

# Long Road Home to Virginia

*by George Ding*



It was May and I had just graduated from college. I didn't have a clue what I wanted to do but I knew I didn't want to stay in Los Angeles. So I decided to go back home to Virginia.

The only problem was: I had a car in Los Angeles. Shipping it would have cost around eight hundred dollars, not including the four-hundred dollar plane ticket I'd have to buy to ship myself home. The only option was to drive it across the country myself, along with all my things.

Luckily, one of my best friends from middle school offered to make the trek with me. He and my roommate helped me pack all my stuff up in cardboard boxes. I wrote the contents on the side with a permanent marker. "CDs," "Books," "Clothes." It was sad to see the last four years of my life distilled into a couple of large brown boxes.

We loaded the boxes into my car, which sagged from the weight. In the end, when my room was empty and my car packed, I could barely see out the rear windshield. I gave my roommate a hug and told him I'd see him when I'd see him and got in the car. My friend hopped in the passenger's seat and we were off. I remember looking in the rear view mirror and watching my roommate wave until he became so small that I couldn't see him anymore.

It's about 2,700 miles from one coast of the United States to the other. The route we took was around 3,200. It took us through 13 states, from the glitz and glamour of Las Vegas; to the vast plateaus of Arizona and New Mexico; the majestic mountains of Colorado; the plains of Nebraska which stretch on endlessly toward the horizon; the mighty rivers that traverse Iowa, Missouri, and Illinois like veins; the quiet townships of Indiana and Ohio; the winding switchbacks of West Virginia; and finally onto the familiar roads of Maryland and Virginia. We saw landmarks that we had seen only in postcards or history books: the Hoover Dam, the Rocky Mountains, Gateway Arch, the Sears Tower.

But the trip was more than just sights and landmarks. One night outside Flagstaff, Arizona, we snuck into a train yard through a hole in the fence and watched the freighters lurch into station and screech to a stop. The noise was deafening, and the train cars were bigger than I imagined them to be. I had never seen one up close. The cars were stacked high with crates which we climbed on top of. We sat there for a long time talking, hoping the trains would start up. When they finally did, we had already climbed down but we heard the links between train cars pull tight and creak one by one down the track. Then the train, which had stopped for a reason that was unknown to us, was gone.

On another occasion we stopped into a small bar in Delaware, Ohio and listened to a three-piece blues band whose name I've forgotten. The other patrons in the bar were all over thirty and though we felt a bit out of place, the beer was cheap and the music was good. When we left, I asked if the band had an album. They said they didn't but that they played here every Wednesday night. They asked us to come back and I lied and said I would.

A road trip is a staple of the modern bildungsroman. Who I was getting into that car in Los Angeles, California was not the same person who got out in Fairfax, Virginia. I had changed imperceptibly. I thought I knew what America was getting into that car, but when I got out I realized I didn't. I realized that America, and every country, is so many contradictory things you can't hope to describe it in a word, a sentence, or even a paragraph. America is rich, it's poor, it's big, it's small, it's caring, it's ruthless. America is not me, it's not New York, it's not Hollywood movies—it's every single person, their hopes and dreams, their homes, their families.

When I think about that trip, the things that stick in my mind aren't the casino floors of Las Vegas as you might imagine—they are the cobbled steps of old town Omaha, minutes away from the shores of the Missouri River; the feeling of crossing from one state to another, driving over lands that people had fought and died for; the way headlights illuminate the road at night; and driving down deserted roads in nameless towns and thinking, even though I'm just passing through, people live and die here.

After nine days, the unfamiliar roads became recognizable. The road signs we had paid so much attention to for fear of getting lost began sporting familiar names. We grew quiet with the thought that we had come home.

We drove to my friend's house first. He got out with his stuff, we embraced and said goodbye, and I continued on to my house. When I arrived it was past midnight. The house was dark. I turned the engine off and just sat there for a while.

As they say, life is about the journey, and not the destination. And now the journey was over. You would think that I would have been glad to be home. You'd think that after nine days of nonstop driving and being cooped up in a small four-door sedan that I'd be relieved. But tell you the truth, sitting there in the driver's seat of my car, loaded with all my things, all I wanted to do was to keep driving.

— April 2008