



The Chief in the workshop

In our final battle, **Dan Read** takes on America, attempting to go coast to coast in a rusty Yank tank, stopping only for fuel and beef jerky

Mad, bad US roads – meet a man who'll sleep when he's dead

Friday. Start at Brooklyn Bridge



4.10pm, Friday.
Through the
Lincoln Tunnel

Lincoln Tunnel
New Jersey

EMERGENCY
DIAL 911

4.15pm, Friday.
Dice with a
NYC cab. Win

6pm, Friday.
Get catapulted
out of my seat.
Excellent

Five go driving.
Between them
they'll rack up
14,520 miles

Pliers to change
the climate. Now
where's the saw
to tune the radio?

Words by Dan Read
Photography by Daniel Byrne



The Chief is In Drive but nothing doing. Mechanic!!!

8pm, Friday. Jerky stocks high

10pm, Saturday. New Jersey. Muffler hangs loose

WORLD'S LARGEST FRUITCAKE IOWA 80

PICTURE THIS. YOU'RE jetlagged, Friday is turning into Saturday and you really should be in bed. You're in Manhattan, behind the wheel of a totally knackered Chevy you've never driven before. You've never even driven in New York before. The bloke you're following swings a U-turn across four lanes of traffic. You follow, but run out of lock. People are angry. Horns honk, and you hear the collective curses of a hundred cabbies. Beads of sweat start to break out.

Well that's me, tonight, and things ain't going well. Just 24 hours ago, I was drinking a beer in west London, sweetly oblivious to the impending text message. It was from Bill, my boss.

"Dan, pack your bags, it's on."

Oh good. Best get some kip, then, because the 'it' Bill referred to is an epic drive, right across America. New York to San Francisco, non-stop. He was sending me on a race. Well, not exactly

a race, more a 'Test of Endurance and Efficiency', as the anonymous event organiser likes to call it – if he called it a race, the law would shut him down. I was driving in the '2904' (twenty-nine-oh-four): 2,904 miles, five teams, each in a car plus expenses totalling no more than \$2,904.

It's a few ordinary guys in a few ordinary cars, versus America. Simple as that.

Luckily, I've got the law on my side, sort of. My Chevy is a 1994 Caprice Classic, see – salvaged from the Parsippany Police Dept junkyard, New Jersey. It's got cop brakes, cop suspension and a gun rack in the trunk. And it's got a 5.7-litre V8 from a Corvette. But it's had a tough life. The dash lights flicker like a faulty fruit machine, and the whole thing smells of mouse shit (they were nesting under the seats). We've sprayed over the police decals to keep it legal, and the lights and sirens have gone. Apart from that, it's police-issue.

Back in the Manhattan traffic, I floor it. My seat swings back like a rocking chair, and I snap

back, disappearing below the window line. I have to claw at the wheel to stop my legs somersaulting over my head. Note to self: fix seat.

Then it dawns on me – it's me against America in this old thing; an entire continent in a car that's just made me look like Basil Fawlty.

The next morning, I meet with my co-drivers – photographer Daniel, and Chris and Ben from *Top Gear* America. We spend some time getting the car looked over (oil changed, wheels aligned, wipers fitted, seat bolted down), and an air freshener soon fills our nostrils with the tang of citrus and petrol. The Chevy's in a bit of a mess, but at least it works. Part of me loves it already, despite the rust and crap.

A few hours later, we head for the Red Ball Garage on 31st Street, where the original Cannonball Run started, and where we get our time sheet stamped. I feel like Burt Reynolds, only without the 'tache and Yanky drawl (I've got a baby face and come from Somerset). Like the



11am, Sunday.
Red Bull for
brekkie

2pm, Sunday.
Are we nearly
there yet?

3pm, Sunday.
Er, no. 2000
miles to go

Funny

Cannonball, the 2904 is the anti-Gumball. No wealthy airheads, no self-indulgence, no supercars, absolutely no twats allowed. This is about the taking part: the breakdowns, the laughs, the challenge and adventure of it. So, at 4.10pm on Saturday, we point the car north and crawl out of NYC, headed for the longest drive of our lives.

'In Manhattan traffic, I floor the Chevy. The seat swings back like a rocking chair. Note to self: fix seat. Then it dawns on me – It's me against America in this thing'

Turns out it's the longest night of our lives too. We're driving west, against the time zones, through New Jersey, recently voted one of 'the most excellent states to visit'. We drive straight through it. Pennsylvania comes next, where something called a cheesesteak is a popular snack.

I'd like to tell you what Pennsylvania looks like, but in the darkness, the drizzle, and through the slap-slap of the Chevy's wipers, I can't see an awful lot. Miles of landscape, lost in the dark.

And already the car's starting to break. The exhaust is knocking against the bodywork, and the headlights are screwed – you'd get more light from a glow-worm. So we pull over and whip the car up on a scissor jack. Ben doesn't mind getting grubby, so he slides underneath on the wet garage forecourt and lashes the silencer to the chassis. A quick spanning of the lights, and we're off.

Three minutes later, the exhaust breaks loose, thumping the tyre this time. Ben takes the abuse well, considering we've only known each other a

few hours. On we go. We skirt around Pittsburgh and enter Ohio, home of the world's largest basket, where we stop for fuel outside Toledo. As I get out of the car, a cop pulls in behind us, circling the garage forecourt like a shark, scoping us through narrowed eyes. It's all a bit spooky, so we quickly fill up and head back onto I-80, cop still stalking us.

He tails us for a while, before we cross the state line. We're in Indiana, where hotel sheets must be exactly 99 inches long and 81 inches wide. I take the wheel and ramp up the speed for the first time – hoping the rain has kept other highway troopers in bed. I gently squeeze the throttle, coaxing the 5.7-litre V8 into life, being careful not to stress it too much. I want this thing to get us to the other side of the continent, and it's already seen over 160,000 miles of abuse in its life. I needn't have worried – it actually feels better growling along at 85mph, its big pistons pumping lazily inside their cavernous cylinders. ☺

I squint down the road into the black of the night – the only view is a hundred yards of cat's eyes and a fluorescent white line streaming under the car. Staring at the road for hours becomes hypnotic, so I slap my face hard and shake my head to break the trance.

We're not that far into the trip, but already the monotony's getting to me. I drive across the whole of Indiana while the others sleep, then pass into Illinois, where a record 16 billion Oreo cookies were made in 1995. Rain's still lashing the windscreen, and water whooshes around the rusty wheelarches like breaking surf. I think of the

'By the time we approach the Mississippi, it's been dark for 15 hours, and the road has hardly bent out of shape. I now have a violent twitch'

history of the biscuit to keep my mind awake. Went back to the Romans, apparently... Maybe I could invent a biscuit... Or a flan. Screw Kipling and his exceedingly good cakes, I'd make effing brilliant cakes. Must fight the boredom...

By the time we approach the Mississippi, it's been dark for 15 hours, and the road has hardly bent out of shape. I now have a violent twitch. So when the sun dawns behind us, I allow myself a celebratory jiggle. Nobody notices.

Across the wide and muddy Mississippi then, onwards into Iowa, the only state whose name begins with two vowels, and where one-armed

piano players must perform for free. It's also the start of the Midwest. The freeway paints a fat black line across the fields and disappears into the horizon, cutting through thousands of acres of corn, wheat, whatever, making the place more beige than the set of an Australian soap opera.

Still, the Chevy ploughs on. And I've decided to give it a name – from now on, I'll call it 'The Chief'. Daniel suggests 'Doris', which is overruled, obviously. It's a cop car, so it's as butch as a trucker's ball sac. 'Doris' is not.

We're over a thousand miles in, and The Chief is doing us proud. It's a comfortable old thing, if a little unnerving. There's a half-turn of slack in the steering, and to keep straight you have to steer towards the middle of the road, up the camber. The rear end feels detached from the front, and articulates like a trailer over bumps. Sometimes I see the guys in the back slide right across my rear-view mirror. They reappear minutes later.

At every fuel stop, Ben disappears under The Chief to work on the loose 'muffler'. I take time out to load up on dried beef, much to Chris's disgust: "Dude, I can't believe you eat so much jerky! You know what that stuff does to you?"

The Midwest continues for a few more hours, before we slip into Nebraska, home to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Ranch. He drove a stagecoach around here, when I-80 was the 'Lincoln highway', the first 'road' to connect the coasts. This was in the days when people still shot each other at noon and smoking was good for you.

And still The Chief is holding together – just. As the daylight begins to fade, we chug on, hoovering up a perfectly straight, 76-mile stretch of road before edging into Wyoming, where fishing with a gun is strictly forbidden.

As another night draws in, I feel a rush of disappointment. After the vacant Midwest, I was looking forward to seeing the Rockies. With a night drive ahead of us, though, I won't be seeing

anything. But I'm snapped out of my sulk when a weird noise fills the cabin – a whine from the tyres. We pull over, have a kick around and shrug our shoulders. No flats. Seems alright to me.

Ben thinks otherwise, and chooses this moment to announce he's a former Ford chassis engineer. I'm dispatched to the hard shoulder, while he pokes knowledgeable around the suspension. Having Ben around feels a bit like having your dad along – safe and reassuring. Daniel, Chris and I stand around shining torches and passing him spanners until he declares the all-clear.

Turns out it was just the road surface – a sort of grooved concrete, making the tyres release a primal scream. Either that, or the relentless mileage is sending us a bit doolally. I don't care – Ben the Ford Chassis Engineer is onboard, and I reckon we'll make it.

It's 8PM ON SUNDAY NOW, 28 hours after we left NYC. Chris is busy with a laptop in the back, sending out 'liveblogs' to *Top Gear's* American website. Amazingly, people are following

our progress. We get texts from other teams too. 'Team Flying Hellfish' (in a Buick Regal) have gone south on Route 66. It's longer, but they reckon they'll miss the dodgy weather in the Rockies. 'Electric Boogaloo', in a NYC cab, are already in the mountains, but we've lost touch. They're probably frostbitten in a remote lay-by, being eyeballed by bearded men with pickups and too much time on their hands.

Team 'Creative Film Cars' (also in a Caprice like ours, but with a US Army paintjob) are well ahead, through the Rockies and in Nevada. So it's us and the 'Wheels on Meals' team (1995 Honda Accord), bringing up the rear. With The Chief in rude health, we start our ascent into the mountains. The weather warnings aren't good: snow, fog and

10pm, Sunday.
Swap from beef
to turkey jerky



11:30pm, Sunday.
Rockies? What
Rockies?

Wyoming and the Rockies rear up. Time to take on the mountains



It's more than a road, it's a metaphor for life, dammit



Somebody shot this sign. God Bless America

Tam, Monday. Time for 'mean driving face'

11am, Monday. That's Wells, Nevada. Not Orson

12pm, Monday. Drugs? Well it worked in Fear and Loathing...

rainstorms. But we're over two-thirds distance, and we all packed jumpers, so we decide to risk it.

Bad idea. The snow arrives an hour into the climb, pitching on the windscreen faster than the wipers can swoosh it away. Then comes the fog, so thick you could bite into it. Later, the snow becomes rain, and standing water has frozen to black ice in places. I'm doing everything I can to concentrate.

It's a raw, wild night. And I'm missing out on the Rockies. I can make out their inky-blue shadows against the faint moonlight, but they slip by silently in the night like giant icebergs.

At least I'm bonding with the car. This old heap is moving us effortlessly across the landscape – we're taking on America, and winning. I've even forgiven it for that NYC seat incident.

By 5am, the road begins to slope away from us and swoops down from the Rockies. We cruise into Utah, where birds have right of way on highways and polygamy is legal. Ben takes over the driving. I haven't seen him eat anything on the entire journey so far. He just drives and fixes things. Maybe he's related to The Stig. With this thought, I nod off for a few hours. Not sure how long I'm asleep before I'm woken by the others. We're driving through Bonneville, past the famous salt flats, home to the world-speed record. Ben takes an exit and drives us towards them.

Frustratingly, they're flooded by an inch or two of water. From the causeway that spills onto the salt, the Chief looks longingly outwards. There'll be no record attempts today. Others must have felt the same frustration – the 'you are here' sign is

'This old heap is moving us without effort across the US landscape. We're taking on America and winning. I've even forgiven it for that NYC seat incident'

dotted with bullet holes. If The Chief's gun rack actually had a gun, I'd fire off a few rounds myself.

Back in the car, we finish off Utah and crest a hill, entering Nevada, where it's legal to hang someone for shooting your dog. The landscape changes abruptly before our eyes into an empty scrubland, encircled by mountains. This is the Great Basin Desert, and it'll take all day to cross it.

Those distant mountains slowly begin to fill the windscreen, getting ever closer as The Chief reels them in. The desert scrub has taken a frosting up here, and fine white powder clings to the little spiky plants like icing sugar. Desert snow.

California isn't far off now. We're close. We pass Winnemucca. We pass Reno. And then we get pulled over by cops. Turns out this one's not impressed with our police paintjob. Tells us to peel it off. "No problem, we can do that," I say. Then, with the state line a mile away, I gun it.

On we go into California, where Barbie dolls and the pill were invented, and up into the Sierra Nevada Mountains. And then The Chief breaks again. We stop off in Colfax, a weird place that looks exactly like it did when people drove horses, not cars. We park outside a saloon, where our transmission leaks green sludge over the road. I blame Chris. As ever, Ben fixes it.

The last hundred miles is easy. At 6.30pm Monday, we cross the Bay Bridge into San Fran, with Alcatraz hidden in the dark waters off to our right. A quick blast across the city, a smoky burn-out from the final junction and we screech up outside the finishing point, an old workshop, greeted by all the other teams. Our time? 52 hours, 50 minutes. A way off team Creative Film Cars and their 38 hours, but blame Daniel, the photographer for that. You wanted to see some pictures of the trip, right?

The 2904 is over. The Chief might stink like a tramp's pants, but it got us all the way across the continent. Yes, we missed a lot of sights, but that wasn't the point. Who wants to see the world's largest hamburger, anyway? (Clearfield, Pennsylvania, in case you're in the area). And here's the thing – we took on America in a heap of a Chevy, and we made it.

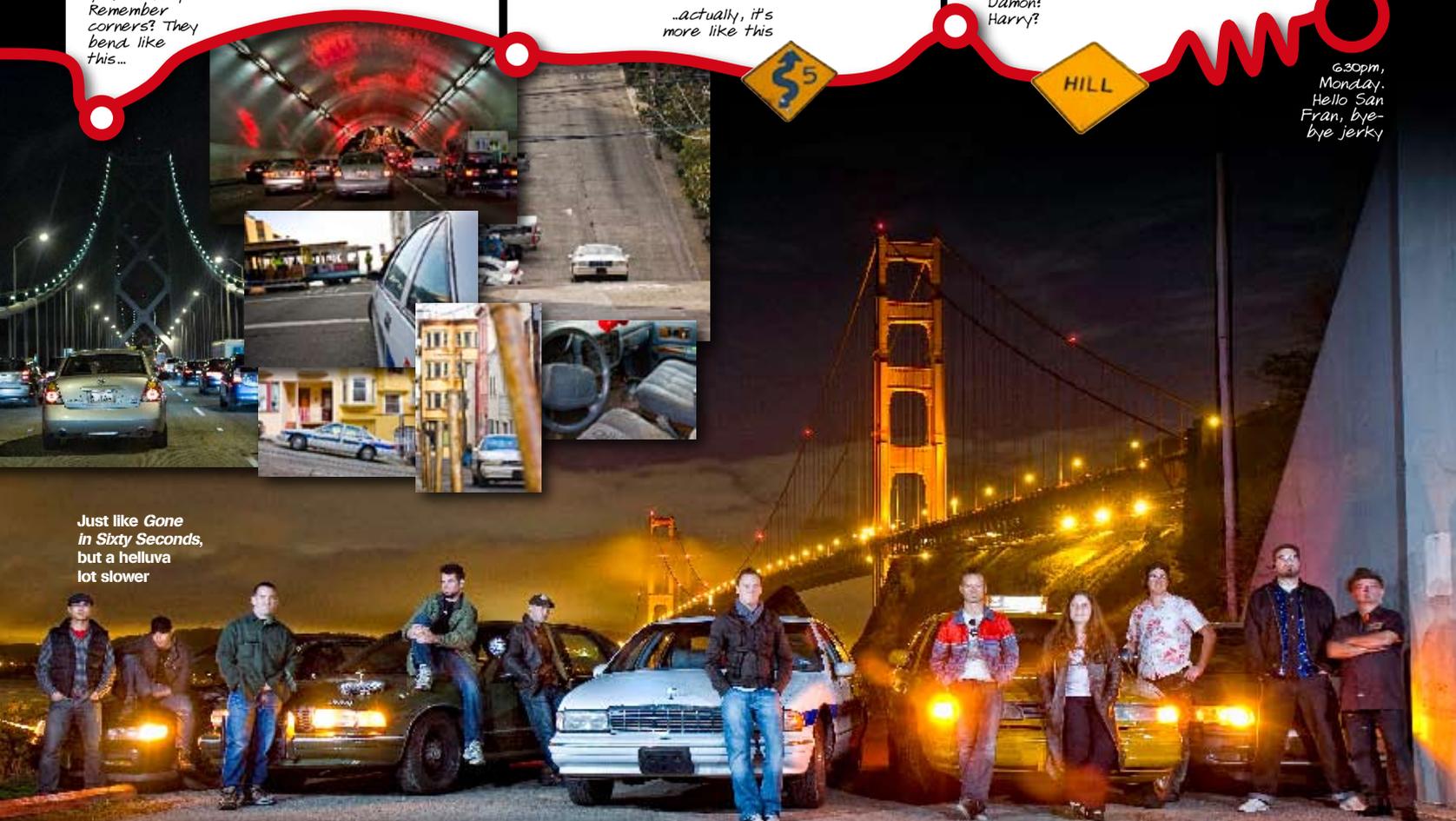
And take note, Gumballers – finishing it in The Chief proves you don't need a supercar to enjoy a big drive. Just pick a route, bring a bloke with spanners, and go. As Ben put it: "It doesn't take a million-dollar budget to have fun, only the sense to know when to say yes to a mad idea." 🍷

1pm, Monday. Remember corners? They bend like this...

...actually, it's more like this

Damon? Harry?

6.30pm, Monday. Hello San Fran, bye-bye jerky



Just like *Gone in Sixty Seconds*, but a helluva lot slower