

ROUTE 66

I was never a fan of road trips. They're too time-consuming, too boring, and to be honest... Far too filled with the worst dad jokes I've heard in my life. My brother Ben doesn't like them either, especially since he got his new Nintendo Switch, he won't take his eyes off them, like a dog that cannot stop chasing its own tail. And I don't get it, honestly, it's not a PS5!

But of course, our dad LOVES road trips. My brother and I are 11 and 9 years old and dad's been taking us on the same journey since I was six: we ride across Chicago, all the way through Route 66, until we get to Los Angeles and visit the Yosemite National Park. A two-weeks trip. Dad says that it's like riding across America's belly. I find that...strange. Still, it would be waaaaay better if we hop on a plane and see America's belly from the sky, but he never listens and simply responds that we'll understand the purpose of the trip when we get older.

Now it's 6 AM and everything is already packed. I included my clothes, my laptop, and my headphones. Basically, my life. My brother packed his Nintendo and almost forgot his underwear. Men, huh.

Dad closed the car door, hit play on some old country music and our strip officially started. Only twenty minutes passed and dad was already hungry. Bad idea to start a trip without eating lunch first.

- "Mary, could you toss me a tuna sandwich? Maybe we shouldn't have started this without eating something first" he said.

Yep, just what I said. Still, I gave him one sandwich. We always pack a full bag, maybe too many sandwiches if I'm honest. It's an American tradition I guess.

Dad takes a bite, and prepares to keep talking. He has **that** look in his eyes. I know what is coming.

- "You know what, kids?"
- "What?" said Ben, not taking his face off his console.
- "You should never trust a tuna".

I gasped audibly.

- "Why is it, Dad?" I responded.
- "They're quite fishy".

Crickets. Almost literal crickets. And some background noise from the shooting game Ben's playing.

- "Tough crowd".
- "Nope, the joke was lame".
- "Maybe. It's not my forte, though. Your mom used to be way better at this".

- "At preparing lunch before trips?".
- "Yep!", he said, laughing for a while. "Making lunch before trips, and also making jokes. She loved tuna sandwiches too, you know?".

I don't remember much about mom, and neither does my brother. I know she was a comedian, but my dad almost never talks about her. Sometimes, when my dad doesn't know what to do, he looks above his head and asks "What would Julia do if she was here?" And then he just laughs.

A short refill of gas in St. Louis and we keep our way until Springfield, Illinois where we stop at the same small motel we stay in every year.

- "Why are we staying in this same motel, dad?", Ben asked.
- "Well, this is the first stop on Route 66. I used to stay here with your mother. We always got the second room on the second floor. The most philosophical room ever."
- "Why is that?" I asked, but I immediately regretted doing so.
- "Well, once you're in there, you can't stop asking '2B or not 2B?'"

Lol.

At least I know why we're staying here. After that night it took us ten days to reach California, and we passed by cities with weird names, like Amarillo, Tucumcari, or Flagstaff. This trip was a bit different than others: every time we reached a new destination, dad told us stories about his time with mom, and how they used to travel the same route every year. Even Ben listened to every story and started to take his face off the screen more often.

Dad told us stories about her favorite restaurants, her favorite food, about the time they went to a steakhouse and she told the waiter to "never gamble if you work at a beef restaurant, because steaks are always too high". Not gonna lie: with each story, I was slightly starting to laugh at these jokes.

Twelve days later after the beginning of our trip we reached Needles, California. Of course, dad had some thoughts about the city:

- "Wow, Needles is a beautiful city. It's not as scary as people say".
- "Do they really say that?" said Ben.
- "Yeah! I mean, not for me. I don't see the point"
- "Wow...".

Dad laughed at his own joke. Then turned back on us.

- "You know, your mom used to love that joke. I used to tell it every time we got to Needles, in many different forms so she couldn't see the punchline coming".
- Oh...

- "Yeah". He took a deep breath. "There are many things that you didn't know about her, right?"
- I guess.
- "I'm sorry about that. You were babies when it happened and... I guess I couldn't bring myself to talk about her. That's why we do this trip every year... We used to do it to celebrate our anniversary".

We didn't know what to say. We stayed in silence for a couple of seconds.

- "So, I hope you were able to know a bit more about her. Now that you're a bit older.... I figured out you would understand better".

Silence again. Ben spoke first.

- "We do. Thanks dad".
- "No worries, kid". He cleaned off two small tears that were running down his face.

We rested for the night, and resumed our travel the day. The rest of the trip was quieter than usual. Eight hours after leaving Needles, we reached Yosemite National Park.

We are surrounded by huge waterfalls, astounding valleys, and the most beautiful sunset. This is always my favorite part of the trip. I watch my dad contemplating the horizon and I know he's thinking about mom. Now, instead of the two tears I saw yesterday, he has a stream running down his face. He's quiet, not cracking jokes. I get close to him, and grab his hand.

- "Hey, dad. What do you call the base salary of a small mother?"
- "I-I don't know. What is it?"
- "The bare mini-mom".
- "Phew... Wow. That was terrible".

Ben got closer to us, and held both of our hands.

- "Yes, it was", he said.
- "I know".

Dad hugged us both. The sun was going down.

- "Love you, guys. Your mother would've loved this trip".

I know, dad. I know.