

Rising from Jack Kerouac's Couch · Fred Setterberg

I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that's why it happened right there and then. . . .

On the Road, Jack Kerouac

"JACK KEROUAC SLEPT ON THAT SOFA," I announced in the morning.

Wally, my nineteen-year-old cousin, bolted upright from his lethargic sprawl across the appalling wreck of my apartment's ratty red-velvet, cat-clawed couch. Wally's backpack, hiking boots, and cardboard hitchhiking sign—upon which he had scrawled in coal-black marker pen with excellent penmanship, CALIFORNIA—had been strewn across my Oakland flat since his arrival the night before. I negotiated a path through the debris of my cousin's vagabond life and forced a cup of steaming black coffee into his fist.

Wally gasped, shook his head, slurped the coffee; he couldn't believe it. "This sofa?" It was as though I had confided that the lumpy cushions plopped upon this wretched heap of furniture had been stuffed with twenty-dollar bills to soften his sleep.

"Kerouac crashed *here*?" Wally wondrously patted the extruding springs.

Even to me the uncomfortable couch seemed a remarkable prize. I had acquired it years before from a friend whose father had been—I know this sounds unlikely—a Buddhist monk; he'd briefly tutored Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Alan Watts in the rigors of Zen. The time was the mid-1950s; the place, Berkeley; the literary epoch, the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance; *ergo*: Kerouac. My friend recalled that as a little girl, she had seen red wine spilt and the veil of illusion called *maya* contemplated broodily amid her family's living room, as the famous writer nodded off on the couch.

Wally really dug the idea of sleeping where Kerouac had also sprawled supine. My cousin had arrived after thumbing across the country from Massachusetts, materializing at my door like a spirit from another era. Although we had already hit the end of the Eighties, Wally wore Sixties buckskin, blue jeans, and shoulder-length hair. In the top flap of his Army

surplus backpack he transported an eccentric collection of forgotten music culled not from his own youth, but mine: Blue Cheer, Moby Grape, Iron Butterfly, the Seeds.

A few days after his arrival, while we were driving together through San Francisco, I mentioned to Wally that on the summer solstice twenty years before, I had attended a free concert in Golden Gate Park featuring the original incarnation of the Grateful Dead—a band whom I would now pay only to avoid.

“Damn!” said Wally.

“What’s wrong?”

“I missed everything.”

Although my young cousin certainly had missed vintage Dead by twenty years and the Beats by thirty-five, he seemed determined to mine from the past a full stock of recyclable wisdom and experience. Most serviceable was the dog-eared paperback stuffed into his backpack. It hardly needs to be said, but Wally was reading Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*.

“That’s so weird,” he confided on that first morning in Oakland, upon hearing the news about my couch. “That’s wickedly weird, in fact, because you know what?” Wally spoke just above a stage whisper, running his long, thin fingers through his far longer sandy-blond hair. “I was *born* on October 21, 1969.”

I didn’t get it.

“The day Jack Kerouac died.”

Together we contemplated all possible manifestations of Jack Kerouac’s disembodied spirit now hovering above the sacred couch.

I’d also read *On the Road*—but twenty years earlier, when I was about Wally’s age.

Since then, I’ve been informed by friends and acquaintances equipped with advanced degrees in English literature and graduate seminar training in semiotics, hermeneutics, deconstructionist dialectics, and feminist Marxist analysis that *On the Road* is really about the true meaning of traffic signals and mileage signs posted along Interstate 80, or the passivity of the American male, or the post-war expropriation of travel as a leisure commodity, or perhaps even nothing at all.

All along I thought it was about a couple of schmoes who roll around the continent like two marbles on a tray, goofing on the scenery and enjoying themselves.

In truth, over the years the specifics of the novel had almost faded from memory. I now associated *On the Road* with other early reading pleasures, like *The Willie Mays Story* or the first thirty-one volumes of the Hardy Boys mystery series: books I had once loved that probably wouldn't stand up to reexamination. The idea propounded by my more serious and scholarly friends that *On the Road* is a "text"—a term that conjures up visions of seventh-grade social studies taught with a five-pound primer titled something like *The American People in Their Melting Pot*—implied that the immensely untidy novel contained some central, distillable lesson for which its corpus must be drugged and dissected in order to extract. I didn't like to think about books I had once felt strongly about in that way. I knew the old saw about an identical fate awaiting both a dissected frog and a dissected joke (they both die), and I think I feared that this observation might also pertain to the books I had absorbed into my central nervous system as a kid.

Yet even twenty years ago, I had been able to discern, along with thousands of other young and equally indiscriminating readers, at least one worthwhile lesson from Kerouac's best novel: America was worth getting out and taking a look at. "All I wanted to do was sneak out into the night and disappear somewhere," shouted Kerouac, echoing my own sentiments, "and go and find out what everybody was doing all over the country."

Reading *On the Road* back then encouraged me to do just that. I imagined myself enlisting in what Kerouac called the "great rucksack revolution" in which "thousands or even millions of young Americans" dashed about helter-skelter to "hear the voices crying in the wilderness, to find the ecstasy of the stars, to find the dark mysterious secret of the origin of faceless wonderless crapulous civilization." I think most of us were fired by more modest ambitions—a mere itch to visit an uncle in Flint, Michigan, or vague notions about seeing the ocean for the first time. But how could we not learn one or two lessons along the way?

Now twenty years have passed. My nineteen-year-old cousin has turned up at my door like the Ghost of Journeys Forgotten. And I must admit that I've grown lead-footed about travel. As bad, I'm reluctant to open any book—Kerouac or otherwise—that might compel me to rise off the Beat sofa. And yet, under duress, I must sometimes travel around the country

for my work. I am a “freelancer writer,” which is to say that in the eyes of most of my friends I am unemployed, except that I can’t collect Unemployment Insurance. When I travel today, it is often with a skinflint spirit; I am a lifetime away from the young man that I was who routinely set his compass by the books he had just read.

I recall one evening long ago, when I was very young and as far from home as I had ever been, fresh from a long bout of reading the Beats. I was hitching along the coast highway in southern Italy with a thousand-pound rucksack strapped to my back. I hadn’t eaten or washed for several days, contributing perhaps to the reluctance of Italian drivers to stop and stuff me and my mountainous pack into their speeding toy Fiats. And so I decided to jump a freight train heading to the heel of the boot, similar to what the men in my family had done during the Depression—and as Jack Kerouac seemed to be urging me to do from the centrifugal swirl of my bottomless pack, where I had stored rain-swollen editions of *The Dharma Bums*, *Desolation Angels*, and of course, *On the Road*.

Around dusk, I slipped into the train yard. Two Italian guards immediately breezed out of the weed patch and arrested me.

“You are very stupid,” said the head guard in flawless English, spotting me instantly for another of the lumbering young Americans who’d been swarming all summer throughout southern Italy like black flies with backpacks. “It is very dangerous in here.”

I agreed that I was stupid, explained that I was sorry, (left out the fact that I had been reading Kerouac), and promised to return to my post at the highway where I would continue to hitchhike until I was transported somewhere very far away.

“Not yet,” ordered the head guard, as I tried to saunter off. His accomplice held my arm.

Soon the three of us were strolling down to the station house for a nice talk with the chief engineer.

“*Vous êtes très bête.*” the chief engineer told me. “*C’est dangereux ici.*”

“*Oui,*” I admitted in my best high school French, proclaiming my regrets, agreeing that I was *un fou*, a real American knucklehead, and that my accent was terrifying.

“Not yet,” ordered the head guard. He stalked off, returning minutes later with the brakeman who conveyed, I guess, the same message in

German. I tried to explain that I had got the point in the first two languages, but I didn't speak German.

"Not yet," ordered the head guard. He picked up the telephone and barked out an order in furious Italian.

Shortly, another uniformed man appeared at the office door, gasping for breath after his sprint down the platform. He glowered at me, wheezing with asthmatic rage.

I didn't understand a word he said.

"He's speaking Russian," explained the head guard. "Very fluent Russian. Before he worked with us here in the railroad, he sold Italian wines to the communists. He also speaks Croatian and Czech. You may go now."

I wandered down the road as the skies darkened with rain, full of wonder for the vulnerability of young travelers and convinced that life will often twist and gibber as implausibly as any book. But I had not yet discovered that the weirdest and most implausible nation of all time and direction was my own.

Many of us grossly misinterpreted Kerouac on first perusal, taking his books as an incitement to rush off to foreign shores. But Kerouac was, most likely, a lost waif overseas, forced to declare himself indelibly, pugnaciously American. The strangest stories could be heard at home.

"The only people for me," says Sal Paradise, the narrator of *On the Road*, "are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars. . . ."

Now that sounds pretty good when you're a kid taking off on your own for the first time, brimming over with expectations for everybody you'll meet along the way. But it's also responsible for the miseries of 10,000 miles. What Kerouac neglected to tell his readers—particularly naive young men like myself for whom reading *On the Road* was like unwrapping a bale of flypaper, its intimations of adventure sticking to our fingers and thumbs, and bundling us up into a jumble of romantic illusions that often took years to unravel—was how trying and tedious the road really could be.

Historian Daniel Boorstin has aptly pounced upon the etymological roots of the word "travel," binding it to the notion of "travail"—a word derived "from the Latin *tripalium*, a torture instrument consisting of three stakes

designed to rack the body.” In French, *travail* can mean work or woe, which must have been clear both experientially and linguistically to the French-speaking Canuck Kerouac. “The soul is no traveler,” warned Emerson, Kerouac’s fellow New Englander, one hundred years earlier, “the wise man stays at home. . . . Travelling is the fool’s paradise.”

When my cousin Wally arrived at my Oakland flat, we fell all over each other with talk of our own roadside glimmers of paradise. We disgorged *all* our stories. I insisted on telling Wally about the year long ago when I hit the road the hardest—starting off by twining up the Grapevine to Los Angeles with six other guys in the back of a flatbed truck, which suddenly caught fire when I flicked a smouldering butt across the straw-stuffed mattresses strapped to the frame. Wally spoke plaintively of standing in the rain for three days straight, failing to hitchhike out of Bellingham, Washington, because he was too wet and ridiculous to be picked up by anybody except Charles Manson. I recalled the pup tent I used throughout a winter in the water-logged Pacific Northwest as it leaked through the top-seam stitching, but held tight at the bottom in a three-inch greasy puddle like a miniature Doughboy swimming pool. I rambled on about spending a sleepless night in a barmaid’s bedroom above a cowboy honky-tonk in Carson City, Nevada, while the lady noisily made love to a depressed steel guitar player whose Hawaiian band had been unaccountably engaged for a disastrous three-week gig. Wally said he’d passed the night fitfully in Greyhound bus stations in the worst quarters of New Orleans, Birmingham, Shreveport, and Des Moines (where Kerouac claimed to have found the most beautiful women in the country, but Wally only got moved along in the morning by a garrulous policeman with cigar-stub breath and a porcupine disposition). I remembered sleeping dreamlessly, at last, in a public urinal outside of Duluth. Wally said he’d been waylaid into eight hours of conversation about Jesus across the breadth of Alberta with a sadistic divinity student who kept playing his lone John Prine cassette tape over and over and over and over and . . . And we both could talk all night about fighting madly above the roar of countless eighteen-wheelers for some means of keeping awake an exhausted truck driver who threatened to fade into an amphetamine blur and run us off the highway; or wobbling down the road on foot with the weight of the Rockies perched upon our shoulders, as cretinous teenagers showered us with empty beer bottles from their speeding family station wagons; or playing the sucker, again and again, as we chased the

promising VW mini-van (some are still running today) that pulled to the side to pick up hitchers, but then changed its mind at the last second—as the driver gunned his engine, howled like a jackal, and tore off into what the rhapsodic Kerouac incessantly called “the sad and lonely American night.”

Not very much had changed since Kerouac hit the road in the late 1940s, followed by me in the late 1960s—and then my cousin at the end of the 1980s.

Of course, Jack Kerouac had not in any strict, actionable sense directed me, Wally, or anybody else to ricochet around America’s least exotic locales (Oakland, Detroit, Knoxville, Kalamazoo) as the preferred adventure of our youth. In fact, Kerouac bridled under his designation during the 1960s by *Time* as “the hippie Homer.” But *On the Road* is so full of promises about the romance of America on the run (Shelton, Nebraska; Dalhart, Texas; Fresno, California) that we had all somehow skipped over the plentiful passages in which Kerouac copped to “the beat and evil days that come to young guys” who stray far and long from home. When you’re fit and callow and susceptible to every kind of illusion like some maniac virus—including the illusions of literature—you find yourself constantly infected by your own worst judgment, only to be rescued again and again by the ceaseless kindness of strangers.

Back then, twenty years ago, standing by the side of the road in the rain, I always swore that at some future date I would not revise my miseries in order to make them sound more palatable, or worse, *romantic*. But once Wally and I started swapping road stories, as breathless and frantic as Dean Moriarity and Sal Paradise, as self-conscious as countless thousands of other road-ridden travelers who pictured themselves to be bright reflections of Kerouac and Cassady, I couldn’t help realizing that we were doing exactly that. Here we were, yammering on about best rides and worst rides and generally stretching the truth like old soldiers.

I just had to tell Wally about the night a buddy and I caught a ride near Buffalo with an off-duty factory guard who was draining two six-packs on his way home from work. The drunkard asked me to drive, and after he’d finished his last Budweiser and passed out in the passenger’s seat, I drove all the way to Syracuse, about 130 miles out of his way. I yacked until midnight about the coldest night of the year in Toronto, when I stole into an unlocked laundromat to sneak a luxurious sleep curled up next to the clothes dryers. Wally had already dozed off on my Jack Kerouac couch, but

I kept blithering away about the air-conditioned tour bus that once picked me up along California's coast highway on route to Santa Cruz. The driver had dropped off his paying passengers at Fisherman's Wharf and then cruised down Highway 1 to load up the company vehicle with fifty longhaired kids carrying packs on their backs.

He must have been reading Kerouac too.

Librarians, school teachers, civil libertarians, and other good and necessary people often claim that nobody is ever seduced by a book—but of course, they're dead wrong.

Any book worth opening threatens to divert us from more serious business; almost any day, I'd rather be reading than working. We're drawn to the intoxications of our endless stories as though sucking upon a bottomless wine sack while sprawled under the summer's blooming shade trees *sans* appointment calendar, *sans* answering machine, *sans* everything.

But books don't merely provide a cover for a lifetime of lassitude. We read books, particularly when we're young, because they seduce us with possibilities for mistakes that we haven't yet imagined. It's the best books that serve as manuals for screwing up our lives or resurrecting them or pitting us against the status quo—which is why the book burners begin their crusades by immolating the better writers, instead of the equally flammable, but less persuasive works of Sidney Sheldon and Judith Krantz.

Somewhere in heaven there must be a roll book tabulating all the insipid fistfights inspired by reading Norman Mailer at a vulnerable moment, all the unnecessary shots of bourbon gulped down in blind tribute to Jake Barnes and Philip Marlowe, all the young heads that might have been kept out of kitchen ovens, except for an ill-timed perusal of *The Bell Jar*.

Kerouac himself was nearly ruined by literature even before he began to write it. In 1944, capping off his career as a Columbia dropout, he helped deposit down a sewer grate the bloody Boy Scout knife that his friend, Lucien Carr, had used to kill a man who'd been trying to seduce him. Although Carr handed himself over to the police and pleaded self-defense, Kerouac was arrested as an accessory after the fact. He was soon released, but the incident sparked rough talk throughout New York City about the pernicious influence of poets: one newspaper had run a photo of Lucien Carr toting into jail copies of Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* and Yeats's *A Vision*.

Today Jack Kerouac himself stands among the best of the bad influences. And *On the Road* still sells enough copies each year to sustain the author's worst habits, had he managed to survive them.

And so when Wally departed from my flat for a couple of days to ride the Greyhound down to Big Sur—where Kerouac had in 1960 executed a drunken seven-hour stomp along the highway and finally sworn off hitchhiking for good (the man *was* 38 years old!)—I spread myself across the historic, but still hideous red-velvet, cat-clawed couch, picked up my cousin's copy of *On the Road*, and delved into Kerouac for the first time in twenty years.

The first thing I noticed was how much of the good stuff remained.

On the Road still read like a sweet, sad, fitfully funny book ready to explode with what Kerouac's Beat colleague, John Clellon Holmes, called "that bottled eagerness," the peculiar blend of innocence and impatient expectation that turns parties into brawls, casual longing into operatic love affairs, disaster into adventure—and always sounds better in recollection than when you're living it at the time.

"The characteristic note struck by Kerouac is exuberance," admitted Norman Podhoretz, perhaps the novel's harshest, most un-Beat critic back in the 1950s. And even today the book's wild, careening energy can jumpstart incipient urges to take off, move, go—even for a middle-aged, immobilized reader like myself. (" 'Now we must all get out and dig the river and the people and smell the world,' " insists Dean Moriarity.) (" 'He was so excited it made me cry,' " says Sal Paradise. " 'Where would it all lead?' ")

Where it would all lead was, in fact, the cause of some distress among the nation's sedentary literati when *On the Road* was first published in 1957.

The earliest newspaper reviews greeted the book's appearance as a "historic occasion," but this flicker of generous praise was quickly extinguished by scorn and sneering from all the higher bastions of letters. In *The New Yorker*, John Updike mocked the novel with a cruel parody titled "On the Sidewalk," in which a vagabond five-year-old tears around a "sad backyard" in "the American noon" on his scooter. Truman Capote uttered his famous televised wisecrack to David Susskind that Kerouac's books weren't writing, but typing. And in its Sunday books section, the *New York Times* eventually neutralized its initial acclaim, dourly noting that the novel

actually chronicled “a road . . . that leads nowhere—and which the novelist cannot afford to travel more than once.”

And to be honest, twenty years later, sprawled upon my Kerouac couch with no intention whatsoever of taking to the road again (or at least, not traveling in a manner that would lead me to sleeping quarters in a public urinal outside of Duluth), I thought that they might have a point.

It’s just that I didn’t much care.

Yes, it was painfully evident that the characters were hopelessly confused—“What I accomplished by coming to Frisco I don’t know.” And that they were lost— “. . . all this franticness and jumping around. We’ve got to go someplace, find something.” Too often, they were even sentimental—“But no matter, the road is life.” And I felt it impossible to skirt the obvious conclusion that Sal Paradise was a stone loser—“I forgave everybody, I gave up, I got drunk,” and that Dean Moriarity was exactly the sort of sociopath that you wanted to avoid along any road— “. . . he only stole cars for joy rides.” But I really didn’t care.

Kerouac had kept me reading as a kid: I owed him that much.

What did bother me, however, was that for all of *On the Road*’s speed, motion, and distance consumed (“1,180 miles, in exactly seventeen hours, not counting two hours in the ditch . . . and two with the police in Newton, Iowa. . .”), poor old Dean Moriarity, his buddy Sal Paradise—and let’s face it, Jack Kerouac—didn’t actually *see* very much of the country along the way.

What did America look like in 1947 and 1949 when these characters were Ping-Ponging between the coasts?

Judging from the novel, the United States must have been composed entirely of bus stations, truckstops, and the endless black snake of the highway. The road traveled by Sal, Dean, and Jack seems denuded of its scenery; people along the highway flit by like crows on a wire, and even the nation’s breath-robbing monuments of earth, sky, and water—the Rockies, the plains, the Mississippi—flash past with the indifference of typography lain across the printed page. Upon completing the novel for the second time in twenty years, it seemed to me that “the vastness of old tumbledown holy America from mouth to mouth and tip to tip” added up to one marvelous blur. And in that instant of sheepish recognition I knew that I too had somehow missed the point; in fact, I’d missed the country.

And I figured it was Jack Kerouac’s fault.

Wally knew better.

After a few months on the West Coast, my cousin finally wandered back East, found he couldn't stay put, and drifted up towards Alaska. He and a buddy bought a clunky AMC Hornet and shared the driving, like Sal and Dean—like Kerouac and Cassady—but with a crucial difference. When the Hornet's fuel pump failed somewhere in the emptiness of the Yukon, they didn't turn back frantically, they didn't desert each other, or go crazy, or get drunk and give up. They hunkered down for a day and a half and jerry-rigged the necessary repair. Then they pushed on to their destination, up the highway from Eagle Plains to the Arctic Circle. Wally had always wanted to step over the line that officially demarcates the extreme north (the sign, he said, had read: "LAT. 66, 33' N") just to say he'd been there, that he'd seen it.

"It's the furthest I've ever been," he told me one evening, calling from a telephone booth in Anchorage, where he and his buddy had just landed malodorous jobs in a salmon cannery. "But I still want to go further."

I unfurled myself across the Kerouac couch and listened enviously to every word. And while Wally was rambling on heatedly about the curl of the horns on a Dall sheep ram and the distinguishing hump of the grizzly he'd spotted between Haines Junction and Destruction Bay, and the abandoned gold fever cabins near Whitehorse, and the four-day outdoors ordeal that he and his buddy had executed along the Chilkoot Trail in British Columbia, I found myself thinking about all the places that I had managed to miss. I knew how Wally must picture me: slabbed across the Kerouac couch with no intention of walking out the front door towards some more demanding adventure, satisfied that I'd already done my vagrant duty. And we both knew that if I hadn't hit the road twenty years earlier, my entire world would probably now be circumscribed by my own neighborhood's sad backyards in the American noon. Far more than he, I had needed somebody to tell me to get up and go.

"I think you should be grateful," insisted Wally, urging me to get up and go again. "Now that you're done reading, don't you want to take another look?"

Sometimes it's hard to explain life and literature to the young; I was forced to use the word "mimesis" twice even though I'm not really sure what it means. I offered to quote extensively from Norman Podhoretz's defamatory essay on Jack Kerouac while Wally held on and paid for the call.

But I couldn't avoid the truth: Wally wasn't only a better traveler than me; he was a superior reader, smart enough not to get stuck in his own favorite stories. For him, they were just someplace to start.

"Well, Wally," I admitted, "maybe in a small way, you've got just the slightest point. I think I'm going to settle down now and take another look at *Desolation Angels*, or *The Dharma Bums*, or *The Subterraneans*, and see what they have to say."

But on the other end of the line, somewhere in a telephone booth in Anchorage, Alaska, Wally had already hung up and moved on. And I knew then that I needed to get out and see the places that I had been mostly reading about for years. I vowed that this time I would not miss the country that stood between my books and the real, hard, sprawling world outside.