

K.E. Mahoney

## Tank & Max Do America: Part 1

“So this is basically all of America, huh?” Resigned to vistas containing the occasional cattle and unchanging landscapes of Mid-western prairies, I put my camera away.

“Yep,” my co-pilot - Tank - replied, equally unimpressed. I’ve heard people call this stretch “God’s Country” but I can’t imagine God wants anything to do with the terra equivalent of a beige area rug. *Maybe that’s why He casts so many tornadoes here – to spice things up a bit?* I think thoughts like that and internally scold myself for being such a prick. I suppose I come by the old East Coast snobbery honestly, but it still makes me an asshole.

We’re racing across time zones and through the flatlands to beat the setting sun. There’s only so much driving we can do in a day before the yellow lines on the pavement start to unstick from the blacktop and blur and zig-zag before the eyes. I don’t care about my sanity – we’re getting to Denver tonight.

We’ve seen the sky turn the color of the apocalypse and dump sheets of water on our little Mazda 3 in Cleveland. We saw Mother Nature finally get a hold of the situation and paint a double rainbow in the sky as an apology for the trouble. We were ill-annoyed in Indiana, but that’s only because we saw a billboard that

shouted “Are you Ill-*ANNOYED* yet?” in reference to the commute from Indiana to Illinois. In Illinois we sped past Chicago in favor of sticking to our prescribed route. I noted that I was ill-annoyed that it was taking so long to drive through Illinois and I was sick of seeing advertisements for the “Lion’s Den” adult stores.

Iowa gift-wrapped the most delicious tourist trap to ever snatch ignorant motorists off the road and into the sweet arms of a Taco Bell: The World’s Largest Truck Stop. We came, we saw, we ate garbage tacos, we were horrified by all of the religious ephemera, and we got the fuck outta there. Aside from the ever-present “stranger in a strange land” vibes, we discovered that someone had stone-cold defecated on the women’s public restroom floor.

...And the turd bandit continued her terror across the rest areas of I-80W. How does one completely miss the toilet? Aside from rogue floor feces, Iowa rest areas seemed to have a self-awareness that most rest areas do not possess: “Yeah, you’re sick of being in the car. Driving is boring. Here’s a bomb-ass playground and a vending machine full of vintage grape soda. Go nuts!”

We’ve stayed in Comfort Inns and La Quintas right off the highway. It’s important to note that these particular chain hotels allow furry companions. This was fantastic because our sad-faced, canine tagalong, Winston, periodically became one with the backseat in a strange hybrid of upholstery and puppy.

“So like, *Thelma and Louise*, right?” asked a co-worker when I mentioned I was taking time off to go on this trip.

“Well, I had planned on not dying,” I replied. Besides the whole “staying alive” goal, I was pretty sure that Brad Pitt had aged considerably and was now basking in Bali with his hundreds of beautiful offspring. Drinking expensive scotch, perhaps.

When we had crossed the border into Nebraska a friend of ours who was native to the area texted us, “It’s all downhill from Omaha”. The state of Nebraska had reached legendary status amongst our circle of friends for being the absolute worst state to drive across. “It’s not that bad!” we kept saying aloud. “You’re right – Nebraska isn’t any worse than Iowa!” we’d say to each other. The highways and prairies had all blended together anyway. We were starting to forget the states we had traversed. “Buncha states that begin with ‘I,’” was the best we could do.

Darkness crept closer and closer as we rambled across Nowhere, Nebraska. The sky was overcast but occasionally allowed beams of light to shine through the thick clouds, as if someone had blasted the atmosphere with a shotgun. We were bored with driving and we were exhausted.

“We need to find a place to sleep. I’m fuggin’ done with this shit. Get up early and pick back up tomorrow,” Tank said, her voice worn thin as tissue paper and hoarse. We had run out of things to talk about for the day and had been driving in silence. There was nothing along the road that we hadn’t seen before. Just miles and miles of asshole long-distance truckers clogging up both lanes of the highway, refusing to pass each other. We imagined that they inched ahead of each other slowly, throwing a middle finger to the other along the way. “Fuck you, I’m not letting you pass!” I wondered if it was some strange form of machoism. “Fuck you, your rig sucks! Feel the power! I give no quarter!”

We weren’t even in Colorado yet but we were so close that I could almost taste the mountain air. We had stopped at a gas station where rows of trucks had resigned themselves to setting yellow parking lights and calling it a day. Taking up both lanes of the highway at equal speeds must have wiped them all out. “We need to get to Denver,” I persisted. I’m a stubborn piece of shit when I travel.

“I’m not driving anymore. I can’t even stay awake,” Tank replied.

“Alright I’m taking over and we’re making it to Denver,” I said. I ran into the gas station and grabbed a tallboy of Mountain Dew energy drink, hoping that it would taste better than Red Bull. It didn’t.

“I’m going to have to do something drastic to stay awake,” I warned, fiddling with my phone. “You’re not going to like it.” I found the most obnoxious playlist I had ever created – an “in case of emergency” collection of songs that I absolutely could not fall asleep to. It was full of Rob Zombie and Marilyn Manson and assorted hip-hop songs to which I could not relate. I started turned the key to start the ignition. It wouldn’t start. Jesus, *of course*, it wouldn’t start. The check engine light had been on since Illinois.

“Second time’s a charm, bud,” murmured Tank as she dozed off in the passenger seat. I turned the key again and the engine turned over. “You can do it, little Mazda,” I muttered, petting the dashboard. I turned up the volume to “Dragula” and followed the signs back to the highway.

It was pitch black – no sign of landscape and no lights from any towns. It could have just been over-tiredness, but I felt like I was driving a spaceship in a void. I chugged the Mountain Dew and kept my foot firmly on the gas pedal. *Denver or bust, motherfuckers*. Every now and then, a sea of scattered lights would appear on the passenger side. *Finally! Civilization!* But the road always skirted around signs of life and led us head-on into darkness.

An hour passed. A day passed. Who knows? I was so tired I didn’t care. We were in Denver and frantically googling the nearest La Quinta. In the dark, Denver looked like any other city.

