

Stranger and Stranger in Colorful Nevada

Day 34- I arose early and with my Bodum of coffee wrote at the front table in the still of a bright desert sunrise while Vicki got in the last of her forty winks. In Van Gogh's happy crucible, our morning ritual of me up first is practical as I am out of the way writing when Vicki rises, gets ready for the day and brews her morning tea. After a while when we are ready, we stow the table, wheel the front seats around, plunk our Bodums into the dashboard cup holders, and pull out for another day.

Today we continued down US Route 95 through the astonishing and desolate Great Basin desert with its tiny, widely separated pioneer towns fading into very old age but hanging on. Or not: many in this state are ghost towns, especially if they didn't happen to be strung out along Nevada's major US routes as they got numbered and improved beginning in the 1920s. In many of these very small places—ghost or surviving vestige—old cars and trucks dating from the thirties litter what pass for yards, their owners for the most part too poor to have hauled off spent junkers to the county landfill if there is one. With dry air and scant rainfall, these old vehicles don't rust but do bake to a crisp in desert heat. Some of these eighty-year-old relics are intact to the extent of retaining their glass, wiring and whatever tires they had on from their last run decades ago.

The Great Basin's default housing is old trailers that these days usually sport air conditioners or swamp coolers punched through a wall or ceiling, though there are still plenty of old sun-baked homesteader cabins to be seen, some inhabited, some not. The nobility living here in these bare-trace clusters will drive a shiny pickup, have a double-wide manufactured home hauled in on two low-boy flat-bed trucks, and mount the desert's ubiquitous satellite dish to the roof to get hooked up to the entire planet from the middle of the final nowhere of outback Nevada. The poorest live in tacked-together hovels, the core a small ancient trailer with old tires on top holding down a blue, plastic, heavy-duty Home Depot tarpaulin draped over a beat leaky roof. So rooted are some of these vestigial places that they now have the luxury of mature shade trees. Many are clustered around a spring or good well that drew settlers there in the first place when Nevada opened up after gold and then silver strikes in the late 1800s. Some will have a small roadside stand or card table set up selling antiques, mostly scavenged from abandoned mines and shacks. Such is life in the remote American desert outback.

It was sometime in the seventies or eighties that on a whim I got off the paved road in southern Nevada as I was driving up and out of Death Valley, and wandered off along gravel tracks until I stumbled into a place called Rhyolite. At the time, Rhyolite's population was four: Evan Thompson Sr., Evan Thompson III, Evan Thompson IV and a saloon keeper whose name I don't remember. The three Thompsons lived in Rhyolite's sole remaining home, a landmark of sorts built of 51,000 beer bottles and adobe by miner Tom Kelly in 1905. I was invited inside and shown a 1920s photograph of the elder Mr. Thompson, in his eighties when I met him, decked out in tuxedo on an advertising tour as the original Dr. Pepper in 1924. Why Evan Jr., who was living in Washington state, wasn't caring for his elderly father I wasn't told. That fell to his grandson, Evan III, a man in his thirties it appeared. Evan IV was a cheerful schoolboy around ten who said that he gained extra *bona fides* in his fifth grade class when he bragged that his house was made of bottles. So we had club sandwich generations here with a bread slice missing.

Like desert color after the rare spring rain, Rhyolite grew from nothing after rich gold discoveries nearby in 1904. Eastern investors vaulted west and within two years Bullfrog as it was first called had a population of 10,000, a masonry schoolhouse for the town's 250 children, a water system, three water companies, three stage lines bringing in supplies, a bank, a three-story hotel, electricity and 400 electric streetlights lighting the boomtown around the clock. At its peak, the town had its own opera house, dance halls, slaughterhouse, two railroad depots, three public swimming pools, and forty-five saloons. The numbers tell the priorities.

But Rhyolite's eighty-five mining companies were burrowing out the hills around the city as

fast as they could that made the town just a shooting star across the black Nevada night. By 1909, after the mines began playing out and the lingering national financial panic of 1907 had rattled investors, Rhyolite's population had dropped into the hundreds. A few optimists hung on for a revival that never came, leaving only fourteen residents by 1920, the last of them dying in 1924. As far as I know, Rhyolite's only revival came with the three Thompsons and the barkeep who were squatting rent-free on what by then had become State property. The barkeep had set up trade and housekeeping in one of the old railway stations and said that the few tourists who somehow found Rhyolite were enough to keep him going. I didn't ask what sources of income the Thompsons lived on, but Evan III did tell me that caring for his son and grandfather was his full-time gig.

About fifteen years later, I found my way to Rhyolite again by which time it was once more a ghost town, its remaining old doors banging in the desert wind. A few years ago, I flew over Rhyolite and saw a major gold mining operation in full swing including its gigantic tarpaulin-lined cyanide pond. Rhyolite had made a full strange swing from nothing to desert-genteel opera house to poisoned birds on the flyway.

Stranger and stranger in the strange but beautiful land called Nevada.

And so it goes for Nevada's more than 600 ghost towns, nearly all of them at abandoned mines. During its brief run, Rhyolite accounted for a sixth of the state's 60,000 population that, because of mining finds, doubled between 1900 and 1910.

Nevada reveals to the traveler any number of other unexpected strangenesses. I've long had a particular fondness for egg salad sandwiches and my favorite is the variety sold in Shell gas stations. I don't know how Shell happened upon whatever vendor it uses that provides the perfect egg salad sandwich, but there they are nationwide and consistent, too. Just be sure to check the "use by" date. In 1997, Vicki and I were driving through Nevada when my taste buds got a strong hankering for an egg salad sandwich. It was near lunchtime but I kept passing food stops in hope of coming upon a Shell station. By one o'clock and way out into the wide open spaces, I gave up and pulled into the only place that we had seen in many a mile looking like it might sell food, a big, sprawling old ramshackle building that had seen better days. Vicki wasn't hungry so I told her I'd duck inside to check and be right back. I always eat my Shell egg salad sandwiches while driving anyway. I went inside and up to the lady behind the bar and asked if I could get an egg salad sandwich. She gave me the most quizzical look and replied that she had never heard it called that before but that they could probably serve up whatever it was that I was looking for. In my lust for egg salad, only then did I notice her see-through blouse, the ladies of the house arrayed on the long sofa, and no sign of tables.

Uh oh.

Seeing my sudden awakening, the Madame tried unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh and suggested a store down the road where I might find an egg salad sandwich. I hustled back to the car and *right away* told Vicki what had happened. I think my exact words were, "*That place is a whorehouse!*"

We were on our honeymoon.

She is still laughing.

I finally did find my egg salad sandwich a few days later in another state. At a Shell station.

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Vicki also likes to remind me that on that trip I had taken her to the Furnace Creek Inn in the *Funeral Mountains* in *Death Valley* on our honeymoon. It's a Mars-Venus thing. I made up for it by taking her on seven more short honeymoons that year. Match that, fellas.

After getting over some low mountains, US 95 took us straight as an arrow for over a hundred miles. Just asking for clogged arteries, we pulled into a roadside café in Amargosa Valley where I had chicken-fried steak for lunch, but I only do this about once a decade. ☆, "satisfactory."

As we headed toward Las Vegas, we passed the gate to Nellis Air Force Base, the Potemkin Village installation that is actually the entry to Area 51, the nation's super-secret mystery installation until Russian satellites and Google Earth laid it out for all to see on the Internet. US Route 93 changed from a two-lane road to a very good four-lane divided highway right at the base's main gate, so it doesn't appear that the government is trying too hard to keep Area 51 a secret any more. Just don't try flying over it.

The people who believe that extraterrestrials landed near Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947 think that the aliens were taken to Area 51 for—pick your theory—debriefing, mating, pickling, the second coming or spawning the Tea Party. This persistent piece of modern folklore has given birth to a resilient mini-industry around here with one Nevada highway on the distant eastern side of Area 51 actually renamed on maps as the Extraterrestrial Highway. As extraterrestrials have spawned an industry of their own around here, let's give 'em credit as job creators and therefore doing better than the one-percenters. One theory is that the extraterrestrials invaded human bodies to create the Tea Party and have now made it as far as radio talk shows and the United States Senate. Brine them all, I say.

Joyless Joyland, the Bottle House, a kindly old Dr. Pepper impersonator, landing pads for Martians, our largest military installation that "isn't there," more ghost towns than populated ones, egg salad, Nevada—Spanish for snowfall in a place where it can reach 120 degrees much of the year.

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To get to our campground tonight, there were no good road choices but to take US 93 and then Interstate Route 15 through Las Vegas, one of those cities where the major routes don't connect well, are way overburdened with traffic, and aren't adequately signed until you're just upon your exit. Last-second exit signage, lane choke-downs, weaving speeders in one of the nation's meth epicenters, miles of orange-cone road work—whatever driving challenge a route could offer, we ran into it nursing Van Gogh through the outlandish Gotham that is Las Vegas. The tinsel town of America and the world makes it through the night on the highest concentration of gambling, hookers, down-and-outers betting on that last throw of the dice, and an entire ersatz downtown unashamedly sporting mockups of an Eiffel Tower, an Egyptian pyramid, a Montgolfier balloon, a Statue of Liberty, Disney World castles, an Arc de Triomphe, and Donald Trump's offering to national cultural enlightenment, a hotel mocked up in super-scale as the French National Library, all of these spotlighted after dark in high-wattage carnival day-glow colors far out on the black night desert. Then there are the drive-through—make that drive-thru—wedding "chapels." Fries with that?

The extraterrestrials appear to have avoided Las Vegas out of good sense. Couldn't handle it, I'd guess.

Much stranger and stranger in the strange but beautiful land called Nevada.

Unrivaled, weirdly tacky overindulgence sells, but not because the hordes who visit here are necessarily equipped to see Las Vegas as weird, tacky or overindulgent. Nineteen of the world's twenty-five largest hotels, with a total of over 67,000 rooms, are in Las Vegas. The nation's largest, the MGM Grand Hotel, has 6,852 rooms. Ultratacky sells.

John Barker had recommended Nevada's Valley of Fire State Park, a very remote, well-run RV campground where we stayed tonight. As we entered the park, two bighorn sheep sauntered onto the road in front of us, nonchalantly inspected Van Gogh, then with utter nimbleness vaulted up a near-vertical cliff that would require ropes and crampons for a human. Neither of us having ever seen a bighorn sheep before, we were wowed by their beauty and the brief extravagant ballet they put on. With the most graceful agility, they swiftly levitated all the way to the cliff top and were gone.

We eased into a shady site at the park's Atlatl Campground surrounded in close by spectacular, wind-pocked, red-rock cliffs that soon after we arrived glowed radiantly at sunset

down here in the Valley of Fire. The distant view is of a miles-long escarpment of brilliant red rock heaved up from the desert floor. The color derives from high concentrations of iron oxide—rust.

As I learned living in Morocco as a teen, evening comes swiftly in the desert. We arrived to a hot desert wind that suddenly stilled and, as soon as the sun set, was replaced by a cooler breeze from the opposite direction from the giant inhaling that a desert does at dusk.

Panhandling chipmunks who were willing to come within inches of us stood on hind legs with front paws outstretched like trick-or-treaters. Wildlife biologists frown on this learned behavior around humans but the chipmunks and the humans seem happy enough with this friendly inter-species communion. In the site next to us, the nine Japanese tourists in their rental RV were also entertained by the chipmunks and maybe vice versa. Their RV sleeps eight so we wondered where they shoehorned in number nine. We have seen a number of RV rentals on this trip including three identical ones with happy German tourists travelling together through Yellowstone.

Having dinner in a different RV park every night has made us aware that a good park heightens the dining experience and we agreed that tonight we had landed in the most stunning dining spot yet. Few restaurants could ever match this scenery. We cranked open Van Gogh's windows to catch the breeze and decided on a cold plate of fruit, cheese, baguette and wine. After dark, we went for a walk through this part of the park. Over the eastern cliff of the tight Valley of Fire canyon we watched the full moon rise, softly splashing moon glow across red rock, quite a sight.

After spotty cell phone reception for two days, we got a five-bar signal down here in a desert canyon in the middle of nowhere near no sign of a cell tower. Arkansas daughter Alex called and is looking forward to our visit.