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The expanse of the highway rolls out before us offering the tantalizing possibility of freedom. The horizon invites us forward, its hidden promise urging us to accelerate into the future. Behind us our pasts and our pains mingle with the exhaust fumes and evaporate into the cooling night air. Ahead the taillights bleed into streaks of color. The telephone poles beat out a rhythm, and almost unconsciously our foot presses the accelerator closer to the floor.

As the speedometer inches higher the act of driving becomes visceral. Flesh and metal become one, the automobile an extension of ourselves, a speeding incarnation of our wills. Yet the thrill of speed and the romance of the open road before us cannot mask the truth that we are lost. We have no map; out here there is no cell phone coverage. The robotic, manufactured voice of the GPS fell silent long ago. All we know is that we don't want to be where we have come from, and we are not sure where we are going. So for now our home is the road.

ONE:

A TALE OF TWO ROADS

“Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?”

Carlo Marx in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*

“Nobody move, everything will be OK.”

Mohamed Atta

In their chinos, casual shirts, and T-shirts they even dressed like writer Jack Kerouac. And although they had probably never read his classic novel *On the Road*, they were imitating Kerouac’s vision of life to a T, living in cheap motels, sleeping in rental cars, criss-crossing their way around America. Through their lifelong exposure to popular culture, they had imbibed the life script for twentysomethings that Kerouac had sketched out almost half a century earlier. They were in a limbo, existing on the American road.

A delayed adolescence marked the culture of their group. Theirs was an all-male world. Yet long-distance phone calls to girlfriends, parents, and neglected wives betrayed an internal conflict between a desire for domestic bliss and an unfettered pursuit of pleasure. Kerouac was drawn to the seedy side of American life, so were the boys, they also liked strip clubs and dive bars. In Florida they rented scooters, speeding up and down the beaches.

They also seemed to have a weakness for glazed donuts, visiting convenience stores to sugar-load several times a day.¹

The group had traveled en masse to Las Vegas, where they stayed in “cheap hotels on a dreary stretch of the Strip frequented by dope dealers and \$10 street hookers.”² The sons of the wealthy were slumming it, and just like Kerouac would regularly be seen staggering drunk or stoned on hash. Other nights they would go up-market and splash the cash on lap dances and expensive champagnes.³

Their public displays of arrogance and excess ensured that women would be seen on their arms. When they were not in the clubs they were buying porn,⁴ and paying for sex with prostitutes in their hotel rooms. Their behavior could have been the script for an MTV reality show or a B-grade spring break movie, a lifestyle unintentionally championed by Kerouac on the fringes of American life. A vision of life that would in our time be pushed to the center, becoming typical and expected.

Yet these men were far from typical. Their wild living was a precursor of something more sinister.

A COCKTAIL OF FAITH AND VICE

Jack Kerouac lived out a contradiction. Raised a conservative Catholic, he maintained a love for and relationship with Christ for his whole life. Even in his most debauched moments his Bible was never far from his side. At times he was prudish and conservative, at other times a libertine. The young men in the group were the same. Like Kerouac, their actions were also contradictory. One moment they were deeply religious, praying late into the night and poring over scriptures; the next moment their behavior was marked by an unrestrained indulgence in vice.

Both Kerouac and the young men were drawn to and yet felt like outsiders in American life. Both wished for a death that would see them leave this world and find union with God in paradise.

Kerouac's journey to find God would take the form of a modern pilgrimage, with off-ramps and excursions into drug-fueled hallucinations, and dalliances with Buddhism and Taoism. Eventually, his body broken and addicted, he would return to his childhood devotion, spending his last days focused on Christ and the Cross. The young men would take a very different road in their quest to please God.

GO, GO, GO!

Popular culture chooses to ignore the middle-aged, worn-out Kerouac, hip to the futility of the American dream and the reality of sin, spending his last days meditating on the Cross. Instead it prefers the romantic vision of the handsome, twentysomething seminal hipster of *On the Road*. Speeding across America in a beat-up car that flew like a rocket, high as a kite, pretty girls in the back, jazz pouring out of the radio. His wild buddy and partner in crime Neal Cassady next to him like a fan at a jazz club, screaming GO, GO, GO out the window into the impossibly starry expanse of the Midwestern sky.

THAT MORNING THE
NEW YORK STREETS
THAT KEROUAC HAD
WALKED HALF A
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HIS FRIENDS WERE
SHOWERED IN THE
CONCRETE DUST OF THE
WORLD TRADE CENTER.

The young men would also be remembered for posterity, flying across America at high speed, not on an impossibly starry night, but on an impossibly blue-skied morning. Their shouts would not be jazz-inspired slang. Instead they would be guttural and Arabic, screamed last words of "*Allahu Akbar*." That morning the New York streets that Kerouac had walked half a century earlier with his friends were showered in the concrete dust of the World Trade Center and the vaporized remains of Mohamed Atta and his friends, known to history as the 9/11 hijackers.

CONTRADICTIONS

To us the behavior of the 9/11 hijackers seems strange. These were terrorists. A group of militants committed to a radical interpretation of Islam. A cell of men who were ready to offer their lives to defeat an enemy that they saw as morally degenerate. Men whose idea of modesty ensured that they covered with towels frames on their walls that contained some old photos of women bathing in 1920s swimming costumes, yet who happily would visit strip clubs.

The contradictory behavior of the 9/11 hijackers has confused analysts. Yet when examined in the light of our culture's true nature, the behavior of the group is not that shocking. Humans are contradictory creatures: we like to be logical, but our actions, wants, and desires are a far more confusing and inconsistent affair.

The majority of the 9/11 attackers were from upper- or middle-class families. Many, like the group's leader Mohamed Atta, had spent time living and studying in the West and felt strongly the tension between the worldview of the West and their adherence and loyalty to their own worldview and religion. The propaganda of Al Qaeda would point to various rationales for its war on the West, such as Western foreign policy, the existence of the state of Israel, and so on, but the hijackers' last moments giving into temptation illustrates a deeper and more implicit motive. They viewed the West as a culture that had thrown off any kind of restraint. Their last gasp giving into the fleshly temptations of the West was an admission to its seductive power and a confirmation of its need to be destroyed. Christianity and Judaism were seen as impotent and inferior because they had failed to rein in this new secular self with all of its base desires and personal freedoms.

The hijackers unintentionally found themselves caught between

two visions of being human that would come to dominate the consciousness of the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century. To understand this tension more fully and appreciate its pull, not just on the lives of the 9/11 hijackers but on our own, we must now travel back to the period just after World War II. Back to the same Manhattan streets that Mohamed Atta would cover in ash, streets that in 1948 two men walked, reveling in and wrestling with the new culture that was emerging in the West. Two men who would create two philosophical roads.

TAKING A TEMPTING BITE OUT OF THE BIG APPLE

During a two-year period between 1947 and 1948, two young men lived in New York City. Both men were aspiring writers, both had reached a crossroads in their personal lives, both felt that Western culture had descended into a spiritual and existential crisis. Both men would end up writing bestselling books about this experience, works that would electrify generations to come, mold lifestyles, and offer visions of being human that would help shape the twenty-first century. Both in their own way would leave their marks not only on New York but on global culture. Both men would die early, in a manner that would appear as a kind of martyrdom to their followers. Their ideas would live on long after their deaths.

WHO WAS JACK KEROUAC?

Journalist Tom Brokaw would label Jack Kerouac's peers the "greatest generation," lauding their selflessness, work ethic, and commitment. This was the generation who understood material deprivation during the Great Depression, confronted the forces of fascism during World War II, and during the forties and fifties built America into the dominant global superpower.

Born in 1922, Kerouac was part of Brokaw's greatest generation,

but his influence would shape the generation following his own. In a period of conformity and conservatism Kerouac would bounce around New York City in a ball of drug-fueled, jazz-inspired, sexual energy. Though unusual and deviant at the time, his lifestyle was far more like the typical young adults' of the twenty-first century—a lifestyle defined by a thirst for experience and travel, recreational drug use, a fear of and yet a desire for community and commitment. A promiscuous approach to sexuality, a desire to make it, a contradictory approach to faith, and few qualms about returning home to Mom when the money ran out.

For Kerouac, New York City was simply a starting point on a manic journey that would last for four years and that would criss-cross the United States multiple times. This journey, part spiritual

**WITHOUT KEROUAC
THERE COULD BE NO
EASY RIDER, NO EAT,
PRAY, LOVE, NO BLUE
LIKE JAZZ.**

quest, part hedonistic romp, would inspire every road movie. Every buddy flick, every spring break bender, and every twentysomething, backpacking search to discover one's self that would follow over the coming decades owes something to Kerouac and his vision. Without

Kerouac there could be no *Easy Rider*, no *Eat, Pray, Love*, no *Blue Like Jazz*. The details of this odyssey would be transformed into Kerouac's famous book *On the Road*, which is part confessional, part travelogue, and part novel.

The book would be loosely autobiographical. *On the Road* tells the story of Kerouac and his friend Neal Cassady's numerous romps across the continental United States between 1947 and 1951. Since the book includes frank descriptions of the drug-fueled sexual misadventures of Kerouac's friends, his publishers worried about possible lawsuits. So they persuaded him to change the names to pseudonyms. Kerouac reinvented himself as Sal Paradise, and Neal became the legendary Dean Moriarty.

CATHOLIC, FRENCH-CANADIAN, AND CALVINIST

Kerouac was christened Jean Louis Lebris de Kerouac to French Canadian parents in Lowell, Massachusetts. Growing up in a French-speaking household, he did not speak English until he was six. The defining moment of his life was the tragic death of his brother Gerard from rheumatic fever at age nine. A survivor's sense of guilt haunted Kerouac for the rest of his life. His mother and father both loved God and the bottle—influences that would mark Kerouac's life and shape his grief. The French-speaking Catholics of Massachusetts followed the teachings of Cornelius Jansen, whose Catholicism was deeply influenced by the theology of John Calvin. This unique blend of Catholicism and Calvinism shaped Kerouac's faith, infusing it with a deep understanding of sin, the Cross, and the place of suffering in the Christian life.

**IF AMERICA WAS
SETTLING DOWN
BEHIND WHITE PICKET
FENCES, THEY WANTED
A LIFE ON THE ROAD.**

A gifted football player, Kerouac earned a scholarship to Columbia University in Manhattan. Despite his athletic prowess and good looks, Kerouac found a home amongst a strange grouping of bohemian University buddies. The embryonic group consisted of poet Allen Ginsberg, writer William S. Burroughs, editor Lucien Carr, and various other misfits, bohemians, and artists. The group was united in their belief that American culture had gone awry. Their reading of Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* convinced them that they were living at the end of Western culture.

The group looked at a postwar society awash in materialism, secularism, and shallowness, and came to the belief that if rationalism and science had led society to its current crisis, then romanticism, spirituality, and experience would re-humanize America. The group found what they perceived as the strict and conservative moral confines of the forties stifling. They began to

plot, plan, and live out a new way of being human, a response to the great crisis they saw all around them. If America was settling down behind white picket fences, they wanted a life on the road.

HOW A GROUP OF JAZZ FANS SHAPED THE CONTEMPORARY SELF

The proximity of Columbia University to Harlem gave the group an appreciation of jazz and a somewhat naive and patronizing desire to imitate what they saw as the unfettered and authentic lives of African-Americans. This group of renegade bookworms also idolized other groups that they saw living on the edge of American culture, such as prostitutes, homosexuals, and petty criminals. Idolization would turn into imitation and eventually immersion as the group pushed the boundaries of acceptable social behavior, grounding themselves in the world of hustlers who hung around Times Square.

Unbeknownst to the group, their seminal experiments with sexuality, Eastern religions, drugs, and restless travel would be launched from the margins into the cultural mainstream over the coming decades. Kerouac labeled his friends the “Beat Generation”; later the media would dub them “beatniks,” after the Sputnik satellite. The Beats would foreshadow the counterculture and the hippie movement of the sixties, which would in turn influence the mainstream in the seventies, and eventually come to define the contemporary consumer, popular culture, and personal questing in the West.