

## One Good Road Is Enough

By Robert Waller

Autumn in 1949, night, and the geese are moving south. I hear them talking, toss the covers aside, and scramble to the foot of my bed, looking out the window. Low they are, coming down the river valley and passing over town. On unsleeping wings they ride, long necks extended, with sober eyes that see only time and far things and space...and me, I think.

They know I'm here, I'm sure of that. Ten year old boys have not yet succumbed to a world counseling consumption in place of laughter and duty in place of wings. The geese understand. I clutch the bed covers to my face, responding to some curious mixture of delight in their coming and sorrow at watching them pass.

Celestial reckoning. That's how they go ...by the stars. That's how they find the ponds of Texas. Scientists study their ways, dissecting and inducing. The answers will evade them. It's magic and no one can argue me otherwise, at age ten or four decades later. Logic and data have their place, but not in the night, not out along the roads of wonder, where the music rises and the Canadas fly and a wizard waves them onward with long sweeps of his arm from tall grass in the river meadows.

I lie back on my pillow. My parents are asleep, but the little brown radio beside my bed, the one with only two dials and tan cloth covering over the speaker, glows in the darkness. "Welcome to 'Your Saturday Night Dance Party,'" the smooth baritone from New Orleans says. The music is live, and I know, absolutely, there are handsome men and beautiful women. They are eating and drinking, and dancing on a southern rooftop, a big hotel, their hair only slightly ruffled by the soft wind from the gulf.

Over the music and following the geese I hear a Rock Island freight train. In the bottomlands south of me, the wizard is laughing and does a backward flip, unable to contain himself. The Road is busy tonight – music from New Orleans, geese across the moon, trains across the trestle. The wizard loves the Road and is teaching me to love it, as both an illusion and a reality.

I fade in and out of sleep, wandering along the edge of things, open to the possibilities. The music changes and images come. People dressed in wind-whipped black, carrying daggers with carved handles and drinking tea in front of flapping tents, waiting for the call to prayer. Camels moving silk and frankincense at a steady pace over blowing sand, pushing hard toward Medina. Near morning, my mother pulls the covers over me and turns off the little radio, while I travel, far from her.

There was only one good road leading out of Rockford, Iowa, back then. The rest were gravel, loose and dusty in the summer, treacherous in the winter. But one good road is enough. I knew that's all it took. I could travel east on it, go south on Highway 14, swing east again and catch one of the big highways leading down to New Orleans, or, for that matter, to Paris or Persia or twilight places in the Amazon Basin.

These were not fantasies without the possibility of fulfillment. I never believed that for a moment. They were plans, you see, plans that could be converted into small-town sidewalks that turned into streets that turned into highways and the highways into old steamers or airplanes or caravans headed toward market towns. The steady two-beat of a New Orleans drummer could become the complex syncopations of wrinkled hands on tightly stretched goatskin in high-desert arroyos, and the Rock Island freight could some day be transformed into a long, chuffing train across Siberia. The images are beginning; you must have the images first. Then comes the Road.

So I lean over a 4 AM hotel balcony in my forty-third year and watch Bombay work its way toward morning. Thirty-four hours in front of this, I had shut the front door of my house in Cedar Falls, slapped my vest pocket to make sure the tickets and passport were there, and picked up my suitcase. Car to the airport, commuter plane to Chicago, jet to New York, and there in the darkness was Air India 106, loading. Then London by daylight, and into the night again – Europe, Istanbul, Persia, the Gulf of Oman. India, unknown, and fearsome in that ignorance, out there somewhere.

On the balcony, I drink a Kingfisher beer as light approaches, watching Arab dhows run up their sails into the first wind of morning where the Portuguese once harbored, watching the street people cook their breakfast on charcoal burners, thinking of a little brown radio humming, geese flying, and a wizard promising me that my would would not always be so circumscribed as it was then.

I wander the streets of India. Touts offer sightseeing, drugs of any kind, and women, or young boys if a woman is not to my liking. I swim in a pool at dawn, listening to a flute somewhere, and fall in transient love with Indian women in green silk, gold upon their bodies. For seventeen nights I eat at a table next to that of Sir David Lean and his wife. He's here scouting locations for *A Passage to India*. We do not speak. My Midwestern reticence and respect for privacy prevent me from asking about his dreams as a young boy. I know he thought of deserts and jungles and dark winds from Java, though.

And Arabia came along. On Themari Street in Riyadh, the old ways endure. There is gold, and women with covered faces and men with covered intentions. There are calls to prayer and desert winds and I wander through the markets at night looking for presents to take home. The bracelet will do, and the necklace. The scarf also. I flag down a taxi in the middle of a broad avenue. The driver is a Bedouin who remembers the sound of hooves and the taste of blowing sand. Far to the west, Canadas are beating their way south over the rooftops of Northern Iowa.

Then Munich and Dubai and Hong Kong and Paris and on and on. I ride a coastal boat south of Puerto Vallarta to a fishing village. Staying there for a week without light or pure water. I listen to an African drummer tell me how the drums can talk, if you have the skill. I believe him and sit nearby while he plays to the darkness, on a hill 167 stone steps above the village. In the morning a man from San Francisco sings his night-dreams and

invites others to do the same, while another man murmurs incantations to the beat of a smaller drum.

In the river towns of Belgium, winter lies hard and brittle upon me. Moving across the cold marble floors of a Flemish cathedral, I listen to the sound of my own boot heels and wonder if the bishops in their crypts of stone are listening also. Was this the place? There's something here I can't touch, some ancient sense of having stood in these shadows before, and watched. Watched the lady in silver, small hurried steps as she came streaming down a secondary aisle past the confessionals and toward me. The image is there for a moment only. It wavers, dissolves, as early light comes through high and painted windows and colors orange a suffering Jesus, hanging, crucified.

St. Maarten is expensive, but the beaches are good. You can make up the cost at the casinos if you know blackjack and the cards are running your way. I am suspicious, though, about playing against the government. Governments think of gambling as taxes; they have unfavorable rules and close the casino while I'm in the middle of a streak. The hell with 'em. I put my winnings in a metal box at the hotel and catch the morning flight out of there. I'll try Macao next.

I ride long-tailed boats through the backwaters of Bangkok, hang off of foggy cliffs in Acadia with my cameras, and follow snowy egrets through the swamps of south Georgia. In Big Sur, I read my poetry by firelight. There are professional poets with long hair in wide-brimmed hats, and pretty young women who love the idea of poets more than the words. The high-plains drums are still there in New Mexico, if you listen, and old dogs lie in the streets of La Push, where violent January waves hammer the coast of northwestern Washington. A fusty woman, from Omaha twenty years back, combs the Oregon beaches and dreams of secret cargos only she will find. I spend an hour talking with her about that.

Now there is more than one good road out of Rockford, Iowa, though still only one to the east. The same one. I visit there and talk with my mother. She remembers the old brown radio, the one with two dials and a tan cloth covering over the little speaker. She remembers the late night sound of geese overhead. But she never quite has understood the wizard or the Road or why the man she raised loves it so.

"India?" she says. "How many times will this make?" "Three," I say. "There is more out there, and I'm fifty now. It's time for India again."

At some point, it gets down to "lasts." It's getting there now. I wear clothes for a long time. I wonder if my leather jacket, worn but tough, is the last one I'll buy. And my boots, good ones, Red Wings, are the same. The man at the shoe shop says they're going to outlive me. And my old hat? And the guitars? They'll go on forever. Maybe this is the last of the India voyages. Maybe.

I go down into the bottomlands to talk with the wizard of my summers. His ways are slanting ways, as mine have become and turn ever more so. He looks at the river purling

by and listens to my questions. I ask again about the geese and the Road and the music, and what it all means. Where does it go from here? What about the “lasts?”

He is a fey companion, uneasy with too much directness, and begins to move away from me through meadow grass, chanting as he goes.

Looking upward, he begins to sing, sweeping his small arm in widening arcs. I follow the point of his finger. Geese are moving south across a daggerlike slice of moon, their ancient sextants working in sober eyes, taking them along time and space, towards the ponds of Texas.

I drive my truck out of Rockford, down the one good road to the east. On the tape deck, Kitaro plays of blowing sand and loaded camels pushing hard toward red-walled cities in the deserts of Rajasthan. Goatskin drums underneath the melody. Switching over to celestial reckoning, I jam my boot harder on the accelerator, drifting somewhere between illusion and reality, refusing to succumb, thinking of magic...and believing in it.