

Dylan didn't have much of a plan or any idea of what to expect once he passed through the border into Missouri. It was just him and his 1971 Ford Econoline, speeding down the highway while approaching midnight. There was the sign on his right, fading into his high beams, getting closer. It was painted on a steel sign, in bright colors with a pretty landscape cut into the shape of Missouri.

The State of Missouri Welcomes You! The Show Me State!

Dylan had been headed there since he left home, but hadn't thought about it much until now. What was Missouri like? What would be the first town he came across? Were there any rednecks? Which side did they fight on during the civil war? A nagging paranoia overcame him, picturing fat slobs in greasy wife beaters, Dixie emblazoned on their baseball caps. "Where ya from boah?" He knew such cartoonish characterizations were unfair and untrue, but coming out of Iowa and into what could be considered the south meant venturing into uncharted territory. Anything could happen. Anyone could be waiting for him.

He checked the clock on the dash. 11:23 it read in bright green digital numbers. He watched it hit 11:24. He felt his eyes turning dry and saw the first hint of fuzz come over his vision. Yeah, it was time to pull over. He saw a sign that said "Rest Stop Exit 3". He decided to turn in there. The exit faded into view on his right and he peeled off into the exit. The rest stop building was half-concealed by the forest behind it. A large lot for tractor trailers was on its right, currently occupied by three tenants. The front of the building was dimly lit by old fluorescent lights, buzzed around by a small swarm of moths. A map of Missouri was posted on the wall behind a pane of glass. Dylan pulled his van into a parking space adjacent to the main road and killed the engine. The radio went silent and the headlights went dark.

He peered out through the windshield and out into the road. There was nothing to be seen other than the dense screen of trees on the other side. It was all so isolated. The rest stop felt like some anomaly that had risen out of nature rather than something built by man. He wondered if he knocked on the doors of those tractor trailers would anyone answer him. Of course someone would, but he would rather not arouse any bitter truckers from their well-earned sleep. He unbuckled his seat belt and opened the door. It creaked loudly, letting the dank Mississippi river air hit him in the face and fill the van's cabin like a vacuum. Crickets were chirping loudly, the only real sign of life around other than the moths.

He stepped onto the pavement and yawned. Dylan was a raccoon with a slim build and a bright young face. His fur was a light tan across his body except where it turned a dark brown around his raccoon mask and in the rings on his long, floofy tail. His hair was long and soft, cascading down to his shoulders in a soft brown color. In spite of his slim frame, he had big paws

and big feet, padded heavily on their undersides and tipped with nubby white claws. His fingers were thick but nimble, a trait he had acquired after almost two whole decades of playing guitar. All he wore was a plain white t-shirt a few sizes too big for him, some baggy jeans, and big work boots. By no means his regular attire, he didn't think driving down the highway on his lonesome for hours on end would require any appealing dress. Sweat had dampened his shirt, sticking it to his back and darkening the pits. His first order of business was to find a hotel with a laundromat.

But first, he had to pee. He made his way to the building, cautiously eying the empty parking lot around him and listening to the incessant chirp of the crickets. He knew he was alone, but the silly idea of being watched by some desperate criminal put him on edge. He kept his paws in his pockets and his shoulders huddled. His pace was brisk. Telling himself that there was nothing to worry about was just as convincing as the urge to walk fast, get to the bathroom, then get back to the van. He made it to the building and entered the Men's bathroom. There was nothing there but the acrid smell of urinal cakes and disinfectant. He scurried to the nearest urinal, did his business, then went to the sink. He looked himself in the mirror while he washed his paws. With the shirt hanging off of his shoulders so loosely he looked haggard. There were bags under his eyes, visible even through his dark raccoon mask. He thought his eyes were bloodshot, but either the mirror was too foggy or his vision wasn't all there enough for him to tell. *I need to sleep. I'm not built for this.* He finished washing his paws and saw that the paper towel dispenser was empty. There were no blow dryers. He wiped his paws on his jeans and left the bathroom.

Once he stepped out he noticed the map of Missouri again. He stood in front of it and saw a tiny red star posted near the top, right under the line between there and Iowa. It looked like something a teacher would stick to a student's paper after grading it. YOU ARE HERE it said right next to it. The star was red, not gold, as if to say "We did a good job. Not great, but good." The paper map's edges were yellowed and worn. It probably hadn't been replaced in years. Good, not great. That sounded about right. Next to the map was a wall of pamphlets and flyers. Next to that was a cork board with several advertisements tacked to it. Dance lessons, church sermons, help with taxes, soothsaying, and a whole bunch of other stuff. He spotted one offering guitar lessons. *Don't need that, I hope.* He checked the pamphlets out. They were all about state attractions like amusement parks and museums. There was a pamphlet about what to see in St. Louis and another in Jefferson City. He thought those might come in handy. He took one of each. Lastly there were maps of Missouri. He didn't need it thanks to his GPS, but he was compelled to take it. With nothing left that was useful, he turned around and headed back to his van.

He went to the backdoors and swung them open. The floor of the van had been stripped of its seats, leaving room for a single mattress and some blankets. A radio sat next to it and a fan that was plugged into a large battery. His black leather guitar case was nestled snugly between the mattress and the van wall. A cooler was behind the head of the mattress, just behind the

driver's seat. It was currently empty except for some water that had been sloshing around inside of it. He climbed inside and closed the doors behind him. He plopped his butt onto the mattress, kicked his boots off, wiggled out of his jeans and took off his shirt. With just his sweaty boxers on, he pulled the blanket over himself and curled into a ball.

He closed his eyes and tried to go to sleep, but it wasn't that easy. It never was. This was only his second night on the road, and it was going to be as bothersome as the last, he was sure. He had everything he needed, at least for now. He had the money to get him where he needed to go, he knew the directions, he had the talent and the know-how to achieve his dreams, and the work ethic and patience to see it through. But was it really enough? That wasn't a question he liked to bother himself with before he set out on his big journey. He'd saved for so long, since in the middle of High School. He wasn't going to waste his money or his life on college. He wasn't going to spend his talents on the small-town where he grew up. He wasn't going to let doubts hold him back. He was going to go through with it and achieve his dreams, which were quite basic, the way he saw it: travel the open road, play music, meet people, make love, and make a name for himself. The American Dream.

Now that the pursuit had begun, he found himself wondering if it would all pan out. He felt like Dustin Hoffman at the end of *The Graduate*, sitting next to Katherine Ross on the bus, smiling as they had their whole lives ahead of them, then slowly growing cold and stoic once the doubts fell on them like a sledgehammer. Nothing was certain. He could very well find himself stranded out here, all alone, not having come close to what he hoped for. The road journey was already proving intimidating. He was learning the hard way that he was not built for long distance travel. He burned through his snacks at a ravenous pace. His ass was sore from sitting on it for hours on end. The country was nice to look at, but turned stale once it devolved into nothing but repetitive farms and endless trees. His imagination helped a little, but could only go so far.

He pulled the blanket into himself tightly and nuzzled his face into his chest. He pushed off those thoughts, reminding himself that there was a whole lot of country ahead of him. Dreams weren't made by dreaming them, but by doing them. He wasn't about to turn tail and go back now just over a couple bad nights. He took a deep breath and relaxed for the final time. He was asleep within a few minutes.

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He woke up to the sun peering into the van through the curtained backdoor mirrors. He didn't have a clock other than the one on the dash. He more or less woke up whenever his body told him to, which was very unpredictable. He groaned and yawned. He kicked the sheets off of him and sat up. He smacked his lips and reached for the suitcase on his right. He opened it and

blindly yanked out some clothes. He put them and his boots on, then hopped out of the van through the back.

He squinted hard once the daylight hit him. The sun was high in the sky, approaching noon. He visored his eyes with his paw and looked around. The parking lot had a few added cars around, each one with travelers getting a good stretch in before their journeys continued. They hardly seemed the kind of folk to give somebody a hard time. They were probably headed in the same direction as him, coming out of Iowa. He didn't think any of them were natives to the state. They weren't gonna be any help. So, with his second day of his journey down, he got back into the driver's seat, cut the engine on, and pulled out of there.

On his way back to the highway he passed by a roadside cafe. He dropped by to score some breakfast. He walked inside and found the place busy. He didn't smell coffee or hear any simmering bacon, but rather smelled burgers and sandwiches, indicative of lunch. *Must've slept pretty well.* He sat at a booth. A middle-aged bobcat served him. He asked if they were still serving breakfast. They were, and he ordered some pancakes, eggs, and bacon. As he sat back and waited he realized how hungry he was. His stomach rumbled and his mouth salivated as he listened to the sizzle of the flat top stove and the scrape of silverware on plates. Who knew how tiresome driving could be?

The waitress came back with his food. His eyes lit up at the sight of it. He unraveled the silverware from its cloth and went right in. He came to a stop, however, once the waitress started to walk away. "Um, exchoose me," he said through a full mouth. He swallowed mostly unchewed food and repeated himself. "Sorry, excuse me."

She came back. "It's alright! What's up?"

"I actually had a question, if you're not too busy."

"Ask away."

"Have you ever been to Jefferson City? Do you know any good bars with live music down there?"

She put her hands on her hips. "I'm afraid I haven't. I've got family out there, but haven't been in a while. Sorry."

He suspected as much. "Don't worry about it. Thanks."

She waved her pen around at the café around her. “Don’t hesitate to ask any of these folks, though. Any of ‘em from there will let you know.”

“Did you say Jefferson?” asked a voice from behind him.

He turned around and saw the profile of a long snout. The gentleman sitting behind him was a coyote, a big fellow, dressed in a faded old t-shirt. Dylan twisted in his seat to face him. “I did. Are you from there?”

“No, but I used to do a lot of contracting work down there. You said you’re looking for a musical bar?”

Excitement surged through Dylan’s heart. “Yeah!”

“If you don’t need anything else, I’ll leave you two boys to it,” the waitress said, moving on.

Dylan nodded at her in thanks, then quickly turned back to his newest conversation partner. “I’m headed down there now. I’m looking for places to play and hoped I could find someone who knew about one.”

The man twisted to face Dylan and rested his chubby arm on the back of the seat. “I might help you. What’s your name?”

“Dylan.”

“Dylan? I’m Lyle.” Lyle held his paw up. Dylan shook it and felt how strong he was.

“Nice to meet you, Lyle. Do you know a place down there?”

“I’ve been to a place, but I’ll be damned if I remember the exact name of it. We went a few times while I was working down there. Nice place. They got a stage for players like you n’ such.” He looked off into the distance and frowned. “Shoot. If I could remember the name.”

Dylan slid his phone out from his pocket and opened Google. “Do you remember what it started with?” He already had a list of bars to visit, but he wanted a place to start based on what people had said about it.

“Roof... Roof something. On the roof, or off the roof.”

Dylan's eyes and ears perked up when he saw it. "Through the roof," he said.

Lyle clenched his fist. "That's it! I think you'll like it there. Didn't go there more than twice, but I enjoyed it each time. Seemed nice."

Dylan was already copying and pasting the address into his notes. "Yeah, I'll definitely check it out." With a giddy grin on his face he slid his phone into his pocket and held his paw out for another shake. "Thank you very much, Lyle."

Lyle shook his paw again. "You're very welcome! I hope everything works out for you."

Dylan turned back around to finally eat his breakfast, smiling from ear to ear. "Me too."

He gobbled his meal up and hit the road right after. He was on the highway when he saw the sign. **Jefferson City 341**. That was about a five hour drive. That was more than manageable. His grip on the steering wheel tightened as did the bite on his lip. At first he stopped himself from doing a celebration, but then he remembered that he was alone. Nobody was watching. Nobody gave a fuck, and you know what? Neither did he. He slammed his fist on the roof. *Boom boom boom*. "Woooooooo!" he hooted. "Yes!" *Through the Roof* was the name of the bar, as well as an accurate description of how he felt. He had known about the place for a while now, but now that he had the most minute bit of connection to it, it felt real. *Freebird* by Lynyrd Skynyrd came on the radio. He cranked it up full tilt, and sang along word for word.

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Jefferson City didn't have the most impressive skyline, but it was pretty enough to grab Dylan's attention once he saw it breach the puffy green horizon of trees. Most eye-catching was the Missouri State Capitol building, a Victorian style dome of white marble that strongly resembled the one in Washington. Everytime he Googled Jefferson City, that building would be the first thing that came up. It was beyond exhilarating to finally see it in person. He passed into the city limits and drove to the nicest hotel he could afford, a La Quinta. Passing through the streets he couldn't stop himself from gawking at the old southern architecture and the people walking by, minding their own business. It was all placid and uniform, exemplary of many midwestern towns. He loved it just for that. He couldn't wait to discover more of it.

He parked his van and checked into the La Quinta. His room was on the second floor, just over the street. From there he could look down and watch the city flow by. People walked the sidewalks, some of them holding hands, some on skateboards, some of them jogging. They all went about their daily lives. They all looked content. Was he? Maybe not, but that didn't mean he wouldn't be. He may have not hit his dream just yet, but right now he could be happy. He had

reached his first city, had a nice comfy bed to sit on, and a place to go to. The doubts still lingered, but they were dim and unconvincing now.

Dylan would've loved to hang out by the window and just watch the world float by his window, but he was on a mission. He wasn't about to waste anymore time. He left his guitar in its case on the bed and made his way out into the street. He walked with a brisk pace, looking straight ahead, hardly cognizant of the city around him. He came to a stop at intersections, took note of a few peculiar buildings, and even looked up at the sky to cloud gaze whenever he wasn't moving, but every other moment had his legs moving, propelling him forward to his goal. He rounded one last corner and saw it, hidden snugly in the center of a long strip. It had no particularly astounding features other than the blinking neon sign attached to its facade. Written vertically, surrounded by a ring of light bulbs, it said **THROUGH THE ROOF**.

Dylan's tail flicked behind him. His chest rose as an involuntary inhale of excitement came through him. He told himself the same thing he had once he began his journey back home: *Here we go*. He hustled down the street and walked through the front door into the bar. The interior looked older, being made entirely of dark hardwood from the long bar on the wall to his right and to the many tables and booths to his left. The walls all around him were decked with portraits of famous musicians, celebrities, and athletes. There were flags, baseball bats, group photos, signed jerseys, everything that would memorialize the visit of a famous guest who had once stepped through the same door he had just opened. He looked over to the corner on his left. There was the stage, barren of any speakers, microphones, or instruments. If everything went as planned, he would be standing on top of it soon. The place wasn't terribly busy. The lunch rush had just wrapped up and it wasn't quite dinner time. A handful of people sat at the bar and at the tables. Nobody seemed to notice him.

He took yet another deep breath and headed to the bar. The black leather stools were atop tarnished brass poles. A shiny finish made the wooden bar shimmer like mahogany. The bartender, a heavily bearded back bear, was busy handing out drinks. "Be right there in a second, bud," he told Dylan without looking at him.

Dylan nodded. "No problem." He didn't sit down, instead looking around at the people and the memorabilia. He noticed a few famous faces on the wall: Elvis Presley, Jayson Tatum, Michael Jordan, Freddie Mercury, Albert Pujols, Bettie White, among others. Had all of them really set foot in this place? Or was it all for show? Jefferson City wasn't that extravagant of a place, at least not some other nearby cities like Kansas City or St. Louis, places he would expect to see such big names, although he wasn't about to call them out on it.

The bartender handed out the last drink and strode over to Dylan. "What can I get ya?"

“Yeah, actually, can I talk to the manager?”

“Sure thing. Lookin’ for a job?”

“No, I’m trying to perform here.”

Dylan waited for him to balk or grimace. He did neither, betraying no emotion. “Alright. I’ll try and get him first chance I get. In the meantime, can I get you anything?”

Dylan started to notice how nervous he was. His stomach was in a bit of a twist. Alcohol wasn’t about to help. He shook his head. “No thanks.”

The bartender said “alright” and went back to business. Dylan sat down. A waitress walked past behind him and the bartender got her attention. He told her to go get “Marty”. She hurried off into the back of the bar and came back out a few moments later. With her was a short beaver fellow, older looking and with a stolid face. He was wearing a striped polo shirt and khaki shorts. His hair was greased back slick on his scalp. He walked in a way that was almost a march. His barrel chest bulged his shirt significantly. He was shorter than the waitress, yet looked like the biggest man there. Dylan felt a little intimidated just by looking at him.

The waitress pointed him to Dylan. He came forward and extended his paw. “Hey there! I hear you were lookin’ for me.” His voice was oddly cheery for his demeanor, yet just as boastful.

Dylan grabbed his paw and shook it. His grip was like iron. “Yes sir, looks like I found you. I’m Dylan.”

“Dylan? I’m Marty. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too.” *Marty, like Marty McFly.* That was a comparison that would be hard to shake.

“Funny, I got a cousin named Dylan.” Marty said, smiling.

“Really?”

“Yeah! So, what’d you need, Dylan?”

“Well, I was wondering if you needed any performers for any upcoming shows. I just came into Jefferson from Iowa. I’ve been looking for work.”

Again, Dylan expected some sort of rebuke. Mercifully, Marty nodded. "I think we can arrange that." Marty jerked his head over behind him. "Let's have a seat over here." As he turned around to lead Dylan to a booth, Dylan smiled from ear to ear. *Holy shit, this is going great!* Nothing had really happened, yet his hopes were, for lack of a better phrase, through the roof. He told himself not to get too excited. It was probably them just being polite. Still, he couldn't help the sporadic swaying of his ringtail behind him. Marty sat him down at a booth and took a seat in front of him. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Ah, just a water would be nice."

Marty turned to the bar and shouted. "*Grace!* Let me get two glasses of water, please!" Grace, the canine waitress who had fetched Marty from the backrooms, rushed to bring them two glasses of ice water. "Thanks," Marty said.

Dylan thanked her too and took a deep swig. It did a number to ease his nerves. "This is a nice place you got here," he said.

"Thanks. It's one of the oldest in the city. I bought it a few years back. Didn't need to change much. Don't fix what ain't broke." He took another deep swig of water. Dylan noticed how his powerful beaver teeth juttled into the glass as he drank, looking ready to crack it into pieces like a hammer. Instead he drained half of it and set it down. "So, you said you're a performer. What do you do? You on your own?"

"Yes sir. I've got a guitar with me, and I'm pretty good at it. I can sing too. I've got a whole repertoire of songs and genres I can do."

Marty nodded approvingly. "That's good, good. A lot of the folk here like old school rock and country music. Think you can do that?"

"Yeah! Anything like that, and if I don't know how, I can learn."

"Awesome. How long have you been playing?"

"Since I was a little kid. Can hardly remember a time when I didn't have a guitar in my paws. Been practicing and getting better ever since. I hate to brag, but I'm pretty good now."

Marty chuckled. "I would hope if you've been playing for that long. Ever perform professionally?"

There was the rub. “No sir. I mostly played in talent shows and in church. I’ve got a YouTube channel, but it’s not that popular. I do tutorials and covers, but it’s not that big like so many other channels.”

Marty nodded along until he brought up YouTube, then his face lit up. “You’re on YouTube? Can I see some of your stuff?”

Dylan loved few things more than when people asked him that. “Sure!” He leaned back and fished his phone out of his pocket. He unlocked it and opened YouTube. He went to his channel. He had over one hundred videos, evenly mixed between tutorials and song covers. Each thumbnail was of him on a chair, guitar in his lap, wearing a plain t-shirt that hung off his thin frame. None of them had more than a thousand views. Most of them were without comments and had only a few likes. His most popular was a cover of Going up the Country by Canned Heat. He tapped that and let it load. He handed the phone to Marty. “Here’s a cover of Going up the Country I did. See if you like that.”

Marty took it from him and started to watch. He paused it. “You got any headphones?”

Dylan’s heart sank. He patted his pockets frantically out of vain hope that he would find some. “Ah, shit. I don’t.”

“It’s alright.” Marty lowered his head to the phone’s speaker and hit play. Dylan heard the opening notes to the song out of his guitar followed by his voice singing the lyrics. The knot in his tummy grew tighter. Marty’s expression grew stern as he listened closely, trying to determine if he liked what he heard or not. Dylan couldn’t read him either way. He took a sip of his water and waited. Dylan was a bit of a perfectionist when it came to his music. Nothing he put on the internet would have a flaw to it, at least not in his eyes. There could be no sour notes, no missed beats, no poorly sung lines. He orchestrated his online songs with an even greater discipline than he did when playing on stage. Regardless, he never felt a more prescient anxiety than when he watched Marty scowling while listening to his music. He could handle a church crowd, a theater, or even thousands of people on the internet, but watching the person who would determine his immediate future was downright unbearable.

The song ended. Marty put the phone down and nodded with his lips pursed. “Not bad. I liked it.” He slid the phone back over to Dylan who felt ready to faint out of sheer relief.

“Thanks a lot.” He meekly took his phone and made to put it back in his pocket.

“Hold on, I wanna exchange numbers real quick.”

Dylan stopped. “You do?”

“Yeah! I gotta call you and let you know when’s a good time to have you over.”

Dylan didn’t react at first, neither inwardly or outwardly. His mind went into autopilot, trying to decide what to do or say next. For an entire second he remained blankly still, not offering any emotion to the news he just heard. He finally spoke. “OK.” He took his phone and opened his contacts. He cleared his throat. He was starting to shake. “What’s your number?”

Marty relayed it to him. “That’s my cell. Text me so I know yours.”

Dylan tapped away with his thumbs. He thought that somehow he would miss each key and put the wrong number like he was drunk or in some sort of physically hindered dream state. Once he had it down he read it back. Marty confirmed it was right. Dylan texted the number a single word message, *Dylan*, then tucked it back into his pocket.

A soft buzzing noise came from Marty’s pocket. “Got it! I’ll check what we’ve got going on for the next few weeks and let you know when I can have you. How long of a set can you make for me?”

Dylan blinked and shook off the haze. “Ah, an hour. Maybe two. However long you need it to be.” He wasn’t so sure about that. The longest he had ever been on a stage by himself was thirty minutes. Quadrupling that time sounded like a daunting task.

Marty nodded. “Good. I won’t need all of that, though. ‘Cause you’re by yourself and you’re new to this I don’t wanna have you be the only show in one night, no offense.”

“None taken.” Indeed, he appreciated it.

“I’ll have you starting before a band sometime in the near future. Think you can drum me up a thirty minute set?”

He nodded sharply. “Yes sir!”

Marty smiled. “Awesome. I’ll let you know when I can have you. Expect a text within the next week or so. I think I’ll have something by the end of the month.”

Now the thrill was surging back, making Dylan’s heart throb and his mouth form a smile. But before he could celebrate, he had one more question to ask, one he was afraid of. “And how much will I make that night?”

“How’s \$500 sound?” Marty responded without skipping a beat.

It was everything for Dylan not to leap out of his seat and kiss Marty on those big fat teeth of his. “That sounds great!”

“Awesome!” Marty stood up and extended his paw.

Dylan couldn’t believe it. He stood up, bracing for the inevitable end of what had to have been a dream. He would wake to the angry screech of an alarm or the urgent banging on his door. Neither of those things happened, and his paw neatly fell into Marty’s for a very friendly shake. “Thank you so much, sir.”

“No problem, Dylan, and uh, call me Marty.”

Dylan blushed. “Yeah, sorry.”

Marty just smiled. “No problem.”

Dylan walked out of there looking and feeling like someone in shock. So many emotions were boiling inside of him, yet his expression remained blank. He trudged his way back to the hotel without much thought or any real feeling. He knew he should’ve been exuberant, but the presence of so many people around him kept him reserved. He made it back to the hotel and took the elevator back to his floor. He opened his door with a key card, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him.

There was his guitar case, still waiting for him on the bed loyally. He made a slow walk over to it. He didn’t scream with joy, he didn’t jump up and down, he didn’t pump his fists into the air, and he didn’t shout a defiant “fuck you” to everyone who had doubted him. He calmly slid his guitar off the mattress, laid it down on the floor, and plopped face first onto the bed. With his snout buried into the plush comforter, his sneakers hanging over the bottom edge, and his arms spread out at his side, he laughed. He laughed, laughed, and laughed until the tears ran down the side of his face.