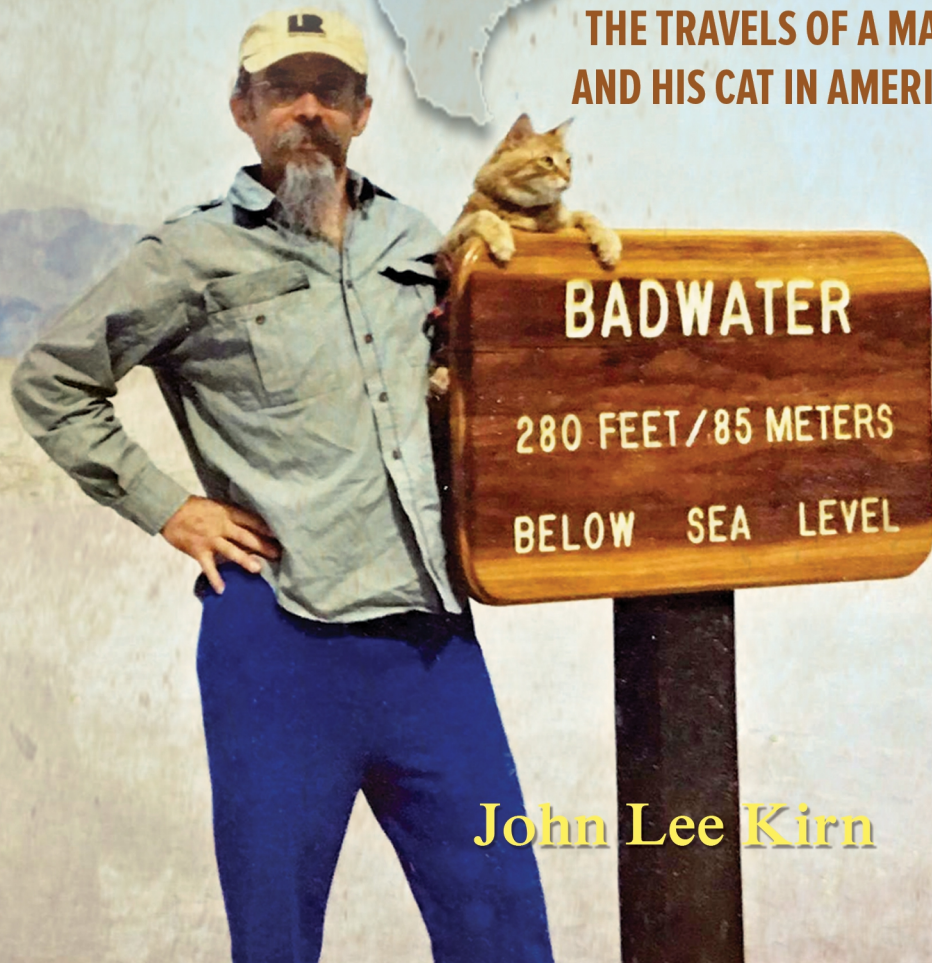


# SINBAD AND I

## *On the Loose*

THE TRAVELS OF A MAN  
AND HIS CAT IN AMERICA



John Lee Kirn

nbad and I on the Loose  
The travels of a man and his cat in America

By  
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As if it really matters...

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## PROLOGUE

I have had cats all my life. Most all have adopted me looking for a home and a good life which I gladly gave to them. After tragically losing a young cat during a particularly bad period of my life I was so devastated that for the first time, I actively went out and adopted a cat. That is how one year old Sinbad came into my life and in doing so he helped me with my own life. Sinbad was a medium long hair orange/ginger cat. He very much looked like a Somali. Sinbad was destined to be the first cat I ever took on the road traveling. We started out in old 1967 British Land Rover 109. Unfortunately those journals have been lost. When I grew tired of wrestling with these beasts I purchased a used 1995 Isuzu Trooper and we car-camped out of it for a few years. During this time the first motor home came into our lives, an old 1976 Winnebago Brave that we refurbished. I loved that old classic RV we nicknamed *The Box* for it was just that—a huge box on wheels. Finally, longing for something with a bit more comfort and reliability in my advanced years I bought a used one year old 2006 Winnebago View. Our stories here begin three years earlier in the fall of 2004. Sinbad was now five years old.

# Sinbad and I on the Loose

## RUNNING FROM MOUNT ST. HELENS

October 2004

Early one Sunday morning I was reading about the events occurring at Mount St. Helens in Washington. The volcano was showing some activity for the first time since the mountain destroyed itself back in 1980. My wife walked in and asked what I was doing and I told her adding "I ought to go see it". She said "You should" and with that I began to prepare for the trip. I took most of the day getting things together including cat food and a litter box for Sinbad. It'd be a good test for him in the new to us 1995 Isuzu Trooper. We left at four-fifteen Monday morning making it as far as a rest stop two hours up Highway 101. Unusual for me, I was tired already so just I lay down in the back while it was still dark. An hour later with the sun rising and feeling refreshed we were on our way again moving north on Highway 101. We stopped in Crescent City, California for gas then continued on into Oregon.

Unlike entering Nevada, in Oregon you genuinely feel you're in a different state. Everything is greener and more lush. The people in Oregon appeared to be either doing well or were simply down and out. There was no in between. In Nevada everyone looks like they are on the run, hiding out from the IRS or have been relocated as part as a witness protection agreement. A lot of little stores and shops were closed up-out of business. The lagging economy was evident. Still, tourist places we had seen when the kids were along on family vacations like the Trees of Mystery with giant Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox standing out in front, the Prehistoric Gardens with the full size dinosaur replicas and Safari USA where we petted baby lion cubs all were in business and looking well cared for, not run down and in disrepair.

Midway up the coast, just before Newport we pulled into a campground at five-thirty P.M. There was no problem getting a spot even though I had been seeing many tourist RV's and campers on the road all day long. I was better prepared and set up after a trip the Bonneville, Utah salt flats a month earlier trip so things went smoother except for having Sinbad along. He's really no bother but is something I have to be aware of all the time. Early on in the drive this became evident in that he'd step on buttons rolling down windows, locking and unlocking doors, folding the mirrors in or heating up the seats. The worse one was locking doors. I realized how easily I could be locked out. So I was always aware of having the key with me at all times. One good thing out of this was I discovered what this other "*lock*" button was for. Pushed down it prevented any of the windows to be operated except from the driver's control, so that problem with Sinbad was eliminated.

The next morning we were on our way at nine A.M. The upper half of the state was distinctively different from the lower half. It seemed better off with more tourist businesses along the arts and crafts line and a drive-up coffee/espresso trailer every mile or so.

Reaching Tillamook, Oregon I thought best to get gas for the towns pass that point were far and few in between. I had forgotten that they pump the gas for you in Oregon. It's the law and a very strange experience. The attendant told me just Oregon and New Jersey are the only states left that do this. He even washed the windshield. I felt I should have tipped him.

Rounding the bend of the state, through Astoria where even more closed businesses were to be seen and a stop alongside the road for the other half of my submarine sandwich before we crossed the Columbia River. Once across the river it was only ten miles of Interstate 5 before the turn-off to Mount St. Helens. I was

starting to get excited. Sinbad was asleep.

A sign stated that the road was closed forty-three miles in. A lot of traffic was coming out but only I and maybe one other car was going in. Why was everyone leaving? An evacuation was in effect? No, the road would be closed. Maybe there was no place to stay so I began to take note of all the possible places to pull off into for an overnight camp. Then I began to start feeling a bit silly as if I was driving to go see an accident. Was I just another gawking spectator ultimately being in the way?

Then a turn in the mountain road and the volcano came into view for the first time. I was impressed. This volcano was big, much bigger than I remembered. I don't think we came in this way from the west when we as a family came here a few years after the big eruption. A lot had been built up too. It was a nice road with view sights, tourist information and more than one visitor center. The lack of funds didn't seem an issue when developing the area for the tourist.

Suddenly a large view site turnout appeared filled with dozens of cars and several large camera trucks with satellite dishes on the roof. This is it! We pulled in and backed in to a spot on the upper level. I was feeling very grateful for getting a spot to park and began to set things up for the long wait. I thought to myself others around here are set up for the long wait. I can too. *I'll just be like everybody else.* I set up the camera and spotting scope on their tripods and was ready, looking like a pro having done this sort of thing all the time.

A lady on the level below us had towed her little hotdog wagon up and was doing a brisk business selling dogs and nachos. I watched the news crews prepare for their broadcasts including an interview with the enterprising hotdog lady. I took a few pictures, looked through the scope, and walked around a bit.

I came upon a guy talking to a young couple who obviously had just arrived as I had. I overheard him say how the volcano blew that morning. My heart sank. "I have the pictures. Come over and I'll show you." They walked to the back of his van where he pulled out a large big buck digital camera with a massive two-foot long lens attached and displayed the pictures to them on the camera's LCD screen. I peered over a shoulder and saw what I had missed seven hours earlier mostly a large puff of smoke. Slowly I walked back to Sinbad and the Trooper and thought, *now what?*

Well the thought occurred to me that I hadn't even been to the end of the road where it had been closed off. I should at least go see that. It's not like I'm going to miss anything now. So putting everything away we moved out. A few turns later another pull over view site and *Oh my god!* There were close to twenty news camera trucks. This encampment was huge including support vehicles, rented RV's to live in and several tent structures to work under out of the weather. Thinking this would be the place to be I soon found the view site was restricted for MEDIA ONLY.

Further up the road we came upon more volcano chasers all having set up camp alongside the road so I figured where to stay for the night was not to be a problem. The closure of the road was at the Coldwater Ridge Visitor Center. This was a big complex with lots of parking. This would be a good spot to set up camp. Many were there set up with cameras and tripods but no news trucks. One lady, just like one at the previous turn-out was doing an oil painting of the volcano. All in all everything seemed to have a big circus-like event, football tailgating, outdoor concert atmosphere about it. I had noticed a dirt road a mile back going up a ridge and there were a dozen or so were camped along it. I felt this was more to my liking and I would go back to it for the night but first, into the visitor center. It closed at six P.M. A glance at my pocket watch showed it to be five-fifty-five. Maybe tomorrow.

Back to the dirt road I set up camp, cameras and spotting scope, ate dinner and then took down cameras and spotting scope. It was too dark to see anything. What was I thinking? I noticed one lady there in the back of her small pick-up truck with Ohio plates. I wondered and later wished I had asked her if she drove

all the way out west just for this. Yes or no, I admired her spirit. Overall most were Oregon and Washington, maybe ten percent California with a couple of Colorado, Idaho and a few Canadians thrown in for a good mix.

That night it rained. In the morning I couldn't see the volcano which otherwise was so close that it filled up the entire view out the back window of the Trooper-clouds. I knew before leaving home that a weather system was moving in for the week. Also the thought occurred to me on the drive up that this thing could blow at night. So that in itself cut the chances of seeing anything in half. Now with clouds obscuring the view, and no activity expected for days, what am I doing here? I pulled up stakes and went to the visitor center for some postcards. The gates were closed not to open until eight A.M. so they run everyone out each night it seemed. Once in the parking area I discovered the center didn't open until eleven A.M. Heck that was an hour and a half away so Sinbad and I held council and we decided to head out for home.

Motoring along the thought slowly began to germinate about the feasibility of making it all the way back home in one day. Could it be done? I'd be going back via I-5 and should be able to camp somewhere along the way if need be. We pressed on going sixty-five and seventy mph most of the time. Soon after crossing back into California it grew dark and Sinbad became fascinated by the trucks and cars we passed. He had his nosed pressed to the glass for most of the time until we pulled off the interstate at Williams. Perhaps it was the lights as we never traveled during the night before.

In the end, fourteen hours later at eleven-fifteen P.M. we pulled into the driveway. Seven hundred thirty-eight miles! Something I could never have done in the Land Rover. The Trooper is such a pleasure to drive.

Sinbad traveled well enjoying each time he was able to get out be it at camp of a rest stop. I had my act together and came back with a much smaller list of alterations to make to the Trooper Still space is at a premium compared to the Land Rover 109. I jettisoned some more unneeded gear, and removing the other rear seat help even more. A few more trips should do it where it won't feel like a lot of work to set up camp. Before with the Rover it was the other way around, it was just a lot of work to drive it.

Thursday morning I checked the news and what do I see right off the start? Mount St. Helens blew. Oh well, it was a nice drive. And besides, Thursday was the one year anniversary of my first day of retirement life.



## LIFE AT SLAB CITY

February – March 2005

Slab City is an abandoned 1942 Marine Corps Training station in the California desert east of the Salton Sea. In 1954 it was dismantled leaving only the concrete slab foundations in place, hence the name. It has become a winter refuge for those wishing to escape the cold from their homelands up north. It is free camping which in turn has attracted some of those who do not have a home in the typical sense.

Salvation Mountain is what can be termed as an art project created by Leonard Knight over two decades in the making. Leonard passed away in 2014 after being moved to a care facility where he lived for over two years. He was eighty-two. More can be found about Leonard online.

The following is an account of my first solo trip in my first RV.

Monday

My first day at Slab City; now that I am here the last two days full of driving seemed worthwhile. I suppose just the getting here is the hard part. First and foremost I need to learn how to relax. It is very peaceful here. The weather is perfect mid seventies with a slight breeze T-shirt weather that later on evolves into shirtless weather. The pace of the residents here is slow and relaxed. Generally it seems everyone is just going about his or her day doing what needs to be done towards *survival* as some might call it. I suppose *existing* would be more the word for it as there is not much activity to speak of. One diesel pick-up passes by on the dirt track in front of the Box (my 1976 Winnebago Brave RV with all the shape of a box on wheels) with two fifty-gallon empty water drums in the back and returns within the hour with both filled. This is an important piece of knowledge to have—where to get water—if I were to be a long-term resident, especially in the fact that I pulled in yesterday with water dribbling out of one of the rear faucets. It could only have been happening for the last thirty nine miles when I had stopped for lunch outside of Coachella.

We are in the area where we camped one time before visiting Slab City. Dogs are barking but not all the time and far enough away for it not to be bothersome. And it is nothing earplugs cannot silence at nighttime. Again I am struck with the peacefulness in the air, no traffic noise, no emergency vehicle sirens, no dogs barking directly across the street and no noisy kids, everything I left behind at home. As for kids, the school bus comes by at seven A.M. I had forgotten about that. I will take notice at what time in the afternoon it returns. Otherwise there is a fair amount of vehicles coming and going on the main road through Slab City. People going into town for food, supplies, mail, or maybe even a job, for some of these people look to live here year around.

This morning it is a little nippy but not too bad. I awoke at six A.M., force myself out of bed to heat coffee then crawl back under the covers to read. I feel lazy doing this for it is not what I do at home. All of this is new for me. Then finally it comes time for me to face the fact of having to use the toilet in the Box. This is not something I have ever done before in the past as we were always in a campground with restrooms or pit toilets or in the desert where I can dig a hole. Here none of those options are available. Of course this brings to mind the same thought as with obtaining water. These people out here must deal with

the fact that the holding tank in their RV gets full and has to be dumped periodically. Where do they go? Where is the closest place? I know I will not be here that long for this to be a concern for me yet it is a vital piece of knowledge to be had. And then there are those living here outside of a trailer or camper, a whole different and even more challenging set of problems to deal with.

The day lingers on. I spend most of my time lying on the bed reading. Every once in awhile I'll get up to do something: refer to a map, eat an apple, let Sinbad out for a walk, fix lunch, or see what is going on in the neighborhood. There are so many potential stories out here to be told. Here is one: While reading I hear this man yelling "HEIDI! Heidi, come here!" I look out the back window and see an old man, hunched over, hobbling along. Wearing dark blue dungarees held up with suspenders, a dark plaid shirt and blue ball cap he shuffles along hollering out that same phrase over and over "HEIDI! Heidi, come here!" I feel sorry for the old guy knowing his pet, most likely a dog, has wandered off. He heads west for a quarter of a mile, which much seem like over a mile to him, but no Heidi. After over a half an hour of fruitless searching and yelling he turns back. I watch to see where he goes and see that it is the fifth wheel trailer several hundred yards on the other side of me. Nearing home his wife, fashioned out in a flowered blouse, rose colored polyester pants and the typical puffy blue rinsed hair-do of elderly ladies, meets him part way. I feel for them. *Why don't they unhook the truck and drive around looking* I think to myself. It would be a lot easier on the old guy and he could cover more ground. Sometime later I hear a diesel truck on the dirt road in front of me and it is them. Shortly they return and stop a fellow on a scooter and talk with him so I know they haven't found Heidi. I hear the description—a small tan and black dog. Later in the afternoon he is back out on foot again. He only yells his line once but searches nevertheless. I can imagine how they must feel. If it were Sinbad...well I don't even want to think about it. Hopefully I'll have a good ending to this story.

There was another story on the road out to here after getting gas in Coachella. I had eaten my lunch in some flash flood ravaged desolate industrial area outside of town and had just pulled back on the road when I saw this hitchhiker. He was a scruffy looking character with long hair down his shoulders and an equally long beard flowing down his chest. He looked weather-beaten and probably around my age. The worst part, as I came up to him on the road he held out his cardboard sign - NILAND. *Oh man, should I? He's going to Slab City no doubt. Oh gee, why did I have to see that? I don't want to have talk to anyone. I don't want to answer questions. Maybe he's the quiet type. Surely he wouldn't care to be silent just as long as he gets a ride. Maybe he smells. I'd have to smell that for an hour. Maybe I should turn around or maybe not.* I stewed about this for the next ten miles feeling like a jerk for not helping this guy out. *Well, someone else is bound to pick him up, someone nicer than I. What if he sees the Box in Slab City?* This raised another whole set of probabilities for me. I can see it now: "Hey buddy, why didn't you stop and give me a ride, you some kind of asshole or what?" *Yeah, you're right* would probably be the correct reply.

Tuesday

I make progress. This morning I set up the rug, table and chair outside. Maybe I will spend more time outdoors today rather than being holed up inside the Box all day reading. Sinbad is happy to be outside too. Today I feel a sense of getting into this lifestyle...loafing. Still the mornings are rough. I miss getting my wife her morning coffee. Being in the surroundings of the Box this memory is more persistent than if I were alone in the Trooper. If as the day wears on that proves to be the worst of it, I think I'll make it.

I go for a little bike ride this morning before breakfast and have a stomach ache the entire time, so perhaps I should have eaten first. Anyway, the squalor! For all of those who appear to live here most of the time, I could count on one hand those who have a fairly tidy homestead. The rest have all their possessions—and there's a thin line between the definition of possessions and junk—scattered all about. There are some areas where no one is living that are thickly littered with trash and junk. The refuse is so worthless that even I am not interested in getting off my bike to investigate. Those who are living/existing here, their habitat leave a lot to be desired. They could just as well drag their living quarters across the street to the refuse lot and be perfectly comfortable at *home* with no noticeable change in appearances. Most are old, beat up, weatherworn, dilapidated trailers, motor homes, fifth-wheels, campers, none of which will ever see the road again. I even see a few long-term residents living out of tents and one Indian tee-pee. When I return to the Box, it doesn't look so shabby after all. In fact, if it weren't for some of the high-end diesel motor homes and fifth wheels here, I may be considered among the elite.

Later on before lunch I take a walk that eventually brings me to the top of Salvation Mountain. It appears that Leonard has done a lot of work on his house. I am happy to see him giving a couple a tour down below. That guy must be pretty old by now but he's still getting around just fine. I wander on down and soon he comes over to greet me. I tell him how we had been here before and he confirms that most of the work since then had indeed been on his living quarters. I don't stay long for it is approaching lunchtime and I know I will come by later in the week.

I do more reading, sitting, looking about watching life go by. You have to be alert for not much happens and when it does it can be easily missed. I get a little restless so I go for another bike ride on my side of the "city", which proves to be not as trashy. It would be hard to guess but I suspect a couple hundred camps are here. It sounds like a lot but the area is big and everyone is spread out so there's no congestion.

I fill the solar shower around two-thirty P.M. and it has cooled a bit since the sun is behind some clouds. I think it best to do my shower now and I feel better afterwards. The best part of my shower is I see the old man walking a tan and black dog. I think Heidi might have come home. Tomorrow I will go by and find out the story. I also catch the school bus on its return trip today, which was at three fifty-five P.M. So I have that to do tomorrow also.

### Wednesday

With the start of each new day I find myself becoming more and more comfortable with being here. The Box is slowly taking on the appearances of an old geezer living alone in the desert. I have empty tin cans and bottles sitting on the counter-top, papers and eyeglasses scattered about the table. The few dishes that I do use are half washed, just rinse and wipe. Clothing is not an issue for I wear the same thing each day. Still I sense a slight bit of squalor forming in my own life. Is this an inevitable aspect of living like this? My main concern at this point is I'm running out of reading material. I'm down to my last book. Fortunately it is a thick one. I do have my Dad's letters to go through but don't feel like this is the best place after all for getting into that, or I'm just not in the right frame of mind for it. [These were letters my father had sent home while he was in the Navy just after the Second World War. I lost my father in 1954 when I was five years old] Food will not be an issue. I'm not hungry much and I miss my wife's cooking. Water too will not be a problem. The water in the tanks is funky and needs to be dealt with. I left water in there after the last outing and now it smells. Not bad, but I know it could be better. I plan to pick up a

bottle of bleach on the way home and let it slosh around inside for the trip. I never turn on the radio nor listen to any of the music I brought along and I'm just fine with that. I can list the appeal of this place: The weather, temperature, the peacefulness, the wide spacious uncluttered view and the solitude.

I will try to describe some of the scenery and characters in the neighborhood. Directly across from me, a couple hundred yards on the other side of the ravine, is what I call 'The Mexican Encampment'. There are four large and one small travel trailers arranged in a square formation. I don't know if they are Mexican or not for I only see one fellow doing anything there. A couple times a lady is present and I think I heard Spanish spoken so it got tagged 'The Mexican Encampment'. Except for one, the trailers look to be of fifties vintage. One has a solar panel on top angled skyward. The fellow I observed wears a sleeveless shirt and black Levis. For three days now, although nothing has yet happened today, he has been working on establishing a solar panel on another trailer. The first day was building the support for the panel. The second day was mounting it to the roof. All of what's been done so far normally could have been accomplished in a few hours. I doubt I will be here long enough to see its completion. They have a shaggy dog chained to the ground and two cats. I saw the lady out with a black & white cat on a leash with a young cat running loose. There are two other dogs always running free. One is large and the other medium size with stubby legs. They have a collar and a harness on and I think they live in the Encampment but later I'm not so sure. George and Ralph, I call them, have their routine always exploring the neighborhood trying to root out ground squirrels with no luck. They are never a bother and Sinbad always keeps a watchful eye when they get near. Only Ralph, the short legged one, came close one evening evidently trying to snatch a hotdog from the barbeque. Sinbad tipped me off and besides the barbi was too hot for George to make a snatch and grab.

East of the Encampment a hundred yards is 'The Fighting Irishman'. He received that name for he wears the same t-shirt every day from the fighting Irish of Notre Dame with the number 12 on the back. Each day he takes his dog for a walk, usually in the direction between Salvation Mountain and me. Now the only reason I write about this fellow is he's doing his thing out of a tent. It is a large family size dome tent with a fly over it. Off to the side, and not very far off by that account, is a little porta-potti size tent with a blue tarp on top, which I suspect, is just that, his toilet. He has erected a shade structure in front of his tent with all of his gear stacked on a couple of tables. I never could see a car there, but today returning from my walkabout I see he has a Trooper. He parks it in the same exact spot that is blocked by the tent.

Behind me is 'Red Shirt'. He is an old geezer living out of a little old fifties style trailer. Everyday he has on this long sleeved bright red sweatshirt. There is a beat-up old Ford pick-up next to him and an odd looking camper van. I have never seen anyone else there nor him going to the camper van. I never see him go anywhere either. He ventures no further than the ditch next to his bleached white trailer. There he tosses his garbage or washes out a rag. For the most part he is inside that cramped looking trailer. *What does he do all day long in there?* This one is really bothering me to know. If that wasn't enough, I never see a light on. Does he have no power? There is a propane tank outside. Then the question arises, what about a toilet? Maybe there are things I don't want to know.

I have the usual contingent of vehicles drive by in front of us as they negotiate the ravine in getting to the main road. It is a short cut but one I cannot do in the Box so I have to go the long way around on the "street". There is a couple of diesel trucks, one if not both from "Camp Heidi" (I haven't found out about the return of Heidi yet), a couple of military style jeeps usually running an errand such as getting water, a VW or two and then there's "Radio Man". I can hear this guy coming before I see him. He is another geezer driving a white Saturn. I suspect he is hard of hearing and has the radio cranked up because of that. It's always a talk show. I find this amusing.

There are other cars too but they are not noteworthy although are regulars passing by in my front yard. Finally there are a couple of motorcycles, scooters and bicycles that make their way through my front yard. And just as I was writing this an older fellow slowly made his way by on a bicycle with bags hanging fore and aft and a backpack on his back. It all makes me wonder.

On my afternoon walkabout I get to see more than from a bicycle seat because I am moving slower. For all the refuse that is scattered about there is absolutely nothing of any use. I suppose the reason is that the residents have picked it all over long ago. These people are after all a resourceful lot. I come across several more burned out rigs. It makes one wonder what happened and where did they go afterwards? My guess most of these were due to the occupant falling asleep with a cigarette. I imagine the firestorms that must have been coming out of these tinder dry stick homes. One incident, the nearby cottonwood tree and creosote bushes were fried in the process. No doubt it is enough to make a neighbor worry. It is best to camp away from your nearest neighbor.

After my walk I come to realize that the Box is not so bad after all. In fact after seeing a lot of what is out here I'm pretty well off. Being unfamiliar and uncomfortable in it makes me a bit nervous. I just need to give the Box a chance and respect it more for its potential. It is better than having nothing at all. I need to allow it to serve me until we are able to do better and upgrade. When that time comes I'm afraid I will have a hard time letting it go. I should do as I have often thought about; put it up on blocks and have it as a little retreat for me in the desert. Slab City would be ideal. No investment in property. No taxes. I would worry though that it would get vandalized from what I've seen here, so this is not an option.

Thursday

It is a wonderful day in the neighborhood. I get out of bed by six-thirty this morning and it doesn't seem as nippy. After a cup of coffee and wiping the dew from my bicycle seat I go out to do surveillance on the school bus stop. Only one kid shows, a teenage boy. When the bus arrives right on schedule, there are only two other kids on the bus. Back home I do some maintenance on the Box. I check all the fluids and everything is right up to snuff. I am surprised thinking at least I would have to add some oil. I just don't give the Box the respect it deserves. I then do a little bit of housekeeping. Things are not as bad as I may have led on before. Just put a few things away, tidy up, sweep out the floor and things look ship-shape. I wash the front and rear windows in preparation for the drive home.

This has become an issue. I keep thinking about what to do regarding going back home. I am content to stay here. I have enough supplies although the reading material may run out. On the other hand I feel good by getting out, feeling I purged the wanderlust out of my system for a while and am kind of energized about finishing up some projects at home. And most of all I miss my wife to share my adventures with. I thought several times about the prospect of her driving down here and meeting me when I come again. Maybe stay until she's had enough (twenty-four hours worth most likely) then she could return home. I think that may be an interesting and fun thing to do. Maybe not from her viewpoint and I'm sure she'll tell me so.

Sinbad is really doing great and I am happy to have him along. After a couple of days he is content just to sit inside and look out. I don't even have to shut the screen door. If he decides to go out then he lets me snap the string on and out he goes. He will go outside and sit, roll around in the dirt or just lie there and sun bathe. After a while he will come back in. His only problem is his string gets wrapped around these little tufts of grass and he won't pull hard enough to free himself, so he will meow at me and

out I have to go to free him. Sometimes as I look at him I get the feeling he might be bored but maybe that's just a human point of view.

I walk over to see Leonard this morning. Mainly I want to leave him with a donation. As usual, when I arrive he is giving tours. He sees so many people—two hundred in a day sometimes he tells me—that he doesn't remember my having been there two days earlier. I sit for a spell while tours are being conducted and then finally, I just have to ask. "When are you ever able to get any work done with so many visitors?" He says that it is a problem at times. But the man is so conscious about people coming by that he feels if someone has stopped and he hasn't greeted them, he hops on his scooter and rushes over apologizing for not having said hello.

While we talk he is re-arranging ladders. I ask if he needs any help lifting something into place. He is elated by my offer. Pointing to a muddy wheelbarrow he asks if I have ever mixed adobe.

"Ah, no" I reply and immediately think *what did I get myself in to?* Mixing adobe looks like WORK.

"Later on I could use some help with that, but till then, do you want to paint some flowers?"

Now this sounded more to my liking. I tell him sure and that I will be right back. "I'd just like to go and get some water and check on my cat."

"Thank you so much. Lord that would be a great help."

As I wander back to the Box I think even more as to what I have got myself into here. But maybe I reason, it will be a good experience and a memory I will not forget. Oh how that was later proved to be so prophetic.

Back at the Box I get my water, camera, an apple and change into my sleeveless shirt. I return finding Leonard struggling with the same two ladders.

"Hi Leonard, I'm here to paint flowers."

"Oh praise the Lord, thank you. I've have about seventy-five years of work to do yet. I tell you what. You don't mind painting to you? What I think I'll have you do is paint the waterfall" and I follow him over to the paint depository which is hundreds of one and five gallon cans of paint scattered about the desert ground. He picks out a gallon of deep blue.

"This is blue isn't it?" he asks. I ask if he is color blind but he said he doesn't think so. It is just sometimes the blue looks turquoise to him. I think Leonard needs to wear some eye protection. The colors are so brilliant in the blazing desert sun that it's nearly blinding. He isn't even wearing a hat both days I see him and later I call him on that.

"Usually I do," he informs me.

Leonard finds me a four-inch wide paintbrush that previously has been used for green. Over we go to a fifty gallon drum of dirty water and he rinses it out, slapping it dry against a twelve-by-twelve pillar. Up on the mountain he gets me started on going over the blue on the waterfall saying that after a build-up of six coats, "...it will last twenty years". I don't have to put on six coats, just one of the six. He says he will come back in twenty minutes and check on me.

Twenty minutes stretches out to over an hour with all the tours he is giving. Meanwhile I am getting into my task. I am enjoying this plus gaining an even deeper appreciation for what this man has done. Also I am fielding questions from tourists walking along the *Yellow Brick Road* above me, most of who refer to me as "his helper".

"How long have you been helping Leonard?"

"What time is it?"

“10:30”

“About an hour.”

Sometime later he comes by and is thrilled with what I had accomplished, especially having done the detail work in and around the flowers. “Oh I like to do detail work” I tell him.

He says he would like my help with something else later and I say sure. “I just would like to finish up to this point”, as I hate not finishing something. “I like the sense of accomplishment you know.” He agrees.

Then I add on a second thought. “Maybe we should do it now while no one is here” for I know he will get distracted. He likes that idea and I set down my paintbrush and follow him over to a wheelbarrow full of freshly mixed adobe.

My first thought is *Whew, I don't have to mix adobe*. My second thought is this old man did, and had done so while I was painting and in between tours. *How does he do it?*

He has four 5-gallon buckets and throws a shovel-full of adobe in each. He asks if that is too heavy. “Huh?” I lift a couple and say, “No problem. Put another shovel full or two in.”

Oh he is full of praises and so thankful to have a strong hand to help out today. Then I discover we have to haul the buckets up to the top of his three-story “museum” he is constructing!

*Okay, I can do this*. And really it wouldn't have been too bad...BUT, this building is a pyramid of hay bales set in no particular order or fashion. Then on top of the already adobe covered and painted hay bales, he has other hay bales stacked in to use as climbing surfaces. As I crawl up this wall of teetering hay bales, lifting up buckets of adobe one bale at a time, I am thinking *would OSHA approve any of this?* Anyplace else I'd be required to wear a hardhat and safety harness. And of course, this old man does this every day. *How does he do it? How in creation does he get these hay bales up here?* At the top he asks if I have ever worked with adobe and shows me how to go about plastering it onto a hay bale. Then some more visitors arrive down below. As he leaves me on top to go greet the new visitors only then he asks if I am afraid of heights.

This is dirty work but I'm getting in to it. I dump a bucket of adobe. I grab a handful of the gooey mix and work it in with my hands, then another handful and another. Then I smooth it all over thinking how when this dries it will be hard as concrete and the water will run right off the smooth surface I'm leaving behind. Adobe is my medium. I write my name and date in the fresh adobe. After I finish with the fourth bucket I start back down for another load, *this time only one shovel full in each* I say to myself. I also think I should bring my camera back up next time. At the bottom I wash up in that fifty gallon water clean-up center so I can get a drink and handle the camera. Now I discover why my finger hurts. There is a piece of straw jammed into it like a splinter. I would never think so from straw. But I need to get it out and with what? I have nothing. Fortunately I am able to press it out backwards and then the blood starts to flow. *Let's see, didn't the Indians use mud for arrow wounds?* So I don't worry.

Back at the wheelbarrow there is just enough for one shovel-full in each bucket. Good, it will look like I didn't wimp out when he sees the now empty wheelbarrow, plus it will be the end of this manual labor that I am not accustomed to. Back up I go. It takes four or five stages of lifting and climbing to progress to the top and at each stage I look up. *I don't remember it being so far before*. Midway I am whupped. Leonard comes back up and tells me how happy he is with what is getting done.

“I've wanted to do this for two months.” It's then I learn that this isn't the top. He plans on bringing more hay bales up and applying more adobe! And then it has to be painted. It is only when I see him trying to fit in this automobile windshield as a skylight that I've been crawling around that I get an idea of

how much more he plans to do up here. Fortunately some more visitors arrive and he gives up on the windshield. He is back down and off to conduct another tour. I get the four empty buckets and make my way down, not as sure footed as I was before, taking extra care on the wobbly hay bales. I am spent.

I clean off adobe from my hands and arms grab my haversack and go back over to the waterfall where I want to complete my painting. With the current batch of visitors gone Leonard comes back over to me thanking me for all my help. I am not too proud to tell him I am spent and let him know the deep sense of appreciation I have for what he has done, what he does, and all this in light of he being seventeen years older than I. He tells me that any time I want to help out I am more than welcome. "We are good friends." In fact if need be and I am a bit down on finances, he would pay me ten dollars an hour for a week's worth of work! I'm shocked and only can reply that I should pay him ten dollars an hour just for the privilege to work with him. To see how he lives and what little possessions he seems to own, I wonder how he could afford such a sum. Then I have to only consider with all these people stopping by many give him money without his asking. He never asks for money or imposes his strict belief in God and all God provides upon you. Earlier I was standing next to him when a gentleman slipped him a twenty. It went right into his shirt pocket along with a "God bless you". Yep, I think Leonard has a good thing going here.

While I finish up, Leonard is off on his scooter into town to check his mail. I clean my brush in the fifty gallon clean-everything-tub and put my paint, glitter jar and rags away. On my way out I find he has left me with a stack of postcards and two giant full color jigsaw puzzle pictures of Salvation Mountain. Thank you, Leonard.

Back at the Box I find I have been working for over three hours. It feels like a full day. Sinbad is happy to see me especially since I have some great new smells on me. Off with my boots and socks. My dogs were barking. Off too with the sweat-soaked shirt. A cool one is in order. I sit and reflect and groan. My back is sore. I shower and clean up which helps a little. I doctor my hand injury. After I finish my beer I still hurt. Looking in the medicine cabinet I find some ibuprofen. *I bet Leonard doesn't do this* and I gulp one down.

Friday

I make a decision. We will leave Slab City today and go as far as the Salton Sea Campground forty miles north. It will be a change of scenery and I can dump the tanks there. I take my time. I get things squared away for the drive out leaving my bicycle for last. I want to go around and say good-bye to Leonard. When I arrive there is no one home. But I think I see him on his scooter talking to someone down the road so I pull up a chair. Leonard is happy to see me and I assure him I will be back, thanking him for the experience. He mentions how he sure would like for me to send some help his way and I tell him I will do what I can. Yesterday I told him about possibly being able to do this, thinking it would be a good piece for this year's Burning Man. [That year at Burning Man I had a large display of Salvation Mountain with a write-up about Leonard, directions on getting there, the free camping and all the fun in helping with the art project. It received a lot of interest. If only a couple followed through, then it worked] He then asks if I can spare him ten minutes. He has cut some sticks down the road a ways and wonders if I would like to help him load them up in his "Scout" which is really a Jeep Wagoneer. Of course, what else do I have to do?

After he finally locates his car keys we're off down the road about a mile. The "sticks" turn out to be some Tamarisk that he has cut early this morning. He tells me usually he only takes the dead wood but



today he cut some green stuff. While doing so some guy stopped by and told him he shouldn't be cutting the green stuff. Leonard felt bad about it and was telling me how the man was right and he wasn't going to do that anymore. I told Leonard the guy doesn't know what he's talking about.

"Leonard, that stuff is Tamarisk or Salt Brush. It's not a native species. It was introduced here long ago and since has taken over everything killing off the native plants by starving them of water. The Park Service and Bureau of Land Management go out and try to eradicate the plant but it's nearly impossible since the root system goes so deep. You're doing everyone a service by cutting down what you do."

He says that makes him feel better but he still isn't going to cut green stuff anymore. We stop a bit further along the road for he has his eye on a large tree branch. Seeing it I can't imagine getting it into the Jeep with just two people. It is huge, eight inches in diameter and nearly twenty feet long.

"It has a nice arch to it and I know just where I can use it. I'll come back some other time and get it" The only way I figure this could be done was to chain it onto the bucket of his skip-loader but he says the tractor wasn't running at the time.

"Maybe this afternoon I'll get it running."

No he informs me, he has brought bigger stuff than that back with the Jeep. Then I find out he chains it to the Jeep and just drags it up the road. Well, okay. It is not like there is a lot of traffic out here. Do what you want to do; there's no one to tell you otherwise. I like that philosophy.

The sticks we have loaded amounted to hardly anything, eight branches in all. I think Leonard just wanted me along for company. On the way back to Salvation Mountain I delicately get on the subject of money and the donations he receives. He tells me that a box of postcards costs him eleven hundred dollars for twenty-six thousand cards. The large 11"x16" two hundred piece jigsaw puzzle photo of Salvation Mountain cost four thousand dollars a box of puzzles and he had four boxes made up last year. He has an order in for two more boxes. So Leonard does all right on donations alone.

Back at camp I load up the bike and roll out of Slab City. I am ready to go but I will miss it, especially the mornings and late afternoons, dogs barking and all. I stop at the store in Niland and get a small bottle of bleach for the water tanks. I walk down to the Post Office for ten postcard stamps. I discover where everyone gets their water. Leonard told me at the corner market and sure enough in the back is a spigot. Some ZZ Top looking fellow, in a thoroughly thrashed pick-up from Oregon is washing up at the time. The town is fully occupied by the down and outs, a few near-to-do-wells and several unsavory looking individuals, a very interesting slice of society. I feel like I don't fit in. In order to feel more comfortable walking the streets of Niland, next time I need to have several days' growth of whiskers, some oily long hair would help the image, and my clothes need to be many times more dirty and worn out than they currently are. And I could stand to lose about twenty pounds too. Scrawniness is a big factor here.

Up at the Salton Sea Campground I am undecided as to what to do when the Ranger lady at the kiosk asks me if she can help. "I am not sure if I want to stay or press on" I tell her. She invites me to take a drive through which I do. Right away I know I'm staying. I pay the seventeen dollars and immediately go to the dumpsite. With that accomplished I feel much better and ready to relax then drive home tomorrow, which probably will be a two-day trip. I elect the 'parking lot' style camping as we can be close to the water, which I discover Sinbad is not too fond of. Still, there is hardly anyone here and it is peaceful save for the traffic on Highway 111 and the frequent Santa Fe freight trains rumbling by.

I walk up to the visitor center for a look around. I am once again in the world of polyester clad tourists and the sight of these people scares me. If I ever evolve into wearing white tennis shoes with white socks half way up my calves, fashion designer off-the-rack Bermuda shorts, a brightly colored polo shirt with

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