

A **60-Minutes** program had warned that state troupers in Louisiana were pulling RVs over for any reason they could trump up in order to search for drugs and confiscate the vehicles. Not hauling much contraband ourselves, we decided to make a law-abiding dash across northern Louisiana and into the safety of Texas. Our rig was new and in perfect working order, but it wasn't long that a trouper came up on us. I drove a straight line at exactly the speed limit in the curb lane. The trouper hovered behind us in the passing lane for what seemed like five minutes. I could see him in the driver-side mirror and was pretty sure he was calling in our plates. We were being unreasonably harassed just like *60 Minutes* had accused. He decided not to pull us over, and I stopped at the first rest area for a relieved lunch and to reexamine the trailer. I called Lee Ann out to look at it.

"See how this license-plate holder is blocking out the name of our county?" I was holding a screwdriver and pliers.

"Surely the bastards wouldn't pull us over for that."

"Why give them an excuse? It's not like Wilcart RV is paying us to advertise. We'll go without the license-plate holder. I think it'll look better without it anyway."

"Your salad's ready and waiting." Lee Ann took great pride in her salads. She would buy the freshest of a variety of fixings and make enough to last a week at a time. We got in the habit of stopping around the halfway point of our drives to have one for lunch. She listened to me rant on about the out-of-control bureaucracy of Louisiana, not appreciating that this was only the first of many such outrages yet to come. They would antagonize me to near the point of protest as the trip continued.

We proceeded across the state and into Texas without further incident and boondocked for the night at a perfect and fine Texas rest stop. I stayed outside in the dry air and waited for darkness and big bright stars. It was disappointing, but I was hopeful. We weren't exactly "Deep in the Heart of Texas." I went in to find Lee Ann reading and petting Egypt. She'd laid in a good supply of crime novels, which she began devouring while I drove and devoured the country. We'd both read during our TVless boondocking. I had more appropriate reading material and was learning what lay down the road and how to operate all our new toys.

Waking up excited at being in Texas, I filmed the rest stop and caught Lee Ann and Egypt emerging from the trailer. "We're in Texas. We were boondocking last night. We were the only ones here when we got here, but now there's two other campers here and some other vehicles. Started pumping oil soon as we crossed the Louisiana-Texas line, and here they have the picnic tables looking like oil derricks. I can see why there weren't many stars last night. Sky's smoky or maybe dusty. We're heading on to Dallas today. We're only 150 miles away now."

The trees got smaller all bluegrey morning long and gave out entirely as we drove on to Aledo, Texas and checked into the Cow Town RV Park, which would be the base of our explorations of the Dallas-Fort Worth area. I carried a couple cold beers and my GPS as I climbed a fence and headed off across the prairie. I tried to walk far enough to lose sight of the campground so the GPS could take me back, but the land was so flat I couldn't do it. I found a hot rock to sit on with the idea that I'd remain still until the

wildlife forgot about me and emerged. I drank both beers and thought about my friends and family safely trapped in the madness of their lives.

Giving up on the wildlife, I made my way back to the trailer to find Lee Ann and Egypt surrounded by a small group of people. The conversation was to be repeated a great many times as we made our way around the country. It would usually go something like the following.

"What kind of cat is that? I've never seen one like it."

"He's an Abyssinian. His name's Egypt."

"He's a beautiful cat. Can I pet him?"

"Go ahead. He won't bite."

"Why Egypt?"

"His breed is from Egypt. He's the cat the ancient Egyptians used to worship as the God of Joy."

"Oh yeah. The statues of the big-eared cat."

"That's him."

"I've never seen a cat walk on a leash. Do they all do that?"

"I don't know, but I doubt it. I've been walking him since he was a kitten. He walks good on the leash most of the time."

"Look at this cat, Honey."

"What kind of cat is that? I've never seen one like it." On and on that way it would go as she would walk Egypt and meet people.

When we went in for dinner that evening she was happy. She talked about all the friendly people, telling me where they were from and where they were going, the camping advice they'd given her. Lee Ann needed people, but she was just about all the people I needed. I'd come to see the country or what was left of it that people hadn't spoiled. I longed for the wide-open spaces. I wanted to see "Deer and Antelope Play." I'd seen enough people and enough cities, and I wouldn't go much out of my way for either. I wanted geography, biology, and just a dash of history. I wanted to receive the emotional impulses of Nature as Einstein had advised. The only people that interested me were the wild ones, the ones that lived wild and had wild stories to tell, people I couldn't shock or scare off, strange and extraordinary people.

To please a woman I found myself standing on the grassy knoll in Dallas with two friendly strangers, retired school teachers from Cow Town. Dallas was on our way and I'd planned to see it for an almost embarrassing reason. I used to love *Dallas* the television show. I'd learned a lot of business lessons from J.R. Ewing. Seeing the big city grow out of the Texas horizon was exciting for me. I could almost hear the theme song playing. We checked out the buildings as we drove around deciding where to park, and by the time we found a spot I'd seen all I wanted. Once in it, I didn't particularly like Dallas and didn't shoot any film of it. We visited the Schoolbook Depository and talked conspiracy theories. A friend of mine claimed Kennedy was killed because he wanted to abolish the Federal Reserve. Lee Ann's new friend was convinced Castro was behind it. Her husband believed it was the FBI, a theory he'd seen on *X-Files*. I was in seventh-grade science class when the president was shot. Lee Ann was too young to remember.

Lee Ann's friends purchased steaks on the way home, and I was assigned to grilling. The steaks were Texas size. They brought martinis in big plastic glasses. RV suspension systems did not lend themselves to the use of actual glass. We gorged on mass quantities

of beef along with mounds of fried potatoes and a healthy portion of asparagus covered in melted Swiss cheese. With another round of martinis in the hot tub, we were talking loud and annoying the crowd. We got the trailer rocking that night.

The following morning Lee Ann and I went to see Fort Worth. It was the feed lots and the Stock Exchange that I mainly wanted. There was no reason to expect it would be more than a tourist trap, but I could add my imagination. I posed for a picture on a saddled longhorn steer right outside the exchange. We found authenticity in a saloon. It was much restored and catered to tourists but proudly displayed its history. It was more the bar portion of a restaurant in a hotel lobby, but in the old photos and paintings it was a larger saloon with rooms above. It was done in dark paneling and had a good variety of Western wildlife stuffed and mounted. There was a mountain lion poised to jump from a branch over a doorway, a possum hanging from the ceiling by its tail, a Western diamondback coiled and ready to strike, and the rear end of a buffalo over the center of the bar. There were large fans spaced across the ceiling connected by a belt on a series of pulleys driven by a single motor. A beautiful, brightly colored, and large painting featured saloon girls waiting on cowboys playing poker around a wooden table. As I was filming, an old cowboy stood up and opened his arms to the camera, his 10-gallon hat held in one hand. He was tall with skin of leather and a full head of greasy dark-gray hair.

"You want the wild West?" he said and smiled as big as the West.

"You're not wanted are you?"

"No, can't say I'm wanted." He paused to think. "Except by women."

"Don't put that camera on me," said his friend on the next barstool. He was just as old and just as happy but not a cowboy. He looked more like a homeless wine alcoholic you might find back East. They both wore winter coats, one a blue-suede, fur-lined cowboy, the other a goodwill trench.

"Buy ya a drink, pardners?" I asked.

"Double Jack Daniels on the rocks."

"Isn't that from Tennessee?"

"Only comes from there. Don't have to be from there to drink it."

I was feeling a little hungover from the prior evening, but I bellied up to the bar and announced that I'd be having the same. "Let's lasso one on," he grinned. He relived the days when they drove cattle right down the street in front of the saloon and played poker on the big table in the corner. "Just like the painting," he affirmed. He talked about his days riding the range and working the oilrigs. He kept smiling and never became melancholy though he clearly missed the good-old days. At one point he asked Lee Ann if she wanted to see some pictures of his girlfriend. He retrieved them from a breast pocket and handed them proudly to her. He pointed at the mirror and we watched the initial shock on her face turn to disgust as she examined Polaroid nudes of an obvious hooker. She passed them quickly to me. He, himself, was thankfully not in any of the pictures. It must be a cowboy thing. It stands to reason that a cowboy would be away from women for long periods of time and would want to keep a picture. Perhaps that's why all the saloons we visited had paintings of nude women. A cowboy reaches town after a long cattle drive, he's going to want to quench his thirst and see the female form. His eyes danced all over Lee Ann whenever he thought I wasn't watching. When the lunch crowd started to fill the place, the cowboy-hatted barmaid with Texan sweetness in

her stern voice told both of our drinking buddies that it was time to go. They accepted the eviction as if it was daily routine. We shook hands, and it was a good strong grip, and I held on a little longer than appropriate seeing Mat Dillion, Ben Cartright, the Rifleman, and the Virginian in his cowboy eyes. "Happy trails," he laughed and turned on a boot heel for the door. His little buddy staggered after him. We stayed for a sobering lunch.

We'd planned to tour the Ballpark at Arlington but settled for a few frames of film from the parking lot. "The Ballpark at Arlington, home of the Texas Rangers," I slurred. "A little too buzzed from drinking with the cowboy to bother taking the tour. We bought each other double Jack Daniels, now known as red eye."

Before setting off the next morning, Lee Ann and Egypt went to say their good-byes and I filmed the park. "This is our campsite at the Cow Town RV Park in Aledo, Texas. Friendly people. We enjoyed it. This was the base of operations for our trip to Fort Worth that preceded this on the tape. Prairie. Southwest of Dallas trees disappear and it turns to prairie country. Too many fences though. Can't get out on much of it."

While we drove in relative oblivion, Fort Worth was hit by a tornado that tore through downtown and blew windows out of many of the buildings we'd seen. We didn't notice any weather or even see the sky darken, but we got a phone call from home inquiring after our status and describing the damage. This was the first of a series of disasters that was to follow us around the country. It brought back thoughts of death's pursuit. Were my efforts to beat cancer a vain attempt to cheat fate? If the reaper was trying to catch me with a tornado instead, he just missed me. We were on the road moving west. We were headed for Abilene, a name that said cowboys and cattle drives. Lee Ann spotted a castle, and we pulled off the interstate and into a gas station to make some inquiries. There were no tornado warnings out. The castle turned out to be a corporate hunting lodge, and they warned us not to climb its fence.

They didn't have to worry. I wanted no part of it. Looking at the castle filled me with an aversion to man. What kind of man would spend all that money for the joy of destroying animals for sport? We'd come half way across Texas and had yet to see our first wild animal. It wasn't bad enough they seem to have killed every wild animal in Texas, now they were importing them from other countries for the sole purpose of killing them. "We gotta go."

We drove in silence. Lee Ann stuck a book in her face and didn't ask what bothered me. She knew I'd work it out for myself or bring her in if I needed. We parked our rig right on the street in Abilene in front of a restored train depot and set off on foot to check it out. Abilene held little attraction for us aside from the marvelous renovation of its old Paramount Theater. We were able to shoot some film of it. It is by far the best renovation of its type I've ever seen, much better than the Playhouse Square renovations back in Cleveland. It turned out that the main reason I'd heard of Abilene and many of the towns in west Texas is that there are very few towns in west Texas. The cowboy movies and television programs I'd watched in my childhood would reference these few towns. Abilene was a county seat in spite of its small population. Many towns get that designation because they are the only town within a 3,000-square-mile area.

"Historic Abilene. That's about all of Abilene we're gonna see."

About 15 miles south of Abilene we found Buffalo Gap, Texas. The town was named for a gap in the mountain range through which Buffalo used to migrate-before they killed them all!

Our camp for the night was at a state park. We found it cheap to camp in state parks, but their facilities were usually quite limited. It was very dry there, no rain since October. We got busted for grilling steaks during the "high fire danger" period. He let us finish the steaks in return for a promise to douse the fire pit. I did some hiking and GPS practice the next morning without seeing a four-footed animal. We did watch a group of sinister black vultures, so big we were afraid to leave Egypt out alone.

An 80-mile drive from Buffalo Gap brought us to Big Spring, Texas, a small city named for a big spring which used to be a camping spot for Commanche Indians until settlers drove them out. The spring is now the center of the city's park, which includes a beautiful 6,500-seat amphitheater built of local stone, a pool, ball fields, and a golf course. We became the only trailer at Big Spring State Park, which is south and above the city and has a commanding view in all directions from a tabletop mesa. The drive from Buffalo Gap to Big Spring included oil wells in mostly plowed fields that I believe were awaiting cotton planting. I suppose they plowed the fields so rain would soak in rather than sit on solid ground and evaporate. A consequence of the plowing was a haze of dust in the air and all over everything and -one. It brought to mind the dust-bowl days of the Great Depression. There was enough West Texas Intermediate for an oil refinery and enough wind for a wind farm, both of which were in view from our campsite. The dust settled some, and we were treated to a spectacular red-dust sunset. The huge red ball shot its star arms out through dust from red to orange to yellow at the points. The scene was complete with a flight of majestic sandhill cranes that put on a good visual and audible performance. In preparation for the trip, I'd bought Lee Ann a pair of binoculars and a bird identification book in the misplaced hope that she might get interested. Though she didn't, I used it whenever we spotted a new bird.

One reason we stopped at Big Sky State Park was its prairie dog town. Texas had been so devoid of animals that we were willing to settle for rodents. A chain-link fence surrounded the town. We could see their holes but no other sign of them. We guessed they might be bedded down for the night, so we decided to get up early to check them out. After an hour of frustrated silence the next morning, I climbed the fence and went to flush them out. I did everything short of digging up the ground. There were no prairie dogs.

Lee Ann rode my mountain bike down from the top of the mesa following Egypt and me in the trailer. Once she got her confidence up, she passed us. We picked her up at the bottom. "What a rush. I wish you could have tried it."

We left the interstate and headed south on U.S. Highway 277 to San Angelo. We camped at Newsmaster Lake for two days and had a beautiful spot right on the lake. The lake was a welcome respite from desert and prairie. Being near water made us both much happier. Lee Ann's mood always improved when she could pull on a pair of shorts, and this was our first 80-degree day. She continued her reading in a lounge chair while I tried for bass, inspired by the state-record large-mouth bass which came out of the lake and was mounted in the office. The locals were fishing for catfish, but I resisted their advice and caught my first large-mouth on a white spinner bate. He posed for pictures and joined us for dinner. We explored San Angelo's River Walk, restored fort, and several galleries and antique shops. We weren't impressed. It was a very poor imitation of San Antonio's River Walk, just as poor as Cleveland's imitation of Baltimore's Inner Harbor.

We continued south out of San Angelo heading to Sonora. The Caverns of Sonora proved to be as spectacular as advertised. Still-growing formations of every sort were all over the cave. We saw the beautiful and famous crystalline butterfly growing on the cave wall. There were soda-straw formations growing up to six feet long. Other formations that seem to defy gravity are rare in every other cave in the world but common here. It's actually a release of air from within the rock that carries the mineral-bearing water in different directions and builds the formations. It was an unexplained 70 degrees in the cave. Why wasn't it 56 degrees, the standard underground temperature everywhere else I'd ever heard about? They didn't know. Though the cave was big, I still expected to be awed by Carlsbad Caverns in a couple weeks. There were no bats in the cave. Carlsbad has them by the thousands but not during the winter. We didn't camp but moved on to Del Rio. Because we arrived in town just before sunset, we boondocked at Wal-Mart. It didn't save much money since Lee Ann made two shopping trips into the store. There were several large rigs also spending the night. Lee Ann's cat walk would usually draw out other Wal-Mart boondockers, and we would share valuable advice and information. "Be sure to do this. Don't do that. Stay there. Don't stay there. Eat there. Don't eat there. Watch out for this or that."

The next morning we checked in at Lonesome Dove RV Park hoping for the Internet access they advertised but were disappointed when they really didn't have it. I made a note to pick up one of those Lonesome Dove novels. We walked over the bridge into Ciudad Acuna, Mexico. One side of the Mississippi looked exactly like the other, but one side of the Rio Grande looked nothing like the other. The change from the United States to Mexico was astounding, immediate, and without doubt. We were tentative and cautious. We had a raleño and one margarita each, bought some prescription drugs over the counter, picked up a couple bottles of tequila, and walked back across hoping not to get busted. From the bridge, we saw Mexicans wading the Rio Grande into Texas. Customs waved us right through, and we smiled to ourselves. Lee Ann's a shopper and loves a deal, but buying prescription drugs and tequila in Mexico was close to stealing and bringing them across the border was close to smuggling. She squealed with delight when we unloaded back at the truck. We drove out to Amistad National Park which borders Lake Amistad, a huge lake made by damming and backing up the Rio Grande and two smaller rivers that join it there. The lake is shared by both countries and has marker buoys to make the international boundary. The February water was too cold for swimming but was exceptionally blue because of a mostly rock bottom and no soil runoff. It hadn't rained in Del Rio for five months. Clear water is blue water, the clearer the bluer. Cactus and thorn bushes extended right to the edge of the lake. Roads that predated the lake just disappeared into the water. We did a couple shots of our self-imported tequila and took off into the park for some four-wheeling. Lee Ann's screaming about her female organs accompanied the sound of the thorn bushes and stones on the side of the truck as we bounded over the desert. We were treated to a loud and close fly over by three F-16s from nearby Laughlin Air Force base. We expected some dents and scratches, but that Ford clear-coat proved tough enough. It's leased.

Although Langtry, Texas is a short distance from Del Rio, the local Blockbuster did not carry *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Beam*. We were uncomfortable in Del Rio for some reason neither of us could verbalize. Let me try to find it through the keyboard. It marked the end of our comfort zone, the edge of our citizenship. The fingertips of the

long arm of the law ended in the middle of that river. The people were foreign and unreadable, even to Lee Ann. Crime seemed to linger over everyone. Whether they were hiding from past crimes, presently committing crimes, or contemplating future crimes we couldn't guess. Past, present, future. We were surrounded in time by crime. Lee Ann made margaritas, and we stayed in with cable. She didn't even show off Egypt.

We headed northwest out of Del Rio on U.S. Highway 90, because there was no other choice. We were crossing an arid landscape heading toward the most remote national park in the lower 48, but even here, as all along the Texas freeways, we watched the fiber-optic cable go into the ground. Great clouds of dust rose as the trenchers dug through sand, soil, and stone followed by huge coils of dark fiber. It was the build out of the Internet and our telecom stocks were soaring with it. We had to follow the road 150 miles to Marathon, Texas before we could turn south to reach Big Bend National Park.

We stopped at Seminole Canyon State Park for a hike into the canyon to see ancient cave art. The cave shelters were home to ancients for 5,000 years before they vanished leaving no forwarding address we could understand. It was easy to try to assign deep, spiritual Shamanistic meaning to the pictographs, but I figured they could just as easily have been done by bored ancient teenagers. I flushed out a roadrunner and chased it to Lee Ann. She was surprised at its size and speed as it ran toward her through the brush. "I see him. I see him." I chased him for a long while before I finally got him to fly and was amazed at how well he flew. They seem to have no problem flying. They just prefer to run. The hike in and out was long and strenuous. About half way back the trail became easy to follow and the guide told us to finish at our own pace. The older hikers were left to survive on their own and get themselves out.

We took movies of the canyon and the cave art that included a towering pictograph of a Shaman and a bug-like creature said to guard the entrance to the underworld. "Maybe that's what happened to the ancients. They killed the bugs and went to the next world." They had a huge metal sculpture of the Shaman overlooking the canyon.

After our hike we continued to an overlook above the high-level bridge at the Pecos River and stopped for our lunch salads. A sign read, "Pecos River bridge, completed April 1959, highest highway bridge in Texas, height 273 feet, length 1,310 feet." My film of the Pecos River gorge included a look of bored impatience on Lee Ann that I failed to notice.

West of the Pecos we stopped to see Judge Roy Beam's operation. The restored Jersey Lilly was still one of the better buildings in Langtry, Texas. It was the combination saloon, billiard hall, and courtroom from which the Judge dispensed the "Law West of the Pecos" and became a legend in his own time. Interestingly, the final spike that linked the railroad from New Orleans to San Francisco was driven and forgotten right there in Langtry. It would have been the town's claim to fame if it hadn't been overshadowed by the Judge's legend. His practice was to dispense his form of justice on the spot. When an accused was hauled in, the Judge would put a jury together from the men drinking at the bar, hear the evidence, and pronounce a sentence that would often include a round of drinks for the house. They called him the hanging Judge, but we read that his most severe penalty was to take everything a man had and set him free. Driving across the desert, we must have passed the bleached bones of most who got that sentence.

We continued on to Marathon, where we expected to pick up our mail. We boondocked on the side of the road near the Gage Hotel. A wealthy railroad man named Gage built it many years ago to great excess. We awoke to find the post office did not open on Saturdays and proceeded down to Big Bend National Park. We entered the 800,000-acre park at its northernmost point. Since it was 60 miles of bad road to the other side and we didn't know if we'd ever be in the northern portion again, we decided to take a good look as we progressed through it and stopped to take a long hike into a desert canyon.

After our Dog-Canyon hike we headed for a campground on the western edge of the park in the town of Study Butte. Their brochure advertised "instant phone lines" yet there was no Internet access. We booked three days anyway. There was plenty of daylight left, so we went to check out Santa Elena Canyon. The Rio Grande carved the canyon walls to 1,800 feet on each side. How long must that have taken? I threw a rock across the river into Mexico. We walked through a wild-cane jungle with lush green spikes reaching 20 feet high. We ventured as far into the canyon as we could without going into the river. "This is the canyon as far as we can walk. Amazing that this water will eventually blend with the water from the Mississippi somewhere out in the Gulf of Mexico. Texas sand and Mississippi mud. Time to test the echo. Barrerrrr, Barrerrrr."

We thought we'd go hungry until we found the Starlight Theatre at Terlingua Ghost Town. It was formerly the store for the mining town of over 600. The mine produced mercury (quick silver) but played out many years ago. We met a couple from Chagrin Falls, Ohio on the porch waiting for sunset. We got two cold longnecks and waited with them. They owned a tree-service company and took off winters. They'd been coming to Big Bend for 12 years. Just as the sun was about to set, people swarmed out of the Starlight to watch. It was a great purple sunset that moved across our spectacular high-and-wide panorama. When the sun disappeared the people were gone. "Were they ghosts?" asked Lee Ann.

"They call that the Chisos recharge. We come down for it most nights. Those are the Chisos Mountains in the distance. Don't they seem to be floating on air?"

Their name was called, and they invited us to join them for dinner. The Starlight Theatre had all the atmosphere you could want and excellent filets as well. Our new friends stayed for the entertainment, but they were Ohioans and Lee Ann was too tired from a hard, long day.

"How could she let him drag her back to this place year after year? Her brain is what's floating on air."

"Don't worry. We're only staying a few days. We have a lot to see tomorrow."

Our first animal spotting came the next morning when we entered the park. In my excitement, I left the truck in the road and chased a coyote. He blended quickly into the desert, and I ended up falling down a wash.

"I'm hurt and you're worried about getting me on film?"

"Are you bleeding?"

"Barely. Just a scrape. Better get my hiking boots on."

"Our first animal spotting. You stopped right in the road. People were looking at you wondering what you saw to make you run into the desert."

After the coyote chase we continued exploring into the vast park. We spent most of the day covering the 46 miles through the park to the Rio Grande Village visitor center

and its scenic overlooks. We stopped for several short hikes to see one natural wonder or other. Lee Ann saw enough after the first canyon hike and usually stayed with the truck. She did take the two-mile hike from an overlook down to the river to find a natural hot spring. As we approached I watched a Mexican Indian mother and daughter emerge from the hot spring and put on their clothes. The daughter must have been at least 15 years old, judging from her toys. She was an all-over, beautiful shade of dark tan. Naked, they were a before-and-after picture documenting a tough life in the intense sun. I was checking them out through the camera's zoom lens and wishing we'd have gotten there in time for the whole bath. I'd read that the Indians would smear on mud and wash it off with hot water from the earth to get as clean as is possible. What watching them said about me was open to internal debate. On one side was guilt because I was treating them as if they were part of the flora and fauna of the desert. On the other side I had tremendous respect for the Indians and recognized that I was the intruder. In my defense, I didn't film them. When we actually reached the spring they were rinsing clothes in its hot pool. The spring water was contained in a stone enclosure of about 10 feet square right on the edge of the river so that the overflow ran directly into the Rio Grande. It was on the Texas side and the two Indian women had waded across to use it. I wasn't about to miss the experience, so I began to strip off my clothes. With a you-showed-me-yours-so-I'll-show-you-mine attitude, I pushed down my shorts and underwear. The Indian girl checked me out. The mother gasped and averted her daughter's eyes by saying something sharply in Mexican. Apparently a naked Italian-American differed in some big way from the naked Indian men across the river. They hurriedly finished their laundry as I soaked nearby. The spa had a mud bottom and Lee Ann refused, citing bacterial concerns. When I had enough I stood up to a shock. My skin dried immediately in the arid air, and I was instantly freezing. Had the two women still been there to see me, they would have felt much better about Indian men. I rushed into my clothes.

Lee Ann was done hiking for the day when we made it back to the truck, but we were able to drive to several interesting overlooks. We didn't see another wild animal, but we did spot a herd of beautiful bright-white goats in the distance on the Mexican side. We watched a line of them jump a creek. It was like counting sheep.

Lee Ann had promised sex in the wilderness, so we set out on an unmaintained four-wheel-drive-only road deep into the desert hills. Lee Ann filmed us bounding over the desert from inside the truck.

"We're recording. Okay, drive. This is on a road in the National Park of Big Bend. You're looking through dirty windows, but this is the view we've been seeing for miles and miles. Just thought I'd let you see we are very much out in the wilderness. There's mountains way out there, but you can't see them too good. Bye."

Nine miles in we came upon a grave. It had a cross and was covered with a pile of large rocks. I got the point. No matter where you hide you can't escape death. I got out to pay my respects. I took a rock from the grave, put it in the back of the truck, and replaced it with a similar rock from the desert floor. "We made it up here. We followed nine miles of bad road and sagebrush to get here. We hope to make it back out, but after seeing this we're not, so, sure. Whoever you are, if you're tired of this desert you're welcome to come along with us and see the country." A mile further we found a beautiful spot and backed the truck into the view. We put the tailgate down, laid out our

padding, and got back to Nature in one of the most remote spots in the entire lower 48 states.

Driving out was an ordeal as we rushed toward dinner. We happened onto Vann's Desert Bistro. It was a tiny hole-in-the-wall with a dirt floor. We were Vann's only guests and were treated to his life story and his award-winning chile. The ghost town hosts the World Championship Chile Cook-off and Vann was a proud former winner with a plaque to prove it. He told us the event had been bringing thousands of chiliheads to the desert each November since 1967. He looked like an old prospector and his grin was three teeth short of a smile. He kept me laughing, and Lee Ann filmed us drinking a shot of whiskey together. "Jack and Vann drinking red eye or rot gut to cap off a long-long-dirty-dusty day in the old West," she narrated.

"Not too much little gal. You'll filch my soul," said Vann.

We slept solid that night and woke to President's Day and my birthday. We drove up to the basin. It didn't seem reasonable to me that you would drive up to the basin until we got there to find a basin surrounded by still higher mountains with amazing views through gaps in the mountain range they called windows. We learned that the Chisos mountain range was totally contained in the park. There were actually trees up there. When you got right up into the mountains, there wasn't even a hint of the purple you saw from a distance. A big sign warned that it's "Bear and Mountain Lion Country." I'd been asking everyone I met if they ever saw a mountain lion. So far the guy from the couple we met from Chagrin Falls was the only person to report a sighting. He'd seen one up at the basin two years ago. Because of the drought the rangers didn't know where the mountain lions might have moved to find water.

Lee Ann couldn't face another day of hiking and had no desire to confront a mountain lion, so we drove down to the Rio Grande and paid a Mexican \$2 each to row us across it. Lee Ann patted the donkey, but we opted to walk to the tiny town of Santa Elena. We came upon a dirty, open-air cantina with a sign that claimed it had the best food in town. We took that to mean it wasn't the only food in town and kept going. We found a much cleaner place. We ate burritos and drank Coronas at a beautiful and quaint cantina made of mud bricks but with a tile floor and wood-beamed ceiling complete with a black-and-white framed photo of Pancho Villa. Lee Ann reported that they didn't have running water but did have an indoor toilet with a bucket of water next to it for a manual flush. She supposed it hadn't occurred to them that they could have put the water in the tank. We enjoyed trying to speak with the owner who didn't speak much more English than we did Mexican. She made a point of telling us that they keep the river in a stone box and we must canoe to see it. Lee Ann found a store to browse while I filmed the little town. I shot a young, black-haired, well-groomed Mexican woman as she walked across the square. She carried an old Coke bottle, the kind with the screw-on cap. She was sad beautiful and wished she could be a fashionable American with designer clothes and Perrier water. On our walk back to the river we warned a group of approaching tourists to take a pass on the "best food in town." Lee Ann opted for the boat, but I waded back across the Rio Grande like thousands of Mexicans do every day.

The movie shows me wearing a cowboy hat, standing on the bank of the river rolling up my pant legs. I pick my way across the river being turned by the current and getting my pants wet. I step out on the American side, pull my hat off, and hold it up in victory. "This is Jack attempting to walk from Mexico to Texas. And he's off." She laughs.

"He's got quite a current to contend with. He might be in trouble. He's got wet jeans. He might lose his cowboy hat on this. I almost did this too. I'm glad I didn't. He's on the line. He's got one foot in Texico." She pauses and laughs. "He's got one foot in Mexico and one foot in Texas. One too many Coronas over there. He's definitely on the American side now. He's made it. He's walking up on the shore of Texas. How'd those hiking boots do? Did they stay dry? Yeaaaa!"

Lee Ann called my mother and was reminded that it was my birthday. The Starlight Theatre at the ghost town was the only place to celebrate within a 100-mile radius. We arrived before sunset to find a film crew outside documenting the haze over the mountains toward Mexico. At dinner, we happened to be seated at the table next to them and learned that the haze was not wind-blown dust but pollution emanating from Mexico City. It was disheartening to learn that even in the most remote area in the entire continental United States outside Alaska we couldn't escape man's pollution of the planet. The young journalist was equally disheartened by it. Her camera crew went up to the balcony for some film of the inside of the Starlight. Sitting with her, we were prominently featured. While we discussed the pollution problem, I made an innocent enough comment about having expected the stars to be bigger and brighter and she took offence. She went on quite a rant and insisted we go out for another look. "I call that big and bright," she said proudly, pointing back over the Starlight Theatre. "Bigger and brighter than Ohio I'll wager."

"It is beautiful," I admitted. "Have you lived here all your life?"

"Okay, okay," she snapped. "I'll admit they were bigger and brighter when I was a child."

"It's still beautiful here," I said. "Can I buy you a drink?"

She smiled and punched my shoulder. "Let's go in."

Back inside we rejoined Lee Ann and the rest of the crew who had learned it was my birthday. Buying the Texan a drink proved a great investment as she was on an expense account and I never had to buy another drink all night. I recognized a particular smile on Lee Ann's face and announced we were going to finish celebrating my birthday back at the trailer. The years she forgets and doesn't buy me a present are always my most memorable birthdays.

We left Big Bend around noon the following day. I took in a big breath of Big Bend air and watched the buttes grow smaller and disperse in the dust behind us. What's the feeling when you're driving away from a place and it recedes on the plain to a speck? It's the too-small world drawing me, and it's a memory being etched. We made the drive from our campsite at Study Butte through Alpine, Texas and into the high-wind region of west Texas. The trailer handled surprisingly well in winds that easily gusted over 60 mph. I saw a truck being passed by a tumbleweed on the interstate. We pulled into a roadside rest at the crest of a hill to shoot some film and experience the wind.

"That's El Capitan. Not the famous El Capitan, but it's a cool shape for a mountain. An escarpment. The southernmost peak of the Guadeloupe Mountains. We're going into Guadeloupe Mountains National Park. We're in a high wind area. Down there is a salt flat where they used to mine salt and fought a war over salt with the Mexicans. Those are the Delaware Mountains, most of which are capped with windmills. There's a big wind farm."

We stopped for groceries and proceeded to Guadeloupe National Park just inside the Texas-New Mexico border. We found the park's campground and tried to get a spot out of the wind. It wasn't possible. Nobody was out of his trailer, and we too stayed in for the night. The wind never quit. The trailer was certainly rocking that night, but there was no sex involved. "Maria" didn't bother me, and I slept like a petrified log. The next morning, I woke to a horror story. Lee Ann reported that the wind buffeted the trailer all night long. It rocked so bad she was afraid it was going over on its side. We don't have stabilizer jacks, but we were hooked to the truck. She said she almost woke me a couple times but was more afraid of driving in the wind than waiting it out in the trailer. She had considered going to the truck but was afraid to walk. Guadeloupe Peak was the highest point in Texas, and I was desperate to climb it. According to the brochures it could be done with moderate difficulty in three hours. I started up knowing how angry Lee Ann was about spending another six hours alone in the trailer. I went far enough to get the feel of it and enjoy a good view and turned back. She was happy to see me. I regretted it for many days, but I kept it as reminder to allow no more regrets.

Overall, Lee Ann didn't like Texas. It started with the first "Don't Mess With Texas" sign. To her, the state had an attitude. She interpreted the winds as a final warning to get out. We drove 40 miles north into the Mountain time zone and New Mexico.