

VLACHOS' VIEWS

America through the lens of PAUL VLACHOS

Temporary neighbors

I normally like to sleep in my van at a truck stop or, better yet, BLM land or a national park. For better or worse, though, that's not always possible, and I will then check into a motel. I always take notes. Here are a few excerpts from over the years. Some of the names, dates, and places have been changed to protect the guilty.

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May 5, 2011
Best Western, Wickenburg, AZ

I took Elko out for a walk this morning and ran into one of those typical red-faced older guys I always seem to meet, especially in Arizona. Shirt tucked in. Decent enough fellow. He was thoughtfully smoking a cigarette while he stood in the morning sun. I stood there while Elko raised his leg and, within 30 seconds, this guy and I had somehow devolved into a conversation about mortality.

I guess he said it was a nice day. And I said something like, "It's good just to be perpendicular." But we both picked it up and ran with it. He told me about how people he knew were dying every day, including somebody he just heard about that morning. We then discussed the merits of a fast versus a slow death. We agreed that life was short and then Elko and I walked on to finish our walk. Happy Sunday morning in southern Arizona.



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June, 30, 2010
Motel 6, Amarillo, TX

Waking up at the Motel 6 in Amarillo, Texas. Pulled in late last night. I was in room 144. In room 143 was some tweaked-out dude and his girlfriend. They were already



there when I arrived. She peeked out their door while I was unloading. Ten minutes later, they had a huge argument. She was screaming and shrieking. And then he said, "I don't need you," upon which she shrieked some more and walked off.

So, all was quiet for a while. He kept going out to his his old Nissan pickup - shirtless - over and over and over again. Ostensibly

checking on stuff in the front seat, looking at stuff in the back, but really just glancing down the exterior corridor, the sidewalk, I guess waiting for her to come back, which she never did. I was more worried that he would be stealing my catalytic converter.

Later, a guy drove up in a big pickup with no muffler. It was just roaring away. He checked into room 145. His truck made a ton of noise, but he shortly started making a lot more noise, as the dog - which he left off leash - ran off. He went into his room and then came out and started looking for the dog. And thus began 20 minutes of loud coyote whistling and screaming. Finally, he got his in truck and drove around and found the dog. He came back and promptly let it off the leash again. He looked at the dog and said "You should know better than to do that." Then, he stood outside, leaning with his forearms on the hood of his pickup, having a disgusting, sexually explicit phone conver-

sation with somebody, during which he said, "I'm 38 years old." Later he said, "You can kiss my ass," a few times and hung up.

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July, 2005
Day's Inn, Roscoe, TX

Roscoe is not my favorite place, at least not the motel strip, which doesn't really represent the town, I suppose. I went into three motels, maybe four, looking for a room. This was on a Saturday night and they were all booked. One of them, the Motel 6, was filled with people wearing t-shirts for a family reunion - "Raynor/Gomez 05 Family Reunion" - something like that, two names united. They had a couple of rooms left on the upper level, but I declined. I then went to the brand new Comfort Inn. Both of these places, by the way, had stuffed animal heads - a mountain lion head, a deer head, and some other choice taxidermy in the lobbies. Next, I went to the Home Ranch Motel. That one not only had stuffed animal heads, but it had a big counter which was just a glass box, sort of like a terrarium, with a stuffed rattlesnake in it, and there were two old women there, talking to the desk clerk about THEIR family reunion, which had taken place the previous year. I then went back to the Comfort Inn, which was more modern. They didn't have any good rooms, either. They were all second floor - I noticed more mounted animal heads. Finally, I made it to the Day's Inn, which was the worst one of them all, furthest down the highway, probably the first one they built - I'll bet you the same family operated all of them. The air smelled vaguely of natural gas and the room had a huge spider in it, but I didn't care at that point. Home is where you're too tired to keep on driving.

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June, 1998
Victory Motel, Wells, Nevada

The old guy at the Victory Motel pointed to his pickup sitting out front and said it was a '73 Chevy. It looked like a rusted-up pile of junk, but I complimented him on it and said "They don't make them like that anymore," at which he grinned happily and maniacally. He told us that one of the two guys standing there were trying to get him to sell the truck to them. I told him what a good year that was; how it was right before all the pollution controls hit, and he said "That's it EXACTLY." Then I grinned and told him to make those two young guys pay through the nose. He then told me about how the motel was no longer operating, but he lived there with a bunch of folks and that it was built from old railroad ties. "That thing is solid," he told me, "they don't build them like that anymore."

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1999
Near Glacier National Park, Montana

One nice thing about staying at an old-style cabin motel is that you get to have neighbors. And you get to wake up and see what it's like to live next door to people that you would not ordinarily live next door to. They come out smoking and coughing, wheezing and hacking, lighting cigarettes, locking their girlfriends out of the cabin for fun, making noise and just raising a ruckus. You also get to experience ancient plumbing and notices on the wall saying that the water doesn't comply with government regulations, so you have to use the small bottle of water that they provide. "More can be purchased at the main office." You get to experience the ancient electric heater unit built flush into the wall. You get to have one electrical outlet in the entire room (from when being "wired" meant being wired for electricity). Most of the motel rooms in this town don't have phones. We tried a few before we settled on this place, it being too cold to set up our tent in Glacier tonight.

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January, 2014
La Quinta Inn, Panama City, Florida

I spent the night in Panama City, Florida, at the La Quinta, which was a decent hotel. Earlier, I had checked in at the Quality Inn, across the street, even though I had a bad feeling about this Quality Inn. It looked very fluorescent and run-down. It was the kind of motel that was built in the '70s and '80s, where each room had a big glass panel, with a curtain on it, next to the door. There's nothing inherently wrong with that, but those motels don't seem to have aged well.

Anyway, I went in and the desk guy was pleasant enough. They double-checked to make sure the room was ready. He asked this big, tall, broken-down maintenance guy, "Is 153 ready?" They looked at each other for just a second too long and then the maintenance guy took off. Five minutes later, he called on his walkie-talkie and said, "One fifty-three is ready."

I got in the van and drove down to the room. It looked okay at first glance. A little worn and old, but I was exhausted, having driven 700 miles that day. I went into the bathroom, flicked on the light, and there was a huge roach, which I quickly stepped on. This roach was so fat that he could not move very fast. That's a really bad sign for a motel.

It means that they're not doing enough exterminating. So then I went and ripped off the bed covers, and everything looked okay, but I remained suspicious. So I lifted up a corner of the mattress, just to see if there were any bedbugs.

I lifted it a bit higher than usual because of the roach, and there - in the middle of the box spring - were dozens and dozens of small black bugs crawling around. I'm no entomologist and I didn't examine them closely enough to see if they were bedbugs but, at that point, I just backed out of the room with Elko and left. I didn't even want to go deal with getting my money back, but I did.

We went across the street to the pricier La Quinta, where the trees in the parking lot had a thick bedding of long pine needles, which Elko really enjoyed.

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January, 2015
Magnuson Lodge, Hammond, Louisiana

At around 9:00 p.m. there was a frantic pounding on my motel door. The proper thing to do in that situation is to hunker down and not answer the door. But I did. Actually I didn't at first, but I did engage with the potential murderer. It was some guy with a heavy southern accent screaming about laundry. Was I doing my laundry? Did I have clothes in the dryer? I kept saying no, I didn't.

He was asking me how tall I was and I finally realized that he was accusing me of stealing their clothes. So I said, "Wait a minute." I got dressed and then opened the door, as I thought it would be better and would project a more respectable front if I did this face-to-face. In retrospect, it was probably pretty stupid for me to have done that. I would have told anybody else to not engage and to just call the front desk.

It was two very young guys. They had a white pick-up truck. They were both dressed in hunting camo, with camo hunting caps, and I think they were a little drunk. The one guy kept asking me if I was sure I didn't have clothes in the dryer. Finally, I just said, "Listen: maybe there's a security camera in the laundry room or in the hallway. Let's see if the front desk can check the videotape."

I was simply going into rational mode, but that seemed to give them pause. They both shut up and one of them said - "We don't want to do that." And I think they realized in that moment that I was not the guy they wanted. So, off they went, saying "Well, whoever did it, we've got THEIR clothes."

Five minutes later I heard some more talking outside my door. Again, like an idiot, I opened the door and they were standing there, but they didn't even notice me, as they were absorbed in conversation with a shorter guy, who was trying to be reasonable with them. He was saying, "Who knows?" Then he said, "Let's go back to my room and look at MY clothes," which I thought was a truly insane statement.

They all walked off and that was the last I heard of them. I worried for a few minutes that they were going to do the usual things that I worry about - slash my tires or steal parts off my van - but, when I woke up the next day, all was intact.

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