

# West Goddamn Virginia

## Fock 2: Oh Deer

But West Virginia was not done with us. No, no, not by a long shot.

On the return journey, we pulled into the rest area in Virginia – Patrick was driving, again – and as we cozied up to the curb, we heard a hissing sound, and steam began to rise from under Max's chin.

Thunder and damnation, Hoss, we be overheatin'!

I wrongfully chastised Patrick for not being mindful of the gauges – like the goddamn thermostat wouldn't have gotten stuck if I had been driving.

Well, we cooled our heels in the hot but pleasant confines of that rest area and waited for Max to unheat. After an hour or so, brandishing a hollow things-should-be-fine-now attitude, we set out once again for home. I was at the wheel now, so, clearly all would be well.

Three hours later, we were on the shoulder again. Max was emitting steam, and Patrick was emitting smug. We let Max catch his breath, then drove his steaming carcass to a nearby Chevron station in Strasburg, VA. We bedded down for the night in the dark lot of the closed gas station, and hoped that we could right the situation in the morning.

When they opened at 6:30, we fed Max copious helpings of anti-freeze and water, tossed in a quart of oil for dessert, and with crossed fingers knocking on wood, we returned to I-81.

At 7:15 a.m., Patrick wrote in the Notbook: "West Virginia! Let's hope we have better luck this time."

At 7:45 a.m., Patrick wrote in the Notbook: "FUCK! It happened again. Max hurled up anti-freeze. Rick looks as if he were a madman. He's gone toward the exit to find some help. Suck it up, Max, will ya??"

We were within a very long stone's throw of getting the hell out of West Virginia, but we got tripped up within sight of the goal line. AAA answered the call, as always, and we breathed a collective sigh of relief as the flatbed truck hauled Max and our unfortunate selves across the border into Maryland. But our sighs turned to groans when the driver took the first turnoff, and headed back into WV.

Just after 10:00, we hunkered down to spend the next several hours at Cupp's Texaco, in Martinburg. Replacing the thermostat is not a hard job – I did it myself a couple of times back when engines were simpler – but Cupp's already had a full plate this day, and we were just going to have to wait until they could squeeze us in.

We ran out of things to do real fast. The service station wasn't near anything of interest – no mall, no mini golf course, no bogus water park – nor was it a modern place with a convenient store full of magazines and food incorporated into it. It was your plain, old, 1960's style gas station. And it was a good one too, but it really made for a long day just sitting around waiting, not knowing when they might get to work on poor Max.

The week in New Orleans had left us very weary. It had taken a large toll on us: physically, psychologically, and financially. [More on that later.] So, right now, all we wanted to do was just get home. We had scrubbed our original plan to do a D.C. tour in favor of a beeline route home, but the beeline, to our dismay, took us back through the Mountaineer State.

I have no beef with that nickname. As stated before, I think the state name itself is foolish, but actually The Mountaineer State is a very good nickname. One of the best. It sums up the soul of the state: it describes the terrain, it alludes to the first settlers of the land, and it gives you the flavor of the redneck population that endures today.

The flag, though, is a study in overkill. In the central design, there are: a farmer, a miner, a corn stalk, an anvil, an ax, a plow, a pick, a bale of wheat, something that looks like a log, a rock engraved with the state's birthday, a pair of rifles, a Liberty cap, a red ribbon with the state motto on it, a bigger red ribbon with the state name on it, and a freaking flowering rhododendron wreath around the



whole thing. Give me a break. You'd run out of crayons trying to do that flag. It's not a symbol, it's an animated attempt to please every goddamn dunthead in the state.



Can't you just picture the endless succession of meetings and incessant bickerings that it took to decide on all of this?? Makes you wonder where (or if) they finally drew the line and said, *no, we ain't puttin' that on thar too.*

Dugg went to WVU for his undergraduate studies, and Patrick and I visited him once when he was there for summer session. Morgantown is a bland city. The University itself is nice enough, but the city that surrounds it is hurtin'. The houses are old, very close together, and poorly maintained. The streets are beat, and many of the businesses are run-down. It still kicks ass on Wheeling, but the comparison is not fair:

Wheeling is a city that was built up around industry, while Morgantown centered around a college. When industry fails, things get abandoned and fade into disrepair. In a college town, things just get beat up and worn out. Why paint the outside of a two-story house if you're just going to rent it to some college kids anyway. It'd be like washing your Jeep before you go off-roading.

Dugg lived in such a house off campus when we visited him, and one evening I went for a stroll down the steep hill and along the river. There was a small store along there somewhere that sold beer (among other things). I felt like having a few to sip while I dug the river, so I went in. It was old and plain, with a very basic selection. I grabbed a six-pack of Rolling Rock and took it to the counter.

A college boy had just gotten there ahead of me, with one of those 24-can suitcases of Busch. He made a little small talk with the counter girl about some guy he supposedly knew who supposedly worked there. The homely, squat, hick girl in the Marines T-shirt asked for his identification. He replied sadly that he didn't have his legal ID, or his driver's license, but he did have a school ID.

Griselda just said, "hay, ah jest need to see yer birthdaye." So he handed it to her. She studied it for several seconds, looked over her shoulder at the sign that read, "You may purchase alcoholic beverage if you were born by June 30, 1968."

Griselda turned back to Mountaineer Moron and said, "You were born in 1970??"

Moron responded forlornly, "Yes, ma'am."

Griselda promptly, but kindly, shot him down. I felt like pulling him aside and slapping him. WTF was he thinking?? You don't show the girl an ID that proves that you are NOT legal! God, what a dolt.

The Rolling Rocks on the banks of the mighty Monongahela were cold and things got good and chilly, if you know what I mean. Mo-town had daunted me initially as a shell-shocked city, but we went on to have fun swinging on the rope swing at Cheat Lake, and swilling cheap beer at The Bullpen Cantina. It doesn't take expensive, new, or trendy things to please Patrick and I. We are very comfortable in unpretentious circumstances. And, as Dug noted about his college home, "It's what you make of it."

Always is.

So, after more than four hours of sitting idly at Cupp's Texaco, waiting for Max's turn on the operating table, my restlessness, boredom, and frustration got the better of me, and I announced to my semi-snoozing traveling companions that I was going for a run.

We had been away from home for a fortnight at that point, and I had steadfastly refrained from running. Even though most of our NOLA Trials Tour Ensemble stubbornly insisted on dragging their brutally hungover selves around the sweltering inner city streets at noon every day, I had borne their taunts with ease. I took plentiful satisfaction in watching their wretched, sun-crushed, dehydrated semi-corpuses crawl pitifully back to the pool when they were done.

Age wasn't a factor. As Michael Palin's "constitutional peasant" character in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* once objected, "I'm 37, I'm not old!" No, it was laziness, not age, that was the issue. No bones about it.

So when the decision was made to launch into a run from this West Virginia gas station, it was done with full knowledge that it would be a most unpleasant experience. Two weeks of drinking like a

fish, eating crap food, staying up till 4 a.m., and doing *nothing* that resembled exercise: that was the lead-in to this run.

Why do it then, you ask? Well...where were you to ask it *then??* I could have — and *should* have — been talked out of this one.

As a coach, I have always preached to my runners that a positive attitude is a must. You gotta believe. Well, as I started this run, I was *positive* it was gonna SUCK. And I firmly *believed* that I just might drop dead.

Running is also a rhythmic thing, and if you can latch onto a consistent tempo, it can often carry you through. So, as I slogged miserably — and far too visibly for my liking — around the residential streets of this medium-sized town, I consoled myself with the fact that there was no way I would be seen by anybody that I knew. It sucks when someone who knows you sees you in the middle of a strugglin' run, especially if you don't see them first. Invariably, you bump into them somewhere later and they say, "Hey, I saw you runnin' down such-and-such street. Mannn, you looked baaaad."

OK, I could be anonymous, but I still had to survive. I sought that elusive rhythm that might help coordinate and revive my labored breathing and stunned leg muscles. The obvious miseries within soon developed into a mantra, and I fell into its steady beat: *I'm fat ... I'm old ... I'm slow ... I'm fat ... I'm old ... I'm slow ...*

Over and over. That self-deprecating (and overly honest) refrain carried me through. You'd think it would've beaten me up, with its relentless thrumming of negativity, but, in a contrary way, it actually raised my spirits some. It gave me three good and valid reasons why this running experience was so heinous. Had I attempted any kind of positive imagery or upbeat inner dialogue, the contrast with reality would only have led to self-loathing.

Max was just about done when the run finally ended. The plastic card, now swollen from overuse, was called into action yet again, and we were back in motion after a 5½-hour pit stop. West Virginia's toll — collected in the form of auto repairs — now stood at \$943.

You'd think that West Virginia would be done with us, but it must have sent out some voodoo whammy or something to intercept us. Directly because of the delay, we were riding through the final hills of eastern Pennsylvania at dusk. Without that wasted time, that final 500 miles would have been in the bank, and we would have been snug and comfy in our homes by the time the sun had set. We had passed through Scranton too, so maybe there was some evil influence from that as well.

Daylight was just about gone as we neared Blooming Grove, in the foothills of High Knob, on I-84. Neal was at the wheel, and I was passenging. We were 65-ing down the empty highway, trying to get as close to home as we could before spending one more unexpected night in the van. Our hope was to reach home that night, but the thermostat woes had put paid to those plans.

The transmission and thermostat were far from the worst mishaps of the '92 Tour, nor were they the most costly. Patrick and Dugg had pulled a rather pricey boner in The Big Easy, and we had simply hoped for a quick and uneventful ride home.

We couldn't even make a clean break from New Orleans, though. A violent thunderstorm hit us just as we began to cross that 29-mile-long causeway across Lake Pontchartrain. It was like something out of a fantasy novel: we pulled onto the bridge under sunshine, but, there ahead of us, maybe a mile out, was a dark and flashing cloud that stood from the surface of the water and towered hundreds of feet skyward, totally swallowing the bridge. It reeked of evil and death, it roared and hurled streaks of fiery power, but there was nothing to do but drive right into it. After all, a little rain never hurt anybody...did it?

The storm had it in for us. Half-blinded by its pea-sized water bullets slamming against our windshield, we could manage only about 35 MPH in our quest to move northeast. What was even more unfortunate was the fact that the storm itself was also moving northeast, and also at about 35 MPH. It and us were both on the NOLA-to-Birmingham Express. Exasperated by its persistence, we even pulled over at one point and made some samiches, hoping to let the storm pass. It seemed to work, but once we got back up to speed, we caught right back up to the soaking bastard.

So that sucked.

Then the overheating episode further smashed our schedule. We craved the homeland.

So as we reached twilight in those eastern Pennsylvania hills, I was seated sideways in the front passenger seat, facing and conversing with Neal at the Wheel, and Patrick by the picture window.

Suddenly, Neal jerked the wheel hard left and blurted out what sounded like “oh, dear!” I whirled to face forward and had a couple of hundredths of a second to realize that what he had really yelled was, “Oh! Deer!” There was a blink-of-an-eye glimpse of a full-grown doe in an all-out sprint, legs underneath her body as she gathered for another powerful bounding stride, head stretched forward, and nostrils flaring. Trouble was, she was sprinting directly across the highway, and Max was heading dead nuts for her.

Neal’s quick wheel-out was a valiant effort, but that doe was hell-bent on self-destruction. Before I could fully grasp what I was seeing, and figure out why the doe’s head was so bright, there was a loud *whackkk* as the deer cranium introduced itself to Max’s headlight, followed by a van-jarring *thumpp* from the doe’s body slamming against the side of the Ram-tough vehicle.

My head kept on swiveling, and as my eyes caught the mirror view, I saw a large black lump sliding down the edge of the breakdown lane, and something round and rather flat – almost like a warped hubcap, crookedly rolling out into the traffic lanes.

Neal pulled us over forthwith so we could assess the damage. I opened the passenger door and quickly stepped forward to check the headlight and make sure that Max was indeed still drivable. I had NO desire to call AAA *again*. They would have just hung up on me.

First impression: hey, no crisis – the headlight assembly was smashed, and the front fender was dented some, but the grill, hood, and bumper all seemed intact. Small, light brown hairs were wedged between the cracks in the plastic headlight frame. But there was nothing that would interfere with Max’s roadworthiness.

Content that we could at least keep driving, I checked the passenger door. There was a little streak of blood on it. I pointed it out to Patrick, how it kinda fanned out a little from the fender to the door handle.

“Ohh,” he said, rather cautiously, “then you haven’t seen this.” He swung the front door shut, and cleared my view of Max’s side. The van was coated, caked, splattered and dripping with a thick wet layer of green-and-red chunks and globs. It was partially digested grass, mixed with copious amounts of blood. That fanning out on my door was just the tip of the funnel that exploded out five planks to Friday all over poor abused Maxie. His side doors were caved in from the doe-body-slam, but somehow that seemed secondary to the horrid mess that was defiling his body.

It struck us all at about the same time, where this disgusting mush had come from. When Max had smacked the doe’s head with his headlight, the force of the blow, the angularity of the fender’s front edge, and the pliability of the deer’s soft neck combined to result in swift decapitation. Having just been grazing, the animal had an esophagus and stomach full of grass that had the consistency of Cream o’ Wheat.

Uncorked like a bottle of multi-colored champagne, the deer’s body spewed forth its latest meal, colorfully garnished in the fresh flow from its severed jugular.

It was gross.

It was beyond gross.

After of a moment of soaking in its beyond-grossness, I realized that that odd flattened object that had been rolling wobbly into the road was, in fact, the deer’s smooshed and misshapen head.

Poor deer.

Poor Max.

But the grossest was yet to come.

Realizing that there was nothing more to see here, we remounted the battered Dodge and sought a means to bathe him.

[And, NO, we did not take the body of the deer with us! For Christ’s sake, I can’t believe how many people asked me that. And they were serious! Talkin’ about eating the meat and all that. Did any of them really think I was gonna strap that headless, blood-gushing carcass on top of Max, get 262 miles worth of road grime on it on the ride, then skin it and cut it up when I finally got home?? WTF!? Get your heads out of your asses, please, you damn drunks.]

The next exit was not far, nor was the gas station it led to, but cleanliness still was. This was a very hick area, so choices just weren’t available. Daylight was all but gone, as were our hopes of home.

It was a typical 1992 gas station: no service bays, two three-pump islands with overhead roofs and lighting, and an attendant hut with a minimum wage, swarthy-skinned “worker” within. There was another building attached to the hut, which held promise of tools and other equipment.

We pulled one-eyed, blood-and-guts Max up to the nearest pump, with dripping deer residue plainly visible to Ahmed the attendant. I de-vanned and went over to ask Ahmed if he had a hose that we could use, and gestured to Max’s slowly crusting side.

He replied that he did have a hose, but that his employer had expressly forbidden him to allow anyone to use it. Irritated but not surprised at his robotic response, I made a vain effort at appealing to his common sense, and hoped that he had at least minimal capacity for independent decision making.

“Look,” I said. “We just beheaded a deer. I want to wash its blood off my van. If your boss were here, he would tell you to give me the hose.”

“No. He told me nobody use hose. Nobody use anything.”

I gave him a long, dark look. “I’m going to clean my van. If you don’t let me use your hose, I’m going to have to use your damn squeegee, which *you’re* going to have to clean later.”

“No hose. Boss said nobody can use any equipment.”

“Hose this.”

I walked back to the van, and, as Patrick and Neal watched in something close to disbelief, I pulled the small squeegee from its bucket.

“You’re not...” began Patrick.

“I am.”

“Oh my,” said Neal.

The squeegee was good and wet, and it made a sick **splutt** sound when I slapped it against Max’s messy flank and began to swish away the thick slop. It fell to the ground in clumps and gobs, dropping like red-and-green bird turds on the light gray concrete. I had to step around the droppings as I continued to knock the carnage loose.

Then came the moment that would surely ruin the night for the next few dozen customers: I dunked the blood-soaked squeegee back into the water bucket. “God help the poor bastard who uses this next,” I said to my traveling partners, who were standing there not knowing whether to laugh or vomit. When I pulled it out, it was dripping pink, and the top of the bucket’s water had some serious floaters.

It took several re-dunkings to get Max anything close to clean. Each time the sponge went in the bucket, the water got darker and the floaters got thicker. When it reached the point where the water was grosser than the van it was supposed to wash, we abandoned the effort, placed the vile squeegee back in the vile water, gave Ahmed the salute he deserved, and pulled away.

The ground we left behind must have been permanently stained. Somebody would definitely have to HOSE it down very soon. And I can only imagine the next unsuspecting motorist pulling in to the other island, distractedly reaching for the squeegee handle without checking the bucket, and slapping that nauseating blood stew all over the windshield on his girlfriend’s side.

There was no stopping us now. Max pretty much said, “screw you lunatics” and barrel-assed it home. There would be no more delays. No stops. I slowed down at Neal’s house and let him jump out. Patrick had to eject at full speed. Home was reached at 2:41 a.m.

And there was great rejoicing.

But, **thankfully**, on the way to Sacramento, on the pass through West Virginia, nothing happened. Nothing. So much nothing, in fact, that I even missed the border sign: before I knew I had left Mary Land, I was looking at a “Welcome to Virginia” sign. The Mountaineer State was done.

[Pretty good: 6346 words for a state where nothing happened. The man can digress.]