

## **Backgrounders**

I stopped at Health Camp in Waco on the way up and ordered a Super Health Burger, which meant double meat and double cheese. I ordered onion rings too. There was a booth with a view of a used car dealership called You're Approved Auto and the little blue and silver flags lining its parking lot, and I sat there watching the wind and the highway because I had already checked everything on my phone that I normally checked. I ate my burger and onion rings as fast as I could and checked my phone again. Two children wearing oversized hats played basketball in the parking lot with no hoop.

My vehicle for this mission was a removable-top Jeep leased to me by a man with a disfigured face named Polo. It replaced a sixteen year old wagon that I put 25,000 miles on one summer driving around the United States, viewing places of grandeur and depression. In that time I learned the prideful melancholy of day after day on the Interstate, runs fueled with scattered radio signals and the occasional emergency Mountain Dew. It was the summer I decided that I liked country music and beef and the sun and that Texas might be a good place for me to live, and I still credit the wagon for holding up the way it did. In the Jeep I had the guilt of betraying my old car and some hope that I could start another similar connection, with less visible rust and fewer grating noises during acceleration.

The car came with a satellite radio service, so I flipped between stations called Outlaw and Highway the 90 minutes from Waco onwards. Country songs in all their corny defiance, or lonesomeness, or romanticism, had a way of making me think of my own life in saccharine terms. Their red dirt road was the long block with the water treatment plant I grew up on in Michigan. Their fishing with dad was my Playstation with online strangers, their hunting my egg throwing. Their ex-girlfriends were my ex-girlfriends except we didn't still love each other.

I switched over to Hip Hop Nation every ten minutes or so to recalibrate. The scenery was unchanging until the Dallas Skyline, where a rapper I liked screamed at me that he woke up in a new European luxury vehicle. I switched to local radio and found a country song about chewing tobacco, which I had done once in college on St. Patrick's Day and gotten sick. Finally arriving at the French-themed hotel, I pretended to have experience with valet parking.

I was there for the Ultimate American Weekend. Driving a 4x4 north through Texas to Dallas, meeting a close friend stationed at an Army base in Oklahoma so that we could see one of our nation's biggest country music stars...it appealed to the caricatured patriot in me. Never mind that I had forgotten to send a dishonest email demanding press passes for sneaking an insider's look at the show on behalf of an imaginary Australian travel magazine, as planned. We would sit in the crowd and understand what it meant to be a normal young person in Texas, fanning our shirts and smelling of mosquito repellent.

Tom was in the hotel room when I got there. We were in Uptown, a neighborhood I was warned would not allow me into bars if I was wearing jeans. The only pants I owned were jeans. I put on an emasculating pink polo shirt and my everyday Wranglers, and we walked into an easygoing house-shaped building with tattooed waitresses. There were two stools at the far end.

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"Which of our friends is the most likely to get married?" I asked.

"Which of us will be the first to get divorced?" Tom answered. The girlfriends of our guy friends were disappointing, and changing them in different negative ways. One had stopped eating meat, another had been caught watching a show about house hunting during the basketball playoffs. Tom and I were single and unchanging and putting much of our thinking into the professional football season, which could not come soon enough.

## **Backgrounders**

At the next bar it was later and three men wore the exact same shirt I did. We rested with faux-comfort against a wooden ledge. “Can you think of a less capable future father than me?” Tom asked. I looked away from the television we were both staring at and thought about the question.

“The only thing I could see myself being worse at than parenting, is the sex required to conceive a child.”

Tom was tired and ordered us several energy drinks mixed with vodka. I remembered nothing of the rest of the night and woke up with a pounding headache, my contact lenses drying in my eyes under the cool air blowing from the wall. A man with a French accent delivered me an omelette and I used the ironing board in our room as a table. Tom also had limited memory and pulled several receipts out of his pocket with a look of disgust. The Sportscenter episode repeated. State Police were inside the house of a star New England Patriot football player, searching for murder clues. I lost consciousness again and woke up thirty minutes later feeling better. Tom was on the phone.

“One hundred twenty dollars for a thirty minute massage,” he repeated, a wine glass full of water balancing on his stomach. “This is the person I have become. What should I wear?”

“Don’t worry,” I said after he hung up. “I recently bought a coworker lunch at an expensive Japanese restaurant while pretending to have an expense account.” An ice cube melted on the carpet near my feet. “We’re operating at a high level.”

Tree shade covered the sidewalk as I jogged slowly into the center of downtown Dallas, where there were lots of office buildings and no people. I stopped at Thanks-Giving Square and looked at the Golden Rule mosaic painting. Do unto others, etc. Dehydration became a factor and human beings emerged near the Dallas Muesum of Art, outside of which a group of children

## **Backgrounders**

played in a fountain I otherwise would have run through. Before reaching the hotel I saw a lime green Porsche with a vanity license plate that said Sandman.

An empty Mexican restaurant near our hotel served enormous Enchilada platters and tall cups of ice water. “My taste in food is elementary school level, at best,” Tom said. “Completely unsophisticated.” Our slouches exaggerated themselves, their mock weariness competing. I folded my copy of the bill into a sailboat, creasing it until the sides were symmetrical.

“I’m almost certain I can’t change a tire.”

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Tom had indigestion. The hotel concierge directed us to the business center so we could print our tickets, and I did so while Tom vomited upstairs in our room. We wandered down Maple Ave looking for a ride and found a cab at a Shell station where two small dogs barked at each other from the backseats of different sport utility vehicles.

They had expensive bottles of water at the concession stand so we drank under a shaded table near the pavilion and looked at the girls who weren’t too young. “I’ve reduced myself to a fashion expert,” Tom said. “I spend the majority of my time away from the base analyzing female clothing choices and rendering opinions.” It was admirable, in my opinion, to have opinions. The sun was going down and the cooling air smelled of hot dog and kettle corn.

On the cheap ticket lawn, a young woman with freckles and her nervous friend approached and asked us to buy them alcohol. Tom refused for fear of getting arrested and losing his place in the Army. They were my younger brother’s age and made me think of his Michigan life, playing with an expensive camera and being mean to his parents. I took the twenty dollar bill she threw on the ground next to me and bought two Bud Lights from a hawker wearing a neon t-shirt that said hawker on the back. He was lugging a cooler on the sloped green

## **Backgrounders**

through blankets topped with middle aged women sipping lime flavored beer. I gave the girl and her friend their drinks and they retreated giggling to the wall at the back of the lawn, where a huge crowd of young people stood flirting and yelling at each other. Closer by a couple snuggled on a blanket, the boy looking bored while the girl smoked a strong smelling grape cigarillo.

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Love and Theft concluded the first opening act by playing their hit, which was about a woman who had a degree of devil in her otherwise angel eyes. Cigarillo girl sang every word while her boyfriend nodded his head. At the end of the song another girl came crashing down next to Tom, slamming her head on the ground. “She’s concussed,” he said in a football announcer’s voice. “She’s on an incredible variety of drugs, and she’s concussed.”

“You hate to see that,” I said as her drunk friends tried to walk her away. “Especially at this stage in the game.” Half an hour later, shortly after Brantley Gilbert’s 2<sup>nd</sup> act interlude re: the right to bear arms, I noticed her staggering through the swarm of other young people behind us, her mouth agape.

We slowly worked through a few oversized beers. There was something about being surrounded by high schoolers and married couples that made us less inclined to drink to the point of amnesia. Security was now escorting the poor girl out of the area via wheelchair as she threw up on herself. Behind us a young guy lay face down in the grass as five security people attempted to lift his limp body into another chair. Tom squinted in the dark. “Dog tags,” he said. “Bad for the brand.”

## **Backgrounders**

The man dragged his feet in a final belligerent protest and was not seen again. Right behind us a boy called a girl a fat bitch and a man our age screamed at him to respect women. A girl to my right kicked a paper tray full of nacho dip at my leg to clear herself some room.

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Tim McGraw walked through the audience onto the stage like the Heavyweight Champion of the World and the crowd was suddenly denser and louder. He was one of Tom's favorite singers and I had been in love with his wife since she made the Sunday Night Football on NBC intro video. There was a full moon above the stage and the girls in front of us, who had asked us to save their seats earlier in the night, talked about how beautiful he was. Later in the set they began throwing empty beer cans at a couple dancing nearby, perhaps out of jealousy.

Tom and I did not speak. McGraw exercised control over us and everyone else. The lights went out after every hit, and each time we thought it might be over. Then a familiar riff would flair and the crowd would roar, and at least for one song many adolescent boys would put their arms around each other and sway. Tom and I did not sway.

Young people everywhere danced and kissed and lay next to each other as the show wound to a close. Tom missed the last song, sprinting to the bathroom. I stood by myself in the middle of the crowd trying to be observant and invisible.

A flash went off somewhere in front of me. I would be the one standing alone in the background of their uploaded photos wearing a denim short-sleeve, staring somewhere with a light beer glaze. McGraw finished Truck Yeah and told everyone to have a safe night. Tom and I met back near the concession stands and shared a cab with Oklahoma girls.

“Great show. Expectations exceeded. Almost a religious experience,” said Tom.

“Sublime, transcendental, not a single flaw.”

## **Backgrounders**

The girls told us we talked funny and asked us where we came from, then told Tom they hated New York as they hopped out of the taxi in a quaint residential area. Back Uptown, we went to a pizzeria instead of waiting in long bar lines.

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My drive back was fast in the morning. I passed through the small highway colored cities of I-35, scripting more country songs into my own life until the lyrics bled together with the sun piercing the dashboard and my head hurt. I turned the sound off and heard an empty Gatorade bottle rolling around the backseat and turned it back on again. A disc jockey announced the arrival of a disgraced former baseball star to Round Rock, where he would attempt to resurrect his career.

A song about a farmer's daughter came on. I tried to remember all the words in the song about getting taken to the ball game, to the crowd, eating peanuts. Days later Tom would send the local minor league baseball team's media relations representative an email posing as the veteran editor of an Alberta-based global sport and culture magazine, describing his declining health in great detail and verifying my credentials.