

“Are you sure you don’t want to smoke?” He offered again.

“No. I’m good; I’m from Holland,” I said by way of explanation and pointed right to the junction where I had to get off to connect with another road that led to the trail. I thanked Gary for the ride, we shook hands, and we each went on our way. The funny thing was that the smell in the desert when I stepped out of the truck was very similar to that of the weed. The strong odor of sage and juniper bushes replenished in the recent rainfall had risen over the landscape. Except the living plants around me were a little sweeter.

I’d followed the white and yellow stripes of yet another asphalt road and gotten picked up by a second hitch not long after. A gentle elderly fellow in his seventies stopped and made room in his somewhat messy car to give me a ride to the trailhead several miles down the road.

“My wife will kill me if she finds out I’ve picked up a hitchhiker,” the man said with a grin. He told me that he had hitchhiked around Europe and North Africa for 10 months when he was 25, some 50 years ago. He had loved his trip, and I could see by the twinkle in his eye that he still cherished the memories of this adventure. He was currently on a little road trip by himself to sleep under the stars again. He was slowly driving through a few states to reconnect with his wife in a few days’ time. She had flown ahead to their vacation, and he was simply pitching his tent at campgrounds along the way.

“Wanderlust, it never really leaves you,” he said, and I congratulated him on his adventure. Not long after, he dropped me off at the trailhead and asked me if he could take a picture of me to show his wife. We’d waved goodbye and parted ways.

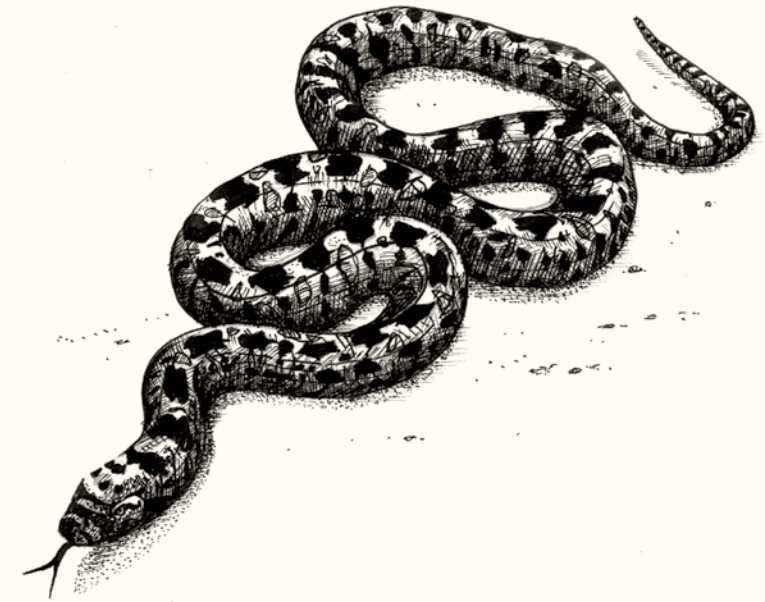
For quite some miles, the trail followed the road under the El Malpais Narrows Rim, a steep sandstone cliff wall. The light poked through the rain clouds, and the sun shone in my eyes, making me sneeze. My loud achoo bounced back at me off the high sandstone wall. Instinctively, I started making more loud sounds to hear what

might return from the wall. A clear sound bounced back, and I started experimenting by singing octaves. It was beautiful to hear the sounds blend and echo. I could imagine how people who rode these plains hundreds of years ago might have done the same before me. Just to have some fun.

Days later, the long dusty road walk toward Pie Town was littered with both locusts and crickets. Dead and alive. Insects in all shapes and sizes jumped around me, a glimpse into what had been the Dust Bowl. Back in the 1930s, this entire area had been scavenged and eaten dry by a grasshopper plague, resulting in thousands of acres of dust. Severe droughts reaching up to the Midwest, and a failure by settlers to prevent wind erosion in the region also strongly contributed to the years of dust. With no more fertile land, the settlers packed up and moved down south and passed through the tiny hamlet of Pie Town. Back then, the pie shop offered the only decent food in miles. Now, I was looking forward to tasting some pie when I got there in a few days.

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As I plodded deeper and deeper south, the landscape had indeed finally turned into an even desert. Flat endless expanses rimmed with pale-blue hills in the far distance. There wasn’t a single tree to be seen for miles; only grass, sage, and cacti survived. Finding good water had become my highest priority, as most water sources I came across were still, brown ponds filled with green algae and bacteria. My map indicated that there would be a water source every 20 miles (32 km), but these were also often cow troughs. Occasionally, I got lucky if there was a spring or a solar panel to pump fresh water from deep within the earth. It was important to keep my wits about me, as getting caught



off-guard without water out in the desert could prove fatal.

As I’m generally a deep sleeper, it still surprised me that I lay awake for a few hours each night. But come to think of it, I should not have been so surprised, as 12 hours of deep sleep is a bit too much to expect. I went to bed at hiker midnight each evening, which was 21:00. By 4:00 in the morning, my body had had enough rest. After having had a pee, I lay awake staring at the condensation slowly sliding down the roof of my tent. As the nights were getting longer each day, and it remained dark much longer, I got out my needle and thread to do some repair work while waiting for the light to return.

WoW had always teased me when I got out my needle and thread to repair my Hawaiian shirt, which was practically threadbare at this point and needed constant care and repair every time I was in town. But one night, I had other work to put my sewing attention to. I had to repair my sun gloves, which were beginning to fall apart at the seams. In the light of my headlamp, it was quite pleasant work, as I had always enjoyed needlework from

an early age. Once my gloves were somewhat repaired, I took a good look at my hat. The previous day, I had found the entire wing of a swallow on the trail and was looking to find a way to attach it to the side of my hat.

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At least, I thought it was a swallow’s wing, but the white dots on the black feathers left me with some doubt. Either way, I took a long yarn of dark red thread and carefully stitched the wing to the side of my hat. I stretched the feathers out to reveal the full glory of the bird’s wingspan before sewing it to my cap. In the bright light of my headlamp, I looked at my handiwork, and although one of the feathers had been slightly damaged in the process, I was happy with the result. I put it on and felt just like the comic book character Asterix. I just hoped it would last for the last three weeks before I reached the Mexican border.