

THE DEADWOOD DRIVE

by Michael Ventura

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South of Rapid City, up in South Dakota, driving the Black Hills, I pass a little turn-off marked “Gumbo Lilly Lane” and slip into reverie. How’d that gal get that name? Maybe she hailed from Louisiana and made a mean gumbo. (In a mining camp? How’d she get the fixings?) But why had she come and what did she do, that a century later a “lane” repeated her name? Is she enough of a local legend to list on the Internet? Later, I search. There’s her picture! She’s not a woman, she’s a flower, *Oenothera caespitosa*, native to the Dakotas. Pretty little thing. But for ten miles or so I’d had a fine time wondering about a wild gal. Of such stuff are Western legends made...

(Ok, she’s a flower, a lily, but still: why “gumbo”?)

Back in Nebraska, between McCook and Ogallala, driving US 6 -- 6 once rode from Provincetown to Long Beach and is still our longest transcontinental highway, a notable distinction for a bumpy two-lane. Here 6 has no shoulders, grass bends over the asphalt. A two-lane’s so different from an interstate -- on the interstate you’re *upon* the land, gliding over its topography, but a two-lane’s *of* the land, it rises and falls, weaves and curves, and in the West (as in New England and the South) it’s usually a tarred-over wagon road. Upkeep is erratic, especially this far north, where winters buckle the tarmac. This Western sky is wide, a view not like back East -- there, roads feel like hallways through woodland; here, blue air and white cloud touch the ground on all horizons. The road ascends and descends gentle grades of small valleys, passing modest farms that still appear family-owned. One farmer’s erected a rough billboard on his fence, hand-painted lettering over graying wood:

THIS IS A SIGN -- God.

Nearer Ogallala is a valley with no farm, no poles and wires, no human vestige but the humble road itself. A creek runs through, cottonwoods shimmer along the waterline, and there’s a stand of larger trees beside a pond. And suddenly I knew, I *knew*, they camped here, camped here often -- it’s perfect, there’s water, good grazing for the animals, game for their cookfires and furs. The low hills that surround the valley protect from winter winds; on those hills, sentinels would see an enemy miles off. I felt it so strongly, they camped here often, before we came, Cheyenne and Dakota and Lakota peoples, in numbers large and small. No image arose -- and where could I get such images but from movies and mostly staged old photos? No one living knows how their camps really looked. But they were here, and it was as though I could hear their memory spoken in the voice of the valley, wordless but definite, clear...

I get crushes on towns the way I get crushes on women. I fell for Deadwood as soon as I got here. It’s mostly only two streets wide, for it sits at the bottom of a gulch; the steep Black Hills rise, wooded, on either side. You walk Main Street’s length leisurely in fifteen, twenty minutes. Its population of about 2000 lives on hillside lanes so slanted you’d need a strong heart to go for a stroll. Deadwood thrives on small casinos, but woos me with history: many of its brick buildings (like the Bullock Hotel, built by Seth Bullock himself) date back a century and more. One wood structure escaped the early fires and is dated 1879. The Adams Museum is first-rate. I’ve spent hours there, where I learned that Sol Star, Bullock’s friend and business partner, was the only non-Chinese welcome at the Chinese Masonic Lodge. Star was also Deadwood’s mayor, 1884-1898, and a leader of a rare entity in the Old West: a thriving, respected Jewish community. An old photo shows an unnamed man in suit and Hassidic hat dancing Hebrew folk-steps -- not your typical Western icon.

Wild Bill Hickock and Calamity Jane are buried up the hill. Stroll the family plots and you see small stones for many, many infants and young children from the 1870s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, more than I’ve seen in any other old graveyard. That Deadwood was a hard place to be.

I first came through last June. This June I’m here to meet with Dave (we’ve known each other since age ten). He was driving from Long Island back to Oakland on I-80, which passes some 220

miles south of Deadwood. I suggested I drive north from Texas and meet up with him here. We explore places, we share a love of history and have complementary ways of knowing: he can tell me (just by looking) how a building was built, and with what, and why; I can tell him who built here and what they were up to, and we compare theories about their thoughts and their hearts. Between us, we construct a place's history, and share great satisfaction at standing, say, at the spot by the creek where gold was first found.

I've booked a suite (the only smoking room left) at the Franklin Hotel, built in 1903. Last June you could sit in the Franklin's dining room knowing that there dined Seth Bullock, Sol Star, their friend Teddy Roosevelt (Bullock was a captain in Teddy's Rough Riders), and maybe Calamity Jane, who died in '03 near here. Also, Willa Cather. But a casino's bought the Franklin; alas, the dining room is making way for slot machines.

I wasn't prepared for Room 421. It's immense. Two large bedrooms. A huge living room with an intricately carved bar (Dave explains its different woods and why no one builds like that anymore). And the sofa! Plush cushions covered with rich whorehouse-violet clothe, and its frame... imagine a kind of basket-weaving, but of thick molded dark wood, and at the end of each arm, where your hand rests, the carved face of a beautiful woman. On the wall, a long tall mirror framed in golden gilt. In the dining room, off the kitchen, a rectangular wood table, and six chairs... again, intricately carved wood. On their backrests, front and back, the profile of a devil, and devil's heads bulge from the legs and at the ends of the arms. A place for gambling men and wanton women. The suite pulsed with the psychic scent of sin.

Of hundreds of rented rooms I've known, from Manhattan's Waldorf Astoria to Santa Rosa's Sun & Sand (the mattress deeply stained with blood), I've never seen the like. Deadwood doesn't disappoint. Though (alas again!) by year's end 421 will be "renovated," its uniqueness erased.

Dave is an early-to-bed-early-to-rise guy, I'm a stay-up-all-night guy, so for hours alone I read at that table, sipping whiskey, smoking, and forgetting my book for indeterminate moments, listening to the suite's ghostly whispers, too faint to make out, but still barely audible.

The day after next, a time filled with good conversation and fascinating history, Dave continued west, I headed due south... western Nebraska, where it's as though a great stormy sea, with sweeping rolling swells, suddenly stilled in place and grew prairie grass. Wind ripples the grass to the horizon, the land looks alive (and it is). My '69 Chevy startles some quail, they fly scattering in all directions before me, one bird is not quick enough and thuds sickeningly against my windshield -- a chance death amidst the beauty. And there is a dancer-like, Shiva-like, many-armed lightning-struck tree, bare of bark, gray, dead... I say aloud, "The dead are beautiful."

You learn that when people you deeply love die. Their memory overwhelms you with difficult beauty.

Western Kansas, state road 27, another two-lane -- wild turkeys and lovely pheasants cross the road now and again. (A trucker nearly swerved off the road trying to run a pheasant down. I'll never understand that.) Not so far from the Oklahoma border. Soon night will "fall," as they say - - a strange usage, night doesn't fall, it emerges.) Here the world's flat as an ironing-board. No one born here, who had not been taught otherwise, could conceive of a round planet -- but for that very slight curve at the far horizon. Between you and the horizon there is rarely a bush, rarely a tree. Some might not think a land so flat and featureless could be beautiful, here where the skyline sits several degrees *below* your gaze, and you must look slightly down to see horizon... yet sunlight plays upon such a topography as upon a canvas, you never know what subtle color will gleam next, and on a day like this, the sun sifting through clouds, your eyes are constantly rewarded by tints no painter has imagined.

Sunset, huge and orange-crimson in the west. In the east, at the dark brim, the moon is impossibly large and silver, draped with the thinnest shifting clouds, an effect like lingerie. A being (almost) naked, playing at appearing (partly) clothed. The universe condenses into one word: *invitation*.

At seventy miles an hour, I grope for words of gratitude to say to this glory of a moon.

The words that arise are, “Thank you for the blessing of your beauty.”

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