

On The Level

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ALong Ride Into My Past

A Cross-Country Ride, a Family in Transition, and the Return of Buckskin

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Arizona's Painted Desert

Around Christmas 2024, my brother called with the news every adult child expects—but never wants. Mom and Dad's lives are shifting. They need to simplify: fewer technological hurdles, more like-bodied friends to stay active with, and a home that doesn't require Mom to micromanage every corner.

It's not that Dad isn't helpful—he is—but housekeeping has always been Mom's anchor. It keeps her tethered when conversations get too complicated or too quiet. It's her way of staying in control in a world that rarely is.

My brother's voice was soothing. "Look, Tam, you don't have to rush out here. How about coming in the spring before Phoenix boils over?" His offer gave grace to both my calendar and my soul, which needed time to get my head around what this next chapter might mean.

By April, my client's book was ready to submit to the publisher. I could finally head west. But this wasn't a trip I would take in a middle seat at 30,000 feet with pretzels and recirculated air. I needed the solitude and continuity of a ten-day motorcycle ride—a slow crossing that would give my thoughts room to expand and settle.

People sometimes ask if I get lonely out there. I don't. Not because I don't love the people in my life—but because my solitude feels expansive, never empty.



Breaking gravitational pull

Leaving is always the hardest part.

It happens at both ends of a journey—first in the leaving, then in the returning. I never plan to leave before 10 a.m.—but noon is my statistical habit on launch day. After that, I get antsy. I fidget. I second-guess.

Originally, I had intended to leave on April 2. But a storm front loomed over the Ohio Valley, Southern Appalachians, and Ozarks—a wall of weather fierce with tornadoes, flooding, and high winds. Rather than get marooned in a roadside motel before I'd even found my rhythm, I stayed put.

And while I waited, I did something unexpected: I cleaned my office. Reorganized the supply closet. Lined up the bookshelves. Cleared out old correspondence and travel brochures from a decade ago. I don't love doing it, but I love what it gives me: clarity, order, a kind of mental runway.

In the quiet sorting of old papers and glances out the window to check the clouds, I was making space in my mind. More than once, I thought of the nesting behaviors animals display before giving birth. I was preparing for a kind of birth too—a new relationship with my parents. Looking back, I see I was preparing to cross not just state lines, but time zones and history. And with them, emotional terrain I hadn't yet mapped.

Road-Ready

When I finally set out on April 6, everything felt aligned. I stopped at my local motorcycle dealership to grab a can of chain lube—just a quick errand. But Marc, my longtime service advisor, noticed something else.

"I'm not sure that front tire will make the round trip," he said, crouching to run his hand over the tread. "See here? Left side's pretty worn."

I was embarrassed. "Crap. I checked it with Abe Lincoln's head and it passed." As I think about it, I just put the penny in the middle tread, omitting the sides.

Marc brought the chief tire prognosticator over. He took his time, looked at the tire from both sides as I silently willed him to give me his blessing to leave. He eventually dropped the bomb: the tire might make it *to* Arizona. But not *back*.

I could've kept moving, convinced myself I knew better, gotten a new tire after wringing another thousand miles out of this one. But that would have been stupid—the constant worry



about it would have ruined the ride. So I did the right thing. Two hours later—new tire, fresh chain lube, a little lighter in the wallet but a lot safer—I rolled out of Charlotte, North Carolina, pointed west, and let my spirits soar.

The next morning I woke up just three hours from home, ready to roll well before the mountain temperatures (and possible black ice) were ready for me. I took my time over breakfast in the Hampton Inn's lounge where a broadcast morning show played overhead. Watching from my usual app-free vantage, it struck me—network TV is geared entirely toward the elderly—reverse mortgages, prescription ads, production values stuck in 1982. I was appalled. Was this the kind of crap Mom and Dad were watching? If so, maybe they felt older and more infirm than they should. I'd be on the lookout for their viewing habits when I arrived the next week.

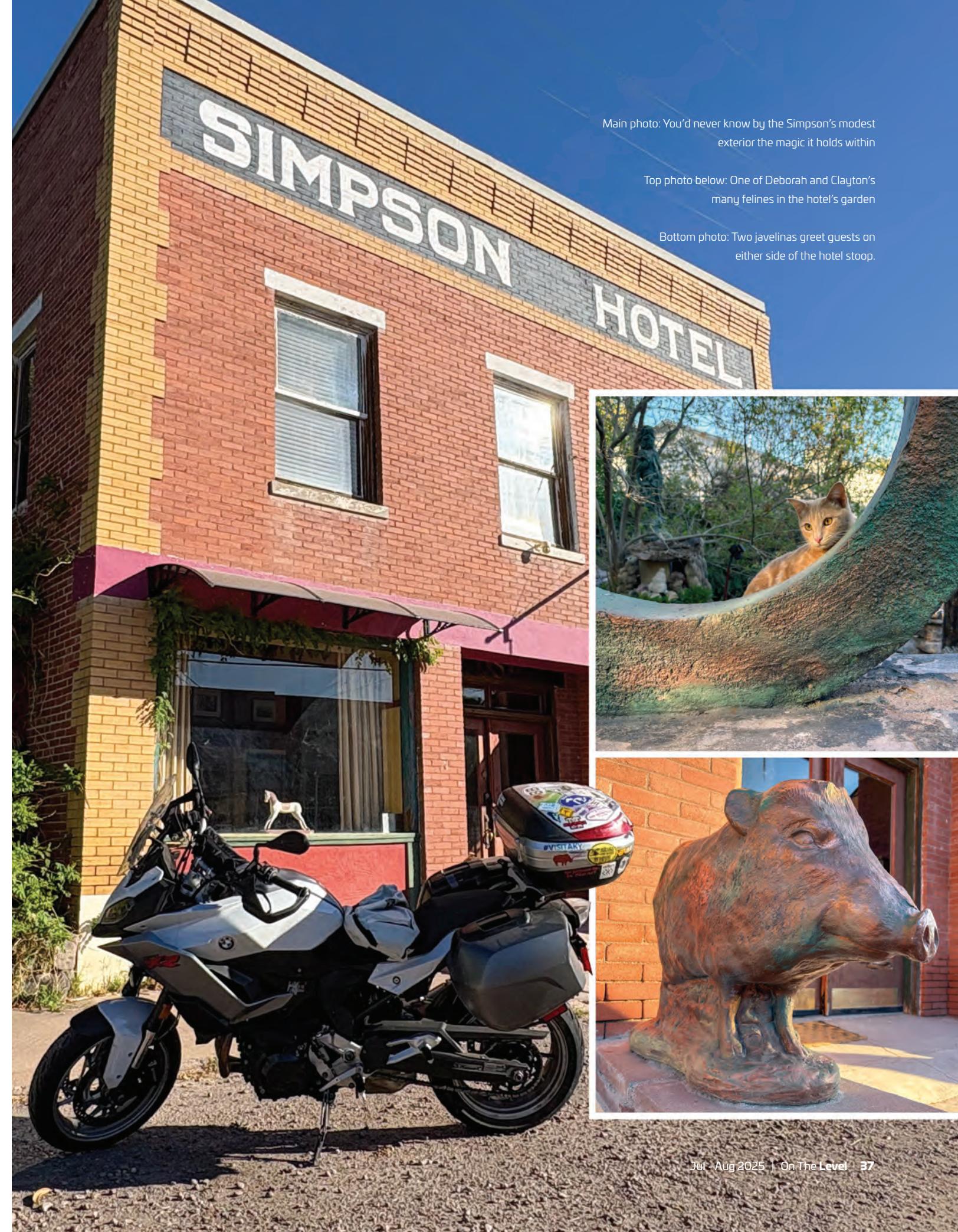
I wish those TV hucksters could have watched me an hour later when I took Pine Mountain Road to avoid the construction traffic on US 64. The mountain views were spectacular, but I missed a turn and immediately realized it. I pulled onto a gravel driveway beside a house with a Jesus Saves sign in the yard. This social marker could have meant any number of things—devotion, defiance, or a warning not to knock—but fortunately no one was home. Not even a dog barked. I dismounted and muscled the bike through a 20-point turn, leaning it toward me, pushing from the hip against the side case. My trainer would've cheered my stubborn patience as much as my balance. When I got the bike pointed the right direction, my breath was steady and my shoulders loose.

The day was unfolding exactly as it should. Take that, pharma pushers!

Meet Buckskin

As I headed west under my own power, I wasn't just riding toward Arizona—I was riding back into a story that began decades earlier, when Dad mounted a CB radio under the dash—standard issue for regional and long-haul drivers in the 1970s before amateurs entered the scene.

"Buckskin" was my CB handle as I rode shotgun in our family's Vista Cruiser station wagon, barreling west from Ohio to California most summers. Dad was "Stagecoach." We'd scan the airwaves for "Smokies" (that's highway patrol) and call out to truckers for road reports. "Breaker 1-9, this is Buckskin. Got your ears on?" It was more than a game. It was my first taste of



Main photo: You'd never know by the Simpson's modest exterior the magic it holds within

Top photo below: One of Deborah and Clayton's many felines in the hotel's garden

Bottom photo: Two javelinas greet guests on either side of the hotel stoop.



Right: Artist Isaac Caruso painted this mural in Globe, featuring the miner on Arizona's state seal, George Warren, who, in 1877, had the original mining claim in Bisbee, Arizona

Far right opposite page: Duncan, Arizona, population 670. No town is too small for its own indie pizza joint.

Bottom left and middle: There are shopping delights at the Pickle Barrel Trading Post in Globe. The former warehouse was built in 1905 to store the Old Dominion Copper Mine's drilling mud and equipment



Right: Five days after I took this shot, the beloved Cordell mural was demolished. After a long vacancy, pigeons and other small animals took over the building, which became a health hazard. When asbestos was discovered, the only solution was mandatory demolition.



freedom—talking to the wide world out there: burly truckers and cross-country dreamers who'd never have given me the time of day without the anonymity of the CB radio. Where else would it be appropriate for a man to chat up an adolescent girl about smokies and road debris? I was getting a taste of adulthood without the dangers. A sharp-eyed, road-savvy traveler, part of a bigger world humming with voices and code.

Now, all these years later, Buckskin was back in the saddle—but this time, I wasn't calling out alerts. Stagecoach, once the man at the wheel, was now virtually riding shotgun, texting me for road updates, asking for photos of quirky motels and burger joints. He was dreaming aloud of "one last ride."

I'd send photos of roadside curiosities and little motels, and Dad would light up: "How do you find these places?"

Truth is, I've never stopped looking.

Some days on the road reward that kind of looking with magic. Others ask for something closer to discipline.

By the time I crossed into the high plains—where the land stretches wide and the wind runs unchecked—the ride became less about nostalgia and more about physics.

At 75 mph, a 50 mph crosswind doesn't just buffet your helmet—it can throw 700 pounds of bike and rider off course with nearly 0.7 Gs of sideways force. Riding in these conditions isn't so much about bravery. It's about not tempting physics. I just had to ride consciously, maxing out at 55 mph, and not succumb to white-line fever. Adjustments in lean angle, both hands on the grips, a little less daydreaming. Oh, and fuel management.

At one point, I nearly ran out of gas. My bike's computer alerted me that I had about 40 miles on the tank in the present conditions, and with the help of Google Maps I plotted a path to a middle-of-nowhere station. To get there, I rationed the throttle without trying to coast—impossible to get anywhere doing that with wind.

Yes, I made it, but with only nine miles to spare. What a rookie mistake.

Running out of gas has its own legacy in my life. The summer before senior year, I finally got permission to drive myself the seven or eight miles to school in the family's 1973 baby blue Super Beetle. That car taught me to drive a stick shift—a skill that later made motorcycling second nature. It also introduced me to the quirks of a faulty gas gauge. More than once, I coasted to the shoulder on fumes. No, I'm not saying the Bug's fuel gauge was broken; it simply didn't register the final third of a tank.

Much to Mom's chagrin, that car pushed me to learn Dad's "beat the gas" game. She never trusted a car with less than half a tank of gas, and Dad never brought his home with more than that. He wasn't so much a gambler as absent-minded, and he



Top left and right: 66 Monument and 1932 Studebaker exhibit in the Painted Desert of Arizona

Right: South-Central Arizona is copper country, and proud of it. This mural in Miami furthers a narrative local narrative about corporate responsibility in an extractive economy by combining poppies and mining. In a social media post the town explained: "We have come to a day where mining copper has taken accountability to work in harmony with our precious environment because our world needs ALL of its natural resources."

Bottom right: A solemn reminder at Becker Butte Lookout not to be distracted by the beauty of Arizona's Salt River Canyon

Inset opposite page: At GO AZ Motorcycles I got a new back tire, chain service, and a clean bike for the return trip



never seemed to leave enough time in his schedule to fill up. Then again, those were the days of gas rationing according to the last digit of your license plate. Sometimes you'd wait in line for twenty minutes only to see the car in front of you buy the last drop. Pull away, find another line, and wait.

Even after the gas supply stabilized, Dad and I were still the ones who'd stretch the tank and bet we'd make it.

Maybe it's no surprise I married someone with Mom's wiring. Matt loves a reliable plan, a known rhythm. I get it. There's comfort in repetition. But part of me still runs with Stagecoach, figuring the solution will reveal itself just in time, and that the best stories live a little beyond the edge of the plan.

Road Magic in the High Desert

Road magic imprinted itself on me early and I'm happy to say I never shook it off. I still get a thrill from pulling into a new town, from the promise of unknown cafés and creaky beds and conversations with strangers. My spouse doesn't share that bug, and younger people who never grew up road tripping—they fly everywhere, rent a car, then fly out—will never get the chance.

I had my heart set on the Simpson Hotel—an old place I'd flagged during route planning, promising charm and character. Ten days later I rolled into Duncan, Arizona, population 670. But when I got there, the Simpson was locked. No note. No lights on inside. A black cat blinked her yellow eyes serenely through the storefront window, unperturbed even when I cupped my hands around my face to see if anyone else was at home.

Some travelers would've taken the hint and left town right then. But I wanted to sleep in this classic territorial building that opened its doors in 1914 as the Hotel Hobbs.

I shrugged out of my riding jacket and sauntered across the street to the Gila Valley Feed & Hardware. Its facade is classic midcentury: a long stretch of front-facing windows framed in aluminum, beneath a flat blue awning that shades the sidewalk just enough. Inside, I found a display of Case® knives, horse halters and riding gear, and the kind of handwritten signage that tells you everything you need to know.

I quickly identified the proprietor, a slim man wearing the desert uniform of boots, jeans, snap shirt and cowboy hat. "They were here earlier," he said, when I asked about the hotel owners. "Probably just out for a bit." He offered me a chair by

the window.

When I texted a picture of the hotel's facade to Matt, his response was instant: "Are you sure this is a good idea?" I was. I'd seen enough to trust the place—and the hardware store owner, who had already started calling around town to see if anyone else had seen the hotel's owners, wasn't giving me the side-eye or nudging me toward the next town down the road.

From my chair by the window, I watched the hotel like it was a grandparent who had just dozed off, the sun shifting on the bricks as I occasionally glanced up from a game I played on my iPad. I didn't feel stuck—I felt rooted. As I waited, hardware store customers came and went—there was a big run on black sunflower seeds that afternoon.

Eventually, a dusty white minivan pulled into view, and out stepped Deborah and Clayton, owners of the Simpson. They'd told me they'd been a few towns over buying a water heater and thanked me for waiting. Deborah got my room ready with air-dried linens and a thoughtful touch in every corner.

As she worked her magic indoors, Clayton and I sat in the garden, enveloped in the scent of desert dusk after he'd watered the herbs and roses. His garden is a patchwork sanctuary—half desert whimsy, half outsider art installation. Cats lounged on sun-warmed stones and slipped through gaps in the walls like smoke except for Malachy, the queen of them all. She took her rightful place on my lap and permitted me to stroke her beautiful gray tortoiseshell back.

Tableaus made of found objects peeked out from the shade of olive trees and vines. One corner featured a mural with a wide-eyed face and a Latin phrase painted in red: *Hic habitat felicitas*. Here lives happiness. And for that night, it was a truth.

After a shower and shampoo, I walked fifty paces to Humble Pie, a no-frills pizza joint painted the same dusty blue as the evening sky. The sign was hand-cut, the windows a little fogged, and there was no dining room—just a flickering OPEN sign and the warm smell of melted cheese and oregano. The pizza wasn't transcendent, but it was hot, honest, and sustaining—just like the place itself. In a town with few options, it was exactly what it needed to be.

I brought my pepperoni-mushroom back to the hotel, and had my hosts all to myself. We spent the evening talking. Clayton had been part of Andy Warhol's Factory crowd in New York while Deborah came from civil rights roots—her



father had marched at Selma. They were artists and thinkers and caretakers of a place that could've crumbled, but instead, vibrated with life.

As the evening deepened, so did the conversation. We talked about the state of small towns, how even places like Duncan—places you might think would be insulated—had absorbed the same divisive currents as everywhere else. They spoke of neighbors with warmth and history, but also with weariness—the kind that comes from trying to hold a community together across painful differences brought on by the COVID pandemic and a bitter political climate.

There was no neat bow on that part of the conversation. No need for speeches. Just the shared reality that goodness, ignorance, love and prejudice often live uncomfortably close together. It reminded me that the road doesn't just offer escape—it offers perspective. And sometimes, the balm of conversation comes from simply sitting with life's dichotomies

just as they are and appreciating the company of those who hold space alongside you.

The next morning, I took some photos of the garden, patted the two bronze javelinas that flanked the front door for good luck, and made the turn for Globe, about a hundred miles away in the Sonoran Desert. In Globe, I'd meet my parents and niece for a couple of days of sightseeing in mining country before heading to their home in a Phoenix suburb.

The Simpson was still with me in spirit while I rode Highway 70, known fondly as The Old West Highway, as it rose and fell through a series of cool, pine-shadowed elevations before opening onto wide golden valleys flanked by soft red buttes. My night there was a reminder that stillness has its own pace, that solitude isn't the same as loneliness, and that sometimes, the road leads you exactly where you need to be—if you're willing to stop.

And wait.



On Road Magic and the Gift of Invisibility

If I could choose a superpower, I wouldn't ask for flight or telekinesis—I'd ask for invisibility. Not because I want to disappear, but because I want to witness the world unfiltered. Not the performance people give—or even the subtle shifts in animals when they know they're being watched, but the quiet reality of what life looks like in its unaltered state.

This is why I am a master-level road tripper. The road doesn't angle itself toward your gaze. It doesn't tidy up or announce its best features. It just is. And if I'm paying attention, I get to witness moments that feel sacred in their ordinariness: A shift in wind. The smell of unseen water in the desert. A black cat blinking from a window. An old man laughing too hard at his own joke in a gas

station parking lot. I call this road magic.

Road magic isn't luck. It shows up when you're paying attention—when you leave space in your schedule and your spirit. You can't chase it, and you won't find it if you're rushing toward a reservation or obsessing over your MPG. It shows up in the small spaces you give yourself permission to linger in. And it usually arrives when nothing's going as planned.

Just another note about invisibility: it doesn't mean detachment. For me, it means I get to step outside the roles I play at home—wife, mother, daughter, neighbor—and meet the world without the weight of expectation. It's a rare liberty for anyone, but especially for women. On the road, I get to return to my truest self. The road, in its vast, indifferent kindness, always seems

ready to receive me.

People sometimes ask if I get lonely out there. I don't. Not because I don't love the people in my life—but because my solitude feels expansive, never empty. Out there, I'm invisible by choice. No one has a stake in who I am or how I'm supposed to show up. But at home, I'm needed—and that kind of visibility carries its own weight.

We have an understanding, Matt and I. The beach is his touchstone—the place where time slows and things feel just as they should. He loves the familiarity of returning to the same spot each summer, the rhythm of days that don't ask too much. I go with him because he wants me there, and that's easy since I work remotely.

My need for new experiences continually reshapes me. I need them to feel alive, to stay connected with the greater world and everything just beyond reach.

Neither of us is wrong for needing what we need. And we're better for learning how to hold space for both.

Most of the other motorcyclists touring the Petrified Forest that day kept their helmets on to protect them from the wind. I thought it might knock my bike off the sidestand

