’s sake. It doesn’t get manlier than that. When I walked out of the saloon holding a paper foretelling my every turn and the number of miles kilometers between each, I thought I would feel better. But I didn’t.

“VP, I can’t stop thinking about those girls. They really got under my skin.”

“Who? The sisters at your table? I told you right away they looked like prudes.”

“Not them,” I said, pulling back onto the highway. “The girls from my college, the ones I graduated with. When you and Marcus had rehearsal, I went downtown with them to watch a movie and eat supper.”

“Yeah, I know. I was pretty jealous of you, actually.”

“Most of it was fun, but do you have any idea how awkward it was for me at supper, when everyone was talking about their fancy, new jobs, and I had to tell them I work overnights, stocking shelves at Wal-Mart?”

“It’s your own dumb fault, Trevor. I told you to quit that job as soon as you started, just like I said with *all* your previous jobs.”

In the last two years, which included my senior year of college, I had certainly worn many hats. After working at the Pizza Ranch back home in Sioux Center for seven years, I jumped on a carousel of jobs. At the same time as I was handing out basketballs and pretending to ignore anyone sneaking into the Rec Center without a membership, I was helping cook for and playing YuGiOh (despite not knowing any of the rules) with a home of adolescent males with mild mental retardation. After that, I worked for a

window washing company, but quit when I had to power-wash the roof of a dairy without a safety rope. I swore more in those few hours than I had in my entire life. Then, as an assistant manager of the local movie theater, I got to see all the free movies I wanted, but that didn't mean much because I was only making minimum wage. So I took a full-time position at Wal-Mart working overnights.

"You have a psychology degree," VP needlessly reminded me. "Why don't you use it?"

"I don't know. I don't even know why I kept it as my major. I loved the classes, but I knew the whole time I didn't want a job in psychology."

VP pointed to the right, and I turned onto a narrow, bumpy road.

"I'm so lost, VP?"

"The paper says we stay on this road all the way to the border."

I held the steering wheel tighter. The road was shit.

When I graduated college, I was the last person to leave our apartment. After packing the final things into my car, I said goodbye and locked the door. I'm usually pretty reverent with stuff like that. I started my car and drove away, but before I had even reached the edge of campus, my car died. I tried, unsuccessfully, to start it, but it wouldn't. Then I broke. I've always been the poor sap who tears up whenever movies hit the sentimental music, but this time I wept like a little kid. For the first time in years, I found myself without direction in my life, without anything to work towards. I had reached my greatest fear, and I wept.

The narrow, bumpy road soon merged with a larger highway.

"Those girls told me to make up a new job to tell people at the reception."

"What did you pick?"

"I didn't. I wanted to, but I'm not much of a liar."

"What would you have picked? A writer?"

"Or a teacher. When I was in grade school and high school I always saw myself becoming a teacher."

"Yeah," said VP. "Me too."

Before long, we reached the border, and I almost jumped out of the car and kissed the American soil. VP did the math, and realized we'd only lost an hour and a half. That wasn't too bad.

One mile into America we saw a sign: PORTLAND 286 miles.

"Wanna go to Portland?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I would always regret it if I didn't."

Standing the chicken suit alongside the busy street in Ames, I finally realized the mistake I'd made. I was back in school, enrolled in Iowa State, but working at the Pizza Ranch was my new way of holding on to my old path, of playing it safe, and my reward was looking like a fool. If there was to be a new me, it had to be all new. So I went inside, took off the chicken suit, and I quit.

Trevor Mouw is an English education student from Sioux Center, IA. After graduating with a B.A. in psychology, he is back in school to realize his desire to become a teacher.