

# Coolo California

## *Fock 4: The Pacific Coast Highway*

There was no direct Interstate route from Bakersfield to the coast. My goal was to head due west, through San Luis Obispo, get to the ocean, turn right, and do the Pacific Coast Highway up to San Francisco. It was good that there was no Interstate, though; I had done enough of those already, and it would be good to plunge into the true California country, instead of watching it zoom by beyond the guardrail.

The majority of the ride was on CA Highway 58, a delightfully empty, curvy, rolling road through placid farmlands and pastures. It was the kind of road you see on Acura commercials: two lanes snaking up and down these lush, green, grass-furred hills, with very few trees in sight, and simple wire fences occasionally marking someone's territory. The road branched out from the small town of McKittrick, and began with a warning sign that there were no services (i.e., GAS) for 58 miles.



The day was brilliantly sunny, and the road was just plain fun. It was a feel-good-in-the-soul kind of ride. When lunchtime approached, I simply pulled Blue Man onto the narrow dirt shoulder on a fairly straight stretch of road, and munched a cuppla samiches while looking out on a small orchard and the large fields beyond. I finished lunch with a dig into the dugout for dessert, and resumed my mellow motoring.

The ride was so enjoyable that I deliberately missed my turn. There was a fork, and without really worry too much about which way led to where I wanted to go, I assessed the appearance of both forks, declared that the right fork looked less traveled and proceeded on down it. I knew it was not The Most Direct Route, and I embraced the concept. It took me though even more serene countryside where farming and ranching was the only way of life. I stopped to chat with a few horses on the edge of their pasture. They seemed bemused by my banter, but listened patiently, slowly nodding in the summer sunshine. They were good listeners. I'm sure they were only tolerating me out of a notion that I might give them a more stimulating snack than grass, but I had no such thing in mind. After a minute or two, they figured that out, shrugged off the weird passer-by, and wandered off in mid-sentence (my sentence, not theirs). Unoffended, I wandered off back to BM.

Much too quickly, I got to the little town of Creston, where a left onto the larger-but-still-not-large Highway 41 got me headed back coast-ward, with just the last dividing high ground of the Los Padres National Forest, standing between me and the Pacific.

The title "National Forest" used to conjure up images of towering trees and lush canopies of green. By now, though, I knew better. Our 1984 drive down the middle of California had taught me that scrubby arid brush can constitute a National Forest if there was enough of it, and if it was deemed worth preserving.

As I looked westward at the ridge beyond Los Padres NF, I could see an overcast rising above it and infiltrating the summer blue. Viewed straight up, the azure heavens were brilliant, but as you slowly lowered your gaze, the sky became tinged with a kind of smoky tint, then gradually got duller and dimmer, until the gray was downright stark at the lip of the ridge. Not quite forbidding, mind you – it wasn't like I was going into Mordor or anything -- but definitely stark.

When BM crested the ridge, the view was extraordinarily ordinary. Gray will do that to scenery.

An ordinary flat empty landscape – that salt flat in Oklahoma, or that deserted stretch of Route 160 in Kansas, for instance – can be inspiring in dazzling sunshine, while even the glory of Yellowstone or Yosemite is mitigated by a melancholy mist above. The ocean was not close enough to see yet anyway, I knew that, but the overcast just blahed everything.

I mean, since Dash, Ban, Mark, and I had appeased the golfing gods with our appropriate offering back on the sixth tee at Wahconah thirteen days prior, my skies had been almost totally sunny. [OK, my *daytime* skies...yeeesh. My *nighttime* skies were mostly moony.] The Poconos, the Blue Ridge Parkway, Atlanta, New Orleans, Little Rock, Enid, Dodge City, and Pueblo had been non-stop, nary-a-cloud blue. I wore sunglasses all the time, and a shirt almost none of the time.

A couple of hours of clouds had slightly diminished the spectacle of Colorado's Black Canyon of the Gunnison; then I got that welcome and cleansing drenching at Arches NP; I sat in the van and enjoyed watching a sunset downpour across the street at Canyonlands; and touched just enough of shower to get Dan and C a little damp in southern Utah. Not bad for a 5000-mile fortnight in prime thunderstorm season. As it would turn out, there would be no other rain for eleven more days – predictably, it would be around Seattle.

On my way to the Ocean, I was using San Luis Obispo as a marker: get to SLO and head due west for another hour or so. But *somehow* (three guesses how), that rather good-sized city escaped my vigilance, and before I could regain the lay of the land, I was facing a sign with an arrow pointing me toward "BEACHES." Still a little lost, and eschewing Rand McNally's help, I looked up and saw another sign for **Morro Bay High School**. Well, the old curiosity of let's-see-what-their-track-looks-like kicked in, so I steered right in, figuring I could regroup with a little track karma.

Out behind the school, though, instead of a football field and track was...the OCEAN! I looked to the left of my parking space, and saw that I was about 150 feet from sand, and there was a large blue-gray thing sloshing around just a little bit further. The goddamn high school was right on the edge of the frikking beach!! Must have been great for the Surfing Team.

I wonder if that was how Vasco da Balboa felt when he reached the Pacific in 1475.

The former teacher in me mused over the possibilities of a beach-view classroom. The professional, get-stuff-done side of me cringed at the distraction of a sunny day, with crashing surf, and fabulous temperatures ...*in January!* How the hell do those teachers hold their students' attention? How do they hold their *own* freaking attention??

But the blow-stuff-off part of me would have thrived. All you former students of mine will remember the music videos passed off as "Poetry Analysis," or the comedy tapes excused as "Creative Use of the Language for Effect." Then, of course, were the word-and-initial puzzle sessions. You know, those number-letter combos that you had to decipher, like this: "9 = I. in a B.G." I love those things! [Innings in a Baseball Game.] The best one that I recall was:

3 = B.M.S.H.T.R.

That one took me quite a while before it just suddenly clicked: "Three Blind Mice, See How They Run."

Of course, there were the TBD's too. Total Blowoff Days. "Take out some homework to do, and be quiet" sometimes worked. Those were often Thursdays, after a later-than-planned night of post-run buckets at Lewis', or post-run 12-ouncers in the Don Bosco locker room with my fellow H.F.C Striders. So, not only was my class preparation lacking, so was my verve. If you've never tried it, believe me, you need a full supply of verve to command the attention on 35 teenagers.

In my rookie year as a teach, I actually made the STUPID mistake of giving my freshmen an in-class writing assignment to fill up their 40 minutes. DUMB!!! Now I had 35 more papers to read and grade. Duhh.

But there was one other time that I side-stepped that trap quite deftly. It was my first year, and my honors level freshman class of homeroom 113. Andy Ryan, Bob Spadoni, Tommy Palmer, Dave Delaney... were all in that class. So was Dicky Barrett (seated, center, in pic at right). Yes, *the* gruff-throated Dicky Barrett of Mighty Mighty Bosstones



fame. He actually has the distinction of being the very first name I called, on my very first roll call, in my very first class, on my very first day as a teacher. Fuckin' A, huh?

Being the inexperienced and unimaginative newbie that I was, my plan was to seat the students alphabetically, at least until I could get to know all their names. "Barrett, Richard" was first. So I gave him the option: first seat by the window, or first seat by the door? To my surprise, he took the door, eschewing the sunshine and fresh air and outside view, in favor of the locker noise and hallway distractions. I was a bit taken aback, and asked him why he chose that seat. His reply turned out to be prophetic: "This way it'll be a shorter walk when you throw me out of class."

I did indeed toss Dicky a few times, but we were always both cool with it. He was a smartass, and often a funny one, but sometimes he'd cross the line, and I'd boot him. And unlike some other frequent flyers, we never had any umbrage towards each other for it.

Anyway, pardon the digression-cubed.

So, this very first class was a cool bunch. They were fun, I was 23, and we got frisky as all hell sometimes. Well, one Friday, they were suspiciously well-behaved as I went about my weekly vocabulary lesson. There seemed to be more paper rustling than usual every time I turned to write a new definition on the blackboard, but nothing to make me think that something was up.

Second period class ended at 10:03, so I suspect that the pre-arranged signal was the big hand clicking to 12 (yes, the clocks still all had hands then), because when I turned around after my last definition, the room was filled with paper airplanes. They were flying everywhere, though mostly at me! There must have been at least two per student, and that fleet was a dazzling sight.

Now, this was a clear affront to my authority, a flaunt in the face of my control, a patent challenge to my disciplinary gumption. Honestly, I thought it was pretty damn funny, but I couldn't just let it go; God knows what kind of daily barrages I'd be facing if I didn't nip this in the bud.

The idea came quickly. Straight-faced, I addressed them: "Okay... homework for the weekend, since we are all in such an airplane mood, I want a five-page essay on the history of Aviation in America." Groans and protests filled the air where the planes had been, and the bell promptly sounded, punctuating my decree.

Thirty-two students times five pages is a lot of extra reading for an overloaded first-year teacher, but that's where my deft side-step came in. On Monday, I went around the room and collected their essays one by one, making sure that they had all indeed done the required assignment. I'm sure many of them took some sort of satisfaction in the fact that I would be spending more hours correcting the papers than they had spent writing them.

When I had them all, I stood up the front of the room, held up the pile, said calmly, "No more airplanes," and dropped the hefty stack into the trash barrel.

They were bullshit! I was so proud of myself, I was giggling inside. It was very cool. ☺

Creative Writing classes, my only senior class, were the easiest to blow off, mainly because a regular CW class was pretty close to a blow-off CW class. Hell, most days all I did was photocopy two stories that members of the class had written, and hand them out for the class to read, then we'd talk about them. Most of the time, I had never even read them beforehand.

That bit me on the ass a couple of times too, when the chosen tales turned out to be lurid porn or sickly gross. I always preached First Amendment, even when the school administration came down on me in their annual you-can't-let-them-use-the-word-fuck meeting. Invariably, some student would leave a copy of a story lying around where mom could find it, or some nosey little sister would just poke around his bookbag, and the fucking world would fucking end. Fuck fuck. It's just a word. What the fuck.

Buuuuuut, the head of the English Department would "have a word" with me, which I would pretty much blow off, then the headmaster would take his turn. I always stood my ground, with a what's-the-big-fucking-deal approach, they dutifully chastised me for being such an evil influence on our angelic lads, I would go back to class and announce that they had to be more fucking careful where they left their fucking stories.

So, a TBD in CW was easy: I'd just tell them they could work on their stories. It kept them occupied and quiet, and in most cases relieved as well, since most of them would have waited till the last minute to start it, as usual.

But even then, those teenage wheels were always turning. There was always some sleazebag who wanted to either fill his face with the crap food that the cafeteria sold, or sneak out to smoke some of God's earth (either kind). The kid would whine that he needed to use the word processor in the computer

room to do his partially-finished story, and that I surely must excuse his sorry ass from this period of quiet in-classroom writing. I usually did; he just would have caused some disruption if I let him stay anyway.

Sooooooooo....

Regroup!

Morro Bay High School was what triggered the reveries of my days as an educator. But now here I was, gazing at the Pacific Ocean.

Morro Bay was a very good spot to rendezvous with the Ocean of Peace. Even though the sky was overcast, the MB scenery was striking. The scene was dominated by Morro Rock, an enormous upthrust of solid gray rock that stands 576 feet high and about 1000 feet wide, and which wades in the meek ocean waves at the end of a sand peninsula. In Louisiana, it would be called Morro Mountain. It is a protected home of the Peregrine Falcon. Some four-wheeler permit or something was required to actually drive out to it, so I contented myself with a distant view, and walked out onto the beach.

This was not how I pictured my behavior would be. There was no crazed sprint across the sand, no body-hurl into the cold Pacific water, no dazzling sun beating down, no crashing surf, no crowd to speak of, and no **heat!** With the rather substantial wind off the ocean, it was actually quite chilly. The few locals who were there were well covered in sweaters or jackets.

A black and very shaggy half-lab-half-wildebeest mutt came jogging slowly over to sniff my karma. I said "Hi, Fred" to him, but he stayed out of my arm's reach. He smiled a panting, pink-tongued smile, winked a "welcome to the Pacific, duuude" wink, and jogged on.



Devoid of the impetuosity of youth, I did not feel compelled to strip to my shorts and dive in. My heart rate was a quite comfortable 50 bpm or so, and I did not feel like tripling it. Funny how conveniences like keeping the sand from between my toes, and avoiding the change out of wet shorts to resume driving had come to take precedence over the reckless thrills of the almost-icy, system-shocking plunge, the gasp for air after the heart-stopping immersion, the invigorated "Woooooooooooo!" with chest-thumping bravado, the short stint of frenetic thrashing about, and the pumped-up buffed-up strut back to sand for a wind-blown dry-off.

If the sun had been blazing, I probably would've taken a quiet plunge. And if I had some drunken reveler with me, I'm sure we both would have charged the sea out of sheer peer-pleasure.

But, solo and delightfully mellow (uh-huhhhhh) in this near-melancholy scene, and seeing no reason to disrupt such a fine numbness, my stroll across the beach had been serene and slow. I savored the squish of the sand under my navy blue Nike Aquasocks, and the looming presence of monolithic Morro Rock against the gray, sagging sky.

I got to the water's edge and stood motionless there on the smooth, freshly-moist sand. I stood and waited for the Pacific to do what Fred had done: come up and sniff my feet as a hello. It kept its distance for several laps, shyly waiting for *me* to approach *it*. Then it relented with a rush, and embraced my feet and ankles. It felt good. I let a few more wave-ends wash by, and enjoyed that feeling of sand tugging out from under my heels as the water retreated, carrying grains with it in the ageless process of beach erosion.

I've always loved to do that – just stand there and let the ocean pull the rug out from under me. It's always from under the heels too! Every time I do it, my heels sink deeper and deeper, like some primordial achilles tendon stretch, until I'm ready to topple backwards.

The feeling briefly whisked me away to every beach that my memory could find. Hilton Head Island's grand flat landing-strip of a beach. Fort Zack Taylor S.P. Beach on Key West, with the Civil War fort as a starkly-contrasting backdrop (Smathers Beach was no good for this – all that rock and coral would rip your feet up).

Race Point, Herring Cove, Cahoon Hollow, Head of the Meadow, Marconi Point, and all the other great Cape Cod National Seashore beaches and those of Chatham, Dennis, and Dennisport that I frequented through my thirties and twenties.

And Salisbury Beach, and even Old Orchard Beach with Nickasaurus way back in my just-out-of-college days. Duxbury Beach with Cliff and Dash and many others...

Then Nantasket and Wollaston as a Boston schoolboy...

...and to one of the earliest memories of my life, on Old Silver Beach in Falmouth, with my tiny four-year-old feet, which had purposelessly stomped up and down the side steps of our cottage a hundred times each day during that fortnight – I probably had a reason for it then, but who knows what the hell it was – on those still-wobbly little-kid legs, feeling the amazing rush of water yanking big gulps of sand from underneath my feet, and wondering what it, like everything else, was all about...

Ya gotta love the beach. So good for the soul.

I suppose that all makes it sound as if I stood there for hours, like a mindless zombie, staring vacantly at nothing. Actually, it was less than two minutes. I started to stir when I recalled Stephen Wright's line: "There's a fine line between fishing, and standing on the shore like an *idiot*." And I wasn't fishing.

Anyway, the Balboaic *I-have-reached-the-Pacific!* feeling of conquest wore off pretty quickly, and was rapidly replaced by that fond Alexander Mackenzie-ish more-new-roads-to-explore mood, and that meant the Pacific Coast Highway [henceforth referred to as the PCH].

In 1984, Richie and I had a perfect opportunity to check out this fantastic road, but foolishly we had sought an alternative. It was the day after our San Francisco sojourn, and the day that the Olympic Track & Field Trials got underway in L.A.

We arose early because we wanted to check out 17-Mile Drive and Lone Cypress and that whole shtick. More on that later.

Anyway, once we evaluated just how far away LA was from SF, we decided that the most expeditious route would best suit our expedition. So, we eschewed the serpentine coastal route as being too slow, and chose California's spinal I-5.

I-5 forever changed my view of the Golden State. All those images of palm trees, redwood forests, country club fertility, and glimmer and glitz galore, all got shot to holy hell by that ride. Hours and hours of relentless sun-scorched rolling hill after sun-scorched rolling hill, brown and nearly barren. We even had to scoff as we passed through the dwarf, desert-like shrubbery that comprised some "National Forest."

It was enlightening. I actually enjoyed seeing the reality, the everyday ordinary nature of this large, mythical land of California. I wonder if the migrant workers of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* type were vastly let down by the true face of that promised land. Nahh, they were coming from Oklahoma; anything would have been an improvement to them. Besides, the Joad family was only fictional. Screw 'em.

So, where the hell were we?

Ah, yes, the Pacific Coast Highway. What a treat.

The skies were still gray when I picked up US-1 (the western version – funny how I would end up on the eastern one to Key West only a few months later). But by the time I had wound through a couple of the towns that lay along the route, things had begun to brighten.

The towns themselves surprised me. I found myself traveling through a variety of scenes, including cattle grazing, dense pine groves, and quaint very-western villages. The sun had come out, and the day was getting nice and bright. But no ocean. WTF? I thought this was the Pacific Coast Highway?

And then it just exploded. I emerged into an overwhelming vista of sea and coastal cliffs. It was dazzling. Now, THIS was what I had in mind!

This was **coast!**

The highway was cut right into the side of the towering hillsides that plunged down into the sea. I always marvel at such constructions. Engineering this roadway must have been quite a project. Hundreds of miles of cliffside blasting, drilling, leveling, supporting, and paving. And there was no *road* already there, either. Still, I hope those workers enjoyed their coffee breaks, looking out over the shimmering Pacific. I also imagine that they enjoyed progressing their way up the coast, doing their own migrant worker slide along the edge of the continent, for whatever number of years that it took to complete the project.

As you can imagine the road was narrow, and it was very windy. No, not windy, windy. Although, it was rather windy too. So it had both twists and breezes, ok??

Just as the irresistible song of The Sirens lured sailors to their peril in the times of Homer (no, not Simpson, you idiot), the true treachery of the PCH lay in its scenic appeal. Being solo, I had to split the sight-seeing and road-watching duties, assigning one eye to scoping out the gorgeous vistas, and the other eye to maintaining proper motorist decorum.

I'm a pretty confident driver, I suppose, after years of doing way too many non-driving related things while still handling the wheel: packing and lighting various things, opening this, swilling that, eating meals, changing tapes, changing cd's, changing batteries, reading the Rand McNally, taking photos, changing rolls of film, writing in my various notebooks, or watching movies on the VCR. I've used the Luckless Log or my spare 1-iron to reach way to the back of the van and hook the handles of my gym bag so I could fetch an item without stopping the van. I've done the complete change from running gear to work uniform (yes, including underwear) while flying along in the fast lane of I-95 in heavy traffic. I've even set cruise control, steadied the wheel on a straight flat stretch of road, and clambered to the back of the van to grab something (no, usually beer is within arm's reach).

So, I have a confidence born of a *well, I pulled THAT off, so why not this?* mentality. But looking directly backwards to sneak a digital pic while swerving around one of those hillside near-hairpins, and having a Winnebago suddenly appear just ahead was probably pushing my luck a bit. But, I pulled *that* off, so...

Hey, blame Dad. Throughout my childhood, Dad was a pipe smoker. He was also a 50,000-mile-per-year traveling sales rep for a leather finishes company. I'm not sure how his list of ambi-drive-terity would compare with mine, but it was in those young and impressionable years that I began to realize that driving need not be an all-consuming experience. I watched Dad steer with his knees while he loaded his various pipes with Amphora Red tobacco, strike his double-match (always 2, never a single), and then do the two-handed, deep-haul lightings, with flames flaring and smoke billowing, give the matches a big wave to douse them just before they nibbles at his fingertips, and open the window to toss the matches out. Then casually return his hands to the wheel. He was the absolute master of knee driving. Most people I've known couldn't stay on as straight a course with both hands on the wheel, and a cop on their tail for motivation.

But driving chicanery notwithstanding, the Highway was outstanding.

Now, it just occurs to me: what the hell is the word "notwithstanding" all about? I mean, it's a pretty cool word, though a bit on the pretentious side. I use it playfully, kinda in the *I use it because I can* mode. But where the hell did it come from? Not with standing. Does that mean "with sitting"? No standing room allowed? Or is the ability to withstand something that is the issue, or the inability to withstand, I guess, since we preface it with "not?"

Anyway, can we get back to the PCH, please??

As much as I was reveling in the drive itself, I did a couple of roadside pullouts, just to savor it all. I took so many digital pics, but alas, they would ne'er see the light of day. Thankfully, I thought to snap a couple with my old Pentax – mainly so I could blow them up to poster size.

I stayed at one particularly pleasant spot, parked under a nice shady tree, let the ocean breezes wash over me, and the summer sun bronze me, and made meself some tasty turkey samiches. The cliff I was standing on must have been 500 feet above the shore. The surf crashed silently on the ragged rocks, but the sounds were lost in the breeze by the time they drifted up to me.

On a whim, I took my 5-iron, a tee, and a Pinnacle 4 out of my golf bag. I forced the tee into the hard dirt of the pullout, and balanced the frightened Pinnacle atop it. Given the recent state of my golf



game, I suppose I was just putting this ball out of its misery. They are designed to fulfill your golfing dreams, not get deliberately swatted into the briny sea. Barefoot and shirtless, and very cognizant of the passing motorists, I addressed the poor Pinnacle. With a waggle and a quick “it’s been nice knowin’ ya!” nod, I began my swing.

Slow and deliberate on the lift, balanced well on the turn, and remembering (for once) to pause at the top, I felt the groove coming together, and I knew I could really rip into this one.

With head down, hips turning, runner’s legs driving, and long arms pulling, I bullwhipped that 5-iron head right into that horrified Pinnacle. I smote it with all my might. It compressed and jumped, and with a silent scream of utter terror, it zoomed off into the azure summer sky.

I picked up its path and stood there in classic follow-through pose, letting all the passers-by know that I had just smacked a beauty. It arched across the sky and began its downward path. Like a dumbass, I was focused on some random spot out in the ocean – like 2000 yards away. So, when the ball dropped from view behind the rounded edge of the cliff, without ever making a splash, there was a twinge of disappointment. I hope I didn’t bonk somebody on the beach. Or on the head, either.

Which begs the question: why the 5-iron, RAM? Why not the Big Dog? Why not that graphite-shafted long-distance weapon that has been the mainstay of ramgolfing joy for decades?

Answer: I dunno. Just my mood, I reckon.

That scenic turnout was also the spot of my geekiest moment so far. Looking to impress my mailing list with postcards from the road, I had a makeshift office rigged up in my rig. Running off my cigarette lighter, I had an extension cord connected to my digital camera, my laptop, and my printer. The latter two devices were bungy-corded into my middle passenger sheets, and the camera was strapped to the armrest with two rubber bands. I processed my favorite Zion pic (the one with the dorky wave in The Narrows), added a caption, loaded up some glossy card-stock paper, set the printer for Print, started up the van, and returned to the road.

So there we went, man and van, a rolling postcard printshop. What a geek. Well, I just wanted to see if it would work, and it did. To a point.

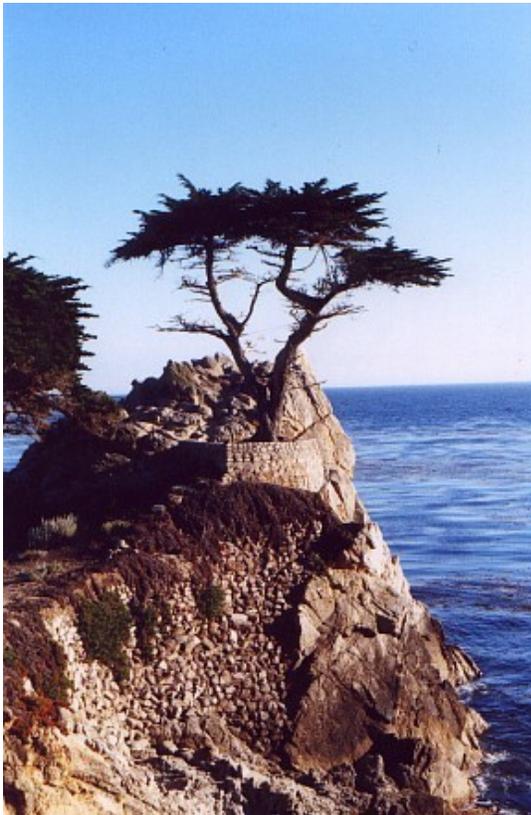
I had set the printer to pump out 20 pages (of two cards per page), and it had gone silent a little too soon. There was an odd smell in the air. So as the road was snaking along the cliffs, I was turning around to the seat behind me, to try to determine the problem. The printer looked fine, though the power was off. The cables looked fine. The laptop looked fine. Then I looked at the cigarette lighter. Ooooops. The plastic plug for the AC adaptor had gone flaccid. Melted by the three-device overload – what does “amperage limit” mean anyhow? – the plug had melted and the plug had gone limp and was sagging like, well, ummmm, use your imagination. ;-)

Ah, well, it was *almost* a really cool idea.

Hours of enjoyable driving passed, and I found my way to Carmel, and Seventeen-Mile Drive (henceforth referred to as 17MD).

If you’ve never been to 17MD, let me tell you that it is a weird concept. It’s a neighborhood, not a National Monument or a State Park, just a nice very wealthy neighborhood. But you have to pay to get in. There’s a toll booth on each entrance, and you have to fork over your \$6.00 just for the privilege of cruising around this huffy-stuffy neighborhood. Oh, yeah, it’s *niiiiice* and all that, with big ol’ trees towering up and giving cool shade, but it’s still a freaking neighborhood.

The real funny part, when you think about it, is not just that admission was being charged to drive through a neighborhood, but the feature attraction was simply a tree. And not even a big tree, like a mighty sequoia. But it was one very nice tree. Lone Cypress



(left) is one of the most famous trees in America, albeit a bit on the twirpy side. The brochure for 17MD – at least I got a brochure for my entry fee – claimed that it has long been a symbol of Hope. Well, I don't really get that. Maybe I'm not good at symbolism or something, but to me it is just a damn pretty tree with a beautiful ocean as a backdrop.

This particular evening was gorgeous: brilliant sunshine, clean and dry air, mild temps, light breeze, and I couldn't see a gawddamn thing! Once the sun dipped, insects emerged more and more, and as I left the coast and entered more vegetated territory, the frequency of contact between bug and windshield increased.

So, the first half of the ride through 17MD was viewed through an ugly mural of smudges and smears.

But that's still more than Richie and I saw when we paid our fee-to-see in '84. It was the first time for either of us on the Left Coast, and though we did not feel that the coastal route would get us to the City of Angels in time, we did want to take in 17MD and see this freaking tree we had heard about.

We got up early that morning, which was not unusual, because most mornings would find us unwillingly roused by the convection-oven effect of the sun's rays on the van roof. This particular morning, though, we could have slept in. The sky was gray, and the air near San Francisco Bay was still on the cool side. We *should* have gotten a hint by that, but, duhh-heads that we were, we didn't.

We got to the entrance to 17MD, and were buffaloed by the need to pay a toll. We did pay, of course, but should have gotten another hint by the smirk on the bored toll collector's face. Dumbass West Coast rookies, we didn't realize that when you go to see anything along the coast before noon, all you're actually gonna see is **FOG**. Tree? What tree?? We drove slowly through, saw the place where we should have been able to see Lone Cypress – though we could make out a dark gray silhouette among the lighter gray mist – then decided to cut our losses and head south for nine days of Track & Field. As I recall, we justified blowing off the PCH as probably being fog-bound as well, which it very likely would have been.

In 2000, though, the sky was as clear as clear can be; it was the glass that wasn't. The 7 p.m. sun was at blind-the-driver level, and all the former insects that had morphed into windshield smear shone in all their repulsive glory. It's funny how we get so we just routinely focus right through that disgusting collection of smooshed bug guts as we drive. It takes a moment like this to realize just how gross your windshield has become. And, of course, the windshield washers do no good: all they do is turn the splatters into stomach-churning smudges of moth pudding with hornet gravy.

But, once again, kudos and huzzahs to The Best Worker Of The Trip -- good old Maurice from Little Rock, Arkansas – because one swift application from the can of Essex GC-800 professional strength glass cleaning foam that he had given me, and I was viewing Lone Cypress with no-streak-no-film clarity.

My first Pacific sunset in a decade came at Asilomar Beach, then it was off to Monterey to see if I could locate Jon and AMac, two juniors-to-be at U of R who were doing a California summer. Jon was captain-elect of the 2000 CC team, and hailed from just outside the runner's Mecca of Eugene, Oregon. AMac was an upstate New Yorker who looked the part of a hippie: dark hair tumbling to his shoulders, slim, casual, and oft-attired in tie-dye. But he was a fast sumbitch.

Jon had gotten himself a position at the Aquarium for the summer, and picked up a hotel job, and these two college roomies had found themselves an apartment overlooking Monterey Bay. I had told them that they were gonna be on my itinerary, but I didn't pin down exactly when. Once I got Utah-ish, and could confidently project my time-table, I tried calling them to let them know my ETA. Several times I called, always getting nothing but ring-ring-ringing. No voice mail, no nuthin'. I did send an email from my Vegas hotel room, estimating my arrival, but I still lacked a key factor: directions to their place.

So it was that I pulled into Monterey carrying nothing more than an address. It didn't really bother me. I had once found Nooch in Sarasota, and all I had to go by was his name, without even a phone book listing.

My prime assist this time came from a friendly gas station attendant who stopped what he was doing, took me to a map, showed me the Here and There of my quest, and actually took the time to write out the best route, complete with tips on traffic lights and traffic trends. Think that would've happened in the northeast? NFW! If you were lucky enough to get a grunt (with an accent) from within the closed booth, you'd be told, "Maps are over there. \$4.95 each."

So, with the help of Mr. CooLo Neato Helpful Gas Station Man, I located Jon and Amac's pad. Predictably, they were not home. Bummer, duuuude. Well, I know how to deal with such setbacks, and I

lit out to find me a bar. J&A lived about three blocks above -- and I do mean above, as it is a nice steep hill that rises up from Monterey Bay -- a tidy little strip of shops and bistros that I had scouted out as I zeroed in on their street. I remembered seeing a couple that looked like they would be comfortable places for a person of my stature. So, leaving a message stuck to their mailbox with RAMruns stickers, I informed them that they could come find me this one small, cozy-looking bar, an almost-Swiss style place with plenty of dark wood and stained-glass windows or something.

Well, I went there and sat down at the bar, and began looking at the menu. After a couple of minutes, things began to claw at my vigilance. One: none of the dozen or so patrons there were women. Two: the neon "Lite Beer" sign glowing behind the bar was in rainbow shape and colors. Three: the bartender was shirtless. Four: two of the bald guys with mustaches and wife-beater shirts were looking over my fitness trainer self with drooly eyes. Five: everything on the menu was overpriced.

Seeking cheaper food, I decided I would try elsewhere. I didn't want Jon and Andy to go back to school and spread the word that Coach had been found in an overpriced bar. My reputation as a smart consumer and thrifty roadtripper would be shot to hell. So, with a *harumph* and a butt-waggle, I departed.

A quick trip back up to the lads' pad ensued, so I could change my note, and tell them to find me at this trendy Szechwan pizza place that sold beer. (*Szechwan pizza*??? Eh, California...)

But when I got there, and parked right out front, I had second thoughts. It looked OK, I suppose, but my cerebral cortex was receiving other vibes, coming from somewhere behind me. I already had my hand on the door handle, but I slowed to a stop, lowered my arm, and warily turned around. My eyes scanned the facades across the street as I did so, until they homed in on the source of the vibes: a wooden sign painted in classic style lettering, and beckoning with the words "Bulldog British Pub."

Fuck Szechwan Pizza. A char-grilled bacon cheeseburger and few pints of cold Bass Ale were much more to my taste. Jon and Amac? They know me well enough; they'll figure it out.

They did. I was nearly done with my burger when I looked up and saw the two of them bound youthfully into the pub. Cheerful greetings ensued and a lively exchange of summer episodes began. Amac, wielding an ID proclaiming him as a 21-year-old, bought me another Bass, forever cementing our friendship, and Jon insisted that they pay for my burger as well, locking him in the Friend File for eternity as well. I now would officially take a bullet for either of them.

But Jon had no I-Can-Legally-Drink card, so we didn't tarry long. At my suggestion, we adjourned to their apartment, with the lure that I had something for them when we got there. Once there, I produced the three 1-liter bottles of Moab Rock Amber Ale that I had bought for Ed and Bryan and myself to drink when we would complete our rendezvous in SacreMerde. Oh well, this rendezvous would do.

When I first saw their flat, it seemed that they had done quite all right for their \$750 per month rent. The building was decent, the living room OK, with a big window overlooking the bay. Amac even told me that, because of the side of the bay they were on, they could actually see the sunrise over the water -- a pretty neat trick for a West Coast abode.

Then it was revealed that they had a roommate, and that the roommate was actually In Command Here. And that these two guys were just sharing a bedroom. Well, now the rent seemed a bit more pricey. *Then*, I saw the room. No furniture. Well, that's not true; there was one simple chair, but that had clothes all over it. No beds, just two blankets laid out on the rug in the middle of the room. Various clothes, unzipped and disgorging duffel bags, untidy notebooks, open magazines, and who knows what else lay strewn about the 12x12 chamber. Jon's Mac laptop sat in the middle of the floor, connected to the phone line. Hmmmm, no wonder I got no answer whenever I called.

But the best part was the bathroom. Towels, running shorts, underwear, and socks hung off just about anything that resembled a hook or rail. Things needed to be, uhhh, cleaned. And there, sitting in a small clearing in the middle of the cluttered counter, summing up the whole scene in one quick snapshot, was an extra-large bottle of generic ibuprofen, a depleted tube of Colgate, and a mostly-empty Budweiser tall can.

Ahhhh, college.

It occurred to me that their Thoreau-ish existence here was not unlike mine: away from home, minimum possessions, encountering strange people at every turn. But I didn't have to work, and they did.

They offered to let me sleep in their apartment, but I deemed the Belly O' Th' Whale to be the more comfortable option than their unpadded floor, and adjourned thither at about 1:30 a.m.

In the morning, I bid them adieu, and departed for San Francisco. Sacramento (!!) would have to wait one more day.