

# BRING OSCAR



LANCE FRIEDMAN

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Dedicated to the dogs who can't read this,  
yet provide the companionship, courage, composure,  
and comedy described in these pages.





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# Introduction

I've flown around the world and throughout the United States. During each trip, I had to leave my dog, Oscar, at home. It might be for three or four days or as long as two and a half weeks during international travel. Oscar had run of the house with access to the backyard via a doggie door, allowing him the freedom to go in and out. While gone, I left him in the best care. When I returned, he'd wag his tail, and we'd wrestle in the living room.

One summer, I decided to take an extended vacation. I imagined a road trip that would require at least a month—I'd have to bring Oscar with me. At the time, traveling with a dog seemed a hassle. Or, was it? And, there were limitations. Or, were there? We would find out.

Oscar and I ended up traveling over thirty-five thousand miles in the car and walking at least twenty thousand miles together. Friends, family, and people we met along the way suggested, "Do you have a blog? You have some great stories," or "You should write a book." Well, here is the book!

These pages are my thoughts, experiences, and impressions as we glided across the country. Everything in this story is true, with the exception of a few name changes (so that I don't get in trouble).



PART I

WEST



## EVANSTON, ILLINOIS to MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

I WALKED OUTSIDE, carrying a bag of dog food. Oscar watched with anticipation as I put it in the trunk of the car. He knew something was going on. He'd seen me countless times carrying groceries from the trunk, which meant rotisserie chicken for him. And, he'd seen me lugging large bags of dirt and mulch to the backyard. But, this time, I was *loading up* a car.

I went inside the house and returned a minute later holding Froggie and Sylvester, Oscar's two favorite stuffed animals (both muddy and shredded, but recognizable). I tossed them on the back seat.

As I walked past Oscar, I reminded him, "going road trip!"

His sideways ears perked straight up.

I went inside, and Oscar followed me. I grabbed the cooler off the kitchen counter and any remaining perishables from the refrigerator. We went back outside. As I packed the final items in the car, Oscar watched with his tongue hanging out. "Yeah, you're coming with," I assured him. "Big road trip!" He wagged his tail.

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There wasn't much preparation. I prepaid my bills for two months, arranged for my neighbor's kid to collect my mail, and tried to finish eating all the perishable food in the refrigerator. I hate wasting food.

For the trip, I threw the following into the car:

- Two dog bowls (water and food)
- One old 64 oz. plastic juice bottle to hold water
- United States map
- Laptop
- Camera
- Credit card and cash; roll of quarters for tolls or parking meters
- Flip phone cellphone
- One duffel bag with clothes
- A cooler with energy bars and snacks
- Oscar's favorite pals, Froggie (missing an eye) and Sylvester (caked in dirt)
- Oscar's blanket and pillow

In the trunk of the car, I stored the following in cardboard boxes:

- Dog food (bag of dry and a couple of cans of wet)
- Paper towels and regular towels
- A few small plastic bags and a few garbage bags
- Simple Solution (a cleaner for pets)
- Car first aid (jumper cables, oil, and basic tools)

That's it. To be honest, I was winging it. If I forgot something, I could always buy whatever it was at a store along the way. I figured if I had a credit card and some food and water (in case the car broke down), what could go wrong? If the trip was a disaster, we could just turn around and go home.

I chose the destination of Emmett, Idaho, where my mom lived. Once we got there, Oscar and I could spend a week (or so) visiting family, relaxing, and taking a break from driving. Plus, free housing would cut costs. Along the way, we'd get a chance to pass through South Dakota to Mount Rushmore. A bit of Wyoming. And,



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eventually back through Montana. A friend had mentioned that the Badlands and Devils Tower are cool places. Otherwise, looking at the map, I had absolutely no idea what we would find in between. But, at some point in time, we'd get to Idaho. After packing up the car, we did a final walk through the house. Lights out. Empty fridge. Computer off. Oven and appliances off. As I was locking the front door, Oscar skipped over to my old Acura. Perhaps he was anticipating a trip to the park or the lake.

At the time, I had two cars. The "dog car" was a nineteen-year-old Acura Integra. It used to be my car, but eventually rust, mud, dog hairs, and wear and tear turned it into a very, very used car. When I finally bought a new car, I kept the old Acura. It was a stick shift, which I loved, and I also appreciated the fact that I could use it to hit the gym, transport a muddy dog, or fill it with junk from Home Depot. It didn't matter about clean-up. The other car was a Nissan Altima, and it remained spotless. It still had new car smell and a clean interior because it was seldom used.

"Oscar, come this way." I guided him away from the rusted '94 Acura with its bumper held by duct tape. (It wasn't going to make it across the country.) "We're taking the Nissan."

I opened the back door. Oscar paused and looked up at the seats. They were a bit higher than the Acura. Plus, there were extra blankets and pillows covering the leather seats. As I prepared to assist him into the backseat, Oscar climbed up and in, dragging his back paws, but he managed to generate enough lift! Even at over thirteen years old, Oscar could still make it into the car. I shut the back door, and then I went around and got into the driver's seat. Oscar poked his head between the seats and licked my face. "Nice job, buddy. Thank you."

I turned and could already see some dirt and hairs on the wrinkled blanket and exposed backseat. I just shrugged. After four dog-free years, I thought, *It's OK. Just let it go.* I had no illusions. I knew the car interior would get trashed. "Let's get rollin'!"

We pulled out of the driveway and started toward the freeway. Mile 1—2000 to go. Oscar placed his two front paws on the armrest, completely disregarding the blankets and comfort that I had

carefully prepared in the backseat. Then he rotated into the front passenger seat.

“OK, so you’re going to break in the freshly cleaned leather seats on day one.”

Oscar sat comfortably—tongue hanging out, a slight smile, looking content—as we headed into our adventure. I rolled down the passenger window, and he stuck his head outside to enjoy the wind blowing in his face.

We drove north on I-94, passing neighborhoods, restaurants, and places I’d seen countless times. Then, an hour later, we crossed the border into Wisconsin. The interstate road beyond Kenosha and toward Milwaukee took me into territory that was less familiar. Then we encountered construction and traffic. *Really? Friday at 11:00 a.m.?*

*Patience*, I reminded myself. *This trip is a marathon, not a sprint.* We had plenty of time to cover ground each day, and we had weeks to complete the journey. There was no hurry.

After grinding through Milwaukee traffic, then passing Miller Park where the Brewers play baseball, I looked for a suitable stop beyond the city limits. It seemed reasonable to take a break every two hours or less, allowing Oscar to relieve himself and stretch his legs. When I didn’t see any interstate rest areas, I just pulled off at a random exit.

We ended up in Waukesha in the parking lot of an abandoned shopping center and a lone Kentucky Fried Chicken. I wasn’t hungry, but it was a chance to use their facilities. Since I observe an animal-friendly diet, I ordered a Coke and fried potatoes—I felt obligated to buy something. After using the restroom and refilling Oscar’s water jug, I went back outside, sat down on the curb next to my pal, and handed him a dog treat. He paused, looked around, and meandered to a little parking lot island with rocks and a bush. He pawed at the rocks, creating a little hole, and placed the treat in the rocks. Then he used his snout to push the rocks on top of the treat, partially burying it.

“What are you doing? Saving that snack for later?” Satisfied with his cover-up work, he trotted to me. “Dude, we ain’t comin’

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back here.” I was hoping he realized that unlike the snacks buried in the backyard, he couldn’t retrieve this one later.

We continued our journey, bypassing Madison, the state capital, and neared Wisconsin Dells, which is known for its resorts and water parks. I exited the I-90/94 and started looking for an intriguing lunch place. Indoor dining was out, and I could eat at a chain restaurant any time—I wanted to try local places. Fine dining was also out. I’m not cheap, but I just don’t appreciate fine meals like some others do. I like quality food but at a better price.

I spotted a large, colorful beer mug sign—Brat House Grill. As we approached, I noticed outdoor tables under umbrellas. Perfect! A casual place with outdoor seating and shade to keep Oscar cool. I tied him to a picnic table and ran inside. It was a typical tavern decorated with Brewers and Packers memorabilia and televisions showing various sports channels. I took a quick look at the menu. Every minute inside was a minute Oscar was on his own and out of my sight. I easily defaulted to a veggie burger, waffle fries, and a Coke and asked the bartender to bring the meal outside. I refilled Oscar’s water jug and trotted outside where he was sitting in the same position I had left him. He seemed amused by the new environment, watching diners at the other tables.

I struck up a brief conversation with a family who had two terriers with them. They were from a suburb of Chicago and were spending the week at the Dells. I mentioned our month-long trip, and they took an interest in Oscar.

“What kind of dog is that?”

“He’s a Shepherd Lab mix with a bit of Schipperke; maybe some terrier.”

“A bit of everything,” the mother added.

“Yeah, his mama got around,” I joked. She laughed.

“What’s his name?” one of the daughters wanted to know.

“Oscar.”

“Cute name!” she said

“Named after Oscar Madison.”

“Who?” asked the mother.

“Ever watch *The Odd Couple*?” I asked her.

“Oh, yeah! Oscar,” she remembered. “Then, are you Felix?”

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“Oh, no. Oscar is definitely my sloppy, likable roommate. But, I’m no Felix.”

The waitress came outside with a tray holding my lunch. I started to dig in and Oscar joined me. When I gave him some of my veggie burger, he started lickin’ his chops. A few minutes later, the family stood up to leave.

“Nice meeting you,” they said.

“Bye, Oscar,” one of the daughters said as she gave him a pat on the head.

“Take care,” I told them. This was the first of countless brief encounters Oscar and I would have. Our first lunch stop was a success.

We returned to the I-90/94 west toward Minnesota. As cars raced by us, we continued cruising around sixty-five mph. I usually drive fast, shooting down the Chicago expressways, but today, I took my time winding through the green valleys. I enjoyed the company of my canine pal. Why rush? Driving long distances may seem boring or something you want to hurry through. But, it’s a mindset. I viewed it as a new and interesting journey. Plus, it gave me lots of time to think and daydream.

“What the hell?!” Suddenly, a bunch of flashing lights appeared in the distance. I wondered if there was an accident, but it turned out to be an ordinary speed trap. Many of the people who had sped past me in a racing cluster had been rounded up. As we drove past the flashing lights, Oscar watched the scene through the window. *Getting a speeding ticket on day one would suck, I thought. Especially an out-of-state ticket.*

I looked at Oscar. “Good thing you’re here. Otherwise, I might’ve been speeding with them. You may have saved me a big hassle—and a bunch of money. It’s like a doggie dividend.”

Oscar stared at me with his tongue hanging out. “Or, maybe a bow wow bonus. What do you think?” He tilted his head trying to understand. “Nothing? I’ll work on it.”

As we left northern Wisconsin, I noted the lush green landscape and valleys formed by lakes and rivers. I also couldn’t help but notice a lot of fireworks shops, a couple of casinos, a few adult

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stores, and a slew of fast food. What does that say about American interests?

In the late afternoon, we passed over the St. Croix River on a substantial, crowded bridge that connected Wisconsin and Minnesota. Just beyond the “Welcome to Minnesota” sign, I spotted a rest stop. This was a good time to take a break and double-check the directions to our hotel. As we pulled in, I noticed a walking path and doggie bags for waste. Nice. I gave Oscar a treat and let him sniff around. “Oskie, this is all you.” He led me along a dirt path to explore some of the wooded areas.

“Holy cow!” The “Land of 10,000 Lakes” is the land of ten billion mosquitoes! Oscar flicked his head as the insects surrounded his ears and went relentlessly at my legs. After five minutes, I couldn’t take it. We raced back to the car and made an escape for the hotel. Following the map, I maneuvered through downtown Minneapolis traffic and turned south to the Richfield suburb.

The night before, I had picked the Candlewood Suites. The photos and reviews seemed fine, and they accepted pets. Besides, “Suites” sounded better than “Motel.” This would likely be our longest driving stretch—four hundred miles—so why not treat ourselves?

As we approached the front doors, we paused and looked at each other. *Do we just walk in?* I wondered. *Or, should I leave him in the car? Tie him up outside the doorway? Maybe there is a side entrance for pets?* I had never stayed at a hotel with a dog before, but since this place had pet-friendly rooms, I concluded that we could both enter the lobby. So, that’s what we did.

We were greeted by a young man behind the reception desk who handed me two key cards (Was one for Oscar?), and we proceeded down the hallway to our air-conditioned room. It was definitely a suite. It was spacious with a nice kitchen area, business workspace, and living room. I popped on the TV and plugged in my laptop, flip phone, and camera to recharge.

I was pleased that the first place was a terrific hotel! Or, maybe it was the novelty of staying at a hotel with a dog.

I connected to the Wi-Fi and started looking at destinations for the next day. I wanted to stick to my original plan of going

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through South Dakota first. On the way home, we'd pass through North Dakota. After thirty minutes of Internet research, I booked a room near Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The photos, description, and reviews of the hotel seemed fine. In the end, I just wanted a clean, safe, fair market-priced place in a decent area that took a dog. With my reservations complete, I climbed into bed and turned on the television. This was a late-night treat. I didn't have a TV in the bedroom. (Before you know it, you're sleeping less and watching TV more.) After thirty minutes of channel surfing, I cut myself off and went to sleep.

# MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA to SIOUX FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA

I WOKE UP to the sound of the air conditioner cranking, which I had set low for Oscar's sake. He was a cold temp pup. In the winter, I'd look out the window and often spot him sitting in the snow, contently basking in the arctic air.

There were two possible routes to our next destination: either straight through Minnesota along minor highways or via the interstates. Because I'm a curious person, I usually default to the route I haven't seen, but in this case I hadn't been either way, so I chose the faster and smoother path. As we cruised on I-35 through new territory beyond Minneapolis, Oscar sat in the backseat snacking on a treat.

It was then that I began appreciating this "traveling with a dog" concept more and more. There were lots of pros, like no awkward silences in the car and you get to pick the radio station. But let's acknowledge the cons. There's no one to split costs or driving with,

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no planning input (although an occasional tail wag was informative), and you must skip places that don't allow pets. Plus, I had to schlep all of his stuff. I liked to joke that Oscar needed to pull his weight!

Just past the I-35/I-90 junction, we stopped at a rest area southeast of Mankato. I remembered Mankato from *Little House on the Prairie*. I had considered including the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, in our itinerary because I had fond memories of watching her stories on tv as a child, but it was far off the main interstate, and it didn't seem to offer anything for Oscar.

After a bit of people watching at the rest area, Oscar buried another treat in the high grass. Soon after, an older gentleman approached us. "So, it's just the two of you?" He seemed harmless.

"Yep, just me and the dog," I replied. "Long road trip."

"And he can stay in hotels?"

"Actually, there are lots of hotels that permit pets. More than I thought."

"Well, that's great. We had to leave our dogs at home. The road gets to be too much for them."

"He seems to like it," I said looking down at Oscar. "Lucky for me. It's tough to find people to travel with. They either have work, or most of my friends are married with kids."

Oscar started tugging on the leash. He was signaling that he wanted to move along.

"I think your friend wants to go," our new friend said.

"I think so," I said as Oscar tugged harder on the leash. "Gotta go!"

We resumed our journey, heading west on I-90. I remembered seeing something online about a Jolly Green Giant statue around this area, so we took the exit leading into Blue Earth, Minnesota. It was lunchtime though, so I pulled over at the Pizza Hut. After sharing a mini pizza, I took out a ball from the trunk, and we went into the neighboring open field to play catch. I threw the ball, and Oscar chased it down. He picked it up and took three steps back toward me. Then he dropped the ball and started sniffing around.



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“That’s not the way it’s played,” I called out to him. I walked over to the ball and picked it up. He looked at me and wagged his tail. I threw the ball in the other direction. He took a quick step toward the ball, then he abruptly stopped and started sniffing and exploring in the other direction. “OK. This game is over. The only one fetching is me.” I watched Oscar wander around the open field with dark clouds behind him. When it started to sprinkle rain, we went back to the car and began our hunt for the Jolly Green Giant. As it came into view, I learned it was evidence that all sorts of random things are in the US.

I took a few photos of the enormous attraction, and that’s when the dark clouds really started coming in. Then it began to rain, but I still wanted to get some photos of Oscar and me with the Giant before it really started pouring. I saw an older couple taking pictures, so I approached them for assistance. They looked like veteran tourists, and the gentleman graciously agreed to shoot a few pictures of Oscar and me. I showed him the buttons on my digital camera while his wife introduced herself to Oscar.

After handing him the small camera, I rushed Oscar over to the massive statue. We walked up the steps and stood between the two enormous green feet. Ignoring the inconvenient rain coming down, our photographer patiently took several nice pictures: a few close-up shots of us between the huge feet and then a couple of shots from a distance, extending from head to Green Giant toe.

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*Standing with the Jolly Green Giant*

We darted back to the car as the rain picked up. However, just before climbing in, Oscar walked right through a small puddle of mud. I imagined Tony Randall playing Felix Unger and moaning, “Oh, Oscar, Oscar, Oscar,” as Jack Klugman playing Oscar Madison made a mess in their apartment.

“You couldn’t just walk around that?” I suggested. With complete indifference, Oscar left a trail of paw prints on the front seats. I grabbed a towel from the trunk and wiped some of the paw prints off the driver’s seat. Then, I lightly wrapped Oscar to get the excess rainwater off of him. After going through the convenient Dairy Queen drive-through, we exited Green Giant Lane and hit the road again.

While driving in the on-and-off rain, I counted down the miles on the signs to Sioux Falls. They passed quickly, unlike when I was a kid and driving took forever. I can remember my mom driving fifty-five mph as countless cars passed us. Her slow driving was not as bad as her choice in music. A twelve-year-old is not going to

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sing along to “I Am Woman.” Occasionally, she’d choose the Bee Gees or The Grease Soundtrack, which was more appealing. But we didn’t have a choice—she drove, she chose.

I also remembered that our seat positions were decided by rock paper scissors or by which kid hollered “call front seat!” first. Car bingo got old. Counting license plate states got old. Looking at the landscape through the window got very old. Oscar should be grateful he was on a road trip with me - first-class ride!

In the afternoon, we cruised past the “Welcome to South Dakota” sign. It’s always exciting to reach a new state. A quarter mile farther was a sign—Speed Limit 70. Nice. Being able to pick up the pace and the spacious scenery offered a good first impression.

It’s interesting to observe the contrasts between states. It seems the US is composed of several “regional countries.” The Southwest, South, Pacific Northwest, Northeast, Southeast, and Midwest are all unique places. As we crossed the border into South Dakota, the change was noticeable. Suddenly, instead of Minnesota potholes and crowded roads, the South Dakota highway was wide open with smooth, freshly paved roads. We passed the next speed limit sign—75. Awesome. Within thirty minutes, we were at the hotel.

The nice gentleman at the front desk of the Sioux Falls Econo Lodge handed me two room cards. Again? One for you, Oscar! We walked down the hallway to our room and found two queen beds. I threw the bags on one bed and sat on the other. “Oskie, here’s your blanket with Froggie.” I laid his blanket on the ground with his stuffed animal, then I flipped on the TV.

Oscar looked up at me. They don’t call them puppy-dog eyes for nothing. “Alright.” I lifted him onto the bed beside me, and we watched TV. “Just don’t leave any paw prints on the bed.”

There’s a beige couch in my living room that was practically new and perfect—until two hours after I got Oscar. He ran into the house and sat right on the cushions. I tried to wash out the mud, but it was never the same. He kept climbing onto his comfortable couch spot until he was trained to stay off. But by then, the couch was history. So I gave up and let him sleep on it. “No paw prints in the hotel, Oscar.”

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It was June, and the sun didn't set until around ten o'clock. We had time to do some evening exploring, so we headed out to Sioux Falls. It looked cool, and it was dog friendly—the perfect activity. Once we arrived, we were greeted by extensive sidewalks and grass areas among rocks and waterfalls. It was a nice place to hang out. Plus there was a festival going on with food, music, arts, and crafts. We grabbed a snack and found a spot with a good view. *There's something intriguing about stepping into a place where nobody knows you.* I had a front-row seat to watch how the people of Sioux Falls spent a summer evening. They seemed like friendly folks.

We also took some time to explore the nearby statues and art pieces, picking up some history about the falls themselves. That's when I noticed Oscar had stopped and his head was gyrating back and forth. His stomach started heaving. Uh-oh. Yes, Oscar puked his snack on the ground. I looked around, and fortunately, nobody was looking at us. Between doggie bags and handfuls of napkins I managed to clean it up without anybody noticing. *If a dog pukes in a park, and nobody sees it, did it happen?*

At this point, the sun was lower in the horizon, and most of the festival vendors and artists were packing up their booths. We were also ready to leave and pick up dinner, but most of the food places had already closed their tents.

On our walk back to the car, Oscar stopped to greet a family sitting at some covered picnic benches.

“Like your dog.”

“Thanks! He's a good one,” I said. “Are you from around here?” I was curious, plus I intended to ask for a restaurant recommendation.

“No, we are here for the festival and to visit the falls. We live in Iowa, about an hour and a half away.” We made small talk about the merits of South Dakota and our common experiences in and around Chicago.

“How old is your dog?” the husband asked.

“I think about thirteen. I got him at a shelter. They said he was one at the time.”

“You've had him a long time.”

“Yep. Adopting him was the best forty bucks I ever spent.”

“You're right. We have two rescues at home.”

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"I found a good one. Picked him out at the shelter—or, he picked me. When I got to his cage, he stood up from the back, walked right up to the front, and looked right at me."

"Sounds like it was meant to be," the wife said.

"Where are you headed?" the husband asked.

"We're going west all the way to Idaho and back. Looking forward to Mount Rushmore and Montana."

"You'll love them both!" she said.

"Do you know much about North Dakota? Is there anything to see?"

"Not much," he said. "It's all oil tankers on the roads. South Dakota is much prettier."

It didn't matter. I was going there regardless to see it for myself.

Oscar leaned over toward their little kid. The boy reached out his tiny hands, and Oscar started to lick his fingers like a kid licking frosting from the mixer.

"I kinda want to see what's in North Dakota. I hear the Badlands are cool."

"Yes, they are interesting, but it's only part of the state. The rest is just open road and oil fields." This seemed too simplistic to me. I couldn't believe there wasn't more to see. In a few weeks, I would find out.

After leaving Falls Park with no restaurant recommendation, we stopped at a convenient Subway. Inside the sandwich shop, there were two high school kids working. It was around 9:15, and there were no customers. Billy Idol's "Flesh For Fantasy" was playing over the radio.

*Eighties hard rock*, I thought. *My kind of town*. I ordered a turkey sandwich and cookies. The turkey was for Oscar, and the rest of the fixings would be for me. The two teens seemed to be enjoying their summer jobs. One was singing along to the music, then he stopped and enthusiastically asked me what I wanted on my sandwich.

As he prepared it, he bobbed his head to the guitar of Steve Stevens. Then he handed my sandwich to the other worker, and she asked if I wanted chips and a drink. They both had a sincere smile and energy, like this was the best sandwich, the best job, the best time ever. It inspired thoughts in me about attitude, gratitude, and

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perspective toward work. “I like the spirit,” I said to them and happily left money in their tip cup.

When I got back in the car, Oscar sniffed at the bag. “Not yet. Ten more minutes.” Once we arrived back at the hotel, Oscar eagerly followed me—or rather eagerly followed the bag of dinner! I unlocked the door to our room, turned on the TV, and we both started chowing down. “Glamorous life on the road, huh?” Oscar was enjoying his dinner of “turkey on dry.”

## SHIOUX FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA to RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA

THE NEXT MORNING we checked out of the Econo Lodge, and I pulled out the map and a yellow highlighter. I continued to trace the path of our journey, pleased with the distance we had covered so far: almost seven hundred miles. I shoved the map back into the glove compartment and started racing west on I-90.

Mile after mile, we passed towns, rest areas, and attractions. The decision to stop usually depended on timing. Did Oscar need to walk? Was I hungry? Did we need gas? Also, I was not above being influenced by a billboard promoting a tourist site. The farther the attraction was off the highway, the less likely I was to stop. But, in the end, I usually defaulted to having a look, because it would kill me to learn later that I had missed a cool sight simply because of fatigue, laziness, or impatience. Sometimes, weeks after a trip, I discover a spot I had completely missed. I usually write it down because someday I plan to get back there.



The billboard that caught my eye this time was for “The World’s Only Corn Palace.” Corn Palace? I was intrigued. The drawing was curious, but what would it really look like? Since it was advertised as a palace, it must be quite regal and ornate! We decided to take a “tour detour” and pulled off at Mitchell, South Dakota. For fifteen minutes I followed arrows through town. I started to have reservations, but we were committed. After following a maze of directions leading to the middle of town, we finally found it!

On our way in, we passed a few buildings with a carnival/county fair/Vegas feel. Upon arriving at the front of the Palace, I thought, *Yes, it is unique*. As I peeked in the window, a lady waved us inside. “Hi! I saw the Corn Palace sign on the road. Just wanted to see what this place is all about.”

“Well, come on in,” she invited us with a smile.

“Him, too?”

“Of course, he can come inside.”

Oscar and I walked through the turnstile and entered the Corn Palace. I stopped to thank her for letting us inside, and she went on to tell me about the over one hundred years of history of the Palace and the Mitchell community. She clearly loved talking to us, and I enjoyed hearing her personal tidbits about life in South Dakota. After the nice chat, Oscar and I walked through the lobby area. As Oscar mingled through the crowd of visitors, some kids and parents stared at the only dog walking around, but most ignored us. Instead, they were admiring the corn themed attractions and interior decorations.

We came to the arena with seating and a nice scoreboard in the middle. It was used for basketball games, concerts, or in today’s case, a market with souvenirs. It definitely had a nifty motif of agricultural murals and corn decor. At this point it had been twenty minutes, and Oscar had yet to mark his territory, so I decided not to push our luck. We headed back outside to take a few photos of the Corn Palace front and admire the architectural style. Then, I noticed a giant smiling corn across the street. We had to get a picture! I asked a stranger to take the souvenir shot, and he happily agreed. As I hoisted up my fifty-three-pound pal, passersby turned to watch us pose for a humorous photo. Oscar can really draw a crowd. Plus, he always takes a good picture.



## Bring Oscar



*A “corny” picture of Oscar and me*

After spreading some Oscar love to the people who had gathered and answering some questions about our road trip, we were back on the road, flying down I-90 west through South Dakota. The roads seemed freshly paved and smooth, and there was little traffic. The speed limit was seventy-five, so going eighty miles per hour with the truckers made it easy to cover a lot of ground. It was mostly open scenery with towns every twenty or twenty-five miles. And, of course, there were consistently spaced billboards doing all they could to lure me off the highway.

Two hours later, we passed a few billboards promoting an “1880 Town” near Midland, South Dakota. This got me reminiscing about the Old Tucson theme park I had visited as a kid in Arizona. It was a western town replica where you could do things like pan for gold and watch a gunfight reenactment.

Harkening back to my good memories as a child, I couldn't help but pull off the highway and steer us in the direction of the Original 1880 Town. Before heading to the entrance, I offered Oscar some water. As we approached, I looked at the ticket prices—around twelve bucks just to walk inside and see the town, with the highlight being some original props from the Kevin Costner movie, *Dances with Wolves*. Well, we're here. I forked over the entrance fee, and Oscar and I went inside to see what was behind door number one.

We were welcomed by gravel and dirt separating wood buildings. It was barren, and some of the buildings were a bit run-down. I half-expected tumbleweeds to roll down the main walkway. We did see the *Dances with Wolves* items, but they were anticlimactic. There was also some ancient farming and Old West equipment that looked as if they hadn't been touched or maintained since 1880. Inside one of the old wooden buildings were exhibits filled with aged photos and items someone in the nineteenth century would've had. With the exception of a few covered wagons and some pioneer relics, it seemed more of a garage sale than an antique exhibit.

Nevertheless, I had to look on the bright side. Oscar found places to sniff, we met a few nice people, and we stretched our legs. Also, there was a nifty pet area with three red fire hydrants, a ceramic life-sized dog, and a little doghouse. There was a sign that read "South Dakota's Original 1880 Town Pet Rest Area" with a cartoon dog sketch. It was a thoughtful, cute setup. This tour detour wasn't a total loss. While it didn't live up to my childhood memories, we got some exercise and the weather was pleasant.

Once we were back on the road, we passed countless Wall Drug billboards along the interstate. This was one attraction I had no trouble passing by. Despite being a popular shopping destination, trinkets and tchotchkes don't interest me or Oscar. Neither do crowds, so we passed. Besides, we were on our way to something much more exciting: Mount Rushmore. And by skipping Wall Drug, we still had time to get there in the same day. I was eager to reach this monument, then it felt like the Black Hills would never end. *How much farther?*

We persisted through some winding roads, until suddenly around the corner was a face.

## Bring Oscar

Amazing! I stared up in awe at the profile. There was an enormous face in the rocks! Incredible.

I wanted to get a picture, but unfortunately, the road didn't have a suitable shoulder for pulling over. We followed the scenic highway, eventually arriving at the main entrance and parking structure. That's where we learned dogs were not allowed beyond the park entrance. Many visitors left their pups in their vehicles—not me. It's either both of us, or none of us. Oscar and I walked past a motorhome, listening to a dog bark near the window. Then we passed a big truck with two dogs sitting inside, the windows cracked to let in some air. That wasn't for us.

We walked to the edge of the allowed designated area. We couldn't enter the park, but I still had a view where I could see the four carved faces of the presidents. As we walked along a paved path, I admired the massive monument in the distance while Oscar inspected the plants, the path, and a garbage can. His interest was ground level. At one point on the path, I was able to line Oscar up for a photo.



*A National Treasure and Mount Rushmore in the background*

It was a moment: standing near Mount Rushmore. It took a long time to get here, and I didn't know when I'd return. I wanted to take advantage of this time. *Be in the present.* I just sat and admired it. Wow. That took some serious artistic talent. I stared at the etchings in the mountain and wondered, *How the hell did they do that?* It would have required incredible ingenuity. The project was started in 1927 before computers, cell phones, and other technologies. I facetiously imagined some guy hanging from a rope chiseling away. Meanwhile, the others were at the bottom yelling, "A little to the left. Now take a little more off the nose." Or, I pictured another person running half a mile away to draw what he saw and then came running back with a hand-drawn sketch. I wondered what would have happened if they made a mistake. Could they put pieces back? Super Glue ain't gonna work. As I was deep in thought, Oscar tugged on the leash and pulled me away. That was my cue. He was done with Mount Rushmore.

Before getting back on the main highway, we took a pit stop in the nearby town of Keystone. We both needed a snack, and I wanted one last look at the view of the Black Hills.

Outside a souvenir shop, a kid approached and asked, "Can I pet your dog?" In the distance, his parent yelled out, "Make sure you ask permission!"

There's no doubt that traveling with a dog makes it much easier to meet people. If I were alone, there's no way a stranger would suddenly start talking to me. And, if they did, would I even bother to engage? But, when traveling with Oscar, lots of curious people wanted to chat.

"Of course," I answered. "He likes meeting people." We chatted about his name and breed.

"We used to have a Lab," the boy said. I sensed the boy had a dog because he was comfortable with Oscar. "How old is he?" By now, his parent and a girl joined us.

"Not sure, probably about thirteen," I told them. "See the gray on his chin. But, he's still got some pep. We were running 5K races when he was eleven."

"I like his ears," the girl said happily. "They go in different directions!" On cue, Oscar's left ear went straight up while his right



## Bring Oscar

ear lay down. They continued asking questions while petting and hugging Oscar. Then, a few others joined in to pet Oscar and talk about him. I didn't mind. I enjoyed talking about our adventure, and Oscar enjoyed the attention.

After everyone got their fill of loving on Oscar, we left Keystone and aimed for Rapid City to find our hotel. Unfortunately, somehow and somewhere, I made a wrong turn. I found myself driving through open area with fewer and fewer cars. I turned around and started retracing our path. There were no buildings, and I was disoriented. I stopped on the shoulder and looked at the maps on my laptop, but I couldn't figure out my location. I needed to get to civilization to ask someone for directions. Ideally, I wanted to find a gas station where the cashier or a person in line could reset me in the right direction. I was also fine with going online at a Starbucks, McDonald's, or Dunkin' Donuts with free Wi-Fi.

I hoped it wouldn't take long to find a person. As I drove aimlessly in western South Dakota, I finally noticed a landmark: an odd-shaped building I knew we had passed earlier. From there, I started to deduce which way to the town. Then, around the next turn, a gas station appeared! I ran inside to confirm my directions. The cashier assured me that I was headed the right way. After the thirty-minute detour, we were back on track.

At last, we reached the Americas Best Value Inn next to a Chili's restaurant by a shopping mall. There was a lot of concrete, leaving only small patches of grass for Oscar. There were better locations in Rapid City, but being near Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills, the hotels were quite expensive. In the end, we just needed a quick stop with a bed and a shower. I did, however, spend an extra fifteen dollars on an upgraded "executive room." I've found that when you pay just a little bit more, you usually get significantly more space, and perhaps a couch or a kitchen area. Also, I suspect someone paying extra would expect a cleaner room and likewise would treat the room better. Same goes for rental cars.

Our executive room was terrific. There was lots of room to spare—everywhere. I cranked on the air conditioner, and we popped on the bed to watch TV and figure out where to get dinner.

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Regardless of what I was up to, Oscar seemed excited about the new room.

The thought occurred to me that we'd visited more fast-food joints in three days than I had in three months: KFC, Pizza Hut, Subway. Plus, I had snuck in a Dairy Queen and a bag of Doritos chips. With better nutritional balance in mind, I found an Italian restaurant where I picked up some pasta, a salad, and meatballs for Oscar. After dinner in our room, I followed the routine of looking for the next day's itinerary and hotel.

During an ordinary search for "hotels with dog," I discovered a website called BringFido.com that lists hotels and restaurants that are pet-friendly. While their database isn't necessarily complete, it became my default place for researching hotel options because it offered a ton of information, including pet fees and some user comments. After booking the room, I started searching the towns we'd pass along the way and read more about Mount Rushmore, Crazy Horse, and the history of this area. Meanwhile, Oscar wandered around the opposite side of the room. He picked out a comfortable spot beside the refrigerator, sat down, let out a deep sigh, and closed his eyes.

## RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA to SHERIDAN, WYOMING

AFTER A BRIEF morning walk with Oscar and a quick bite to eat for breakfast, I printed screenshots of online maps, anticipating the cool sites we could see today. I also sent some photos and emails to friends and family. Then, I posted a few Oscar photos on Facebook. I'm not real big on Facebook. People telling strangers about their personal stuff. Same goes for texting about a great moment rather than actually watching it. Facebook feels like you're sharing with your friends about the fun you're having without inviting them to come along. And what's the point of having hundreds of "friends" that you rarely talk to? An old friend of mine described Facebook as a "time suck." In any event, maybe some friends or family of mine would like to see Oscar out on the road.

I closed the laptop and packed it in the bag. Oscar followed me to the front desk to check out. He was getting the hang of the hotels. And, I was very happy with the trip so far. In fact, seeing Mount Rushmore alone made the drive worthwhile. Looking at Oscar that morning, I thought, *We should've done these road trips years ago.*

Upon entering the car, I glanced at the odometer and saw the miles we had piled on—nearly eleven hundred. I took out my yellow highlighter and traced more distance on the map. Yesterday, we had basically gone across the entire state of South Dakota. Time was moving faster and faster, and the trip was cruising along.

We resumed our travels on I-90 west along the Black Hills, passing by Sturgis, which is home to the huge annual motorcycle rally. Before we knew it, we were at the border, and there was the sign—“Welcome to Wyoming: Forever West” with a silhouette of a cowboy on a horse. A new state! I decided that the Welcome Center would be a good place to stop. As I took the off-ramp, Oscar sensed the car slowing down, woke up, and assumed his “Washington Crossing the Delaware” pose in the car. He liked standing on the arm rest, and I had a few theories about this. I assumed he was curious and liked watching through the window. Maybe he just likes licking my face. Or perhaps it’s more comfortable to stand there than sit in the back. Or it could be that he likes the air conditioner blowing directly into his face.

Before exploring the area, I gave Oscar fresh water, then we trudged off to inspect a large bronze wildcat and a view of open land in the distance. No doubt, there is a lot of space in this part of the country. After speaking with a helpful woman at the information desk in the Welcome Center, we were back in the car with a plan to detour off the main interstate onto Highway 111 to Highway 24. I-90 was sparse, but this local highway was almost empty! We passed the sign for a town called Alva. “Population: 50.” Yes, lots of space.

We were making our way to Devils Tower National Monument. A friend had mentioned it to me prior to our trip, and the Welcome Center confirmed it was a popular attraction. So I drove with anticipation. And drove. And drove. Suddenly, a plateau-like mountain in the middle of an open plain appeared in the distance. It was unique and eye-catching. I started to understand why Devils Tower was a must-see.

As we pulled in, I grabbed Oscar’s leash. “Let’s check this out!” He seemed up for it. We walked around the park in a long, grassy section where pets were allowed. We had a great view, so I



## Bring Oscar

persuaded Oscar to pose for a photo. It wasn't difficult. He was a bit tired and quite content to sit still. His tongue was hanging out of his mouth, so he presented a perfect smile! I marveled to Oscar about how they should include him on a Wyoming postcard! There are plenty of Devils Tower pictures out there, but I preferred a shot with a personal touch.



*An angel in front of Devils Tower*

After marveling at how few visitors there were, even during the summer vacation season, we got back on the road headed toward a little town called Hulett where we'd stop for lunch. I found a place with the curious name of R Deli. What really caught my attention

was the countless white animal horns on the eave and roof in the front of the building! I decided not to ask where they came from and instead ordered a big chicken sandwich for the two of us to share. Oscar got the chicken; I took the veggies and cheese.

As we ate comfortably under a shaded awning around the corner from the deli, I noticed a Hulett Museum Art Gallery. What could possibly be inside that place? After lunch, we went across the street to find out. Sure enough, it was another pleasant surprise! There was a nicely displayed collection of Western items, and it was run by a historical collector from the area. It had shiny finished-wood floors and immaculate displays, so understandably, pets could not enter. Fortunately, the weather was pleasant, and there was a wooden bench with solid railing. So Oscar sat at the entrance under the bench. He seemed content, clearly having no interest in the exhibits inside.

The owner/curator, who was wearing a western shirt, jeans, and cowboy hat, introduced himself. He was from Tucson, among other Western spots, and had acquired tons of items for his own personal collection. After having accumulated enough stuff, he opened this museum, alongside items on loan from the Smithsonian's storage and pieces from collectors in the area. It was a substantial display of artifacts and antiques. He was quite welcoming and offered some cool historic tidbits. As I looked at the items, I could still see Oscar sitting at the museum entrance. He seemed to be OK, watching an occasional car or person go by.

Thirty minutes later, we left Hulett and took the scenic side road out of town headed toward Sheridan. I continued to admire how wonderful and remote this land was, but at the same time I thought, *What if the car breaks down? How long would it be before I could get some help?*

What a sight that would be: Oscar and I walking along the interstate for miles. Fortunately, the two-hour stretch to Sheridan went by quickly. Tonight's destination was Mill Inn. Its towering structure was visible from a distance. It's a former flour mill, which seemed interesting, and it was listed as the number one hotel in Sheridan on Tripadvisor. It was worth a try.

## Bring Oscar

To get into the lobby, we passed under the hotel emblem: “Best Rest Out West” with a silhouette of a cowboy riding a bucking horse. Our room was small but nicely renovated. Overall, the Mill Inn was a score! Oscar and I explored the hotel grounds with a keen interest in the high silos. Although, I think Oscar sniffed the bushes with greater interest.

When it was time for dinner, I decided to try Taco John’s. I had seen several of them along the way, and curiosity got the best of me. Plus, it was located two blocks away, so we could walk rather than drive. At the restaurant, I left Oscar in the outside patio. I went inside and ordered a taco salad for me, Santa Fe chicken on the side for Oscar, and a Coke. As they prepared my meal, I gave a quick wave to Oscar through the window. I think he saw me. He was waiting patiently.

After dinner and custard dessert, we returned to the comfortable, air-conditioned room. Oscar found his spot for the night.

## SHERIDAN, WYOMING to DILLON, MONTANA

IN TAKING A cross-country road trip, there are inherently long stretches of driving. Today's leg would be four hundred and twenty miles, enabling us to get to Boise in two days. In total, we had nearly seven hundred miles left. At least, these long periods of time in the car were relatively comfortable. I can remember in the late 1980s when I was going to and from college, it took about six or seven hours by car from Phoenix to LA. I did the three hundred and sixty miles of driving through the desert in a 1970 Dodge Challenger—with no air conditioner. I called the system “4-40 air conditioning,” which meant I rolled down all four windows and went forty. I'd also leave as early in the morning as possible, and sometimes, when the temperature gauge rose toward the red line, I would turn the heater on with the hope that it would add ventilation and help the engine heat escape through the opened vents, thus cooling the radiator. The ride was a furnace on wheels.

Today, as an adult, driving is a more comfortable journey. There can be long stretches of the same road, but it's exciting not knowing

## Bring Oscar

what town or site is around the corner. I found driving two hundred and fifty miles per day with Oscar to be enjoyable. Listening to XM radio, which included dozens of classic stations, was an improvement from old cassettes. And, of course, there was plenty of air conditioning.

On this day of driving, we got an early start and crossed into Montana. It truly was Big Sky Country. The scenery was beautiful: green pines, white-capped mountains, and the blue sky. It's hard to describe, but when you look in the distance, it really does look like a "big sky" that goes on forever. Occasionally, I just had to stop on the side of the road for a photo. Each time, I'd look up and down—*big sky*. The height from the horizon up to the sky seemed larger than normal, as if it were an optical illusion.

We remained on I-90 west, driving around Billings, until we hit an official rest area twenty miles west of town. There was a pretty view of mountains, along with Yellowstone in the distance. Oscar and I took a moment to walk around and enjoy the fresh air. It was at this rest stop that it hit me how much easier (and appealing) it was to learn facts, history, and geography during this trip compared to textbooks or a classroom.

I found yet another good photo op and asked a young man if he could take a photo. He agreed, not enthusiastically, but he was nice enough. I handed him my little digital camera, and he seemed a bit perplexed. Perhaps, in this day of smartphones, traditional cameras were becoming less familiar. I showed him which button to push and where to view the shot then picked up Oscar, walked twenty feet away, and posed. The guy took a few pictures, handed me the camera, and rushed off. I looked at the digital photos, and realized there were no pictures! He had pressed the wrong button.

I tried another guy, repeating the process. Photographer number two took the photos and walked off. I looked at my camera, and there were photos, but they weren't centered. At least I could crop them later. *Can't anyone take a picture with an ordinary digital camera anymore?*

Before returning to the car, I ran across a kid wearing a Boston Bruins t-shirt. "Aren't they playing the Blackhawks?" I asked. The Stanley Cup Finals was the extent of my hockey knowledge. Then I mentioned that I was from Chicago.

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“Yeah,” he answered. “We’re up 2-1.” The kid seemed to be boasting. I’m not sure why. After all, I wasn’t playing. Nevertheless, he seemed nice enough.

“Hey, you mind taking a photo of me and my dog?” Third time’s a charm. In the end, this Bruins hockey fan took a nice, well-centered shot of us.

During the next stretch, we passed ranches, cattle, and railcars carrying coal or minerals. Then, the spacious road went through a few passes along the Gallatin Range. It was a beautiful mountainous view of pine and green grass. Some homes in the mountains caught my eye, so I wrote down the nearby town’s name, Livingston, so we could pass through on the way back. Twenty miles farther, we stopped at a rest area near Bozeman. Oscar scouted around while I read a few illustrated timelines related to the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail; another lesson, courtesy of the Montana Department of Transportation.



*Montana rest stop—Green grass and Big Sky*



## Bring Oscar

Shortly after passing the Continental Divide of the Americas, a significant position dividing the flow of water into either the Pacific Ocean or Atlantic Ocean, we reached the eighteen hundred miles of traveling mark via I-90 and switched onto the junction of Interstate 15 heading south toward lower Idaho. An hour later, we reached Dillon, Montana, where we were staying at a Motel 6 for the night. The room rate was only fifty-eight bucks, so I was prepared for anything. At the reception area, Oscar and I encountered a friendly student, originally from Mesa, Arizona, working the front desk.

“Really?” I said. “I grew up in Phoenix.”

“Small world.”

“And, you ended up in Montana?”

The student explained when and why she moved. Mostly, she liked the climate and lifestyle of Montana. “But maybe I’ll go back some day,” she added.

Oscar popped his paws onto the front desk countertop. She seemed to like dogs and gave him a friendly glance. “Sorry about that,” I said. “He’s excited about checking in.”

I pulled the car around back, closer to our room. I lifted Oscar out and placed him on the ground. Then, I went to the backseat and pulled out my small bag with one night of clothes and toiletries. I grabbed a bottle of water and my laptop, then locked the car.

*Where’s Oscar?* I looked around. The dog was gone.

“Oscar,” I called out. *Where did he go?* “Oscar, where are you?” It was useless. I noticed his hearing had begun deteriorating a few months earlier. He may not be able to hear my voice, even if it was loud. I put the bags down and walked twenty feet in each direction.

*What the hell? I know you can’t go far.*

I called his name a few more times. Suddenly, I heard the rattling of his collar from above. I traced the sound to an outdoor stairwell around the corner. I walked over, looked up, and saw Oscar frozen near the top of the stairs! “How’s it going up there?” I asked him. Oscar could work his way up a set of stairs, and if possible, he would patiently, methodically, slowly come back down. Unfortunately, sometimes his old legs found it too difficult to come back down steep or separated steps.

He looked down at me with the expression, *are you coming?*

“Oscar, we’re not on the second floor.” I went up the stairs and carried him back down. Then, I retrieved the bags and bowls, and we went to our room.

Motel 6 can get a bad rap, yet the room turned out to be a great deal—quite spacious, two beds, good Wi-Fi, and air conditioning. Plus there were no blood stains, crime scene chalk lines, or funny smells. It seemed like a good deal and safe place, and there was no pet fee. It was a bit noisy, but we could live with that.

The only downside to this remodeled place was lack of extras. I didn’t see any shampoo or soap; so, I used leftovers I had collected from other hotels along the way. And, the bathroom had flimsy white towels, (the kind we had in seventh-grade gym class).

After unpacking, we did a bit of exploring. Two blocks away was a huge running area for people and dogs, and farther down the street, there were restaurants and a great walking path. Oscar and I started along the expansive path through the woods and along the ponds near the motel. Then, we continued to an open field where two dogs were wrestling with each other. Oscar gave it a try and joined in the wrestling, albeit a half step behind the young Labs. Eventually, he walked away and started sniffing and yawning. “Yeah, Oscar. Your best days are behind you.”

After returning from the afternoon walk, we drove ten minutes into the downtown area, searching for a place to grab dinner. Starting at the Beaverhead County Courthouse, we drove around the area until finally settling on Papa T’s Family Restaurant. “Family restaurant” usually implies decent prices and a menu full of choices. Plus, on the awning it said “Taste of Montana Hospitality”—sounded like an endorsement to me! I went inside and placed an order to go. While the food was prepared, Oscar and I walked around the block, looking at the shops, a tavern, and other Dillon businesses. It was a Tuesday evening after seven o’clock, and although it was bright and sunny outside, many of the places were closed.

During the ride back to the motel, Oscar sniffed the bags. As we walked to the room, Oscar led the way—he was anticipating dinner! Following dinner, I checked email and reported to my mom that we had made it to Dillon. Then I flipped on the TV and



## Bring Oscar

relaxed. As Oscar sat next to me on the bed, I scratched his back and massaged his ears. That's when I felt something on his back. I rubbed my finger over it again. When I pulled back the fur, it looked like a dark red pimple. *Maybe it's a tick?*

I checked online, searching "How to remove a tick from a dog." Apparently, I was supposed to use tweezers, but I didn't have tweezers. Fortunately, a few days ago, I had packed plastic utensils. So, using a plastic knife and fork—and some bad lighting in the motel room—I started to pick at the "pimple." After a few times of picking at it, the thing changed position. So, it was definitely not a pimple. *It's alive!*

I kept prodding with the fork and knife. Then, I could see it!! It was a tick, with the little legs still moving. I managed to pluck it out, like chopsticks. After squishing it, I tossed it in the garbage. I kept thinking, *Damn, that thing was alive.* Yuck.

## DILLON, MONTANA to EMMETT, IDAHO

IN THE MORNING, Oscar eased his way out of the bed onto the carpeting, cleverly using the hotel comforter to help himself down. Each night at home, when I went to sleep, I'd hear Oscar's paws on the wood floor: clop...clop...clop...clop...clop-clop-clop, and then a leap into the bed. Until one day, he couldn't do it. The bed became too high for him, so he would walk over and stand next to the bed, waiting for me to lift him up. Getting off the bed wasn't bad. He figured out how to drape his paws along the side and "slide" off the side. And that became our routine.

Oscar landed all four paws on the ground and wandered to the toilet for a drink of water, bypassing his bowls set on a towel. *Dogs do something funny, stupid, or gross every day.*

With no breakfast offered, we checked out sooner. I led Oscar to the car and opened both the passenger door and the back door. "Which seat do you want?" He chose the backseat and climbed up. It was a bit high, so his hind legs slipped back to the ground. I caught him and gave him a lift. "Backseat it is."

## Bring Oscar

After closing the doors, Oscar retrieved a leftover dog treat lodged in the backseat. I sat in the driver's seat, placed the Motel 6 printout on the pile of receipts in the compartment under the armrest, and started the engine. After an hour on I-15, we approached Monida, Montana. Exit 0, the last stop before crossing into Idaho. I started looking for a rest spot. Then I saw a sign: "Spencer, Idaho—Opal Capital of the World." It was approximately fifteen minutes down the road.

Opal Capital of the World sounded alluring. *Of the world? Let's see if they live up to it.*

We pulled into this small town, which would be our last stop for gas. I drove into the lot with an old-school gasoline pump, the sort I hadn't seen since I was a kid. It was like stepping into a forty-year time warp. There was a café with a gift shop that sold opal-related souvenirs. Also, you could pay to go into the back and mine for opal. A few senior citizens were outside trying their luck. We might've joined in the opal search, but no dogs were allowed. It's too bad. Oscar would've been great at digging up the ground!

After fueling up the car, we walked down the road and passed a sign that read, "Since 1897, Spencer, Idaho, Elevation 5898." The elevation seemed a heckuva lot higher than the population. We also came upon what appeared to be an old mining stop. There were railroad tracks and what looked like an old depot stop. I snapped a picture, and that was the extent of our tour of Spencer.

We resumed our drive down I-15 through desert landscaping as well as lava formations that created porous rock surfaces and scenery. Just past Idaho Falls, there was a place called Hell's Half Acre. The name choice struck me as odd. Are they trying to attract visitors or discourage them?? It sounded like a miserable, ominous place. So, of course, it piqued my interest!

Hell's Half Acre turned out to be a lava field. There was a trail that did a full circle through the desert and island of cooled lava. Along the way were boards with information and history about the area. It would make a good field trip for a geology class. It also proved to be a good place to walk with Oscar. We just had to bring water because it was hot as hell in the desert!

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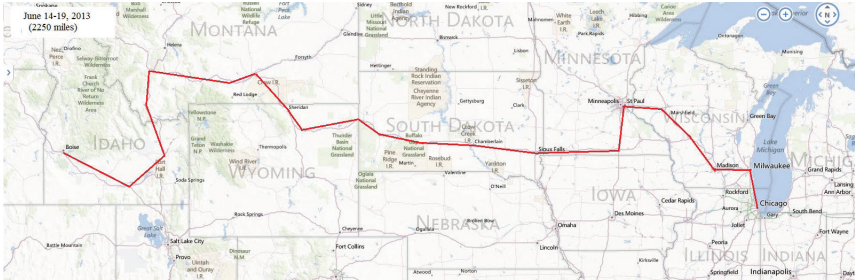
*Staying cool during a summer day in Hell*

Back in the car, we continued along I-15. Oscar was sitting in the front seat, soaking up the view and a back massage from me. At the interstate split, we turned onto I-86 west. This merged into I-84 west/Route 30 west toward Boise. At four o'clock, I realized I'd made a rookie mistake as we cruised straight into Boise's four-lane highway packed with cars. It was the middle of rush hour traffic on a Wednesday. Over the past few years, Boise had exploded into a rather large city. This brought restaurants, entertainment, and real estate development. It also brought traffic and other downsides of sprawling growth. There was no way around it. We were going to grind our way through Boise toward Gem County.

Once we made it through the traffic, we enjoyed the ups and downs of some small mountain passes, and we stopped at the Pearl scenic overlook. In the parking area, signs explained its history as a bustling gold mine town around 1900. Eventually, the ore ran out, and it became a ghost town. Our last scenic stop for this leg of the

Bring Oscar

drive was overlooking Emmett, Idaho. We looked at the beautiful view of the mountains and the valley below. At last!



## EMMETT, IDAHO - At Mom's House

WE PLANNED AHEAD of time to spend about a week at my mom's house. This would be a chance to visit family, take a driving break, get some laundry done, clean the car, and relax. It would be a reset. We'd use each day to explore an area around Emmett and nearby Boise. Spending a day or two touring a place gives an impression, but spending a week living in a place helps immerse you and produces a better understanding of the people. You may cover less territory, but it'll be more thorough.

After picking up some groceries for the week, I decided to check out the neighborhood gym. It's important to me to stay active, especially after so much time in the car. My mom, Oscar, and I walked three blocks to get there, and I tied Oscar to a bench just outside the gym entrance.

"He'll be fine," my Mom assured me. "Nobody in town will bother him."

"I know. I just want to be sure he doesn't block the sidewalk." I gave Oscar a quick pat on the head. "Wait here. We'll be right back."

## Bring Oscar

We went inside the building to check out the facility. It was a bit run down, with older equipment, but the people were super nice and the gym provided enough to get a workout. After all, dumbbells, pull-up bars, and stationary bikes are timeless. I explained that I was in town for a week, so signing up for a gym membership wouldn't work. However, they improvised and offered me a two-week pass—ten gym visits—for a whopping fifteen dollars. My local gym cost almost fifteen bucks for one guest pass. Small town wins again. The manager handed me a business card to use as a makeshift membership card. He told me they'd put a stamp after every visit. Perfect. "I'll be back later today."

We continued walking along the main streets of the small downtown. My mom pointed out places she frequented: a flower shop, a diner, an antique shop, the local bakery. A few blocks away, there was a large grocery store, restaurants, and an ice cream shop. And, there was a place to wash the dog. Lucky for you, Oscar. Across the way, there was the local car wash called the Car Tub, which was located next to the Gem County Fire Department. One mile away, there was a public sports complex with a track and open field. Plus, there was a concrete area for skateboarding. Along the way, the locals greeted us. Meanwhile, I kept noticing the surrounding mountains that rose into view behind the town.

The first few days, we slowed down and adjusted to small town living. Instead of miles of driving in the car, we were enjoying the extra free time. Each day, I'd walk Oscar. We'd pass by familiar shops, or we'd try different residential streets. People in trucks would say hi or wave as they passed by us. When I was younger, if you asked me to describe Idaho, I'd probably say "potatoes and militia." But now I was seeing rural Idaho firsthand, and so far, in Emmett, I'd begin by describing it as "nice people and mountains."

During most evenings, I'd check email, write, set my itinerary, or watch a movie on my mom's DVD player. One mile away, there was a Redbox, containing plenty of one-dollar films to rent. Meanwhile, Oscar made himself at home, resting in different spots around the house, unknowingly leaving his hair behind in each location. And, every few hours, I watched Mom straighten the house or sweep the floor.



Lance Friedman



*Oscar enjoying his vacation (Nearby, my mom is sweeping up dog hairs!)*

One evening, we left Oscar in my mom's place and walked down the street to the Emmett Community Movie Theater. This week's feature film was *The Fast and the Furious*. The ticket was about three bucks, the popcorn was a dollar, and the soda was a buck fifty. What a deal! We took our seats, where I enjoyed lots of legroom. While talking to Mom, I scanned the theater and looked at the scene. There were teenagers sitting up at the front, and two old ladies wearing tennis shoes in the row next to us, cheerfully gossiping about events in the town. A mix of townspeople of all ages filled the theater. Just before the show started, I trotted up the aisle and got another bag of popcorn. It was just one dollar, and I was happy to support the theater.

Before the start of the movie, the owner came out and introduced the show. He thanked everyone for attending and made a few announcements about upcoming movies and current events in town. After the film, which was thoroughly entertaining, everyone filed down the aisle and exited, each saying goodbye to the theater owner standing at the entrance. Small towns truly are a wonder.



## Bring Oscar

My mom and I walked three blocks back to the house. Inside, Oscar was waiting for us. I was relieved that there seemed to be no accidents nor any damage—until I noticed the blinds over the door window. Apparently, Oscar was trying to see outside? Or, get out? Nevertheless, he did OK.



*Oscar posing next to his handiwork*

That night, we took Oscar around the neighborhood. At 10:00 p.m., the summer weather was pleasant and the town was quiet. We walked by a small bar and restaurant, one of the few places that was open. Then, we continued past a few empty streets before turning back and calling it a night.

## EMMETT, IDAHO - Day 5

ON THE FOLLOWING Monday morning, I got up and took Oscar outside for a walk. When we returned, my mom was awake and offered to make breakfast for everyone. While we were eating, she got up to sweep the floor again. "He's just going to leave more hairs," I reminded her. In the hot summer, Oscar consistently shed his black coat.

"I know," she said, "but I like to keep it clean." I didn't bother to stop her.

"So, are we still going to your brother's today?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm not sure if we should stay overnight or return tonight."

"Either is fine with me," she said. "I can pack a small bag."

"I'll throw our stuff in the car, too."

My mom, Oscar, and I took a beautiful drive to Baker City, Oregon, passing through mountains and high desert. We stopped along the way to get a glimpse of a part of the Oregon Trail. A couple of hours later, we reached Baker City where we passed lamp-posts with pictures of their 2013 high school graduates. *I like small*

## Bring Oscar

*town communities.* There were a few cafes and a random general store, as well as several antique dealers.

We pulled in front of my brother's two-story house. Eric's two sons were playing in the front yard and happily led us inside. While Oscar browsed, my brother and nephews gave me the brief tour of the house. Thirty minutes later, Eric, Oscar, and I got into the car and drove to see his land, cattle, and bed-and-breakfast.

We began the forty-five-minute drive to Halfway, Oregon, stopping at a remote, scenic rest stop overlooking the valley with ranches and cattle and horses. After taking in the view, I lifted Oscar back into the car—and he tumbled into the backseat. “Are you OK, buddy?” Oscar leaned forward between Eric and me. *That was weird.*

We continued driving through the winding road, climbing in elevation, with the windows cracked open letting in the mountain air. Oscar pushed his snout against the window. He seemed to be sniffing the fresh air or enjoying the breeze. Or, maybe he was trying to get a better view of the scenery?

We turned off the paved road onto a dirt path that led to the bed-and-breakfast. After we parked in the gravel lot, I lifted Oscar out of the car and noticed he was limping a little bit. But then he started walking ahead of us. As my brother described the buildings and land on the ranch, I watched Oscar from the corner of my eye. He began making a wincing sound. “Maybe he twisted his leg,” I thought out loud. “Sometimes, he gets a sore leg and eventually walks it off.”

We continued walking behind him. Then he began acting oddly. He was sort of chasing his tail. Perhaps he was stung by a bee? Or, trying to sweep away an insect pestering him? He appeared to be desperately running in a circle.

We caught up to him. “Oscar?” Nothing. “Oscar!” He didn't respond to my voice.

I grabbed him, but he was stubbornly trying to go in circles. I held his body, and it was in a contorted circular form. I tried to straighten him, but his stiff body resisted. Then, I wrapped my hands around his neck and looked at his face. No expression. I waved my hand in front of his face. Like a blind person, there was no reaction.

Lance Friedman

I looked into his eyes and saw an eerie look of emptiness, fear, and stoicism. Then, his eyes started twitching!

“What the fuck is that?!”

My brother looked at the eyes. “I have no idea.” He waved his hands, but Oscar did not respond. “Is it a seizure?”

“Shit, I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like that.” Could it be a stroke? His body was stuck. How did it happen so suddenly? He was walking around, then suddenly, his eyes were twitching. And, he was crooked.

“If it is a stroke, we need to get him to a vet fast.”

“Maybe it isn’t? It suddenly happened. Maybe he’ll snap out of it?”

“He doesn’t look good.”

I carried him around for a bit. Then, I let him walk. Suddenly, like a drunk, he veered to the right and stumbled. I helped him up. Then, I watched his thirteen-year-old body wobbling and walking crooked, and then falling. I looked at him, and he stared vacantly back at me. We started to walk again. Then he began walking in circles.

“You’re right. We gotta find out what’s wrong. Is there a vet in this town?”

We drove back to Baker City. I wondered if these winding roads had given him vertigo. Or, when he fell at the rest stop, did it hurt him like some sort of concussion? Meanwhile, Oscar sat in back, looking medicated and vacuous.

Forty-five minutes later, I carried Oscar into my brother’s house and set him gently in the middle of the living room. Meanwhile, Eric went on the computer to get information. The others came into the room, curious about what happened.

Oscar staggered a bit, and then he suddenly puked—on the nice rug. This was a new low.

“Oh God,” my brother groaned as he looked over his shoulder. “That was a new rug.”

Murphy’s Law: Oscar didn’t throw up in the car, or in the yard, or on the kitchen floor. He let it out on the new carpet.

Eric turned back around and continued doing Internet searches about Oscar’s symptoms.

## Bring Oscar

“I’ll pay for another,” I mentioned.

“It’s a handstitched Persian rug.”

It sounded expensive. “I’ll get you another.”

“I bought it from an old guy in Pakistan when I was deployed.”

“Oh,” I sighed.

“Ah, whatever. I’ll just move a piece of furniture on top of the stain.” My brother’s dry humor could come out in any situation.

My mom and nephews rushed to get paper towels and cleaning materials to minimize damage to the rug. Then, I noticed Oscar’s eyes start twitching side to side again.

“It’s like he’s possessed,” I called out. “Hey, Eric, do a search on ‘dog twitching eyes.’”

My sister-in-law returned to the room with an address of the local vet. “He’s there right now. I told him you’re on the way.”

My brother jumped off the computer, I grabbed the dog, and we rushed down the street to the vet’s office.

After describing everything that had happened during the day, the young vet speculated it could be brain damage from a fall, stroke, or old age. Or, maybe not. “We could do an MRI, but it would be expensive. And, if it is a stroke, there isn’t much we could do here. You’re better off going to Boise where there is a surgical team and more advanced equipment.”

“That’s three hours,” I said. “Is that too much time to help him?”

The vet couldn’t provide a definitive diagnosis, so we had to drive back to Boise to see a specialist at the emergency animal hospital. If it were a stroke or seizure, we had a small window of opportunity to help him—if at all. I wondered if a dog stroke was different than a human stroke.

The vet offered the name of a specialist in Boise. “Here’s her information and the address of the clinic. And, I’ll send the records to her.” We started racing back to Boise, consistently checking on Oscar in the backseat. He was just sitting in his spot, staring aimlessly in no direction.

“He seems calm,” my mom said hopefully.

I was watching the clock and the speedometer. And, I was worried. “Well, his eyes are open. I suppose that’s a good thing.” When