

Cruising

Although I am a firm believer in environmentally friendly practices I still enjoy the occasional cruise with one of my closest friends... my 1996 Jeep Cherokee. Not only was it my dream car since the age of sixteen but it was the symbol of freedom that liberated me from bus schedules, it was the friend that offered its steering wheel as a pillow for those broken hearted nights, and it acted in place of the stereo I never had, giving me a safe environment to belt out my off-key sing-a-long moments. I love driving, but given the current state of the air quality in the Salt Lake City area, I'm pretty sure that statement would make several people hate me. As I go out tonight for a drive I'm relieved to see that there isn't a travel-wise alert on I-15 and so I continue on without the guilt or a particular destination.

Although I almost always take advantage of my time alone in my car to practice my singing (and indulge my secret trashy pop obsession) I do enjoy the occasional silence even though my anxiety levels increase since I'm able to hear every expensive internal organ inside my Jeep straining. As my car slows to a stop at each light in the city before I reach the on-ramp, it sits there panting in deep rumbles as if it were running a marathon on nothing but ten cups of coffee and cigarettes, jerking and belching emissions out into the air. As soon as the light turns green and I push on the gas it's like every screw in the car that holds all the tubes and engine in place are loose. My Saint Otto air freshener sways with every turn. The Christ-like Saint cradling a blue escort in his arms is the Patron Saint of Parking – the savior from tickets and towing zones and who gives strength for parallel parking. All the spare change in the ashtray rattles with increasing frequency as I speed up. Merging is not for the weak of heart and as I hit 55 mph my steering wheel starts having seizures until the needle in the speedometer hits 65.

The freeway is characterized by a spaghetti bowl of tangled roads – on and off ramps that zigzag above and below Interstate 15, looping around from North to South, East to West, and every direction in between. As I set off southbound this

particular night I'm awed by my choices, the signs read big landmark cities such as Reno, Las Vegas, and Cheyenne, but my choices truly are unlimited. The exits come and go rapidly and even the slightest distraction can mean missing the intended exit. As I'm driving I can feel every crack of the highway as if it were just one big sidewalk. The sound associated with the freeway is tricky to define but as my car cuts through the air at high-speeds it makes a hollow and coarse high-pitched windy noise that changes tune when the cars pass by, narrowing the escape for the wind to cut in between.

Driving offers much time for reflection and the isolation is a welcome relief from daily life. The best time for driving is at night when you don't have to deal with as many cars and the cities are all lit up. The spectrum of lights offers a view like none found in the wild (not saying it is superior to anything you see in the wild, but it is quite a beautiful spectacle that is worth being enjoyed from time to time.) Car lights illuminate all manner of street signs: the bright neon coloring of the green signs on the interstate, yellow exit only lanes, red stop signs, blue bus stops, and the tri-colored stop lights are a beautiful contrast against the darkness.

On the deserted interstate the pavement seems like an endless meandering black river as it snakes through towns and cities. The lights in the median seem to hang in the sky, acting like a compass. The dotted white lines zip along behind me, now a thing of the past, I try to count them but I get too dizzy and have to give up. I can tell where major city roads are in the distance because of the thick string of red and green dots that go for miles and it feels kind of like a game of Pac-Man as I get the urge to follow the lights and gobble up each red and green blob in the distance.

Although everything here is man-made I'm aware of the traits man has tried to incorporate from nature such as the greenery of interstate signs and the billboards surrounding the highway in a forest of advertisements. Each post shoots up like a tree; peeking above the sound barrier in competition with each other for the viewers attention from the giant still life boards to small flashing incandescent

signs. Even cars are named after various animals and resemble them with lights that look like eyes and grilles that look like barred teeth making them as distinguishable as animals in the wild.