



Motto

I moved here to Vermont (motto: "If the weather forecasts don't kill you, the icy roads will") about a year and a half ago with my parents in a series of events practically requiring its own series on the History Channel to fully detail. We had visited the previous winter to investigate the area and make a decision about moving. I thought for marketing purposes my parents should have opted to come during the spring, when we wouldn't have needed to pack a portable space heater just so we could go outside, but it turned out that they weren't marketing anything to me – I was just cargo; they were to make the decisions on their own.

In fact, I still harbor suspicions that they only moved as part of some complex psychological experiment focused on me, examining the number of hourly complaints I made over time. If so I must be quickly climbing to a five-digit grand total. Or perhaps they thought I'd stay in Colorado for college, giving up free rent, free food, free cooking, and free cleaning in exchange for a temperate climate and the chance to stay with my high school friends. A third possibility, of course, is that they just completely lost touch with reality and thought they were moving to Disney World.

In any event, it was winter when we first visited, and the Weather Gods were out in force making sure we knew it. I cannot recall, in the time I lived in Colorado, seeing a snowplow more than perhaps once or twice. The streets within a quarter mile of my house there were never plowed, for Colorado snow appears only long enough for people to notice and then retreats to the mountains to fulfill its real purposes of looking picturesque and letting people ski on it.

Eastern snow, to the contrary, not only appears more frequently and in larger quantities, but also completely fails to melt between falls. Until we moved, I refused to believe that Vermont (motto: "Try the syrup – that's all we do here.") was truly a skiing destination. Colorado's Rocky Mountains nested all the ski resorts; without "real" mountains, where would the snow accumulate? Only after spending a full winter surrounded by endless fields of ice and powder did I begin to mass-produce "Future Ski Resort" signs to place everywhere I went.

So with snow piling down on our windshield we drove in our rented car through the barren and sightless landscape looking for prospective places to live and work and go to school. After about a week, we drove back down to a fairly sunny Connecticut airport, from where my infinitely wise parents had decided to fly back home (completely neglecting to account for the perfectly good airport *in Burlington*). Throughout the following months my parents, inspired by some powerful mysterious force, compelled to move to a state famous only for getting sticky stuff out of its trees, began preparing to move.

The house was quickly sold, and a new one was chosen in Vermont (motto: "got cows?"). According to their telling, we actually managed to purchase the *only* house for sale at that time, though I maintain they deliberately selected the one they could say was "just down the street from a farm stand," which they said about ninety times before we even left. This would be quite a change from our Colorado

home, which was “just down the street from” four hotels, three chain restaurants, a grocery store, a school, and a twelve-screen movie complex.

Still, about a week after my graduation from high school, we were ready to begin leaving. Thus, with much fanfare, the Mayflower people arrived and began the process of moving everything we owned from point A to point B with as many unnecessary steps as humanly possible. Their checklists were clearly designed by Rube Goldberg himself, consisting of no fewer than nine steps just to put little stickers on all our boxes of stuff. These boxes had been filled while we were at lunch one day; the next they were moved onto the truck destined for Vermont (motto: “If trees could talk we’d all be deaf.”)

All that was left to do then was actually *go*. Here again, the process seemed so simple: get in the car, drive there, and stop. Yet such a simple process was where the real trouble began, for as we approached the state line – before we were even out of Colorado – our car screamed out in agony and forced us off the highway to a town whose entire population could, in a time of crisis, be sustained by a daily food supply of one McDonalds “Happy Meal.” This town was indeed so small that despite having no working engine in our car, we still managed to coast the entire distance across to the auto shop we’d called from the highway.

Julesburg, for that is the name of the town now permanently burned in my memory, had about four auto repair shops and a payphone, besides one small grocery store which was out of business and empty (presumably because no sane person drives to the middle of the desert for milk).

After much indecision, the mechanic (who’s entire training seemed to have consisted of being given a screwdriver and a dirty hat) pronounced our car officially dead. We then began... well... we didn’t know quite what we were beginning actually – when you’re stranded in a city that’s entire industry is based solely on *you*, what can you do? After much debate and discussion (in which my mother insisted repeatedly “This is not happening,” and I assured her repeatedly that it was) we arranged to get a ride to “the big city” to take a bus the rest of the way.

Now I admit that living near Denver, perhaps my interpretation of “the big city” might be a little different from everyone else’s, but I do not believe a highway with a McDonalds on one side and a gas station on the other qualifies as a “big city.” I believe it qualifies as a place to stop with little kids when they need to go to the bathroom on long trips. Nonetheless, such is the city in which we arrived and ventured to purchase bus tickets, to the absolute shock and surprise of the person at the bus station.

More accurately, the “bus station” was a “gas station” strategically placed just off the first interstate exit across the Nebraska border. It contained one shelf with various items for sale, and of course a counter behind which two very disgruntled-looking clerks were scurrying about doing absolutely nothing. There was a map of Nebraska under the glass countertop with prices for Greyhound tickets marked next to various destinations, so we assumed we were in the right place.

“We need to get to Vermont – both of us,” we informed the clerk, whom we assumed had taken elementary school geography.

“Where?” he answered, to prove the adage about assuming things.

Still, new to the concept of "Transportation By Idiot," we pressed further. "Vermont. Burlington."

He looked puzzled for a while, and stared at the map under the counter, presumably hoping to find "Vermont" or "Burlington" stenciled on it somewhere. He didn't, of course, and eventually looked back up at us. "D'ya know where that is?"

When we had explained the concept of life outside Nebraska, the other clerk approached the counter. She lit up gleefully, thinking she had cracked our secret code, "Is that toward Omaha?" Since Omaha is on Nebraska's Eastern border, we agreed that it was, so the clerk cheerfully swiped our credit card and wrote out two tickets. We examined them, looked at each other, and then proceeded to lose faith in all of humanity. "These are tickets to Omaha!" we protested.

"Isn't that where you wanted to go?" asked the shocked clerk.

At this point, the bus driver arrived and poured himself a cup of coffee (it's that sort of a town), then explained to them in Nebraska-ese how to write tickets for places not on their little map. The two clerks struggled through writing a second set together, and finally passed them over – these were correct. After another five minutes we got them to refund the money from the first transaction (and then from the third transaction they had submitted when trying to refund the first); later that day we found out Discover had suspended the credit card for fear some bus-ticket-purchasing maniac had stolen it.

We had about an hour before the bus would arrive, so we began consolidating the seven or eight pieces of luggage we were carrying. I remember distinctly throwing my backpack into the car before leaving Colorado, literally thinking, "Do I need this? Well, it couldn't hurt – I'll probably need a pen or something." The gods, in order to spite me, proved very quickly that it *could* hurt to have those things, for we soon had to carry them across the highway in the pouring rain through speeding traffic in order to catch a bus that Dr. Bus Tickets, PhD had sworn would be arriving on the *one* side but then actually arrived on the other. This town had only two places to be, so how he managed to screw up the directions even with a 50-50 chance of blind luck is a mystery still puzzling scientists.

Upon arriving on the other side of the town (which after carrying everything seemed considerably larger), we found two busses – an express, and a local, both destined to some *other* tiny town on the opposite side of Nebraska. We walked up to the busses with the silly intent to get on one – we really didn't care which – and discovered instead the beginnings of a labor strike.

"Sneaky," the bus driver from the gas station, had crossed to the McDonalds earlier and was running back and forth between the building and the bus telling the people outside about his conversations inside over the phone with Greyhound about how Greyhound was screwed up. He had to work overtime and unless the trip was delayed by such-and-such an amount then he only got paid thus-and-such, and the woman driving the other bus wasn't allowed to be doing this-and-that and so many people from this bus had to trade with however many people with that bus and, he shouldn't have to work in such conditions... In retrospect, it might have been easier and faster to just *walk* across Nebraska.

At long length, we finally managed to board the local bus just as the rain stopped and eventually pulled away from the "station" and onto the world's least busy Interstate highway. I don't believe the driver

even looked before pulling into “traffic.” Sneaky proceeded to list all the things that were illegal to smoke on the bus and finished just before we arrived at the first of about 20 rest stops consisting literally of nothing but a place to rest.

The first actually did have a payphone, from which we called my father. He had flown to Vermont (motto: “think ‘Polar bear in a snowstorm.’ That’s your commute.”) to begin working a month or so earlier, and until then didn’t know of our plight. He did know his credit card had started being declined that afternoon, and for whatever reason the people at Discover refused to tell him why (perhaps thinking *he* was the bus-ticket-purchasing maniac). We settled the problem, explained the situation, and rushed back to the bus to start again toward the East.

About a week later, by our estimates (a few hours by the clock), we arrived on a movie set. That is, no real-life bus station actually has a woman carrying a giant bundle on her back approach the weary travelers as they enter and talk about leaving the army. This one did. We managed to shake loose the woman and find the food that could quite possibly be the cause of all the nation’s health problems. This “food” was *all* deep-fried, and tasted only vaguely like actual hamburgers. “Sneaky” (his nametag actually did say “Sneaky”) went into some back office and returned with an itinerary for us to get across the country. The itinerary held true until we got to Chicago, where a good portion of that Nebraska town had evidently migrated, for the clerks there were equally “helpful.” The original clerks had hand-written our tickets (God help us if they ever get computers out there), so we ran out of carbon copies by Chicago. We were instructed to go inside in the five-minute layover and exchange them for new, computer-printed tickets instead.

We entered the Chicago bus station (a term that would strike fear into the hearts of people braver than us), and faced “The Line.” The Line should be used for military training of some sort, for it extended from the door through which we entered all the way around a Disney-style wraparound queue to the counter at the opposite end of the building where one woman with horrendously long finger nails (it’s possible she had never left that counter to cut them) clicked slowly away at a single computer. We missed the next bus by several hours, and unsealed our cooler (yes, we had carried a picnic cooler from Nebraska to Michigan) to snack on some candy bars – the best food we’d had thus far.

From Chicago, with new tickets (which actually had yellowed a bit by the time we managed to leave the station), we proceeded onward to Albany. “Albany, New York.” Another phrase that doesn’t exactly spark images of fluffy clouds laughing children. Though the station was arguably the dirtiest place we had ever been – including being in actual *dirt* – it did contain real food, which was a welcome change. From there only one stretch of driving remained. This stretch, run not by Greyhound, but by some Vermont company, actually managed to be pleasant despite the enormous pressure against it. The driver greeted everyone besides us by name and stopped to help a pregnant woman settle something in some tiny Southern Vermont town. Still, by the time we arrived in Burlington, we were prepared to never drive anywhere again.

We stepped off the last bus and looked for my father's new car (which was foolish, considering it was a *new* car – one we couldn't possibly have seen before) and then called him from the payphone there. "We're here! How far away are you?" we asked anxiously, wondering why he was late to meet us. "About five seconds," he answered as he pulled into the station holding the cell phone in one hand and waving to us with the other, consequently nearly hitting something (which would have fit perfectly into the events). Our first priority was showering for the first time in days, so he drove us straight to the hotel where we'd be staying which was naturally out of shampoo. After a meal in a real restaurant we finally went to our new house, though our belongings had not yet arrived to fill it. I didn't want a new house, of course – I wanted our old house in Colorado – but my parents had overcome my resistance and brought me at last to Vermont (motto: If you can still feel your fingers, you're not in Vermont).