

Backroads

By Vinnie Rotondaro



Joe pulled up in a red Jeep Cherokee, put the car in park and let the engine idle. It was about 10:45 in the morning, a Friday. Sam arrived a few minutes later fresh off of the subway, duffle bag slung over his back. The sun was clear white that day and shining down hard. It was almost spring. Joe honked the horn, and when Sam spotted the car, he pointed to the sky and started walking over.

Reaching into the backseat, Joe popped open the door opposite him so Sam could toss his stuff in, which he did, shutting the door and climbing into the front seat. Sam and Joe clasped palms in salutation. Sam was wearing jeans, a jean jacket and some boots. Joe was in grey sneakers and a blue hoodie. They were ready to roll.

The two were on their way to Pittsburgh from New York City. Sam hated rushing things and insisted that they take backroads. Joe was in. After inching their way through the Holland Tunnel and creeping along an expanse of industrial wasteland in New Jersey, they rolled onto a tree-lined road running parallel to the highway, and cruised a cool 60 miles per hour with the windows down.

Eventually, they made their way into the country. Joe found the historical markers that dotted the sides of the roadway interesting—the ones next to old colonial stone houses and scenic graveyards, and the like—and every now and then—this was a decidedly relaxed ride—he would pull over to read them.

Somewhere in the middle of Pennsylvania, he spotted one that was about an old bridge. The bridge itself could barely be seen—a thicket of barren trees obscured it. But a shining band of bright white light could be seen. It was a river, and the sun was all over it.

Joe sidled the car up to the sign. He hugged the outside of his door and took off his black sunglasses. Squinting, he read:

ROCKVILLE BRIDGE

The longest stone masonry arch railroad bridge in the world, visible to the south, was built between 1900 and 1902. Named for the surrounding small settlement, it has forty-eight arches and a length of 3,820 feet. It is the third bridge constructed here by the Pennsylvania Railroad. A wooden structure has been built 1847-49, followed by an iron bridge in 1877.

The two pulled back onto the road and drove up a bit further where they found an opening in the trees. A clear site of the river spilled into view. It was the Susquehanna River that was branching out before them, beautiful and mighty. They looked at the bridge. It laid low along the water and was made out of weathered stone. One arch after another crossed the water. Above the bridge and the water alike, a sloping wooded mountaintop sat in the sky.

The men drove on. A few miles down the road they ran into a town called Dauphin Borough. The town was located along a bend in the Susquehanna, just off its banks.

Joe found a gas station and pulled in to fill up. They had a direct view of the river. Sunlight dappled the water, which rushed over rocks where shallow and flowed slowly where deep.

Sam opened his door and stumbled out onto the pavement. He stretched out in the beauty that lay before him. He walked down to the river. After filling up the tank, Joe pulled into a parking spot and called down to him.

“This place is incredible,” he hollered.

Sam came jogging up.

“It’s so great down there,” he said grinning. “Hey, I’m going to go into this diner and use the bathroom.”

“Cool,” Joe said.

Sam ran across a lawn of freshly cut green grass, pulled open the door and walked inside.

Joe leaned against the jeep. Looking down at the water, he breathed in the deep cool air. About ten minutes later Sam came out of the door with a burger in his hand and a brown paper bag full of French fries.

They hopped into the car. Sam stuck his hand out the window and slapped the top of the jeep. *Pop Pop!* They hit the road. As they were on their way out of town, Sam called out, "What's that?"

"What is what?" said Joseph.

"That thing out there," Sam said. "It's like a white statue, or something."

Joseph craned his neck around and caught a glimpse of it. He shook his head in disbelief. Out there in the middle of the river on a hunk of grey stone, there it sat, glowing white in the sunlight.

"It looks like a miniature Statue of Liberty," said Sam. "See how the left hand is holding up a torch."

"Yeah I do," said Joseph. "Look that thing up on your phone."

Sam entered "Dauphin Borough Statue of Liberty" into an Internet search on his smartphone.

It was built by a local area resident, a lawyer, he learned, out of plywood and venetian blinds, and erected in secret late at night one night with the help of some friends. No one else in the town knew he was going to do this, so when everyone in Dauphin Borough woke up the next day and looked out over the river, it was as if the white statue had risen miraculously from the water.

Over the years it had been blown over by wind, reconstructed and raised again. These days it's just considered part of the town.

"You know" Sam said, "America is amazing."

"Yes it is," said Joe.

“That’s why these backroads are so great,” Sam said. “You get to see all these things.”

The two agreed it would be foolish to ever drive on a major highway. With the sun starting to set, they kept moving towards Pittsburgh where Dan was waiting. Dan was engaged to be married, and Sam and Joe were going to take him on a road trip to Texas before his wedding. This was how the trip began.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Joe and Sam are on their way to which location?

- A Dauphin Borough
- B the backroads of Pennsylvania
- C New York City
- D Pittsburgh

2. The main setting of this story is

- A Pittsburgh on a hot summer day
- B Rockville Bridge on a lazy afternoon
- C along backroads over the course of a day
- D an airplane flight to Texas

3. Read the sentences: "Sam hated rushing things and insisted that they take backroads. Joe was in."

Based on this information, it can be concluded that

- A Sam and Joe did not want to go to Pittsburgh.
- B Sam and Joe are generally relaxed on road trips.
- C Sam and Joe are generally very stressed on road trips.
- D Sam and Joe have known each other for a very long time.

4. How do people in Dauphin Borough most likely feel about the statue?

- A They believe it is a sign from a higher power.
- B They embrace its presence.
- C They are confused by its miraculous appearance.
- D They pay little attention to it.

5. This story is mostly about

- A the difference between natural and man-made landmarks
- B the importance of taking time to appreciate nature
- C a friendship formed through the bond of sharing a car ride together
- D the beautiful and interesting things to be discovered along backroads

6. The tone of the writing throughout the passage can be described as

- A frantic, or hurried
- B relaxed and smooth
- C suspenseful and unusual
- D exhilarating, or exciting

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Joe and Sam decide not to take the highway _____ they could drive through backroads.

- A even though
- B so
- C instead
- D next

8. The presence and appreciation of nature is evident throughout the story. Identify at least three phrases or sentences that support this claim.

9. What did Joe and Sam enjoy about their trip?

10. Sam and Joe's trip to Pittsburgh would have been quicker had they taken the highway. Why was it more worthwhile that they drove through the backroads?
