

Beans and I on the Loose

A traveler and his cat exploring the back roads of America

Book Five

2021

MISGUIDED WANDERINGS IN AMERICA

By

JOHN LEE KIRN

This book is a work on nonfiction. Yes, it all really happened.
Names, characters, places, businesses and incidents actually do exist,
and are not the product of the author's imagination.
He could not make up any of the following even if he tried.
Any similarity to events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely meant to be.

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Although doing so would be a great form of flattery.

Lastly, I apologize for the typographical errors. I know they are there, despite the fact I've gone through this manuscript numerous times. When you edit your own work you deal with your mind undoing what your eyes are seeing and thus making corrections or filling in the blanks.

For Brother Tom

I never met Brother Tom. I only became acquainted with him by watching one of the many interviews Bob Wells does with nomads on his YouTube channel Cheap RV Living. Tom was unique in that he was black. There are not all that many black people living the nomadic lifestyle on the road. Tom appeared to be in his forties in age. What even more intrigued me about Tom was Bob asked him how many vehicles he had owned in his lifetime. He answered Bob saying around one hundred and forty some vehicles. He had them all listed on a legal-size notepad he held in his hand. Few of the people Bob would interview would have their own YouTube channel. I have only subscribed to two of those interviewees and Tom was one.

I don't recall what type of vehicle Tom had at the time of the interview a couple years ago; most likely just a passenger car he was camping out of. Tom would pick up these automobiles through eBay, Craigslist, the classifieds or online auction sites. With the auction sites many times he never knew what he was getting in regards as to what condition the vehicle was. He would pick up the cars, trucks, what have you on the cheap for only a few hundred dollars most of the time. There would always be something needing fixing and Tom was quite knowledgeable in auto mechanics. He could do most anything including replacing entire engines. He would keep the vehicle for awhile then sell it at profit or trade for something else. This is how he made a living such as it was. He never seemed to have much in the way of money or really anything for that matter but always seemed to get by.

After that interview Tom's YouTube channel gained well over a thousand new subscribers. Tom was good about putting out a new video every two or three days. They were usually short, ten minutes in length, give or take. The main subject of most of his videos was dealing with whatever was wrong with the current vehicle he had at the time. It was always something— the engine needed work, there was a water leak, a fuel leak, the brakes needed replacing, the transmission slipped, it wouldn't start, it ran badly if it did start or he'd be broken down alongside the road or maybe had run out of gas because the gas gauge didn't work. It was always something. Whatever the case may be Tom was most always positive and in good spirits about his current predicament sometimes even laughing about it. I would watch these videos thinking about whatever it was with some issue or problem I might be dealing with, it could always be worse and Tom showed me that.

During the year of 2021 Tom finally was able to get his dream camper van—a Road Trek. He picked it up through a private party seller at a good deal and best of all it was in great shape needing no work. Tom was thrilled, absolutely giddy with his new home on wheels. Tom lived in the Maryland area. He had big plans for travelling wanting to return to the desert of Arizona for the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous during the winter where Bob Wells had discovered him a couple years earlier. Not even a week had passed in his new-to-him Road Trek when someone had passed him on the road, cut him off and slammed on the brakes. Tom swerved to avoid rear ending the idiot running off the road into a ditch. The impact severely bent the front end A-frame and part of the chassis itself. The damage was more that could possibly be repaired. Tom was devastated with the loss of his Road Trek. Tom had the worst luck of anyone I ever knew. He never seemed to be the same after that event. Shortly thereafter his health began declining, not to say it was the best to begin what with eating mostly fast food cuisine. He eventually had kidney failure and would need weekly dialysis. Sometimes he missed his dialysis appointment because his vehicle had failed him. Every once in awhile when a new video came up it would be from Tom's bed in a hospital. There he would be lying in bed with tubes and wires attached to him. He would start the video in his

usual manner “What’s happening y’all?” Then the next video he’d be out of the hospital back in his car, van, truck camper trying to get along yet happy as always.

Then one day a video showed up; it was only a few minutes in length. The image was dark. You couldn’t see anything. You could only hear Tom’s voice. “What’s happening y’all? Well I’m in the hospital again as you can see, or maybe not since it is in the middle of the night.....”

A week or so passed by and I realized there had been no videos from Brother Tom on my automatic feed. I checked his channel. The same dark short video was there as the most recent. I read the comments below. Tom had passed away. I was stunned. He had a cardiac arrest while in the hospital. The doctors jump-started him back to life. This happened twice. The third time he never came back. I was saddened. I felt I lost a good friend; a friend I had never even met.

Weeks passed by and the loss of Tom’s videos still hung with me. I truly missed him.

As I worked on my journal throughout the year for this eBook I had a title in mind from the beginning. But my plans for the year didn’t really go the way I imagined. I had to come up with a new title. I thought of Tom. Tom hinted to a new title. His YouTube Channel was named: *Brother Tom’s Misguided Adventures*. And so I used part of his title in honor of Brother Tom. His channel is still on YouTube.

and for South Park Steve

I “met” Steve through an RV traveler’s website, RVillage. There one would exchange information, ideas, adventures and photos with like-minded RVers. There are numerous forums at this site and one was *Cats on the Road*. There I would occasionally post photos of Beans doing Beans things. This is how we connected. Steve admired Beans calling her his “hero”. He had an adopted cat named Smokey he wished he could train to wear a harness and go for walks on a leash like Beans did. His other cat Tesla he pretty much was sure would never tolerate RV life. I exchanged ideas and tips with Steve at times. He lived in Breckenridge, Colorado working at a high-end RV resort in a meeting/event planner, tour operator and realtor capacity. He was frustrated having to work when he longed to be out there on the road like so many he saw everyday come through the resort. So, he lived vicariously through all he followed on the RVillage site. Winters kept him confined to the work desk but he always tried to get away for a few weeks in the summer months in his travel trailer with his “Kamper Kitty”. It was in the first week of December I realized I hadn’t seen any activity on the website from Steve in a long time. Shortly thereafter another member posted they learned Steve had passed away on November 26 from COVID. He had a preexisting lung condition that compromised his ability to fight the virus. I was shocked. Steve was only in his fifties and died long before he could live his dream.

Foreword

At various points along the book I make references to the COVID-19 pandemic. You may take them as being insensitive. I wish for you to understand I never took the virus lightly or disrespectfully. I viewed it seriously. I am well aware many people died from COVID-19. You dear reader may have lost close friends or even a family member to the virus. Of that I am sorry for your loss. It should never have happened in many cases. My remarks and attitude reflected in my writing is directed at the governments at all levels and the way they handled the pandemic. Their hysteria response devastated our economy which means their policies severely impacted tens if not hundreds of thousands of lives needlessly. Politics got in the way of saving lives.

MISGUIDED WANDERINGS IN AMERICA

ARIZONA

The year 2020 was over. I felt like I had lived through and survived an episode out of the Twilight Zone. It now remained to be seen what 2021 would be like which from all appearances probably much like the previous year. At least we were all now better conditioned to deal with what was to be thrown at us than we were a year ago all being newbies to pandemic life at the time. I knew for myself I had no plan to repeat what I did last year. I would not hunker down in fear all summer, in one place, isolated. My plan now was to resume our travels as we have always done, COVID-19 be damned, full speed ahead.

We had returned to Quartzsite, Arizona in late December after dealing with a medical issue (see *The Pandemic Year 2020* eBook). The winter population of Quartzsite was seemingly only half, if even that, of what it usually was. Part was the fact the borders were closed. The large amount of Canadian snowbirds were unable to make their winter migration south this winter season. Perhaps the pandemic threw a wrench in other traveler's plans but other than that I never could really tell why there were a lot less campers in the area. The annual Big Tent and RV Show was held in January although a couple of the usual big RV dealers decided to forego transporting their inventory of RV's to the show grounds. On one hand I wasn't complaining as congestion in the LTVAs (Long Term Camping Area) and free 14-day stay camp areas was greatly reduced. On the other hand this led to fewer interactions with people where I could generate stories from visiting with them. Typically the beginning of my yearly eBooks would have several of these stories to tell. This year I had nothing.

When we returned in December to the same camp spot I hastily evacuated from two months earlier I went for a walk one day. I noticed my neighbor Nancy from the previous winter had arrived. I approached her van to say hi. When she saw me walk up she immediately went into panic mode shouting "COVID! COVID! Don't come any closer!" Good Lord! She acted as if I was a leper standing there twenty feet away. I figured she wasn't worth the bother. I walked away. Interestingly, when I met Nancy a year earlier the Wuhan virus had been present in the U.S. for two months. People were already well into toilet paper hoarding, bathing in antiseptic concoctions and wearing primitive face masks. Back then when I approached my new neighbor to introduce myself Nancy immediately reached out to shake my hand. I thought *At least she's not all freaked out about this virus thing*. My how people living in media induced unfounded fear can change in one year. On a side note, that hand shake with Nancy was the last physical human contact I had with anyone for the next nine months until I met Tracy in Nevada in October and we exchanged hugs.

I did have one visit which was refreshing. I had ridden my little Honda Trail 90 motorbike a few miles south from where we were camped to revisit a little desert community named La Paz which was mostly comprised of two weather worn RV Parks and a few scattered houses. Mainly I wanted to visit the little pet cemetery outside the area just to see if anything had changed. Not much although there were a couple new additions. Returning I decided to explore up and down the few paved streets nearby. One dead ended at what appeared to be a little community center. The small parking lot was filled with cars, pick-up trucks mostly. It was a Saturday. They were holding a little musical jamboree in the center. As I turned around at the dead end a little old lady approached me from the parking lot waving her hands to get my attention. I stopped and shut off the engine. She was a small little thing, five feet tall, maybe a hundred

pounds with tightly permed dark auburn hair which very well could have been a wig. I had met Phyllis. She wanted to tell me about the music that was going on and invite me to come in and enjoy the good time. Phyllis wore no mask. The few people I saw milling about in the parking lot didn't either. I learned from her she had lived in the surrounding area of Quartzsite for about ten years with her husband at the time. He died in her arms as she said when she was fifty and then moved on to La Paz afterwards eventually buying a small park model trailer as she called it in the Burrwood RV Park. "I was a widow for twenty years with no intention whatsoever to remarry. I would attend all the social gatherings and dances we had. One day my friends approached me saying I ought to ask that man sitting there in the back on the bench all by himself to dance. Why I asked. Well they said he was a real good dancer but had no one to dance with. And so I asked him. We got along great, he being recently widowed himself. We learned we had similar interests and beliefs and well we ended up marrying. We've been together now for ten years. We have our own separate bank accounts." Phyllis was eighty years old, full of life and refreshing to talk with. I didn't go into the dance hall. I'm not ready for any relationships at this stage in my life.

Phyllis explained to me about a small chapel setting in the corner of the parking lot when I asked her about it. She said a gentleman lost his daughter to an early death. When he realized there was no church anywhere nearby (there is one in Quartzsite about ten miles north) he built the small chapel in her memory. I forgot to go have a look after talking with Phyllis that day but returned to do so a week later. In my travels with Sinbad (see *Sinbad and I on the Loose* eBook) we would travel all around the country seeking out the weird and unusual which would dictate the routes we took. Several of these oddities were coined as 'the world's smallest church/chapel'. One I discovered by accident in a soy bean field in the upper Midwest was about the size of a telephone booth but strangely no one ever laid claim to it as the 'world's smallest' of which it actually was in my opinion. Anyway this little chapel wasn't all that small (maybe six by twelve feet?) in comparison to some I have seen. It was nicely done with two small upholstered chairs, a wood bench and small table inside; a nice quiet little sanctuary to sit in and meditate. I happened to have returned on the one day the Music Barn held its weekly "jam session". Inside were fifty or so folks sitting in folding metal chairs enjoying the country music being played up on the stage by a small group of two or three guitars, drums and a lady with a nice voice, all local talent no doubt. I didn't have a mask with me and the crowd inside being made up of the "high risk" category I didn't go in. I hung around outside and listened to the nice real country music from the 40's and 50's—old country, not this stuff they pass off for country music these days. It was quite pleasant to listen to sitting outside in the peaceful surroundings of this small Arizona desert community. I took a closer interest of the RV park as I motored on out. I'd estimate maybe a hundred trailers, fifth wheels and large RV's were present all parked in fairly close to each other hooked up to electricity and sewer drains. I envied the folks being of the nature able to live together that close in their little community. I could not. Nevertheless I wouldn't be surprised to learn living there in these peaceful quiet surroundings of the fresh dry desert air with like-minded folk taking in the long list of social activities to be had added years to their lives versus living similarly in a city environment.

I had been keeping up with the news all of the previous year mainly to be aware of this virus thing. In doing so I was exposed to the entire goings on (rioting, violence and mayhem) of the Black Lives Movement and the soon to follow "cultural cleansing" that was sweeping the nation. It grew tiresome. Plus I was a bit miffed at myself for allowing these events to dictate my travel plans, being part of my reason for hunkering down in the national forest outside of Sisters, Oregon all that summer. Add to that the silliness leading up to the upcoming November election was all too much. I dialed back my news

monitoring quite a bit after election time. Come the New Year we were facing the soon to come inauguration (a circus event which I had absolutely no interest in) which was preceded by the now famous “capitol invasion”. My goodness. We spend \$750 billion annually on defense and the center of the American government falls in two hours to a bunch of buffoons protesting a “stolen election”. By inauguration day my iPhone and iPad devices were practically dinging constantly with incoming news bulletins “ding...ding...ding.” It grew increasingly annoying. I was already fed up with these notifications of the latest act of violence and bloodshed, a shooting here, more homicides there, rapes, kidnappings, child abductions, assaults and too the news of celebrity so and so having just died at an age close to my own age (I don’t need that reality check) and of course the never-ending political malarkey. I had had enough. I went to my settings and to my amazement I discovered I had control of all notifications. [I will pause here until you are done laughing] I slid the buttons to *off*. I deleted a couple of news apps on each device. Peace and quiet ensued. Why had I not done this a long time ago? I just didn’t know I had this power and could do this. Within a week I couldn’t believe the change in myself to not know anything of the twenty-four hour reality show that was going on within the news media. I was feeling so much better every day.

Thomas Jefferson said the job of journalists was to portray accurately what was happening in society. The media over time increasingly failed to report positive news. In the 1990’s while homicide rates in the U.S. dropped forty-two percent, television news coverage of murders surged more than seven hundred percent according to the Center for Media and Public Affairs. If you are old enough you will be familiar with The Huntley-Brinkley Report news program on NBC which aired from 1956 through to 1970. Chet Huntley reported from New York City and David Brinkley from Washington D.C. Both men had the deepest respect for each other even though one was a firm Democrat and the other a Republican. Few people knew this for their political differences were never apparent in their reporting. This type of professional journalism is now extinct today. If you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes ~~truth~~ journalism.

Disconnecting myself from the merchants of fear and loathing would be one of my greatest accomplishments for the year to come.

My nomad friend Amanda arrived to camp with us after all the hoopla in January. We had met a few years back (see *Getting to Know You 2017* eBook). Now she had a new cat having lost her sweet all black Dilbert the previous year. She had Louie, a big brown tabby she befriended at a house/pet set she had done over the summer. Louie was doing real well molding into a travelling nomad cat after living a life for however long on his own in the Texas wilderness. Louie did have this fear of men Amanda said, something stemming from his unknown past. I took this as a challenge. I would gain Louie’s trust. Beans was interested in Louie and the two would meet, rub noses, grew bored with each other and wander off their own separate ways. It took a while but Louie slowly started trusting me. I was eventually able to pet him and give him a lot of good ear scratching.

One day I rode Gracie the Honda 90 trail bike into town to fill my four one-gallon jugs with drinking water from the purified water machine outside of Family Dollar. While filling my bottles a young man walked up to fill his five-gallon bottle. “Hi” he says. “I’m camping...” I think *aren’t we all?* “...and I had to use my heater this morning”. Why are you telling me this I wondered? “Oh” I say. “Well I just put my heater away this morning.” By now I am done and turn the machine over to him. Back home I shared this with Amanda. “Sounds to me like he was lonely” she said. She added how it bothers her having

people say to her she's camping. "I'm not camping, I'm living." She was right. This is our life. We're not on vacation camping out. We are not homeless people. We simply are houseless enjoy this free lifestyle.

It was about this time a year ago I would have occasional dizzy spells leaving me feeling nauseated and a bit scared I admit. I thought I was having a blood sugar issue. I cleaned out all my crap food that was loaded with an abundance of sugars giving it away. I left it all in a box near the dumpster in the camp area. Someone took the lot. I later learned I was suffering from some sort of blue light issue from my laptop. Being this was the only time I became dizzy and nauseated it relieved my concern about a blood sugar issue but hey, I improved my eating habits so that was a win. I kept coming across more crap food days later. One day I tried to pawn off some applesauce onto a woman living out of her beat up little blue car nearby. She declined the applesauce stating she too had to be careful about sugars. She sent me on my way with a "don't worry, you'll be fine" comment. She was here again this year and had added a small little shower tent to her kit. Catching her outside one day during my walk I stopped by to say hello. She remembered me and we had a nice time visiting more in length this time. Her name was Joy. She said she purchased the shower tent to keep some things in and give her a place to be in other than sitting inside her car all the time. "I can sit and stand up in my little tent." She added she was thinking of buying a Kodiak canvas clamshell style tent and to look for it next year.

Also at that time the Wuhan virus was all a new thing and everyone everywhere were being told to stay in place, self-quarantine and remain in lock down. We here at Quartzite didn't know if we would be booted out after the April 15 deadline of our paid to stay period. Well that ended up not becoming a problem as the BLM rangers left everyone alone to stay, isolated. Beans and I lasted a couple more weeks beyond the fifteenth and finally it just got too hot so we left. Joy told me she made it well into June and that is with no shade of any kind. Wow! She left for the New York area where some family lives, she herself being from Ohio. I asked where she stays when traveling and she told me she always stops over at Pilot Truck stops. She'll park well away from the trucks and enjoys the fine dining to be had at Pilot diners. Along the way to New York she somehow contracted COVID. Although her daughter wanted her to go to the hospital she refused, thinking that would be a death sentence in itself. I couldn't agree more. Hospitals are germ factories. Joy got through the virus just fine but still gets wheezy at times she said. "No big deal if you are healthy and eat right." She drove cross country to her other daughter's place in Los Angeles which is on record as her place of residency, where her mail is delivered and her car registered. She stayed there parked out front still living in her car which I thought odd as she said she doesn't go inside her daughter's house. "The police know me there and leave me alone." I later learned in another visit she and her daughter do not get along well. She has since decided to no longer go Los Angeles after Quartzsite each year. Besides the car being worn looking and filthy dirty from being in the desert most of the time (much like Beans) when she drives by I can hear all sorts of rattling, clanging and banging. "I need new tires." She might need more than some new tires. What an adventurous little woman driving that rattletrap little blue Chevy back and forth across the country. Joy is seventy-four.

Another woman I met last winter near where we were camped came by to see us one day. I had some art supplies I said she could have which she was thrilled about. I'd guess Michelle to be in her late fifties and not much over five feet tall. She has some health issues and it showed when I first met her last winter. Her ailments are of long words I cannot pronounce let alone spell out here. She is now well into her second year of being a fulltime nomad. I noticed a big change in her as she stepped out from her truck. She had lost weight, looked healthier and was full of life. I commented on it. She said she feels so much better now. "It is this lifestyle. Living in this tranquil stress-free dry desert environment for half of the year has worked wonders." She still has her health problems but is able to manage and cope with them

much better here. She too is from Ohio like Joy and has since changed her residency to Arizona. She has now established Quartzsite as her home base since she spends most of the year here, then travels elsewhere in the southwest when it becomes too hot to stay here any longer. “My new Arizona driver’s license shows ‘La Posa South LTVA’ as my address.” I laughed. However she pulled that off I don’t know as it is just barren desert Bureau of Land Management land but I thought it great. That is like having my driver’s license showing ‘Tyson Wells LTVA’ where Beans and I were camped as my address.

I missed smiling faces, even frowny ones. I am not opposed to talking with perfect strangers most of whom I come across while shopping for groceries and standing in check-out lines. It is pretty much the extent of my social interactions these days. If the person is wearing a mask I rarely start up a conversation. In talking with someone wearing a mask I may as well be talking with a mannequin. So much is lost when half of the person’s face is concealed behind a thin piece of “virus proof” material. I also miss handshakes. I never thought I would find myself writing that. Long before the Wuhan virus I was always aware of a handshake being mindful to keep the ‘contaminated hand’ in check until I could sanitize it. This stems from my pneumonia episode twelve years previously requiring two visits to the emergency room all of which turned me into a somewhat mild-mannered germophobe. But now I miss a handshake although my mind would still be reeling with *be aware* afterwards. That pneumonia thing instilled a life-long change in habits with me. Hugging too is sorely missed. I never initiate a hug. I am well aware of the “creep factor”. I allow the woman to make the move which I will then welcome their hug with open arms. And guys please don’t hug me unless one of us saved the life of the other then a hug would be understandable. All of this lost casual physical contact has been replaced with the stupid fist-bump or elbow tap. Puhlease! Don’t bother. That’s just weird. My two recent visits with Michelle and Joy were great. I enjoyed seeing their smiles. It was so nice to talk with someone who wasn’t scared to death to stand there with a naked face and converse like we always had in days gone by.

I went into town one day having to take *The Little House on the Highway* as I was going to pick up two large boxes of cat food I ordered—\$210 worth. Beans eats better than I. Having our house with me I did a major grocery shop while at it. When I shop having the Honda with me and can only carry what I can get into my backpack and a stuff sack on the back of the bike. I came out of one small grocery store and a beat up old Honda Trail 90 was parked outside with its owner standing nearby. I had to stop and visit. The bike was a 1978 while mine is a 1972. This poor bike was so distressed looking I thought it was older than my bike. He was a nice old guy to talk with, unfortunately we didn’t exchange names. I learned he was eighty-four years old and still riding his scooter around doing errands on it as I do. I told him how much I enjoyed meeting people like him which inspires me. He was leaving the next day to return home at Silver Springs, Nevada. He mentioned he thought he would get the COVID vaccine when he returned adding his son had caught COVID and had a rough go of it. His son is nineteen years younger, sixty-five.

After finishing up buying groceries and picking up Beans’ food at the UPS drop-off store Quiet Times, I had one last thing to do—fill up the water tank on the way back to camp at the only water source which is at the LTVA camp area across the highway from our camp area. There are four stations there and each has two spigots of free water, one of the perks of paying the seasonal fee of \$180 for staying at any of the four long term areas. I pulled up to one station where the lady in front of me was finishing filling her six five-gallon water jugs and hefting them into the back of her small SUV. I wished I had taken a photo of her for the blog but had no idea at the time this simple act of getting water would evolve into a blog post. Next to her at the other water faucet was a guy in a jeep with two little dogs yapping away constantly at

the woman. I have tinnitus (constant ringing in the ear) and the high pitched sound of small yapping dogs is not just annoying but outright painful to me. The guy made no effort to shut his dogs up. The woman couldn't load up her water fast enough. I thought *I can't deal with that barking* and was considering moving then noticed dog guy coiling up his hose. *Good, he's going too.* Both left and I pulled forward when another guy in a black SUV pulled next to me. He too had an ankle biter who was all hair, teeth and eyeballs going berserko yapping at me from the open driver's window. The owner was completely oblivious to it. I finished filling a one gallon bottle. I looked across the way seeing the other faucets were clear on the other side of the road. I got back in the RV moved over there, my ears ringing painfully. I had just got my hose inserted in the side to fill the main water tank when an older large class A RV pulled up alongside. I am not exaggerating one bit; I could smell him before I saw him. The motor home reeked of cigarette smoke. It was as if it were a rolling ashtray. I couldn't believe the stench I was capable of smelling standing outside as the breeze blew it in my direction when he approached the station. I stood in back of my RV, upwind for the fresh air until the water tank was full. The guy walked out and came around behind his rig to hook up his hose. He looked every bit the hardcore smoker. He was a skinny old fart with shriveled up leathery yellowed skin and rheumy eyes. Neither of us greeted each other. At least he didn't have a yapping dog.

Our distant neighbor across the road from camp was up to something. His truck and camper trailer had been here as long as we had. I could not remember if he was there when we were here earlier before I had to evacuate for that medical issue, probably so. At any rate for a few weeks from January through February he had a second vehicle in camp, a van. I could see him puttering around with it each day. One day a couple came by in their van. From the goings on it had all the appearances he was selling the van. Sure enough, they went for a test drive, the deal was made and the couple drove off with both vans. A couple weeks went by and a new camper trailer showed up. The guy must be picking up these units around here, fixing them up a bit and turning around selling them for a profit. Not a bad idea. You're here for six months. It gives you something to do; a project to keep from going nuts and you make a few bucks along the way. Several days later a second camper trailer showed up, that was now two trailers in addition to the one he lived in. Several more days passed when another van appeared in camp! I came back from my morning walk a few days afterwards and saw his main pickup truck; the one he arrived here in was parked out by the road that separated our camps. A FOR SALE sign was propped up in the window. I figured maybe he planned to tow his live-in trailer with the van now. Well, this lasted all of one day. He must have changed his mind as he started using his truck again. A few days later the van was gone. After a few more days the van reappeared! A few more days he drives away in his van. I looked beyond to his camp and see not only the truck missing but also his main living trailer was gone! I couldn't keep up with the guy. Now you are probably wondering why I hadn't gone over there and visited with him getting the scoop on what he was up to. I had this feeling that in the first thirty seconds I would realize *well this was a mistake. How do I get away from this guy?* It has happened to me before.

March rolled around and the days steadily went by one by one. People came and went. Fewer and fewer campers remained nothing like it was in years past when many hundreds of campers would still be around. COVID uncertainties, rising fuel prices and maybe even the ever increasing tide of illegal immigrants streaming across the nearby open border unchecked all could be responsible. Who am I to know? We were growing tired of the same scenery each day. The cats were bored with sniffing the same bushes everyday. Amanda suggested we move down the road a few miles to Road Runner a fourteen-day

stay camp area. I was all for it. I had done up all my accumulated laundry a week earlier and filled up with propane so I was ready. We left Beans' Tree camp each going into town to grocery shop and get water then met up at Silly Al's Pizza Place in town at Amanda's suggestion. Amanda said she hadn't been in a restaurant to eat in many months. I had her beat. I hadn't been in one since long before all the COVID business began a year and a half ago. We each got a small pizza which we both agreed was quite tasty. I will admit being in that noisy busy enclosed space was a bit overwhelming for me having been isolated in quiet wide open places for so long. This was one of my goals for this year of travel: to eat out more often if it be only by myself. Having Amanda along would be helpful in establishing a new pattern for me. We left Silly Al's under gloomy skies with a smattering of rain now then over to fill up with water at the long term camp area across the highway from where we had been camped. We drove south four miles to Road Runner. I pulled over and asked if she wanted to go pick out a place. "Oh don't leave that up to me; you go ahead. I trust you." I went on ahead and selected a place in a dead end peninsula between two dry washes thinking no one will be driving by or camp near us; not that any of the camp area was hurting for potential camp spots. She was fine with the site I selected and we settled in. The next morning I pulled up the map of the area on Google Maps to drop a pin on the spot as I always do with every place I stay overnight. The map showed Amanda and I had camped not more than one hundred feet away from where we were back in February of 2018. That was too weird.

We stayed there for a few days until the weather heated up then decided it was time to move on eastward. The morning we pulled out we stopped in town to do a few errands then met up once again at Family Dollar. Amanda suggested we eat before starting our long day's drive which was a good idea, but we couldn't decide where or what to eat. We ended up at Burger King at the other end of town. Yeah, I could get a vanilla shake. This would carry me on through Phoenix. Inside there were only two workers, the cook and the cashier lady at the counter. No customers though so that was nice. Amanda placed her order and then I did. The lady had to fill the shake machine with product; I guess I was the first to order a shake for the day. There seemed to be an issue with the machine. I was then sadly informed the machine hadn't been turned off the previous night and now had frozen up. "I'll refund you your money" the lady said. The thing was she refunded me the cost of the entire meal—\$5.18—then handed me a large cup saying to get any drink I wanted. Wow, a free meal. I'll take that. I gave the cup to Amanda telling her to get herself another drink. I would go across the road to get my vanilla shake at Carl's. This was becoming altogether like what I went through with Tracy coming in through Parker, AZ. months ago. Securing a milk shake anywhere would eventually become a year-long ongoing problem. I let Amanda in my RV to eat her meal. I went off for my shake. Crossing the road dodging semi-trucks and inattentive tourists I walked into Carl's. They had three workers and again no customers except a large lady having difficulty with the debit card reader. I saw where the kid taking orders at the counter would have to leave hustling orders out to those who had placed their order at drive-up window and were now waiting in the exit driveway. "I'll be right back to take your order sir." Another order had to be delivered. "I'll be right with you" as he gathered together another drive-up order. Finally I was able to order my shake. Then he took off out the front door with another order. "I'll be right back and get you your shake." Geez, something was wrong with their operation. Finally I got my shake—\$4.41, seventy-seven cents less than my entire meal with fries at Burger King. I safely made it back to the RV where Amanda by now had finished her meal. She left to go wash the windows on her van and check tire pressures while I ate. She came back and we were off.

It was a two hour drive to Phoenix—what a horrible place—where we made it through to the other side of the metropolis and began climbing the Pinal Mountains to a camp area I had picked out from a camping app, Oak Flat Campground near Superior. It had been a long tiring day of driving (we were out of shape after months of no driving) and were in no mind to go any further. The campground had APACHE STRONGHOLD, NATIVE GROUND, SACRED SITE signs scattered about. The few people camping in an open area just past the entrance looked questionable. I looped around, looked in my mirrors and saw Amanda was gone. *Where is she?* I drove back out and up the road where I found her parked at a turnout squeezed in between two of the hand-painted sheets of plywood Apache signs. I parked near her. She told me she now remembered being here before. “It wasn’t inviting so I stayed up here. I tried to send you a text but there is no service”. I was level, tired and was fine with staying put. After taking Beans for her exploratory walk and having a relaxing cup of tea I walked back down the road and through the camp area. I discovered had I driven in further there was a nice shady grove of oak trees with nice campground sites complete with cement picnic tables, fire rings, two long drops (pit toilets) and level parking. Overall it wasn’t a bad place to stay except for the lack of cell service. Amanda hadn’t gone in any further either on her previous trip so she too was unaware of the nice camp area. With a little online research later on after we had moved to where there was cell service I learned the local Apache tribe was trying to protect this lovely canyon from exploitation of mining interests who wanted to decimate the entire area with a huge ugly open pit copper mine.

We left the next morning continuing east through Miami (Arizona that is) and Globe where we stocked up on a few supplies and filled fuel tanks. At this point Amanda took the lead heading southeast on Highway 70 to a place she had stayed at before just beyond Safford, a dispersed camp area on Hackle Road. It was a vast wide open desert landscape, extremely quiet. It left me trying to imagine being an Apache and living in this harsh environment. We could see one trailer up on a ridge a mile away, and two or three more barely visible in the far distance in the opposite direction. That was it for neighbors. It was nice for I had new land to take my daily walkabouts, weather permitting, meaning no high winds. The other aspect in regards to weather was the gradual rise in temperature. After a few days there we were in mid-ninety degree days. We tried to come up with a plan as what to do. All the camp areas at altitude (as high as eight thousand feet) in the Sitgreaves National Forest to the north had size restrictions—no vehicles over sixteen feet. Unable to come up with a plan we resigned ourselves to stay put and sweat it out for the two or three toasty days. As long as there was a breeze it wasn’t bad.

Most every day I took a walkabout in the bush a different direction each time. To the south most all of the rock, big and small including chunks of volcanic material were all round in shape and smooth surfaced. The entire area must have been a massive floodplain millions of years ago. Yet just on the other side of the road the landscape wasn’t as so, unless all of the flood plain rock was buried beneath the surface. For all the miles I wandered around while at Hackle Road I saw maybe one lizard, one rabbit and two cows. The place was void of animal life except for a few birds. I pulled up a satellite image of the area and found a pond of water. This had to be where the animals if there were any got their water. One day I took off in search for it. I followed an animal track through the surrounding brush (animals always take the easiest route) and finally came out upon the pond. It was bone dry; nothing but a deep dark patch of sun-baked pond bed. When the last time this saw any water was hard to tell. Even a nearby spillway—an anomaly I saw on the satellite image not realizing it was a cement spillway—hadn’t seen water in years based upon the height of the brush growing along the edge of the cement.

NEW MEXICO

The weather forecast called for a high wind day. Rather than just hunker down inside our little homes all day we decided to break camp and drive back into Safford to resupply. We would then make up our minds to either return to Hackle Road or press on southeast towards New Mexico. With shopping done and seeing the winds were not all that bad and would be behind us pushing us along, we continued on for the town of Lordsburg. In all we had been at Hackle Road camp for a week. It hadn't seemed that long.

I had in mind a free camp at a VFW lodge post Beans and I stayed at before years before. Amanda looked it up. Some travelers had left comments that it was closed due to COVID-19 silliness. We would check it out anyway and had a plan B in mind if the comments proved to be founded. After an hour of easy driving we arrived at the VFW post. It looked okay until I pulled in further on the drive in and saw a posted sign: CLOSED 10:30 PM TO 6 AM NO OVERNIGHT CAMPING. The place used to be a nice spot with nineteen sites including tables and shade structures. Now it looked uncared for and in disrepair which was sad to see. Amanda took the lead heading east on Interstate 10 towards Deming. She had found a boondocking spot online somewhere before the town itself. After another hour of being pushed along by the wind she pulled off the Interstate on an exit ramp which I almost missed as I was gawking around looking at the scenery. A couple miles in we arrived at the spot which was a fenced off rock quarry. "This isn't what the pictures look like on the free camping site" she said. "Where in the hell were these people camping leaving all the favorable reviews?" She left me there and walked on down the narrow dirt road a way then came back saying she found a spot we both could fit in. I followed her. It was just big enough for our two vehicles and would be fine for a night. The next morning I went wandering about in the bush and a hundred yards further from our overnight spot lay a small flat open dry lake bed. This had to be what the reviewers were commenting on. I came back and filled her in suggesting we move down there and take a day off from traveling. She was all for that. We settled in at our new spot. When I stepped out I forgot to slide shut the door handle opening on the screen door. Little Miss Opportunity made her escape jumping up through the hole—not the first time for her to pull this stunt either. Now I had to round her up from underneath one or both of the vehicles. Amanda brought out Louie's treats and that got Beans to come out where I could scoop her up. I picked up the few treats on the ground and back in the RV little Houdini went.

Later in the day Amanda came by to get me for a walk and explore some stone ruins at the base of the hills around us. They were once stone cabins for the miners who had once worked the area. The entire landscape was littered with rusty tin cans—beans, soup, sardines, condensed milk, tobacco to name the more identifiable—and broken dishes and bottles. I found some square-head nails so that sort of dated the operation to pre-1890, at which point round head nails came into production. There were several extremely deep vertical mine shafts in the area that had been closed off with steel gratings by the Bureau of Abandoned Mines for safety reasons. Just to drop a rock down into the dark abyss waiting to hear it hit something was all together spooky in the sense how long it took the rock to make contact. One hole I never could hear the rock hit bottom. Nearby was a windmill water pump. I have seen dozens of windmills in my wanderings in desert places but this one was the first I had ever come across which was fully functional and still pumping water. I was fascinated watching the shaft move up and down only about a foot pulling water up from deep down below the ground. One other interesting feature was we found about a dozen empty weather beaten backpacks scattered about the area. Being less than thirty miles from the Mexican border it didn't take much imagination to figure out where these empty backpacks came from. Oddly all the backpacks were identical. My theory was the migrants carried food

and water in the backpacks. This spot was a predestined pickup point being only a few miles from Interstate 10 where the migrants met up with a car or van. They had no further need for the backpacks plus it would be a giveaway to be seen walking along the highway carrying a backpack.

We originally planned staying at this site for the day but the next morning we decided to stay longer as being isolated, no one ever came by plus we had good cell service. With that decided I changed into my hiking clothes to go explore a cave I could see up on the side of the mountain near camp. When I first saw it upon arrival it looked like too much work to climb up to, but now I planned to go for it. The climb wasn't all that difficult; the old man still had it in him. As I approached the opening I heard the dreaded hum of bees. *Bees! Why did it have to be bees?* I can deal with snakes, spiders, scorpions; you name it but bees, nope! They will attack unprovoked for no reason at all. I have had it happen before in a mine shaft opening. I went no further into the cave. Actually it didn't look like the cave went any deeper from what I could see standing safely outside. Rather than turn around and go back down the slope I continued the climb up around the side of bee cave and stood on top taking in the wonderful view of the valley down below. Still not wanting to return I traversed the side of the mountain to see what there was to see. Good thing I did for there were a couple of mines along the way hidden out of view from below. Unfortunately the mine safety people had sealed off the entrances with a steel girder fence secured in place. Ah, but one such fence someone had cut away a foot and a half of one of the steel rails. Being as I am a little guy I could just squeeze through the opening. Once inside I discovered that was pretty much it. The mine didn't go much further than what I saw from the outside. I continued on my trek across the hillside face until almost reaching the stone cabin ruins where I caught a dirt track down from another mine back to camp.

Friday April the ninth rolled around which was Beans' adoption day when we became partners four years earlier, a happy day for both of us. The next day was Amanda's birthday. I wanted to take her out for a nice steak dinner or the like for her birthday but it didn't work out as we were not near any place decent to do so. We had a nice day anyway where I set her up for a desert style soak your feet in warm water pedicure while we drank gin and tonic's (her) and rum and cola's (me). I cooked up hamburgers. We sat outside enjoying the afternoon sipping drinks and sharing what we could remember of our fractured childhoods. I seemed to have many more memories of my early years than did she. I mentioned "For all these moments I can recall in my first six years of life I have no memories of my father. The only thing I remember is sitting in his lap one time as we drove down the street to our home and him letting me steer the car."

She asked if I had pictures of him as she did not have any of her father who abandoned her and her mother early on. "Oh yes. He was a good looking man. He looked much like James Dean. I sure didn't inherit that from him."

I told her how my parents were separated when I was five and a half and my mother and I were living at my grandmother's house. "I recall one afternoon my mother taking me into the back room and sitting me down to tell me I wouldn't be able to see my father anymore. I didn't recall the exact wording or even if she told me what had happen—he had been killed by a hit and run drunk driver. I suppose it was incomprehensible to me and I simply got up to go back outside and play."

Fifty plus years later I attended the funeral of a man who was like a father to me. Tippy filled in the void in my life left behind by the death of my father whom he knew. He included me in along with most everything he did with his son who was a year younger than I. He felt bad for me being tied to my step-father, a man he worked alongside with in construction. At Tippy's funeral many of his remaining life-

long friends were in attendance all of whom also knew my father for they were all of the same crowd having gone to school together and such. I figured this was my last chance since I had no family left to get an answer to a question I always wondered about: Was I at my father's funeral? I had asked my mother years before and she couldn't remember. Interesting. One lady, Wanda, was adamant about it. "Oh yes you were there. I remember you sitting up front with your grandmother and grandfather." I had no memory of that yet I remember being at the wedding of my mother and soon to be asshole step-father (the man my mother was carrying on an affair with that led to the separation) six months later. Why do I remember that and not the other? I asked around if anyone could tell me a little bit about my father. Everyone said he was a kind and thoughtful man who was well liked by everyone. "At least you inherited that from your father" Amanda said. Well that knocked me back on my heels. I thought about what she said. I never had thought of myself as others had thought of my father.

"Why thank you. No one has ever said that to me before."

We sat in silence while I processed this revelation. It pleased me much knowing I did have in me a little bit of my father, a quality I had never given any consideration.

We both got way too much sun that day. Earlier in the day I had gone out to check all the rubbish heaps looking for a nice tobacco can to put up on the wall with my other collectables. There were well over a hundred tobacco cans scattered about but for some unknown reason every single one had been smashed flat. Well actually most all the cans of any sort were flattened, rusted through or shot full of holes. I finally found one decent tin which would go up along with a baking powder tin lid I had found earlier in the week that I could date to around 1910.

In trying to affix a date to this mining operation based upon some of the artifacts I found I discovered this was all part of the Victorio Mining District out of nearby Gage. The site was established in 1880 with gold, silver and lead being the primary resources mined.

We planned to enjoy our time at Miners Camp as we called it on through the weekend to avoid the weekend travelers before moving on. Amanda had her heart set on some beachside primitive camping (no hook-ups) in a New Mexico State Park along Caballo and Elephant Reservoirs northeast of Deming near Truth or Consequences. Unable to make much sense from the online site where it appeared all camping was by reservation only for the full hookup sites. She finally gave up and called. She got a prerecorded message: "No beach or primitive camping is permitted due to COVID-19 safety concerns." She was livid! "Well ya know we might spread COVID germs in the sand and contaminate the water so...for safety." Not only that but all restroom and shower facilities were closed due to COVID-19. So we would be forced to make reservations for full hook-up sites, pay twice or three times the fee to be packed next to each other cheek by jowl but God forbid anyone to camp dispersed far away from their neighbor. There must be some misguided logic there in the COVID prevention decision making of the New Mexico State Park system but we failed to see it. We couldn't bother dealing with their absurdity and would camp elsewhere.

We left Miners Camp going our separate ways to do errands in Deming and planned to meet up afterwards. I wanted to go to a car wash to clean a couple rugs and also give Gracie the Honda motor bike a good washing off of all the desert dirt accumulated from Quartzsite. The well-used carwash was a dated simple affair with three bays under a tin roof. It had the unbelievably low price of one dollar to wash a car. What happened? Had I passed through a time warp and found myself back in the 1960's? While trying to make sense of the vacuum machines that had no hoses Amanda pulled in to do her laundry at the laundromat next door. While she washed clothes I found newer vacuum machines in the back of the lot. I

sucked out the water from the two jugs and vacuumed the other three. Nearby was a water faucet with no handle, but I was able to turn it on with a screwdriver. I filled my two jugs for the next foot bath. I joined Amanda in the laundry. Inside there were twice the number of signs posted on the walls than one would normally see as half were in English and half in Spanish. So with your laundry churning away one could sit there and brush up on their Spanish while waiting. And like the car wash the laundromat was like no other for one cycle of the dryer seemingly went on for nearly thirty minutes where they are usually only eight or ten minutes. When she pulled her clothes out they were too hot to handle. I was put to work helping her fold her laundry. By now we were hungry and thought it best to eat before going to Walmart to food shop. We drove back up Pine Street to a Mexican restaurant we had passed coming into town. The name was Benji's. It was housed in what looked like a drive-in diner from the old days with individual parking stalls where they brought your food out and set on trays hanging from your car door window. Today there were several picnic tables set in place out in front and five tables inside the small dining area. We planned to eat in the RV since all the tables inside and out were in use (goes to show how popular the place was) when two tables cleared up inside as I paid for our meals. I texted Amanda to come back in. There we ate in air conditioned comfort with Mexican music playing in the background. We each had the combination plate—chili relleno, enchilada, tamale, beef taco with rice and beans swimming in green sauce. Outstanding! If I lived in Deming I would be eating at Benji's all the time.

We went on down to Walmart for a few items. I had spotted a water machine outside a Speedy Mart on the way. I told Amanda to meet me there. I arrived and found the machine was broken—OUT OF ORDER. I walked in the mart to ask if they knew of another machine in town and was immediately accosted by the mask-wearing Nazi store clerk. "Mask required!" she barked. I told her I just wanted to know if she knew of another water machine in town. She simply shook her head. The customer standing at the counter was a nice helpful guy who directed me down the road to Walgreens. "They have a machine outside the store." I thanked him and walked out texting Amanda to go to Walgreens. When I arrived she was already parked. *How'd she beat me here?* With errands completed and our bellies full we began the hour and a half drive north to the town of Truth of Consequences.

Upon arriving we drove through the nice little town to check out a camp area on the other side. It charged ten dollars for a shelter, a picnic table and nothing else, not even a water faucet (the non-existent cell service was the deciding factor) so we backtracked seven miles to a dispersed camp area along the Rio Grande River. It was free, had good strong cell service plus the added bonus of nearby highway noise. The camp also came with people driving in and around at two a.m. doing whatever people do at two a.m. in the dark. I didn't know because I slept through it, but Amanda did not. Now to say we camped along the Rio Grande may sound enchanting but the poor river itself was not. The water wasn't something you'd want to splash around in being stagnant moss and algae covered harboring unknown toxic bacteria laden elements within. We've stayed in worse places in our separate travels over the years so this was okay for a day. At least we wouldn't be exposed to COVID-19 spreaders here.

The next morning I could see across the road from our hard scrabble location the old geezer in a beat up old Ford van pulling a much too long of an Airstream trailer just for him alone was preparing to leave. I sent Amanda a text: "Hey! I think the old fart across the way is packing up." She texted right back asking if I could get ready to go grab it. It is easier for me to move on a moments notice than her. It turned out to be no great rush for it took the grumpy old curmudgeon (I had tried to be neighborly the previous day and he barely acknowledged my existence) forever to get ready to move. Hours later he finally pulled out and I rolled across the road staking our claim. It was a nice level wide spot with riverside frontage part of which was in the shade of a large cottonwood tree. Being the nice guy I am I let Amanda have the

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