

# **21 Days on a Greyhound Bus (excerpt from book)**

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*our thoughts are numbered.*

*(Contents from complete book)*

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# **Greyhound journal**

*Excerpt of the First 4 Days  
January, 2002*

*This is my diary, more or less verbatim from the journal I kept as I traveled, transcribed just a few days after I came home. The numbers refer to the dates of entry. Paragraphs indicate a pause between entries. These pauses range from anywhere between a few minutes and several hours.*

# 1 .

First day on the hound. I'm in my first bus, idling in the Chicago bus terminal. Bill, a friend from high school, drove me this far. Two days ago we set out at 7:20 am with a full box of Krispy Kreme donuts, courtesy of my mom. An uneventful drive, except for me learning to drive stick (sort of). After maybe ten minutes in a parking lot, I made towards the on-ramp, freaking out at every toll booth, each one luckily staffed by folks kindly enough to be amused by a young man screeching into the first gear of an overloaded Toyota Tercel.

I drove straight through Ohio and had decided to stop after "just one more tollbooth", when I got flustered and shifted up from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup>, and then tried to fix it but moved into reverse instead. We switched seats on the side of the road, reminding me of a certain Levi's commercial. It was the first of many cliché moments, which at the time seemed poignant. Besides that, we only made two other stops for gas, reaching Chicago from Rochester in only 10 hours,

beginning a fairly strong thesis that America really isn't so vast after all.

I sat in the idling bus, realizing that I had a lot of film to shoot, and it suddenly felt like a huge responsibility, something that weighed on me, and I was struck with an overwhelming fear of failure. Sitting in the bus station, with a pass for 21 days of unlimited travel, I wondered if 21 days was *enough*. On my first bus, a half-hour late and still motionless, I was somehow stressed about running out of time.

To get a handle on myself, I picked up **The Man w/o Qualities**, taking comfort in how it felt appropriate—like the trip, once you start it, you can't imagine finishing it, or reading something else.

### 3.

Originally, I planned a stop in Louisville because I thought it would serve as a solid halfway between Rochester and Colorado, but the free ride I picked up with Bill made it seem somewhat unnecessary to stop there for a whole night after traveling just 6 hours. Still, I had a good time, and got to see a city I'd never been to before. So, basically, mission accomplished.

I stayed with Sara Baker and her mother, who each made the idea of “southern hospitality” seem very real. Sara dropped out of school our freshmen year and was not someone I was ever close with, but being a friend of Kelley’s she gladly put me up, and did recognize me upon meeting. It was strange for both of us because I was just starting my trip and feeling out what exactly I wanted and how to do it, realizing how much work I had to do and how hard it would be, and she was forced meanwhile, by my presence into a nostalgia for a time long past and all but forgotten. She said it was good to talk to me and hear that

the memories she has are of real people that still exist. We looked at old pictures of her and her ex-boyfriend.

We spent the evening at Sara's boyfriend's apartment. It was inspiring to see these successful young hipsters, gallery curators, to see them living on their own terms, and to have them interested in the project I was undertaking. I explained it at the time as a trip to uncover the urban decay associated with bus stations and to draw a correlation between that and the psychological decay one experiences when traveling on the hound, although I was not very articulate at the time, and still fairly muddled in my ideas. This was made worse by the fact that I had not yet shot *anything*, a failure I can partly blame on the Hound itself, which was surprisingly rapid and on-time, despite its late start, leaving me no chances to get off the bus and look around.

I was hit though, with a certain feeling of isolation. It occurred to me that while mass culture makes a stab at uniting the country, the art world is so fractured, so localized, with kids everywhere digging totally different things. In a way its good to see this, and to know that all

over the country kids are doing different things and finding local scenes to support them, but it's also frustrating to see how disconnected everyone is.

I was reaffirmed in my belief in travel as education, in part because almost everyone is excited upon meeting strangers that have visited their hometown, if only for a few hours, but more importantly because in travel one experiences a constant flow of new information. When you're only in town for a few hours everything becomes meaningful. The way a normal trip might be remembered as its best moments, 'passing through' is remembered almost in its entirety. While your activities may be routine for those you are visiting, for the traveler they are new and interesting.

I had a thought yesterday that I didn't get to write down, about a link between **The Man w/o Qualities** and my own abstraction of self, both in the way I am archetyping my journey and the simple process of cramming a body into a small seat and pretending that one is comfortable for many hours at a time. To ignore your physicality and just watch the road unfold...

So much still needs to happen. I'm getting more self confident, but I'm still afraid. I don't think I'll really feel like myself until I pick up Katie, a friend from school, in San Francisco. There's so much self-consciousness in traveling alone with a camera. I still don't have any audio, but well... as Chocki, a band from back home, said, "something's bound to happen."

2 ½ hours in Indianapolis: I shot 70' of film and bought a fish sandwich for \$2.75 (w/chips) at the Tailgater's sports bar, where I was the youngest patron by at least 15 years. The girl working the counter was super nice. I even bought two post cards and put in a call to my parents.

The sun is setting on a certain emptiness. Something is missing. Maybe it's the perspective of knowing that this is only the beginning of a very long trip, but something is missing. I don't feel the desperation. I actually feel *content* to just sit here, and watch the emptiness of Indiana pass by.

## 4 .

The sadness finally hit. Another greyhound night had me feeling so small I should have cried. So much willpower just to sit in my seat and not scream out for salvation.

So I found myself warmed by reading **Calvin & Hobbes** at 3am in Iowa City. At dawn I was still unhappy, though unbelievably thankful for the new day, damning the winter season for its long darkness. It's the nights on the bus that get to you. I listened to the mix tape Kelley gave me to pass the last bit of grey dawn before I could begin reading again.

I took a break from the trenches of modernist literature at our meal stop, horrified that a shitty short stack of pancakes and a cup of coffee cost me 8 bucks. With nowhere else to go and no food for 20 hours I didn't have much choice except to grumble about the way lousy cheap diner food suddenly becomes good ol' country cookin' when you cross the Mississippi. I did snag a shot of God's Country in the parking lot, which made me feel a little better.

In a fit of desperation I powered through the last 80 pages of **The Man w/o Qualities** in one sitting (this after reading 50 pages *before* breakfast). I felt more that I was absorbing the text rather than reading it, as if an alien force was causing me to completely internalize the story and concepts of Musil. It was an exhaustive effort, which I finished just 45 minutes outside of Denver. Part of me wanted to immediately write down my understandings of Musil and Ulrich, of the impotence and barbarism of civilized man, but I was too out of breath. Instead I collapsed into my headphones as if I'd completed some kind of athletic event. My mind is in full gear now, and I feel that I'm on to something, that this is a worthwhile undertaking, that there's something good about searching out this country, investigating the land to uncover something beautiful and unifying. I'm finally ready to embrace whatever comes.