

Van Horn

It was in the 1970's when me and my girlfriend, Sue, were driving from Tampa to visit my Dad in Las Vegas in my piece-a-shit Dodge motor home. I named the Dodge, "Oh God Not Again" because although it had that great 360 V8 engine, and that amazing C-10 transmission that would power it straight up the side of a mountain, something would fail on it about once a week. It was a high maintenance, ulcer inducing, mechanical nightmare but I lived in it fulltime and drove it all over the US for 6 years.

I was in the back of the motorhome trying to sleep and Sue was driving West on I-10 about 25 miles East of Van Horn, Texas, when I heard a noise. I thought she had run over something, but she didn't say anything. A few minutes later steam started coming from under the engine cover, and Oh God Not Again started losing power.

We were nearing an exit called Boracho (Spanish for "drunk"), the motorhome was slowing down, we exited and stopped at the crossroad at the top of the overpass going over the interstate. I looked in both directions to where the road disappeared over the curve of the earth without a building, tree, or anything else in sight. It was eerie, I couldn't imagine why they put an exit there.

Across the road in front of us was the onramp going back down onto the Interstate. On the right side at the beginning of the onramp was a gravel parking area big enough for several semi's and there was a semi parked there with the diesel engine loping. We eased across the road, stopped in the gravel parking area twenty yards

behind the truck, Oh God Not Again chugged to a stop, and wouldn't crank back up.

I walked up to the driver's door and smiled up at the driver. He rolled his window down and bobbed his head up. I told him I needed a ride into Van Horn and he started talking fast with a slight Mexican accent.

“Sorry Man, no can do, company policy, no insurance, against the rules...” When he slowed down I pulled a joint from my shirt pocket, held it up between us, and said, “You get high, Man?” His eyes got real big, he smiled and said, “Get in Man, get in.”

As he drove toward Van Horn we smoked the doobie and became best friends. We were heading west into late afternoon sun, we both had on sunglasses and trucker's hats, the smoke swirled around in the cab of the truck, we talked and laughed with a Santana *Black Magic Woman* cassette playing in the background. He dropped me off at a gas station/convenience store with a pay phone in front where I called AAA.

I got a drink and some chips in the store then sat on the curb and waited for what turned out to be a couple of hours for the AAA tow truck. It was hot. A guy came walking from the Interstate, slouched, beaten, head down, with a half empty backpack and a weiner dog with its head down walking a few paces behind him. They were both dusty, the color of a dirt road. He looked about my age, mid-thirties.

He drank water from the hose where you could get free air and water then threw the hose on the ground for the dog to drink from. When the dog finished he picked up the hose, bent over, and turned the water on his head and neck. Then he looked around and saw me sitting on the curb.

Roy. A few weeks earlier Roy had been a carpenter in Southern California with a house, a new truck and a girlfriend, but his girlfriend caught him doing something she didn't like, called the cops and turned him in for the pound of pot he had under his bed. As he stood in his front yard in the middle of the night in boxer shorts and handcuffs one cop said to the other, "What should we do about the dog?" The dog looked from one cop to the other.

The other cop said, "We'll call Animal Control and they'll pick it up."

Roy yelled, "Run, Sadie!" The dog's name was Sadie, and she ran to his friend's house and stayed there for a couple of days until Roy got out of jail and came and got her.

That little dust up cost him everything and now he and Sadie were wandering across the west with, "No friends, no dreams, no pocket money" (*Pocket Money* Carol King 1972). He told me they had slept in a culvert under a back road the night before and that it was pretty cozy, insulated and quiet, with soft white sand. When the AAA truck finally got there I gave Roy a buck and told him to get Sadie a treat. He laughed, said okay, and we shook hands. I wonder where he is today.

In Van Horn, the tow truck pulled us under the overhang at a huge stone garage from the 1940's. The friendly Hispanic garage owner, Roberto, told me what I already knew, that it was a blown head gasket, and that it would take a couple of

days to fix it. Then he hooked up the motorhome to water and electricity in the shade of the overhang.

You wouldn't think that in the 1970's you could be stuck for a week in the middle of nowhere waiting for parts, but we were. At the end of the second day I told Roberto to loan me one of the cars that were scattered around the building and I would drive the couple of hours to El Paso and get the gasket kit, but he said no it would come in on the bus tomorrow. Tomorrow was Sunday and there was no kit, and... manana, manana.

This old building had about fifteen derelict vehicles parked around it with tags from different states. Roberto explained that the owners had made it that far, their vehicles had broken down and they didn't have the money to fix them so they sold them to Roberto for peanuts, put their thumb out and headed on down the road. As I said, it was the '70s's.

Every junker told a story. There was a green Volkswagen van with California tags, a peace sign window decal, and a Stop the War bumper sticker. There was an old Ford Crown Vic with the engine missing, an Arizona tag, a Mexico insurance sticker, and a Try Tucson First bumper sticker. There was a Volvo with Oregon tags, and little plastic toys in the back. The vehicles ranged in age from 10 years old to 40 years old. Inside the dark, cavernous garage was a broken down old school bus where I later learned one of the Mexican mechanics lived.

One day I took my camera and started walking east from the intersection where the garage was. The town's only traffic light was suspended over the intersection but it didn't work, it just swung in the breeze like it had done something wrong so they

turned it off for punishment. I thought if I explored the town I would eventually find downtown, or something worth photographing like an old Catholic Church, or a big old stone courthouse with a statue out front, or a row of Victoria houses from when the town had seen better days.

I walked all the way back to the convenience store where I had met Roy without seeing anything of interest. That afternoon I walked west from the intersection till I ran out of town without seeing anything other than derelict buildings and a few derelict people. I was beginning to think they should rename the town "Dust".

The next day I walked south but after just a few blocks I came to the Interstate and there was nothing but desert on the other side of it. I turned around and went back north through a few sad residential blocks but again, nothing interesting. The road north disappeared into the distance where Roberto had told me there were some big ranches. On the way back I saw the garage, and the dead traffic light, in the distance, and it dawned on me --- that was the center of town! Where the motorhome was parked was the epicenter of downtown Van Horn.

One morning I saw that another truck had been added to the cluster of abandoned vehicles in back of the garage. A little wiry guy who looked to be in his twenties was rummaging around in the back of the truck.

Cowboy Billy. He was the 13th rated Bull Rider in the US, at least that's what he said, how would I know? That was before I started following the PBR. Cowboy Billy was a good talker, charming, full of himself, a Texan. He was on his way to an event in New Mexico when his truck broke down and he didn't have enough

money to get it fixed so Roberto took it off his hands, and now he was going to stay in a \$6 a night motel down the street.

He didn't have any pot but he didn't mind smoking mine. For the next couple of days we walked around town and traded stories, or sat on a bench seat from a pickup truck under the overhang, drank beer and swapped lies. He told me about his Daddy, and how he would throw Billy up on the back of anything with hair on it from the time he was five years old.

“I've ridden sheep, goats, cows, you name it; I've ridden it. Now I'm a bull rider although I'll enter other events, bull riding is my speciality. I'm 13th rated in the country right now.”

It all sounded good, great stories, but I didn't know how much was true and how much was bull until one day when we were walking around town and came to an arena, a fenced in city block where locals practiced rodeo. There was a pickup truck with a two horse trailer parked there with an old Mexican leaning on the fence watching what was probably his little grandson riding a horse in the arena. Another horse was saddled and tied to the fence inside the arena.

Billy went up and started talking to the old man in a friendly Tex-Mex dialect that I understood about half of, then he climbed the fence and went over to the tied horse. The old man had said he had hoped there would be some young guy at the arena who would exercise the horse because he was much too wild for him, “Cabayo Diablo”.

Billy tightened the cinch, mounted the horse, made the horse back up, then spin in a circle to the right, then spin in a circle to the left, and then took off at a run. The old man took his hat off, slapped his thigh with it, and said something like, “Now that’s a cowboy, look at him ride”.

The morning Oh God Not Again was finally ready Sue offered her diamond ring from a previous relationship as payment for the repair. Roberto called his wife, she came to the garage and looked at the ring but wasn’t interested so I ponied up the cash.

Before leaving I asked Roberto if he had seen Billy that morning, he said he had seen him the night before at the bar dancing with some rich rancher’s daughter, and that they had left together, but he hadn’t seen him since. Roberto acted as if he hated to see us go, it was kind of touching; we had been there for a week and had enjoyed one another’s company.

About twenty years later I told my wife, Michelle, this story as we were driving toward Van Horn. I was looking forward to seeing the garage, and Roberto, and remembering the good times I had there. When we got to the intersection the traffic light still swayed in the breeze but there was no garage. I drove half a block behind the corner where the garage had been, turned around, and parked facing the empty lot. There was no sign of the garage or all the vehicles that had been there. The corner had been scraped cleaned.

I sat there looking at the empty lot with a slight frown and a blank mind where a question mark floated in and out of focus until Michelle said, “Well?” and I raised my eyebrows once gave my head a little shake and said, “Well, that’s kinda sad.”