

# Hamilton

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BY JOHN MCKAY '04 AND JON BELLONA '03  
ILLUSTRATED BY ELAINE VERSTRAETE



([/web/20161019080638/https://www.hamilton.edu/magazine/2007/summer/images/O1lg.jpg](https://www.hamilton.edu/magazine/2007/summer/images/O1lg.jpg)) I'm driving, one hand on a cup of coffee, the other nervously twitching the stereo dial. The wheel rests comfortably between my knees. As we pass a sign welcoming us to the Central Leather-Stocking Region, I grab a cassette from the console: Ultimate Waylon Jennings. I bought it used at a gas station 20 miles back. When I pop it in, "Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)" is in mid-song. Satisfied, I return my hand to its original resting place. Out of the corner of my eye, I see J. He places his hand on the passenger side window and tilts his head up to the sky. All traces of sunshine have quickly vanished behind a stealthy cover of gray. He jerks his hand off the frost-veiled window and shoots me a look. I smile and shake my head. As we expected, spring has not yet sprung.

At mile 233, we turn off the concrete tundra of I-90. Casually, I glance at my watch. "How long's it been?" asks J. "A little over four hours, plus that one stop for gas." He laughs. "Not what I meant." I pause. "Oh! You mean since I've been back? Graduation, almost three years." He nods, as if to say the same is true for him. "Do you really think some of those West Coasters will be there?" "I don't know." At once a dozen faces flash through my mind. Faces I haven't seen in years. Smiles I hope to see shortly. I'm invigorated. "Turn it up," says J. "You got it." Waylon's "America" is now inside the car as we cruise down Route 12B.

And the men, who fell on the plains  
And lived, through hardship and pain  
America, Amer-ica

Patches of dirty snow still line the road. The whole area seems colorless. Each house we pass blends with the last. I notice J. perk up slightly as he stares out the window. "You actually see something worth seeing?" He points at a house on his side. Then at the next. Then at the next. "Haven't you noticed the flags?" I catch a glimpse of the flag in the back corner of someone's front porch. "So?" We exchange puzzled looks. "I don't know," he mumbles, and sits back.

We turn off 12B onto the main drag in Clinton. We aren't far now. J. turns to me. "This last stretch of road seems shorter." I nod. "The whole town seems closer. Almost right on top of us." He's right. I can see the faces of Clinton, familiar and sharply defined, like neighbors. Despite the bitter wind, they don't hide.

Even with the heat up, I'm still cold. I don't think I prepared myself for the bitter winter of Central New York. J., with his Carhartts and lightweight long-sleeved tee, can't be any warmer. He does, however, look happy to be here. I smile a short sigh. We're home again.

I never could find the right speed up the Hill. The car practically drags itself. My hand shakes slightly as it grips the wheel. The stiff combination of coffee and spirit is an old college sensation that stirs my stomach into butterfly knots. No more driving. "So where're we gonna park this bird?"

"How 'bout North Lot?" says J. "We'll be on campus in an hour." I laugh. The jolt of the car kicks us back as we round the corner. At once, the campus begins to unfold. Open grass, classic stone buildings and the air of April winter welcome us. "Take a right," J. insists. "I want to see the view of the village. Besides, there'll be parking down this way."

Any parking spot seems like a good one after five hours. We pull into a driveway behind Ferguson House. The need to stretch my legs fuels me to find the first spot available. A howling wind is my only reluctance to get out of the car. I shut the engine off and exhale. "I guess we better get changed."

J. crawls into the back seat of the Vanagon while I stretch my legs. The area is empty so I meander over to a small grove of trees to take a piss and a few deep breaths. By the time I return, J. has switched his Carhartts for a pair of wrinkled slacks. He buttons down his white shirt but lets his bowtie hang loosely from his collar. "You're up," he says while tying his boots and putting the stocking cap back on his head.

My outfit takes a bit longer to put on. I methodically piece it together while J. takes his own nature walk. Polished black shoes, a black tie and a pea coat give me a slightly different look than my companion. From the lot, we walk toward the quadrangle in front of the library.

He's there. Waiting for us, it seems. We quickly stride across the street and head his way. He waves and takes a pull on a cigarette. As we return the wave, the sun pokes through the clouds for the first time since I-90. The campus brightens and students begin to appear from everywhere. From nowhere. Has class just ended? Is this a break in the weather? Are we witnessing the first moments of spring? After a short pause, we continue up the grass until we reach the boarded-up house. O. sits on the porch.

The house has never looked so fortified. O. has never looked so relaxed. We step up onto the uneven concrete and at once agree that we've never left.

"This looks familiar," says J., half-laughing. O. stretches out, opens his coat, and pulls out a drammy of whiskey. With a smile as broad as it is yellow, he pulls out three cups and three cigarettes. He fills the cups generously and places the bottle at his feet. I

look at O. and he looks forward. There is an unmistakable sense of satisfaction in the air. "Hey O., what was that quote your pops used to say?" J. cuts in, "I remember. Wasn't it...?" he pauses to reflect. "To them that's here. To them that's gone. Then we'll see each other again." O. smiles and raises his glass. J. and I follow. The bourbon burns nostalgia into our throats. O. finds relief and looks in our direction. I look at J.

"So, are you ready for this?"

J. smiles. "Is anyone ever ready for this?"

J. and I each shoot O. a grin. It's his day. "Can you believe it's been three years since we've seen some of these characters?" O. smiles and exhales a puff of Marlboro smoke.

I gesture for a lighter and O. tosses it into my hands. We light up. Pulling a drag off the freshly lit cigarette, I lean back on the worn, filthy couch. My muscles, my tension, the realities of life and all its stress — lost in the waft of smoke as it enters and exits my body. I'm back to my homes here again: on a couch in a dorm room, in the passenger seat of O.'s Range Rover, on Martin's Way. I take a quick second drag. My mind and body are not used to the rituals of tobacco. My soul has not forgotten. I return to the porch, to the others staring off into the distance, overlooking the valley below.

Out of the silence, I hear J. sit up and speak. "I remember walking out of our back room freshman year in North, and there he is," says J. pointing to O. but looking at me. "He's struggling on guitar, playing a familiar riff. I walk over and smile. Of course I know it. Guns n' Roses' 'Sweet Child O' Mine.' 'Bro, can you help me with this?' with that typical shit-eating grin." J. stops to take a drag. "I said, 'Sure. Slide over.' That was the first true connection.

"Then one night I made fun of O. driving back from the movie theatre that same year. He couldn't find his way — proudly — and I knew it no problem. Words were exchanged and the heat was thrown. The entire six-passenger Range Rover was silent for the full 15 minutes back to North Lot. Of course it should've been 10. But as soon as we got back, we traded apologies and shared an atonement cigarette." O. smiles and nods before J. finishes. "We were forever connected then."

As I recall, there were only a few moments at school that made O. outwardly prideful — his father coming to visit, his brother smiling, his sisters calling from afar. He never could stay too far from his family. Before I ask, "How's the fam, O?" J. chimes in. "The only thing missing on this porch is a captain's chair."

"Make that three captain's chairs," I add. We chuckle together. The air around us settles for the first time since we lit up. "Remember working for physical plant during the school year? We used to share cigarettes just like these on our way back from work."

"Well, there's nothing like being together again," J. quips. We all take a long drag from our smokes and internalize the moment. We know it'll be our last smoke with each other as free men.

"So, are you ready for this?" I ask. O. looks at us and exhales. Our eyes turn toward the valley. We do not speak. The thick cloud of three cigarettes temporarily obscures the view. I shut my eyes and flick my ash on the ground. "Today is a good day."

([/web/20161019080638/https://www.hamilton.edu/magazine/2007/summer/images/02lg.jpg](http://web/20161019080638/https://www.hamilton.edu/magazine/2007/summer/images/02lg.jpg)). "Do you remember that fishing trip up in Canastota with the three of us? That weekend consisted of nothing but an ice storm, a \$25 hotel room, a \$30 handle of booze, and a deck of cards. We didn't even cast one single line. But I'd have to say, that was probably the best fishing trip I've ever been on." I laugh, "That was the only fishing trip I've ever been on."

By now J. is pretty excited. "And the night before graduation where we stayed up all night and slept an hour in the back of the truck? We got up an hour before commencement and made it back in the nick of time, coffees in hand." "Yeah, and celebratory cigarettes," I'm reminded as O. takes a drag. I put mine out and stand up in front of the couch. "Say O., why did you bother to pick me up in the morning all those days in Wally J? I had so little to offer you. How did I know that I could make a friend a saint?" O. laughs and shakes his head. "I needed the ride, the coffee, the discipline to get my ass outta bed and do my homework. What did you need from me?" After a long pause, I say what's really on my mind.



"You know I regret not coming, don't you? I was working the next day ... and already in the car going to the Giants game with my dad that Sunday. I get the call that your going-away party is that night. I mean, I knew you were going, but I didn't know when." He smiles and exhales. "We all knew you were tough enough to go. But it couldn't have been easy to leave like that. Maybe I could've made it that much easier." I turn away from the couch. J. cuts in, "Sit down and relax." He tugs at my sleeve. "He didn't need anything. Back then or in college. You're friends. You give him plenty."

I sit down and motion for another butt. A short slug of whiskey and a drag and I'm wondering what I mean. In reality, we didn't get to know him that well. Sure, we understood him, connected with him on what we felt was a profound level. Yet we didn't really know him. Now, he's going to be sharing all his deepest, darkest, most personal secrets with someone we won't get to know for a long time. Is that robbery?

J. sees my distress and pops in, "You remember O. driving around campus with the biggest F350 you ever seen? That truck tooted his fishing rods, shotguns and camping gear. He used to drive around in that thing so much you thought he was working for campus safety! Dude, he and his girl drove off-campus to hotels on weekends just to get cable TV." We laugh together again and raise our glasses in unison.

"You're blue-collar, man," I finally say in O.'s direction. "Even after freshman year, you kept in touch with that janitor over in North. Smoked butts and shot the shit with the man before and after class. Just a regular Joe keeping up with old acquaintances."

"You know, I recall that only three photos escaped from our freshman year," confesses J. "And I still have them. Each one is of a different roommate in North chugging from a handle of Jim Beam. Me, in a swaying motion, a precursor of things to come. You fully equipped with hemp beads and a Phish poster in the background. And O. decked out in a mullet under a baseball cap, with some girl at his side, he holds a flower in one hand, the bottle of whiskey in the other, and a big shit-eating grin on his face."

([/web/20161019080638/https://www.hamilton.edu/magazine/2007/summer/images/03.jpg](https://www.hamilton.edu/magazine/2007/summer/images/03.jpg)).

J.'s almost drunk. I can tell because all his stories are sentimental but keep referring to booze. O. gives us a look as if to say, I know you love me you fuckin' jokers, but it's time to go. Once he says that I turn quickly toward the Chapel and see a crowd congregating in front. We fix our ties and start walking. The wind begins to pick up.



We follow the sound of hugging. As we near the chapel, the faces I imagined in the car begin to take shape. J. and I are quickly immersed in their warmth. With every turn, there is another smile and another pair of arms to embrace. O.'s parents watch this scene proudly from the fringe of the throng. His fiancée stands next to them — fidgeting and shuffling her feet — with tears in her eyes. A bell

chimes and the crowd begins the procession up the steps and inside. J. and I purposely lag behind. Once everyone is inside, we glance at each other and then back toward the porch. The campus is barren and the sun has retreated behind the clouds. He pats me on the back and we walk inside. There are programs on the table. The cover reads:

Memorial Service  
In Celebration of the Life of  
1st Lt. Michael J. Cleary '03  
April 4, 1981 — December 19, 2005  
Hamilton College  
Clinton, New York  
Saturday, April 8, 2006

## 'Typing fast and telling lots of lies': commentary on the contest and notes on the writing life

*By John Nichols '62*

I'm a lousy person to judge a writing contest. I'm no fan of 10-best lists, nor of Oscar nominations, nor of the 100 "best" novels ever written. People have often asked me what writers or books have influenced me most, and I've always replied: "I never met a writer (or a book) I didn't like." [More ...](#)

(</web/20161019080638/https://www.hamilton.edu/magazine/2007/summer/nichols.html>).

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