

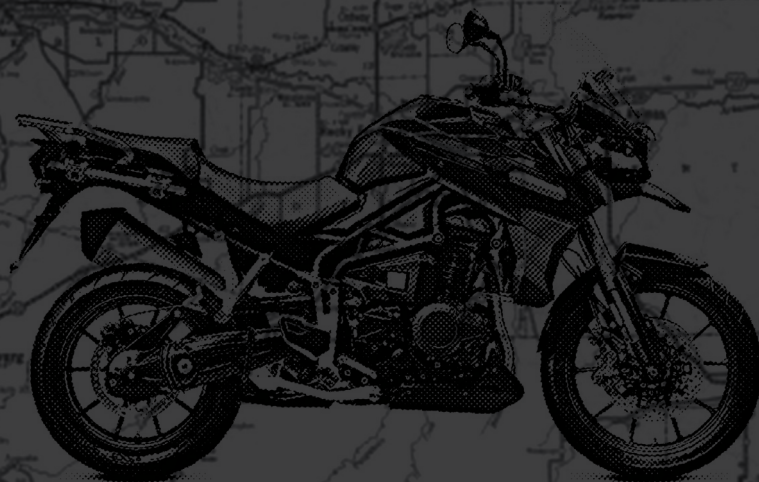
IDIOT SAVANT

(Or Avant Idiots)

CROSS COUNTRY EDITION



WORDS BY DAVE REGAN



Hi there! Did you get a haircut? No, I mean, I'm saying it looks nice. Serious...oh come on, just take the compliment. Some people...ANYHOW—hi, how are you? I'm good, thanks

for asking. Time, yet again, to fill your eye-holes with much wordery about things that sometimes have to do with tattooing. This is not one of those times. Well, it is...sort of. In the spirit of avoiding writing about the same things over and over (the beneficial side-effect of no short-term memory is forgetting what you were talking about anyway), I'm making a bit of a departure from the last article, and telling a story of sorts. Some parts are very relatable, and some are completely subject to personal experience, but it's a common thread for the nomadic spirit in all of us. And that thread, in this instance, is roadtrippin', motorcycle style. I'm write knowing fully well that I'm not the first person to ever do this, nor the last, and it certainly won't be my final time doing it either. I'm also writing in case any of you ever felt like you needed something like this in your life; you do.

I guess there are two big pieces to this; before the trip and after the trip. But we'll focus on the before at the moment.

WHY

It has been a long time coming—the idea of taking the bare minimum, leaving everything else, and surviving across the American landscape completely alone. I don't really know when along the way the seed was planted, but I felt it growing larger and larger.

I moved from Baltimore to Boulder in the summer of 2009, joined one of the best crews/families I have ever worked with at Bolder Ink, and put nose to grindstone immediately. I've always been into the work; it's a sickness sometimes. Working 6 to 7 days a week always, sometimes between multiple shops, just because. Maybe it's escapist or maybe it's obsessive? Either way, it's always been that way. One goal, and maybe the biggest of moving to Colorado, was not to let work dominate life. Hell, the last tattoo I got before leaving Maryland was "MAKE TIME" across my knuckles, sitting directly under "WORK HARD." Seemed fairly apropos for me, and I wanted to make it my rallying cry. And when I moved here, I did just that. I was outside every morning: dirt biking, hiking, four wheeling, exploring, camping, bicycling to work every day—generally celebrating the beauty of this place.

And then, after three and a half years, I found myself working two jobs, 6 days a week, going home and painting every night, feeling completely alienated. No social life whatsoever, and ultimately feeling as though I had totally failed to follow my own advice. I was really bummed at the situation and at myself for creating it. I needed a break, and as I am not the most graceful of people, I figured that quitting my job and buying a new better-suited motorbike was exactly the cure for what ailed me. There was a lot of hemming and hawing; mainly at the prospect of having no job for the first time in my adult life, and at the idea of shelling out an obscene amount of money for a vehicle. But I couldn't ignore the voice telling me to do it. Last year, my best friend, John Shea, and his lady, Piper, decided to take a 6-week trip on their Ducatis', coast to coast, and they stopped to see me on the return leg. We have always spoken candidly about everything, and John made it a point to tell me that the trip was one of the greatest things he had ever accomplished in his life, and how invaluable it was to gaining perspective and finding out what really matters. I had thought on this quite a bit prior to our conversation, but that was really the catalyst for making it happen.

HOW

At the beginning of April 2013, I bought a brand new Triumph Tiger 1200, the first new anything I've ever owned, (but something like my tenth or eleventh bike) and set the ball in motion. Having absolutely no idea what I was doing, I rounded up all the unused gear I had sitting around, hit the Army/Navy store, and Return Everything Incorporated (REI to some of you) to gather whatever gear made sense. I knew less was more, so I didn't have to grab much. The bike was outfitted with Touratech aluminum bags (can't say enough good things about them, far superior to Triumphs OEM bags) and I carried the following:

- Sleeping roll (Thermarest, coffin bag, small pad rolled as a pillow)
- Tent
- Rainsuit
- Magnetic map bag
- Waterproof duffel, top roller
- Boots
- A very limited assortment of clothes

Chaps

Cold weather gear (insulated and windproof, I'm not fancy enough for electric clothes)

Some easy meals: Pro Bars (if you don't know about these, you need to, particularly if you're on the road), almonds, water, jerky, you know... essentials. Basically anything to avoid eating most of the garbage you find along the road.)

Tools

Air pressure gauge

Knife

Rope

Airhawk seat cushion (absolutely the smartest thing out there for touring)

WHEN

The date was set to leave my job May 1st, and to leave the state on the 6th. I prepared, and as seems to be the case in these tense situations, literally everything around me became a mess. The weather was uncooperative. It snows here. A lot. And whenever the hell it wants to. 2013 was a very late season for snow. After getting the bike through the 500 mile break in, only the damn dealer could service it (warranty bs) and that was frustrating in and of itself, as they took longer than I had hoped. Got my first ticket ever on a bike (I ride sport bikes normally, this was a great surprise to get nailed for 10 over), wrecked my car, had the absolute WORST client ever as my last tattoo in Boulder, my travel plans continually changed because of weather, and the route changed from a western to eastern-bound trip so I could spend time with my brother, who was working out of the country with no set date for returning...it was a lot to pile on. But deadlines are deadlines, and the one I had set was fast approaching.

Unlike the case of John and his lady, I was doing this alone. My mind is my greatest enemy, so the neurosis grew with each day that brought me closer to leaving. In all honesty, I was terrified. And that sort of set one of



the themes I had plenty of time to think about—fear. The night before leaving was not a good one. After packing the bike, I just couldn't sleep. I was tossing and turning, imagining all the things that could happen on the road, it was a lot. But by that following morning, that was all gone. I was ready, got on the bike, and made east for Kansas. I very intentionally left my music at home. I had earplugs. For a month.

Our everyday lives are so full of noise, chatter, distraction, that even something that completes life like music does was just too much. This was about reflection and inflection.

WHERE

My first day was eastbound, 630 miles straight, on I70. I wanted to take 70 for a bit, as it was the road that brought me to Colorado, and somehow very symbolic in returning to Maryland (which was the route I ultimately choose, namely to see family) that way. It started out very cold, but that didn't faze me, and ahead I went.



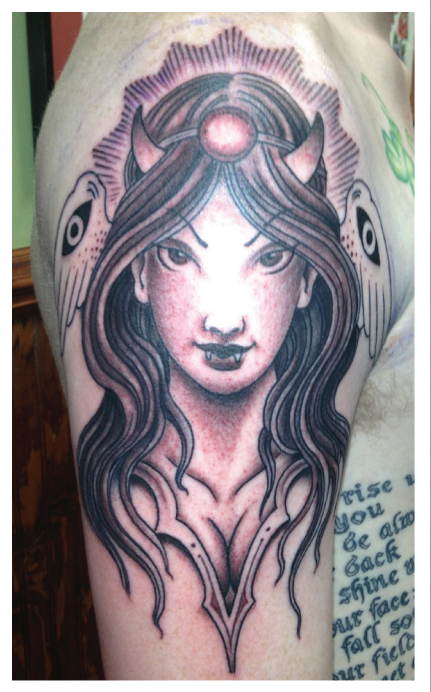
Kansas, for anyone that doesn't know, comes from the native word meaning "godforsaken land of wind" or something along those lines. It was a brutal trip, getting blown across lanes every time you would hit a flat spot between the hills that on-ramps and overpasses create. I get about 180 miles in between fill ups, which were a nice chance to stretch my legs. After about 8 hours, I made my way into Kansas City, MO to see my friend Ross and his wife Kelly, and their beautiful little lady, Lola, for an evening of food, friends, and lots of cold beers.

I stayed two days in KC before making my way to Columbia, MO to work with Lars, Gabe, and the crew at Iron Tiger. College towns know how to get tattooed, and there was no shortage of work. I was able to sneak out the second morning I was there; Lars took me to see the Missouri River, and what he called "Missouri's Stonehenge," a mysterious site where some very busy souls were able to steal time away from their lives to stuff a bunch of boats in the ground on their ends, to remind us of a simpler time where a man could dispose of his boat however he saw fit. Across open fields, I also saw the largest tree in the state, which had been used during the Civil War (and possibly the Revolutionary) as a hanging tree. It was evident that an old death was there, waiting quietly in the air around that place, and you could feel the echo of battles fought long ago permeate everything.

After an evening of couch surfing with a dog, I was off to my next stop in St. Louis, at Trader Bobs. Despite a rainy start to the day, I darted around back roads that trailed 70 and made my way in. It had just cleared up as I rolled down Jefferson Avenue and pulled up in front of the shop. Ahmed greeted me, and introduced me to the crew that I hadn't met before. Unfortunately, Alan was gone that day, having a new moose heart and antlers installed in the Volvo.

If you have not been to Trader Bob's, I will say this: it is an institution. One of the oldest shops in the country, it has been around since the '30s (although the location has changed over the years) and is home to an absolutely unbelievable amount of our history. I'm not going to go into detail, but seriously—go there. I was fortunate enough to even get to sit in and make a super fun late walk-in on a young fella from the air force, and it made my night! I said my goodbyes, packed up, and headed just across the bridge into Illinois to see Matt Hodel and spend an evening learning how versatile digital art is, and how easily it can be created...in the hands of a madman! Matt is deeply involved in the digital world, and extremely well versed. He also makes mean taquitos. We stayed up late talking art and philosophy. I woke to an empty house and a beautiful lakeside view, as I packed up and made my way to Lexington, KY.







My aunt, uncle, and cousins live in Lexington. I was planning on heading to Indianapolis, but for as many times as I've driven through Kentucky, I have always wanted to be on a motorcycle. The roads are incredible—they wind you up through cut passes with all manner of rock to distract you from the road, and sink you into valleys where you can chase the river as fast as you like. After two days, it was time to move on to Maryland. My brother still hadn't made it home, so I reconfigured a few things and lined up work at Classic Electric in Frederick, MD. That stretch, a drive I had made many times over the years, was the hardest day of the entire trip. The temperature was not on my side, as I rode out in the low 40's and dropping—it may not sound cold, but try sitting in it for 10 hours and going through the mountains. It started snowing on me outside of Charlestown, WV, and got to the point where I was stopping once an hour or so to try and warm up. I had on long johns, double socks, windproof liners, a windproof jacket, leathers, full-face helmet, neck warmer, gloves, etc., but it just didn't cut it. I seriously considered calling it, but there was a storm moving in that I caught bits of, and I would have been stuck, so I opted to push on. I finally arrived at my brother's house and was greeted by his girlfriend. I was relieved and exhausted. I polished off the rest of his bourbon and met up with friends for dinner and drinks. And more drinks...

Classic Electric is a wonderful place. I've been working with those guys on and off for the last nine years or so. The crew has remained almost entirely the same—it is very much a family, and has always felt like home. I am incessantly busy when I go home...between friends, family, and work, there isn't a lot of relaxing. One night there was

an impromptu meeting with all the founding members of Thee Unholy Swarm; the bike club I had ridden with for years in Baltimore. It was beyond good to be home, and with them especially, but my brother was the entire reason I was there, and he was still out of the country. I had one day to myself, and John (Shea) took my mother and I on a tour of the Station North Tool Library (near the Greenmount Cemetery), an amazing community project that he and Piper started last year. It's a brilliant project, and is really bringing that neighborhood together. I eventually made my way back to Frederick for a well-deserved and much-needed massage, and had a few more tattoos to make before my brother finally made it back. And when he did, something clicked.

I looked at my hands and felt that, yet again, I was missing the point. This was supposed to be a long, happily self-imposed break from work, and I wasn't taking the break. But not working is scary. Not scary in any tangible way, but in the sense of the aimlessness that creeps in. I have a good life now, but it was not always this way. In fact, it was pretty terrible for a long time, starting with being homeless for quite a while. Tattooing really lends a crystal clear focus to, as well as an escape from, life. Tattooing has been the main driving force in turning my life around for almost 15 years, and not working, to me, is a doorway backwards into that old life. Regardless, this would be the end of tattooing for the remainder of the trip, period.

On the morning following his arrival, my brother Pete and I made our way to Harpers Ferry, WV; a favorite of both

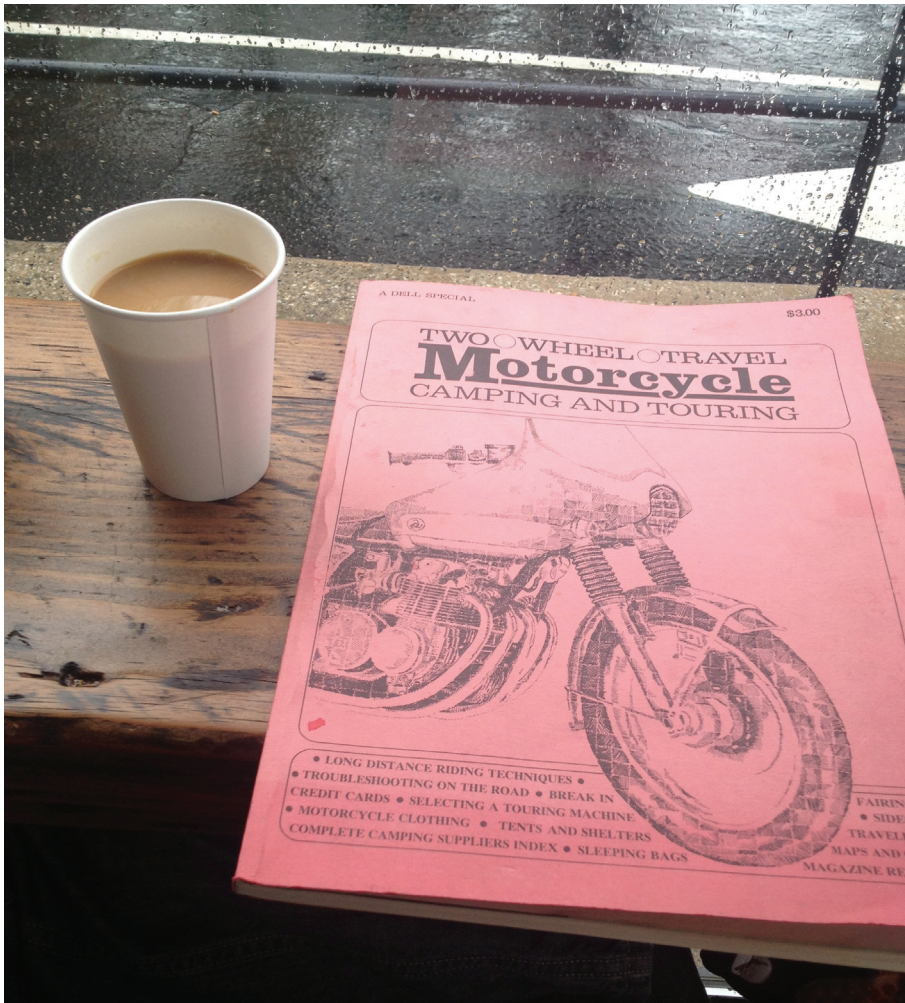


THAT TOWN HAS A SOUL, AND IT IS AN OLD SOUL INDEED...

of ours since we were little. There is an amazing energy to that place. The converging point for the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers, it was home to Harpers Armory, the Hilltop Hotel (which is all kinds of haunted, and I will attest to that), and it played a major role in the Civil War. That town certainly has a soul, and it is an old soul, indeed. We made our way up one of the long, winding trails—the same trails soldiers marched up and down 150 years ago—searching for pumpkin balls, or whatever memorabilia we could find. It's rare to find, and illegal to take, anything you may come across...but you know how it is. Coincidentally, after having bad luck with ball shot, we miraculously came across the button off of a Union soldier's overcoat. It was crushed, but the eagle is still very visible. I mean...I think it was. If I had kept it, I might know, because I would certainly never break the law. Ahem. Pete is an archaeologist by trade, and we grew up scouring the woods for whatever we might find, and find we did, then and now. The woods have always been sacred for us, not in some religious sense, but just the peace and solitude that comes with being there and the promise of finding hidden treasures. We went back to Frederick, and after our last family meal, I packed up and was ready to kick off.

Lewisburg, WV was my next destination. It was also the windiest day of my trip. Leaving Frederick was okay, but by the time I was on 80 South, it was ridiculous. My bike loaded with gear might tip in at 580 lbs, so it isn't terribly heavy, and it gets pushed around HARD on the highway in those kind of winds. I'm talking 40-50 mph crosswinds with stronger gusts, far worse even, than Kansas. But by the time I made it to 64, it had calmed down and I could actually enjoy the scenery. Those hills...there really isn't anything else like it. It's as though the mountains laid down to sleep, and covered themselves with a verdant blanket of the thickest trees I've seen in this country, even compared to the Northwest. But I suppose that's the entirety of the Smoky/Appalachian Mountains; it's very different from the Rockies out here. Lewisburg is a beautiful, albeit tiny, town nestled in very quiet hills along 64. I was there to make a surprise visit to a friend





I hadn't seen in almost 10 years. I spent the night with her, her husband, their kids, and a few other friends, sitting around a bonfire, talking about life, and listening to amazing music. Oh yeah, and drinking.

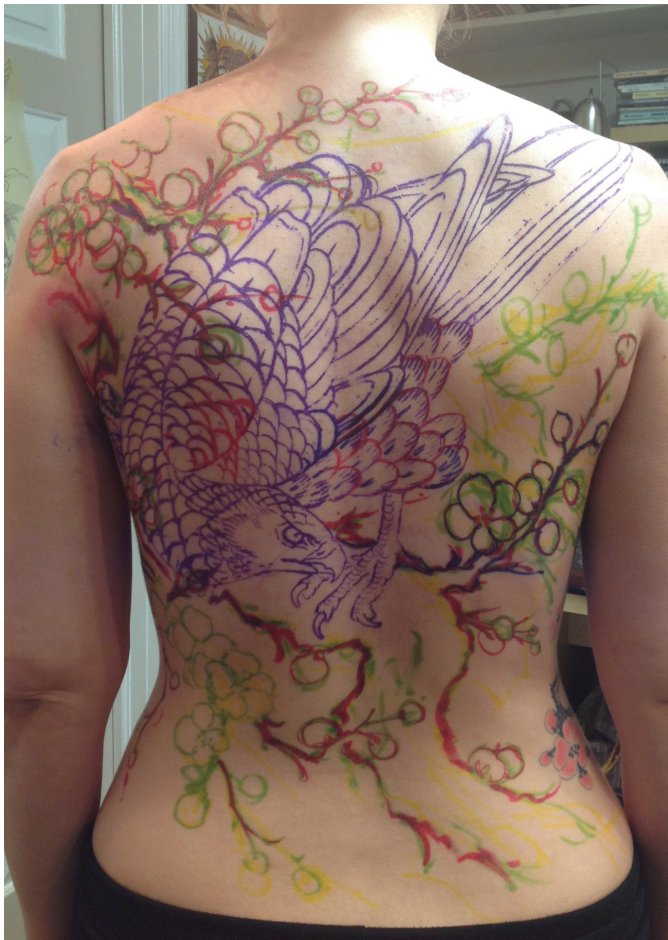
Asheville was my next goal, and I took every back road out of Lewisburg I could find. Best riding of the entire trip, without a doubt. Not a car to be seen on the tiny, windy two-laners that found the river on one side and the mountains on the other, so I took full advantage, and pushed the bike as hard I had yet. Triumph makes a fun touring bike, but they suffer from the same under-suspended issues most bikes give to folks my size, so it's fun to push, but it gets sloppier than my CBR954RR for instance, which is as sure-footed as they come. The ride into Asheville is amazing. Even the main roads are pretty, and the last southbound climb before getting into the valley of Asheville is unreal. I was staying with my old friend Trina, who was living with Kris from Hot Stuff at the time, and was still at work when I got into town, so I made my way to Hot Stuff to say hey to Danny and the crew.

Prior to moving to Colorado, I had actually gotten a job at Empire, but wasn't able to put it together as fluidly as Colorado. I had met Danny years ago, and was excited to see what he had done in the time since my last visit. Hot Stuff is as eclectic a shop as you get. That place is huge inside! I've never really worked in big stores until recently, so it's always amazing to me when you can use a light table without sitting in someone's lap. We hung out there until Trina finished work, and then headed to the house for dinner times. Trina

and Kris could not have been more gracious hosts, and River (a horse of a black pit bull, and possibly the sweetest gentleman on the planet) was reluctant to share the couch, but made for a nice pillow. I spent more time than I planned there, but it was too perfect to leave immediately.

I did leave, however, early on Memorial Day, and my route was straight across the Blue Ridge Parkway, which I found surprisingly less crowded than I would have guessed. I'm not a very patriotic person, for a number of reasons I'm not delving into, but I love the physicality of America, and could not imagine a more American thing to do on Memorial Day. Again, the Smokies are much different from the Rockies, but that road, and those vantages give you pause—it's something we take for granted quite often. I spent hours there, riding and stopping, writing (I documented all of this) and just sitting quietly. And later, as if it was some completely cosmic goof, and all too American, the road took me through Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge. It is the exact opposite of everything I love, and was precisely what I was trying to avoid on the trip. Which isn't to say I don't appreciate its absurdity for what it is, but imagine the backwoods equivalent to Vegas, with less gambling, more diabetes, an upside-down house, and Dolly Parton. Ridiculousness, Gatlinburg be thy name. With absolutely no desire to be anywhere around that mess, I rode until I found a KOA outside of Knoxville.

When I arrived, I met the husband and wife who owned the site, and they told me their story, of how when they turned 70 they sold everything they had, bought a camper, and have been on the road ever since. They spend the better part of the year managing for KOA. I was advised of a worthy hike through the woods, down and across



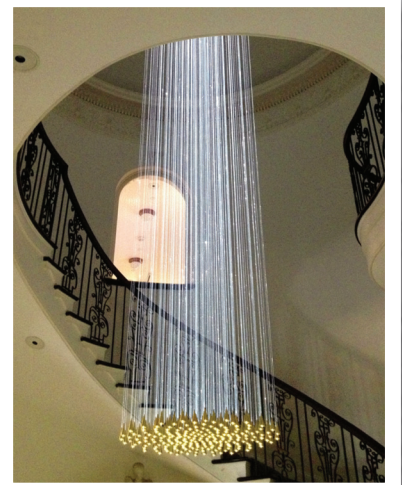
miles of long-since used rail. I walked the tracks for hours, and stumbled into a rancher's field, made some cow friends, and went back as the sun set. I sat around my tent, writing by my fire, when I started feeling it. You know how when you get sweaty and nasty, that feeling of things crawling on you sets in? It started, and I couldn't get comfortable. Now, I'm no stranger to the horrid little creatures of the forest, but when I saw the first one, I ran to the shower, stripped, and spent the next 45 minutes pulling ticks. More than I've ever had on me in my life, total. It was foul. I dried off, changed, and wrote until I was tired. Before sleep, I had that bizarre feeling that I was going to see someone familiar, and soon.

I changed time zones during the previous day, and after the ticks, didn't sleep very well. I woke at what I thought was 6:30 (actually 5:30),

and gathered my things to walk back to the showers. I made my way, and noticed a white F-150 drive by slowly. I heard my name called, looked up, only to find a girl I had dated in Denver there with her current boyfriend. It was hysterical—literally in the middle of nowhere Tennessee, and there we were. We had coffee, and they told me about the Loveless Cafe in Nashville. I was hungry, but didn't mind the 2 hour ride to breakfast. That cafe is a staple of Nashville, I'm told, and it didn't disappoint. Along the ride, I stopped at the Krishna temple, and saw signs for Cheekwood Estate, and after breakfast I made my way there. It is an incredible botanical garden set on 50+ acres, with the main house converted to an art museum. An installation artist, Burt Munro, working in fiber optics, had covered the gardens as well as the house with his creations, all of which were illuminated at night. It was a real hidden treat, but unfortunately, the

lights only run weekends, so I left, and made moves for Memphis. The ride was rough, traffic jammed for an hour in 95 degree heat, while I was still sitting in leathers. I hadn't really eaten much of anything exceptionally good on the road, so I wanted to treat myself to a solid dinner. When I got into Memphis, I went to downtown to McEwens, and it was fantastic. The food, as well as the company. It's amazing how many people you meet on the road that are just as kind and generous as could be. KOA was to be lodging yet again, so after dinner, I made my way over to West Memphis, and called it a night. Trying to sleep next to a highway doesn't feel remotely like camping, and I slept terribly.

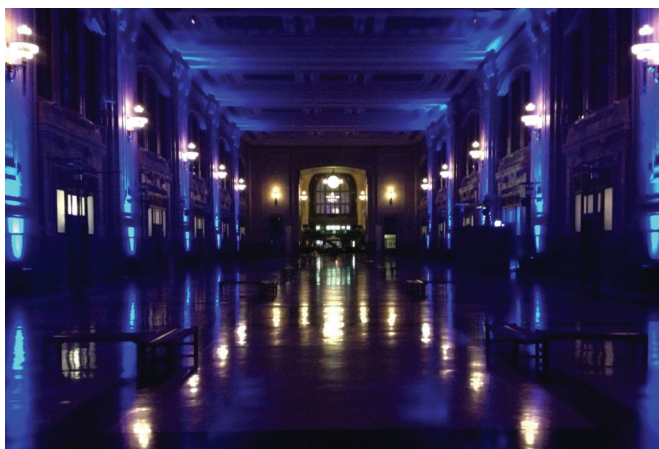
My route changed thanks to weather. My initial plan was a holeshot through Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and home. This was the week of all of those insanely powerful



tornadoes that pounded Oklahoma City, and I was literally riding shotgun to them, so I had to make quick decisions. I rode halfway through AK, and camped. I was tired.

As much time as I had been on the bike was taking its toll. My shoulders were killing me, wasn't sleeping well, and hadn't been exercising much. I had reconnected with an old friend, Ashley, when I was visiting KC, and she offered me a couch if I made my way back to Missouri. So I rode the rest of Arkansas, which is an incredibly beautiful place—no highways for me, just backroads pointing in the right direction. I stopped for the night in Springfield and kept a very watchful eye on the weather. It's 3.5 hours from Springfield to KC, and the storm was big enough to swallow an entire state. It looked like I had a small window where I would miss the brunt. I left in accordance with the radar, and all was good. I had rain gear on, and was pretty well-prepared. So I thought. The first two hours were spent eerily on the edge of it, but the sky suddenly turned green (indicative of tornadoes, we would get them every once in a blue moon in Maryland) and it became a wall of water. I've ridden in plenty of storms over the years. Snow, rain, dust, whatever, I've been in it. But, this was terrifying. Rain in sheets, surprisingly strong winds, and a lot of riding blind. When I finally decided to be smart (it took a bit) and pulled over, the storm let up. I was only about 30 minutes from KC, and I called to get directions and make the last little jaunt. Those storms move in bands, and I hit the next one as I was trying to get into the city. By the time I got to Ashley's house, I was soaked, rain gear or not. I got in, dried off and played piano all day waiting for her to get home from work. We spent the next few days together, and I also got to see Ross, Kelly, and Lola again. I spent two days going with them to the Nelson Museum of Art. Hands down my favorite smaller museum in the country. It certainly isn't tiny, but I grew up next to DC, so that's sort of my basis for comparison. I can't say enough wonderful things about that place, but I will say that it is worth a trip to KC by itself. There was a Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera split show, a completely reconstructed Buddhist temple from China, a massive collection of Rodin, and an incredible contemporary wing, portrait gallery, among other things. Go there.

June 6th, I decided to go home. I left early, to yet another slate sky and freezing morning. I stopped for breakfast and to warm up in Salina, KS. I must have been there two hours, I just couldn't get warm. But after a big breakfast, I felt like I had enough fuel to finish the 580 or so remaining miles, straight-shot across Kansas, and back into Colorado. The nearer I came to home, the more uneasiness was building.



I wasn't ready to be back. I had already started scheduling appointments at my new job, but I just wasn't ready. The ride to my house was a reluctant one. I was tired, yes. My body ached, I missed my routine, I missed my own bed, I missed my instruments, music, drawing, et al. And when I walked in my front door, it did feel good to be home. But that sort of unease has never left me.

AND?

I think no matter where we go in our lives, it is never enough life. To be able to appreciate everything around you, have nothing more than what you carry, have no real responsibility aside from not getting killed on the road, and no specific destination...that is living to me. Not that the work isn't. The work is what facilitates being able to shuck off the binds of daily life, and the more you put into work, the more you should put into not work. It is a balance, and it can be a very hairy one from time to time. I know I will be back on the bike for a long trip again, there is not a doubt in my mind.

Lastly, the ride gave me the chance to be alone with myself. No distraction, aside from riding, which is pretty perfunctory after a while anyhow. I thought a lot. I was able to visit recurrent life themes, namely fear, and faith in oneself. The fear I had in making the decisions leading to leaving, the fear of being a speck across America, the fear of the unknown, and the fear of failing. Fear is a powerful tool in our lives, and overcoming it is empowering. I had a few friends killed or hit over the years doing these kinds of trips, and I think that is just part of the acceptance of motorcycling—you can know that risk exists, and be comfortable with it. You can also know that risk exists, and never get on a bike. It's a choice. For the riders out there, only you will know the magic of that experience. In an increasingly frightening and paranoid, invasion-of-privacy world, the motorcycle is truly one of the last shimmering rays of independence. It's not ego, it's not pride, it's not anything; it just is. That experience is there to be had, and while I appreciate you reading any of this, it doesn't even come close to describing what happened to me in that month. Life changer is an understatement. It allowed me to create a new and improved hierarchy of what matters in my life. And maybe, more importantly, what doesn't.

Tattooing created the factors to make this trip happen, and it's one more reason I love and am obsessed by what we do for a living. The families we forge in this business are for life, the relationships we have somehow find a deeper meaning, and we are reminded to pay it forward. Fear will always exist, but fear is to be conquered.

Faith in yourself, regardless of what you do for a living, will take you the farthest. You can only control what happens in front of you, in your field of vision, as it were. There are always going to be those outside voices telling you not to do something, why they would never do it, or how moronic and dangerous something is. It is up to you to determine how much that periphery affects your day to day. It's like Instagram or the tv shows...I know a lot of tattooers, myself as well, who don't have a billion followers, or aren't out there parading around on the tube. Honestly, who gives a shit about that? It's peripheral. It is nice to be appreciated by the internets and all, but you go to work, make your clients happy, and make yourself happy; that means something. That is real. In this digital day and age, we are all so lost trying to present this 'idea' or image of ourselves, that we forget what's important is right in front of us. Real relationships with real people. A real relationship with yourself. That's why the motorcycle makes for a good metaphor. You can always look around you, but you have to focus on what's ahead. What's behind may matter, but what's in front can kill you if you don't pay attention. And the more distracted you are, the more danger exists. So take a minute, and really think about what is important to you, and what that means. And, for your own sake, get out there!

**Thanks,
Dave**

