

ROCKIES and ROLLIES

Fock 1: Mile High Hopper

The exhilaration of reaching Colorado was somewhat mitigated by the absence of a big colorful welcome sign. And I do mean absence, as in “not here today.” There was a big frame still there – probably about 10’ x 15’ – but no sign stood within it. I sure hope it hadn’t been stolen. Pretty damn ballsy theft, if it was.

The scene was nice though: the afternoon sunshine was dazzling in the clean, thin air, and the long, vivid shadows seemed like arrows pointing the way westward, with Blue Man himself as the arrowhead.

There was also no great change in terrain, nor any state-of-the-art Welcome Center – not that Welcome Centers constitute “art” anyway. There was just a small dirt road turning off the Interstate, and a dusty clearing where a couple of travelers had stopped to celebrate the border. We paused just long enough to wolf down a bland turkey samich, then pressed onward. There was no desperate rush, but there was time to regain. The injury timeouts had thrown off what little schedule there was.

Half an hour into Colorado, Blue Man had just finished guzzling gas in the small town of Lamar, and I had just begun to roll away from the pumps, when the Lung Demon pounced.

I could have liked Lamar otherwise: it had a peacock just walking along in the street with his tail all a-showin’, and there were almost-neighboring businesses called The Car Palace and The Booze Palace. But any fondness I may have held for this town vanished when the pains returned.

This attack was sudden and fierce. I immediately turned the van aside, almost ran into the rail fence that I stopped it by, and hurriedly clambered onto the bed. The initial attempts at fetal-style relief did no good whatsoever, so I grimly resolved to face this beast head-on.

Rolling onto my back, extending my legs out straight, and laying my crossed hands on my sternum, I went zen. I closed my eyes and swam into myself, exploring what it was that I was feeling. I totally relaxed every muscle in my body, giving up all fight against the pain.

I swirled around and studied this Lung Demon. The image came to my mind of a dark, thin creature. It had no head or main body. It was like a hand with long squirming fingers, almost like the tentacles of an octopus. The fingers ran from the bottom of my right lung, and they wrapped around it from the heart-side outward. They squeezed the lung as if to crush it, pressuring from the whole length of each finger, not just the tips. Smaller tendrils had attached themselves to the heart and arteries.

It hurt like unholy hell, but since there was no good coming from straining against it, I detached myself from it. I remained in my inward trance and faced the Demon with calm. I let it squeeze and did not resist. I silently asked it what it wanted, why it was there. I lay totally motionless, taking small, slow easy breaths, not even moving my lips as the warm exhailes and inhailes passed across them. I was gone from my body. The pain was very much there, but my relaxation was isolating it and frustrating it.

After a time, the fingers gradually released their hold. I saw them slip slowly down the lung, and then the beast was gone. And I remember feeling somehow that he was gone for good.

I awoke more than three hours later, at 11:30, still in the same position on the bed, with arms folded wake-style across my chest. It was lonng since dark. My lips were very dry, and I was surprisingly stiff as I began to stir, as if rigor mortis had misinterpreted my inert state. But I felt very good about what was no longer in my chest.

Still, it was not an experience that was quickly dismissed, as my Notbook entry for the next morning demonstrates: *7:06 a.m. – I approach the day with trepidation: the Lung Demon may stir again. Damn, that hurt yesterday.*

Happily, he did not stir that day. Nor has he stirred since. I hope the little pigfucker never does dare invade this temple again.

It gave me pause, though, for another reason too: was it good to be solo in that situation, or would I have been better off to have a traveling companion? As things happened, with me surviving and all that, all that was lost was a few hours of expendable travel time. Had I been with someone, he most likely would have brought me to a hospital. Acute chest pains are rarely dismissed, even by the most callous of companions.

The initial bout was short enough that it likely would have passed before help could have been summoned anyway. With my foolish I-never-want-to-admit-imperfection ego of mine, I may have even tried to cover it by saying I was just going to the back for a lie-down.

The second attack lasted longer, caused more distress, and would have been hard to hide. It surely would have made the companion take notice. If it were me observing a friend in such straits, I would have been hospital bound by then. It'd be mighty hard to explain to somebody's family that I had let him die of cardiac arrest just because I wanted to get to the time zone line before 6:26. *No, really, I coulda done 6:26 TWICE! C'monnnn!*

The final onslaught would certainly have had me heading for the ER. Especially if said friend had just come out from the gas station restroom and found me laid out on the bed like the centerpiece of Freddie's Funeral Home.

Tests and observations and non-covered expenses would have ensued, and, even though Sacramento still would've been reached in good time, the Utah experience would have been cut short.

It was the only time in all the roadtrips where a real physical threat had arisen (not including that ghettoshit in New Orleans). Since I was solo, it simply came and went. No hoopla, no are-you-sure-you're-OK's. I'm not glad it came, but I am glad it went.

If you've never driven into Colorado from the east, you would probably be surprised. You are not met with a wall of snow-capped mountains. You are not even met with rolling foothills. You emerge from Kansas, and, if anything, the landscape seems to get even flatter. Empty grasslands sweep to the horizon in all directions, and, even though you know you are not in Kansas anymore, you sure as shootin' ain't in Oz either.

When Richie and I breached the Colorado border in '82, we were perplexed by it all, but considering our fluid intake for the day, that shouldn't be surprising. We drove on and on across more than two hours of boring prairie, wondering what all the hubbub was about in this Rocky Mountain State. We expected such things from Kansas, but WTF was up with Colorado?

We reached Denver after dark. Naturally, we had no reservations at any motel; the van was our home. But we also had no plan regarding parking for the night. Our goal was Denver, and here we were. Now what?

As roadtrip neophytes, we had no hotel-lot savvy. We had gotten by with empty parking lots, highway rest areas, relatives' driveways, and such. Now, here we were in a very nice residential area on the eastern edge of downtown Denver. Had we thought things through, I'm sure we could have done better than what we did, but our minds were dulled (from all the "driving", wink, wink), and somehow it just made sense to pull over on the roadside and call it home. The only semblance of a plan that we manifested was in deciding to park right on the line between two home lots, so that half the van was in front of the Smiths' property, and half was in front of the Jones' property: just in case either looked out, they would think the neighbors had visitors. Brilliant strategists, ain't we?

It was mid-morning when the sun's brightness shook us awake. Bladder relief was paramount, and we de-vanned with a purpose. When we looked around, the purpose stalled for a second. The numerous homes on this street were damn nice. We sure know how to pick a bedroom. There was a grassy median strip with big old trees on it, and beautiful lawns and hedges everywhere. But the real show was behind them. I saw them just as I heard Richie say, "So, *there* they are..."

The purplish-gray wall of the Rocky Mountains loomed over the city skyline in the brilliant sunshine, dwarfing the city, and stopping us in our tracks.

"Holy shit," was all I could say. It was such a beautiful sight. The great plains of the Midwest are vast indeed, and I'm sure thousands of weary wagon train riders, upon first laying eyes on those towering rocks, uttered the same words that had escaped my lips, but their tone was less in admiration, and more like *How the HELL are we gonna get over THOSE???*

Denver is a mile above sea level. I don't know for sure how they know that. I mean, you can't see the sea, see? It's pretty damn far away. So, how anybody surveyed this versus that to arrive at a

specific number of feet is shruggable stuff to me. If I really cared, I'd look it up, but I don't. I'd only argue with it anyway: *Is that at low tide or high tide? And which sea?? Aren't the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans different levels? If not, why is it that the Panama Canal can be something like 12 feet higher at the Pacific end than at the Atlantic?* So I'm ready for 'em.

But that mile sneaks up on you. You enter Colorado, already 3000 feet or so up. You hit Lamar at 3622. Then LaJunta at 4066, and Pueblo at 4695. It is a sly rise. Steady, without pronounced upslopes. You just constantly climb, all the while feeling that you are on level ground.

Even though entering Colorado is uneventful topographically, the Rude Brothers once again found a way to make it memorable: we ran out of gas.

It was in '84. We had stopped at the small town of Colby, in western Kansas, to get beer, ice, munchies, and gas. Well, we forgot the gas. Got plenty of beer, ice, and munchies though! Good priorities, huh?

Consequently, the Moose – the dung-brown 1972 Dodge Van that I had bought from Doug T – wheezed to a stop about twenty miles inside of Colorado. Neither of us could blame the other. Two guys driving west and we BOTH totally forgot about gas. We laughed it off: at least we had cold beverage.

It made sense that one of us would stay with the van and our belongings, while the other went off and foraged for fuel. Richie lost the coin toss, so he set out westward on the empty I-70. It was about 3:00 pm MDT, and there was still lots of hot sun out there. I sat vigilant guard over our stuff as I watched him walk down the highway with thumb extended. According to the map, there was an exit ramp not too far ahead and a tiny dot called Vona pretty close to it.

Richie was probably about almost a half-mile away, and my beer was about half gone, when some fairly large car – like a big old Buick or Oldsmobile – pulled over. I saw him jog to the car, and converse through the passenger window. The back door flung open, and Richie climbed in. It occurred to me that I might never see him again. I was glad I had beer.

One hour seemed to be a reasonable No-Worry period, so I settled in back to, um, pass the time. Not many cars passed. Nobody stopped, of course. Why should they? I was flying no flag of distress. I was kind of enjoying the privacy after a week of having none.

In the meantime, I would soon learn, Richie was having a mild adventure. He had been picked up by a couple and their daughter. Sounds innocent enough. The couple were fat rednecks from Montana, and the daughter was a hugely fat truck driver whom the couple had gone to fetch down in Texas. Apparently, she was taking a bit of a shine to Richie. She also was taking up most of the back seat, so Richie kind of had to squeeze in. He is not a large guy, but her largeness more than made up for it. They were all friendly as all get-out, though, and the daughter seemed to like rubbing her leg against Richie's.

Fortunately, the exit was close, and the gas station was too. They drove him right there, waited while he borrowed a gas can and filled it up, and drove him all the way back to the disabled Moose.

I was roused from my reveries by the sound of their car galumphing across the median strip and pulling in behind me. There were loud voices, some boisterous yuck-yucking, and then a loud "Gooooo luccccck!!" as they roared off down the highway.

I went to get out, but was met by Richie getting in. "Did you get gas?" I asked.

"I need a beer, fast," was his reply. I let him guzzle while I gassed us up.

We proceeded to the gas station, and I had a good laugh at his story on the ride, then another good laugh when I saw the gas station. We were in 1984, but the station was in 1944, maybe earlier. What a hurtin' place!

Called the Oasis, this service station was probably more successful in the pre-Interstate days, but I doubt it was ever thriving. It was on an unnumbered road that paralleled I-70 and ran plumbline straight for 22 east-west miles, from Burlington, through Bethune, Stratton, Vona, and Seibert – all just prairie outposts in Kit Carson County. What was once The Oasis Restaurant stood dilapidated and overgrown with tall weeds. Given that there was a divorcee singles bar named The Oasis very close to Richie's home, we got a hearty chuckle out of the state of disrepair that this namesake was in.

While we were in Denver, we got a hankerin' to check out Mile High Stadium. As luck would have it, the city's AAA baseball team, the Denver Bears had a game that night against eh Omaha Kings. The lasting memory of that game is quite a bit more mundane than the images of stadia in Atlanta or Baltimore or Toronto. Richie and I had decided that if we were gonna get high, we'd go real high, so we hoofed it up to the third level, and went most of the way up. We watched the game with moderate interest, mostly just enjoying the lights and color of the field and the Denver skyline.

After a few innings, we heard a kid behind us say, "Hey, lookit that!" Since we weren't exactly rapt in awed wonder by the spectacle before us, we turned to ascertain the cause of his alarm. He was sitting two rows behind us, and had actually been addressing us with his exclamation. As we turned our attention his way, he pointed at the bench row behind us. There, sitting motionless, was a good-sized, green, grasshopper.

We eyed the hopper, and looked back at the kid. Either Richie or I shrugged it off with a "yeah, a bug," and turned back to the game. Then the kid asked, "But how'd it get here?"

Well, once we stopped to think about that, it did strike us as a bit odd. We were quite a way from grass level, and not exactly amid cornfields either. Obviously, the little feller must have hitched a ride on somebody's coat or something, but we had fun speculating about the enormity of the prodigious single jump it would have had to make, and its secret role as SuperHopper, Hero of the Insect Kingdom.

And we laughed about it hop-hop-hopping up the long upward climb, avoiding feet and such along the way, just to get the upper deck view. We likened it to any of us bounding up the steps of a six-hundred-story building. No wonder he was just sitting there; the poor little hopper was all hopped out.

And we even proposed an alternate theory that maybe he had been borne by a bird, but had writhed his way out of its avine clutches as his captor flew over the stadium.

A moment later, probably bored by our babble, it hopped away. Good chance it was dead within another couple of minutes. It's not likely that the next people to see it would have been as appreciative of its tribulations as we had been.