

*I found a thousand and one caresses and cuffings from the highways
of this vast land; how come I couldn't get a decent cup of coffee?*

On the highway—in a bad bean funk

By Tom Bentley

I just came back from 30 days on the road, driving 10,000 miles across America and back, and the first thing I did when I arrived home was kiss my Krups. I've got some strong advice to any coffee lover who's considering the same: Don't go—I was lucky to survive. I'm not saying that a cup of coffee is grace, joy and love—you know, the Sistine-Chapel-in-the-mouth kind of thing—but there's been more than one morning when, if I had a choice between a steaming cup of caffeine and the keys to a 911 Porsche, I'd have to do my accelerating internally—junk the wheels, give me the juice.

In a world that's often so downbeat, there's something like optimism in that cup; it's one of the few things that can be relied upon. Of course, it's got to be good coffee, stuff with weight and a slight edge of menace. A morning cup should be both stimulating and bracing, sweet-tongued succubus and brawny drill instructor, the lady and the tiger.

I never realized just how heavy a hold the daily grind has on me until a few days into my trip, when the deep psychic injuries I suffered from the watery cruelty served up at roadside diners began to take its toll. Long before the eastward blur of the plains I was jonesing hard for a fix.

Here in The City, coffee snobbery is a matter of course; the Spinelli Squad squaring off against the jousting cups of Team Peet—it's easy to get spoiled. Hell, we've got businesspeople with espresso machines built into their briefcases, street people cadging for lattes.

No more will this man take that pot of liquid gold for granted.

There I was, as free as I pleased to go on whatever road that beckoned, reduced to a narrow obsession with finding a good cup of joe. Can you fault me, though? Devil caffeine is such a righteous high, it's cheap, and incredibly enough, legal.

Sure, there's caffeine in those roadside pots—drink enough and you can get that ice-grinder stomach howling like a screaming Coltrane solo. But getting to the caffeine in that woeful coffee, saints protect me.

To compound the trouble with its taste, roadside coffee rarely has any staying power. I found that only an hour or two after dosing up at some joint with some of that wobbly brew, my mind became a kind of crock pot, gently snuffling a soggy



Tom Bentley sips a cup of joe

head of cabbage around in a tepid broth.

So I had to start playing on-the-road wake-up games: sticking my face out the window, hoping that a mug full of high plains wind would stir me, or craning my head completely sideways, parallel to the dashboard, which created a curious and wonderfully warped perspective that made the road appear to be driving itself into my face, a situation that would have become literal had I persisted. I even tried listening to Rush Limbaugh's vitriol stab out of the radio. But these are only surface substitutes for what you want in your blood—good coffee works from the inside out.

Even the heraldic lineup of signs for Wall Drug, which begin hundreds of miles from its holy grounds in South Dakota, couldn't regale me out of my bad bean funk. Wall Drug and its renowned 5-cent coffee became a mantra of sorts, until I arrived, 500 signs later, drained a cup, and felt like telling them it was overpriced.

So I calmed down and got practical. I began planning my trip around sure things: college towns like Madison, Wisconsin, where students, connoisseurs of cheap highs, can be relied upon to produce a buyer's market. Bang down a couple of triple espressos and hope that the residuals would last until the next caffeine oasis. But sometimes the road just stretched on forever, the Avron B. Fogleman Expressways leading to the Elroy Sparta Highways, past the Tank and Tummy Truckstops, the El Cheapo gas stations, towns

like Arkadelphia, Teutopolis, Palestine, Baghdad, with all manner of inns and cafés, those kind with the old, boxy movie-house bubbling vats of orange juice, the Formica counters, tables topped with Sweet n'Low, and coffee, coffee everywhere, but not a drop that's drinkable.

I found so many things: that if you can eat a 72-ounce steak (approximately the size of a cocker spaniel) in one hour in a certain Texas roadhouse, it's on the house; that music spills like sonic sugar out of every cafe and bar in New Orleans; that there are fields of placid-eyed camels just off the highways in Florida; that there are eye-popping carpets of van Gogh wildflowers along the interstate in Oklahoma; that the residential streets of Taos are perfumed with the intoxicating scent of a thousand lilac bushes; that in the space of seven seconds duration of passing and gaping at an attractive stranger at the wheel you enter a timeless world in which you are beckoned over to the roadside for the grand passion of a lifetime.

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Maybe it was just a language thing; maybe my neutral vowels and cautious California consonants caused my request for coffee to be heard by all those patient Mildreds and Mavisas as a request for something else, for that exhausted hot brown water I was given at both roadhouse and restaurant. After a while the prospect of drinking that dejected brew was completely disheartening, but I couldn't quit.

On my way back West, I stopped at the Grand Canyon, that rather picturesque hole you've probably heard about. A sight it is, but a short while after I sat on its rim in boggled contemplation, all I could think of was how nice it would be if the mighty Colorado were a rushing river of fresh-brewed coffee.

You know, when I wrote earlier that maybe a cup of coffee isn't the end-all, be-all of existence, that was a bit of a stretcher. I lied. It is. A good cup, as all we honorary Agent Coopers of the world know, is *it*, the Zen distillate, the first thing the grunting beasts reached for in Plato's Cave, the glue of civilization, your first kiss, ever-renewed. Don't leave home without it. ☞