



ON THE BEATEN PATH

“Whither goest thou America?” Kerouac asked in *On The Road*. As the long-awaited film hits cinemas, **Fin Young** sticks the Beat classic in his pocket and crosses the US to find out

“Whither goest thou America, in thy shiny car in the night?”

Jack Kerouac was 25 years old when he began his travels across America. The chaotic coast-to-coast journeys he and Neal Cassady made in the late 1940s formed the basis of *On The Road*, the great American novel of youthful rebellion, friendship and spiritual yearning.

Sadly Kerouac, the man who gave voice to America’s post-war beatniks,

would die a bitter, alcohol-drenched death at only 47.

Now, more than 50 years on from the novel’s publication, and with the release of Walter Sales’s movie, it feels as if the America that Kerouac chastised and romanticised has not aged well either. The turn of the century brought 9/11. A clutch of unwinnable wars followed. By 2008, the financial system had begun to implode. Religious and political divisions reached their zany, caricatured zenith.



“This is the story of America. Everybody’s doing what they think they’re supposed to do.”

It is a freezing Washington DC morning. A woman in a red coat and hat kneels in the middle of the busy pavement. Bible in hand, she is chanting psalms outside Planned Parenthood, a provider of reproductive health services.

“I’m here every day, by the grace of God. I came here once planning to have

Highway 81 stretches off in the distance towards Mexico, viewed in the mirror of a motorcycle

PHOTOGRAPH: ALEXANDER ALBRECHT/ALAMY

an abortion. Then God saved me and my child.”

In Lafayette Square, in front of the White House, Concepcion Picciotto is sitting on her milk crate. Three decades ago, she began a vigil against nuclear weapons that continues today.

The previous night in New York City, I had met up with old American friends in a Manhattan restaurant. “The problem with America,” declared one New York native, “is that people take everything just a little too seriously.”

“I like it because it’s ugly. All his life was in that line.”

A nostalgic hitch-hiker turned corporate lawyer drops me off at the edge of the Appalachian mountains. I wander the aisles of a gift shop lined with junk. There are model dogs with human faces, plasticky moonstones to heal your soul, and a Grim Reaper with a pink, fluorescent skull. Someone carefully designed this stuff. Someone will buy it.

“Everyone I know loves our range,” the woman at the till tells me. Hearing of my hitch-hiking trip, she scuttles off down an aisle and pulls out a bumper sticker and affixes it triumphantly to my bag. It reads: Practice Random Acts Of Kindness. I thank her for her generosity. She charges me \$1.99.

“There was no end to the American sadness and the American madness.”

I walk three damp miles before someone takes pity. I tell him about the gift shop. “That’s why people in America are sad. They’re making useless things that don’t last so they can afford to buy useless stuff that don’t last. Or they’re not even making nothing, just buying useless stuff some Chinaman made and sent over here to break.”

Neil, who growls like Tom Waits, is a carpenter. He may also be a prophet. He makes furniture. “Make it plain and simple, then you know it’s strong. That’s the only life philosophy you need.” The financial crisis only happened because Neil wasn’t consulted. “Bunch of mad, too-smart elves running around them cities making things too damn complicated for everyone.”

As we shake hands goodbye, Neil whispers his final revelation in my ear. “Fat, funny, women, Fin. Plain, simple, strong. Go get ’em.” With this stirring call, I set out anew.

“At the end of the American road there is a man and a woman making love in a hotel room.”

A good hitch-hiker picks a visible spot then waits, suppressing the urge to progress on foot. I know this now. “Only people out in this weather are ducks and assholes,” a state trooper named Bill says, running a security check on me. “You’re about 14 miles from this way, and 15 miles from that.”

Snow fills my footprints as I trudge on up the mountain. Some time after 1am,

a neon-lit car pulls over. CJ is 21 in a 15-year-old’s body. “Man, you’re getting out in America like Springsteen!” Shivering in his rubbish-filled car, I ponder on the vast expanse of common ground I share with the American icon.

CJ and his girlfriend Amy want to escape rednecks. “You know rednecks, right?” Gatlinburg, Tennessee, is the destination. “You know the 12 days of Christmas, right? They have it on the highway right there, in lights.”

“Lights are pretty awesome,” I agree. My lit-up friend drops me at a dank motel just outside of Shenandoah, Virginia. Somewhere down the orange-grey row, a bed frame bashes away against a wall.

“For what’s heaven? What’s earth? All in the mind.”

On good days, my thumb seems a great gleaming magnet to drivers. None is immune. “My name’s Johnny Cash, don’t say nothing ’bout it,” says the gruff man in the blue pick-up.

Next to succumb is Dennis, his red nose so broken it points directly out his right-hand window. He laughs like a hog rooting for truffles. “Automatic weapons, grenades ... Man, I did terrible things before God.” I feel sure mention of my Baptist minister father will lengthen my ride, but Dennis sounds concerned. “Does he preach the rapture?” He doesn’t, but I hedge my bets. “Bible’s all a matter of interpretation, isn’t it?” I say. Dennis’s nose changes shade. “That there is HELL talking!”

Revealed as the mouthpiece of Lucifer, I am soon back on the roadside. As Dennis roars away, I see the bumper sticker. “In the event of rapture, this car will be driverless.” I see not another soul, and wonder if said apocalyptic prophecy may have come to pass. Lonely night freezes in. I wrap myself in the foil of my bivouac sack under a tree.

“It’s an anywhere road for anybody, anyhow.”

It is not long after I change a woman’s tyre that Leonard pulls up beside me. I consider my karma chips cashed. We are on the interstate before I notice the blood on his hands. “Last hitch-hiker I picked up gave me head. Haw-haw.” Giggling Leonard has blood on his hands and is talking sexual favours. I consider the physics of leaping from a car travelling at 70mph. “Don’t worry,” he says cheerily. “You just need to tell me a joke.”

Violent deviants have never inspired my comedy. “Why did Fred fall off the swing?” I blurt. “Because Fred’s a fish.” Leonard looks at me unhappily, blood now smudged on the steering wheel. “Are you saying Fred is queer? I hate queers.” My fear grows. “No, erm, as Fred is a fish his sexuality is, well, unclear. I mean, he’s almost definitely straight. I just don’t know him that well. And even if I did, I still wouldn’t know if he was, you know ...”

Leonard and I part ways at the next ►

► turn-off. The sexual predilections of Fred the fish remain unclear.

“Somewhere along the line I knew there’d be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me.”

In seven hours standing on a slipway on to Interstate 81, the closest I come to a ride is a truck driver who calls me a deadbeat and curses my mother before urinating right by my feet. I cherish the companionship of the moment, so lonely is the day.

Two pretty girls in a small Honda exit for petrol. I smile my safest smile at them, the Gok Wan of smiles. Twenty minutes later, they return. Glory be to Gok. Ali and Puja are organic types, heading for New Orleans and looking for kicks. They play Belle & Sebastian in my honour, and feed me homemade granola. We do yoga at petrol station stops. As we arrive in Asheville, North Carolina, I consider they might actually be angels.

I find the only bar still open, and with it Matt, Jeremiah and Jim. They are “pole-men”, moving around the country climbing and fixing mobile phone masts. They guffaw incessantly and bellow at passing girls. They tell the tale of a pole-scaling friend who lost his footing. Elegiacally, I’m told that “Benny can’t love any more”. We drink to Benny’s potency past; once, twice, three times.

“What do you want out of life?” I asked, and I used to ask that all the time of girls.”

I meet them on the Atlanta street. Puke and Crystal call themselves “krusty kids”. Grubby young lovers, sleeping in America’s dark spots. They are Puja and Ali after the apocalypse. “Not homeless; houseless,” they tell me. They look for neither sympathy nor an escape route. Their life is chosen. “A guy gave us a hundred dollar bill. We got a motel room, bought a bunch of razors. Shaved our legs, and the rest.” They smile cheekily, finishing each other’s sentences like a retirement-home couple. The image of these two ripe-smelling androgynes spending their new fortune on personal beauty products is briefly humorous. Then suddenly they are my little sister spending all her pocket money in Boots, and I feel desperately sad.

“Better to sleep in an uncomfortable bed free, than sleep in a comfortable bed unfree.”

To rationalise their decisions, I want to imagine past abuse and neglect. “Nah, my parents are awesome,” says Puke. “I just hate America. I hate capitalism. I hate the motherf***** who own every corporation. I hate the choice. I hate the pressure.” Having checked out, they are rare Americans without a masterplan. They quietly scrape across the landscape in empty freight cars and truckers’ cabs, protecting one another from crack-heads and other predators. They seem the greatest love story in all of let-down America.

“... Rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation that I was slowly joining.”

That night a bearded barista invites me to stay at his house, full of books, fixed-wheel bicycles and ironic Polaroid pictures. Puffing on a striped hash pipe he talks only of fears. “Everything we cherish is dying.” Recently, he and his friends fought a long battle to prevent a Starbucks from opening in their proud enclave of non-corporate America. The inevitable was delayed.

We sit light-headed and heavy-hearted in his smoke, watching his pink-eyed pet rat chew and spit out its cardboard home, over and over.

At 5am, I wander back downtown. This is the bum rush-hour, when unkempt men with plastic bag galoshes tied over their feet move from sleeping place to begging place. The sane ones wash their faces in McDonald’s bathrooms. Others mutter and scratch distractedly. A sub-class of thousands.

“We all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one noble function of the time, move.”

Arien is trying to leave behind his girlfriend, work and numerous other fears. An obsessive collector of obscure hardcore punk LPs, I find him looking for a record called All Their Money Stinks Of Death by a collective called Antischism. His rental car satnav has plotted straight routes from store to store across America’s big cities. I bully him off course. Together we navigate the back roads of the Deep South. Rural Alabama, Mississippi: these are the places time and government forgot. Confederate flags billow above beat-up trailer homes.

“At the washed-out bottom of America.”

In a motel launderette somewhere in southern Mississippi, I sit naked bar my overcoat, watching my clothes in the grey brown suds. My road map shows the short-looking distance south I have travelled and the long way west still to go. The bold red line of Interstate 10 leads straight across the vast desert lands of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. I think of the vast lorries I have been too scared to approach. I find some just outside New Orleans, where a man with shiny tanned legs and tight denim shorts is handing out Christian tracts. A woman is selling pornography. A passer-by scolds me. “These drivers, some are animals, ex-cons, Muslims. Boys can be raped too, you know.”

Luis, a twinkly Mexican in an unmarked burgundy 12-wheeler, looks me up and down a number of times. “Any weapon?” Satisfied, we set out for Texas. His satnav speaks Italian. “I’m learning. Beautiful, no?” His phone sits active in his breast pocket. He and his girlfriend in California stay for ever connected as they work, thousands of miles apart.



Clockwise, from above: Fin Young hits the road; his route across the US; and a scene from the film adaptation of *On The Road*, with Sam Riley, Garrett Hedlund and Kristen Stewart

Later, Luis is jerking and shaking, fighting the weight of his eyelids. His girlfriend, the Italian route-master and I all talk at him. The wiggling lorry finally reaches Houston, and we both bed down in the truck cab. In my sudden fear at what he could turn out to be, I marvel at Luis’s kindness. He murmurs sweet Spanish nothings to the everlasting conversation.

“Texas is undeniable ... we were already almost out of America and yet definitely in it and in the middle of where it’s maddest.”

On the outskirts of San Antonio, some young men slow down as if to pick me up, then throw wet rubbish over me. I consider the merits of gun ownership. A pick-up finally stops as night falls. Two girls going to Austin, doors locked, windows shut, gesture that I can get in the back.

I gaze back on the San Antonio lights.

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queue of hopeful Mexicans between two different worlds. It is dark when I finally get into El Paso, at the end of Texas. Having not noticed I was leaving a country a few hours earlier, it is no surprise I also fail to notice the absence of women in the very friendly bar I settle into. I am happily regaling Ernie with hitch-hiking stories when he tells me I'm beautiful.

"What a driver ... a great big tough truck-driver with popping eyes and a hoarse raspy voice."

Don the trucker is America distilled. "I came home and found some schmuck in bed with my second wife. I gets my gun and say this real slow: 'Get out of my wife. Get out of my bed. Get out of my house.'" He laughs out loud. "As he's leaving, I point at my wife and say to him, 'You take your dirty trash out with ya.'"

Then, without missing a beat, he goes on to tell me of his hopes for his son from that same marriage. His face glows. "He's in medical school. You just gotta earn the dough and bring em up solid. That boy can do anything." What neither he nor any other doctor can do is treat the tumour Don tells me will soon kill his first-born. We fasten on the road in silence.

I look for safer topics as we move through New Mexico to Arizona. "How is your youngest son doing at school? Another doctor?" Don snorts. "That f***** school. He come home with a letter asking for donations to help Afghanistanis. I tell my son to tell the teacher all he's got for 'em is a bullet in the head." He looks at me sadly. "You know what, Fin? There's just way too much hate in the world."

"California ... the land where everybody somehow looked like broken-down, handsome, decadent movie actors."

California shines bright. In Joshua Tree National Park, we stumble on a GQ magazine shoot. I laugh as the prettiest, most emaciated boys ape truckers who could eat them whole with ketchup.

"Somebody had tipped the American continent like a pinball machine and all the goofballs had come rolling to LA in the south-west corner."

We pause on the Venice Boardwalk, Los Angeles, where unlikely breasts and muscles bulge, and every waitress is beautiful. Real old-style freakshows draw the eye, promising two-headed snakes and bearded ladies. Reaching the Pacific coast highway, Route 1, feels a beatific escape. It is the most perfect of all imaginable roads, a sublime highway of pilgrimage skirting the very edge of the whole continent. It is here, in a Big Sur cabin, that Kerouac sought solace, and here, as San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge looms large, that my own trip ends.

"Here I was at the end of America ... no more land ... and nowhere was nowhere to go but back." ■

On The Road (15) is released on October 12



McDonald's, Hooters and Harley-Davidson light the sky. Eat, leer and ride.

"I just won't sleep, I decided. There were so many other interesting things to do."

In Austin, the South By South-west music festival is on. Frat kids in boat shoes spill out of thumping bars. Every hotel and motel is full. I take up residence on a stone bench, but it is booked too. A crazy lady screams obscenities until I move. I hail taxi after taxi, but none stops in the dark night for someone who looks as I now do. It is a failed hitch-hiker who cannot even hail a cab.

I walk until I reach a Greyhound bus station. I find a corner in the loneliest place in America. I'm woken by a stiff blow to ribs. "Can't sleep here. Get your ass outside." I jump up, fearful. A bald policeman looms, holster bulging. Proudly producing a \$50 bill, I buy a bus ticket west as the policeman continues his

rounds, kicking sleeping unfortunates who may or may not be homeless.

"Behind us lay the whole continent of America."

Texas is a dusty forever of cacti, sand and bare rock. I join another Mexican trucker on his route west. He speaks no English but smiles warmly, shooing my tired frame on to the small bare mattress in the cab behind his seat.

I wake to the sound of voices and cars revving on clutches. I peek through the curtain, but the Mexican shushes me. I sit tight in the dark. As we move again, he tells me: "OK." I join him up front as we pass bored men in green uniforms carrying large rifles. Green uniforms? "Mexico!" says the Mexican, giving me a thumbs-up. Ciudad Juarez, with more than 5000 murders since 2009, feels more a thumbs-down kind of place.

Getting back into America is harder than inadvertently leaving it. I stand in a