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Richard Dixon

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Country Roads

by Richard Dixon

Section lines, my father used to call them. A lot of them now are paved, or rather asphalted, especially closer to the large cities and towns. What I'm referring to here, though, are *dirt* roads. In dry weather, I was always accompanied by the large plume of dust trailing behind the pickup; in wet weather, I had to be careful about sliding off the roadway; that hard clay could be slick as glass. And, there was no stopping on a really wet, muddy road for fear of getting stuck.

In dry weather again, there was the dealing with the ruts, made from the rain and cast now as if in concrete; the only way to do this sanely was to straddle the original wheel tracks. Also, it paid to be careful not to drive too close to the right; erosion could take its toll, resulting in a vehicle dropping down, sliding off and ending up in the parallel bar-ditch. So, basically, about half the time the best thing to do was drive more or less in the middle of the road, with an eagle eye for any oncoming traffic.

Oh, and let's not neglect to mention those murderous washboards, able to shake the nuts and bolts loose from absolutely anything. There were two opposing theories regarding the navigation of washboards: one was to drive real slow, taking it nice and easy, and the other was to just drive like hell over them, the faster the better! And who wanted to drive slow, in the days before seat belts and the double-nickel? Of course, with the roads being under the purveyance of the county commissioner, if your family were friends with that august official, your road got graded a

lot more often. Or if your family were friends with the grader driver, same difference. My state is notorious for the poor condition of the majority of its county roads. Vermont, on the other hand, is just the opposite; so well and constantly graded it's hard to tell the difference between dirt and paved. What's the secret? A void of kickbacks and corruption, possibly?

Topping a hill, it always paid to be extra-cautious: I never knew when I might meet a farmer driving a sixteen to twenty-foot combine. Believe me, there was only room for the combine. And when I met another vehicle, usually another pickup, common courtesy dictated that we both, the other driver and I, raise our index fingers from our driving hand at the top of the steering wheel in a rural "howdy," a "Southwestern Salute." A true, born-to-the-breed country-roader never, ever drove with both hands on the wheel. Are you kidding?

As hard to drive and as fearful as those country roads could be, I miss them. Or maybe I miss that time in my life; the country Christmases, the warm Thanksgivings, the driving home in the summers, coming back from town at midnight, with both windows rolled down, inhaling the cool, crisp air of a late July evening. Maybe it has to do with innocence, and a time when that innocence was pure and pristine, no more than a year before Kennedy was killed and I was still sexually a virgin, although I was convinced otherwise; and those dirt roads are just a connection, a link, taking me from here to there.

