

Delta Driving
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In Cleveland, Mississippi, the line of Highway 61 runs parallel to the line created by the railroad tracks—a line both physical and symbolic, a line that still cleaves the town into two distinct worlds, a Delta town unchanged by progress that swept the rest of the country decades ago. Following the highway north, up, up, past Cleveland, past Mom’s Truck Stop and Shady Nook convenience store; past Po’ Monkeys’ in Merigold, a one-room Juke Joint parked in a cotton field, I experience a marked sense of nostalgia. Even though I am only a visitor of the land, a brief blip in the age-old history of the Delta, a sense of unsettling connectivity to the past overwhelms me. Further north, the highway passes through Tunica, speeding by the old Blue and White Restaurant, where waitresses and patrons alike contribute to the acrid scent of tobacco that pervades. Finally, the Interstate reaches Memphis, a hub of culture, history, and innovation, a city still stricken with crime and poverty. It is a journey I have traveled many times.

At first, the trips my mother and I took from Cleveland to Memphis, settling into St. Jude for a few days, a few weeks, a few months at a time, felt novel, unreal, almost an adventure, although of the most terrifying sort. Soon, however, they melted into routine, and even as they became a normal part of my life, they slipped away, fading from a visit once a month, to once every three months, to once every six months, and finally, now, to only once a year. My awareness of and appreciation for the route heightened inversely to the frequency of the visits. Although just for a day now, my world of theater rehearsals, planning lessons for a unit in history class, playing basketball and football with my younger brothers, was replaced by MRIs, bloodwork, and the constant echo of the overhead paging system: “Patient 34601 to D Clinic, Patient 34601 to D Clinic.”

Trips up and down Highway 61 punctuated my adolescence. On the journey, it is impossible not to feel small. The wide, open fields on either side of the road are as never ending as the sky above them, and the rows of crops are as unique as the patterns of the clouds. The two hours spent in the car with my mother became precious periods of stolen connection, an impossibility in the rush of daily life in our household of seven, and I soaked in as much of her as I could. The canvas for reflection and absorption the highway provided was invaluable. Driving with her taught me how to recover, how to forgive, how to grow up. Even five years after I finished treatment, the familiar ride has the power to catapult me back in time, memories pounding through my head, but as I grow older, the recollections are replaced by impressions, and gradually, any remembrance of the actual experience is embalmed only by my emotions.

Fast forward, and as a seventeen-year-old, driving to Memphis with two friends to visit the zoo, free from parents' reach, feels like the epitome of teenage freedom. With the windows rolled down, sun blazing—a perfect Delta day—the car coasts down the highway, and although for my companions the trip is light-hearted, I feel something heavier. It is a sense of respect for this highway that displays equanimity toward whoever travels it, despite the scars that mar the land it passes through. They are scars that match the marks on my stomach. At that moment, driving down the highway myself after years of being the passenger, I am acutely aware that I am no more significant to this road than one of the mosquitoes that briefly buzzes onto a rice plant before flitting back upward, but at the same time, I am as important a part of the highway's story as it is of mine.