

Can's Ass

Fock 3: The Rise of the Lung Demon

So, like I was saying, as I angled for Dodge City a decade later, en route to Sacramento, there was no anticipation of the Wild West preserved; it was just another mark on the map. In fact, as I noted in the Notbook: *KS astounds me again: took no pics because nothing would be in it. Amazing. So empty, for so long, on and on...*

Besides, I was pretty distracted by those damn pains.

Ah, yes, the pains.

They were chest pains, and they were, as Dad used to say, doozies.

A “doozy”, of course, is actually a “deusie”, which was short for Deusenberg, a fancy-dandy motorcar of the 1930's era. It was much dandier and cooler and just plain spiffier than the rest, so the “doozy” came into parlance as a term for anything that was beyond ordinary.

And these pains sure were that. Not dandy and spiffy, exactly, but certainly beyond ordinary.

It was mid-afternoon, and the ride across southern Kansas was placid and enjoyable. A small service station had just been passed a couple of miles before. Then, quite suddenly, a disturbing tightening sensation began to happen in my chest. Heartburn, I reasoned, though there didn't seem to be any reason for me to have heartburn. Besides, I *never* get heartburn, so I couldn't be too precise about what it should feel like.

Less than a minute later, I was slumping my shoulders forward, as if trying to close my chest in upon itself to ease the increasing tightness. My attention to the roadway was being compromised, so I allowed myself to slow down and drift to a stop on the grassy shoulder. The pain continued to worsen. I ruled out heartburn.

I turned off the stereo. Don't ask me why, I guess I just thought it would help.

I tried sitting up straight, and then reclining the driver's seat backwards, before reverting back into a semi-fetal tuck. That position relaxed the pain minimally.

All the while, I was trying to concoct some kind of plan. I mean, what could I do? Would it make sense to backtrack to that service station? To do what? Call an ambulance? Then what?? I'd be hauled off to some remote medical facility to get poked and prodded, and the van – with all my valuables – would be...where??? And what if the hospital kept me there for a while? A long while?? Honestly, the concern for myself was dwarfed by my fear of losing the van, the laptop, the camera, my clothes, tapes, printer, golf clubs, chilly, beer, and/or anything else that would be **expensive** to replace.

While I fretted over this, the pain slowly passed. It had lasted maybe fifteen minutes. I sat up tentatively and was relieved that things were feelin' OK. I stepped out of the van for a moment, and walked around. Breathing was fine, heartbeat was fine, everything seemed back to normal.

So, with a Wow-That-Was-Pretty-Fucked-Up shrug, Blue Man and I resumed our westerly route towards Sacramento!

But two hours later, we were back on the shoulder. We were just past Mullinsville, and the demon in my chest had returned with a vengeance. I stumbled into the back of the van and threw myself on the bed. The pains were mostly between my heart and my right lung, though they surged up on both sides, and out almost as far as the shoulders. But the main point of attack was clear. I tried to remember the anatomy from my Exercise Circulation class, and determine if the pulmonary artery was on that side or the left, not that it would have given me any relief, but at least I could have been a little closer to diagnosing if I was having a heart attack, or a collapsing lung, or a clogging artery.

I lay curled on the bed for many minutes as the Lung Demon continued to winch my chest tighter and tighter. My heartbeat seemed normal, except for the anxiety-induced rise. My breathing was not restricted in any way. I could perceive no recognizable physiological symptom. It just plain goddamn fucking hurt like a goddamn fucking bastard!

When it passed this time, it did so slowly, as if teasing me. I'd be lying there and feel the pain go. I'd begin to unclench and it would be OK. But when I began to move just that much more, it would vice-grip me again. So, by small stages, I uncurled and lay flat on the bed, somewhat sweaty, and somewhat scared.

I gave it a few minutes to see if the Lung Demon had indeed left, or if he had just stepped out for a quick whiz or something. He didn't seem to be around, and Dodge City was only about 30 miles ahead, so once again, I resumed driving.

The remaining 150 or so miles of Kansas passed without incident. The small pleasures of the ride began to replace my self-appraisal and I held a muted optimism as we neared Colorado.

Near the tiny town of Ingalls KS, there was a funny sight. The cloudless afternoon was relentlessly hot, and shade was scarce. Cows were ubiquitous along this route, and Mr. Sun was bakin' the bovines bad. But in this one flat and empty grassy prairie, about ten cows had clustered inside a small culvert to escape the heat. They stood there looking out, and, as I passed, one other cow was standing several yards away, and was just looking at them, as if to say *why didn't I think of that?* Another cow was walking purposefully towards the culvert. The shaded cows definitely had a smug hey-this-was-a-damn-good-idea demeanor about them.

Shortly after that, the road rose somewhat and a sign for "Scenic Overlook" coerced me up the driveway to the viewing point. I craved scenic splendor after so much ordinary and empty. What did I see? What was so damn scenic that it warranted Overlook status? About a thousand cows grazing in a huge pasture. Nothing else. Cows. Scenic cows, I reckon.

The final point of interest – if you can call it that – in Kansas was crossing into Mountain Time Zone. Going westward, time zone demarcations are always a boon. They give you the chance to relive an hour of your life. Whatever happened in that last hour gets overlaid with what is happening in that hour again. It really feels like Bonus Time.

What time is it?

4:20.

Againnn????

Yeahhhh. Heh heh.

Losing the hour while eastering is not such a big deal, except that it shoots the holy shit out of your travel schedule. I really don't feel like an hour was *stolen*, though, or even paid back; it's more like I just slept late or something and missed it.

I had mounted a late charge to try to reach Mountain Time before 6:26, thus giving me two 6:26's in one day again, but I was a minute late. I hit the Zone at 7:27 CDT, thus leaping back to 6:27 MDT. So close...

That number – 626 -- is, of course, my birthday (6/26). I keep my wristwatch alarm set to sound at that time (PM, of course) and wish me a sort of Happy Birthday every day. I had tried to sneak an extra such wish for good karma's sake. Maybe I hoped it would keep the Lung Demon away.

Hey, in the middle of nowhere, you sometimes have to rummage for things to keep interested, ok?? It's a runner thing: goals, number, time, the whole bit. *Bet you can't make it by 6:26! Betcha I can!!!* Splits, intervals, calculating remaining miles against the relentless and impassive clock. How many miles left? How much time?? Speed up? You got it, coach!



It gets like that when you're solo on the road, and I love it. There's 138 miles left to the border? Two hours, no problem! And I make it happen. Set cruise control at 69 and let it ride. I always rejoice in the accomplishment, and toast the victory once that line has been crossed. It gives a purpose, a reason, a goal to what could easily deteriorate into aimless driving.

Mile markers are great. All a serene green hue, they are the highway's equivalent of a stopwatch. Their counting down (or up) of the miles is eerily similar to Coach Glennon or Coach Meagher calling out quarter splits as I ran by: "56...57...58...59..." [OK, maybe it was slower than that.]

I always set my pace reasonably, though, and that's a distance runner's trait too. You don't start out a ten-mile run with the fastest mile of your life and expect to keep it up. You hold back and spread out your exertions.

Same with driving. Sure, you'll be CC'ing at 75 for long stretches, but you also stop for gas, or to service Walt, or to nibble a couple samiches and dig the groovy scenery, baby. It all has to figure in the pace when you set your goals for the day, or till supper, or till midnight.

"Budgeting" 50 MPH has always worked well: 100 miles will take 2 hours. That's a pretty good average, so why rush for more? After all, part of the plan is enjoying the country as it zibbles on by. I budget for 50, go 73, then slack when the slackin' is best, and I still stay on shhhedule.