

Branson, Ho!

February 28, 2003

Fate is a strange mistress, leading me on adventures across the globe. I never know where she will lead me. I just never, ever thought it would be Branson, Missouri.

All I know about Branson is...well, nothing, really, except that everyone laughs when I tell them I'm going. I've seen the commercials, with people in Grand Ol' Opry outfits boot-scootin' around some livestock. I know enough, just from this, that Branson is not a place I should be.

And yet here I am, in the car at nine on a Saturday morning made just for sleeping in and my husband and I are on the way to Branson. In a converse demonstration of the same laws of order that let me know I should marry my husband – because it just felt right – this trip just feels wrong. But my husband has convinced me that this is a good idea, that I should tag along with him on his business trip and that we can make the best of it, as we always do. The truth is the bastard just doesn't want to go to Branson by himself. Can't say as I blame him, so I go.

It is 250-odd miles between Branson and St. Louis, virtually all of it down Interstate 44, known in another life as Route 66. Getting one's kicks has apparently taken on a different tune, judging by the dreary landscape and road signs that dot the journey. Just outside St. Louis, we pass the skeleton of Six Flags, bare and neglected in the off-season daylight. We pass equally bare wineries, the twisted brown vines reaching up from the ground like gnarled witches' hands.

Soon after, we spot the first of approximately 6,000 billboards for Meramec Caverns. They will haunt and taunt us for much of the trip, warning us not to miss this seven-story natural spectacle. The truth is, no matter how magnificent the caves are, no matter how serene and beautiful their cool, dusky innards, they simply can't live up to the sheer man-force behind this exhausting advertising effort.

In twelve years of living in St. Louis, I have never traveled this far on 44 and it's quickly evident I could have died happily without doing so. But the truth is that when you tear away the skyscrapers and the arch, the glamour of big cities like Kansas City and St. Louis, this is what Missouri really is – desperate and ambitious farmland, trees, snug trailer parks, old grain silos with crumbling, rusting chutes and long stretches of earth, God and lust all vying for eternal souls. Any remnants of my citified life quickly give way to mile after mile of browned and bare farmland and hundreds of roadside signs begging for attention.

But there's much more to these roadside signs – punctuated occasionally by a plastic roadside statue of a really big bull or a lumberjack – than the death of countless trees. As the road passes under us, I'm made perhaps more aware than ever of how we are a sum of our roadside offerings, each sign a clue as to who we are, what we value and what we have to offer. On this particular stretch of highway, that boils down to three very American things: beef, fireworks and porn.

Make no mistake about it. These rural Missourians people hate their porn as much as they love the revenue it no doubt generates from lonely truck drivers snaking their way to Mexico.

Virtually every sign for an Adult Superstore is shadowed by a smaller, brighter and terribly ambitious billboard announcing that “porn ruins lives.” I’m impressed. Values and passion live here, too.

After about 150 miles, a village of billboards appears, accompanying the winding road ahead, harkening the spectacle that is Branson long before the city proper. Which is good news for those who want a taste of the tastelessness the town has to offer without ever actually having to set foot in it.

We pass signs for Dolly Parton’s Dixie Stampede and Shoji Tabuchi, the Asian fiddle player threatening that “there are some things you’ll just never forget.” I’ll bet. The facial contortions and exaggerated hillbillyness of a duo dubbed, most indecorously, The Baldknobbers appears to be making the best of inbreeding via humor.

The next billboard says it all: “How do you say funny in Russian.” One word: Yakov. Another billboard a few miles down the road confirms: “Funny in any language.” Except, apparently, English, which you’d think might hinder his popularity. But not in Branson, the land of second – hell, twenty-second – chances. Here, the good ole boys from a certain era have been put out to pasture and America wants to watch them graze. In fact, America wants to pay big bucks to watch them graze.

This morning, I didn’t understand Branson, couldn’t for the life of me reconcile how it exists – let alone thrives – in its reclusive Ozark Mountain nest. Now I’m beginning to understand. Nestled at the end of a painfully uninteresting stretch of highway, Branson is clearly the grease trap of American pop culture, catching the John Davidsons, Jimmy Osmonds and Bobby Vintons as they hurtle down the drain on their rightful path to obscurity.

And there’s a market for this? Clearly. Branson ambitiously dubs itself “The Live Music Show Capital of the World” and even with 30 theaters dedicated to providing schlock to the general public, I have a wee bit of trouble believing this is how the rest of the world sees Branson. After all, we’re talking about a part of the world where Cracker Barrel is considered fine dining.

Branson is also land for shoppers and seekers of the unusual and obscure, according to the signs vying for my highly limited attention. We can get t-shirts and fudge at Ozarkland, which sounds like a backwoods theme park. (Ride grandpa’s knee! Touch his corn cob pipe!) Osceola Cheese boasts 80 kinds of cheese and I’m suddenly rendered uncomfortable by the brash opulence of it all. I can’t even entertain what the World’s Biggest Banjo might look like.

Not far from Branson is Carthage, Missouri, home to the Precious Moments Chapel. Where was this info when I was planning my wedding, a truly precious moment indeed? Imagine the wedding portraits we could have taken, Chris and I flanked by those pastel-hued, bulbous-headed porcelain creations. But we don’t stop.

About 50 miles shy of Branson, we finally come across the Exotic Animal Paradise that billboards have been bragging about for miles, with the alluring advertising slogan “Cats, cats and more cats.” Jesus, I could have stayed in my own house if I wanted that many cats all over

me. I'm pretty certain at this point that my definition of paradise is distinctly different from anyone else's in these parts.

I wish to be saved, rescued from all of this commercialism and, as if on cue, the giant James River Assembly dominates the landscape, a veritable mall of worship, its LCD display offering salvation to comers-by. These people take their entertainment seriously, dammit, and I can't figure out if their giant churches are part of the game or to save you from it. Either way, it seems they grow God's houses big in these parts and, smartly enough, put them right near Lambert's Cafe, home of the throwed rolls.

As we approach Branson proper, if there is any mystery remaining as to whom Branson exists for, it's quickly erased by a huge sign welcoming visitors with the promise of "quality dentures in a day."

In the wake of all the other roadside offerings that have rendered Branson irresistible before you even arrive, another billboard slyly delivers the one-two punch: "Want to retire in Branson?" From my space in the passenger seat, hurtling through space and time toward "the Live Music Capital of the World," I find myself clawing at the window of the car and moaning, "No! No! No!"

I'm exhausted. It's been five hours since we left St. Louis and I'm ready to go home. The only problem is, we're just arriving. In Branson, in case I forgot to mention it.