

## The Quiet Moment Inside a Car Right Before a Long Road Trip Begins

The car feels half awake when I climb inside. Cold air settles in the seats, the kind that leaks in overnight and lingers even after the sun shows up. My backpack slumps against the door like it's already tired, and the zipper keeps tapping the plastic panel every time I shift. Nothing moves except a thin line of sunlight creeping across the dashboard.

A travel mug sits in the cup holder, still too hot to touch for more than a second. The smell rises anyway, filling the space with that sharp, warm scent that always shows up before sunrise. I rest both hands on the steering wheel and feel the grooves where the leather has worn down. For a moment, the wheel feels steadier than I do.

Outside, the neighborhood stays completely still. A single bird calls out somewhere behind the houses. A garage door groans open two streets over, barely reaching my ears. Even the trees seem slow, bending only when a sleepy breeze decides to push through. It all feels like the world hasn't quite decided to start the day.

Maps scatter across the passenger seat in soft crumples. A few sticky notes stick to the edges with directions that only make sense to me. I smooth one out with my thumb and stare at the black marker that's already fading. The road ahead feels long, but in a good way. More open than overwhelming.

My foot doesn't touch the pedal yet. I just sit there for a minute longer, letting the cabin warm up from the sun that's finally reaching the hood. The quiet settles around me in a way that makes thinking easier. Every mile I haven't driven yet waits in that silence, lined up and ready.

When the engine finally turns over, the stillness breaks. The moment slips behind me fast, but it leaves a trace, the kind that hangs around in the back of your mind long after the wheels start moving.