A 12,000-mile, post-9/11 road odyssey into proud, majestic America.

Ribbons of Highway: A Mother-Child Journey Across America

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Lori Hein

To Mike, my partner in making all life's dreams come true

About the Author

Lori Hein is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in local, regional and national publications. She is also a features correspondent for several Boston-area community newspapers. A marathoner, she does some of her best writing while running. This is her first book.

Before turning to writing full-time, she spent over 20 years in the corporate world in sales, marketing, training, and organizational development.

She is a world traveler who has journeyed to over 50 countries, capturing impressions of the world's places through journals and photography.

A *magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa* graduate of Tufts University, Lori also studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and earned an MBA from Suffolk University.

Lori lives in the Boston area with three Belangers – husband, Mike, and kids Adam and Dana.

She can be reached at LHein10257@aol.com.

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Introduction

Although my kids and I didn't climb into the van and drive off until nine months later, our 12,000-mile American road odyssey began on September 11, 2001.

Where I was and what I was doing when the planes ripped through New York are part of my life's fabric. I was outside painting the fence brown, telling my neighbor Donna that I'd plenty of time now to do the job my 13-year-old son was supposed to have finished because I'd just been laid off. We groused about the economy's sorry state and mused over whether things could get any worse.

In the next instant, they did. The kitchen phone rang. It was my husband calling from the car to tell me one of the twin towers had been hit. Mike was on the road, making sales calls, and hadn't seen any pictures yet. He'd only heard the radio reports.

The paintbrush hardened outside in the sun, pieces of cut grass sticking up like spikes in the brown mess.

When Adam and Dana came home from school, we gathered around the table on the deck, and began, as a family, to sort through facts and feelings and fears. The kids' teachers had done a good job dispensing comfort and assurance before sending them

home. By the time they got to us, we'd decided we had three things to communicate: they were safe and loved; America was strong; the world's people were good.

To our family, this last point was as important as the others, because our kids have been traveling the world since they were babies. Respect for the world's people is part of their upbringing. This is a gift, and we'd allow no senseless act, however brutal, nor any retaliatory distrust or intolerance, to steal it.

My mind's eye called up images: two Turkish teenagers kicking a soccer ball with a 5-year-old Adam on the grounds of Topkapi Palace; Adam joining a group of Bolivian boys in tabletop foosball during recess at Copacabana's school, Lake Titicaca shining at the end of the street; the kids building sand castles with Javier and Daniel, two Belizean brothers who'd pass our hotel each day on their way to class; Dana setting off for a bird walk, in the shadow of Kilimanjaro, with Mike and Masai chief Zapati. These experiences enrich life and must continue.

As the painful, numbing slowness of the weeks immediately after September 11 yielded to something approximating normalcy, I regained enough focus to give the future some thought. That future had us traveling again, but this time, we'd get to know our America.

1

GETTING READY

"Can I start packing?" asked Dana. Such an exuberant little ball of energy, she thought the road trip idea was colossal and couldn't wait to stuff her backpack. It was September. We were leaving in June, right after school let out. "It's a little early, Dane, but start making a list of things to bring. Or, start making a pile of things you think you want to take." She knew the pile strategy. Before every trip, a pile of definite-and-maybe gear grows on the rug in the TV room. It's my staging area. "Will we need plastic spoons?" "Maybe. Put them in the staging area." Pile up now, pare down later.

At first, Adam saw the idea of an American road trip as two months away from his friends, locked in a van with his mother and little sister. It's not that he didn't want to go .He just didn't want to be gone "so long." A reasonable reaction from a 13-year-old.

His vision of this rolling summertime hell persisted intermittently until the June afternoon when key met ignition, and we left our Boston area neighborhood behind. We'd find that, once the deed was in motion, Adam would truly enjoy most of it. And I would enjoy him enjoying it.

There was a lot to do to get ready, so I was in my element. Few things thrill me more than piecing together a trip, and this one was a biggie. I plunged into the planning like a carnivore into sirloin.

The staging area sprouted seeds in January, and, by March, grew too big for the TV room. I moved it to the basement exercise area, leaving a small path for the back and forth slices of the NordicTrak's skis. Most of the stuff in the pile came from Wal-Mart. We went at least a dozen times. The kids loved these expeditions. The first time, though, I went alone and completed a three-hour, aisle-by-aisle, item-by-item reconnaissance mission. Would we need this? Could we use that? If we didn't have one of these, would we be sorry? If we had one of those, would the trip be safer, more fun, more organized, more comfortable?

For three months, the NordicTrak sliced through the Wal-Mart mountain. We had notebooks and pens; a tent; Sterno; a windshield sunshade; pots; bungee cords; folding tables; beach chairs; sunscreen; bug juice; flashlights; batteries; film; tape of all kinds; clamps of all sizes; plastic sheeting; sleeping bags; Ziploc bags; Brillo pads; pot holders; baby wipes; utensils; safety flares; jumper cables; water jugs; wiper fluid. Hundreds of items, large and small, amassed to face the final cut to determine what went and what didn't.

I'd already pared down my original route plan, an out-by-the-south and back-by-the north string of back roads and byways I'd highlighted in yellow and pink in the Rand McNally road atlas. Some things – indeed, some whole states and regions – had to go. If I didn't, with regret, cut out the Cahokia Mounds, Galveston, White Sands and the sidewalk egg-fry in Oatman, Arizona, we'd be on the road so long I'd have to homeschool the kids in the van. Phileas Fogg circled the globe in less time than it would have taken us to get to Sioux Falls.

We zoomed in on a seven-week trip length and agreed on a collective must-see list. Dana had to have Kentucky horse

country. Adam didn't really care, as long as he saw "car museums" and had plenty of snacks. I wouldn't negotiate away Appalachia, Cajun country, New Mexico's pueblos, Monument Valley, the Avenue of the Giants, Idaho, the Tetons or the Great Lakes. The reworked itinerary boiled down to 51 days. Sold.

Armed with a rough outline of our route, I went online and ordered every applicable town, city, county and state brochure and map in print. When they came, I filled out every reply card and sent away for more. My mailman, Tom, spent months bent under the weight of those deliveries. He caught me, in early June, in a van-packing practice run.

"So, you're heading out."

"Yep, in two weeks."

"Any chance you've got room for my son?"

"Maybe I could stuff him up top, in the Thule."

"That'd be good."

I'd pored over every map and brochure Tom had delivered over the months, and had strung together a route that tied scores of small ribbons of highway together into a complete odyssey. We would take interstates only when they were unavoidable or, when, in the interest of ensuring we'd be home by mid-August, we simply needed to make time.

Though I used the Rand McNally and all the state maps that Tom had delivered to plan the route, and brought them all with us on the trip, I would navigate by a document I called the Route Narrative. After my children, my journal, my Nikon and my wallet, the Route Narrative would become the next most important piece of cargo.

I took all the yellow and pink highlighted lines I'd drawn on the scores of planning maps and turned them into words. I didn't want to fool with the folding and unfolding of maps. I wanted

one simple tool that would tell me where to head next and how to get there. And, I wanted something I could hold, so I could feel, at once and not in pieces, the pull and power of a whole nation. I wanted to hold the entire country in my hands, every morning before we set out and every night before we went to bed. I wanted a thrilling, perfect, complete thing.

The Route Narrative took our 12,000-mile quest and distilled it down into a three-page series of transcontinental run-on sentences written in the imperative, with verbs that got my blood up. Commands like go, take, follow, get on, pick up, cross and continue.

The five days and thousand miles between Tahoe and Crater Lakes thus became: "Take 20W at Emigrant Gap and continue through Nevada City and Grass Valley. Stay on 20W, crossing much of the state, to intersection with Route 101 (also Route 20) at Calpella. Take 101/20N to Willits, where 101 goes north and 20 goes west. Take 20W at Willits to Route 1 and head south on 1 to Mendocino. After Mendocino, take 1N along the coast to 101N at Leggett (Drive-Thru Tree Park). Stay on 101N to Phillipsville, where get on Avenue of the Giants that parallels 101 for 33 miles to Pepperwood, through Humboldt Redwoods State Park. At Pepperwood, get back on 101N and stay on through Scotia, Fortuna, Eureka, Arcata, Trinidad, Orick/Redwoods Park and Crescent City to Oregon border. Stay on 101N up the Oregon Coast to Florence. From Florence, take 126W to Eugene. From Eugene, take I-5S through Cottage Grove to Roseburg, where pick up 138E to Crater Lake."

I read and reread the finished Route Narrative. America came alive in my hands. I wanted to live these words and numbers. I wanted to leave now. I wanted to meet these ribbons of road whose beginnings and ends, curves and nuances, altitudes and intersections I had studied and traced, and whose numbers flashed in my mind as I tried to sleep - numbers like 14, 39, 53, 98, 184, 267, 666.

But there were things I needed to learn before we left. Things only a Luddite needs to learn. Things that amazed people who knew me. I'd driven the Jordanian desert alone, run a marathon, packed off to China for a week of solitary exploration, been successful in business. But I couldn't pump gas, had never used an ATM (had no PINs to my name), and didn't know how to turn on a cellphone. The things that worried me about this trip- which, because of the kids, required I be in touch and ready for anything- were not the 12,000 miles, the seven weeks, the remote roads or the blistering desert, but cellphones, ATMs and gas pumps.

I bowed to progress and learned to push the right buttons. I'd sold a six-part series about the trip, to be filed from the road, to a local newspaper, so I learned to connect my laptop to the Internet without breaking the bank. Mama was wired and getting ready to roll.

Memorial Day came and went, and we turned the calendar to June. Time to tie up all preparatory loose ends. I turned New Paint, our Nissan mini-van, over to Don Borgeson for a day. Everyone should have as honest a mechanic as Donny. He checked the van from top to bottom, as if his own wife and kids were going to cross the country's most blistering lows and vertical highs in it. For $130, he declared her ready for anything. (Like any good ship, our van is a she, and she has a name. New Paint succeeds Old Paint, who served us for a decade before her retirement.)

I'd studied New Paint's interior geometry and knew every nook, cranny, angle and orifice that could possibly accommodate stuff. I bought clear plastic boxes and labeled them: mom's clothes; kids' clothes; toiletries & first aid; cooking supplies. My goal was to run our rolling house according to the maxim, "A place for everything and everything in its place." The boxes stacked snug inside the tailgate behind the rear seat.

I filled two cardboard cartons with food. At home, we're an organic family. I put that on seven-week hold, knowing we'd eat what we'd eat, which would often have to be a can of something brought down from the rooftop Thule and eaten cold or heated over Sterno. I bought food my kids see only on TV or at other people's houses. They were psyched to the point of giddiness that this trip offered a whole summer of stuff I call junk.

I made music and videotapes to get us through the trip's longest, dullest parts. Music for me, videos for the kids. The van had an entertainment system. Adam successfully argued for bringing both the Nintendo and Playstation systems. I taped from CDs and the radio and ended up with eclectic mixes that had Tennessee Ernie Ford's "How Great Thou Art" segueing into Steven Tyler doing "Walk This Way." We were ready for stretches like the 13-hour Texas crossing. Classic rock n'roll peppered with touches of Lee Greenwood and Andrea Bocelli; hours of "Friends" reruns; two video controllers so Adam could beat his sister at Mario Kart; cases of Wal-Mart root beer.

Time to go.

2

SETTING OUT: Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania

Yesterday we'd said goodbye to Mike. He had a business trip, so we'd stood at the kitchen door, hugging, and crying a little, trying to get through the farewell with as little hurt as possible. "I'll call you on the cellphone," I said a few times, already tapping into the value of this thing I'd resisted owning and hadn't yet used. Adam and Mike shook hands and exchanged masculine back pats.

Dana hugged her daddy tight. "Don't worry, Dane. I'll see you all in a month. It'll go by fast." Mike planned to meet us in Fort Bragg, California and travel with us for 10 days.

The premature goodbye made it easier to leave home. We only had to bear seeing our house disappear as we turned the first corner, instead of our dad and husband. About four miles from home we crossed the boundary marking our everyday lives' routine travel range. We picked up our first interstate. The journey began.

By the time we'd crossed Connecticut, New Paint was transformed. Somewhere around Hartford, the family car became a comfortable home, a secure haven, a dependable workhorse, a full member of the expedition. The kids settled in with their pillows and books and headphones. I eased into the rhythm of the road. And New Paint purred confidently westward, thrilled to be released from post office and grocery store runs. We were four travelers- three with legs, one with wheels.

I'll remember Fishkill, New York as the place where my mind grasped the magic and enormity of what we were doing. The pull of the road; the lure of unknown places; the freedom of being away. These gripped me as we filled our water bottles at the Fishkill rest area and gazed over the history-steeped Hudson River Valley falling away just beyond the endless line of truckers resting in their rigs.

Letters on the trucks and license plates told of vast stretches of highway leading to the places where these tired men lived when they weren't on the road: Tomah, Wisconsin; Lincoln, Nebraska; Texas; Louisiana; Minneapolis. Hard-working men delivering things Americans want and need, catching some sleep in the late afternoon on the side of the road in Fishkill, New York.

The Hamilton Fish Bridge carried us over the Hudson and into Pennsylvania, where the setting sun blazed orange as it nestled into the gray-green, hazy humps of the Allegheny foothills. Great tunnels blasted through mountains with names like Kittatinny and Tuscarora carried us into the state's core. We rolled through sooty Scranton and past

Wilkes-Barre, its trim three-story houses marching uphill from the great twin-spired brick church down in the town's center.

As we neared Hershey the next day, the sun played on the corrugated tin that sheathed white barns and silver silos. The silos were rocket ships waiting to blast from green fields. There was no shortage of places to pray in the farming hamlets that sat near Hershey. From Grantville, a tiny town of churches, to the East Hannover Mennonite Church, "All Welcome" signs told travelers there was always room in the pew for one more.

"Baby, you gotta wait in the line. That's what it's all about," sighed a mother to her I'm-too-cool-for-this daughter. They stood next to us in the Hershey Park ride line. I felt sorry for the woman, trying to carve out a halfway decent day with her kid, who was acting beastly. I'd have told her to wait in the car, made her pay me back the 35 bucks I'd spent on her ticket, and enjoyed the rides by myself.

We had fun in the lines. "Adam, those girls are checking you out," I whispered, as another long wait ate up more chunks of our Pennsylvania time. "Okay," he said, turning to cop a look at two sweet young things in "Angel" and "Princess" t-shirts who'd followed us from the Scrambler to the Twister.

"Okay" means "fine with me, that's good, I approve, thanks, I get it, cool, alright" – a positive reaction catchall phrase. At this babes-in-tiny-t-shirts moment, it probably also meant, "Maybe this trip won't be so bad…"

Once out of theme park heaven – or hell, depending on your viewpoint – we crossed the wide Susquehanna. A dozen hawks soared above us, floating between the high stone hills that hugged the road.

Our Donegal, Pennsylvania motel sat near the BP station - good for filling up, not good for Friday night sleeping. The music of a Donegal Friday night is the continuous screech of teenagers peeling out of the BP, sound systems at high bass and high volume, burning rubber down Route 31 to the Dairy Queen.

Even without the earsplitting coming of age ritual, I wouldn't have slept in Donegal. The chatty gentleman who checked in just before us ("On my way to Virginia to see the grandkids.") had nabbed the last non-smoking room ("The missus'll gag if I take smoking."). So, I took the hit for her, wishing I could put my

nose on the nightstand until morning to get it away from the stink that started in the pillowcase, then permeated every ounce of polyester fiberfill. I resolved to never again rent a smoking room. We'd keep driving, or sleep in the van, maybe in a Wal-Mart parking lot.

Morning brought sweet silence, fresh air and Fallingwater. The kids knew the Guggenheim and knew Frank Lloyd Wright's stuff was funky, but they gave me the "We're gonna tour a house?" lament anyway. Until they saw it. We followed our guide, Justin, into all the cantilevered corners of the cement and steel aerie, and imagined what it must have been like to be Lillian Kaufman or her two Edgars and live in a place that belonged, in every sense save ownership, to the platform-shoed egoist who built it.

We loved it, even the treehouse-like ticket pavilion with deep eco-friendly toilets that terrified one girl so much she burst from the stall shouting, "I can't go! It's too scary!"

Back in the van, as Dana told and retold the scary bathroom story, we laughed, at more than the story. Something good had just clicked into place, and we knew we were going to enjoy this trip - and each other. If we could have this much fun talking about toilets, and dishing on Frank Lloyd for getting mad at Lillian because she didn't like his dining room chairs, just imagine what great times lay ahead! An entire country's worth! We opened some bags and cans of junk food, cranked the tunes, and headed for West Virginia.

3

INTO THE SOUTH: West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee

A little boy in a bright white barber's cape sat on a barstool on the front porch of a house a hundred feet from the Mason-Dixon Line. His mom cut his hair while she talked with neighbors and family sitting on the wooden steps and on the faded couches that lined the porch railing.

Route 381 delivered us to West Virginia. At Bobbie's Texaco in Beverly, our second Justin of the trip filled the tank while we counted the gaudy ceramic angels in the window and read about the Pistol Training Course for a Concealed Weapon Permit to be held in the conference room of the Courthouse Annex. The gas station had no end of things to look at and consider, including a parting billboard that declared, "Some People Get Lost in Thought Just Because It's Unfamiliar Territory."

Since Pennsylvania's undulating Laurel Highlands, New Paint had been working hard, cresting hills and small mountains, then controlling herself nicely on the downhills, some of which were outfitted with serious Runaway Truck Ramps. I checked the rearview mirror frequently.

Between hills, we'd driven through the hearts of Pennsylvania towns made up of churches (one "Celebrating 228 years"), granges and gun clubs ("Turkey Shoot Every Sun. in Oct/Nov & Karaoke" – presumably not at the same time), and farmers' fields with tightly rolled wheels of hay sitting massive and yellow. Smithfield's centerpiece was the Mt. Moriah Baptist Church, beautiful brick and wood, festooned with scores of small

American flags that fluttered in the hot breeze and made you want to wave back.

Near Uniontown, New Paint narrowly missed a man climbing out of the woods by the road. He'd just nailed a handpainted "Gospel Sing" sign to a tree. More "Sing" signs in Fairchance and York. The sign-nailer had covered a lot of ground, fixing signs to miles of roadside trees. They were like a trail of breadcrumbs. A final sign pointed the way to the gathering place up Outcrop Road. We were tempted, but West Virginia lay just ahead, and its soft curves and green hills tempted us more.

West Virginia defined itself on entry as a non-stop mountain, so New Paint put on her game face and eased us up velvet heights and down into pristine valleys threaded with rushing rivers.

A biker rally was in full throttle somewhere near Marlinton. Bikers had claimed a hundred miles of rooms and tent sites, so Appalachia turned into one long quest for beds. We passed on an available space in the Tygart Valley Campground on account of two pigs snuffling around in the dirt.

And, we drove the six miles back down the mountain from a state campground because the forest it sat in seemed to be a hangout for pickups full of men and boys in camouflage t-shirts. "There don't seem to be any women or families up here," I said, preparing my two tired companions for the news that we wouldn't be stopping here, either. Intuition is a traveler's best friend, and, when it speaks, I listen. I maneuvered a 12-point turn and headed back down the dirt road, dueling banjos playing in my head.

"Mom, why aren't we staying up here?" asked Dana.

"Because it doesn't feel right."

"Okay," said two voices in unison from New Paint's rear.

Adam and Dana know about traveler's intuition, have seen it used before, and had no more questions about why we weren't pitching camp up here in the woods. Headphones went back in ears, Oreos got opened, and on we went.

We could have stayed at the Marlinton Motor Inn. The gracious lady at the front desk had one room left, "right next to where they're havin' the bonfire and karaoke tonight, if you don't mind that…" It was the last night of the biker fest, and people were primed to party. For a terrifying second or two, I let my brain play with the image of the kids and me locked in a motel room surrounded by a mob of inebriated bikers belting out karaoke around a bonfire. We moved on.

Marlinton's innkeepers made a valiant collective attempt to put a roof over our heads. The bonfire lady put in a call to the Graham Motel. No answer. At River Place, full to its highly varnished rafters, Dottie got the Graham on the phone. Booked solid. So, Dottie sent us up the hill to the Jericho. Owner Alice was rocking on her front porch, to which she'd affixed a "No Vacancy" sign in small, polite letters. She invited us in and put me on the phone with Jeannie at the Carriage House. Jeannie had an $85 attic suite, but she was east, near Virginia, and I couldn't spare the detour's extra miles. Jeannie told me to come back when we had more time. We left Marlinton without a room, but with fond memories of good people.

Stone ledges overhung the sweet mountain road that twisted and climbed toward Lewisburg. We'd bought subs in Marlinton. The kids laid New Paint's middle seat down like a table and sat in the rear, watching "My Wife and Kids" reruns. We had food, the kids were content, and I was ready to drive all night.

We found a room at a Lewisburg motel where the Hindu managers burned incense at the lobby altar and sat, palms upturned, mouthing prayers on the couch. Taped in the motel's front window were an American flag urging us to "Travel Proud" and a flyer offering a $10,000 reward for information

leading to the arrest of the person who started a fire that took the life of a Roncaverte man.

Somewhere near Pearl Buck's birthplace, stately and pillared and neighbor to several miniature horse farms, we called Mike. "Hi daddy! There are lots of horses in West Virginia!" Dana saw West Virginia as the only thing that stood between her and Kentucky horse country, the holy grail of her American road trip. Back in Pennsylvania, she'd started asking, "Are we near Kentucky?" Now we were, and visions of horses danced through her head.

West Virginia is a beauty contest between rushing rivers and green mountains. It is a place that pulls you outdoors, clears your mind, and settles your soul. Adam and Dana had never camped, and West Virginia was the place to fix that.

One late afternoon, at New River Gorge, we scouted a site at a small campground on a creek, and checked ourselves in via the honor system. This was grand adventure for the kids, and they took off down the dirt roads and through the woods to scope out the portable johns and water pumps, the shower building, and the communal enamel dishwashing sink. They filled the water jugs, gathered firewood, and arranged our folding chairs and little plastic tables. They unpacked exciting gear like flashlights and the Coleman lamp, and spread clothes and sleeping bags to claim their spots inside the three-man tent.

Brian, the campground owner, came by on his golf cart to welcome us and collect our fee. He took Adam on a spin down to the outhouse to replace toilet paper. His tree-climbing dog Loca was busy in the woods, rushing at terrified squirrels. She was quite a sight, running crazed up the vertical trunks, then flipping backward and landing in the dirt. Loca was nuts, and the squirrels were traumatized. They hadn't figured out that the tree would peel her off and send her plummeting, just in time, every time.

As the crisp West Virginia dusk fell, we settled into our outdoor home. The evening was special. Wireless neophyte, I was

awed by the ability to talk to Mike on a phone while standing in a remote Appalachian forest. (I'd already called him that day, from the mouth of a coal mine.) Adam was chief cook and fire tender, and the meal of canned corn and beef stew he heated up was a culinary tour de force. It was, then and there in the cool woods, the best meal we'd ever had. As evening moved toward night, we sat in our little chairs and talked. "Imagine living at Fallingwater…" whispered Dana. We imagined, as fireflies blinked in the blackness, and campfire licks lit our faces. We imagined, to the sounds of woods and darkness and the distant lullaby hum of the big rigs out on Route 119.

We made our way through West Virginia, a place of beauty and brawn. I'd fallen in love with the Kanawha, a broad, heartland river, at once gentle and tough. It meandered alongside the Midland Trail, a coal route, which linked blue-collar towns like Alloy, Boomer, and Smithers, to Charleston. Three parallel lines - river, rails, road - told you these were places that worked hard for a living. Moss-green erector set bridges crossed the Kanawha, and we looked down onto black mountains of coal piled in barges tethered to riverside docks. The front steps of the London Church of Christ were carpeted with aqua Astroturf, and the Twin Falls Restaurant near Shrewsbury advertised "Good Down Home Cooking –West Virginia People Doing Business West Virginia Style."

The Chuck Yeager Bridge took us over the Kanawha into Charleston. Sunlight bounced off the capitol's great gold dome, and fine brick mansions sat on a high bluff above the river. We toured old Charleston's cobbled sections for a while and then, at a "Got Milk?" billboard of white-mustachioed Dixie Chicks, found I-64, which would lead, eventually, to horse country. I shot a big smile into the back seat from the rearview mirror: "OK, Dane. We're officially on our way to Kentucky."

A bridge over the Big Sandy River took us over the state line. Dusty, ochre ugliness. Kentucky wasn't supposed to be dry and

beige. It was supposed to be rich and green. What was this brown limestone world, this claylike landscape of dirty yellow rock, this Daniel Boone Forest that didn't seem to have any trees? I made an emergency stop at the Ponderosa buffet in Morehead, so we could fill ourselves with comfort food and recover from the disappointment of learning that Kentucky – at least this part of it – was not very pretty.

Closer to Lexington, redemption. Hints of green and blue. Patches, then whole pastures, of rolling, perfect grass. Grass that nurtures champions. Mare and foal pairs in love and nuzzling, savoring their time together, sunlight on their withers. Horses so beautiful you wanted to cry. Elegance and long legs and strong backs and power bred for a purpose. This was Lexington.

Dana's dream became real, mile by white rail-fenced mile. The horses were pure majesty. I watched Adam watch Dana. I could see him decide to go with the flow and let his sister enjoy. I filled up. My daughter was in her place of a young lifetime, we were surrounded by equine beauty that took your breath away, and Adam was showing himself to be a true gentleman.

Our Lexington days were all horse. We made an eight-hour, 85-in-the-shade, no-square-inch-missed visit to Kentucky Horse Park. We went three times to Thoroughbred Park to leap among and sit atop the life-size bronze Derby contenders. We stalked a pair of Lexington cops and their chestnut mounts as they walked their Main Street beat. "The police even ride horses!" marveled Dana, as she added law enforcement to her mental list of jobs for horse lovers.

I don't think Dana slept much the night before our dawn pilgrimage to Keeneland Racecourse to watch the morning workouts. When I whispered in her ear at 5:30 that it was time to get up, her eyes shot open, and her face beamed. We dressed quietly so we wouldn't wake Adam, slipped out, and went downstairs for a quick breakfast before heading into the already hot Lexington pre-dawn. We were the first breakfast customers of the morning. As we passed the reception desk, I whispered to the clerk, "We're off to Keeneland." "Ahhhh," she whispered back, nodding at Dana with a knowing look, telepathy transmitted from one horse lover to another. "You'll love it." I looked at Dana, always beautiful, and, at this moment, the most excited, gorgeous little girl on the planet.

We traced a route around venerable Keeneland along parts of the Bluegrass Driving Tour, following Rice and Van Meter and Versailles ("We say 'ver-SALES', not fancy like the one in France," the night desk clerk had told me when I'd come down to ask the best route from the hotel to Keeneland.). Dana could have spent hours on these roads, each a thin, gray ribbon along which lay some of Lexington's most storied horse farms. The pastures were lush green carpet, the architecture distinctive and utterly beautiful. Crisp lines, fresh paint, rich trim. Pristine clapboards and elegant cupolas, graceful weathervanes. Dana has an encyclopedic knowledge of everything equine and, from her reading, was more familiar with these farms than I, and her excitement as we read their names – John Ward, Drumkenny, Broodmare, Manchester, Fares - traveled like an electrical current, stirring in me a deep contentment. We pulled over by a white rail fence on a slight rise in Rice Boulevard and looked out over the pastures spreading before us, hints of blue visible in the rich grass as it waited in the low, early light for the new day to burn off the night's dew and mist.

On Van Meter, the red trim on the outbuildings of a vast farm betrayed it as Calumet, and, as we neared its fences, from a

stand of tall trees that graced a velvety grass hillock, came a line of grooms, all Latino, each man leading a stunning thoroughbred on a rope. The line of small, silent men and sinewy horses flowed down the hillock toward us, then turned left and continued, parallel to the fence and the road we watched from, keeping under the shade of the trees, then turned left again, gently ambling back up the rise toward Calumet's stables.

At Keeneland, we stood at the rail of the fabled oval, the only spectators, and watched trainers lead horses from the misty rows of silvery stables and onto the track. Light, lean, blue-jeaned trainers, one with dreadlocks flying from under his helmet, put pounding, sweating thoroughbreds through their paces. The trainers wore helmets, and most wore chest pads. They carried crops, which they weren't shy about using. Some stood, others crouched. Some made their horses step sideways. The men and animals took the track's bends and straightaways at breakneck speeds. Old Joe, tall and gaunt and wrinkled, in jeans and western shirt and a helmet with a pom-pom on top, sat astride his horse, Frog. They sat at the track rail, inside and on the course, ready to go after runaways. That was their job. Joe's eyes were peeled, and he was ready to ride Frog to the rescue of any trainer whose trainee decided he'd rather be somewhere else.

A good number of the riders took note of Dana. A little girl with a beautiful brown ponytail who'd risen before the sun to stand at the rail. Like this morning's desk clerk, they recognized her as a kindred spirit. They smiled, waved, and slowed down when they passed so she could look longer at their horses. Dana had brought her little plastic camera, and some of the trainers posed for pictures.

One trainer with a gentle face and shining eyes assembled himself and three others into a parade formation. They passed us, four abreast, at a slow, regal posting trot, like palace guard presenting the colors before the queen, each rider smiling down at Dana. I thanked them with my eyes. That they took note and

took time turned this special morning into magic. These were busy men with hard work to do. Some were watched by the horse owners who paid them, and they weren't paid to be nice to little girls. But they were, and I'll always remember them with fondness.

Before we left Keeneland, as the first brush of hot, higher-than-horizon sun kissed the bluegrass, we ventured into the great grandstand and sat awhile in Mr. George Goodman's personalized box, imagining what it would be like to settle in here in the cool shade on a sunny race day to watch the horses and the other racegoers.

Adam had slept until we turned the key back in the door. "Breakfast is about to close. You'd better get down there, bud." On this trip, I left no hotel amenity unturned, amassing a sack full of little soaps, and bottles of shampoo that I used to wash our clothes in the sink or bathtub. And, I encouraged the eating of any available free food. I looked for the magic words "Free Continental Breakfast" on motel signs. Sometimes we hit pay dirt, finding a motel that also hosted a "manager's happy hour." This meant free dinner, because, next to the beer and wine and soda, the manager usually laid out cheese and crackers and a big tray of crudité. The kids drew the line at raw cauliflower and broccoli, but tucked into the celery, carrots and cherry tomatoes, huge dollops of dip on the side. Sometimes pay dirt turned to mother lode, with a spread that included things like tacos and little egg rolls.

Through careful husbandry of free motel fare and a manager's cocktail hour here and there, we were occasionally able to patch together a string of five free meals in a row: free breakfast at Motel 1; free lunch of apples, bagels and peanut butter (cream cheese for Dana) spirited from Motel 1 breakfast spread; free dinner from Motel 2 happy hour; free breakfast at Motel 2; free lunch spirited from Motel 2 breakfast spread.

By meal number six, we were ready for a restaurant, and we always voted unanimously on type: Mexican. (Curiously, we'd eat our worst Mexican food in Texas and our best in North Dakota.)

Dana and I accompanied Adam down to the breakfast bar. "So, how was it?" he asked, of our visit to Keeneland. He asked Dana, directly. I wanted to hug him over his plate of biscuits and gravy. As she wove a tale of the magic kingdom of Keeneland, Adam listened and chewed. While it was clear he thought Keeneland sounded cool – he said, "Okay" a few times as Dana talked – I knew he didn't feel he'd missed anything. Dana preferred horses, he preferred sleep. He was content they'd both gotten what they most wanted from the morning.

That night, while I worked on my first installment for the newspaper, Dana was writing her own story, "Horse Capital of the World." It begins: "In the heart of Lexington, Kentucky, lies a beauty like no other…"

Before we left Kentucky, Scotty, the hotel's maintenance man, cleaned New Paint and prepared her for takeoff. He wanted to release the green machine from the shroud of Allegheny and Appalachia dust that covered her before we headed grill-first into the rest of our adventure. As part of his job involves cleaning things and keeping them neat and in order, I think our dirt had been bothering him for days. He stopped me in the parking lot one afternoon.

"You could use a car wash."

"We sure could."

"You want me to go over it with this hose?"

That'd be lovely."

"Okay. I just needed your permission."

We'd met Scotty on our first day. When we told him what we were up to, he said, "I've wanted to do that all my life." He considered our trip aloud: how big it was; how filled it would be with interesting people and places; how long we'd be gone; that we'd come this far already; that these two young kids were living a

dream that many people had; that he envied his retired brother who spent his days driving around the country in his RV; that New Orleans was "not much of anything, but you gotta go."

He sought us out and spent whatever time he could away from hoses and pipes and bosses to talk about our crossing America. We were in the pool one morning, kids diving and splashing, I trying to execute a meaningful pool-running workout, when Scotty spied us and pulled a beach chair close to the pool's edge to talk about America and all there was to see. I had to make my running laps excruciatingly small so I could stay within earshot and offer decent conversation.

When he talked, he was reflective, pensive. He made us feel our trip into the healing country was important. He seemed proud of us, and I realized that that mattered to me. We'd meet many people like Scotty. That summer, the simple act of one family's trip across the nation was enough to connect Americans in a certain, knowing bond. We were there, on the road, out in the nation, terrorism-be-damned, we're going to see it and drink it in and absorb it and love it and experience the wonder of it because it's ours and you can't knock it down or take it away. I realized that people we met were cheering us on and that we represented them. Perhaps they couldn't make the trip themselves, but we could make it for them, touching the county's corners and middles, confirming that things were and would be alright. We - Adam, Dana, New Paint and I- were a cord, a thread. We had the capacity to sew patches of the vast American quilt together simply by threading our way through it and talking to people we met. These revelations were gifts from Scotty.

We left Lexington at 7 a.m. in light, gray rain. Scotty was in the parking lot. He stood and waved. "So! You're on the road already! Off to see the world!" He watched us leave until we were out of sight.

Before we got into New Paint, gleaming from her wash, I'd taken Adam aside. "You let your sister have the experience she came for. I'm proud of you."

A little nod, then, "Okay."

As we headed for Tennessee, we peered down four-digit roads like 1517 and 1462. Two Amish boys in their horse buggy pulled out of the Sonora Plaza Truck Stop, where back road Kentucky meets I-65.

We had a pit stop to make. In Bowling Green, across from the GM plant, sits the white snail-shaped Corvette Museum, an Adam must-see. Immediately off the exit ramp, things got weird. Had we been dropped in an automobile version of *The Stepford Wives*? Every other car in Bowling Green was a Corvette. "Look at all the Vettes parked at that motel!" "All the cars at that drive-thru window are Corvettes!" We stopped at a red light. Every car facing us, stopped and waiting across the intersection, was a Corvette. I looked to my right. The guy stopped beside us sat in a Corvette.

At the museum, two parking lots. By this point, New Paint was one of my heroes. But, with a flick of his wrist, the parking lot attendant declared her a second-class car and sent us to the nearly vacant "non-Corvette parking lot." A Corvette owners convention had brought thousands of Vettes, from vintage to showroom fresh, to Bowling Green. And all of them, except the ones still back in town at the red light or the fast food joint or the motels, were parked in the special, Corvettes-only parking lot, making it at least as interesting as the museum.

Adam wandered the museum in reverent silence. When he got behind the wheel of the one Corvette you could sit in, I had to rub my eyes to change him back into a 13-year-old boy. For an instant, I saw a confident, independent young man. I gave thanks

for this trip and this time I'd been given to spend with him before he outgrew me.

The road from Kentucky led to my friend Rhonda's house, outside Nashville. We've known each other since we were 14, when I was in love with her cousin Rick. After he broke my heart, we stayed friends. Rhonda was the only person I'd made plans to visit.

Like many of their neighbors, Rhonda and husband Charlie came to Nashville to follow work. While on a 6 a.m. power walk through her development, once a vast farm, I watched people transplanted from Michigan and the northeast drive off to jobs at Dell Computer or the car plants at Spring Hill and Smyrna. As I circumnavigated the tidy neighborhood, I noticed what looked like "For Sale" signs planted on some of the front lawns. When I got close enough to read them, I learned that "The 10 Commandments Are Supported Here" and "Ye Must Be Born Again."

Rhonda and Charlie have adapted to their new culture. They'll always be Yankees, but their kids were born in the South. Erin and Paul go to Christian school, and their summer reading list included the Bible.

Our kids played together in the cul-de-sac, while Rhonda, Charlie and I drank beers on the front porch. Charlie's a traveler. Real travelers know geography, even of places they haven't been to yet. I described our route, and Charlie sat back and smiled, visualizing the Stonehenge of old Cadillacs sticking up in Amarillo, the jagged reaches of the Sawtooth, the forested shores of Lake Huron. This is a guy who, years ago, got in a car with a few buddies and drove from Boston to Yellowknife, just to see what a place called Yellowknife looked like. They spent a few hours there and drove home. I understood completely.

Rhonda's house had been a psychological safety net. It was a familiar destination. A place where we'd been expected. Somewhere with people who cared about us. A chance to stretch out and hang around a house with a yard and lots of rooms and a washing machine and a kitchen with food. A visit with friends. A point from which I could turn around and go home if something wasn't right about this trip and still feel the venture had been worthwhile.

We left Rhonda's driveway and left the safety net behind. We were on our own, for the next 10,000 miles. We drove into America, and it embraced us.

A 12,000-mile, post-9/11 road odyssey into proud, majestic America.

Ribbons of Highway: A Mother-Child Journey Across America