

# 34thParallel

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## Welcome

Donna Spector, who wrote *The Poem Family* on page 6, says that once at a Dodge Foundation teacher playwrights' conference at Princeton University, a playwright asked her why she writes.

"I answered, somewhat melodramatically, Writing is my life.

"But that really is true. I write to explore the mysteries of myself, my world, and the larger world. Who are we, why do we do what we do? How can we deal with confusion, pain, and loss?"

THE EDITORS

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ROAD TRIP BY THAO NGUYEN

**Road Trip by Thao Nguyen**

**THAO NGUYEN**

**ROAD**

**We prepared for our journey to Billy Mays's grave by hitting up CVS and buying fizzy energy drinks, bags of Cheetos, and a gallon of OxiClean.**

# TRIP

**P**hil never really asked for much, but he was always around when you needed him; he was there when your girlfriend dumped you, and he was there to pump you up for a job interview. On a chilly January evening in Baltimore, my teenage friends, Brandon, Nicky-poo, Pat, Aubrey, and I were giving Phil a send-off dinner at Don Pablos because he was to leave us soon to join the navy.

Losing him would be like losing an older

brother who had always been there in the background, ready to guide you. It only made sense to give back something to him, so when Phil yearningly told us of his long-held desire to see Billy Mays's grave, we jumped to make that dream come true.

You may not remember Billy Mays. He was the OxiClean guy from the commercials, the one who sounded like he was yelling every time he spoke. Yeah, that's him. Due to reasons that

## THAO NGUYEN

Besides Billy Mays's grave, I also visit music festivals, film festivals, festival festivals, and the like. I can be seen with a tiny notebook, frantically scribbling down experiences and sketching fancy-looking chairs. I have kept a journal since the age of seven and hope to continue writing and living my dream. I secretly have a Santa Claus complex which makes me want to grow a fluffy, white beard, and buy presents for all of my friends as a surprise. I attend Drexel University, majoring in English and minoring in art history.

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seem to point towards cocaine usage, Billy Mays kicked the bucket in 2009 (bless his heart). His unfortunate death saddened Americans everywhere, Americans who would forever clean their homes with a sigh and a tear falling down their cheeks.

We prepared for our journey to Billy Mays's grave by hitting up CVS and buying fizzy energy drinks, bags of Cheetos, and a gallon of OxiClean. By the time we hopped into the van, it was 9pm, and the night was still young.

After driving awhile, we stopped in Hagerstown at a gas station and stretched our legs. We were sitting at a table and drinking some coffee when suddenly, Aubrey asked, "Hey, did anyone remember to bring the key with them?"

And then Aubrey started crying because we were locked out of her car, and I tried to comfort her while Pat called Triple-A. I like to think I'm good at comforting people, but Aubrey wasn't someone I knew very well. She was classified in my mind as Phil's girlfriend more than she was a close friend, but I did my best and sat with her at the sticky table, listening.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do now. What if we never get the key out?" Aubrey said. "It'll be okay," I promised her, even though those words didn't feel like enough. Silence fell; I held her hand, she looked at me, and we were connected in that quiet night, two girls sharing a moment together.

A half-hour later, a man sent down on a truck popped the door open for us. We were set back a bit, but with Phil at the wheel, we soon made up lost time as we zoomed into the night. As we neared Pennsylvania, the buildings and gas stations disappeared; it was a stretch of nowhere—the perfect place to be when we ran out of gas. We pulled over at some unknown site and then—you guessed it—we called Triple-A and waited in the frosty weather until a man in a truck drove down and filled up our tank. Thank God for Triple-A.

We drove on and made it to the Pennsylvania Turnpike, got the ticket, and continued on our merry way. Now

Pat, with his Jesus-length hair and his patched-up jacket, making him the perfect image of a Jack Kerouac rider, was at the wheel, playing lo-fi rock and cruising for the next hour or two.

When we reached the end of the toll road the man behind the window asked us for our ticket, and you know what? We had lost it. My friends and I scavenged the inside of the van, overturning bags of Cheetos and empty cans of double-shot espressos to no avail.

But we couldn't give up now, especially since we were so close to our destination, so we scrounged together some money, paid the thirty-dollar toll with a wince, and continued on our way.

We drove through Pittsburgh and into Allegheny County, closing in on our target, but then, our GPS went haywire. Luckily, a woman driver happened to be passing by. At four in the morning. Whatever, let's not ask questions here. The point is, she gave us directions, and, after hastily thanking her, we sped down the streets on a mission. We were so close, our hands gripped our seats, and we stared out the windshield, desperately searching for that graveyard. It felt almost like we'd never get there, but then, there it was—the cemetery.

Pat parked the car outside the gated entrance, and we got out of the van with our breaths making clouds in the air and our feet crunching in a foot of snow. But when we came up to the gate, we found that it was locked. That wasn't going to stop Phil, though. So, he climbed the five-and-a-half-foot chain link fence and jumped.

Well, what could we do but follow him? Before I knew it, I was running through the freezing snow searching for the grave of a former advertising superstar. But there were so many graves. How were we supposed to find the right one?

That problem was quickly overshadowed by another when we realized that this wasn't even the right place. We were standing in a Jewish graveyard, and let me tell you, Billy Mays was not Jewish.

But goddammit, we had driven for what was supposed to be four—but turned

into eight—hours, and if we couldn't find Billy Mays's grave, then too bad. This was going to have to do. So we chose a random grave and OxiCleaned it. Now, looking back, had we been seen by the police, we would've had a difficult time explaining ourselves, but luckily, nothing of the sort happened. Whew.

Now, our journey was over; only the drive home awaited us. No-one was in a good mood; Nicky-poo's feet were frozen, Pat and Phil were tired from driving, and Aubrey and Brandon weren't looking forward to the next set of shenanigans that we might run into. I knew it was time for an impromptu motivational speech, so, using my skillful elocution, I came up with possibly the cheesiest thing you could imagine:

"You know, guys, this trip wasn't about finding Billy Mays's grave. It was about Phil. And you know what? We spent this night proving what we really value—friendship. So what if we didn't find the right graveyard? We journeyed, we road-tripped, and some day, months and months from now, we'll be telling this story to somebody and remember the night when a group of friends came together on a quest in camaraderie."

Phil smiled at me, and Brandon gave me a pat on the back, and I knew that everything was okay. And then I realized that this is what life's about—connections, stories that intertwine to make pieces whole again. This journey had woven its way through this group of teenagers to tie us all together. Now, we were a ragtag family with a legend to bind us.

A week later, the gang and I found out, through Google Maps, that we had been only a few blocks away from the actual graveyard.

Well, fuck.