

Free Fallin'

Lily Crooks

Your parents are driving so they pick the music. For hours it's Steely Dan and Basia and Sade. Years later you will astound your twelve-year-old self as you come to appreciate these artists, but for now it's insufferable. You read *Mad Magazine* in the back seat and argue with your brother. It is 1994. You do not have headphones; there are 12 hours of travel ahead of you. You wait for them to put on the good stuff.

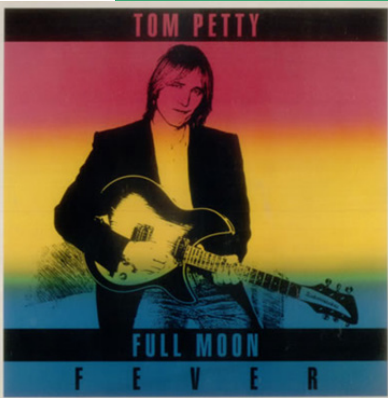
You have been to the Black Hills of South Dakota every year since you were in utero. If the state bird is the buffalo chip, then the state flower is a tattered green sign declaring "X Many Miles to Wall Drug." When you drive from Minneapolis to the cabin it is I-90 direct to Cheyenne Crossing; do not stop at the Corn Palace, do not collect arrowheads at 1880's Town. Your parents teach you the term "kid trap" as you pass the small-town prairie sideshows. There is nothing to see in Minnesota and less to see when you cross the border. To an uninitiated traveler crossing the state line might seem like a milestone, but you know it is just the beginning. It is flat now, and hot. You might stop in Highmore to hear about Grandpa's high school girlfriends. You might stop in Doland where there is one bar and a gas station with a bathroom. It is flat, it is hot. You do not have air conditioning so sometimes you hang wet towels in the back windows of the white Ford Taurus wagon and you try to sleep through the bright roar of wheels on the road. The parents listen to Manhattan Transfer, Matt Bianco, and perhaps most egregiously, *the news*.

But something changes at Chamberlain.

Chamberlain is where the flat yellow-white plains suddenly dip and curve. The bluffs and vistas of Chamberlain are made for sunrises. The Black Hills are still hours away, but you can see hints of what is to come here along the Missouri River. There is green, there are trees. The landscape changes, becomes more nuanced and complex. The prairie on the west side of Chamberlain has antelope and bison. Cross the river into the new time zone, and it's close now. The Wall Drug signs are frantic, you are *almost there*. And as if to celebrate this change in circumstance, this final leg of the journey, your parents finally, finally put on *Full Moon Fever*.

As your car dips down to cross the river, and then climbs up out of the valley into the new world, the opening chords to "Free Fallin'" make you feel like you're in a movie. You're in the West now. The words to the song don't matter, though you are a good girl who loves her mama. The song creates momentum, the car moves faster and with purpose. You love the way Tom Petty says she's crazy about Elvis—it sounds wistful, and hopeful. You imagine being crazy about Tom Petty and decide that you are. By the time the final repetitions of the chorus start, you can feel it; it's happening, the drive is nearing its end. The whole family knows this album by heart. You listen to it twice through. You are running down a dream, falling out into nothing, you won't back down. You watch your own reflection in the car window as you sing along. This is where the camera zooms in, this album makes your life a film in forty-minute increments.

The stops become more frequent. The Badlands are an acceptable break from being in the car. You've seen *Moonraker* and try to imagine you are on the surface of another planet. *Moonraker* was not filmed in the Badlands but *Dances With Wolves* was—Kevin Costner



Tom Petty

"Free Fallin'"

Full Moon Fever

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MCA

loves South Dakota, maybe not as much as you do, but in a way that seems sincere. At Cedar Pass you count Mennonites. Buffalo Gap is not a place to stop for ice cream and just because it's on the map doesn't mean they have a bathroom. No music in Badlands. "Look out the window," they tell you.

So close to your destination, but still over two hours to go. You avoid Rapid City altogether and head north, the dark and comforting hills on your left, dominating the horizon. You stay on the highway and head up to the mouth of Spearfish Canyon, where the roads will wind and the temperature will drop. You're so ready. You can smell the pines now. But first, the butcher shop in Sturgis is better than the one in Hill City. Stop. Gas is cheaper here than in Deadwood. Stop. Spearfish has the only organic grocer between Minneapolis and maybe Denver. Stop. But finally, finally, you abandon I-90. After 620 miles of driving in a straight line, the bends of the canyon's scenic byway force the car to a comfortable 35 miles per hour. You beg your mom to cue it up and *Free Fallin'* starts again; the opening chords ache. You begin the ascent into the Hills. Driving up an ancient gorge, Paha Sapa limestone cathedrals and coal black pines fill you up with their familiar beauty. The music makes it home. You've heard this song one hundred times, one thousand times, but it means something different now that you're here. Maybe the song is about California, maybe it's about nothing. It doesn't matter. You'll write your name in the sky. Leave your world for this one, at least for a little while.