

Karen Chase

OEDIPUS IN THE BACKSEAT

A mother and son sing “America the Beautiful” as the road gets eaten up and day’s light turns to pitch dark. Dots of headlights dart to the radio’s raspy low jazz notes. Neon signs flash in reds and greens and oranges, the speedometer glows, and our first day has passed. We are getting close to Morgantown, West Virginia, the stopping point for the first night. It has been five hundred miles and twelve hours.

Last fall, my younger son Matthew flew to my home in Lenox, Massachusetts, from his home in Santa Fe. The next morning we set out for New Mexico: mother and son, together in a car from dawn to dusk for five days straight, autumn on the trees and sunshine on the land. To start, I drove.

“You excited?” Matthew asked.

“Yes!” I yelled.

“Amber waves of grain, here we come!” he said.

Wanting to get out of the familiar East, we mostly drove interstates that first day. After pizza for lunch in a northern New Jersey town, we crossed into Pennsylvania onto I-80. Matthew remembered that Frank Lloyd Wright’s house, Fallingwater, was in the state, so we found a visitor’s center and called to make a reservation, only to learn that we were so far away we could never make it before closing time.

We knew where we were starting, we knew where we were ending, we knew how long we had, and the rest was spur of the moment. Where to stop, what road to take, where to eat, what to listen to, when to talk, when to be quiet—unfolding like breathing, planless life at its best.

Driving west through Pennsylvania, we sang “Morning Morgantown” along with Joni Mitchell’s high-pitched voice from the moon. We sang and shuffled with the music across the country.

“Let’s each get our own room when we stop,” I suggested.

“Of course,” Matthew said, “after we’ve spent the whole day together, we’ll need time apart.”

“I’ll treat you.”

“No, I’ll treat you. You’re doing me a favor to help get the old car out to Santa Fe.” We agreed to alternate.

Late that afternoon, heading south on a small road, the sun just low in the sky, we drove up and down Amish hills, passing horse-drawn tractors, large-hatted men, Share the Road signs depicting a horse and buggy. The

light on the steep hills was heartbreaking, not the wild, shaking light one sees at the ocean, but a timeless, orangey Old Masters light, varnished and composed.

Because I was in my early twenties when I gave birth to my sons, we grew up together. In those years, I was often mistaken for their older sister or the babysitter. The last trip I made alone with Matthew was when I was the age he is now, forty-four, and he was living in Paris. I was giving a paper at the University of Barcelona, where he joined me. We took an overnight train under a star-studded navy sky along the shore of the Mediterranean back to Paris, where a small museum had mounted an exhibit of his sculptures. During that trip, sometimes I was mistaken for his girlfriend.

The timeless scene in the Amish hills that first day suggests taboos, suggests Oedipus alive. What am I not saying? What cannot be said? If there was a sexual spark between us, it was buried so deep I could not tell it was there.

But I did notice something. Almost anyone I told about the road trip was intrigued: daughters, sons, mothers, fathers. This was not a trip of a young mother and her young son, it was two adult people game to share an adventure. When I told one friend about it, she immediately confessed, unbidden, that she had a crush on a seventeen-year-old intern in the lab where she works, then mentioned that maybe it had to do with her feelings for her teenage son.



DAY 2 WAS MORNING IN Morgantown. In the lifting dark, at the Ramada Inn, we nibbled on an oversized buffet breakfast. In the car, as Matthew pored over maps, I rearranged the boxes in the backseat. It was full of things from my father's house: a microscope, rubber boots, Tiffany candlesticks, an axe, and cartons of books. My father, the ninety-one-year-old grandfather Matthew had been close to, had recently died.

We decided to head south towards Kentucky. I took the wheel, and we pulled out of the hotel parking lot. The first day we had crossed the Hudson and the Susquehanna, and as we left Morgantown, we crossed the Monongahela. Soon we were driving up and down winding West Virginia roads, forested and unmapped. With overdone soppieness, Matthew and I belted out "West Virginia, mountain mama, take me home, country roads."

We were in the middle of nowhere. When we saw a stopped pickup truck, we pulled over. "Excuse me, sir, does this road go to Smithfield?" Matthew asked. Long pause as the guy sized up dark-haired, dark-eyed Matthew. "Well, you *can* get there that way." We kept driving.

Matthew turned on the CD player. On came a voice chanting Hare Krishna. It was Krishna Das, a U.S. singer of Hindu devotional music. Matthew began to chant too; then, overcoming a hesitation, I joined in. Our chanting wove on through the snaking hills.

Son and mother chanting loud and long, passing through those woods, and a word bubbles up to consciousness. Holding one note, chatting between *Hares*, going in and out of the notes, switching styles of chanting—it was *holy*.

Why so much chanting? Last summer, just months after my father died, my first husband, the father of my sons, suddenly fell ill. Together, Matthew and his older brother David and their families flew to California, where they nursed their father through his last week alive. We were both soothed by the chanting.

At a pause in the music, I told Matthew a story about a blind date I had dodged when I was in college. A friend of mine was dating Timothy Leary, who had a friend named Richard Alpert. Both professors at Harvard, they were experimenting with LSD and magic mushrooms. One weekend I was due to travel to Cambridge for a date with Alpert, but I was scared by the thought of hallucinogens, and I backed out. Richard Alpert later became known as Ram Dass. Soon afterwards, I met Matthew's father at a civil rights conference. He showed me some peyote buttons his roommate had given him, along with the warning that they made you vomit. He tossed them out of his Saab into a nearby garbage pail, we talked about freedom rides, and we began to get to know each other. Two years later, we were married.

When Matthew was eleven and David was thirteen, Dick Chase precipitously walked out the door, after having been an especially loving father. Following years of ups and downs between father and sons, there had been meaningful mending in recent times.

We crossed a bridge: "Welcome to Ohio." Driving along the Ohio River, still chanting, we came upon a power plant and stopped the car. Smokestacks, coal barges, sculptural concrete buildings, ethereal billows of carbon spewing into the sky—hideousness and beauty, both. We filmed, we photographed, we talked about coal and carbon. One lone man walked up and down a long barge.

Matthew took a lot of videos at the power plant—clips of red and yellow leaves floating down the Ohio, with smoke reflected in the water. "Beauty and the beast," he said as we walked back to the car.

That second morning we stopped in New Martinsville, West Virginia, for a second breakfast at Presto Lunch. Eating my pancakes, I thought of "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," a poem by James Wright. "All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home"—his line popped into my

head. Did geography suggest the poem, or was I thinking about the father of my sons? The waitress told me that Martins Ferry was up the river not far from there, but in the opposite direction from where we were headed.

In the afternoon, we took the ring road around Cincinnati and picked up the interstate heading towards Louisville.

"Louaville, y'all," Matthew said.

"Louville," I responded. Playing with our accents, we tossed the word back and forth.

In his southern drawl, Matthew recalled asking for directions earlier that day. "The guy said, 'Ya go over the bridge, and ya turn at the place they call Rinkydinks.'"

"He was a guy," I said, "with this round ole hat on and a big beard coming down, all covered with hair, red shirt, ya know he was in a truck, honey."

"Then we passed 'the place they call Rinkydinks,' and the sign said Dinks. It's called Dinks, but everyone calls it Rinkydinks, but its real name, its Christian name, is Dinks," said Matthew. We could not stop laughing.

I had a flash that when I called Matthew "honey," it sounded more couple-like than mother-son-like.

Just north of Louisville, we checked into a Super 8 Motel in La Grange, Kentucky, in a mall behind a Cracker Barrel. We found a Mexican restaurant with raucous sounds and long lines coming out the door. It was Elvis impersonation night. We left and found another Mexican restaurant, crowded and lousy, then returned to the motel.

We said good night and went to our rooms. I began to think about home. Each night I would call my husband once I got to my room, moving from one anchor to another. When I told my husband this on the phone, he said, "It's funny you feel that way."

"Funny? What do you mean, funny?"

"Oedipal," he said.



MAPS OF INDIANA, ILLINOIS, AND Missouri, our Day 3 states, showed straight roads. Driving into the Midwest, we stopped to explore a rusty red field of dry soybeans, then continued on a road of the same color. We drove through the town of Cynthiana, Indiana, then past it.

Somewhere in Illinois we pulled up to a cornfield and parked. There was an oil well that looked like a hammer going up and down in the middle of the field. I had never seen one. "Ew," I said, "smells like money." We walked over to it through dry cornstalks, yellow kernels on the ground, scattered reddish cobs. The heavy red-and-black steel machine was stunning—a rhythmic clink clink clink, the sound of oil being sucked up from the earth,

machine parts moving up, down, and around. I stood there hypnotized as Matthew filmed the rig for a long while.

Back on the road, we passed enormous fields of corn, sorghum, and soybeans, nary a family farm. Then we passed a grain elevator, the lone, dominating structure of the towns in these parts. With Matthew at the wheel, I mentioned that he had done most of the driving. He said, "Sometimes you hit the brake a little bit, being cautious, and I don't use the brake much. I might take my foot off the gas. So it's a little jerky, which is fine, I can handle it! I think it takes more of your *chi* than it takes of mine."

"What's *chi*?"

"*Chi* is like your life force, your energy, your calories. Whoops! What?" He caught himself veering towards the shoulder. Much laughter.

Finally, St. Louis came into view, and we saw the Saarinen Arch, which looked small at first. As we got closer, we saw how huge it was, then saw the bridge over the thrilling, muddy Mississippi. The stainless steel-covered arch, Gateway to the West, took my breath away. It's the tallest monument in the country at 630 magnificent feet.

Matthew pointed out how simple the structure is—it's a parabolic arch—and used a string to show me what that meant. "Think of the McDonald's M, which is two parabolic arches."

From the time my sons were little, both of them were sponges for knowledge. This they inherited from their father. Soon after I met him, we were driving over the Third Avenue Bridge into New York City. As he drove, he was drawing a diagram on a piece of paper on the dashboard to show how different strains of philosophy developed—fascinating and scary.

My father, a scientist at heart, was in love with knowledge too. The last conversation I had with him before he began his long slide away occurred on the day he read my new book of poetry. He loved the book, but had also analyzed the thought processes behind the poems.

He said, "We think differently. There is a lot I can learn from the way you think."

I realized that the men in my life have been intent keepers of knowledge, bolstering my tendency, as well as allowing me the freedom, to think far and wide.

After the arch, we got in the car and explored St. Louis: boarded-up neighborhoods, marble and brick downtown architecture, the Anheuser-Busch section reeking of hops. We had trouble finding our way out of the city but finally stumbled on an interstate. Then came the silliest hours of the trip: scat singing to whatever music was playing, then a rendition of "Ruby Tuesday" sung a cappella by Matthew, filmed by me for his niece Ruby. When we stopped for gas, we both got out of the car, still infected

with silliness. A puzzled-looking female customer stared at us, as if thinking, "Who is this giggling twosome? Who are these funny foreigners?"

So I spoke up. "Hi! We're driving my old car out to my son's house in New Mexico. He's taking it over. I'm from Massachusetts. He's my son." I nodded towards Matthew.

"I noticed your tags. I was wondering," she said. She seemed relieved.

A little while later, we pulled onto a hilly back road, heading towards Kansas. It was still light, and we were clipping along at a good pace. As it got dark, our headlights shimmered and glowed off the yellow divider line. It felt alien and familiar out there as we were coming into the land's center.

When we got to Nevada, Missouri, we found a motel. I liked that our rooms were connected by an inside door. "Good night, Maff," I said, closing the door, then remembered my husband's comment from the night before.



IN THE MORNING, WE WAKE up in our adjoining motel rooms in the dark. We have a routine that combines getting an early start with allowing us each to get enough sleep. If Matthew wakes up first, he emails me, "I'm up," and when I wake up, I check my laptop for the email, then knock on his door (or vice versa). Both early risers, we always get going before dawn breaks.

We each grab a donut and a cup of coffee as we leave the yellow-lit, slightly shabby motel lobby. After driving a few miles, we reach the Kansas border. The sun begins to rise on Route 54 as we come into Fort Scott. The music shuffles to a steady laid-back song, "Farm Girl," as we sing along with Ry Cooder. The streetlights are lit but about to be shut off. There's one pickup on the road, but otherwise, folks haven't ventured out yet. We pass through the town slowly, then drive a straight road lined by fields. On comes Dylan's "One More Cup of Coffee." Am I imagining that it echoes some old Hebrew melody? Our voices lower, then trail off. The land starts to flatten.

I am remembering one gorgeous day when I was living in Cambridge in the sixties. I was walking over to Brattle Street, roundly pregnant with my first son, and newly a Harvard student, and newly engaged in domestic pleasures. Feeling swell and beautiful, I walked into Design Research, itself a swell and beautiful housewares store. A sound I had never heard before was ringing through the place, Bob Dylan on the record player. There and then, I fell in love.

"One more cup of coffee for the road..." Dylan's voice is filling the car. We see a tree with unfamiliar fruit on the roadside, so we bring the car to a stop. By now, the sky is plain primary blue. The tree's skinny branches are gray, the few leaves left are lime green. Some fruit hang from the tree,

many are on the ground. They are the color of the yellowest corn, the size of a grapefruit, and the texture of a brain. We crush one, put another in the car. "As Billie Holiday would say, these are some strange fruit," Matthew mumbles.

Now we are in Gas, Kansas, sorry we don't need gas. Now we are in Iola, and I think of "Iola, Kansas," by my long-gone pal Amy Clampitt: "I feel my heart go out, out here in the middle of nowhere." When we reach Eureka, Matthew exclaims, "We found it!" Archimedes is with us. We sing less as the road unfolds.

This long straight road takes us by Krause Farm Equipment, and we swerve into their parking lot. We drive around and around, filming the red-and-yellow, black-and-green steel beasts, this zoo full of machines that work the vast farms: Arctic Cat, Agco Gleaner, New Idea, White's Kubota, Woods.

I am absorbing a new geography, the core of the map. In the past, the corners of the country have intrigued me, and I have visited three: Key West, Florida; Neah Bay, Washington; and Lubec, Maine. The fourth, Imperial Beach, California, near where my first husband lived, is the missing corner. But now, Kansas, the heart of the country, lands me on a crossroads of feeling as we steer further into the interior.

When Dick Chase left, the sordid details of our divorce and the turmoil it caused crowded out the possibility of much contact. Estranged for years, we seldom communicated. He was on the outer edge of my life. Now, with his sudden actual death, I am drawn, to my surprise, to mourn the richness he brought to our family's young years.

We get off Route 54 onto the most rural roads of the trip, many of them dirt. Because they form a grid, we figure we can't get lost. And then we're lost. As a truck approaches, I say, "Why don't you stop the car, I'll get out and flag the truck down and ask where we are." "What would be the fun of that?" Matthew says, and keeps driving. It's fine with me since I trust we'll find our way out sooner or later. We pass long-horned cattle, sorghum fields, soybean fields, lone farmhouses, and come to a huge number of hay bales in a field. We stop. Matthew gets out and gathers his camera equipment. "Take as long as you want," I say, "I'm going for a walk." He jumps a fence, runs far and fast towards the bales. His large frame slowly becomes a tiny dot in the distance.

The sight reminds me of a scene I watched over and over when I was a little girl. My father liked to swim across a nearby lake. A towering figure, he would dive into the water and begin his powerful crawl. By the time he reached the other shore, he too was a tiny dot in the distance.

I meander up the road and see a large snakeskin hanging on a fence. The wind picks up, the high-blowing grass looks oceanic. We are at the lower end of what I later learn are the Flint Hills.

As I walk past the snakeskin, another picture comes to mind, from a long-ago trip to the ocean. I was pregnant. The wind was wild and the sky dark gray. Suddenly the sun came out, the wind stopped, and I went for a walk on the beach. I took my sneakers off. At that moment, I felt movement in my belly. My feet in the wet sand, the shining water, and the hot sun bonded me to this earth. Why so many images of water, why so many thoughts of mothers and sons, of fathers and daughters?

Matthew and I meet back at the car and take off. We keep spotting hawks. Matthew points out that because they normally perch in high places and nothing's high here, they have to perch low, which makes them visible. We stop again when we see a large dead owl, remove two feathers. Eventually we come to a paved road and discover we have driven way out of the way. Soon, on our right, a large lake appears. The wind is still wild, and we stop again. Waves on the water make it look like an inland ocean. We walk out onto a skinny jetty. Matthew is filming the wind pushing everything around. My red shirt is blowing all over the place, as is my hair, and the waves are breaking behind me. I kneel down to examine some rocks.

"I think these are fossils. Do you remember when you were little, we visited the Mudds and hiked to a creek that had tons of fossils? These look just like them."

Matthew says, "Yeah, wasn't that in Oneonta? Didn't Lucia's mother make some yummy lemon cake when we got there?"

His boyhood memory builds on my young-mother memory and becomes the current story. The huge wind has transformed the scene into something surrealistic and timeless. He could be six. I think of one day when we were at our family cabin in the Adirondacks. He was mucking around down at the pond with his father. I was inside, listening to a Joe Cocker record. Matthew looked up at me in the picture window, and I looked out at him. I began to sway my arms to the smooth crusty voice singing "You Are So Beautiful to Me." Matthew began to sway his arms in unison.

Finally we walk back to the car. Matthew has just mentioned that when he gets home, boxes of items from his father's house will have arrived. He studies the Kansas map to figure out a route. While rearranging the stuff in the backseat, I am struck by the ordinary things Matthew chose to take from my father's house: his axe, his boots, a saw, a jacket—things my father held in his hands and wore on his body. I notice the books he chose from my father's shelves: Dickens, Stein, Miller, Mowat, a twenty-volume set of *The Book of Knowledge*, the ancient edition my father nearly memorized as a child.

I took collections of letters: van Gogh's, Freud's, Pound's. But the book I turned to first was *Farthest North*, by the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen, who journeyed to the Arctic in the 1890s with his boat *Fram* and his

crew. Two maps were included with the book. As I was reading, I spread these maps out on a table so I could precisely follow Nansen's account of courage, discovery, and hardship. I took breaks from reading and worked on poems about my father's decline and death.

Matthew folds up the Kansas map, and we head slightly north of Wichita, then travel west on US 50.

"You are such a good navigator and such a good driver. I'm not exactly sure what I bring to the mix on this trip," I tell him.

"Enthusiasm," he replies.

"Yes!" I say. Yes, we certainly do make a great combo, I think.

We stop in some small town, and I take the strange fruit from the backseat into a second-hand store. I ask the saleswoman if she knows what it is. "A hedgeball," she says. She tells us that they aren't edible but if you set them under a porch or in a basement, they repel scorpions and other insects.

Back in the car, Matthew and I kid around with the word "hedgeball," stretching it out, stressing each syllable, indulging our shared love of sound.

We stop in a town with extremely wide red-brick streets. We stop in a town that looks decidedly Western, which makes me wonder, where does the West begin? In the town where we pick up Route 50, we find a hip grocery store where we buy good cheese, good bread, and, sadly, rancid corn chips. We pass through Hutchinson, where one of my favorite poets, William Stafford, was born. "Who are you really, wanderer?" he wrote. We pass through Stafford, no relation to Bill. We come to Spearville, where we pass a field of huge windmill parts, then fields and fields of windmills, then Garden City, then Dodge City, which we speed through like the prairie wind.

The land has become absolutely flat. Neither of us speaks much. Eventually, feedlots begin to appear. Thousands of cows jammed together, unable to move, the sight and stink atrocious. These are mammals? We start to talk about cows. We start to talk about happiness, about beef, about chickens. Our conversation becomes fragmented.

I point out a farmhouse far off the road, set in a field with nothing around, grass blowing hard against the huge, treeless sky.

"Would you want to live in a place like that, out in the middle of nowhere?" I ask.

"God, no, I'd want a hill, a canyon. Gimme anything."

"I would. I really would. It feels open like the ocean."

We come to a sign for Holcomb. I say, "Holcomb, hmm. I think that's the town where the *In Cold Blood* murders happened. I just changed my mind about that farmhouse." We know how to make each other laugh, and laugh we do.

As light wanes and we get closer to the Colorado border, the sky turns pink, orange, purple, red. Matthew croons along with the Band: "And when you get to the end, you wanna start all over again."

Stark black silhouettes of trees line the road's shoulders against that canvas of red-splayed sky. Black lines of huge steel irrigators wing across the fields in the near dark. Matthew is driving. The sight of his profile and his hands on the wheel is stirring. Approaching the border, we pass through the blackest night.

Earth, air, fire, water—Kansas contains the elements: fire in the night sky, wild water at the lake, windy air blowing like mad, and dirt in field after field. Kansas, the Ur state.

We cross into Colorado and land in Lamar. Matthew goes to the office of a nice-looking motel to inquire about availability.

"They have two rooms, but they're not next to each other. One's upstairs and one's downstairs," he tells me.

"Forget that—I want to be close. Let's go somewhere else." Down the street, we check into the Cow Palace.



EACH DAY, THE CHANGING LIGHT had framed time's turning. Our last day was the first on which we would not see dark turn to light, then light turn to night. We wanted to reach Santa Fe by afternoon. This five-day romance was about to end.

In the oncoming morning light, we left Lamar. It was flat as flattest Kansas. Suddenly, far away and small, the Rockies appeared on the horizon. The outside world began to surface. Matthew got a text message from an old friend in Colorado who had been following our Facebook posts and realized we might be able to get together in Alamosa. Our timing was off, so we didn't meet up with him. Then we stopped in a store where I bought a hat for a friend's newborn. Then each of our cell phones rang. The cocoon of the car started to unravel.

We arrived at the enormous mountains and drove through a pass. We detoured north to Great Sand Dunes National Park, the highest dunes in North America. I was videotaping our approach to the dunes when Matthew started to tell me about the scene at his father's house a few days before he died, how they got marijuana for him. Matthew was describing intimate moments. I turned off the camera, and we hiked the dunes in the blazing sun.

When Dick became ill, not only did his sons and their families hurry to his side, but many other family members arrived. After Dick left our family, he had numerous marriages, relationships, and other children. He

and I had little contact, but in recent years we had occasionally spoken at length. Even so, my tangled feelings kept me away.

Instead, my focus was on my sons' loss. I spoke with each of them on the phone every day. Adult separation collapsed for a while. It was only after we returned to a relaxed rhythm of contact that I began to realize my own sadness at Dick's death.

On the road trip, the separation that Matthew and I had established over the years collapsed again, but this time it was out of pleasure. We had each lost our fathers this year—really Matthew lost two—and it was time for some good times.

That last afternoon, we drove from Colorado to New Mexico, through Tres Piedras, through Ojo Caliente, through Española right down into Santa Fe—that beautiful familiar land—pulled into Matthew's driveway in the late afternoon, sat down at the kitchen table with his wife Julie and my grandson Quill, and began to tell our story.