

So my girlfriend decided that "we" needed to go on vacation. basically she was tired of seeing the side of my head, while I stare blankly into flickering computer screens trying to discern the meaning of life, a better recipe for potato salad, you know, that type of thing.

The destination: Duluth, MN. For those of you who are unaware of what exactly a Duluth is, there are a multitude of definitions; the vaguely bustling metropolis of the Iron Range, tour books refer to it as the San Francisco of the midwest, and no that doesn't mean lots of leather clad homosexuals, or quaint Chinese restaurants. Think St. Paul but on a hill, and parking is never a problem. I think that Duluth could qualify as the most Minnesota place on earth. Every one has an accent, and they really do say things like "Uff Da" and eat "Hot Dish". Needless to say I avoided all personal contact with native Duluthians, and ate only Mexican food -- you know, when in Rome, avoid the Romans.

Actually truth be told, I spent most of my summers growing up in a small town on the Iron Range called Hibbing. Hibbing has three major claims to fame; it is the home of the Greyhound Bus company, it is the location of the worlds largest open pit mine (yes it's even bigger then the one Fred worked at in Bedrock), and it is the birthplace of Bob Dylan.

Unlike a lot of rock guys, I don't drool at the feet of Bob Dylan. I like him a lot, and he made some pretty amazing records, but he's made some clunkers too (like who hasn't? Well, outside of the Rolling Stones, but then they have those solo albums to account for). My only connection to him is a handful of his records, and the fact that my mom once went on a double date with him (she wasn't on a date with him, she was out with his brother). One of the records of his that I don't have is Highway 61 Revisited. It's one that I keep meaning to pick up, I just never do.

Highway 61 is the highway that runs from Mpls to Duluth (actually it goes further then that but I have only driven it as far as Red Wing). For many years it was the only traffic artery between the northern and southern portions of the state. Of course now we have 35W, the Super Speedway. (It took us two hours to make the 150 mile drive). No fuss, no muss, No Bother. Of course, 35W is a road devoid of personality -- it is simply a means of getting from one place to another. Which is fine if you're in a hurry, but what if you are deliberately not in a hurry? What if you want to get an idea of an area other than handful of identical franchises? It might make people feel more comfortable that all Taco Bells look the same, but it just sorta creeps me out. What's the point of travel when there is the same as here?

It was decided that rather than taking the thirty-five autobahn, we would see America, or what we could in an afternoon, after all we aren't hippies, and this isn't Easy Rider, and we really wanted was a good grilled cheese straight out of an Americana time capsule.

It would seem that Highway 61 would be easy enough to find, it is, after all, the midwest's version of Route 66. 5 exits outside of Duluth (on 35 of course) There

it stood shinny and glimmering. " Exit Hwy 61" a simple turn off the worn and familiar path, and into America, well at least Minnesota, perhaps to find those places that Garrison Kellior keeps talking about.

We were tricked -- that portion of Hwy 61 only goes for a mile. After a conversation with a helpful Pump -n- Munch employee, we were told that we have to get off on the vaguely Indian sounding name exit and take our first right and then we would be on our precious Hwy 61, and as a helpful parting shot " You know 35w is a lot quicker ". When I explained that it was sort of a Bob Dylan thing, he replied with a blank stare, and an Ohh -- the sort of Ohh you emit when you find out that the person sitting across from you at a dinner party is a proctologist. Ohhh.

break

Once again we entered the 35W world, only to exit as soon as we started -- you can cover a lot of ground at 80 miles an hour. This time it looked much more promising. We followed the direction explicitly, but there was a problem. Nothing said we were on a Hwy. 61. The only way we verified that we were, in fact, on the right road was from a helpful Kum -n- Go employee -- he also let us know that 35W is a lot quicker.

In different parts of the state Hwy. 61 has different names, much like Bigfoot, or Corn. The only acknowledgment of Hwy. 61 was on the number of business we passed, most of them closed. The Hwy. 61 motor inn seemed to be the midwestern version of the Motel from "Touch of Evil" -- not a real family funground. The Highway itself is a running coil of asphalt, continually doubling back on itself, like they got a good deal on highway laborers and needed them to do something. We were running through town that I had only heard of as a kid, Through each of the closed up ghost towns that we passed, there were always two things that were still open, the Tavern, and the Video store. Somewhere there must have been a Wal-Mart that was really happening. 'Cause there weren't nothing going on here, and we were the lone car for as far as the eye could see, which was pretty far, since the only thing that obstructed our view was the giant signs reminding us of the direction to 35W.

The only real goal here was to find lunch, that kind of lunch that you can't find in the 612, the kind my mom made, well the kind my mom would have made if she cooked. Not great, but good. Grilled cheese and french fries, with iridescent green pickle slices on the side and a sprig of Parsley. I miss Parsley -- no nutritional value, just a little decoration to make your mediocre food look that much... prettier. We just don't get enough parsley anymore. Somewhere somebody lost a fortune, because someone decided we don't need that little sprig of minty greenery. It was probably the same guy that outlawed paper straws.

The problem we had, well besides undertaking a journey such as this and not having Dylan's Highway 61 revisited with us, was that no quaint roadside diner was to be found. After 3 hours of this previously 2-hour journey, nothing remotely homey had appeared. Lots of closed places, the occasional giant bale of hay that seemed to live in the middle of the road, lots of "sports oriented" bars, but not a grannies cafe to be found. Despair was setting in.

At the end of hour 4, we found it -- Bimbo's Pizza and Cafe, located in scenic Wyoming. Wyoming MN that is. Grilled cheese was to be had, but no parsley, or pickle slices. Our 21 year old waitress was surprised to see "folks up from the cities" in her otherwise vacant place of employment. Once again we explained the Highway 61 Revisited theme of our day's travels. This was a learning experience for her as she had no idea that this was in fact on that highway (in that particular county it's Hwy. 31, as if 61 wasn't good enough) or that Bob Dylan was a person that had ever existed.

Without so much as a word spoken between us, Maureen and I headed back to Mpls, on 35W, it was late and the Simpsons would be on soon. We were home within 20 minutes.