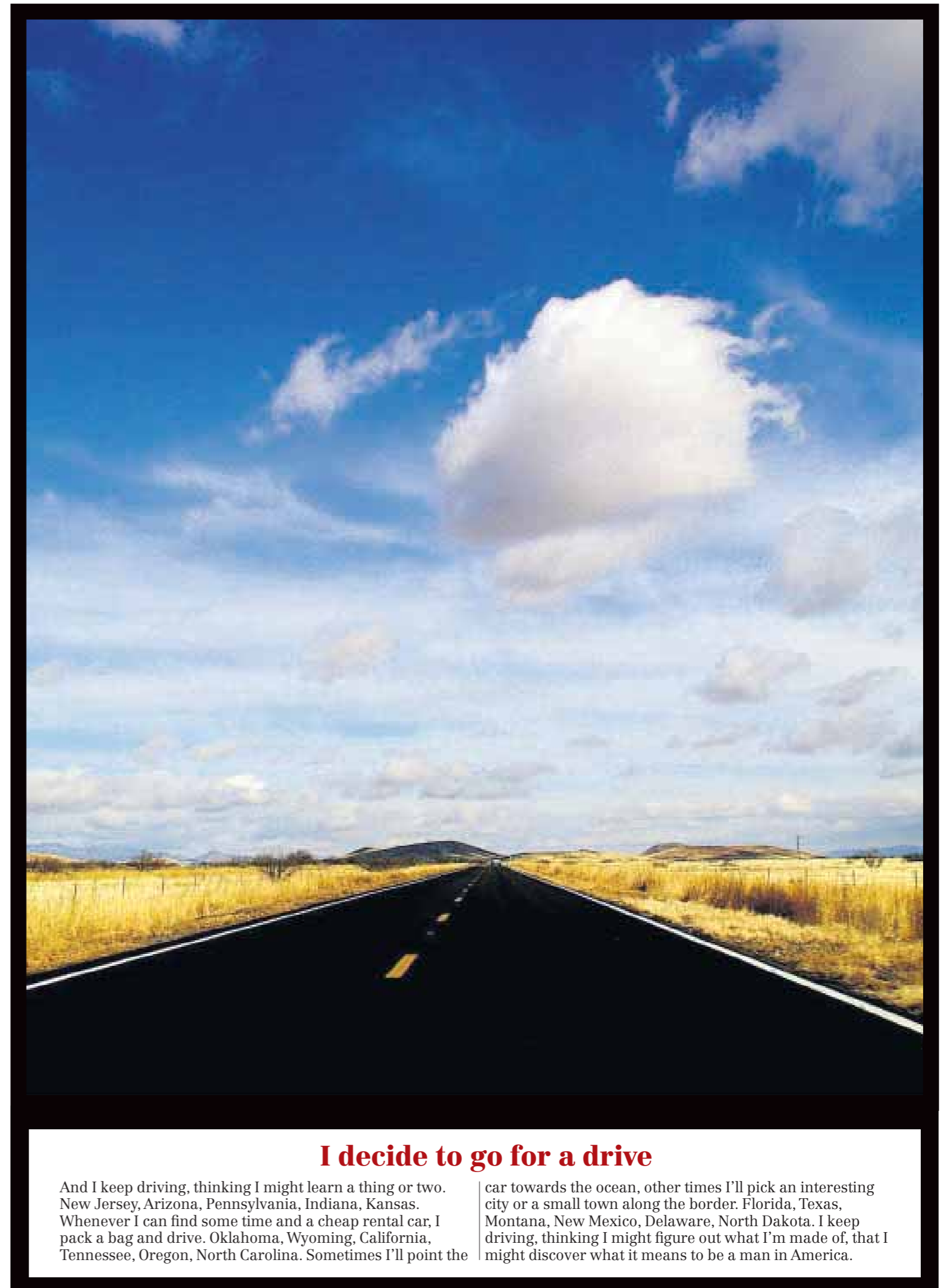


TRAVELOGUE

‘For a moment I thought I was gazing at the end of the world’

One day James A Reeves decided to hit the road to clear his head. What resulted is a scattershot journey spanning five years, 40,000 miles, 12 speeding tickets and several moments of unexpected kindness through the dark corners of the USA. Reeves drove the backroads taking pictures and looking for answers. The result is a photo memoir of one man’s travels through America as sprawling and chaotic as the country itself



I decide to go for a drive

And I keep driving, thinking I might learn a thing or two. New Jersey, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Kansas. Whenever I can find some time and a cheap rental car, I pack a bag and drive. Oklahoma, Wyoming, California, Tennessee, Oregon, North Carolina. Sometimes I’ll point the

car towards the ocean, other times I’ll pick an interesting city or a small town along the border. Florida, Texas, Montana, New Mexico, Delaware, North Dakota. I keep driving, thinking I might figure out what I’m made of, that I might discover what it means to be a man in America.

TRAVELOGUE



◀ State line

Note the buckshot in this sign. A good rule of thumb is that the more bullet holes a state sign has, the scarier the state. The worst I've seen are Texas, Arkansas and Nevada. North Dakota falls somewhere in the middle. Nevada was Swiss cheese.

There ought to be more of a to-do when crossing state lines. You'd think each state would seize this opportunity to put on a bit of a show with colourful signs and exciting slogans, maybe even a few people who wave and throw confetti and float giant balloons. At the very least, they might not want to advertise that their citizens are heavily armed.



◀ Gas and liquor

In some parts of the country, gas stations function as community centres: people come in for newspapers, lottery tickets, nachos, gossip, hunting supplies, flavoured coffee and beer. Sometimes they have showers and meeting rooms.

In Nevada, they have slot machines. In Pennsylvania, I stayed at a motel inside of a gas station. Some sell liquor, some don't. Either way, kids hang out in the parking lot at night. You can tell a lot about a state by the way it handles its liquor. In Utah, only beer with low alcohol content is sold in stores. Waitresses

are prohibited from offering a wine list unless the customer asks for one, and food must be ordered. In Tennessee, wine is sold only in liquor stores, and these stores can sell only alcohol. No corkscrews, no daiquiri mix, not even a bottle of water.

In Nevada, alcohol can be sold almost anywhere 24 hours a day and public intoxication is perfectly legal (in fact, there's a state law preventing any town or county from making it an offence). Minors in Wisconsin can drink, as long as an adult is present. Absinthe is legal in Missouri.



▲ Imperial

Somewhere south of the Salton Sea and west of the Chocolate Mountains [in Southern California], I saw a cluster of tents and trailers, some with makeshift signs for food and dune buggy repair and outfits like Crazy Karl and the Big Belly Crew.

The distant whir of engines cut through the whipping wind. On the horizon, I saw a couple of Rubicon 500s racing across the pink Imperial Dunes. For a moment, I thought I was gazing at the end of the world. Now I'm wondering why I didn't join them.

◀ Development

I drive to the bottom of the country. Pump jacks swing in the sea and refineries shoot fire into the dark. Old men in wife-beaters play dominoes across folding tables while a parked car cranks the local salsa station.

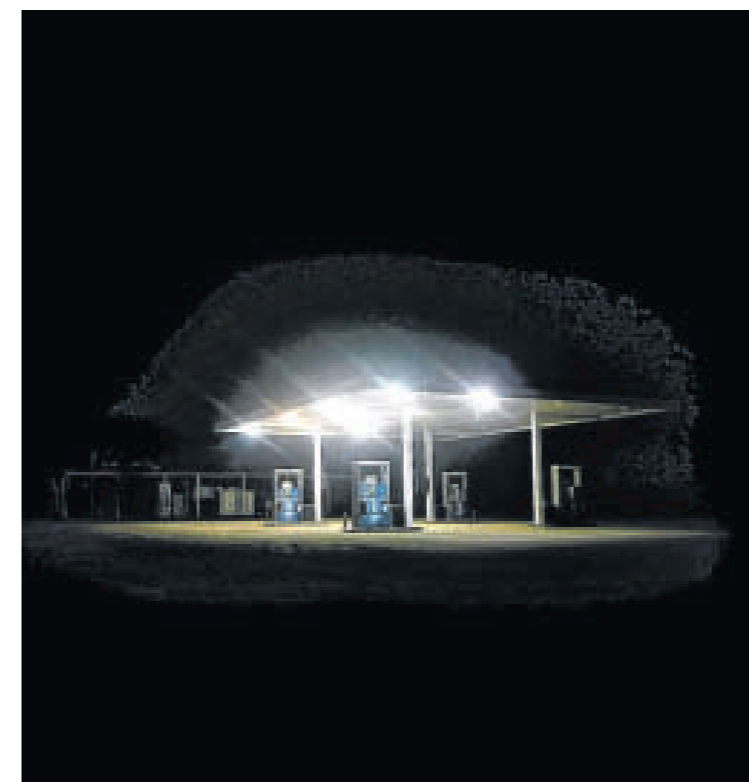
For twenty-six bucks, I score a cinder-block room in one of those motels with cigarette burns around the sink, a sight that always amazes me. The lamp is broken. Bugs zap in the parking lot. I do 50 push-ups and fall asleep slapping mosquitos.

In the morning, I wander into town. It's empty. A lot of American towns are empty these days, but the scene in Port Arthur hits me hard. A boom town that was once the home

to the largest network of oil refineries in the world, today the downtown is empty.

Aluminum peels. Concrete crumbles. Grass bleeds across the sidewalks into the street. You can see the faded letters from hardware stores and luncheonettes. A dignified town lost to storms, poverty and systematic neglect.

I think about everything I've seen, about all of these photographs and notes of banged-up towns. I'm ready to do something tangible. I want to go beyond computer screens and windshields. I call a law school in New Orleans and make an appointment to visit.



▲ **The middle of Nevada gets very dark**

I stop at a gas station at three in the morning because it's the only electric thing in sight, a shocking white box on the horizon. Inside, two little kids play on the floor, batting a candy wrapper back and forth. A thin man tells a video poker machine to go f*** itself before feeding it more quarters. An impressive ponytail hangs through the back of his trucker hat, and it swishes wide when he glares at me while I grab a juice from the cooler. I've interrupted something.

A woman with three different hairstyles at once and mascara

in all the wrong places pulls herself up to the counter. Maybe she was sleeping on the floor. "You going to Vegas, honey?" Her breath is 80 proof.

"No, I'm headed to Tonopah and then over to Death Valley." "Aw come on, sweetie, let's go to Vegas! I know a shortcut and we can be there in two hours."

One of the kids tugs at my trouserleg and my first thought is to give her a dollar. I want to make arrests, issue restraining orders, file paperwork with Child Services. I pay for my juice and leave.

◀ **Gas City**

Leave the politics, guns and sprawl aside: America frightens me on purely geographical terms. So many blank spaces on the map, all of these shocking white rectangles where God knows what's happening. I want to drive up to the edge and take a look.

I rent a Chrysler and fantasise about the romance of the open road: the coming-of-age stories paired with exit signs and motor lodges, the road trip as mythologised in an endless library of songs, books and movies. Do other countries hold such passion for their highways?

Welcome to Indiana, the self-declared crossroads of America. Windows down, music roaring,

driving hard. I speed through a town called Gas City. Sometimes I listen to talk radio. If we look around today, just as the scripture says, the prophetic clouds are gathering. I try to imagine what it would feel like to believe in Jesus.

There are so many beached cars along the corridors of the interstate: are these acts of desperation or the result of some sunburned jackass trying to shave a few minutes off his estimated arrival?

I dare myself to shut my eyes while going 90. I do it three times, 10 seconds each. I promise to stop. Do it any longer and it'll become a compulsion. ■

The Road To Somewhere by James A Reeves is published by WW Norton, at £18.99. We've got five to give away to the first readers who answer this question correctly: How many speeding tickets did the author pick up? Usual Herald rules. Editor's decision is final. Send entries to tabitha@wwnorton.co.uk. Closing date is October 8.



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