

Highway 130, through Minersville, Milford, then state 21, striking a straight course past irrigated fields of alfalfa, and then into sage-covered range and past a sign: "NO GAS NEXT 81 MILES." I turned around and put more fuel in the tank.

The highway rose into the Wah Wah Mountains, past the abandoned mining town of Frisco, and then shot down the other side into a long, empty valley that cupped the sunlight. I put the van in neutral and coasted for five miles, then stopped along the road and got out to walk a bit. Total silence, an absence of sound so complete a man can hear the workings of his metabolism, the pulse of his nerves, the chemical reactions of his thoughts.

The valley stretched north and south forever. I imagined I could have seen 100 miles, becoming overwhelmed in the space. I peered into the long views for almost an hour, entranced. The desert is a place where a man can lose himself, to become afloat on his considerations rising from an open mind, but not a realm to linger in.

A raven cawed from a fencepost, cutting the strings of my gazing. Back to life, back to the van and the lonely road. At another summit, a Millard County deputy parked off the road snoozed away the afternoon. Who could blame the man. There was no noise to wake him.

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The mountains of the Great Basin in Nevada shoot out of the desert flatness like the dorsal spines of some giant prehistoric creature long ago buried by the dry, snaking silt, perhaps preserved by the essence of sage and juniper that leach from their roots, unmoved by time in a stretch of land that whispers a kind of immortality.

The tallest among them is Wheeler Peak, a giant slab of granite that's 2,000 foot diamond shaped face I saw from fifty miles away. I found a road that went up into the park, my little home struggling up and up to over 10,000 feet. I set up camp for the night by a cold, fast flowing stream and hiked to a meadow in a clearing of quaking aspens, their clapping leaves burning bright yellow in the high altitude sun, a rafter of turkeys pecking the rocky ground nearby.

I sat on a rock and took in the cutout of mountains before me, rising from an upslope like a grand tabernacle. I felt small. The setting sun turned their faces flaming orange, then a dripping red, the color of a fresh wound. I sat for a long time, watching the sun escape behind the peak, until all its blazing was washed away. I went to sleep some time later, under the starlight streaming, the cold creek speaking.

In the morning, I packed a few carrots and apples and made a hike the next morning to a Bristlecone Pine grove on the way to the base of Wheeler. The trail wound its way under tall pines, ascending the upslope steeply. Near the grove, breaks in the forest allowed a view north. The floor of the high desert basin surged forever, interrupted randomly by range upon range of tall peaks, rocky islands that cut the clear sky,

A short while later, the grove emerged, and the trees before me became almost otherworldly. The branches of the Bristlecone are twisted and curled and misshapen to the point of being almost grotesque, as if the tree was possessed, the branches reaching out to the sky in a plea for forgiveness, a gnarled stretching to grab hold of a reason for its fate, cursed and palsied.

The roots snake, dry and brittle, across the rocks, corkscrewing in between stones, attached to a trunk that's skin is smooth and slippery, polished by the driving wind. I ran my hand up and down the trunk of one tree, feeling the weight of the wood inside.

Bristlecones can live up to 5,000 years, the oldest living things on Earth. This one was 3,200 years old, just a baby when the alphabet emerge, the horse was domesticated, Stonehenge was completed. That is enough to make one stop and think for a while.

I held my hand on the trunk and imagined not just sensing time, but feeling it, for all those years were bound up inside of this old man; every sunrise and sunset, every storm and blast of thunder, every change of season and rush of wind was in some way etched into the one I was touching. I could sense a humility. I could feel a wisdom.

The grandeur of the Giant Redwoods in California, and as wondrous as they are, is necessarily bound up in their sheer size. The Bristlecones made a mark in their slow growing subtleties. They were alive in a way the Redwoods were not. The massive trees scream at you with their size; the Bristlecones do not speak, for theirs is an inaudible talking, ancient and lost to time.

Even when they die, the Bristlecones remain. Their wood is so dense, so tightly ringed and so highly resinous, that they are preserved, left on the rocky ground to have microscopic layers of their skins lathed off by the wind, which will never die.

Up ahead on the trail was an elderly couple, admiring the trees. I asked the old woman what she thought of them, and she put her hand up forming a tiny amount of space between her thumb and forefinger and said, "they make me feel this big."

"They put a new perspective on aging, don't they?" I asked the old man.

"They do," he said. "But we can't live forever."

They were from Cheyenne, Wyoming, and had been here three times before.

"Wanted to see if we could do this one last time," the old man said.

They made way for me, for the strength of someone much younger. I walked ahead, up onto a rock glacier that led to the base of Wheeler. Each step was hollow, resonating with the ice and snow that the rocks covered.

At the end of the trail, I made a cairn and sat beneath the mountains, taken. The high, sheer faces curved toward each other, and I thought they were friends assembled at a meeting that would last until the forces of wind and gravity and time had broken them down into the stones I sat on.

A rushing breeze came sprinting down their faces and then disappeared. All went silent. A single stone came cascading down one face, filling the air with a clogging tinging. A raven cawed, the low shrill hanging in space. The old friends stood strong and solid and straight, their presence speaking enough.

Out of the silence I heard the squeaking sound of stones being stepped on. It was the old man and his wife, perhaps 400 feet below me, making their way up the glacier.

They'd been right behind me.

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The mapmakers call US-50 as it runs through the middle of Nevada "The Loneliest Road in America." It's meant, I think, to be some sort of novelty to attract folks to the way outs, to give them something to talk about when they pull the minivan around the cul-de-sac back home and tell the neighbors, "There was nothing out there, Bob."

Along the way, at gas stations and diners, a Loneliest Road traveler can buy "I Survived The Loneliest Road" bumper stickers, and at cafes and casinos and saloons, "We stamp your Loneliest Road travel maps!"

That's all fine and good. But for me, a traveler who had time on his hands, who wanted to feel the microscopic spaces between the oceans of molecules that dance in the wide, wide openness, there was a kind of home here. Of all the states I'd visited, Nevada was by far my favorite.

The highway west out of the mining and ranching town of Ely, the road shot like an arrow through the high desert, through the van, through me. Then into a thin mountain range, curling up, up, my little home struggling with the elevation, before reaching the summit and being shot down the other side with tremendous speed and then easing back into a long, wide valley.

Driving through the Basin and Range was like riding big, rocky waves and then gently rolling in the troughs, settling in the arid, sage stillness. Transmission lines disappeared at a point way off south, ending, for all I knew, in Mexico City.

At Pancake Pass, I stopped and packed a lunch of walnuts, dried cranberries and water and hike up a steep volcanic hill. At the top, the promontory eased north and I walked along the ridge until I reach the edge, the hill fanning out below me like a boulder-strewn sash. Here, the long-view north. The sweep of sky, the gentle rise of the base of a high mountain from the perfect flatness and then its explosive lift heavenward. My eyes focused on a spot way out, tucked between a break in faraway ridges, and the signal that passed through my mind said I was seeing Forever.

I sat on a on some stones and ate, then made a cairn and said a blessing to the Earth, thankful for heavy breath, overwhelmed heart, a soul that is easily moved. Out in the basin, the wind lifted dust up from the valley floor and twisted it a thousand feet into the air, a whirling, sparkling cloud of delicate mass. An Old Ghost, alive. It moved like slow smoke, then took the shape of the face of the mountain, scouring its peak in an ancient abrasion, clawing its way to The Other Side.

The winds kept up, the sun obscured in a silty, opaque, orange peel sky. The world glowed, golden and good. The land was beyond range; it felt primal, forgotten about, barely noticed, surreal in its space. The air smelled of minerals and age, and a feeling washed over me that I was in the presence of something timeless, of something holy and good, vacuous but strained with great volume. I felt full.

Back on the highway. I thought about making it to Austin for the night, but grew tired. The sun was beginning a fast run at the horizon and the miles, oh the miles, stacked on top of one another, placed horizontally. A rolling black ribbon of numbing.

A took dirt road off the highway near Hickison Summit and walked into a canyon of sandstone. Etched into the walls and in nooks and fissures, were petroglyphs from long ago, probably before the Shoshone Indians were here.

The markings were faint writings; crude scratching, really, of ovals and shallow lines, hash marks and symmetrical designs. My first inclination was to wonder what the authors were trying to say with those spirals and whorls, to themselves or each other, I had no idea.

I ran my fingers across them, traced the lines, and thought as deep as my little mind could. There is more to it, for sure. Maybe they did not know for how long the marks would remain hewn in the rock. Perhaps the exercise was meant to be fleeting. A

lot of good art is. But so far they have lived on, in spite of the constant rush of wind, which also etches.

But everything created with purpose is not just an expression of our humanity and inherent need to create and produce, but also a purposeful admittance of our mortality, of the hope that what we do while alive will remain after we are gone. It is our stamp on our world, the place we are familiar with, before leaving for a place we know nothing about.

I hoped that was what those Indians were trying to convey, and surely that was what those who had carved peace signs and UFOs and dates and names into the rock were trying to communicate as well, some from as far back as the 1850s. But to co-opt the primitive is a sin. It is a forceful form of sincerity and purpose that lacks both. It is a kind of cheating, of copying. One cannot plagiarize truth. They always wind up looking like a liar.

I made a camp for the night, gathering dead juniper, sage brush and pinyon pine, and made a fire. I was alone, except for the pops and licks of the flames, the exploding resin and dreamy smells of the glowing fuel. It, too, was living.

I made a supper of beans, cheese and tea and sat, listening to the night fall. A smooth rush of wind cascaded down a high bluff behind me, shaking and rustling the juniper bushes that coated it. It hissed and whined, grew and growled, an invisible, phantasmogorpic mass, alive and unyielding. There were so many mysteries in its talking, so much I did not know. The speaking wind, moving the cold night, made me shudder.

The fire died down, and I took my hatchet and searched for more wood. There was a shaking in the pinyon, then another, a sound soft and woody. My headlamp went out, and I stood there, still, gripped in the liquid dark.

In a moment, my pupils widened and I saw clearly. How strange, I thought, that we can see better in the dark without light, feeling our way through the darkness with an intuitive eye, a primal guide, senses acute, mind aware. To see in the dark, to observe that which is in front of us, but also the realms of our insides. It's possible. It is. And we quake to think what we'll find there, so the quest for seeing is rarely made.

I let the fire surge and than level off. Out here by the flames, way of and alone, it felt warm and safe, a time when one truly appreciates fire and understands how it sustained us for generations, how it held those folks who wrote on the canyon walls thousands of years ago.

The wind died down and the silence fell over the land. A jetliner six miles above sounded as if it was taking off. A whisper cut the ears. There was noise in the blinking of an eye, in the impulses of a thought. How grand.

I had more wood, but let the fire smolder, and with eyes adjusted to the night, I looked up, and was crushed.

The sky was on fire. Thousands upon thousands of stars, pulsating, breathing, spewing light onto the land, a shaking, erupting dome of wet, mottled light. Overwhelmed, I laid down on my back so my only field of vision was the cosmic scene dripping into my widened eyes, and I wondered what I'd done to deserve this gift.

To feel insignificant. That was a gift. I felt that for a long time. Then that feeling was worn away by the quaking stars. I was not insignificant, not lonely. I was what I was peering into; my flesh, my bones, the freckles in my eyes, the chemicals of my thoughts. I was the light and heart-wrenching timelessness spread out overhead. I was the glittering

pouring down, undeniably, from everywhere. The stars were everything around me – the dying fire, the speaking wind, the ancient air, the solid rock, the spiraling dust, the length of time.

I was made at the beginning of time. The raw ingredients of me found a way, billions of years after they were birthed, to come together and form me. And when I died, would create something else, perhaps more beautiful and useful and inspiring, perhaps not. But either way, I would last until the ever expanding void above me folded on itself. I would be here, because I always have been.

I raised my arm toward the shimmering sky, toward the light that'd taken billions of years to reach me, formed inside the fiery furnaces of suns that had been born, lived and since died, and sought a way inside, back through time, and wished to carve out channels in my soul for the liquid light to surge through.

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I took some time the next morning, starting a fire with the still hot coals from the night before. Sipping coffee, eating cheese, listening to the shrill cries of coyotes out in the sagebrush flats.

I hiked the bluff and watched as the sun warmed Smokey Valley, running up to the broad, snow-strewn shoulders of the Toiyabe Mountains (Nevada has more ranges than any other state), vapor filling the vale from hydrocarbons being released as the soil warmed.

The highway went straight at the mountains, and then a road sign just before them, “What Happens in Austin You Brag About.” When I got to the little town, sitting at the bottom of Little Pony Canyon, I scarcely heard a word, discouraging or otherwise.

I walked the streets for a bit, as steep as you’d find in San Francisco, trying for conversation, but no one was about.

Smoke from a juniper fire was billowing out of the chimney at the Owl Club. Someone home. I took a seat at the empty bar, when a small woman’s head emerged from behind a kitchen area.

“Oh, you again,” she said. What?

“Nope. Just me,” I said.

“You must be hungry.” What, what?

“I could eat.”

“Kitchen’s closed.”

“Guess I’m not now.”

The little woman, Mary Skeath, a daughter of Springfield, Missouri, opened a bottle of beer and put it in front of me.

“Drink,” she said. I did. Despite her small size, she had the fierce manners of a woman who had dealt with hard people, a face of smooth skin falling to the sides in soft pockets. She lit a long cigarette, and fixed me a plate of cold chicken and beans from a birthday party she’d held earlier in the day.

“Eat,” she said. A direct gal. I liked her a lot.

A brochure on the bar advertising the town’s businesses had a short history on Austin: In 1862, a horse belonging to a W.H Talcott accidentally kicked-up a piece of quartz rock bursting with silver. Mr. Talcott soon staked out a claim and got to work, picking the hills for more. But word spread quickly, and Austin swelled to 10,000 people

in just one year. By 1880, the silver rush had faded, but not before \$50 million in precious metals had been extracted from them.

“Looks like the boom times are over,” I said.

“More like a bust. A guy wrote a book about Austin a while ago, called it, ‘The Town That Died Laughing.’”

Mary fed a few bucks into a video poker machine laid into the bar, common in many Nevada saloons, her face taking on an antiqued look in the cloudy, pocked mirror.

“I moved here in 1980 from Idaho with husband No. 3. One night he was sitting right where you were. A real asshole. I’d made good friends with this gal, Betty, and she was in here playing pool. He made a comment to me, and she took that cue and said, ‘I’m giving you three seconds to get the hell out of here.’ He told her to *you-know-what*, and she took the fat end of the stick and beat him with it. I’ve been working in bars since I was 18 years old. Men and bars. They’ve toughened me.”

“Nice to have good friends,” I said.

“Especially ones willing to beat up a man for you. Do you mind putting some wood in the stove?” she asked. I threw in a shaggy log. Hung on the walls were shamrocks crafted out of green garland; a map of Ireland hung on a door.

“Is this an Irish bar?” I asked.

“My husband’s Irish. He’s husband number four, been that way for thirty-three years. It was bad luck with husbands 1, 2 and 3. I don’t say their names. As soon as a man raises his hand to me, I divorce him. No man messes with me. Deesie never put a hand on me. The Irish do not believe in beating their women.”

“It’s a matriarchal culture. The women usually run the family.”

“He was just a kid. Very annoying. I said, ‘Get out of here, you sonofabitch! Get out!’”

“He grew on you.”

Whimsically, she said, “No, he didn’t. It was the Fourth of July. I was drunk. We ended up married. I said, ‘Oh my God, what have I done.’ I was 41. He was 28. He’d been bugging me for months, ‘Will you dinner with me?’ And the next thing I knew I was running across the street throwing beer bottles at him. He never saw ‘em coming.”

“You were flirting.”

“I was flirting.”

Deesie came in from the cold, looked at me with a big, bulbous face, and smiled. One eye was on my me, the other aimed toward Galway.

With a thick brogue, he asked Mary, “Do we got ‘nuff wood for ya foire, love?”

She nodded, and he left.

“That was quick,” I said.

“He’s a good man. He knows what to do. You should head out to Middlegate, say hi to my sister, Fredda.”

“Sister moved out here with you?”

“Like a sister. Some folks walk down the block to see a friend. Out here, we drive an hour.”

Mary’s youngest daughter came in from a bar across the street, a sweet girl, bubbly, all smiles. She gave me a once over, and a protective look crept across her face.

“Who is this guy, mom?” I introduced myself.

“This is DesRae,” Mary said. “Named her after Dessie.”

“Shake my hand,” DesRae said. I extended my hand for a formal introduction. “Good. That’s a handshake. I had to see what kind of man you were.”

Mary leaned against the bar, wearing a thin smile, her smoking arm resting on a Lander County phone book.

“I taught her well,” she said.

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I veered off the highway and took state 722 west, toward Middlegate, which wasn’t on the map. The road past rangeland and alfalfa and hay fields, road signs turned to colanders by drive by shotgunners, then climbed a few hills and dropped into a valley, where a wide alkali hardpan sparkled in the sun. I took a road out to the dry lakebed and drove out to the middle of the cracked, salty floor.

It was perfectly flat, totally silent. The afternoon light bounced off the white earth and glinted off everything. With no one there, I drove Harry around, and then imagined we were dancing. I had Strauss’s Blue Danube on my iPod, and played it.

We waltzed around the powdery, forever dance floor, making figure 8’s, carving ovals and abstract etchings in the ground, kicking up salty dust as we let loose, brackish silt swirling through his cracks, chasing dust devils that twisted in the expanse, and cutting through them, chopping off their movement. It great fun, dancing with my little home; connecting again with my always friend.

The highway crept through a canyon of basalt cliffs deep in shadow, bright green lichen stuck to the sides, iridescent in the shade, where sage on the canyon floor grew taller than me. At Carroll Summit, I cut some sage and placed it on the dash. What a scent – sweet, reviving, clean, purifying. Native Americans consider it one of the most sacred of plants. I can understand why. No other smell has connected me to the earth more than fresh, pungent sage.

Out of the canyon, Middlegate Station sat near the western ramparts of the Desatoya Mountains. It was a desert outpost, a former stop on the Pony Express Trail, as well as many Overland Stagecoach lines. Now, it was a true oasis in the barrenness, a tiny community of sun-bleached trailers and chicken pens and tarp verandas whipped and frayed by the ever-present wind, a small bar and motel with a gas pump placed by the rusted shell of a Model T. A place where people stop when they *have* to fill up. The closest town was 50 miles away.

A sign on the bar said, “MIDDLEGATE STATION. ELEVATION 4100 FEET. MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. POP. 17, 18.” The ‘18’ had an ‘X’ through it.

I took a seat at the bar, sharing the space with large men wearing cowboy hats greased in the spots where they adjusted them, insulated Carhartts stretched over strong backs, the holes and tears in them frayed artifacts of their work, holding bottles of beer with 80-grit hands swollen and scarred, staring at the glowing liquor bottles with cobwebbed eyes held in faces lined in deep, sun-dug wrinkles and thin-snaking capillaries. Hard men, tough men, who talked of gold mining, geothermal plants, and the Bureau of Land Management, which Nevadans despise even more than Californians.

Middlegate was owned by the Stevensons, Fredda, a woman of fine faced features and white hair that cascaded down her back like meringues of snow, and her husband, Russ, a tall glass of Navy veteran held in place by a happy beer belly.

Next to me was Ray Salisbury, a short, bulbous nosed, strong man in a sheepskin jacket, well-worn cowboy hat and cowboy boots caked with dirt from the Bicentennial year. A rancher. A man many men imagine they could be.

“Good country out here,” I said.

“Whole state’s basically property of the federal government. You can camp anywhere. I’ve done my share.”

He recounted a tale of outdoorsing.

“I knew this guy when I was younger, and he asked me to go camping up near Denio. I don’t know why. I think he wanted to jump my bones. But he had a bunch of bird dogs. I barely slept that night, all this commotion and something trying to get in the tent with me, clawing at the door. I just kept slapping it away. In the morning, he asked me how I slept, and I said, ‘Horrible. Your goddamned dogs were trying to get in my tent all night.’ He said, ‘My dogs slept with me all night, Ray.’”

“What was it?”

“Probably a bobcat. Who knows. I hit it hard.”

Fredda slapped ground beef on the grill, and the whole bar was held in a cloud of thick grease. On the ceiling, on the wooden support beams, on the walls and window frames were rows and rows of dollar bills with writing on them; some bills were new, but most looked sautéed, singed and fried, grease dripping down their sides held in suspended animation. Even here, in the middle of nowhere, I counted more than a dozen countries’ bills: Monrovia, Mongolia, the Euro, Bulgaria among them.

“Lotta money on the walls. Too bad you can’t use them with all that writing on them.”

“The hell I can’t,” Fredda said. “It doesn’t matter. As long as you got the three-quarters of the bill.”

“I thought you couldn’t deface currency.”

“There’s a law that says you cannot deface United States currency but there is no law that says that the currency still isn’t good. We took all those ones in those back banners down and spent them. That’s what got us through the winter last year when we almost went broke. Couldn’t pay the diesel bill for the generator.”

Fredda went back to the burgers.

To me, Ray said, “You know they named the Salisbury Plains in England after me.”

“Your old enough,” I joked.

“Oh, got to hell. These young wits. I met this kid the other day, college guy working for the BLM. A rancher wants to install a cattle guard on a road out here. Kid says, ‘Ok. When do I get to meet him.’”

Fredda came back.

“If you wanted to, you could spend a couple days and get all of these dollars down and you could buy me for a night,” Ray said to her.

“Kiss my ass,” she said.

“I would do that in a minute. Don’t ever tell me to do that because I’d love to.”

Russ yelled across the bar to Ray, “Watch it old fart. Don’t be messin’ with my old gal, you hear?”

“I’m not, you young punk.” Russ was north of 60. “Remember when I made you mad?”

“Refresh my memory.”

“We was in Austin and you was playing a guitar there in International Hotel and a double rainbow come over. I said, ‘would you play that song Over the Hill and Far Away?’ It made you madder than hell.”

“It was you making a move on my wife again. Keep it up I’ll have to shoot you.” Behind him was a bumper sticker pasted to the bar, “God Bless Our Troops, Especially Our Snipers.”

It was all in good fun. Ray had lost his wife of over 50 years the year before. The more time I spent there, the walls closed in. Not like a trap, but a kind compaction. A high-pitched buzzing sound grew outside. I walked out. A man in a vintage single-prop plane had landed on an old abandoned highway and was taxiing into a spot by the three motel rooms. He came inside and ordered a chicken sandwich.

“You flew in for a chicken sandwich?” I asked him.

“It’s how I get around,” he said.

“People come here to live to get away,” Fredda said. “Had a gal, a really sweet woman, who moved here a year back. She had cancer, and not much time. She lived out her last days right here in the middle of nowhere.”

“Tight-knit community,” I said.

“Out here, you have to be. We saved this place back in 1984. There was a woman, Ida Ferguson, who opened it as a bar back in the early ‘50s, then it went out of business. She was a tough broad, married seven times. If she needed a carpenter, she married one. A plumber? Same thing. In the end, she married a jack-of-all-trades.”

“She’s not around now I take it?”

“Not in body. Still haunts the place though. I found a diamond ring one time when I was gardening. I put it on a counter, and the next morning it was gone. Bet it was her wedding ring. And we’ve had earthquakes here, but I called up the USGS and their instruments hadn’t picked up a thing.”

A man walked in, talking to himself, none of it making sense. He introduced himself, asked about my van and whether I thought about driving in reverse instead of forward so I could see what was behind me at all times.

“He lives here?” I asked.

“He’s happy,” Fredda said. “He came one October and we were going to give him a month’s work and give him some money and send him on the bus and get him on his way because he was almost dead when he got here. He was riding a little kids’ bicycle across the flat and no food, no water, no money.”

“Oh really? Bad shape.”

“He was almost dead. He was so close to dead. We fed him, watered him, gave him a place to sleep, gave him some chores to do and we were just going to keep him for a month or so and send him on his way. We sat down for Thanksgiving dinner, and we all took our hands and said what we were thankful for. We got to him he said ‘I’m thankful I found this place.’ Then we couldn’t send him away. Been here ever since. He’d been thrown away. That was the first time he’s gotten a gift in years. He held the gift.”

Outside, a low rumble swelled into a loud roar, then a Buh-BOOM! That shook the floor.

“Jet just went supersonic,” Ray said. “Naval air station over in Fallon. There’s a bombing range just past Fairview Peak.”

“Hard to get used to,” I said.

“Background noise,” he said.

A man from Reno, overweight in a soft, city way, walked in with a little Asian woman on his arm, the dude looking like he’d sent away for the Cowboy package: Tight jeans, hard and new, wool-coated sherpa jacket, the cuffs sharp, a cowboy hat so bright it could brighten the Nevada night.

A little too soft in the hand, a little too liberal in his talking, he announced his presence to impress the little lady arm candy and said to Ray, “Howdy, partner!”

Ray, staring ahead, said, “Yup.” He left.

I sat alone for another beer, taking in the warm feel of the place. Middlegate was one of those places where you could end up, and never leave. A place where one can find a home where no one would ever build one.

A trucker hauling hay threw open the screen door and asked for water. Nerve-wracked, wild-eyed, an unlit cigarette hanging out of his mouth backwards.

"My truck's on fire," he says. "Been that way since Austin. Water! I need water!"

Another bartender, Dee, a young, no-shit-takin’ woman in the mould of a Mary Skeath, handed him a pitcher of water.

“Honey, that's like doin' surgery with a toothpick,” he said. She got her coat to go help him find a hose out front, drawing a beer-soaked comment from a grizzled miner.

“Hey. I thought you were gonna dance on the bar for me, baby,” he said.

Dee pointed to a Barbie doll, spread-eagle and scotch taped to a gold pole running from the ceiling to the bar.

“Trixie’s taking over, asshole.”

A cold night in the van, a cold morning on the range. I woke and made some coffee, slid the sliding door open and sipped, letting the sun warm me. The pilot, who’d spent the night, got in his plane, used the old highway as a runway and took off, making a few circles around the outpost. A crowd of folks who’d also stayed the night gathered to take in the scene, and the pilot buzzed them, let go of a thick stream of smoke, before lifting away into the western sky.

A man in the group shook his head and laughed.

“Only at Middlegate,” he said.