

West



Jeff Burns

West

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on that old broken-down river pier and watch the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, and all the people dreaming in the immensity of it...

On The Road – Jack Kerouac

I remember the first time I read these lines. I was making my way through the reading list for a modern America Literature subject and realised that I didn't know Jack. Jack Kerouac had spent seven years on the road and had written a book about it in three weeks - apparently in a single burst of Benzidine-induced writing. Legend has it that he sticky-taped twelve foot long sheets of drawing paper together and fed them through his typewriter in a single long roll. On April 27, 1951 after three weeks the book was finished - typed as a single spaced paragraph 120 feet long.

My great friend Braggy and I had talked on and off for years about going. When I moved to Melbourne in September 1994 I sent him a fax recounting our adventures to date and indicating that there was something missing - the big one. Later in early 1995 when he told me he'd popped the question to his girlfriend Karen we decided we should go. Karen said OK, God bless her, and so we went.

Customs

Braggy and I were taking separate flights to LA. We were concerned about how we would manage to meet up in a city as big as LA. After some convoluted discussion about various rendezvous scenarios, we eventually hit on the idea that he'd meet my flight at the airport. Braggy's sister Anne works for Qantas and as direct family he was travelling on a staff ticket that did not have a confirmed return date. Now Americans don't mind folks dropping in for a while but they get down right patriotic when they discover that you don't intend to go back where you came from. US Customs spotted the omission of the return date and ushered him into a small office and asked him to wait. Eventually a large African American brother walked in adjusting the fit of a pair of surgical gloves. Braggy remained tight lipped and stood his ground. He had a look on his fresh innocent young Australian face that said, 'ain't no man taking that route with me.' Well the brother thumped the table a bit but eventually bought Braggy's story and let him go. He slapped the ticket across Braggy's chest and said, 'well it's a hell of a way to spend your first day in America.'

Mustang Sally

I lobbied into a Los Angeles International Airport under repair on the afternoon of Friday May 3, 1996. Our rendezvous plan worked perfectly. It was the first day of a three-week odyssey covering 3,720 miles (just less than 6,000 km) of southwest United States. We had a quick orientation Budweiser in preparation for our headlong dive into the spaghetti of LA's freeway system and caught the courtesy bus to the Hertz lot. I'd booked a Ford Escort (basically a Laser with a different badge), however the extroverted rent-a-car lady (known thereafter as Mustang Sally) upgraded us to a Ford Mustang at no extra cost. This machine is the same one that Ken and Barbie drive. Sally told us that the bigger car

would help us blend in with the locals – after all there’s nothing like cubic inches and horsepower for added respectability in America. It was decided that I would drive and after baulking at the wrong door I eventually located the steering wheel. I pushed the soundtrack for the trip into the cassette deck: Counting Crows’ August And Everything After and put the spurs to the Mustang (unfortunately the first of many equine metaphors).



Braggy with Mustang

When you’re out on the road remember, keep right

The freeways in LA are pot-holed concrete carriageways, flanked by eucalyptus and populated by legions of hyperactive motorists who have never been formally introduced to the wonderful possibilities of the indicator. American cars don’t have orange indicator lights, but rather the red brake light flashes, even when the vehicle is under brakes - I suspect a conspiracy between automobile manufacturers and their spare parts departments to encourage nose-to-tail collisions. I have been told since that European cars with orange indicator flashers attract a lower insurance premium. An interesting phenomenon I noticed about driving on the freeways was my natural tendency to take each off ramp as it comes along. This is not due to some morbid fear of staying on the freeway, but rather that’s where the continuing road would be in Australia, with the exit on the left. Seeing your right ear in the rear vision mirror is also eerie, along with nobody in the right hand seat (our driver’s seat) of the cars in front - or worse kids. I had a tendency to drive on the very right hand side of the lane I was in, putting Braggy close to trucks and so forth, "Burnsy you’re crowding me."

Elvis does Bakersfield

We drove out of LA in peak hour - with extreme prejudice. We pushed north on the I-5 and stayed in Bakersfield for the night. Bakersfield is a sprawling country metropolis on the western edge of the Mojave Desert that defies anyone to find its main street. We had dinner at a drive-in diner where these good old rednecks in enormous pickup trucks pull up to the microphone and say: ‘gimme three chilli dogs and a malt.’

A pickup truck is basically a back porch with an engine attached. Both a pickup and a back porch are good places to drink beer because you can take a leak standing up from either. Pickup trucks are generally a little quicker downhill than back porches, with the exception of certain Californian back porches during mudslide season. But back porches get better gas mileage.

High-Speed Performance Characteristics of Pickup Trucks – P.J. O’Rourke

We had our first genuine burgers and fries and Braggy was quite impressed with the free soft-drink refill. The farm boy that was making my thick shake told me it would be the best one I’d ever tasted. I think his name was Joe Bob - really. Elvis was appearing in the bar downstairs where we were staying, but we were

too dog-tired to sit up for anyone, even the King. I sat up in bed for a little while and watched the television - sixty channels and nothing on - and always the sneaking suspicion that you may be missing something on another channel. Braggy fell asleep and made a primal snoring noise that will haunt me forever.

Having made a slight miscalculation as to exactly how far Bakersfield was inland, our first full day would involve some back road travelling to get out to the West Coast. Braggy and I awoke at exactly the same time, something about two pillows. Anyway, we felt quite fresh and decided to get going. It wasn't until we had saddled up the Mustang that we saw that the time was 2am and Elvis was throwing his leg over a groupie in the car park - so it really was the King. I swear I heard him say, 'thank you very much, ma'am' as we drove past.

San Luis

We pushed west through the mountains, and Braggy bagged his first bunny rabbit around 3am. We hit the coast just north of Santa Maria and hooked up with Route 101 and followed it north to San Luis Obispo. By sunrise the word was out among the bunny population that Braggy wasn't taking any prisoners and they were stepping a little more lively. The town of San Luis Obispo is named after an old monk who established a mission there a long time ago. He is not to be confused with his less noble half-brother San Luis Opisspot who founded an order of home-brewing monks. The walls of the San Luis Opisspot monastery are adorned with frescoes of 'The Vision of the Madonna and Keg', and 'Speaking in Tongues on the Porcelain Telephone.' Their hymnals contain the moving funeral dirge 'Imbibe With Me.'

Sur

San Luis Obispo marks the start of the Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) or Route 1, which is the old road from LA to San Francisco. It is regarded as one of the greatest scenic drives in the world, and justifiably so. A lot of the place names are of Spanish origin and we amused ourselves with constructing our own: El Rancho San Luis Camino Real Casa Beuna Vista del Mar, which was exceptionally funny when jet lagged, but loses something on paper. I have since discovered that although we were being silly, there were actually placenames like that only worse. Los Angeles began life as El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora la Regina de Los Angeles del Rio Porciuncula (The Town of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels by the Little-Portion River) - unlike a lot of what you're about to read this really is a true story.

The PCH winds its way around the mountains with unguarded drops-to-your-death views of the blue Pacific. The 90-mile stretch of highway from San Simeon in the south to Carmel in the north is known as Big Sur. The region was known originally as El Sur Grande (The Large South), and described by the explorer Cabrillo in 1542 thus: 'here there are mountains, which seem to reach the heavens, and the sea beats on them.' All I can say is, 'Cabrillo my man, you might have given your name to a kitchen scourer but you were spot on about Big Sur.' We drove through these mountains with their stone bridges and wildflowers at dawn and it is one of the most spectacular things I've ever seen - right up there with Therese Devine's underwear in grade 7 during tunnel ball, but that's another story.

Carmel is one of the towns on the Monterey Peninsula - an artist's colony turned holiday retreat for the rich and famous. Clint Eastwood was mayor (or was it sheriff?) of this town some years ago. I remember a cartoon from the Courier Mail at the time - Clint as Dirty Harry has a crowd of townsfolk with their hands in the air at gunpoint and he says, 'well look at that, it's unanimous.' We had breakfast at a trendy diner in Carmel. I had French toast with whipped butter and maple syrup, and Braggy had steak and

eggs. It was the first of many occasions where Braggy would look at my plate and say, 'I wish I'd ordered that.' With a belly full of coffee we were back on the road, jarred up on caffeine and very tense - and we pushed on to Monterey. In the 1940s Monterey was a sardine-fishing town, but the fish had bugged off by the time John Steinbeck wrote the novel Cannery Row. When Steinbeck visited his beloved Cannery Row in the 1960s he was disgusted to find that it had become a tourist destination - for which he had written the first and perhaps best tourist brochure.

San Francisco

We travelled the 115 miles north to San Francisco through Santa Cruz (Holy Cross) and the confusing suburbs of Palo Alto. We kept going through the suburbs and over the Golden Gate Bridge to San Francisco - sounds right doesn't it? Only problem is San Francisco is on the south side of San Francisco Bay and going north over the Golden Gate Bridge takes you to a National Park - we'd actually been driving through the suburbs of San Francisco for about half an hour. We consoled ourselves with the thought that Christopher Columbus believed he was in India when he discovered America. We did a U-turn and came over the Golden Gate Bridge and into San Francisco - there, that's better.



Golden Gate bridge as seen from the Presidio Yacht Club

We found the Tradewinds Hostel, which as hostels go I thought was pretty good - what do you want for your \$10, I say. As we were looking through the rooms Braggy had a look on his face like we were planning to sleep on a park bench under a copy of the LA Times. We ended up embarking on what was to become known later as 'The Holiday Inn Fiasco', where a quietly manic receptionist fleeced us \$140 for one night - parking not included. We were so impressed that we borrowed the map of San Francisco from the inside cover of her White Pages and walked down to Fisherman's Wharf. We had dinner that night at the Hard Rock Cafe, San Francisco, which everyone does once.

C a l

On Sunday morning we made a strategic withdrawal and occupied the Allison Hotel on Stockton Street, between the Stockton Street Tunnel and Union Square. The Allison is a charming hotel located between the districts of Nob Hill (the most expensive real estate in San Francisco) and Chinatown. We opted for a room with a shared bathroom for about \$35 a night. Holiday Inn my ass.

On this clear morning we drove out to the University of California at Berkeley (CAL). Berkeley was the first of the nine campuses of the University of California and is thus permitted the nickname 'CAL'. Berkeley itself is a university town that lies across San Francisco Bay north of Oakland. There is a giant merging of two freeways just before you get to Berkeley and this was the scene of the most Kamikaze driving manoeuvre of the tour - Braggy's six-lane-drift with optional indicator - very impressive. CAL campus is nestled between the hills and downtown Berkeley. Its main street is Telegraph Avenue - the Champs Elysees of the 1960's - complete with fraternity houses, street stalls, hippie throwbacks and undergrad' cafes. It was graduation day when we were there and the streets were lined with the flowing blue robes of the soon-to-be qualified and their families. Upon returning to the car we saw the campus-parking officer finalising the details on our parking ticket. More about that later.

The Romantic City

Returning to San Francisco from Berkeley we were again lured over the Golden Gate Bridge to drive around the national park which lies on the northern side of San Francisco Bay. Under the bridge are the Presidio Yacht Club and remnants of an old military establishment including coastal artillery defences. These defences were built in 1853 as part of a series of bunkers designed to protect the bay from British invasion during the dispute over the Oregon boundary. Other bunkers are on the south side of the bay at Fort Point on the Presidio. This was the location for the movie of the same name starring Sean Connery. Some of the buildings are used as part of a working Coast Guard Station.

Like clockwork, in the late afternoon a San Francisco fog began to roll in from the Pacific Ocean. Agreeing that it was too cold to walk the Golden Gate Bridge, Braggy and I drove back across to San Francisco and went in search of Coit Tower and Lombard Street. Coit tower stands atop Telegraph Hill and has one of the most spectacular views of the city. You may recall Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry running up the path to Coit Tower at night.

There was the Pacific, a few more foothills away, blue and vast and with a great wall of white advancing from the legendary potato patch where Frisco fogs are born. Another hour and it would come streaming through the Golden Gate to shroud the romantic city in white. And a young man would hold his girl by the hand and climb slowly up a long white sidewalk with a bottle of Tokay in his pocket. That was Frisco; and beautiful women standing in white doorways, waiting for their men; and Coit Tower and the Embarcadero, and Market Street and the eleven teeming hills.

On the Road, Jack Kerouac

Grasshopper

That night we walked down to Chinatown and had some Japanese at the Katana-ya Ramen - Braggy's first experience. Braggy ordered ramen based on my description of something else entirely. 'What's with the prawn heads?' he said. Not that I would know ramen from raw fish. 'Maybe it's a different chef?' I offered helpfully. We felt like a couple of old samurai warriors who had just finished a day of wandering the countryside thumping villagers and we amused ourselves by making up fictitious Kung Fu lines, 'ah Grasshopper, if you ever come back to this village I'll run you down with my Mitsubishi.' And, 'waiter, this sushi is raw!' Our waitress was from Tokyo and was paying her way through art school a long way from home.

A Quarter Century Rolls By

My 26th year began appropriately with a visit to the FAO Schwartz toy store. The toy store has three stories and is in the heart of downtown San Francisco. Macys Department Store lies across the street and I treated myself to a full week of Calvin Klein underwear - now I'm not just cool on weekends.

We walked down through SoMa (South of Market Street) looking for the Ansel Adams Center. Adams is one of the world's great photographers and is particularly well known for his black and white images of America's national parks - Yosemite, Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon and Monument Valley. Walking back towards Union Square we happened upon the 4th Street Deli - easily the best sports bar in town. They have giant TV screens showing the Ice Hockey, Baseball and Basketball playoffs. The walls are lined with sports memorabilia and posters. Combine this with the best burger and fries of the whole tour and our boys were in hog heaven. Even the stalls in the men's bathroom have notice boards where they pin the sports pages - just so you don't miss a minute of the action. There could never be a place like this in Australia - guys would get drunk and decide that some of the decorations would look much better on their walls at home. The kitchen announces your order over the public address: 'Hey Jeff, come and get your burger and fries.'

Ballpark

That afternoon we went to Candlestick Park to watch the San Francisco Giants play Pittsburgh or Philadelphia. * We caught a MUNI express bus (San Francisco Municipal Railway - yes they have busses also) to the park and met an outgoing if slightly over-the-top (describes half of the USA) girl who had lost her job as a bartender the previous day. I can't remember her name, only that her friends called her Moisha. She asked if we wanted to buy some tickets. I replied: 'to what?' This was apparently quite funny



Me on a very cool evening at Coit Tower

considering we were on an express bus to the baseball stadium and the African American bus driver cracked up so much that she nearly lost control of herself. 'This bus only goes one place honey,' she chortled. She had a point. Moisha offered us two tickets for \$10. I hesitated, which Moisha interpreted as haggling and so we ended up with \$28 worth of tickets for \$5 - not a bad scalp in anyone's book. It was 'Cap Day' so the first 40,000 through the gate got a free cap - proudly if not ambitiously sponsored by Hitachi, as there were only 18,000 people at the game. The crowd numbers have been poor since the pro baseball player strike of last season - quid pro quo. We drank a lot of beers and Moisha disappeared promising to get our names on the scoreboard - and was never heard of again. The baseball has strict crowd behaviour rules including no swearing, no throwing, no smoking and no sitting (for the national anthem). It was the Mexican Independence Day, so the American anthem was sung by a mariachi band - it just gets curiouser and curiouser. The food and souvenir vendors walk through the crowd peddling their wares. Braggy liked the look of a souvenir baseball I had bought so he calls out to this vendor, 'hey mate, you got any balls?' The Giants were flogged by about nine runs and we stumbled onto the bus bound for the city. I sat next to a lawyer who said she had just moved from Boston. I mumbled something about privatisation law concerning power utilities and she seemed to be impressed - it's so hard to tell. There were the ubiquitous comments like, 'Oh I love Australia. Whenever there's a documentary on the Discovery Channel about Australia I always tape it etc.'

'For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is.'

From White Noise – Don DeLillo

*Post Script: I have since had it confirmed that the Giants played Cincinnati, like I said we drank a lot of beers.

Laundry at Tiffany's

That night we wandered down to a laundromat. Establishing a pattern that was to be repeated many times over subsequent weeks I put in a large load of underwear, socks, T-shirts and jeans while Braggy tossed in his IndyCar T-shirt, that's right, one T-shirt. What was this man doing for jocks? The laundromat was full of Mexican Americans and there was one sad young teenage girl doing enough laundry for a football team all by herself. When we came back to move our (mostly my) clothes to the dryer I noticed her wedding ring.

'When I married Lulamae, that was in December 1938, she was going on fourteen. Maybe an ordinary person, being only fourteen, wouldn't know their right mind. But you take Lulamae; she was an exceptional woman. She plain broke our hearts when she ran off like she done.'

Breakfast at Tiffany's – Truman Capote



Braggy with that damn IndyCar T-shirt.

The Alcatraz Triathlon - Dig, Dash, Dive

On Tuesday the 7th of May we caught a cable car to Fisherman's Wharf. The cable car brakemen are a living tourist attraction. We listened to one brakeman tell a group of kids that the cars hooked onto gophers that ran along under the street and pulled the cars up the hill. Another one waited until we were climbing up a particularly steep street to announce that this was his first day back after 'the accident.' Various others mumble about trying to give up drinking and falling asleep on the job. While waiting for the ferry to Alcatraz we amused ourselves with a pay toilet. This was a modern computerised thing that cleaned itself between visits. I imagine the toilet on the Starship Enterprise to be something similar, 'wipe Factor 9 Scotty.' 'But Captain, I canna clean it any faster.' So I boldly went where many men had gone before.

We also did a tour of the USS Panpanito, a World War Two submarine moored on display at Fisherman's wharf. Fisherman's wharf is very touristy and expensive. Among the less tasteless San Francisco T-shirts available there was one commemorating the Alcatraz Prison Triathlon: Dig, Dash, Dive.

Alcatraz was named for the pelicans (alcatraces in Spanish) that were conspicuous by their absence if you ask me. The island (known as 'The Rock' to inmates) lies 1-2 miles from Fisherman's Wharf. Of the 23 men who attempted to escape 18 were either captured or killed. The remaining five were presumed drowned although their bodies were never found. In 1962 Attorney General Robert Kennedy closed the prison. Indian activists barricaded themselves onto the island in the 1970s in a resurgence of native warrior pride, and burned a number of the residential buildings. It would have been a demoralising place to serve time, offering as it does tantalising views of San Francisco. There is a number of giant gum trees on the island and quaint little gardens left over from the days when part of the island housed families of the military prison officers.



A wire happy Braggy going over the fence on The Rock

Big and Orange

After lunch we walked the Golden Gate Bridge. I have been told since that there are city council trucks with tyres on their bumper bars that do a circuit of the Oakland Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge every fifteen minutes to clear out any broken down vehicles. Apparently if you break down you just wait to get shunted along; the traffic flow cannot afford to be stopped. The Golden Gate Bridge has no suicide

rail - only a crisis telephone at each end. I'm not sure what the telephone number is, some suggestions might be 1-800-YOU-CHOOSE or 1-800-NO-NET, or 1-800-SWAN-DIVE or perhaps 1-800-NO-BUNGEE. It's a strange place. When we were walking across the bridge there were two container ships and any number of tugboats down on the bay. Jeff confirmed his status as the man who will pee anywhere and Braggy realised he had to go to the bathroom for something more substantial - only problem was the nearest facilities were on the other side of the bay at Vista Point where we parked the car. Strange how the trip back always seems longer, eh? The humorous potential of this situation was fully realised when, after walking the three kilometres back across the bridge with clenched butt cheeks the Vista Point toilet block was locked. I'd never seen a man turn grey.

The Golden Gate Bridge is an impressive orange structure that I couldn't help but take photographs of - it is sincerely spectacular. The bridge was completed in 1937 and its statistics speak for themselves: overall length is around 3 kilometres, main span is 1.4 kilometres and the towers stand 250 meters high. The bridge is continuously being painted; it is designed to swing during earthquakes and has expansion plates at each end for when it gets longer in summer.

We hit the 4th Street Deli again for dinner that night. The basketball playoffs were on and the place was packed with the after work crowd. Faced with this hostile environment we worked on instinct and ordered some beers - your first reaction is often the correct one. We rolled home through the streets of San Francisco around midnight looking to steal stuff and stumbled upon an impromptu jam session in Union Square. There must have been twenty street musicians - each the image of Bob Dylan, Jimmy Hendrix or Bob Marley - I don't know how he did it but one guy had an electric guitar with amplifier plugged into somewhere - where the hell do you find power in a public square? And then there was this guy who I don't think was connected to the musicians at all and he's walking through the crowd of onlookers with a bucket for donations - everybody wants a piece of the action.



Braggy on the Golden Gate

Great Horny Toads

Wednesday May 8 saw the boys pull stumps and farewell San Francisco. Foolishly I tried to make a left hand turn off Market Street where two days earlier I'd nearly run down a Policeman and the crowd of pedestrians he had just waved across. We lucked onto the freeway and then onto the Oakland Bay Bridge for the last time and out via Berkeley. The I-5 runs north to south down the middle of California. It is a featureless drive through country like Dubbo. On the road we spotted a Bradley Armoured Fighting Vehicle (AFV) on the back of a transporter. The AFV is a classic story of American Military logic and over funding. The story goes something like this. The AFV was originally conceived as an armoured amphibious troop carrier capable of taking an infantry section (10 men) into battle. And then the

designers loaded it up with so much offensive weapons and associated computerised targeting electronics that they could only fit five guys in the back and the machine sank like a stone in water. Needless to say the funding has continued and the Bradley AFV is the main armoured troop carrier for US mounted infantry. I thumbed through the guidebook and noticed that Yosemite National Park was only a short distance from where we were - Braggy was interested. When I read the statistics on the waterfall he was sold on the idea. We cut east along back roads and through little mouse-shit towns and had lunch at the Jack In The Box restaurant in Merced. Jack in the Box essentially serves toasted sandwiches except they're called 'melts'. Charlie Sheen does their TV commercials.

Yosemite (pronounced yo-sem-a-tee, which Braggy insisted on pronouncing yoss-a-might and for a while I thought I may have to kill him) National Park was the nation's second national park, established in 1890. The Yosemite Valley is a flat narrow floor surrounded on both sides by sheer rock faces. The Upper Falls drop a spectacular 470 metres in one hit. The total drop from top to bottom is 800 meters - that's a long way. The roar of the Upper Falls echoes through the valley day and night and we suspected there might be a big water pipe that gets turned off at night and a recording is played over the public address system. Purely on instinct and rat cunning, Braggy navigated us to the Yosemite Lodge where we got ourselves a cabin for the night. I couldn't help thinking of Warner's Yosemite Sam, 'just what I always wanted, a cabin in the sky.'



An Ansel Adams-esq picture of the Yosemite Valley

We were at Yosemite just prior to summer holidays and I would hate to see it busy. The next morning Braggy went out hunting early and bagged me a coffee and four-pack of croissants - rather thoughtful of the young lad. We then drove out of the Yosemite Valley to Mariposa Grove to see the giant sequoia trees. The trees are unnervingly big with comically disproportionate branches. There are your usual facts about how much water they drink each day etc. The largest is called the Giant Grizzly with a girth of 30 and a height of 70 metres. Although not the tallest it is certainly the most substantial tree in this neck of the woods. Braggy said, 'if these are the trees I'd hate to be hit by the bird shit.'

Back on the I-5 again heading south we drove past Bakersfield and didn't look back. The I-5 near Bakersfield is lined with car, truck, farm machinery and camper-van yards. These camper-vans or Winabagos are like nothing you see in Australia. They are about as big as a bus and often there are bicycles, inflatable boats, and small four-wheel drives strapped to the roof or towed behind. The logic of driving your house half way across America escapes me. I am reminded of the story of a removalist struggling along the footpath with a grandfather clock. A man passing by asks him if it wouldn't be easier to wear a wristwatch.

M u r o c

Muroc was chosen as a place name after the locals tried to register their little town under the name of Corum. A place called Corum already existed and the Post Office refused so the locals spelt it backwards. Muroc was the site for Muroc Field, later renamed Edwards Air Force Base. It has always been the home of the US Air Force Flight Test Center and it was here that on the 14th of October 1947 that a sonic boom was heard for the first time as Captain Chuck Yeager piloted the X-1 rocket plane faster than the speed of sound. The exploits of Yeager and the other test pilots in the early days at Edwards have always held a special fondness for both Braggy and I, so it was with some disappointment that we were turned away from the guard house at Edwards. No longer does there exist a place in the world like Edwards and Pancho's Happy Bottom Riding Club as it was in those rat shack, low rent, mouse shit, righteous early days.

My God! - to be a part of Edwards in the late forties and early fifties! - even to be on the ground and hear one of those incredible explosions from 35,000 feet somewhere up in the blue over the high desert and know that some True Brother had commenced his rocket launch and know that he would soon be at altitude, in the thin air at the edge of space, where the stars and the moon came out at noon...

The Right Stuff - Tom Wolf

We stayed at a motel in the town of Mojave - more of a bend in the road than a town. Mojave is full of diners and truck stops and places to keep the highway trucks and their drivers pumping through the artery that is the I-40. The motel was run by a lady who was born in Rhodesia and grew up in London. She loved the desert and its warm days. It mustn't rain much either, as the motel's washing machine and dryer were out in the open air near the pool. Braggy asked me if I had any laundry as he thought it a shame to waste a whole sachet of washing powder on one T-shirt. James Bond was on the cable TV in the room - You Only Live Twice. We had dinner at a Denny's restaurant and it was cold and windy and we climbed in and out of the car like we were wearing straight jackets to avoid the static electricity.



Me in front of a sequoia you used to be able to drive a car through

Sidewinder Cafe

Friday the 10th of May we pushed on east on the I-40. Outside Dagget, and still in California we saw the lights in the sky from the Solar One power station. There is a tower in the centre of a thousand large mirrors that reflect and focus the sun's rays onto the top of the tower. There is also a secondary reflection that concentrates light into the sky as if it were hovering. I remembered a song from a film.

*A desert road from Vegas to nowhere
Someplace better than where you been
A coffee machine that needs some fixin'
In a little cafe just 'round the bend

A hot dry wind blows right through me
The baby's cryin' and I can't sleep
But we both know a change is coming
Coming closer, sweet release*

I Am Calling You – From the motion picture Bagdad Cafe

An old friend Sal Donahoe introduced me to an indie film called Bagdad Cafe, starring Jack Palance. In the closing credits the film acknowledges special thanks to The Sidewinder Cafe, Newberry Springs, California. As the I-40 rolled east and I saw the exit for Newberry Springs I thought there might be a chance. Braggy drove up and back along the five buildings that make up Newberry Springs and not one of them resembled the run down cafe or motel of the film. Somewhat dejected I let Braggy get us back on the interstate. And there it was, a small hand-painted sign that said, 'Bagdad 2mi.' We pulled into the cafe and it was an eerie feeling to be standing in a place I knew so well but had never been. We ordered some coffee and talked to the waitress. I asked her if there were many people who came there looking for the place where the film was made. 'Wait a minute', she said, 'I'll get you to sign the visitor's book.' There were names from Germany, France and Italy.

The new owner of the cafe was trying to get the place repaired to look the way it did in the film. It was close enough for me. And far better than going to Disney Land or Universal Studios - here was a real place that others and I had to dig up out of the desert. We had a walk around the motel, and yes you can actually stay there.



Sidewinder Café, Newberry Springs, California

Route 66

The road past the Sidewinder cafe is actually an old stretch of Route 66, the old Trans-America highway from Chicago to Los Angeles completed in 1926. Route 66 was the highway that brought people west during the depression years as they escaped the dustbowl of the mid-west. After World War Two Route 66 brought the automobile generation to California on their family vacation. We drove one of the longest remaining stretches of what is now 'Historic Route 66' in Western Arizona between Seligman and Kingman. This highway has entered American folklore like no other. On the way we saw stack of Harley Davidson riders and even one guy walking along with an Army duffel bag, white T-shirt and Levi's - life imitates cliché.

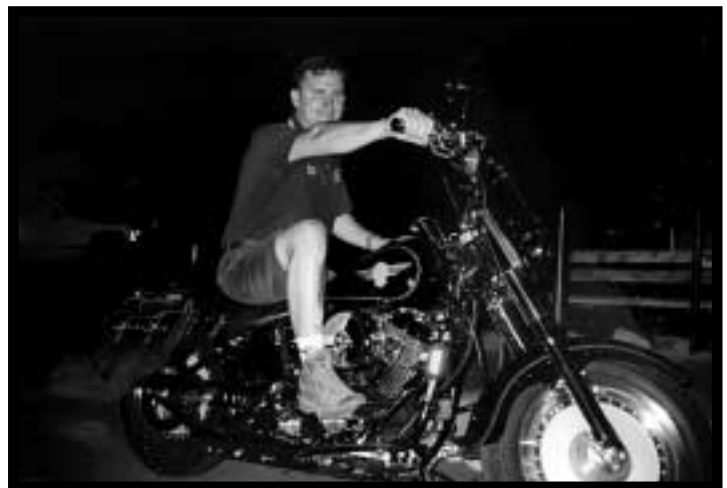
Beaver Street

Back on the more practical though less spiritual I-40 we moved on to Flagstaff, Arizona. Flagstaff is a tourist town in the north, about an hour and a half south of the Grand Canyon and is up in the thin air at 2300 metres. The town has about 50,000 people and the Santa Fe railroad runs through the centre of the town with its freight cars all day and all night. We checked into a Motel 6 and made our way to the Beaver Street Brewery. This sounded like a place where the boys might find at least two things worth checking out.

Surprisingly it was a micro-brewery on Beaver Street. We talked at the bar with a guy named Chuck, who was a professor from the Arizona State University West in Phoenix. He had spent his holidays at the Navajo Indian reservation. Chuck had served in Vietnam with the US Navy as a Vietnamese interpreter - listening to the radio traffic of the North Vietnamese. I talked with Chuck about the US Presidential election, Hunter S.

Thompson and P.J. O'Rourke and he explained what GOP stood for - something I had wondered for a long

time. If you want to know what it stands for you'll have to go to Phoenix and see Chuck yourself. He said that politics in the US wasn't of much more than passing interest to most Americans and that it took someone like me from another country to remind them how silly it is.



Braggy in the carpark at the Beaver Street Brewery

It's sort of heartwarming - America can co-opt anything, make anything insipid. No politician is too weird to withstand our fanatical blandness. Our democracy, our culture, our whole way of life is a spectacular triumph of the blah. Why not have political conventions without politics to nominate leaders who are out in front of nobody? Maybe the American political system isn't like a Mexican Christmas fiesta . Maybe it's like a McDonald's Big Mac. It's mushy and tasteless and made out of disgusting parts of things. But, when you come right down to it, everybody wants one.

On The Bandwagon: The Democratic Party Convention – P.J. O'Rourke

Deserts miss the rain

Braggy slipped into a few Bourbons and Coke at the Beaver Street Brewery - realising later that at 80% alcohol it would not be long before he would be paying me to tell him his name. Braggy's new found social lubrication allowed him to meet a couple of Harley Davidson dudes and local playboys - one was a Rugby player whose motorcycle was so loud that it set off all the car alarms in the car park. I could tell Braggy was impressed. I dragged him back to the motel before we got into a fight (with each other) and he begged me to help him dial reverse charges to his fiancée Karen. I spent the next 40 minutes standing outside freezing my buns while Braggy asked Karen twelve times what the time was in Australia and mumbled a similar number of 'I love yous'. When I got on the phone to Karen the first thing she said was: 'what's wrong with him?' We had been in country for just under a week and our boy was clearly in love. He has since advised me against it - being in love that is. Over the last few days in the desert there had been a song getting a lot of airplay: and I miss you like the deserts miss the rain.

Dr J's Hangover and Flatulence Elixir

Dr. Jeff was on the job early, slipping out to McDonald's to pick up what I knew would be needed for Braggy's monster hangover. I stocked up on orange juice, coffee, bacon & egg biscuits (like a scone), and headed back to the motel. Braggy had showered and shaved his tongue and was walking around which surprised me. I thought to myself, 'what discipline' - maybe his Tae Kwon Do was useful for something other than thumping folks after all. McDonald's is a remarkable company. The menu is essentially the same as it was when the McDonald brothers founded the restaurant in 1948. The relatively few menu items that have been added since then were invented (or rather ripped off from other chains) by franchisees, not headquarters staff. The formula is nothing if not successful.

In an average year all but 4% of Americans will visit a McDonald's. Thirty-two percent of all hamburgers, 26 percent of all French fries, 5 percent of all Coca-Cola, and nearly a fifth of all meals taken in a public place are eaten at a McDonald's. McDonald's buys more meat and potatoes and trains more people than any other organisation, the US Army included. It is the world's largest owner of real estate. In 1994 it had more 13,000 restaurants in 68 countries serving 25 million customers daily. So international a commodity has the Big Mac become that since 1986 The Economist magazine has used the cost of a Big Mac in various world cities as a more or less serious basis for an index comparing the relative value of their currencies.

Made in America – Bill Bryson

Hole in the ground

And so on through the ski resorts to the Grand Canyon. Any number of other adjectives meaning 'large' would suffice. The English author J.B Priestly said of the Grand Canyon that, 'those who have not seen it will not believe any possible description. Those who have seen it know that it cannot be described.' Like most things in life, as I am reliably informed, size is a factor. The canyon is 445 kilometres long (4 _ hours to drive at 100km per hour), from 6.5 to 34 kilometres wide and more than 1.6 kilometres (4x100 storey buildings) from the North Rim to the canyon floor. Nothing can prepare you for how damn big it is, so I'll say what I said for the first twenty minutes when I first saw it - nothing.

Bright Angel

I wanted to go for a walk along one of the trails, so Braggy and I went our separate ways. I packed a few gallons of water and some Swedish Cheese Rolls (I bet the Swedes have never heard of them) and ventured down the Bright Angel Trail, made famous by the donkey tours. I walked down into the canyon for an hour and a half and covered only 5_ kilometres. Remembering that it was uphill all the way back I turned around at one of the rest stops. I had travelled less than a sixth of the way to the bottom and I was Jelly-Man from the waist down. I met a couple from Virginia who were big Ken Burns fans. They were quite impressed that I had heard of the American Civil War and had even seen Burns' documentary series. They were also impressed by Australian polymer money - making me pose for a photograph with the same. The lady gave me a lozenge and a crunchy granola bar for my trip back. On the return walk I met two Australians from Melbourne: 'I know that accent,' he said. I also met a squirrel and a Russian woman in a pink bikini and running shoes - the things you see when you haven't got a gun.

We drove back to Flagstaff and toyed briefly with the idea of visiting a meteor crater; Braggy said, 'it's just another hole in the ground', and he had a point. We checked into the Weatherford Hotel that dates back to 1897 when it was Northern Arizona's finest hotel. Now it is a youth hostel with \$10 dormitory beds and static electricity (because of the high altitude air). Our roommate was a materials engineer who worked for Intel in Santa Cruz, and he gave me some tips on home brewing. I went for a wander in search of a bookstore and sat on the street with an iced tea and started to read White Noise. We hit a pizza joint for dinner where the patrons are encouraged to carve their names into the tables and walls. At what point does the furniture become firewood? And the beer was cold and we saw that it was good.



A Bright Angel? Me with my back to the canyon (a bit too close to the edge in hindsight). It was taken by a young German backpacker who said as he took it, 'you have to smile, otherwise they worry back at home.'

V. F. H

The next day we took the I-17 south to Phoenix. It was 108°F (43°C). The hotel was air-conditioned. What else do you want to know? In the late afternoon we ventured out to a baseball batting range (nine pitches for a quarter). We tried the 40 (65km), 50 (81km) and 60 (96km) mile an hour machines, in that order and with diminishing amounts of bat on ball. Major league pitchers throw their curve balls at 80 (129km) miles and hour.

We went to a coin laundry (one wash for a dollar) near our hotel in the suburb of Tempe. Tempe is home to the Arizona State University. ASU sweatshirts were on special. I found Phoenix to be an unremarkable town of over a million people, with a giant airport called Sky Harbor - and none of it would be there without the invention of the air-conditioner.

Let's get The Hell Out Of Here

There was no argument from either of us to the suggestion of pushing south and on to Tucson the next morning. While Braggy slipped out to bag some breakfast I telephoned my old flat mate Sheryl Rose Egan in Baton Rouge, Louisiana – and a good thing too. She mentioned that I would not have been spoken to ever again if I had not called. I was persuaded to book a ticket that morning to fly to New Orleans the following weekend.

We drove to Tucson via the Casa Grande Indian ruins. The place was once a Hohokam Indian village abandoned around 1350. The Casa Grande (big house) itself is about 30 feet (10 metres) high with mud walls 3 feet (1 metre) thick. A little lady at the visitor's centre mistook us for Germans. She didn't mention the war. Her name was Patsy Cline.

We made Tucson in the late afternoon (to use an American turn of phrase – as though people weren't expecting you to make it) and cruised through downtown to the Hotel Congress. The hotel dates from the 1920's and has an alternative music nightclub, a bar called the Tap Room, and a cafe called the Cup Cafe. It was easily the most excellent place we stayed in. Our room was decorated with wild-west horse paintings and the carpet had a cowboy hat design on it. John Dillinger (America's most wanted) was apparently shot in the street outside the hotel in the 1930's. We went for a drive down Speedway Boulevard and had dinner at a pizza joint. The waitress was a tall blonde Uma Thurman lookalike who was entirely unaware of her beauty. Someone lucky person had given her an engagement ring.

Aluminium in the desert air

The Pima Air and Space Museum lies on the south side of Davis Monthan Air Force Base on Valencia Road just outside Tucson. The museum houses over two hundred aircraft and somewhat comprehensively represents the history of aviation in the United States. Braggy and I wandered around in the desert heat for hours just soaking up the atmosphere. The names read like an honour roll of heroic



Don't try this at home children. From this angle it looks like a Shooting Star I believe



"Can I interest anyone in a second hand SR-71?" – the Mach 3 Blackbird

endeavour at altitude: Starfighter, Skyraider, Thunderchief, Shooting Star, Sabre, Blackbird, Huskie, Phantom, Tomcat, Stratofortress, Superfortress, and Globemaster.

El Presidente

The Pima museum has a jetliner that was Air Force One - the President's plane. This particular one had flown John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. It was on this plane that Johnson swore the oath of office following Kennedy's assassination. There are separate compartments for the President and guests, press, back-up crew and there is also a galley. Despite the signs that say 'Don't Touch Anything' and 'Don't Open Any Doors', Braggy has a picture of me sitting on the Presidential toilet - a date with destiny so to speak.



God bless America. Me on the steps of Air Force One looking presidential



Pope Braggy the 1st returning home



Somewhere on the side of the road in Arizona, an airliner wrecking yard.
That's me in the shadows under the nose.

The Most Expensive Trash in the World

I first remember seeing a photograph of Davis Monthan Air Force Base in a mid-seventies National Geographic article on trash. There was an aerial photograph of row upon row of F-100 fighter planes in storage awaiting World War Three or scrapping - whichever came first. Fortunately the F-100s are no longer there. But they have been replaced by row upon row of multi-million dollar fighter planes that stand as a monument to the sheer size of the US military machine during the Reagan years. Officially designated as the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Centre, Davis Monthan was established after World War Two. Tucson's low rainfall, low humidity and alkaline soil make it possible to store aircraft indefinitely with a minimum of deterioration and corrosion. The soil is like cement and negates the need for building special parking stands. Over 5,000 aircraft from the Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps and Navy are stored here, making this the world's largest concentration of air power.*



Davis Monthan Air Force Base - row after row of F-14 Tomcats (the ones from Top Gun) and F-15 Eagles

* Unsubstantiated although reasonably sounding conjecture by the author - prove me otherwise.

Spider Bob

That afternoon I wandered through the antique stores of downtown Tucson. The shop hours in Tucson are 10ish to 6ish. It was in one of these stores that I met Bob 'Spider' Mikalson, refugee from a divorce suit in Seattle that had cleaned him out. Bob's old man had served in Australia during the Second World War and he suspected he might have a half brother or two down here. Bob's opening comments on Tucson, 'don't worry about what the map says man, this is fucking Mexico. We got a quarter of a million illegal immigrants. Tucson is a big drug town, don't you fucking doubt it.' Bob was a partner in the antique business with a husky wild girl named Brooke who smoked Lucky Strikes. Bob was working on a screenplay for one of the networks called Twenty Reasons To Kill Your Ex-Lover - keep an eye out for it. Bob's mates wandered in and were most interested to find an Australian in the store. The first one asked

me if I'd ever heard of Woman's Weekly - not a question I was expecting. It turns out this guy was a male nurse in an old people's home that had nursed the former lover of Marilyn Monroe's psychiatrist. On her deathbed, the old girlfriend had told him the full story of Marilyn's murder and he had sold the story to Woman's Weekly - it's a small world.

The boundary between the Mexico and the United States is two thousand miles long with few natural barriers. It's just an imaginary map doodle through a bunch of scrub. There isn't even a linguistic gulf since the majority of people on both sides speak Spanish. But this ill-patrolled and undefended frontier is the one place on earth where a fully developed nation collides head-on with the filth and chaos of the Third World.

Mexican Border Idyll – P.J. O'Rourke

I hadn't noticed it at first but there were police officers in the back of the shop with a young girl. It turns out that Brooke's friend had been taken out into the desert the night before and raped.

Tap Room night

I wandered back to the Hotel Congress and found Braggy in the Tap Room and sat in the cool dark with him and sipped some beers. The jukebox played Hank Williams and Willie Nelson. There was even something modern from a young man by the name of Elvis Presley. The bartender's name was Tiger and he was a ducky middle aged gent. The Tap Room is a tiny bar and I remember him announcing to the whole bar in a rather camp voice, 'my doctor tells me I have to lower my cholesterol, but I've heard that song before.' This beautiful girl walked in by herself and I had just enough courage (read beer) to go up and talk to her. Her name was Claire and she came back and sat with Braggy and me for a couple of hours and told us about herself. She was an aerobics instructor but had worked as a dancer and a stripper, and was one of the sweetest people I have ever met. Braggy and I sang along to King of the Road on the jukebox - doing the Proclaimer's version. It was one of the rarest of times. I had a five-beer smile on my face along with my best friend and a pretty girl for company. Throw in a warm night in a desert place that I had dreamed about for a decade and a classic little bar called the Tap Room and I ask you, what the hell else do you want out of life? I was sadder than I had been in a long time.

Tour bus at the OK Corral

The town too tough to die was founded in 1877 as a silver mining town and soon Tombstone was a bustling metropolis of 10,000. In 1881, 110 saloon licenses were sold and there were 14 dance halls to entertain the miners. 1881 was also the year of the famous gunfight at the OK Corral when Doc Holiday and Wyatt Earp shot it out with the Clanton Gang. Tombstone today is pure tourism. The buildings are mostly the same as they were last century - on the outside. It's a strange thing, but as soon as you hear your feet clomping on the timber boardwalk, you slow down to a cautious cadence as if on your way to a gunfight. Braggy and I had our photographs taken in one of those old-style pictures. The photographer gave me an overcoat that would not look out of place in Liberace's wardrobe. We had a feed at the Nellie Cashman restaurant. I had a Wyatt Earp burger and Braggy had a Sitting-Bull - a half-pound of Angus beef, bacon, ham, sausage and something that looked like the heel of a leather shoe. We drove back to Tucson with the windows down.

On the outskirts of Tombstone is the Boot Hill cemetery. It is the only place in Tombstone with free entry. Braggy and I had a wander around the headstones and cacti.

missionaries and poets

Back in Tucson we lobbied into Spider Bob Mickalson's antique store to pick up a piece of aviation history for Braggy's dad Ray. Bob had located the control column from a World War Two fighter the P-38. Braggy handed over the money in a brown paper bag. Bob invited us to join him for beers that night at Cafe Magritte.

Late that afternoon we went out into the desert to visit the 18th century Mission San Xavier Del Bac. Arizona's oldest European building was built by the Jesuit Padre Kino in 1700. The Mission was destroyed by the Pima Indian uprising in 1751 and rebuilt by the Franciscans in the late 1700s. The building is painted vivid white and stands out against the dusty desert. Nearby, on the only high ground for miles is a small grotto whose gates are guarded by two stone statues. Catholic masses are still held daily. So I guess Braggy and I did go to church while we were away!



Boot Hill Cemetery. Here Lies Lester Moore, Four Slugs from a 44, No Les, No More.



The brilliant San Xavier Del Bac outside Tucson. Omitted from the photograph is the fast food stand where you can sadly buy yourself a San Xavier Burrito (Holy Burrito Batman) – curious.

After dark I wandered through the streets of downtown Tucson to Cafe Magritte, where I discovered it was poet's night. Students from the University of Arizona and beat poets from right out of the sixties crowded into this hip little place. Young poets these days are so well dressed. Spider Bob, as it turns out is also a songwriter and sang a couple of ballads about truckers and bear shooting. He bought me a beer that's made in Seattle from apricots - interesting texture. I had a wild night listening to rolling lines of America's next generation of Whitman and Ginsberg. In my beat state I penned a few lines of my own on a bar napkin, reflecting on an old airliner and all the lives it might have touched. Most people are advised to keep their poetry to themselves, but this is my story so here's my poetry:

*I ran my hand along the shiny curves of this old warrior
And I thought of all the sad night miles it had flown
Over tower lights and country towns
With ice on wingtips and tears from the cold air.
I thought of all the dreams of travellers
Of dark fields and lonely farm houses
I thought of fog breath kisses and sunset hands
And of coming home and taking away*

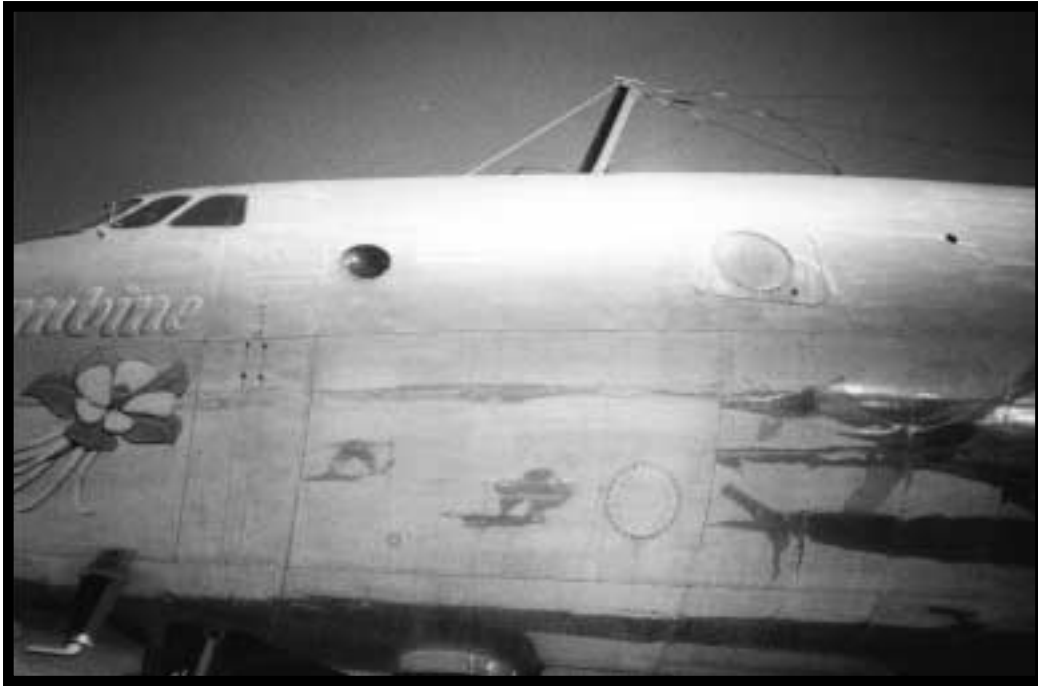
Tower – Jeff Burns

Sky Harbor

And so to The South. When we got out of the car at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix I used Braggy's pocket-knife to cut my USA guidebook in half. I was going east and Braggy was going to ride the Mustang out of the desert west. We would meet again in San Diego in a week's time. We waited for a boarding call in an overcrowded lounge. There was a Mexican Airways flight leaving from a neighbouring gate – mayhem. Braggy cheered me up by mentioning something about a fuel spill. I noticed a guy from the ground crew keeping the beat with orange hand-beacons used for directing aircraft. If he went for a big cymbal-solo there could be a disaster. We had walked past the grim faces in line at the ValuJet counter on the way in. A week before a ValuJet airliner had crashed in the Florida everglades and most of the wreckage and passengers were still in the swamp. My in-flight reading was not helping.

Objects were rolling out of the galley, the aisles were full of drinking glasses, utensils, coats and glasses. A stewardess pinned to the bulkhead by the sharp angle of decent was trying to find the relevant passage in a handbook titled 'Manual of Disasters'. Then there was a second male voice from the flight deck, this one remarkably calm and precise, making the passengers believe there was someone in charge after all, an element of hope, 'This is American two-one-three to the cockpit voice recorder. Now we know what it's like. It's worse than we ever imagined. They didn't prepare us for this in the death simulator in Denver. In less than three minutes we will touch down, so to speak. They will find our bodies in some smoking field, strewn about in the grizzly attitudes of death. I love you, Lance.'

White Noise – Don DeLillo



Reflections of Braggy and me.

Phoenix, Houston and New Orleans were my stops. Sheryl met me at New Orleans Airport on a steamy Thursday afternoon. She had taken Friday off, so we had a few days to look around together. We drove in towards New Orleans and asked directions to the French Quarter at two service stations with differing opinions on where it was. We parked on Canal Street near a street stall where the guy decided Sheryl needed instructions on how to reverse park. We had a beer in one of the Jazz bars on Bourbon Street and watched the world wander past the door. The bar had autographed one-dollar bills for wallpaper - names from all over the world. Apparently it is for luck - there must have been ten grand on the walls.

Now they don't give a shit what you do in New Orleans, and the three of us is havin the time of our lifes, playin ever day in Jackson Square an watchin the other fruitcakes do they thing.

Forest Gump – Winston Groom

Cajun Reggae

Next day in the late afternoon we drove out to Lafayette, the official capital of Arcadiana. Arcadians (or Cajuns) were French settlers expelled from Canada by the British in 1755. The so-called Arcadians migrated down the Atlantic coast towards the Caribbean. They received a hostile welcome everywhere except in the French territory of Louisiana where they settled. Their influence on the music, food and culture of Louisiana's south is everywhere. This place is literally and figuratively spicy. We were on our way to Friday Night Live - a weekly event in downtown Lafayette where a vacant city lot is taken over by a live band and Budweiser vans and you have yourself a party. I was expecting to hear some local zydeco music but instead there was a reggae band doing their thing. I guess everyone wants take-out once in a while. We stayed with an English Occupational Therapist who was working for the same company as Sheryl. We were all a long way from home. He drove us around in an enormous black Camaro.

My two teams are LSU and whoever is playing Alabama

Saturday morning we drove back to Baton Rouge. I was keen to see Louisiana State University (LSU) so we did a walking tour around the campus. The campus reminded me of the University of Queensland - a big leafy green place with sandstone buildings. The only difference really was the LSU football stadium, known as the Colosseum - it seats 80,000 and is right in the middle of the campus. The LSU Tigers play in front of a packed house all the time. In the gift shop the bumper-stickers said: My Two Teams Are LSU And Whoever's Playing Alabama.

In the afternoon we went to a bookshop called Books-A-Million, and they weren't kidding. It was a book-buyer's heaven. There was a coffee shop inside the store where you could take your intended purchases for perusal. I bought a novel called Beauty and Sadness, a Tom Clancy for Braggy and a rubber stamp for Suzanne with her name. I have always felt somewhat wholesome spending money on books - perhaps I get that from mum.

And then to a thing called an Outlet Mall. This was a monstrous shopping complex with brand-name stores: Guess Jeans, Jockey, Disney and fifty others. The Outlet Mall is outside the city limits in the middle of nowhere. When I walked into the Disney store I nearly bought everyone Mighty Ducks hockey jerseys - they were on special for an unheard of \$11.95. While I was trying one on I saw the extra 1 - \$111.95. They didn't fit so well anyway.

Those little cardboard containers

That night we went in search of Chinese food in those little cardboard boxes with wire handles that you see in the movies - this has long been a dream of mine. We sat at the bar and waited for our order at the Koto restaurant in Baton Rouge. The store owner and head margarita mixer, Sam was an elderly Chinese gent who told us about a trip to Australia he had made as a young man to visit his cousin in Sydney. He remembers flying TAA. We also met the sweetest girl named Angela. It was the strangest thing to watch the lips of this Chinese girl and hear a southern Louisiana drawl: 'Aahv lived in Loo-see-anna fo' ay-teen yeahs.' Angela had won a music scholarship in piano at LSU. We sat around Sheryl's apartment full of Chinese food and washed it down with two bottles of wine. Then I started writing some postcards home - I'd like to take this opportunity to apologise.

Baton Rouge

Sunday morning we wandered along the banks of the Mississippi and walked through a museum in downtown. The Mississippi is a giant brown river that could easily be mistaken for a lake. Ol' Man River flows through Baton Rouge at a sedate pace. Baton Rouge was named for the Native American practice of marking their tribal hunting grounds with a red stick. The city has been home to the English, French, Spanish and Arcadians. It is the Louisiana State capital only because a group of evangelical Louisiana politicians wanted a fresh start when New Orleans was overrun with corruption.

We went into downtown Baton Rouge and wandered through the streets that were blocked off for the Fest-For-All. The streets were lined with stalls and there were bands every couple of blocks. Parents pulled their kids along in little red wagons and we watched a Tae Kwan Do demonstration, and some kids doing Cajun dancing. It was a very hot and sticky day and we decided to spend part of it in an air-

conditioned movie theatre. We drove out to a cinema complex and saw *The Truth About Cats And Dogs* where the airconditioning gave the best performance.

That night we had dinner at Ruby Tuesday's. This is a restaurant started by university students who were sick of college food. I had some beers and spicy buffalo wings and a cheeseburger.

Hooters Bar over the road was a restaurant

that featured waitresses with Mae West style busts. At the time the restaurant chain was fighting an anti-discrimination case, not because they had failed to hire any petite waitresses, but because they had failed to hire any men - curious.



The Mississippi at Baton Rouge.

Go West

Sheryl dropped me at the New Orleans International Airport at 7am after a very early start and a drive down from Baton Rouge. I sat around the terminal and read the *New York Times* front to back. There was an article on Brad Meltzer who wrote a novel while studying for his law degree at Columbia University. I was somewhat inspired by this story of a 26 year old whose draft commanded a six-figure advance from a publisher.

On the flight to Houston I sat next to Lindsay Lee, a Taiwanese lady who was an antique dealer living in Sweden. Her first boyfriend was an Australian and she had wanted to be a ballerina when she was little. I pointed out to her that she was still little. Lindsay was on her way to Kingman in Arizona to start a new life with an American guy. We had been delayed on the ground in New Orleans with an air-conditioner pressurisation problem. For a time the pilot was considering flying at low altitude all the way to Houston - he seemed to be saying this with a straight face. We had made it all the way out to the end of the runway before they realised there was a problem. This delay made us late into Houston and we missed the connection to Phoenix as a result.

At the hotdog stand at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix a lady was ordering nachos and having some difficulty downsizing the serve. I said to the guy behind the counter, 'Isn't this America, where you can have it any way you want it?' The lady said to me, 'No, this is America where you get what you're given and you put up with it.' I had met Andrea Garland. Andrea works in real estate on the West Coast and had travelled around Victoria and South Australia with a particular fondness for the wineries as I recall. She graciously gave this complete stranger the address of her daughter Amy in San Diego. Unfortunately Braggy and I did not get the chance to drop in - perhaps sparing both Amy and me some awkward conversation, 'Hi Amy, I'm Jeff. I met your mum at a hot dog stand in Phoenix' 'She did what?'

I eventually hauled my ass off a plane in San Diego at 8.00 that night, which Braggy had been good enough to hang around for. He had been reading a copy of *Alive* in the airport lounge (you remember the Argentine airliner that crashed in the Andes and what they had for dinner?) - the man has a tremendous sense of occasion. He had made it out of the desert looking a little more rugged than before, although his two-week old goatee still looked like my five o'clock shadow. We checked into the youth hostel in San Diego and walked down to the convenience store for a 6-pack. Braggy told me the story of his bay-tour where the tour guide had been talking to the school kids over a loud speaker. The guide is pointing out the various sights, and then he says, 'and would you kids like to see something from Australia?' The kids all scream out 'yeah' and the guide says: 'well take a look at that guy over there in the red shirt', pointing at Braggy.

Hot cakes

We had breakfast at McDonalds and I asked for Hot Cakes with maple syrup. The girl at the counter gives me a look like I just asked for Hot Cakes with dog shit. I can't believe she'd never even heard of it. We drove out into the suburbs looking for a laundromat and found one in the barrio on University Drive. Braggy washed the same shirt that I mentioned in San Francisco - he was on the homeward stretch now. A beggar wandered in and asked for a quarter for a soda. Next thing we see him being encouraged to move along by some of the local shopkeepers who came out of the woodwork with baseball bats.

I watched the washing go around, and some little Hispanic kids push each other in a trolley. Braggy walked a kilometre up the road to use a pay phone to call his sister Anne in Australia to find out it was 2am there. On the way back he noticed a pay phone next door to the laundromat. Braggy has had a somewhat checkered career with telephone booths. I remember we were out together in Kingaroy one night and Braggy had stepped into a phone box to take a leak. The guy in the booth at the time calling for a taxi wasn't too impressed - so Braggy did some Tae Kwan Do on the guy and helped him into the taxi when it arrived. 'Yeah he's had a bit much to drink, mate.'

We went and had a look at the Marine Corps Command Museum where you could buy T-shirts with slogans like: 'Nobody

Ever Drowned In Sweat', and 'My Son's A Marine.' The museum is on the Marine Corps Recruit Training Base and there are lots of big muscly guys jogging about. On the way out of town we had lunch at the Kansas City BBQ which was the location for the so called 'Sleazy Bar Scene' in *Top Gun* where they sing *Great Balls Of Fire*. The place is a pilot's bar, and the walls are covered with autographed pictures, *Top Gun* memorabilia, women's underwear, licence plates (including a full set of Australian plates), Navy uniform patches and posters of all kinds. One of the patches I noticed was an unofficial one commemorating the infamous Tailhook convention in Las Vegas. This event was the Navy's blackest hour in recent years where something like 85 women were assaulted at the Naval Aviator's convention. The



Braggy and me at the Kansas City BBQ (and that Indy car T-shirt)

uniform-patch had Bart Simpson saying: 'I didn't do it, nobody saw me do it, you can't prove anything. Tailhook '94 - Don't Blame Me I Wasn't There' More than a few careers were finished.

We bought a Kansas City BBQ T-shirt for our friend Stewart. We bought him a size FC just for good measure - Fat Chap. There was an old sailor at the bar taking his 'Vitamin L' - sucking on salt and sliced lemons with his beer - I wasn't going to pick a fight with him.

Melrose

On to the I-5 north and we were on our way to Los Angeles. We found our way to Hollywood and Beverly Hills and drove along Melrose Drive to get a photograph of 'Melrose Place' for Braggy's fiancée Karen. Melrose Drive is about as sexy as Logan Road - and runs through a similar cross-section of society. I took photographs of other Melrose locations that for various reasons did not make the cut as Soap Operas. There is Melrose Auto Repair which crashed during advance screenings, Melrose Car Wash was terminated during contract negotiations when David Hasselhoff demanded a stunt double for any scene involving washing or waxing, and finally (yes it gets worse) Melrose Tires, Wheels and Hubcaps which was canned when studio executives felt its plot would tend to go round in circles. Oh dear.



Melrose Car Wash. Where a football team of Mexicans brought the Mustang back to showroom condition.

Not that there's anything wrong with that

Whilst driving along Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood we spotted a tidy, unassuming motel with a vacancy. We drove in the front and realised that the cars were parked the other way - locals, as it turns out come in the back. I went up to the office and asked about a room. The guy was slightly feminine in his manner but I thought, 'Hey, I'm a caring, understanding, nineties type - I'm comfortable with this scene.' I thought nothing of it when he asked me to include my partner's name at the top of the registration form - you know partner as in 'howdy partner' and 'this is my partner Tex.' I smiled and he asked me if I'd like some magazines on the clubs and bars in the local area - you know clubs and bars as in the places where you go for a drink. As I'm walking back to the room I looked at the magazines. The first had two neat, thin single guys on the cover holding hands. The second had two chaps walking along the beach together and an article titled Gays of Our Lives. When I arrived at the room Braggy noticed my smile. As I struggled with the lock he looked in the window and said, 'there's only one bed in there.' Not that there's anything wrong with that. I have come a long way from the days of - don't make eye contact, and if you drop your wallet kick it all the way to the door before you bend over to pick it up. It was the cleanest hotel room I have ever been in. Positively lovely.

Hollywoodland

We hopped in the Mustang and drove up into the Hollywood Hills in search of the illusive though ubiquitous sign. The sign originally read 'HOLLYWOODLAND' and was advertising for a real estate development. Originally called the Cahuenga Valley, and decidedly void of both holly and woods, the area was principally the site of a ranch called 'Hollywood' and named for a friend's summer home on the east-coast. Filmmakers were attracted to the west-coast by the almost year round good weather that negated the need for expensive lighting. Only one studio has ever been set up in Hollywood itself. Locals were so upset by the slovenly studio personnel and daggy buildings of the Nestor Film Company that they enacted a law that forbade any more studios being built in Hollywood.

'Hollywood' is not, of course, a place. Nor is it a synonym for the entertainment business. There are upstanding citizens who make their living in that field. The real Hollywood is the reductio ad absurdum of personal liberty. It is ordinary men and women freed by money and social mobility to do anything they want unencumbered by family pressure, community mores, social responsibility, civic duty, or good sense. The entertainment business is a venue for Hollywood because heaps of money can be made by entertaining and because the public is famously tolerant of entertainers. Los Angeles is a site for Hollywood because, if all the freedom and money go blooey, it's warm enough to sleep on the beach.

Hollywood Etiquette – P.J. O'Rourke

We drove down into Beverley Hills and had a Chinese meal. We were the only ones in the restaurant near closing time. The old guy was folding fortune cookies on one of the back tables. Mine said 'you have exotic tastes', and Braggy's was 'you must broaden your horizons.' My stomach was still sore after watching the Simpsons and laughing up a hernia over the Man Hit In Groin By Football short film - it worked on so many levels.

Lost in LA

Keen to have a walk up Rodeo Drive and also to find the American Express Travel Service, Braggy and I drove down to Beverley Hills and parked in a giant shopping complex. There were escalators running down the side of the building from the car park to street level. There were two sides of the building with this feature, and after wandering aimlessly through the streets of Beverley Hills for 2 hours we realised I had mistaken one side for the other. I also realised that the Army had taught me quite a lot about leading people into disaster and maintaining my command presence. Braggy had complete confidence in me (as did I) for almost two hours. While waiting to cross the street and return to the shopping complex I spotted the Amex office over the road - it's a small world. We had bacon and eggs and practiced the cafe scene from Pulp Fiction that I had been teaching Braggy over breakfast for three weeks.

I bought myself a Buzz Lightyear action figure and a 'Yak Bak' from the toy store. The latter is a hand held digital recorder that records up to seven seconds of sound and retails for about \$5.00. It kept us amused for a surprisingly long time. I recorded, 'drink water you slack bastard' and replayed it the next time one of the Hollywood bums asked me for a quarter for a soda. Firm but undeniably fair. And not to miss the point, we decided to go and see Twister whilst in Hollywood.

Rebel

After lunch we headed up to the Griffith Park Observatory in the Hollywood Hills, and were asked directions in a traffic jam. Not being locals we were happy to direct the couple from Dallas to the Hollywood Freeway. Scenes from Rebel Without A Cause were filmed at the observatory, and there is a monument to James Dean in the gardens. Aside from that it is a very impressive structure and has an interesting museum. There is a Foucault pendulum that is suspended from the ceiling. The pendulum swings in a true plane and the earth rotates underneath, giving the pendulum the appearance of movement. It is an experiment that demonstrates the rotation of the earth. I have tried to read Foucault's Pendulum by Umberto Eco but it lost me - perhaps my brain was full at the time. I had a hot dog at the observatory cafe and was immediately sick. Braggy called the Qantas desk at LAX and decided to fly out that night (an incident unrelated to the hot dog). We drove out to Culver City near the airport and checked into the Wyndham Hotel. Braggy had a shave, shower and ironed a shirt. I showed him how to iron a box pleat. He had graciously although foolishly offered to pay for half the cost of the room.

Via Con Dios, Hose

We drove out to the airport and had an unconfirmed Mr. Miage sighting. I spoke with the Qantas girl who had never been to Australia, and drew her a map of the same with the capital cities. We had a beer downstairs on the same stools from three weeks ago and talked like old friends. When it was time to go we shook hands and I went and stood on the roof of the car park by myself. Airports have always made me sad and I was a long way from home so I let myself cry as I watched the landing lights of half a dozen jets as they lined up on approach over a black Pacific.

He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

The Great Gatsby – F. Scott Fitzgerald

When it was my turn to leave I paid our Berkeley parking fine by drawing a US money order from the LAX Post Office and then I gave the last of my greenbacks to a nun at the airport (or at least a woman dressed up as a nun). The parking fine has since been returned to me and stamped 'EXEMPT' - I don't know why. Now I have a \$27 money order that is only valid in the United States - my own little US currency speculation fund. I guess I'll have to go back and cash it someday. I arrived in Sydney about 9.30pm and rang all the phone numbers I know by heart - and nobody was home. I didn't feel so bad. After all in 1973 when Astronaut Alan Shepard returned home from his Apollo moon flight he had to let himself into his house with the spare key from under the pot plant. I arrived in Melbourne around midnight and got a big hug from my friend Suzanne. When we got back to the car she had a chocolate cake with a candle for my birthday two weeks before. **Email** jeffreypburns@hotmail.com