

## Driving to Boise

You're driving to Boise. The highway runs across the high plains, up from Wyoming and into Utah, across the Wasatch Plateau and on into Idaho. These are very high plains. They're eight or nine thousand feet up. The road, that is. The road is surrounded by rolling hills that are just getting started at 8,000 feet, and the distant mountains are a whole lot higher than that.

It's more than a little interesting driving at 80 miles an hour above 8,000 feet, even without much traffic. Every now and then a semi will pass you and then later, driving up a hill, you'll pass the semi, and then still later, down hill, the semi will pass you again, and after a while you realize this careening do-si-do will go on forever unless you make an adjustment to your cruise control. You can either go slower or faster, but with hours behind and hours ahead slower is no choice at all. So you bump your cruise control by, say, half a mile an hour, but then the next time this eighteen-wheeler passes you on the down hill it takes a little longer to get by, and you realize this thing you're doing, all day, 80 miles an hour at 8,000 feet on a little strip of pavement in the middle of nowhere, with no sign of civilization in any direction, except the road itself and a thin stream of traffic, isn't much fun when you're just a few feet away from a 50-foot truck that's also going 80 miles an hour.

Sometimes when you're passing a big-rig, it turns out to be a dual-tandem with two trailers, and you're plunging alongside for too long, much too long to be three feet away from it, towering fifteen feet overhead. You realize you'd better just goose it and get past the thing, so you push the pedal down and speed up to 85, except this one's still taking too long, so

you figure what the hell, get past it, and you push the pedal a little further and now you're going 90.

Unfortunately the road is turning right now, in a lazy arc that goes on forever, and you're barreling along in the left lane, and this road that's now going 90+ miles an hour at maybe 9,000 feet is for some reason off camber. It's tilted to the left, so the centrifugal force and the tilt of the road compress the left suspension on your mini SUV and you can't shake the impression you're about to fly off into the hinterlands. At your current speed this boxy little car will roll and bounce for miles before it finally comes to a stop like a crumpled tinfoil chewing gum wrapper in a gully somewhere, far out of sight from the road, a few torn up divots between the pavement and your burial site. No one will notice those divots until days after you fail to arrive in Boise.

So it's white knuckles on the steering wheel, nudging well past 90 to get this over with, bracing for the slam of the truck's bow wave, and once you're past the damned dual tandem, you pull back into the cruising lane and watch the tractor falling behind in your mirror and you drop back down to 83 miles an hour on the cruise control and hope there weren't any troopers around.

Chances are good that there aren't any. There's nobody up here. It's just rolling hills of grass that undulate for miles in all directions, and you've been driving through it at 80-90 miles an hour for four and a half hours and you haven't seen any sign of police or even civilization, except cars in the other two lanes going in the opposite direction. Cars and trucks and vans and buses and SUVs headed south, and of course the occasional cars, busses, trucks, and vans that pass you, or the ones that you pass, heading north. You begin to wish you weren't in an SUV, even a mini SUV. If you could choose your vehicle, you'd prefer a low slung car that's glued to the road so you could just sail past these semis and not worry about getting blown into the wilderness when the road's off camber and you're cutting through the bow wave, wondering just how much rubber is actually touching the concrete.

There is a certain tiny yellow road sign that appears every so often, a square panel with the silhouette of the back of a semi tilted up on one side. It's a black box on a skewed axle with one set of wheels in the air, in the process of tipping over, taking one of those sweeping off-camber bends a

little too fast, with a little too much wind, center of gravity a little too high. Soon it will be a pile of rubble on the shoulder or after a long tumble down one of these gently rolling hills. The yellow signs are just for the long-haul truckers, but surely they all get the idea; otherwise the highway would be littered with overturned trucks. Wouldn't it?

Out on some of the dry shallow hills, swirls of dust reach up toward the sky, twisting and meandering aimlessly. They are little tornadoes, sucking the soil into sometimes towering tan columns that catch the sun translucently, with a life of their own. They appear and disappear, rearing up and then fading from view, taking their own random paths through the landscape, while you rush past with the rolling parade of vehicles on your private strip of concrete.

Hours later, into the bright afternoon, there's a sprinkle of colored lights far ahead at the side of the road. All the cars and trucks slow down imperceptibly, adjusting their cruise controls to 81 miles per hour. The stream bunches up a little and flies past a cluster of cops and emergency vehicles by a short bridge, where you glimpse multiple tires and axles sticking up from the ravine below the road. Then the stream of cars and trucks nudges back to 85-90 and stretches out again and resumes its furious passage through the high plains.

Away in the distance the horizon is very interesting. A little waver of mirage hovers above the far pavement, like ripples of water on a pond, and the bright sun flickers on and off the surface, reflecting from puddles of water on the road. This is what you see, except the mirage puddles make the road seem like it doesn't go quite far enough to reach the horizon; they are like patches of sky in the pavement. In fact, as you approach the horizon it looks as if the horizon itself is the end of the road and you can see cars and trucks and minivans and mini SUVs driving into the ripply reflections in the distance, and they waver and they disappear and reappear and then waver some more. And then, presumably, they go on over the top of a hill and they disappear.

But what if that's not the top of a hill? What if that's the leaping off point? What if that's the end of the road? What if that's the end of the world? Now as you drive closer to this horizon you begin to wonder if perhaps something about the hypnotic process of driving at 80-83 miles an hour for four or five hours over these rolling hills in the middle of nowhere at 8,000

feet, with no sign of humanity in any direction except tin boxes and steel containers careening along with you or in the opposite direction—maybe this isn't real at all. Maybe you are on a road at 8,000 feet going all day long at a break-neck speed from nowhere to nowhere. Maybe Boise isn't off that end, up there past that horizon. Maybe it's simply nothing. Maybe you have nowhere to go. Maybe you're going nowhere. What's going to happen when you hit that horizon?

So you drive along, and you drive on, and you keep going, and you stick in the right lane as much as possible, and you watch out for the off camber turns, and you pray there won't be a tractor towing two or three trailers behind it going 82.5 miles an hour, because if there is you'll have to pass it, and the road will be off camber on a right turn and you'll be going 92.5 to get past him before sunset, and that strange bright wet wavering horizon is getting closer and closer.

When you reach it, your car flies off the edge of the world, into the blue sky, with a few scudding puffs of cloud high above and nothing discernible below. As the car floats slowly into oblivion you realize that of course it's not floating, and it's not slow. It's turning slowly but you started at 83 miles an hour and although your forward momentum is slowed by wind resistance, your downward momentum is increasing at 32 feet per second per second and you'll be hitting terminal velocity fairly soon. That is, assuming there's an earth below you, assuming this is a planet you're falling towards, and you try to look down as the car turns and tumbles through space, to see if there's a ground rotating around you, orbiting your car in relativistic motion, and you think to yourself, I'm not seeing what I should be seeing down there. And then you realize that like a pilot in a fog-bound airplane it's not always a foregone conclusion that you would know which way is up. This trajectory is different and it's not funny. This is a significant situation. You have no idea which way is up or down. You're not on an off camber lane. You're not passing a semi. You're in space, going nowhere and accelerating fast in a direction you never anticipated.

Where are the semis? Where are the cars? Where are the buses and vans and mini SUVs? They should be tumbling through space nearby, at least within eyesight, at least within view. But there aren't any. You're alone in the blue sky, falling, accelerating, tumbling. You see the clouds going past your windows, around and around as if in orbit, but there's no land

below. There is no ground towards which you fall, alone in your car. And you think maybe this goes on forever. Maybe I will never hit anything. Maybe this is it. Maybe this is the end. Maybe this is reality, falling into nowhere from nowhere and there's no such thing as Boise.

The dust devils swirl in the vast rolling fields where the road ends, and they watch the stream of cars, leaping like lemmings, flying off the edge of the world, where they disappear in sparkling trails of sunlight.

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