

One Week: A History

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South Dakota is *not* a part of the Midwest; this is very important. (I have never been there, but I am sure of it.) Kansas is questionable, as is western Pennsylvania (eastern PA is out of the question.) And there is more to Illinois than Chicago. I have engaged in a number of toasty debates about where, exactly, the Midwest is, and what it is. It's hard to say, except that pretty much anybody who's from there, unlike pretty much anybody who's not, knows that South Dakota does not count. That would be a *Great Plains state*, clearly. The term exists for a reason, and the distinction ought to be respected. The middle of the country is not a homogenous hunk of "Middle America." Oh but I don't say this out of any particular animosity towards South or North Dakota, Kansas, or Pennsylvania. And the fact that Chicago is a big part of Illinois, is, in fact, the key to my own assumed authority to speak on what is, and is not, the Midwest. To much of the world, Chicago and a whole lotta farmland is the Midwest. Chicago and a whole lotta farmland are in Illinois, ergo Illinois is the authoritative Midwest. And that makes me, being from Illinois, and familiar with both parts, the author. Doesn't it?

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In northeastern Arizona, along Highway 264, up a recently paved, unfenced, hairpin-turning blacktop, atop a millennia old mesa, sits the center of the universe. It has about five hundred inhabitants, three languages, and the occasional tourist. Tourists cannot photograph the center of the universe. Besides the obvious fact that we wouldn't really know what to shoot, the center of the universe has too long a history of exploitation to tolerate any more bounty hunters. One simply has to go there.

Damon tells me all about the center of the universe. You can see the Second and Third Mesas to the West, and the San Francisco Peak to the North. You can see the Highway that leads to and from the center of the universe for hundreds of miles. You can find the center of the center of the universe if you listen; the Western half speaks one language, and the Eastern, another. I happen to be standing on the median line, because Damon usually sits on the median line, because his mother is from the West, and his father is from the East. This may be something he tells the tourists (in our language), but I believe him. My mother looks vaguely Native American. Maybe Damon thinks so too. Maybe that's why he's sharing his story. Maybe it's just because we asked. He is certainly happy to tell us his story.

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My mother is from Chicago. Well she was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, but she grew up in Chicago, and doesn't remember her short time in MA. She lives in central Illinois now, about 4 hours mostly South and a bit West of Chicago. Everywhere she goes is up. She goes up to Chicago a few times a year (my grandma still lives there.) She goes up to St. Louis now and then. We went up to the Grand Canyon just a few days before we went up to the center of the universe.

I'm from Chicago too. Well I was born there. But I mostly grew up in Jacksonville (central Illinois, not the one in Florida.) I go to school up in Connecticut, and come home when I can. I often feel that I have moved the center of my mother's universe. She mentions more her east coast birth. She is thrilled when I ask her if she'd like to go West with me (up up and away.)

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We're going to the "Southwest." We find this place in the guidebooks (*DK Eyewitness*--lots of pictures, and *Hidden Southwest*). I always thought it was something like Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, maybe some pieces of "Old" Mexico. But the guidebooks say it's more like Vegas (baby), Arizona, New Mexico, and southern Colorado and Utah. I believe them, of course, and we're so taken with the pictures and descriptions in the guidebooks that we pretty much decide to follow them. "Antelope Canyon." Beautiful, just beautiful. But that doesn't make the first plan, because we're headed for Albuquerque instead. One week. The plan is:

Day 1: Drive to Chicago. Fly up to Las Vegas

Day 2: Las Vegas, drive up to the Grand Canyon, stay in the Park

Day 3: Grand Canyon, drive halfway up to Albuquerque, stay somewhere in the middle

Day 4: Albuquerque, drive to Mesa Verde (Pueblo ruins, southern CO)

Day 5: Mesa Verde, drive halfway to Zion National Park (southern UT)

Day 6: Zion

Day 7: drive to Vegas, fly out to Chicago and New Haven

But it doesn't work like this. We get stopped up in Vegas (baby.)

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What really gets me about Vegas is the unshakable suspicion that the waiter's Italian accent at Cafe Andreotti, in Harrah's, is fake. It's good, I suppose. "A little too good. Suspiciously good." (Nod to *Daria*.) It sounds exactly like an exaggerated Italian accent should sound. I'm guessing on this from the accents that I've heard in movies, and heard around campus in CT. Do they really sound like that? Gotta be a fake. Is it atmosphere? Am I charmed? No. Am I dwelling, yes. But it feels like the real Vegas is the fake everywhere else. This should not surprise me. Harrah's is, after all, "Mardi Gras," no? All year round, it's like a party in No'awleans. But not.

Approaching Las Vegas at night is like flying into (something like) the sun. Black, black, black landscape below, with stars here and there, and then a glow creeps into the cabin window. The city-sun-Strip electric glares and burns and calls. Lo, behold what we have built! The glorious Las Vegas, center of the universe! I can see the Eiffel Tower; the Great Pyramid, complete with Sphinx; the Space Needle; the Statue of Liberty. And the MGM Grand lion, once we're on the ground. That's new. It is awesome, all.

Grandma booked a room for us at Circus Circus. There's a big top, and a thousand kids, and colors and bells and whistles and slots and buzzers and cotton candy and flashing lights and chasing lights and neon lights and more lights. I am Super Mario 4 (Vegas Baby) dodging suitcases and small children and running into dead ends and trying to get home, to my room, or out, to the street. Okay I'm not Super Mario but it sure feels like a video game. Surreal.

What is this place? Where am I? *Las Vegas, Nevada*, about four hours up and over from the Grand Canyon. The real Grand Canyon. The real Las Vegas. What did I expect?

I did not expect to visit the Department of Motor Vehicles. I did not expect to visit the police station. I did not expect the cab driver that took us to the police station to come in with us and wait an hour and a half with us and to try to help me book a new room for the night because my mom's wallet is lost and we can't rent a car without it and are stuck in Vegas, for now. I did not expect to get stuck up in Las Vegas. All our plans are history, now. But this can't be real.

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The Las Vegas Department of Motor Vehicles (the only one of its four that we visited, anyway) is not like any other DMV that I've been to. It's got a real "Southwest" style, 'y a know? Yeah ya do. The parking lot is huge, there's a Kmart across the street, and a bus stop down the block. The people are nice but cannot help us. The bus is seventy-five cents cheaper once we're off the Strip. (This makes sense-- the strip buses do have a potential market of a couple million more folk in any given year.)

If we seemed to have come, at last, into the "real" Las Vegas, the irony, or the perfection, of it all is that we meet alter-Elvis at the bus stop. With his wife. Sunglasses, sideburns, flipped hair, big gut, funny smile. Suntanned like leather, wrinkled, tired or really relaxed, and, it turns out, from Alaska. Not much of a singer. He's lived in Las Vegas for 'bout thirty years now. He and his wife get to the Strip once a month or so for a good time, a show, you know. They always catch Cirque du Soleil. He's so glad to get away from the snow.

How is it that I could think the Kmart and the DMV to be the "real" Vegas? Vegas. Las Vegas. Las Vegas, baby. Las Vegas, Nevada. Suburbs like Chicagoland. But with casinos, and palm trees, and mountains in the distance, and the Strip down the street is not the Magnificent Mile. No, not Chicagoland, not at all. But suburban America, Vegas-style. A million people go about perfectly "normal" lives just minutes from one of the most (in)famous strips of sin in the world. But that strip is really a part of their "normal" lives, it is in fact often the source of it (and certainly gave birth to the city in the first place.) Maybe the waiter was really Italian but exaggerated his accent so that we would believe him.

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'Midst trying to get out of the city and to the Grand Canyon without any proof of her identity (just try it), the real mom tasted her first real Korean food. I could tell it was her; I could see it in the way she gulped her water and twisted her face and squeeed. Only

the real mom would try the Kim Chee, even though she (thinks she) can't take spicy-hot food.

She tells me her big gambling story, which I apparently slept through this morning. Mom's story: Well I was just passing through the floor, ya know, and I decided that I would play one dollar (holds up index finger, one dollar.) But I wanted to spread it out, so I took my dollar to the change counter, set it down, and asked for four quarters. (Slaps table, leans in.) He gave me the strangest look! But he gave me my quarters. As it turns out the machine I want – it's just lookin at me – takes a dollar, so I put them all in, but it didn't work. It just ate them. (Leans back, breathes in). So I go back to the counter, and tell him that the machine is broken and ate my quarters, and will he please send someone to fix it? Another strange look. But it wasn't just my dollar, 'ya know? (Throws up hands.) I mean, I didn't want to just walk away from a machine that's broken, and leave it to eat the coins of all these other people. So the security guard comes, and he says, (deep nasal voice) 'lady, it's just a dollar.' I say I know, I know, but it's my dollar, and the machine is broken and please fix it. So he does. And he tells me to use a dollar coin instead. So I go back to the change counter, and set down my four quarters, and ask for a dollar. (I laugh, a lot). I take my dollar back to the machine, put it in, pull, and five dollar coins shoot out. Ha! Yeah I took those coins back to the change counter. (Pauses, nods). We got a good laugh out of that one.

Overall, it's the best moment so far of our first real vacation. It's good to see the real mom again. Mom's wallet turns up in the Circus Circus lost & found the next day.

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Mom is generally afraid of 1) driving at night; 2) driving in unfamiliar places; 3) driving on steep and/or curvy roads. We do all three in the first few hours of the trip. I am reeling, she is reeling, and Hoover Dam is the most beautiful thing we have ever seen an hour outside of Las Vegas. We take a few tourist pictures from the roadside lookout, and move on. We are finally headed up to the Grand Canyon.

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But we stop in Williams, AZ, for the first night out, pulling into the Budget Inn around 11pm. We ring the bell on the office door, the lights flick on inside, and we ask the groggy man (the owner) who lets us in if the Budget Inn has any specials tonight. We chuckle. But yeah, he says, we have to now with all the new competition springing up around here, how about \$19.99? I inspect the postcards and check to make sure there's a coffee machine handy for the morning. Perfect.

We take the key to a double across the way. As we unload, our neighbor, a man of about 30, happens to be squirming out the back of his overflowing, capped truck bed, balancing a stack of guidebooks on Central American countries (Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama.) He's moving with his wife and three young kids to Panama. Everything they own is in the huge, brand new, blue Ford. They started in Virginia, and are roadtripping across the U.S.. After California, they're heading South, to catch the Pan-American highway down to Panama. They're moving to Panama because everyone is allowed to import one new vehicle, duty free,

every ten years (or so,) whereas Costa Rica (just North of Panama) has a very high import tax on new vehicles. Oh and they want to live in Central America, to just start over, to just do it, I guess, he says. And the kids will be bilingual.

Home is where you've been for twenty years, or where there's a special and a coffee maker, or where the taxes are cheap and the language is foreign. I contemplate fireplaces and fake flower arrangements, bedrooms and bathrooms, kitchen sinks and lived-in refrigerator boxes, dorm rooms and blue trucks. Nope. Gotta be more to it.

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We cruise down Route 66 in historic Williams, and stop into the 1950's before heading up to the Canyon. Williams was the last stretch to be bypassed by newer interstate highways, holding out until the 1980's. (For groan-worthy zucchini fries, try Twister's Cafe. It's the one with the pink '57 Chevy, white fenders, out front.) We visit the Grand Canyon Railway depot, and admire the old engines and train cars. Mom goes on about feeling old. I imagine gunmen riding 'longside the old cars and whooping, though I know they're not quite so old, and that didn't really happen anyway. Cue *Bonanza* theme, and lavish period dresses (ooo, ahh!) But this is no place for ladies – we escape into the gift shop and modern day.

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The Havasupai have called the Grand Canyon home (in various ways, languages) since 1300 AD, and keep it still. But you can't tell they're there, unless you go looking for them or their waterfalls (Havasu and Mooney.) Of course if you try hard enough, and walk far enough, you can't tell that anyone's there. (If they're not on our trail, how would they get there? Where would they come from?) The Canyon is deep.

The Canyon gave birth to mankind, according to the Havasupai story that we hear from the Hopi park ranger-- something about a God and three bolts of lightning. I can dig it; I think I can see it. I certainly can't think of anywhere in Illinois so fitting for the birthplace of mankind.

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We stay in the Park the second night out of Vegas, at the Yavapai Lodge. (The Yavapai do not live there, but they too were born of the Canyon by legend).

I am Goldilocks; this place is just right. It's built of, or covered in, roughhewn logs. The desert shrubs are perfectly landscaped out front. Mom spots a wandering elk on a late night walk round the building. We even have a chatty English couple next door.

Have you seen it?, they ask, seen that wonder of the world yet? Wonder of the world? Oh yes, the whole world comes to wonder. Yes it's amazing, awe-inspiring, without comparison; one simply can't die without having seen it. They flew into Los Angeles. Yes they've seen most of Vegas elsewhere, ha ha haw. But they might stop by. They don't gamble, don't even play the lottery, but it would be interesting to actually see those people they've heard about who sit for hours or years at a slot machine, like a machine, pulling pulling pulling. Yes Americans can be so funny; why is that? Curious

though, there's been the strangest big surge in lotteries lately where they're from, though that's dying down now. Brits just don't go for that. I offer up that it's maybe because they aren't as invested in the Cinderella stories as we are. (We relate my mom's). Yes perhaps, but better to skip Vegas after all, they say – the West, the Old West, the Frontier, America, though, that's what they came to see.

I think of the Griswolds (*National Lampoon's Family Vacation*), the Kit Carson report I wrote in fourth grade (frontiersman/ "hero"), eagle feathers, *Bonanza*, mountains and cacti, "The Overture of 1812," my years of horseback riding lessons (Western saddle, of course), learning to play "Buffalo Gals" (which I learned in third grade) on my mom's guitar, the Discovery Channel, the Lone Ranger, the sweatshirt I wore like every week in sixth grade with the Cherokee chief (?) on it... "yes, the West, me too; us too."

The walk around the Canyon rim that day, the sack dinner at sunset, the lodge, it's all just right. I'm having a lovely time – but I half want to apologize to the elk and the bears.

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We get up early early early for

Sunrise
the next morning at
Yavapai Point
poetry
ritual with rules and
enigma

before we're off again, stopping at the Hopi House to look out from the tower, and then heading East. The new plan, improvised last night, is to drive up through the Hopi and Navajo Indian reservations (the Hopi is inside the Navajo) that cover northeastern Arizona (and a bit of the other four-corner states). Mom is worried about the roads we'll be taking. They're not interstates. Most people around here have trucks. This was the sort of random that she was hoping to avoid, but she's excited to see the reservations, and I'm absolutely thrilled. This plan is superior to the first; and isn't this the way it should be anyway? We just pull out our maps and our books and we ask around, and see what we can see – new day, new plan.

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We don't know we're headed straight for the center of the universe. But we've a hundred and fifty miles or so of just "wide open spaces" to drive through before we get there. We even see those billboards you hear about that advertise a place a hundred and fifty miles away, on the right; yeah, those are real. ('Course pretty much everybody's going that way anyway, by default.) Up and down, curve, curve, up, over, curve, down, stretch, curve, up...etc. If it weren't for the billboards, I'd think we must be headed up *out* of the universe. Or at least into a foreign country.

This feeling is compounded by our kinship with mostly foreign fellow travelers. When we do see a building of some sort, it's usually a smallish 3-walled box-stall, with table out front, and flags flying from every edge – the United States, Great Britain, Japan, France, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, South Korea, Italy, etc., Navajo or Hopi flags, and what we're told is the flag of the Five Nations, an otherwise regular American flag with a picture of a very Indian-looking Indian (think Western flick, or sixth grade sweatshirt) imposed over it. We stop by a group of five stalls at the Little Grand Canyon (just off the far Eastern end of the big one), and run into some Dutch travelers there. Hear tell there are as many international travelers here as Americans, if not more. (Well that's if you don't count the Hopi and Navajo themselves I guess, but I do).

The land itself is at once familiar and foreign. Wide open spaces-- yes, I know these places, have seen them in movie and song and mind. This is my country, from sea to shining sea, plains and mountains, land land and more land. Oh it is beautiful, affirmative that. But then my land is green and flat and wet, with oaks and taller corn and tiger lilies, with a big city up a few hours.

I admire this land and compliment its keepers, its people (my people?) They're curious about where I'm from. They don't meet a lot of Midwesterners. Yes we have corn too. It grows deep green for miles. The soil is a rich velvety black, and it's real rainy in the spring. But no mountains, and the miles of corn are broken often by towns or villages, and lots of roads, yes. Beautiful skies, too, but the vistas aren't so sweeping because it's flat (flat flat!) Mom gets some driving tips. No...Kansas isn't really a part of the Midwest. Well it's not quite like Illinois, anyway, ya know? They relate some barn calendars recently seen.

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According to the Council of Indian Nations web site, the Navajo feel safe in their current reservation, and the Hopi feel the same inside it. The whole chunk of reservation is naturally bounded on each side by four sacred mountains-- Mt. Taylor, San Francisco Peak, Blanca Peak, and La Plata Range. Damon's home on the First Mesa is roughly in the center of the reservation. (Was that a part of the reservation plan? Coincidence? Revision?) I didn't know to ask when we happened into Damon's center of the universe. (We saw that road headed straight up the Mesa, and couldn't resist.) It wasn't in the books, and the Hopi Cultural Center, which we'd stopped into a few hours earlier, had made no note of this. It had gorgeous old photographs though, and some contemporary painting, and fabulously intricate and colorful kachina dolls. And lots of signs shaming those who would try to take such things home with them.

The natural borders are no real boundaries.

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I make it a point to remember all this, of course. Reclined in the dark, my bare feet propped on the dash, wind blowing my face from the sun roof I've opened to look at more stars than I've ever seen all at once before, and listening to some mellow sing-a-long music, I know I won't have to try. This slides right 'longside my parents' driving

baby-me around to lull me to sleep, that comfort and faith, for one. This is the last night of the trip. We are headed back to Las Vegas.

But this story really ends in Jacksonville, at Dairy Queen, for now, where I'm finishing it. I've just had a nice long chat with my table-neighbors. They're looking to publish children's stories, starting with *In Search of the Truth*. But they want to reach outside the church audience. People are lost, do I see? When people come home from work, and make dinner and do the laundry, they wanna know where the glory is. What they're here for. Why they bother. They wanna know they're not just workin' to pay the taxes to fund the war. The answer's out there; they're just afraid to look. I ask for their thoughts on Native Americans. Knowledge corrupts spirituality, they tell me. The Indians are the most spiritual people on this Earth. They don't lose their spirituality like we do. It's a different form, but it's from the heart. They've got the glory. (I work very hard to sit quietly.) Our den, where he writes, they add, is decorated with cowboys and indians. We have lots of dreamcatchers.

I come from my mother and I return to this place. I will always return to this place. I defend it and bound it and know it is mine. I deny and embrace its myth as I please. And these people are mine, as are the cowboys and indians, farmers, and academics out there. These are histories that are mine. But there are places where I and we split that cause trouble. Do I have to reconcile the cowboy and the indian, for example, or do they just keep on inside of me?

I the wanna-be-this-time-the-everyAmerican, the myth, photograph the perfect mother-daughter/family vacation out to the real West. America the beautiful indeed! My America. And we can leave out the lost wallet, the real fear that everything was lost, the, at points, acute stress and pain. Etc. Can't we?

Yes everywhere we go is up, wherever that may be.

