

One Breath On The Interstate

By David Hill

Wisps and tendrils of morning fog creep through the bridge's superstructure, beckoning my car aloft as it starts crossing the ravine in the frosty pre-dawn. The blacktop on the bridge looks the same as the road. The unbroken rhythm of reflective lane markers would have me believe so. But it isn't the same. And here, in one breath as the car hits the ice on the bridge and starts to spin, headlights nodding a premature farewell to all points of the compass, is suddenly all I have only just discovered and am about to lose. It all wants to live on, just as I do:

America this big cheeseburger of a country Ku Klux Klan Times Square Empire State little Puerto Rican cops (men and women) the wine valleys and kooks of California the think tank of Boston the proud thrusting arrogance of Washington the funny little out of the way places in Nebraska the big ol' expanse of Texas that's not a state it's a goddamn country it's twice the size of England you know the fields of Kansas the nuclear test site of New Mexico the endless lush greenery of Pennsylvania and everybody doing sixty-five on the turnpikes and interstates because the police actually bust you if you speed they come up behind you in a flashing gumball machine and pull you over and drawl a slow cerebrally challenged catechism of questions and if you give them any lip they'll spread you against the side of your car pat you down and make you walk in a straight line and shine flashlights into the footwells of your car to see if you've any open drink hiding there ready to be swilled illegally sleeping in rest areas with owls hooting in the pines far above and well-spaced cars hissing by on the immaculate blacktop at a stately sixty-five on the other side of the firebreak on the

interstate (the flimsy-looking barrier won't hold me back at sixty-five miles an hour, the ravine is deep) America America colour everywhere nothing grey or black and white everywhere violet and pink yellow pastel blues you'd think those were namby-pamby colours but the whole macho country is full of them it's funny to see guys who look like three John Waynes coming out of houses that look like all the gays of the world have competed to design and paint I guess luxury is associated with these fancy colours and anyway it's the women who decide on what colour to paint the house and the men go along with it, they go out all day and take care of business and anyway they have earned the right to live in a house painted pansy colours if they want America America Rocky Mountain high Death Valley low from the freezing North to the sizzling South and an East Coast looking towards Europe and liking a dream of Europe but not the real thing it was cool to be in Paris in the 1920s and cool to be in London in the 1960s but now what, Paris is crumbling and England is just another U.S. state better to go to Disneyworld and live the dream in a nice American mock-up of Europe and save yourself the air fare America soaking up Mexicans from its Southern border like a sponge swelling with Chicanos and Puerto Ricans don't speak English hey what do you get if you cross a Mexican with an octopus? I dunno but that sucker sure can pick lettuce haw haw compare this with good wholesome friendly quakerish habits from the old days like bringing a pie to your new neighbours and being positive and building a great pioneering future well now it's built look at it this huge lumbering mastodon of a country and it's not stopping and it's going to take over the world in fact it already has done the language the music the internet the movies the food pretty much everybody in the world consuming something American every day and deep down loving it even though they might object to US foreign policy but think of the alternatives the whole world painted red which means grey so eat your Big Macs and quit bitching this country has come up like a rocket in only two hundred years and it's got so much momentum it's got to spill over, deep in the minds of men

it's like an orgasm that's got to happen first the cultural invasion smoothing the way like KY jelly get everyone nice and lubricated and then bam! United States of Earth I can think of a lot worse things all the little chicks with their cherry red lips (now I'm facing the other way, resigned to physics, bracing for impact) what a great big delicious pie America is and there's enough for everybody that moon up there is a giant Pringle probably sour cream and onion flavor but you'd have to ask Neil Armstrong corndogs, root beer and pumpkin pie, oh my! the world is good enough to eat and then of course there's the attempted counterculture, Americans don't do irony too well and the ones who try it end up nihilistic and unwashed because they once went to a Guns 'n' Roses gig and saw a guy throw up and think that's how you rebel if you want to be a dissident and your parents will yell at you and call you a pinko commie and they'll be right and things haven't changed much from the days of *Rebel Without a Cause* in America if you ain't part of the solution you're part of the problem and a problem is just a solution the wrong way up and that's why your parents want you to stand up the right way so you'll be on the right side of the tracks when the shit goes down because shit rolls downhill and you wanna be at the top of the hill when the shit starts rolling so you might as well believe the dream and build your castles in the air and make them real because who wants to be a jackass and waste what may well be the greatest opportunity mankind has ever had to get its act together everybody driving around in their Mustangs and Lincoln Navigators and big honking kickass Fords and Chevviess and Dodges and believing and believing and keepin' on believing and country blues rap hip hop jazz rock'n'roll cajun gospel on the radio and everybody a news junkie there's always something to talk about and if you ain't got nothing to say Jay Leno'll say it for you and if *he* ain't got nothing to say Johnny Carson's ghost'll come back and say something funny so everybody can go to bed with a smile on their lips looking forward to a bright tomorrow

The grip returns. I have come to the end of the bridge having performed a precise three-hundred-and-sixty-degree skid and hit the ice-free tarmac of the insulated road going straight as a bullet as if nothing had happened. There was even an eighteen-wheeler beside me the whole time, one I was trying to pass, all polished chrome and pride, its thundering outline picked out in coloured lights like something out of *Tron*. I never put a wheel outside my lane markings, just pirouetted next to the truck like a bee dancing alongside its queen, like Britain alongside The United States.

I pass him now, using the welcome traction, and glance up. Illuminated by his cabin lights, he is whooping and slapping his palms on his wheel. One hand goes to his brow and holds it as he shakes his head. I think of signalling him to pull over at the next run-off to check he is all right. But he gives me a double thumbs-up and as I accelerate away he is applauding me while reaching for his radio mike.

Without this adrenaline-filled swansong, the trip would never have been complete. I would never have felt the wheel go slack in my hands and seen the whole of the USA spinning, and that same breath would have gone unnoticed like most of the six hundred million or so I'll have taken, if all goes well, by the time that bridge finally catches up with me.

Will there still be an America then?

The truck driver and I continue, arrow-straight, to our separate destinations, he to tell this story forever to half-believing buddies and I onwards to Philadelphia where I'll catch a cushion of air across the Atlantic back to this country's long-divorced origins. Murmurs are growing louder there about how America's glory days are over.