

YOU'LL FIND IT OFF
MARKET STREET

By Eric Wasserman

It was supposed to be temporary. Just a nice, one-year stint in the Midwest that would lead to a potential opportunity that would return me to the West Coast with more experience and the prospect of better job security. Perhaps getting a full-time teaching position at a good community college.

That was nine years ago.

My wife, Thea, and I had packed up our belongings and pets, took one last glance at the Pacific Ocean and drove my 1996 Chevy Blazer from Santa Monica, California to Akron, Ohio. I seemed to recall from high school learning that there was a big lake near where we would be relocating. The truck was in perfect working order at the time, but the hope was to get my professional life in working order.

The Blazer literally started breaking down the moment we arrived in Akron, just as my career began to soar. I remember asking one of my new colleagues where to go for vehicle service. I was told that the place was “off Market Street.” Seriously, it seemed every response to where I should go for anything in Akron was that it was “off Market Street,” the main artery that ran through town. Our bank, the dry cleaners, our optometrist, where we bought our groceries, the movie theater up the street from our first apartment, the local coffee shop, The University of Akron that had just hired me for a temporary, one-year visiting assistant professor gig. So, “off Market Street” is where I met my service guru, Tim. Some people think it’s important to find a loyal and trustworthy doctor. Tim was my Blazer’s version of that. I couldn’t have imagined at the time that I would be following him wherever he went (four employment locations in all in just under a decade). I have a service invoice from around that first time we met for a bill of \$557.00 for repair work I can’t even understand. So much for a privileged graduate school education.

The first thing I noticed about driving in Akron was that the locals apparently viewed using turn signals as merely a suggestion, and the police didn’t seem to care. In my first month in Akron I was nearly hit by merging cars on Market Street, which only has two lanes on each side, far more times than in all my previous years driving the seven-plus lanes on each side of the 405 freeway in Los Angeles every day.

But stop signs were another story in Akron. In that first month I rolled a stop in a residential area on a sleepy early September afternoon only to be pulled over and have an officer immediately say to me as I cracked my then still-operating driver's side window, "Where do you think you are, California?" I had actually just gotten my Ohio plates and driver's license a few days before. Unlike Los Angeles though, the officer glanced over the Blazer and said, "Nice ride, used to have one myself. A ninety-six, right?" I was let off with a warning.

The Blazer made it through what was supposed to be just that single year in Akron with Tim performing occasional maintenance that didn't exactly bust my wallet. Then the unthinkable: a last minute tenure-line position came through and I got it. We were staying in Akron. And that's when the Blazer's major problems really began. I have multiple service invoices from around then. Looks like I had to replace the alternator and something labeled "B-GENER REM," whatever the hell that is, for \$450.27 (disclaimer: to this day I also have absolutely no idea what the alternator actually is or does).

Unlike that cop who pulled me over, lots of people made fun of my Blazer. I never cared. I once had to meet my cousin's husband at his place of business in Beverly Hills. He had reserved a space for me in his company's parking deck. When I pulled up to the gate the attendant looked at the Blazer like I had brought an ugly date to a high school dance. Not so in Akron. I never got so much street cred in my life than having that American-made Blazer in Northeast Ohio. Akron is, after all, the once great tire-producing mecca. It took a lot for the not-so-nice Jewish boy in me to hide the fact that I don't know a thing about cars other than how to put gas in them, drive them, and throw down my credit cards for repairs. Midwest car people kept telling me 1996 was a great year for Chevy engines, that I was lucky to have my Blazer, that it would probably run forever if I took good care of it. Twice I had complete strangers approach me offering to buy it just for the parts. Contractors who came to work on the century-old house Thea and I bought always complimented the Blazer. I felt like a fraud, but a proud fraud.

Here's the thing, I never expected us to stay in Akron. Even after I was awarded tenure I thought we would be returning to the West Coast at some point. We had made great friends in Akron, had a community, but I just hadn't thought it was permanent. Thea had grown up outside Louisville, Kentucky, so there wasn't too much necessary adjustment to Midwest living on her part. Not so for me.

So, recognizing that there were thousands of academics out there that would die to have my job and I was being kind of an ingrate, I started trying to make Akron my place. I finally signed up for an *Akron Beacon Journal* subscription. I began rooting for the Indians (sorry, I just couldn't bring myself to be a Cavs fan even though LeBron James went to high school down the street). I joined the board of trustees for the local art house cinema. Thea and I started exploring places to make Akron our place (the Towpath Trail of Summit Metro Parks and Cuyahoga Valley National Park quickly became some of my favorite Akron treasures).

Let me tell you though, if anyone asks me to describe Akron locals, the very first thing I say is that, even with their healthy skepticism of outsiders, they want you to love their town, and they welcome you with open arms to experience their town. They will endlessly list off Akron places and activities they think you will enjoy and encourage you to check them out. There's really something beautiful in a community that seems to collectively wish to share what they pride, as if they don't want what's special to them to just be for them. But there was always a part of my heart still trapped in my beloved Southern California.

People were often perplexed over my attachment to the Blazer. Every time it needed work my buddy Chris would text me something to the effect of, "Who needs a new car? YOU need a new car! Buy a new fucking car!" I look at some of these service invoices from my years in Akron and I can hear Tim saying with reservation, "Are sure you want to go ahead and do this job, E?" (Tim always calls me "E"). I gave him the green light every time. I spent \$1,728.41 one time when Tim was with Fred Martin Chevrolet, Inc. In the top corner in his handwriting he had made the notation "rat." That was the job where during the diagnostic one of his mechanics found a dead, decaying

rodent cradled in the innards of the Blazer's engine (Tim e-mailed me a picture of it that I still have). I can't find the invoice but I know at some point Tim had to replace the entire turn signal unit, not that people necessarily used that in Akron. Another \$499.04 was spent when Tim was with Ron Marhofer Hyundai. Two years ago I threw down \$798.53 on a steering/suspension job at Jeff's Motorcars, Inc., the high-end specialty shop where Tim finally settled as the assistant service manager. As my almost two-decade-old Blazer was being once again kept road-ready I strolled through the showroom filled with classic GTOs, Aston Martins, Mustangs, Corvettes, and Porsches. I felt like a teenager in a room full of girls that were far out of my league.

Now I'm finally going to confess. The irony is that once I arrived in Akron I really wasn't driving anywhere near the amount I had in Los Angeles, and yet the Blazer was falling apart. But I still felt at home when I was in it on the road. You see, in order to make the kind of life I wanted happen, I took the gamble a lot of academics do even though for the majority of them it doesn't pan out so well. For several years I ground it out as a "Freeway Flyer," taking any classes offered to me as a part-timer and going with no health insurance, or any benefits for that matter, other than the chance to build up my experience in the classroom. At one point I was in the Blazer as much as I was in front of students. One semester I was driving every week between Santa Monica College, Pierce College, West L.A. College, and Compton Community College. I would get books on CD or tape (yes, the Blazer had that function) and be in that truck hours on end. The Blazer became as much a part of my connection to the City of Angels as anything. So, if I never moved on to another car in Akron, if I kept the Blazer going, it meant I really wasn't staying in the Midwest. I could imagine selling my Akron house no problem, but I couldn't abandon the Blazer because, like me, it wasn't from here and maybe didn't belong. I even put a bumper sticker on it that proclaimed, "Stuck in Ohio!" just to reassure myself that this was all still temporary. There was no way of explaining this crazy line of thinking to anyone, so I just kept it to myself. I was convinced Midwesterners already thought I was

nuts anyway, even the ones who had become close friends to the point of being surrogate family. I'm still trying to figure out this social ritual of making sure you're not the first person to reach for, say, the asparagus at a dinner party, or take the last tater tot in the basket when having beers with buddies.

Last summer the Blazer turned nineteen and I turned forty. As a birthday gift, my wife planned a great road trip that would take us from Akron to Louisville, down to Memphis, up to St. Louis, then through Iowa, spending Memorial Day weekend in Minneapolis with two of my brothers and their families, down to Madison to see a writing pal of mine, and eventually back to Akron. About 3,000-plus miles. Thea finally put her foot down and said she would not take the trip in the Blazer. She had visions of it permanently breaking down as we drove by cornfields in the middle of nowhere with the nearest service station being a hundred miles away. I told her I thought the Blazer could make it. In truth, I had my own doubts. It had recently developed an interesting sound coming from the dashboard whenever I was turning, like a small animal groaning then fading into a wheeze as the truck straightened out.

With reluctance and even a bit of defeat, I called up Tim and told him the time had come. I'm not sure he really believed me. Nevertheless, he put me in touch with his saleswoman friend, Ciarra, at Ron Marhofer Hyundai, whom he said was very honest and that I could trust to treat me well. Both proved true. I ended up buying a 2015 Hyundai Santa Fe Sport, even spent extra for the all-wheel drive now that I had experienced plenty of Northeast Ohio winters. I had Thea pick the new car's color. Ciarra said that Hyundai was a Korean company but that my new Santa Fe Sport was indeed American-made, that the factory was in Alabama. Still, I knew I would never again get the Midwestern street cred the Blazer had provided me since moving to Akron.

As for the Blazer itself, I considered keeping it for Home Depot runs or firewood hauls, but in the end, I decided it was time to let it go. The dealership trade-in expert took a first look at it and offered me an insulting \$400. I felt I needed to defend the Blazer's honor. I had all those service invoices from Tim over the years in

hand but the guy didn't want to see them. The six-CD changer was now obsolete and wouldn't impress him. So, I decided to pop the hood and make him at least look. His eyes actually did kind of bubble. He bent his head in and peered over the engine, started fingering things and said, "This is the cleanest engine I have ever seen in a nearly twenty-year-old Chevy. Kudos for regularly servicing your vehicle." I wanted to thank the academy for my performance being recognized, but I really had Tim to thank. In the end I got \$1,800.00 for the Blazer. I didn't watch them drive it away. I knew it would be immediately sold at auction, probably for the parts alone. So, I drove my new Hyundai off the lot that day. And yes, I used my turn signal.

A funny thing happened during the two-week road trip Thea and I went on for my fortieth birthday. I started missing Akron. But more importantly, I started missing my Akron friends. I'm not a big postcard guy, but I started mailing postcards back home to those friends. I sent images of the places Thea and I were visiting: Elvis's Jungle Room at Graceland, Sun Records Studios, the supposed future birthplace of Captain Kirk, The St. Louis Arch, the farm where *Field of Dreams* was filmed, etc. All these spots we were driving to in my new car I had bought in Akron.

Somewhere between Madison and Akron, on the last stretch to home, Thea randomly asked me if I missed the Blazer. She was of course teasing me, but there was a little bit of seriousness there. In truth, I actually hadn't thought much about the Blazer the whole trip. But I had thought about Akron. I missed my adopted place. I missed my friends there even more.

And so, as that special trip concluded, we drove back into Akron in my brand new car that had not given us the slightest trouble over those 3,000-plus miles. At last I turned toward home. To the new house we'd bought, slightly off Market Street.

I pulled into the driveway and parked right over the oil drip stain in the concrete that had always been the Blazer's place. I cut the engine of my new car. We were back. I turned to Thea, saw how happy she was to be here again as well. This was now our place with our people. And it would be for a long time.