

# Beans and I on the Loose

A traveler and his cat exploring the back roads of America

Book Four

2020

## The Pandemic Year

By

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As if it really matters...

...and it's five, six, seven

Open up the pearly gates

Well there ain't no time to wonder why

Whoopee! we're all gonna die

*"I Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag"*

Country Joe and the Fish, 1965

# The Pandemic Year

## ARIZONA

During our stay in the Bureau of Land Management Long Term Camp Area of Quartzsite, Arizona for the winter of 2019/2020 I had set myself a few goals to accomplish. One I succeeded at, another was placed somewhat out of my control due to unexpected circumstances I would never have imagined, and the last was a failure of my own doing.

Let's begin with success. It was back in January 2018 while camping in the desert near the Colorado River at Ehrenburg, Arizona that one day I walked over to visit my neighbor Tim. Picture Santa Claus in the desert: big, long white hair with a bushy gray beard to match and wearing faded dusty ratty clothes. That was Tim. He was sitting outside his van reading on a tablet. I asked him about the device. It was a Paperwhite Kindle. Where this Kindle differed from others I had seen this one was backlit. There was no glare on the screen. You could read outdoors and the pages looked like those as if reading a paperback book, off white on color. Now this I liked. I went back to camp and ordered one from Amazon just like that. No taking several days to think about making the purchase or not which is my usual method of buying things. It arrived two days later at the local post office in Ehrenburg.

One of the first eBooks I downloaded—for free of course—on my new Kindle was *Spirit of the Road* by Rick Huffman. The author told the story of him going to school to learn how to drive a big rig truck and trailer and then taking his little cat along with him on cross-country hauls. It was a fun and interesting read where at the end Rick told a little bit about himself. He wrote that he had never written anything before let alone imagined himself self-publishing an eBook. But here it was. Well I thought to myself *if he can do it, why couldn't I?* And so a two-year long project was born.

I had the material from over sixteen years of blogging and journaling my travels. All I needed to do was put it all together. I started working on organizing my writings soon after reading his book. I began reviewing what I had, rewriting some, editing it (several times), proofreading it (several times more) and then finally take on the task of formatting the word documents for publishing. Upon arrival at Quartzite in the fall of 2019 I had four books pretty much ready to go after over a year and a half of fiddling with them. The above mentioned goal I set for myself was to get them published before hitting the road again in 2020. Easier said than done.

I read all I could about how to self-publish an eBook. I watched YouTube videos on the subject. In the end I didn't feel I had the confidence in doing the formatting myself. It was too technical for my limited computer skills. The previous winter I had met a lady camped near me who self-published her mystery eBooks. Remembering her I felt there must be other self-published eBook authors out here in the desert. I planned to put up some notices on bulletin boards at each camp area looking to pay someone who had done it before to do it for me. I did make contact with one woman who said she was a writer and told her what I had going and would she be interested in making some money. She got back to me saying she hadn't done any eBooks and was already spending way too much time in front of a computer for her work. She suggested a couple of online services. The previous searches I had already done online wanted way too much money and seemed to cater to the professional writer who was trying to make a living from their work. I just wanted something basic as I would be putting my books out there for free. But her suggestion got me looking online once again and I soon came upon word2kindle who looked promising

and was reasonably priced. They would not only format your word document but also design a cover for your eBook. I gave them a go with the first book and was very impressed with the final product. It was much more than I could have ever done myself. Well worth the money. I was very pleased. I followed through with the remaining three books. This alone took nearly three months doing one book at a time. That's all I could manage and keep sane. I'm the slow methodical type. I've got to think things out, take it step by step. They were very patient in working with me and my limited computer knowledge. By April I could check this goal off my list. I had all four books published on Smashwords (for free) and on Amazon (where I was forced to set a price—99 cents) and listed them on the sidebar of the blog where my followers could easily click for a free download.

The other goal was to meet someone to travel with. I had traveled with and spent months with a couple of women in the past and found their company much more preferable than with men. Men have a tendency to be full of themselves, egocentric and I don't give a toot about sports, baseball, football, basketball and so on. I had already had one unpleasant experience years earlier and I think it had soured me traveling with men. Most single female nomads I have met are out on the road leaving behind an unpleasant situation—a breakup with a boyfriend, an ugly divorce or the death of a spouse. Seeking a new relationship is the last thing on their minds. Here they were on their own on the road doing something they always dreamed of doing and loving it. I am not looking for a relationship. All I want is a friend, a nonphysical relationship which removes all pressure from the two of us; someone to travel and share the experience with, someone to join in on long walks, short hikes, and slow bicycles rides, plus have someone to go out to a restaurant with occasionally. I have a problem going to restaurants sitting there by myself. I needed to work on that, a lesser goal for the year I suppose.

The other thing I have learned from many of the women I have met in the past four years on the road full time is that they are, well I don't want to say poor, but are living on minimum means. They have to be careful with expenses. They had no career where a comfortable retirement plan was waiting for them. One day they woke up to find themselves a widow or left behind dumped for a woman many years younger or sadly and all too frequently got tired of the abuse and left. All their life they had been someone's daughter, someone's wife, someone's mother. Now they were someone for themselves and loving it and certainly didn't want some man mucking it up.

Being an introvert I like being alone. It keeps the confusion to the minimum. I work at being isolated when selecting camp places. This doesn't bode well as you can imagine if you are trying to meet someone. Being a bit of a recluse doesn't help any. But I have met women who are the same way themselves. They are out there, just a bit hard to find. I'm not shy and can easily approach someone to chat with. Naturally a solo woman is always on guard especially if approached by a man. I can sense it immediately. Within a minute after introducing myself they realize I'm just a harmless old man and I can always tell when the barrier comes down and they are relaxed. It has happened so many times now it has become sort of a game for me—how much time will elapse before they relax. Well circumstances I never would have dreamed of in the beginning of the year would soon sink opportunities to fulfill that hopefully planned goal. Thus this was the failure not of my own doing.

Lastly I wanted to get back into my pen and ink art. I had an unfinished drawing sitting there in the motor home for three years now. I was very disappointed in myself. My only excuse was working on the eBooks took time away from my art. I felt now having the books published I'd once again pick up an ink pen for drawing pictures more often instead of writing words. Check the FAILED box on that one.

## Playing Musical Camps

There are four Long Term Visitor Area camps at Quartzsite. At these the visitor pays a \$180 permit fee which is good from September 15 through April 15. For this fee you can disperse camp wherever you please. Each camp has dumpsters for trash and only one has water and free dumping of waste tanks which those staying at the other three camps are entitled to use. In previous years I always stayed at the free 14-day stay camps which there are five of around the area. As the name implies, you can stay for only fourteen days and then must move on. Last year was the first time I tried the LTVA angle and I liked it. I would do this from now on each year.

When we arrived in Quartzite at the first of October 2019 I drove on down to La Posa South LTVA to fill with water before settling down at one of the other sites closer to town. Pulling in I saw a notice on the kiosk building door where you purchased your permit. It seems the company that made the permit stickers hadn't delivered yet so you were unable to obtain one. The notice stated you were welcome to stay and they should arrive in a week or so. I went on in, filled my water tank and seeing that hardly anyone was here yet decided to just stay there until the permits showed up. I selected a nice area far from anyone else and parked. It felt good to be "home". A few days later my first neighbor showed pulling in and parking their trailer a couple hundred yards distant, just far enough away. It was an old man and lady from Idaho in what looked like a brand new trailer. In fact everything they had looked new. I watched them pulling gear out from boxes unwrapping it all. They stumbled along trying to figure things out in setting everything up from a fence corral for their little dog to a big tent for which what purpose they needed a tent I could never figure out. Hooking up the brand new sewer hose to the brand new portable sewage holding tank was a spectacle to watch. The first attachment of the hose led to a back splash of sewage that drenched the old guy's clothing and he evidently got some in his face and eyes. I missed the actual explosion but I certainly heard it. And this proved to be the first problem with me and neighbors for the year. The woman, besides being one of the ugliest of women I have ever seen was volatile crazy. She would yell, scream and curse at her poor brow-beaten husband constantly. He was meek as a mouse and took this abuse without a word. "You (blank) stupid moron, you (blank) idiot" and so on with every other word a foul curse word only a drunken sailor could match. Sometimes she would let loose on their little dog as if it had any idea what she was ranting about. I was growing weary of this when a couple days later Mr. Toys and More from Minnesota arrived. He had a big-rig truck tractor which he pulled their humungous six-wheeled fifth wheel toy hauler trailer behind. I couldn't believe all the crap he unloaded out from the back of that trailer: one full size Harley Davidson motorcycle, a smaller dirt bike motorcycle, a small ATV and then a big ATV plus two bicycles. Then there were three very large solar panels that he leaned up on the back of the truck against the cab. He set up two large shade structures, several tables, wheeled out a huge master chef barbeque, a half a dozen chairs and an untold number of plastic crates that no doubt held more much needed essential crap. This was all fine and very entertaining to watch until he started up his music. I didn't want to be hearing that. Mr. Toys and More provided me with the incentive to pack up and move away from bat-shit crazy lady.

Moving for me isn't a problem. I can do so in fifteen to twenty minutes if I don't have to load up the Honda Trail 90 and that's what I did this time. I walked on down a few hundred yards and found a nice spot where I couldn't hear Mr. Music Man. I walked back, threw things together in the RV and moved it to our new spot. Then I went back for *Gracie* and rode the motorbike on down to the RV and our new homesite. All done. Alas this spot didn't last long. Nearby generators droning on accompanied by barking dogs soon had me moving once again, this time a mile further on. There I found a nicely landscaped spot

done so by previous campers in years past. This one would do nicely for several weeks being away from the ever growing hub-bub of new incoming snowbirds. We stayed there until after Christmas when some people from California finally moved in. They had a generator although it wasn't really a loud obnoxious one but it was very mildly purring along annoyingly. I'd wake up in the morning to that thing humming away and go to sleep at night the same way. But when one day they drove off for the day and left the damn generator going, that was it. Time to move. Plus I was ready for some new scenery anyway.

After topping off the water, going into town for propane and grocery shopping I returned but moved over to Tyson Wash LTVA on the other side of the highway from La Posa South. There was a lot of real estate over there much of it without anyone in sight. I set up in a nice flat area and immediately realized how much quieter it was there. At the old camp I was hearing the distant crunching of tires on the gravel road from people going back and forth filling up water and dumping tanks and trash. I just had grown used to hearing it. This new area was much nicer although with less entertainment. It lasted eleven days.

Three trailers moved in too close. If I can hear you talk, that's too close. There are acres and acres of open desert here, why right there? Shortly another showed up in a big fifth wheel towing an ATV. I was going to give it until morning but I knew I'd just brood about it. I hopped on *Gracie* and went to scout out a new site. I found one not too far away so just parked *Gracie* and walked back to retrieve camp. When I returned two more units had arrived all circled about like the old wagon trains. Not a solar panel one among them. Generators would be in full harmony by evening. I broke camp and pulled out to the sound of barking dogs. Yep, I was glad to be moving and would sleep well that night.

We stayed at this camp for a month while the world was slowly coming off the rails. A lot of people had move on by March, many coming for the big RV show and sales, gem show and other attractions of January and February. We moved up the dirt road a mile towards town which placed us in the center of the Tyson Wash LTVA where the dumpsters were. This is where the more dedicated long-term campers were scattered about yet still leaving enough space to be somewhat isolated. I could at least go for walks now within a community of sorts having something different to see. This camp would eventually become known as Camp Quarantine and would be our final move.

Michelle

I had recently got involved with a traveler website called RVillage. People would post all types of topics about RV life and travel. The site allowed you to establish where you were in the country so others nearby may contact you to meet and make friends. And so that is how I met Michelle while over at the nicely landscaped camp in La Posa South. She had posted on the site about the water leak in her brand new trailer. Seeing she was near where I was camped I sent her a message offering to take a look at her problem. I figured it was a simple connection at her water pump for the leak only occurred when she turned on the faucet. She checked out my profile on the site, saw I was just an old geezer and said sure, drop on by. So I walked over to her new Starcraft trailer about a half mile distant. She came out, said hello and locked on to my hiking stick. "Oh, that's what I need."

Michelle was in her fifties and had a couple disabilities plus a little yappy dog that soon settled down when it realized I wasn't a threat. She had bought the trailer new with warranty and as so often happens the manufacturer all but completely ignored her inquiries about various problems with the rig. I have heard these stories so many times. I always encourage people just starting out to buy used, preferably a year or so old. By then the previous owner has taken care of all the issues that surfaced in the first few trips out on the road. She said someone else looked for the leak but couldn't locate the water pump telling

her he'd have to cut a hole in the floor from up underneath. So for weeks she had been hauling in water in jugs never using her plumbing at all. That's unacceptable. I asked if I could come in and take a look. This had to be an easy fix—perhaps a loose connection on the output side of the water pump. I got down on the floor, opened the little cubby compartment under the sink where I could hear the water pump churning. Unbelievably there was no access to the plumbing. It was completely boarded off by the back of the cabinet. Not even any screws to undo a panel. Who builds an RV without providing access to the plumbing? Starcraft for one. In *The Little House on the Highway* I can pop off a panel underneath the closet (no screws needed) and see my water pump, hoses, wiring and water tank. Incredible. "I'm sorry Michelle. I'd have to destroy the backside of the cabinet to get to the water pump and fix that line back to it." She said not to worry as she didn't mind hauling water in one gallon jugs. I felt bad. If it were my trailer I'd cut a hole in the back and fix it up to be able to access all the time. Here is another thing with some of the women I meet on the road. Some are fixer-uppers and some just don't have that ability. But they will in time. It'll come out of necessity.

Christmas was approaching and I had an idea. I dug out the half a dozen hiking stick projects I had been carrying around for a couple years now, selected one, cleaned it up, sanded it and applied a coat of Tung oil to it. Then one morning I could see far away Michelle driving off in her truck. Probably to go fill water jugs no doubt. I walked over with the finished hiking stick complete with a strip of masking tape on it where I had written: MERRY CHRISTMAS. I leaned the stick against her trailer by the door. Soon she returned and I watched through binoculars. She walked up, saw the stick, picked it up, looked around and took it inside. A couple times later over our time at that location I visited but she never asked about the stick. She had no idea where it came from.

Time to Straighten Up and Fly Right or in other words Get Your Shit Together John!

One day towards the end of February I was sitting at the table working on an eBook when I got very dizzy thinking I'd pass out. I didn't but I was very shaky, weak, had no energy, all symptoms of being hypoglycemic. I had been eating crappy for some time now. I would start each morning with a honey oat granola bar with my coffee. Breakfast most often was a processed breakfast cereal combination with one of the cereals being a honey oat bran. I'd drink a small soda (7.5 oz. Mountain Dew, Dr. Pepper, Pepsi) everyday especially when I was running down and needed a boost. My afternoon tea would always be accompanied with a sugary pastry of some sort filled with so many mystery ingredients that they didn't need a *best by* date on the packaging. I'd have a fruit juice drink with every dinner. A before bed snack would be a chocolate brownie, or vanilla wafer cookies or something sweet. Now I was scared. I did the research and learned what I needed to do—cut out all sugars and start eating healthier. Plain and simple.

I went through my stores on board and set out all the poison foods I had. I hate throwing food away. I boxed up a large amount and set the box out on the ground by the dumpsters near camp. I wrote a note on the box: *Food inside. Had to get rid of all sugars. Doctor's orders.* ☹ An hour or so later the entire box was gone. I was glad someone took it all instead of just picking through it. I kept leaving items in a plastic bag as I found them over the next few days. Nothing went to waste. In the meantime I went into town and did a big shopping spree buying up healthy foods including more fruits and vegetables. One of the recommended breakfast items was Greek nonfat plain yogurt. *Oh well, I'll try it.* The first day I added some raisins and peanuts to three big tablespoons of yogurt. *Okay, here it goes* and I took the first bite. *Oh, that's not bad at all. I can do this!*



One night I woke up at 1AM and felt really bad. This issue had been on my mind for a few days already so naturally I'm lying there thinking the worse trying to decide what to do. I have Kaiser Health. The nearest Kaiser facility was in Indio, Ca. 116 miles west from where we were. There were clinics in Blythe, Ca. I had already checked. Would they accept Kaiser? If I decided to go, could I even make it that far? I didn't want to go. I didn't want to be around all those sick people. Hospitals are germ factories. What if they keep me? What if I get worse? All of this worry focused on Beans. She needs me. I can stagger out into the parking lot and feed her. Crawl if I need to. I don't want her in the care of someone else. She would think I abandoned her. I don't care about me. I care about Beans. I'm scared, not for me but her. Oh the sacrifices we will make for our pets. I had already written to my ex that I had an issue. The next morning, thankfully still alive, I texted her: *If anything every happened to me would you take in Beans and care for her?* Typical response from her were questions. What is the matter? Are you worse? *Could you please just answer the question?* "Yes". Just her saying yes knowing that Beans would be safe in a good home that she's familiar with was a tremendous relief to me. My eyes got watery. I could drive the six hundred plus miles to the house if it killed me.

I was over reacting to all of this. I haven't had a runny nose or sore throat in well over ten years. The last illness I ever had was at this time eleven years ago when the wife gave me a flu bug that morphed into pneumonia requiring two visits to the emergency room. I needed to realign my thinking. Things go a bit out of whack and my world is coming to an end. I've been out here in the desert in years past when my neighbors had heart attacks! That afternoon I felt much better since this thing started a week earlier and this was the third day into my new eating plan. I walked to the dumpster then continued on for a brisk walk. I was back! Just like old times! I felt the best I had for the past ten days. I still had my moments. I was still learning.

So all of this brought me to a decision that needed to be made: do I want to do what I had planned when leaving here? I was thinking of driving east through New Mexico, on into Texas and maybe revisit the South. Now I just didn't feel like it. I felt like I didn't have the energy or simply had lost the enthusiasm. I used to hike and bike every day. Slowly this winter that happened less and less. Yet I was feeling good...considering, I look at so many around me everyday and they just scream "poor health". Then I think they must feel worse than I do yet they carry on. *Deal with it and quit your sniveling John. You're getting older. This is part of it.* One lady I tried to give my applesauce to said "No thank you. I have to be careful with sugars". *Yeah, that's why I'm trying to get rid of it.* She laughed and we talked sugars for a bit. She was 73 and told me "You will always be adjusting. Get used to it. You'll be fine." Maybe in a month when it gets closer to the time I planned to leave I'd be more into it.

Then the COVID-19 Wuhan virus pandemic madness hit.

It all started out with someone in Wuhan, China eating a bowl of bat soup or a pangolin burger if we are to believe what we read in the media. Well I guess we are for soon a cruise ship is waylaid in the Far East due to infected passengers on board. Then the virus makes its way into the U.S and other countries and soon thereafter pandemonium breaks out. People panic and begin hoarding with toilet paper becoming the most sought after commodity. Store shelves are wiped clean of all paper products. A long-term supply of toilet paper wasn't a concern for me. Before arriving in Quartzsite I stopped at a Walmart outside of Phoenix to stock up on supplies that would be unobtainable in little Quartzsite over the winter. Toilet paper wasn't one of those but I grabbed a four pack anyway just because. You can imagine my disgust sometime later when I broke into that package discovering I had mistakenly bought single-ply

toilet paper! Who uses single-ply toilet paper these days? I didn't even know they still made it. Several months later as I write this I am still working on that very first roll of single-ply toilet paper. A roll of single-ply toilet paper seems to last forever. My mistake turned out to be blessing in disguise. Back to the downfall of life and we knew it. What followed next was the government, state and federal, enacted stay-at-home policies. Schools close, stores and restaurants close, public events are canceled and entire states go into lockdown mode. Everyone is ordered to shelter in place, practice social distancing (six feet away from each other), and impose a self-isolation quarantine. Parents begin to home school their children and in a very short time earn a deep respect for teachers and what they have to do with thirty kids every day. If at all possible businesses allow their employees to work from home. Other businesses simply have to lay off personnel meaning no income for employer or employee. Unemployment claims skyrocket. Nation's economies are severely shaken. I asked Beans what she thought. *Social distancing? Ha, cats invented that.* Basically, during the pandemic we had all become cats. We avoid people, stay indoors, stare out windows, get bored, take naps. Yep, we were all cats now.

The only item I was in need of were paper towels. I checked in stores for days and weeks before finally a small supply appeared on the shelf at Family Dollar. A sign was taped to the shelf ONE PER CUSTOMER. My real concern lay with food for Beans. Junk food such as Friskies, Nine Lives and Fancy Feast always seemed available, but I get Beans quality grain free cat food. After a tip from a lady working at Petco in Idaho over the previous summer I had made the switch to Tiki Cat which she loves. It is a bit pricey but only the best for my Beans. In Quartzsite I was able to order it online from Amazon or Chewy and it would be delivered at the mail drop in town by United Parcel. Only thing was the mail drop would shut down for the season at the end of March. I made an order (a few hundred dollars worth) and completely filled the storage compartment under the dinette seat with Beans food. And in a worst case scenario she can always munch on my moldering body after I expire from the coronavirus.

I had friends check in to see how we were doing during this lock down stay-at-home crisis. Being an introvert out in the middle of the Arizona desert, nothing had changed. Sheltering in place, social distancing, self isolation...this was a normal every day to day life style for me and many of those out here in the desert. We wouldn't even know anything was going on if it weren't for the out of control news media, which I felt was the root of many of our problems in society.

As of March 20 the World Health Organization and the Center for Disease Control reported 26,686 confirmed cases of the coronavirus in the United States with 340 deaths. In comparison the figures for your garden variety flu cases for the flu season (we were in week 11 for the season at that point) stood at "...at least 38 million flu illnesses, 390,000 hospitalizations and 23,000 deaths from flu". The only thing I saw here was a higher percentage of death rate for COVID-19. A large majority of those deaths the patient had preexisting health issues and was elderly. So why all the hysteria, hoarding and pandemonium over the coronavirus? What was I missing here? All I could find out was that this new virus was a bit more easily contracted. To me all this panic was the result of the news media stirring up a frenzy. I did some more research, put out the question on the blog. What I found out was the fact that with so much unknown about the virus there was no way to treat it. In short order hospitals and health personnel were overwhelmed with cases. There were not enough beds or ventilators. And because of public hoarding doctors and nurses didn't even have masks available to them. Although the real killer here seemed to be the more commonly reported influenza A(H1N1)pdm09 virus if you consider only the numbers but the fact was the COVID-19 was of more concern.

So the global pandemic made me reevaluate our plans. The situation in some states went so far as to implement a stay in place travel ban. There was now no need to move on. We'd stay put doing our part to

curb this epidemic. Our long term visitor paid stay of \$180 was good through to April 15. I now planned to stay beyond that until the weather became too hot then move up north to higher elevations. That or the authorities ran us off before the heat moved in.

Faye

I was tooling around on the motorbike one day and met a lady from Oregon, Faye. She was probably in her fifties. She was fun to talk with. She once had a large class A RV, very nice with all of the finest accessories and features. But she couldn't drive it for a couple reasons one being "I've got a bad eye I don't see out of too well." Although she didn't come out and say it I suspect maybe she had a husband at one time and he died, or left or whatever. Anyway she sold the big motor home and now she had a smaller 1997 class C around twenty-three feet long, the "piece of junk" she called it. She was comparing it to what she once had for otherwise it was fine except for a few leaks when it rained. She only had it for six months at this point so it was a matter of readjusting. I finally got her to admit that she liked it as it was easier to drive, a lot simpler without all the fancy gadgets and gizmos and a long to-do check list before she could drive away.

She had an online business of some sort so had brought along her business with her which was in twenty large plastic crates. "I don't know what I was thinking. They take up so much room I can't sleep in the bed. I've been sleeping on the dinette table (they make into a bed for kids or guests whom you don't want to stay for very long) and that isn't comfortable let me tell you. Plus with all that extra weight my gas mileage is horrible and I can barely climb mountains. People are lined up behind me thinking 'that old grandpa shouldn't be driving.'" Faye was funny.

Faye was typical of most all who start out on the road full time making poor decisions and bringing way too much stuff along. I did the same thing. She was sitting outside having just finished her breakfast which she had cooked on an ancient camp stove of the like I had never seen one before. I think it should have been in the Smithsonian Institute. "I picked it up at a garage sale for \$15. Afterwards I discovered for \$5 more I could have bought a brand new Coleman stove!" This made me wonder why she wasn't using the stove inside the RV. Perhaps a couple plastic crates of her business were stacked up on it. Or maybe she just liked cooking out of doors the old fashioned way.

Then there was her bus story. She wanted to go to West Palm Beach, Florida to visit a brother. She figured it out what it would cost her to drive the 'piece of junk' there from Arizona. It had cost her eight hundred dollars just to get down from Oregon so she knew she was looking at close to a thousand dollars. Then she'd had to drive back. Another thousand dollars. She got the bright idea of taking the Greyhound bus for a two hundred eighty dollar ticket. She would leave the 'piece of junk' parked in storage somewhere in town and catch the bus from the Pilot truck stop here in Quartzsite. Then she thought about it..."What was I thinking? Being in a bus for several days with all this virus stuff going on!" She tried to cancel her ticket and get her money back. Greyhound wouldn't refund her money but would give her a ride at a later date within a year's time. She picked a date—November 20. "Why did I do that? I don't want to go to Florida in November." She called Greyhound again and went on a mild rant about being stuck in the desert, unable to travel because of the coronavirus and having recently had open heart surgery not all that long ago, plus being half blind and on and on "...making up things and embellishing upon others a lot". They gave Faye her refund. "I plan to leave Greyhound a nice review for that."

Yep, traveling with Faye would be a hoot.

## Jasper and Alicia

How I met Faye came about my looking for someone else I had met months earlier. I had been riding around on my motorbike when I came upon a woman standing among the sagebrush supervising her cat who was wandering about sniffing everything. I stopped the bike, parked it and slowly approached the two. I could see the *what does this idiot want* look on the woman's face. I introduced myself by saying "I'm a cat guy and saw your cat. I had to stop." She relaxed and the cat wandered away. Then I saw a second cat and she informed me that there was a third one around somewhere. The other two cats weren't interested in me but this second one was. He cautiously approached me, checked me out and then turned away to continue his exploring. "His name is Jasper." Jasper's mom's name was Alicia and she was there camping out of her minivan. She had two small cheap Walmart tents set up which she explained were just a place for her and the cats to hang out in. Jasper was a grey and white tuxedo cat and she told me his story.

The first year of Jasper's life he was being raised as "bait" for pit bull training. People—I shouldn't refer to them as people for they are below such standard—take young cats and throw them to pit bull dogs where they are savagely torn apart as a training tool. I had to stop Alicia there. I had never heard of such a thing and wish I never had. Jasper was lucky for he somehow escaped from this horrific fate. He was eventually rescued from street life and Alicia adopted him. She already had two cats, Sasha and I don't recall the other's name. When Jasper was introduced to his new family he was understandably extremely aggressive to the other cats and Alicia. There was hissing, scratching, biting and blood. You couldn't fault Jasper none for his behavior. Everyone including her vet said he was hopeless but Alicia didn't give up on him. Jasper was now six years old when I met him and she said he was a cuddler and lover. Jasper walked back to me while we were visiting. He allowed me to pet him and then wandered off again. Alicia was surprised to see this. "He's never let anyone pet him before." Jasper came back a third time, gave me a couple of head butts and rubbed against my legs. Alicia was astonished. "Cats like me. What can I say?"

So now I had returned to where they were camped for a visit. There was a tent there, only one, and no car. That's how I met Faye as I asked her if her neighbor was in a minivan and had cats. Faye wasn't sure as she hadn't seen anyone around since she had pulled in a couple days previously. I never saw Alicia or Jasper again.

## The Ten Day War

It was now the nearing April and the word was the quarantine lockdown, self-isolation, social distancing would carry on to May. I by now had moved across the road a couple weeks earlier to a less traffic prone spot. I unknowingly moved into rat neighborhood. One day Beans got into a scuffle under the RV and came out with a desert rat in her mouth. I popped the hood and saw two more rats scrambling for cover. One was very big just sitting there staring at me with his large black beady eyes and the other a juvenile was trying to get a foothold back up next to dad. Some damage had been done to the insulation under the hood and a wire was chewed. I wasn't happy. Beans gave up tormenting the rat and I grabbed it by the tail with my grabber tongs. Not knowing what else to do I slung it to the ground. After a couple of leg spasms it died. I figured it to be the mom. I set up a standard mouse trap and my live catch trap. A day or two passed with sprung traps but no rats. *Rats!* Then the following morning the mouse trap was sprung, bait eaten and no rat. The live trap had sprung too. A peek inside showed it to be the younger rat. I'm

pissed at the added damage to the insulation, stuffing being pulled out and piled up on the engine. Okay, it's not his fault for the bad habits of his parents. I took the juvenile for a ride and released him. "Git! It's your lucky day." Two down, one to go.

I went back to resetting traps. Every morning they were sprung with no rat and more damage. It's impossible to spring the live trap and not get caught inside but he was doing it somehow. Other times the bait was gone and the trap unsprung. This was aggravating to say the least. I had to duct tape the standard death mouse trap onto the engine for I'd find it underneath the RV, bait gone, trap sprung. Every day I'm getting madder. Every day there was more damage.

After nearly a week of this I went to look for poison bait. No stores had any. I settled for rat size glue boards. I taped them down to the engine and battery and reset the other two traps. Next morning the traps were sprung and bait gone. The glue boards were untouched. Can I get more frustrated? The next night I removed the traps and went with the glue boards only. I also repaired the damage to the hood insulation. The following morning he had left little green leaves in the glue on one board and did major damage to insulation around the air ducts, creating a large enough hole Beans could crawl through. If that wasn't enough he ripped off my entire metal duct tape repair job. It was his big FUCK YOU! to me. I gave up. He won the war. I packed up and moved away removing the one glue board taped to the engine with all the greenery and leaving the board on the battery in place. I was done and drove away defeated.

All settled at our new camp up the road a mile Beans heard something up front. I too heard scrambling. "Shit! I brought the bastard with me!" I popped the hood and found a long furry rat tail stuck to the glue board on top of the battery. Redemption! For all the damage he caused me, I now had cause irreparable damage to him. I can only imagine he chewed his stuck tail off or it broke off like a lizard's tail, I don't know. I removed all the undamaged insulation around the air duct thus eliminating further temptation. I decided to quit setting up the traps for I was only just feeding him, encouraging him to hang around. Remove the food and maybe he'll move on. Several days later it appeared he had and we moved back down the road to what we would call Camp Quarantine, a short distance from the rat home.

Samantha

One day I rode *Gracie*, my 1972 Honda Trail 90 motor bike, four miles south of us to check out the free 14-day camp area at Road Runner in case we had to move after April 15 when our time ran out where we were in Camp Quarantine. There weren't many people there—usually never is. That is why I like Road Runner. Tooling around I was surprised to see Samantha was still there. I had met Samantha a couple of months earlier at the very same spot. She had a ginger cat named Sprout and I saw it wandering around. If you have a cat you can expect me to come and see it. So that is how we met.

Samantha was from Georgia and I'd guess to be early sixties in age. Hard to tell for she'd been out in the desert for months already before I met her. Like many solo women I meet out on the road she was running away from something, in her case her dysfunctional family. "I'm thinking about changing my name to make it even more difficult for them to find me." She was living out of her little black Nissan Cube and had next to nothing for a camp except a camp chair sitting outside. She also had a little dog. I stopped to visit keeping social distancing intact at ten feet apart.

She was getting ready to go into town for some ice. I told her about my recent foray into town and the harrowing experience in Family Dollar. There had been a lady ahead of me in the checkout line wearing a mask, one of the good ones, an n95 mask. Just as I was finishing at the register some guy behind me in the line started coughing and hacking. I grabbed my bags and bolted for the door. As I was loading the

motorbike the lady with the mask came back from her RV returning the shopping cart. I told her "We got out of there just in time" adding about the cougher in line. She said "That's why I am wearing this" pointing to her mask. Boy I wish I had one of those I quipped. As I was finishing up loading my purchases she came back from her RV to gift me a mask! Not an n95 like hers but it was a kind gesture on her part nevertheless. I appreciated it. "Oh you're a sweetheart!" I would have given her a hug but we're social distancing remember.

"Yeah, I wish I had one" Samantha said. "All I have is this bandanna" pointing to one wrapped around her neck. "Ever since I have been out here in the desert I quit wearing my bra. I'm going to cut off one of the cups and use it for a mask and cover that with the bandanna." No, I didn't laugh. I thought it a good idea. Even just what that lady gave me, your typical dust mask, wasn't ideal but it was a hell of a lot better than nothing. I planned to cover my new mask with a bandanna also. I was even thinking of sticking an antibacterial wipe between the mask and bandanna. If nothing else it would show that we are serious so just stay back and don't invade our space!

I think it had been quite awhile since Samantha had last talked with someone. She was just going off rapid fire with stories and things to say. I wished I had a recording for it was all good material for the journal. I too was once guilty of that. A couple years back at a little reservoir in Arizona a lady, Lana was her name, came over to our camp. We got to talking and later on I realized it was if I had been vaccinated by a phonograph needle. I apologized to her the next day for being a little Chatty Cathy. "I just haven't talked to anyone for weeks and weeks." She laughed and thought it cute. Since then I always try to curb my enthusiasm when meeting someone after a long dry spell.

## Coping with COVID-19

Our paid for time to stay at the long term camp would soon expire on April 15. I wondered if we would be allowed to "shelter in place, self-isolate and quarantine ourselves" as the rest of the nation was doing. Or would the BLM Rangers come by and ask us to abide by policy and obtain a summer permit—\$75—or leave. I decided I would leave by moving on down the dirt road a few miles to Road Runner where I had camped in years past. That day when I scouted the area finding not very many campers there I figured it would be a good plan with only a few extra miles to ride the motorbike into town for groceries. I would make the move when I next had to go into town to fill the propane tank. Nevertheless I agonized over what would play out for several days as the fifteenth approached. I talked with neighbors or rode around stopping by to visit with some I knew were veteran long time visitors to the area. "Have you ever stayed past the fifteenth before? What are you planning on doing? Have you heard any definite action the BLM would take under these uncertain times?" No one knew anything. We'd just stand there—six feet apart—and hash out rumors and conjectures. I always ended up wishing I hadn't asked for it only fueled my concerns. Then April 15 came and went.

One day I went for a two and a half mile walk out to the entrance station on the highway. A BLM Ranger pulled in as I walked by. I gave him a wave with my hiking stick in a non-threatening manner mind you. I couldn't see if he acknowledge me or not due to the heavily tinted windows. He just drove on through ignoring the squatters along his route. I decided then they weren't planning to take any action. There had to be several hundred campers scattered around among the four LTVAs. I would go with Plan B. When I had to go into town for propane and a few supplies I would just come back to Camp Quarantine. I would leave the bike and camp gear at camp instead of packing up and moving to Road Runner. None of my neighbors within sight had moved on. I would stay at Camp Quarantine as long as

possible and let this virus play out everywhere. I had resigned myself to the fact that I would never get it in my head that everyone out there in the country is bored out of their minds and way worse off than I was. It was an incomprehensible fact for me. And so I continued thinking I was wasting time and should be traveling on down the road living my dream. It was taking a lot of self-discipline, something I'm normally good at but failing miserably at now.

A few days later the propane was in the red zone. I was going to push it another day or two before breaking camp and go fill it up. The next morning I decided to just do it and get it over with. I went to Patties, a little RV Park in town to do so. That would be better than going to the Union 76 station then having to go into the minimart to pay and be around people. The RV park had a little booth right by the pump. No one else was there. Nice. The tank took eleven gallons and capacity is eleven point two so it was good I didn't put it off another day.

Then it was across the street to Family Dollar. Only a couple cars were in the parking lot. Better than nice. I filled my four fresh water drinking jugs at the Geyser water machine outside and put the jugs back in the RV. Then I geared up to enter the biohazard zone. I went with using a bandana alone due to little to no people present. Still there were no baby wipes to be had. On around the corner all along the back wall where toilet paper usually resided it was bare shelving but there were a couple dozen paper towel packages—one per customer. *I'll take that.* I picked up a big box of kitty litter as I cannot do so on the bike. The news had been touting an impending meat shortage so I looked and saw some chicken patties and sausage loafs. *I'd better get it while the getting is good.* Still there were no frozen hamburger patties. They had been missing for over a month only exceeded by toilet paper and baby wipes by months longer. I selected a couple other dinner items plus a dozen eggs and felt okay with my purchases as I found most everything on my list. Next stop was Roadrunner, the small grocery store down the street. There I bought two boxes of cereal, two onions, a package of turkey lunch meat and a bunch of green bananas. I had a good supply yet of yogurt and cottages cheese so I passed on them. Still there were no bagels but I scored on them last time. I decided to get a carton of beer for the warming up of weather later in the month. I am not much of a beer drinker. I gave it up long ago. But I discovered a couple years back while in Washington these Budweiser Lite Cheladas sitting in a cool mountains stream. They were tasty and so beer was once back on my menu for the summer months only. I can get them in little mini 8oz. cans which is all I want. One can along with a handful of Doritos makes for a nice later afternoon snack. I'm a lightweight when it comes to alcohol anyway. And then I found these frozen hamburger patties which I did not know the store carried. I had been buying them at Family Dollar while far away from Walmart stores where I usually bought them. I was very happy with this find for now I could have my weekly tacos every Sunday. I walked out the store with a smile hidden behind my bandanna. Now for the short drive back home to Camp Quarantine. *Hmm...should I go to the other end of town and check out Dollar General. Why not? I have nothing else to do.* I don't usually go to Dollar General for it is out of the way, always crowded and doesn't seem to have as many food items. Like Family Dollar I found only a couple cars in the lot when I arrived. Good deal. I walked in and turned for the baby products aisle finding the shelves empty except for *what is that one item sitting there way in back by itself?* I pulled it out and it was a bundle of five packs of Pampers Sensitive wipes! *Really?!* I read the package over several times making sure it wasn't diapers or something else. *Nope, says wipes.* Unbelievable! This was like winning the lottery. I use these wipes each evening to wipe down all over in place of a shower or bath. It is what nomads do to conserve water. Awesome!

I left there feeling really great with my good fortune and after having my breakfast I felt like I had gone over the hump. I felt good about staying as long as possible. I had no more thoughts I was wasting

time or that I should be doing something else. With the prospect of no Rangers hassling us, finding hamburger patties and most of all those precious baby wipes was all it took to bring me to a level of acceptance and peace. Like the propane guy said "Right here is about one of the best places to be in the country until this thing plays out." So with everything right in the world (my world at least) I set up my small sunshade and would just live each day as it came. Temperatures were supposed to be in the nineties in a few days on out for the rest of April. We would be fine. I would much rather deal with ninety degree weather than forty degree bone-chilling conditions.

But that was to change soon, all too soon.

## CALIFORNIA

In a few days the weather forecast took a drastic change. Predictions were to be rising temperatures all the next week breaking though into the hundred plus range for the last weekend of April. Could we manage? The days were tolerable but not pleasant. Each day more people would leave. Was it foolish for us to stay? Beans would seek cool places inside, hyperventilating. I didn't like seeing that. Thinking of it only becoming eight or more degrees hotter for the next five days straight I finally decided we need to move on. The following morning in no great hurry I loaded up the bike and put gear away while Beans hung out by her tree looking for lizard friends to terrorize. Finally it was time. It was sad for me to take Beans away from her tree. She knew. She didn't want to leave either. I felt so bad for her as she was eyeing a lizard. My neighbor Theresa hadn't returned that night from wherever she went each afternoon. She still hadn't showed by the time we pulled out from Camp Quarantine at 9 AM. I dropped off four gallon jugs full water by the dumpster for anyone who wanted them and deposited the trash. I then drove on down to the Road Runner 14-day stay camp. I wanted to know if Samantha was still there in her little black Nissan Cube cooking in the sun. My goodness she was still there! All by herself with a little dog and Sprout the cat. How does she do it? No shade of any type, just parked there on the hard rocky ground out in the open. She had to be baking. Then I drove back north and over to the other long term camp across the highway. I noticed three hardcore desert rats had left my area in Tyson Wash and saw even more had left from over at La Posa South. I didn't feel so much like a wuss now. From there it was on into town for apples, oranges and yogurt at Roadrunner grocery. I said goodbye until next year to the checkout lady. "Drive safe. I'll be here when you come back." Last year when I left she had her arm in a cast. Imagine doing checkout one armed.

We got rolling heading west. In twenty miles we crossed the Colorado River and hit the border agriculture check point in California. I had agonized over this moment for weeks. What kind of restrictions would I be facing entering California? Would I be questioned extensively, put into a fourteen day quarantine—especially since I had South Dakota license plates, a state that wasn't observing much of any type of quarantine. *Well, here we go Beans.* I pulled up to the kiosk in my lane and there was no one there! I glanced over and the inspector lady in the next lane wearing a mask was waving me on. Geez Louise! I wanted to talk to someone and see what I was in for in driving north the length of the state. All that concern and fretting for nothing.

Claire my GPS girl had routed us through the Los Angeles basin (she always enjoys messing with me) a route that I would avoid by all means. Usually I go through the high desert north of the cesspool. But I thought about it and heck, we're in the middle of a global pandemic and everyone is in lockdown, traffic



should be next to nothing. "Let's have an adventure and follow Claire's lead Beans. What do you think?" No comment.

So as I figured (hoped) the drive was fine. I enjoyed the ever changing scenery just putzing along at 57 miles per hour. At a rest stop nearing Indio for lunch I saw only a few people wearing a mask including the worker emptying trash cans. Rest stops are entertaining for people watching. Travelers from Oregon parked next to us just to leave a brand new head of lettuce and bag of potatoes on the table for anyone who wanted them. I went and checked. Oh, it's cabbage. Not interested. She loses her Cadillac owner's manual supplement under the car and they drive away.

Onward we drove. It was only just past noon and I thought maybe I could get through the LA basin, up and over the Grapevine then down the other side this day. I felt more and more that we did the right thing in leaving Arizona. I was able to see firsthand so many businesses closed, entire shopping malls, casinos, amusement attractions, restaurants, car dealerships all with empty parking lots. I really got a good sense of the impact this virus pandemic was putting our country through. A follower had left a comment on my latest blog post: *The 1918 Spanish flu came back the following fall and winter and was even more deadly.* How could this county make it?

It was all smooth sailing through the Los Angeles area. There was no traffic and best of all no smog. I could see the distant downtown Los Angeles Civic Center skyline of high rise buildings on the far horizon some twenty plus miles away. That was unheard of unless there had been a heavy rain to wash the smog away. Even driving along the base of the San Gabriel Mountains on the Pasadena Freeway sometimes the smog is so bad you could not even see the mountains right there out your window. We needed more pandemics to cleanse the earth. News reports said the International Space Station could see Beijing, China for the first time.

After 330 miles of driving we stopped for the day at a rest stop atop Tejon Pass just north of the San Fernando Valley. It was in the seventies with a nice breeze. We'd be roasting back at Camp Quarantine now. I brewed up a cup of tea right away and ate some cottage cheese. Beans was glad we stopped. She rides in my lap all the time. That is the only time she'll sit in my lap is while driving. She looked out the door wondering if she wanted to chance it asking to go for a walk. She hadn't eaten yet but at least went pee. She finally decided she wanted to go out but it didn't last long—too many people and too noisy with the interstate close by. It would be an earplugs-in-place night for me. I wasn't used to the constant cacophony of noise yet. But we did have a nice spot at the end of the line and far away from the big rig truck section. We had another overnigher, an older couple from Oregon, two spots down from us in the old style Toyota Dolphin mini RV. I micro waved a little burrito for dinner. I missed my traveling road food stops—Subway sandwich, Panda Express Chinese, Burger King Whopper or Carl's Jr. burger but just didn't want to deal with all the possibles I'd expose myself to. I just wasn't comfortable with this whole new world I found myself immersed in yet it was nice getting to see a lot of different sights for a change.

On the third day, the homestretch, it was not to be as a long drive as the first day but was viewed with some anticipation. We had to drive up the 680 freeway in the East Bay by Oakland. It is just as bad as driving the freeways in the Los Angeles area, bumper to bumper with the only redeeming factor being you don't have as much territory to cover. I had high hopes it would turn out to be just like it was in Los Angeles and I wasn't disappointed. What a wonderful drive it was. Most of the time all four or five lanes were completely empty as if there was an apocalypse going on. The only thing missing were the zombies. We reached the Carquinez Bridge at Martinez crossing over the San Francisco Bay into the North Bay counties which most always has long lines at the toll booth. As I was struggling to dig out a five dollar bill for the toll I glanced up to be sure I was in the cash only lane. The sign above read NO CASH. THE

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