

The Open Road

Abby Hoyt

“I’ve got great news!” my father exclaimed as we all sat down for dinner in our brightly lit suburban Chicago kitchen.

“You won the lottery?!” my brother and sister, Tommy and Olivia, cheered in unison.

“Well no, not exactly.”

“You scored us box seat tickets to the Cubs vs. White Sox game?” Olivia hollered.

“No, not that either.”

“You’re getting me a pony?” I teased, completely kidding.

“Even better!”

“You got us all ponies?”

“How is that better?” my brother Tommy added. He loved to point out the rational things in life, like the fact that we were all over the age of thirteen and no one wanted a pony anymore.

“Yeah Ab, horses smell,” Olivia chimed in.

“I’m just going to tell you,” my dad interrupted. Pausing slightly for dramatic effect he yelled, as he often does when he’s excited, “We’re driving to Nantucket!”

Our faces fell. No one said anything as we dumbly glanced around the room staring at one another in disbelief. Naturally, it was Olivia who first broke the silence, “I’m sorry, I must have misheard you. Did you say *drive*?”

Two months and several screaming fights later, we were on the road. It was 5 a.m., no one had had their coffee yet and our dog lay across the three of us in the back seat drooling on my pants. That was another added bonus: Nellie, our carsick, scared-of-everything golden retriever would be joining us in the back seat on this 1100 mile trek to Nantucket. When we had finally convinced my parents to get us a dog and finally adopted Nellie, we already had two three year-old cats—two very domineering, very bossy cats—and because of this, Nellie legitimately thought she was a cat. You couldn't blame her for this, really; after all she was only following the model of her older superiors. Nellie's feline behavior included rubbing up against our legs for attention, sitting on the back of chairs in order to look out the window, playing with toy mice and, perhaps her worst habit, sitting on our laps whenever we sat on the sofa or in a chair. Ergo, it was no surprise when we sat down in the car at departure time that a hot, smelly, fifty-four pound ball of yellow hair curled up on my lap and caused the already too hot car to heat up significantly. Perfect.

The trip was really about my mom. Nantucket had been her “old stomping ground” during her college summers. Since she also had a bizarre obsession with our dog, the driving was about her too. Actually, that was the only thing we all agreed on: it would've been too mean to make Nellie ride in the frigid cargo-hold of an airplane and leaving her at home or in a kennel for three weeks would've been just cruel. That still didn't mean that I wanted to go, much less drive to Nantucket. I had friends at home, a job at home and a car at home. I had nothing in Nantucket. And I certainly didn't want to be in a hot, sticky, crowded, smelly car for twenty hours all for nothing!

Having taken only one actual car trip in our entire lifetimes, Tommy, Olivia and I

were shocked at my parents' persistence on driving. Actually, outraged is probably a better word for it. "But we're not a driving family!" we had yelled, "We fly in places, that's our thing!" We were a driving family now, they reminded us with an unparalleled calm that only made us angrier. The intense and persistent tranquility won out, though, and we three sullen teens found ourselves wedged across the back of the Honda Pilot.

The initial leg of the trip, from about 5 AM to 10 AM, wasn't as painful as expected because everyone slept through Indiana and Ohio. At about Pennsylvania, however, people started to wake up and the formerly quasi-pleasant situation took a turn for the worse. The fight started with Olivia, of course, who, without her coffee, was similar to a caged lion: bitter, angry and with little fear of consequences. Olivia is the stereotypical middle child. Smashed right between Tommy and me in birth order, her whole 16 years of life have been spent disagreeing with most everything we say and holding a pure determination to outshine us in every aspect of life (which, of course, is impossible seeing as oldest children are perfect and impossible to outshine). Forever forgetting that she can use words as a form of communication, she's relied on violence to get her point across. "What the hell Tommy?," she bellowed as my brother's sleeping body gently rolled into her territory of seat, which she had marked off with a pillow barrier—one that took up so much room that it forced Tommy, Nellie and me to share the same seat. When he didn't immediately wake up or move, she threw him—literally *hurled* his limp body like a WWF wrestler would an opponent—back across the barrier forcing him to fly into the dog. The sudden jostling woke Nellie up with a start. And in a typical fashion (seeing as she is afraid of everything) sent her into a frenzy of kicking and yelping. Since Nellie was sitting on my lap, her sudden movements resulted in giant

scratches spanning the full length of my arms and legs. It looked as though I had just been in a fight with 1000 cats. Tommy, Nellie and I glared at Olivia as though we could kill her. We probably would have too if it weren't for my trouble-sensing, ever-peacemaking mother's stepping in. "Who wants to listen to the first book on tape?" She chimed, her voice like a cheerful bell. Olivia and I simultaneously groaned.

Just a few years back, my parents had developed an acute fondness for books on tape—historical books on tape. The topics ranged from the Civil War to Harriet Tubman to the Spanish Armada but the basic theme remained the same: boring. The book du jour was none other than the 10-disc autobiography of John Adams. Olivia and I immediately put in our iPods, but Tommy, in true suck up form, replied with, "Oh good! I was hoping you brought this one!" Rolling her eyes, Olivia gave Tommy one more dead arm before turning up her iPod to drown out the scolding from mom that was sure to follow.

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There is only so long a person can listen to a deep, disembodied voice drone on about John Adams' infancy, childhood and then his pre-teen years before your head explodes, and three hours is pushing that limit. Upon turning it off my entire family silently realized that nobody had spoken a single word since the tape had been started. Awkwardly, we sat in silence, fearing a fight if we did.

Suddenly, Tommy started laughing. "You know what this reminds me of?" he asked between giggles. We stared at him blankly not knowing how to handle the reinstated conversation. "Have you seen the episode of *Friends* where Joey has a homeless man drive him and Phoebe back to New York and when Phoebe wakes up, she's so angry that she refuses to talk to him the entire rest of the trip?"

We've never watched a lot of television in my house, but we all have a special knack for remembering TV's finest moments. Perhaps it's just a weird talent we all possess, or it might be because the entire family has the obnoxious habit of repeating a line from a TV show immediately after it's been delivered—and then about thirty trillion additional times throughout the week. Whatever the cause, our TV memory capacity is as large as Alex Trebek's vocabulary. Our collective libraries have become so filled with hilarious scenes over the years that we've created a game out of remembering them all.

This game doesn't have a cool name like "Life" or "Shoots and Ladders," (which sound like the titles of fancy self-help books) in fact, we call it none other than its first line: "Did You See The One Where..." It is the only game that we could all agree upon playing. "Did You See The One Where" isn't the kind of game that has a winner and a loser; instead, it simply consists of us bantering back and forth, one of us asking the others if they happened to have seen the episode based on a brief description of its events. It sounds a little something like this:

"Did you see *The Office* where Jim impersonates Dwight?"

If the other person has in fact seen that episode and remembers it vividly enough to recall that specific minor plot line, together, you would proceed to act out that particular scene. Putting on a stern voice and a stern face and adjusting an imaginary pocket protector you'd ramble off the quote as though you were one of the characters, in this case Jim Halpert.

"Bears. Beets. Battlestar Galactica."

If the other person hasn't seen that episode or has forgotten that specific scene, you would proceed to quote it anyway, adjusting your imaginary pocket protector once

more, hoping to spark their memory, or at least invoke a laugh.

“Bears. Beets. Battlestar Galactica.”

Occasionally we branched out from our favorites, but usually we stuck to the basics: *Gilmore Girls*, *Scrubs*, anything Disney, *Friends*, *Law and Order*, *The Office* and anything from a comedian.

Driving on that trip, I learned a lot about family and about just how great it is to have them around. The next few days of driving were, dare I say it, almost pleasant: with my father chuckling loudly from the driver’s seat pretending like he knew the shows and moments we continually quoted; my mother excitedly gazing out the window, watching the terrain change, laughing quietly, and not even acting like she knew what we were talking about; Olivia loudly dominating the game with a map in hand to do the highway navigating the rest of us were incapable of; Tommy giving input on quotes in between receiving texts from his numerous friends; Nellie snoring quietly, her warm puddle of drool taking over the pillow barrier; and finally me, alternating between sharing my thoughts and staring out the window just trying to soak up my surroundings. It was nice, being there with my family, and having my family there with me. I was almost excited for the vacation, but then I remembered: we still had to drive home.