

Dave Brigham traveled across America in a van. He hoped the trip would open his introverted nature. With three friends, he visited wide swaths of the country, and settled in Albuquerque for a time. He struggled, but had a great journey.

Great/Dismal:
My Four-Month Tour of Duty on The Battleship Patchouli
By David Brigham

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Great/Dismal

My Four-Month Tour of Duty
on the Battleship Patchouli

Dave Brigham

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Chapter One – I Want A Welt

Cruising west along I-84, I was as close to carefree as I'd ever been, as my buddies and I headed for Parts Unknown. We rolled in a mobile man cave filled with junk food, cigarettes, soda cans, guitars, suitcases, beer, winter clothes and summer togs alike, leaving behind everyone we knew, our compass pointed toward freedom.

Andy and Pete sang Joe “King” Carrasco’s “Buena,” which, with its sunny melody and Caribbean groove, helped us forget the bleak, late-winter scenery whizzing by the windows. John and I sat in back, legs fully stretched, reading books and flipping through what Hawkeye Pierce called nudist magazines. While pondering certain thoughtful passages or ogling anatomical wonders, we gazed out the window, happy knowing that we were a few dozen feet lower on the latitudinal scale than when we’d started out.

Since lunch, we’d made it from Simsbury, Connecticut, where Andy and I grew up together, through the southeastern part of the Nutmeg State, and across New York’s Putnam and Orange counties, a distance of nearly 200 miles. I barely looked out the window for the first 90 minutes. I knew the route – flat landscape, small, well-worn cities, suburban sprawl, the occasional old stone wall – from childhood trips to visit my aunt, uncle and cousins in Westchester County.

Once we passed the I-684 split, however, I started paying closer attention. The purpose of this aimless adventure was, as I saw it, to add new entries and photos to my mental encyclopedia, bolster my self-confidence and provide myself with a lifetime of unforgettable stories. Also, to drink beer in as many states as possible and put off indefinitely the decision of what to do with my college degree.

In prying myself away from my literate pursuits, I was almost immediately rewarded with a stunning vision straight out of a Monet painting: through a hole in the clouds I spied a vivid patch of rainbow-colored sky. It hadn't rained, and there was no arc. There was just this anomalous slice, like somebody had hung an LGBT flag from the heavens. My first thought: any second now, UFO's will dive through this little span of natural beauty and strafe all of us poor, defenseless humans. I imagined cars veering off the highway as saucers flooded the horizon, little green creatures zapping to and fro, military jets screaming in from nowhere to defend the planet.

Something of a UFO nut since reading *Chariots of the Gods* as a kid, I knew the Hudson Valley had a recent history of UFO sightings. Five years earlier, in 1983, hundreds of Hudson Valley residents reported a football-field sized, V-shaped craft moving silently through the night sky. The sightings made the news; I either read the story in the *Hartford Courant* or *Time* magazine, or saw a report on local or national news broadcasts.¹

In 1985, novelist Whitley Strieber (*The Hunger, The Wolfen*) claimed he was abducted by aliens in the Valley. He turned this account into the 1987 non-fiction New York Times bestseller *Communion*.

I didn't know it at the time, but the Hudson Valley has been a hotbed of UFO activity since at least the 1920's.

I kept my eye on the colorful patch of sky, willing, almost daring, a saucer to descend. After we traveled a few miles, however, the tropospheric curiosity faded away. There would be no intergalactic battle. My buddies laughed at my love of alien

¹ Syracuse New Times, November 7, 2013, "UFO's Over the Hudson Valley" by Cheryl Costa; and BJ Booth in UFO Casebook.

spacecraft. I've never seen a UFO, and don't know what I would do if I spotted one. I just love the mystery, the sense that there's something out there that we can't know, that scares people in power. I thought our trip was going to begin with a HUGE event that we'd be talking about until the day we died.

After the brief excitement died down, we found something grounded in reality – depressing reality – to occupy our minds.

On one side of Route 84: Fishkill prison. On the other: Downstate, the place where new prisoners have a cup of coffee and a few smokes before shipping off to their new homes for, say, the next 1 to 5 years. Located in Beacon, New York, Fishkill was constructed in the 1890's on several hundred acres of farmland. The facility, which was originally known as the Matteawan State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, spreads along the highway and is creepy and imposing, the way prisons are supposed to be. And that name...²

With its red-brick Victorian buildings, Fishkill looks like the kind of place where Freddy Krueger might have been born – “the bastard son of a hundred maniacs.” The four of us chewed over what it would be like to be in prison (“Don't drop the soap!”), and cracked wise about orange being the new black.³

We whizzed past signs warning drivers not to pick up hitchhikers. I tried to imagine an escaped prisoner casually thumbing along the shoulder, naked but for his underwear and prison-issue loafers, his orange jumpsuit slung over his shoulder like he was just out for a casual stroll.

² CorrectionHistory.com.

³ This may or may not be true.

Eventually I switched seats with Pete. In the passenger seat shooting the shit with Andy while he drove, I felt really good. We talked about girls, music, cars, baseball, girls, books, professional wrestling, girls, philosophies of life, girls, food, beer and girls.

We were on our way to Bucknell University, in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, to see this dude Tom, who Andy and I went to high school with.

Tom was a good guy, but I found him a little odd at times, and I didn't know him as well as I did Andy and my other high school friends. He and Andy played hockey together during high school, so knew each other fairly well. We went to parties during high school, along with my friends John, Bene and two guys named Steve. Sometimes, as often happened during the '80s in suburbs and rural towns across the country, we drove around aimlessly with beer in the car, looking for a party or a quiet spot where we wouldn't get busted for underage drinking. Other times, we pinballed from the bowling alley to mini golf to McDonald's to midnight movies.

I was more excited to hear the engine growl and the fat tires eat up the road than I was to see Tom on some random college campus. I realized early during the trip that fantasizing about adventures is easier for me than actually doing stuff. Driving down the highway, I see an 18-wheeler and I think, "That trucker's got the life! Out on the open road, watching Hell's Angels fly by in the left lane, hot chicks flashing him from the back seat of a convertible Geo Metro. Parking his big rig at a motel on the Continental Divide."

Reality is a little less exciting for me, although not always.

Crossing the Pennsylvania line about an hour east of Scranton, we stopped to stretch our legs, buy snacks and gas up. Pete and John pounded their Newport packs against their palms, then lit up and hung out for a few minutes while Andy and I bought Yoo-hoos,

Cheez Doodles and other healthy fare. I took over behind the wheel. Andy was most comfortable with the van's three-on-the-tree manual transmission, so he'd taught me how to drive the rig in the parking lot of our old high school before the trip. I, however, was a little shaky on the concept. Most of my driving up to that point was in an automatic Dodge Aspen.

We were only 90 miles from Lewisburg, so I figured it was a good time to get a few miles in.

My timing couldn't have been worse.

Within an hour, I drove straight into a blizzard.

I knew how to drive in bad weather, having grown up in Connecticut and attended college in New Hampshire. Most of the time during snowstorms, I drove like my dad, slow and steady. Occasionally, I'd let loose a bit, say, in the parking lot after work, and do some fishtailing or speed up and slam the brakes on, sliding around like James Rockford.

When I was 17 I'd gotten into an accident on a snowy night while driving home from my job at Stop & Shop. Some fool with a death wish took a left turn from a side street directly in front of me. I slammed on my brakes, and t-boned him. Fortunately, nobody got hurt, but I learned that night how quickly an accident happens in rough weather.

The conditions in Pennsylvania were hands-down the worst I'd ever driven in. I wasn't scared; I was too focused on keeping the van steady and avoiding cars that had spun out on the side of the road.

Here's how I described it in a journal that I kept during the trip:

"For a distance of about 15-20 miles we drove at 10-35 mph as the roads, mostly uphill, were like sheets of ice. Passed one bad

accident and at least a dozen cars that had spun off the road or broken down.”

Even in good conditions, driving the van was an adventure. Measuring roughly 18 feet long, our Dodge Tradesman had a big ass that gusts of wind loved to flirt with. There was a lot of side-to-side motion to control. And because it was so long, you had to make sure of your clearance as you passed cars, or parallel parked.

It had a snub nose, so you sat almost directly above the engine. It took me a while to learn just how close I could get to vehicles in front of me. Leaning over the dashboard was scary until I realized I wasn't as close as I thought. Andy had the great idea to buy a big, round Grateful Dead sticker and slap it on the hood. This was designed to serve two purposes: attract hippie girls, and put the fear of God into people who'd see this red-white-and-blue skull zooming up behind them before we stomped on the gas pedal, the V-8 roaring, and pulled into the passing lane and flew on by.

So, while it could be fun to drive the beast in good conditions, you had to pay close attention.

During the storm, I crawled along at a safe speed, my passengers hanging tight and commenting on the accidents we passed. We hoped to arrive at Bucknell earlier than 9:15, but it didn't matter. Nothing happens on a college campus on a Friday night before 10:00. We walked past a branch of Lambda Chi Alpha, and Andy checked to see if he could use his membership card from Alfred University to get us into their party.

“Nertz to you,” the guy at the door said. Or maybe it was “Piss off, losers.”

One brother was nice enough to look up Tom's address in the school directory. We found his dorm and left a message for him on

his door. Just as we were leaving, he showed up. A smart, athletic engineering student with dirty blonde hair and sorta crazy eyes, Tom had done pretty well with girls in high school, at least compared to me. He was a bit mercurial at times, but liked to have fun.

Tom and his friend Bill took us to the Goal Post Café, a college hangout that the gang from “St. Elmo’s Fire” would have enjoyed. We drank Rolling Rock and saw a band called The Plague.

Seeing the name on a sign outside the bar, I hoped The Plague was a punk band. In high school I discovered college radio, and fell in love with punk and hardcore bands ranging from Dead Kennedys and Circle Jerks to 7 Seconds and Jody Foster’s Army.

With a name like The Plague, the band seemed like it should be playing loud, fast songs about how fucked up society was, and how The Man was always stomping on their necks. Further research online reveals that there were at least two punk bands that used the name The Plague, one from Cleveland, the other from London. Neither played the Goal Post Café that night.

This was, after all, a college bar in small-town Pennsylvania, not Boston or New York City or even East Hartford, CT, on a Thursday night at a VFW Hall. I don’t remember what they played, but I imagine it was a mix of popular rock and pop songs of the era (Bon Jovi’s “Livin’ On a Prayer,” U2’s “With or Without You,” Aerosmith’s “Dude (Looks Like a Lady)”) and originals that sounded like those songs or songs from the ‘60s and ‘70s. Andy recalls them playing “Polk Salad Annie,” a song released in 1968 by Tony Joe White and covered a few years later by Elvis Presley.

Still, they were OK. Or maybe they weren’t.

From my journal:

“They were good until Pete and I decided they sucked. We went out to the van to sleep. At 2:10, the rest of the guys (Tom, Andy, John, Bill) came out. John, Pete and I went back to campus while other 3 went to Hardee’s for 39-cent burgers.”

And thus two themes of our journey were established early on: going to bars, and eating fast food. I wish I could say that during our journey we ventured to National Parks, art museums and historic homes, and dallied with ballerinas, opera stars and theme-park princesses. But we didn’t. We went to taverns, campgrounds, fast food joints, public beaches, strip bars, cheap motels and used record stores.

I had fun that night, but was a bit down the next morning.

From my journal:

“11:45 Saturday, Feb. 27

“Get up. Snow. Cold. Guitar. Bored. Hangout. Hardee’s. Brush teeth. Read ‘1984.’ Wait to meet Tom at work. Pete acts the wandering troubadour. Andy does financial paperwork. John reads about Hitler. We are eager to hit the warmer weather. Travel plans are vague and uncertain. Will go to frat party tonight.”

Despite my initial joy at leaving home, after just one day I was unsatisfied. I was glad to see Tom, but I was ready to get away from the snow and start seeing and learning new things. And hey, I got a trip to Hardee’s.

Which leads me to a third major theme of the trip: my inability to be as carefree as I wanted. This is something I’ve always struggled with, up to and including the day you read this. I can never really and truly let loose, throw caution to the wind, tell people what I really think. I want to be wild and crazy, but sometimes have an

excruciatingly difficult time breaking through my wall of uncertainty about people and social situations.

Jesus, I really didn't want to go to that frat party.

I went to plenty of big parties during high school. Some were at people's houses, others were in public parks or in secluded spots between the railroad tracks and the Farmington River. I mostly hung with my buddies, drinking Old Milwaukee or Meister Brau, sometimes smoking cigars. The one time I broke out of my shell was when I got completely lit and mocked a local band that was playing in some girl's back yard.

People tried to shut me up, but I thought I was hilarious when I requested a Devo song right after the band had played "Whip It."

"Play 'Uncontrollable Urge,'" I demanded.

"We were very obnoxious at that party," Andy remembers, "and probably deserved to get our asses kicked. I think you yelled at the German exchange student, 'Learn to speak the fucking language,' or maybe it was me or Bene. We were so bad."

Eventually I threw up and calmed down.⁴

For the most part during college I eschewed ragers⁵. I went to two or three frat parties during the first two years of school, when I was still trying to carve out my niche. A few of my friends were going with some girls they knew. The girls, of course, had good reasons to go: free beer and the chance to hook up.

⁴ I want to ask you here to figure out why I like this line so much. Perhaps ask your friends who are fans of British punk circa 1980.

⁵ I should've started a grammar dork fraternity in college. Who says "eschewed"?

There really wasn't a reason for a non-brother to go to a frat party, but I went because there was nothing else to do.

That's the same reason I tagged along to the Bucknell party.

Andy and John had been in fraternities in college, Andy at Alfred University in New York, John at New Hampshire's Keene State, where Pete and I also went. Pete wasn't a brother, but a few of his roommates were in the same frat as John, and Pete enjoyed a party as much as the next guy who wasn't me.

The three of them were ready to rage. I complained about the plan, but was in no position to offer alternatives.

One of my biggest hopes for the trip was to have mindless fun, like boozing and dancing with girls. You know, the kind of thing one does at a frat party.

If I'm at a small party surrounded by friends with whom I can be myself – cracking jokes, talking about music or sports – I'm fine. Put me in a house or bar full of strangers, however, and I sink into the wallpaper, even if I know one or two or even three people. I'm bad at small talk and am too self-conscious to really let loose and dance like a wild man or jump on stage for karaoke. I don't think or act well on my feet, I get easily distracted and find it hard to focus on a conversation and I embarrass easily, which leads to me lashing out or dashing out.

So, the frat party.

Let me set the scene: I'm in an old house with beer-stained carpets, couches, walls and people. People I don't know and whom there's little likelihood I'm going to speak to. Especially if those people are girls. Music I don't like – with the exception of the unlikely frat anthem, the Violent Femmes' "Add It Up," and perhaps one other song – is cranking from the stereo. We go down what my

memory tells me was a rickety staircase to the basement. Here are located more people, drunk people. I'm guessing that three decades later the use of Luminol and black lights would expose countless unsavory stains.

I had a few beers (read: more than a few beers), and did end up dancing a bit. I thought I was too cool to be at the party, because I liked punk rock and art house movies, not Top 40 and "Top Gun."

Part of me wanted to throw away all that bullshit and just get rip-roarin' drunk and see where being out of control led me.

But hitting the road didn't magically give me the ability to admit that it was OK to like cheesy music and just whoop it up. Clicks on the odometer didn't turn me into a chick magnet. I was very anxious around girls and had no moves or lines to convince a girl to make out with me.

I wrote about the party in the first article I penned about my trip for my hometown newspaper, the *Farmington Valley Herald*, where I'd worked before leaving on the trip. My editor had suggested I share some stories from the road, and I happily obliged.

"We stayed out until 4 a.m. and danced on wooden platforms. It was straight out of the most unglamorous episode of 'American Bandstand.'"

John left the party that night with a girl, and went to her dorm room. When we met up with him the next day, he had a lump on his head from an accidental plunge off the top bunk.

Pete, Andy and I laughed at him, sure, but inside I was jealous. I wanted the confidence it took to arrive at the point where I could receive such a welt.

Compared to me, my road buddies were lady-killers. I dated one girl at Keene, but she had a boyfriend back home, so it was never a great relationship. Pete dated a lot of girls. Andy dated a few girls, and was always trying to get with others.

Andy thought the party was great. He talked to every girl he could. Somehow, he even lost his favorite tie-dye shirt to one of them.

“It was a bet that backfired,” Andy recalls. “I think I flipped a coin or something, or a trivia question, that if I won I would get a kiss, and if I lost she got the shirt. I lost.”

On the way back to Tom’s dorm, Pete and I strolled through the open front door of another frat house, walked into the basement and played Ping-Pong. We went to bed around 5 a.m. That odd little moment, and many others during the trip, provided inspiration for a collection of short stories I published many years after the fact: *(C)rock Stories: Million-Dollar Tales of Music, Mayhem and Immaturity*, about which you’ll read more later.

The first two days on the road weren’t perfect, and I was fighting my introversive nature, but we’d set a pretty good bar for fun, adventure and camaraderie.

Chapter Two – Brown Bear Taunts Us

I loved college – parties with good friends, hanging out with folks at the campus radio station, working at the newspaper, going to art-house movies, playing in a band, learning the craft of journalism – but I never felt comfortable hanging out at my friends’ schools.

The people I gravitated toward at Keene State tended to be punk rockers, film majors and writers, and somewhat sports-averse. I’d grown up a huge baseball fan and loved playing all sorts of sports, but during my four years in college I put those interests on the back burner, with the exception of one season of flag football during my freshman year, and a softball game against the staff of the local newspaper.

The first year I was at Keene State, Andy was nearby at Franklin Pierce. I hung out with him there a few times, including at a Blotto concert. He and a girl he was hanging out with⁶ showed me a good time when I was there, but I had a hard time breaking the ice with his buddies, who were nice, but not the art-fag types⁷ I was used to hanging with.

That’s on me.

I had the same problem when I visited another friend at Merrimack College, but there the issue was more that my buddy Steve’s friends were loud, beer-swilling psychos who did things like hurl bowling balls out of moving cars.

⁶ For those of you under 30, “hanging out with” translates to “Netflix and chill.”

⁷ Politically incorrect, yes, but not a comment on anybody’s sexuality. Look it up.

The Jack Kerouac in me couldn't embrace the Neal Cassadys in my midst.

That's also on me.

Bucknell was fun, at least part of the time, but I was happy to roll off campus after lunch on Sunday. Tom had classes on Monday, but if we'd wanted to, we could've partied for a few more days.

We were heading in the right direction – south, and slightly east – to Philadelphia. The drive was a relatively quick 165 miles. One of Andy's friends from Alfred University (where he transferred after doing well and being very involved at Franklin Pierce) lived there with a friend. They were great hostesses, letting us crash on their floor and couch, despite the fact that John, Pete or I could have been perverts or drug addicts or Mormons.

The first night we hit three bars with our hostesses, who were a fun-loving pair.

Much of my time in Philly is buried in the deepest abyss of my memory, behind moss-covered gates secured by rusty locks.

But I have a vivid recollection of the highlight of our bar-hopping night.

We stopped at a joint – I don't remember the name, but it looked like, you know, a tavern or perhaps a saloon or even a watering hole, with tables and a long flat surface with several stools in front of it on which sat both men and women who were drinking, smoking and discussing the Flyers, the weather and their chances of sleeping with the person slumped next to them. On the other side was a fellow whose job it was to keep their glasses full, their memories fuzzy and their wallets light.

This bar had a Big Choice game, the object of which is to operate a crane inside a glass box in an effort to retrieve a stuffed animal from a selection of 30 or so.

I know, I know. I can hear you asking yourself, “This was the HIGHLIGHT? I’ve played that game in arcades and lost more quarters than a porcupine’s got quills.”

I dig your homespun analogy, but stay with me.

Three guys at the bar were completely enraptured by Big Choice. Let’s see, is “enraptured” the right word? “Enthralled, transported, delighted beyond measure.” Yeah.

Huddled together at the machine like teenage boys around a *Playboy*, they took turns pumping money into the machine and getting fired up to grab a stuffed toy. I believe they would have exploded with glee if they’d actually snared one of those cute little buggers. One of the animals, however, was a real varmint in their eyes.

“Look at that brown bear. He’s taunting you!”

We all joined in, shouting, clapping, cheering and taunting the bear right back.

“Brown bear – ain’t so bad!”

Then they’d kick in with a song that hockey fans would surely recognize:

“Dut dut, dut dudda / dut dut, dut dudda / dut dut, dut dudda / DA DA DA!”

And where in a hockey arena fans would yell something like “Go Ducks go!” these guys screamed out, “Brown bear sucks!”

I couldn't get into dancing with girls at a frat party, but yelling at stuffed bears in an arcade game I found endlessly entertaining.

The next morning, hung over and moving slowly, Pete, John and I sat in the living room snacking and bullshitting. The two of them were smoking Newports. Or maybe our hostesses made them go outside.

It was at this time that Pete made an important cultural discovery. Well, let's say he had a minor literary revelation. OK, he spied a comic book none of us had ever heard of.

He picked it out of the magazine rack and read through it. Unlike the comic books we knew as kids, this one wasn't about a superhero, or a freckled, redheaded teenager and his pals, or the good times of a spoiled rich kid. No, this one was about a tough-talking, ass-kicking block of a man who delivered milk for a living.

Reid Fleming.

Created by Canadian cartoonist David Boswell, "Reid Fleming, World's Toughest Milkman" was dirty, irreverent, violent and funny as hell. On the first page of "A Day Like Any Other," he pummels a man who makes fun of his truck, drinks rye whiskey while driving and tosses the bottles into the street, tells off a woman who complains that his truck is too loud, then dumps a bottle of milk into her goldfish tank, after which he demands payment.

"78 cents or I piss on your flowers!" he bellows at her while holding her by the throat, his left fist cocked.

Boswell birthed Fleming in 1977 and the next year the foul-mouthed milkman debuted in a weekly strip in Vancouver underground newspaper Georgia Straight. Boswell self-published the first collection in 1980; subsequent books have been issued by other

outfits. Eclipse Comics published some between 1986 and 1991. Most likely, Pete stumbled across one of these.⁸

He filed away the name Reid Fleming.

Months later Pete went into a store and bought a copy of a Reid Fleming comic. We howled reading it, and soon enough I bought a different issue. They were standard bathroom reading for quite some time, and to this day we share chuckles whenever the name Reid Fleming comes up.

We spent one more day and night in Philly.

While Pete, John and I hung out at the girls' apartment watching TV, Andy and his friend saw some sights and walked through a lot of the city. It really bugs me that Pete, John and I were content to sit on our asses while there was a whole city to explore. I wish we'd checked out the Liberty Bell, Congress Hall, Edgar Alan Poe's house, or even gotten a steak and cheese sub.

At the time, slacking around felt right, I guess. I certainly did enough of it during high school and college. At the time, I was a bit scared of cities, having grown up in a lilywhite suburb. I wasn't into photography like I am now, so couldn't fathom why I'd want to walk around some place that might be a bit dangerous or run-down.

Nowadays, I love exploring such places.

Before leaving Philly, we hit a thrift store and then I called my brother, Steve, who was living there in a big house with a bunch of roommates.

⁸ ReidFleming.com, which is run by Boswell; also, Wikipedia.

From my journal:

“Wednesday, March 2, 4:20 p.m.

“Saw Steve briefly at his house before he left for Baltimore and we left for Virginia Beach. House is big and in good shape, but a bad neighborhood.”

I wish I'd spent more time with my brother, but our schedules didn't line up. Well, his schedule.

My buddies and I hung out with him and a few of his roommates for a while, talking about what we'd done for the past few days, and where we were heading next.

My brother was a road trip veteran, having walked from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., with the Great Peace March for nine months in 1986. So, he knew that when you get off the highway and into people's lives, things can be both wonderful and weird.

While I'd wanted to explore America for quite some time, I was quickly discovering that reality is more challenging than fantasy.

Chapter Three – National Lampoon is The Wind Beneath My Wings

In the fall of 1982, when I was 17, *National Lampoon* dropped O.C. and Stiggs into my life. Teenagers bent on destroying a family of large-headed nerds, wreaking havoc on all authority figures, and having sex with private school girls, O.C. and Stiggs were everything I wanted to be: crazy, extroverted, smart, funny, bold, adventurous and able to talk their way into, and out of, any situation.

Andy and I loved *National Lampoon*, a parody magazine designed by the evil geniuses at the Harvard Lampoon to suck money out of the wallets of high school and college boys (and those of equivalent mental age) who'd grown up on *MAD*. There were funny cartoons, comic strips and editorials, fake news stories (“Widowed Rainier to Cast for New Princess”), long fiction, short pieces of lunacy and, most important to teenage boys, nudity.

The magazine was totally politically incorrect, which is what made it so great. The adolescent brains behind the magazine also had a hand in several movies, including “Animal House” “Vacation” and “Christmas Vacation” (all of which feature the words “National Lampoon’s” in front of them). Perhaps you’ve seen some of them.

I was blown away by “The Utterly Monstrous, Mind-Roasting Summer of O.C. and Stiggs,” the issue-length story that was a prose mash-up of “Porky’s,” “Where the Buffalo Roam” and “Fast Times at Ridgemoor High.” Andy and I were high school seniors when the issue came out. We picked out an underclassman who had a big head, and dubbed him Randall Schwab, Jr., or Schwab the Horror Child, after the kid O.C. and Stiggs torment. We never did anything to him other than calling out “Schwab!!” whenever we saw him in the cafeteria or hallway.

He had no clue who we were or what we were doing.

We toured Central Connecticut State University, pretending we might want to enroll there, and wore pajama shirts, because it seemed like something O.C. and Stiggs would do. For a good chunk of senior year, we reread the issue and talked about how cool O.C. and Stiggs were.

For me, this was an exercise in vicarious living. I knew that I'd never be like O.C. or Stiggs, would never rent a hotel room under a false name after selling an incredibly valuable stamp, then fill the room with typewriters, tape recorders, lobsters and tons and tons of booze.

Of the two of us, Andy was the one who stood a shot of realizing our vision of making a movie called "Guys Getting Chicks the Way They Should" and casting girls who might want to make out with us on camera. We started, but never finished, a screenplay.

My friends and I had some good times during senior year. We went to horror movies, saw bands once in a while, went bowling or played mini golf, drove aimlessly while drinking, did stupid shit like stealing "For Sale" signs from a neighborhood and plunging them into Andy's front yard.

More importantly, there was a keg party just about every weekend at somebody's house. For reasons I couldn't understand, but fully enjoyed, kids would invite dozens upon dozens of under-aged boozers to their parents' house on Friday or Saturday nights. Inevitably, something would break, or a bathroom would flood, or the cops would show up. My friends and I would hang out in our group, sometimes joined by a few other guys, once in a while by some girls, drinking Old Milwaukee or Meister Brau and smoking cigars.

The most out of control and therefore awesome of these blowouts was in one of the toniest neighborhoods in my preppy suburban town. Flyers were posted around our school. This bash was epic, especially for the popular kids who took full advantage of the pool, cabana, numerous bedrooms, huge living room and multiple other areas for boozing and fooling around. It was like something out of “Risky Business.”

I was on the fringe of the party, as usual, having fun but not knowing how to get close to the real action. I watched kids swimming, tossing lacrosse balls around and playing quarters. I hooted at drunk girls stumbling toward the woods to pee, a lump in my throat rising when one of them would just squat in the yard within view of everyone. My crew hung out by a buddy’s car, drinking, talking and marveling at the fact that the cops hadn’t shown up.

But none of that compared to what O.C. and Stiggs did, which bummed me out a little.

Once I got to college, however, I stopped thinking so much about O.C. and Stiggs, and at some point threw away the magazine.⁹

I had a great time at Keene State, especially the last two years. I threw several parties in the on-campus mini-house where I lived, and went to plenty of other small shindigs. During senior week, the seven decadent days between final exams and graduation, I allowed myself to emulate O.C. and Stiggs just a little bit. I hung out in Maine with a bunch of friends, doing a lame Hunter S. Thompson impression, complete with plastic Army helmet, bathrobe and pink flamingo prop. Oh yeah, and lots of booze.

⁹ Andy is a notorious pack rat. More than 30 years after the O.C. and Stiggs issue was published, he still has his copy.

Newly inspired by my time in Maine, immediately after graduation I went on a brief road trip with my buddy Ken. Bandmates during those final two years on campus, we went up to Montreal, down through New York and across Connecticut into Rhode Island. I felt so free.

When I returned home, I read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. I romanticized roaring coast-to-coast, blazing through dive bars and house parties, living hard, loving quickly but intensely, playing music and shedding all my inhibitions.

I'd been on a few other road trips in my life, including a family vacation that covered Arizona, Utah and Wyoming when I was 12. Other trips with my parents, brother and sister took us from Connecticut north to Montreal, and south to Washington, D.C. I loved the adventures.

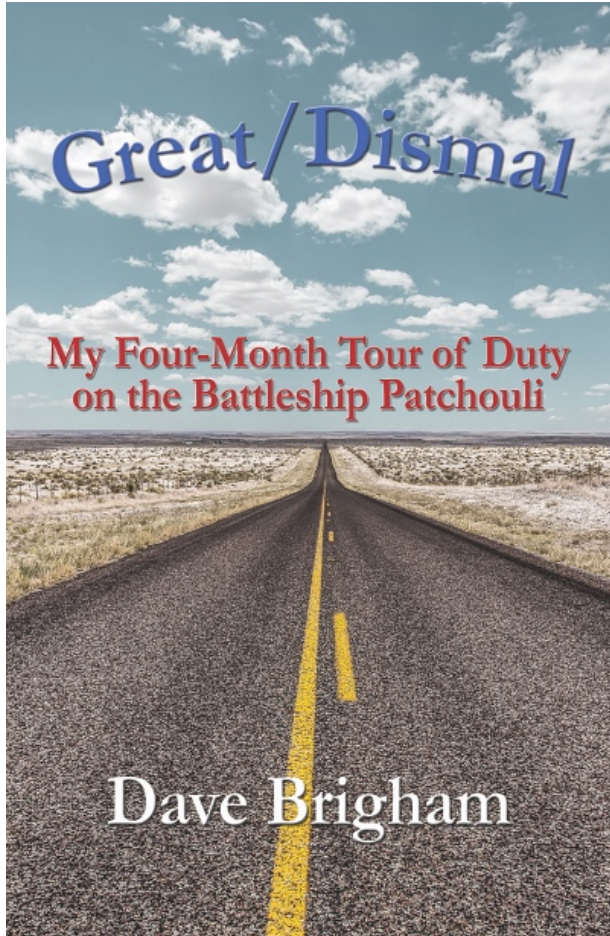
I'll go into details later about these college-era trips.

After graduating from college¹⁰, I hung out at Andy's house a lot, listening to and playing music, watching wrestling on TV and drinking beer. This is when Andy and I began talking about going on a road trip and living a totally id-centric, O.C. and Stiggs kind of life.

He and I got along well, but we didn't want to travel on our own. I'd talked with my buddy and band mate Pete during my senior year at Keene State, and he was into the idea of a road trip, too.

I liked the idea of the three of us going amok in America.

¹⁰ There will be plenty more about college. Not to worry.



Dave Brigham traveled across America in a van. He hoped the trip would open his introverted nature. With three friends, he visited wide swaths of the country, and settled in Albuquerque for a time. He struggled, but had a great journey.

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