

Absolution and Redemption on America's Loneliest Highway

by Jon Sirkis

The package could not have arrived at a better time.

I'd been housesitting for my friend and fellow Canadian ex-pat Allie Jennings at her place in Paonia, a small community in western Colorado. Aside from housesitting, I had two careers: a part time job running a failing and deadly-dull computer security business, and a full-time job battling demons from my past. Neither paid very well.

Allie had suggested that getting away from my unhealthy living situation in the Bay Area and spending a few weeks in Colorado would help to give me some perspective. It did—I soon came to realize how screwed up my life truly was. Unfortunately, I didn't gain any insight into what exactly to do about it, so I spent most of my time alone in Allie's empty house doing what I always do—analyzing and reliving my past in pointless, agonizing detail.

But I digress. The package was from Wild Bill Chen, someone I hadn't heard from in years. In it were a plane ticket from San Francisco to Vancouver, \$500 in Canadian money, and a cryptic note from Wild Bill. He was, among other things, a relentless purveyor and connoisseur of personal drama, but this note was extreme and ridiculous even by his standards. It read, "Steve. Meet me 11am, Sunday. You know where. Lots to discuss. Utmost discretion. No phone contact. Highest level urgency. Repeat, utmost discretion. See you Sunday. BC."

It would have been a simple matter for him to tell me that he wanted me to meet him at the Fortress Wall restaurant in Vancouver's Chinatown, and then explain what the reason for the meeting was so that I could decide if it would be worth my time to go or not. Truthfully, for five hundred bucks and a trip to Canada, it was already worth my time, no matter what the reason turned out to be. But 'Utmost discretion?' His note reminded me of one of those goofy coded telegrams from a 1940's British spy movie: "Utmost discretion STOP Rendezvous in zebra sector with 'Badger' and 'Wombat'

STOP Bring `crumpets' and `gooseberry jam' STOP." I supposed that I just ought to be glad that he opted for communicating by courier instead of by carrier pigeon.

Since Wild Bill didn't want to risk using the phone—even to find out where I was—he had the package sent by courier to my San Francisco office on Friday afternoon. Of course, at the time, I was at Allie's house in Paonia, some eleven hundred miles away. It had taken until late Saturday afternoon for the package to somehow find me there. Within an hour after I'd gotten it, my car was packed, fueled, and headed west as fast as I could go.

Driving the speed limit and allowing for fillups and food breaks, the trip from Paonia to San Francisco normally takes around 20 hours. If you're not concerned about getting pulled over for speeding, you can do it in 15 hours, although a real suicidal maniac can get it down to 13. If I wanted to get to San Francisco in time to catch the flight to Vancouver, I'd have to make it in around 11.

The shortest route was to take Interstate 70 to Salina, Utah, and then catch US 50—"America's Loneliest Highway." The "Lonely" part of US 50 begins at Delta, Utah and crosses over 400 miles of nearly uninhabited Great Basin until reaching the shores of civilization again in Fallon, Nevada—a comparative metropolis populated by scarcely 7000 souls.

The narrow two-lane highway cuts across a wide, dry valley where the grass and sagebrush are sparse and the creekbeds fill with dust and spent tumbleweeds instead of water. From the valley, the road winds its way up the shoulder of a single-ridged mountain range, through a meager forest of starved and exhausted pinon and juniper trees, then over the bare crest of the mountain, down through the pinon and juniper, and out across the next valley. The process is repeated 12 times as the highway crosses the 12 parched mountain ranges of this part of the Great Basin.

Aside from what I carried with me, the only water I had ever seen in the entire length and breadth of the 400-mile stretch of Lonely Highway was during a trip many years ago. As I came over the crest of one of the mountain ranges, I saw spread out before me a vast inland sea that seemed to stretch all the way across the valley below to the foot of the next mountain range. I didn't know it at the time, but I was looking at the legendary Sevier Lake, shimmering an impossible blue in the midst of

the bleak, brown, mid-summer desert. Since I was driving a 1969 Ranchero (sans air conditioning) through the scorching heat, a quick swim in this huge body of water seemed like an outstanding idea. I'd guessed that the nearest shore was no more than four or five miles away. After driving about ten miles, the shore seemed to be a mile or so ahead. I took another twenty miles of receding shoreline before I realized that I'd been had. Sevier Lake is a mirage, hundreds of square miles of parched salt flats that reflect the blue of the sky in the summer heat. It is the coyote of the landforms, emblematic of the hopes and dreams of the people who had come to this land hoping to make a quick fortune and move on to greener pastures. It is also the closest thing to actual water to be found on the entire route.

While "America's Loneliest Highway" is not strictly accurate—there are other roads in the US where fewer cars travel—it is close enough. No doubt the creative Chamber of Commerce members who came up with it were hoping that the catchy name would evoke images of the Old West and thereby lure flocks of people from all over the world to drive through the 3 or 4 tiny towns en route and spend billions on gas, food, lodging, and tacky postcards. Whether this marketing scheme worked, I cannot say, although I have never passed more than 3 or 4 cars an hour in the more remote sections of the drive.

Since, as I have mentioned, I had never seen water on the Lonely Highway, I had assumed that the road would be dry, clear, and suitable for driving fast. However, by the time I hit Delta, a light but steady rain had begun to fall. Great. The sensible thing to do would have been to slow down to a safe speed, call the airline when I got to Fallon, and try to convince them to exchange my non-exchangeable ticket for a different flight. Unfortunately, the Sensible Thing and I had an estranged relationship at best. I kept the speedometer steady at 105 and hoped I wouldn't hydroplane and end up in the Great Remedial Driving School in the Sky.

The rain continued to fall throughout the night, sometimes mixed with patches of fog. Driving America's Loneliest Highway at night was pretty eerie in the best of circumstances, but the rain and fog gave it a surreal, post-apocalyptic ambiance. My high beams illuminated the stream of oncoming raindrops and I began to feel like I was being hypnotized. This was going to be a long, tense drive.

Somewhere in the 100-mile unpopulated stretch between Delta and Ely, I caught a split-second glimpse of a lone figure standing by the side of the road as I shot past. The figure's arm seemed to be extended out from under a dripping poncho. For a brief instant I could not be sure if I had actually seen someone, or if it was just another momentary hallucination that I'd grown accustomed to having every now and then. If I wasn't hallucinating, and there really was some guy standing back there, then what in the hell was wrong with him? What kind of homicidal maniac would be out in the dark in the middle of nowhere, hitchhiking in the pouring rain? And what kind of self-destructive fool would pick someone like that up?

It took me about half a mile to finally bring the car to a stop. I put it in reverse and backed up toward the figure as it ran toward the car. The sodden form threw a dripping duffel bag and a cardboard box into the back seat and jumped into the car.

"Hey, thanks for stopping, partner," said the hitchhiker. "Thought I was gonna drown out there. The name's Jimmy Earl Roswell, pleased to meetcha," he said, extending a rain-soaked hand.

Jimmy Earl was a tall, slightly overweight guy sporting a long drooping mustache and a week's worth of beard. He didn't remove his Stetson, even though it was thoroughly drenched and made it so he had to hunch down to keep from smashing the hat's crown into the roof of the car. Before I could demand to know what in God's name he was doing out here, he asked in a booming, whiskey-rasped voice "So, where you headed?"

"San Francisco," I said. "Then on to Vancouver by plane—if I make it to the airport before 5:30 tomorrow morning."

"Well, then I guess I'll go along with you as far as Sacramento and catch the I-5 heading south. Oughta make Vegas by tomorrow. Vancouver, huh? I hear that's a nice town. Been there before?"

"I've spent most of my life there."

"You're a Canadian? Then you probably already heard about how the queen of England uses the Canadian navy to smuggle drugs to Japan so that the Japanese mafia won't expose Prince Charles as a cannibal."

"What?" I asked, thinking he was kidding. "I think I might have missed that story."

"Well then, you're talking to the right guy. Here's the real scoop." Jimmy Earl then launched into a monologue that veered seamlessly from one apparently unrelated topic to another, expounding more opinions than six months of the San Francisco Chronicle's letters to the editor. From the fact that the weather was changing because of government microwave experiments, to the relative merits of baseball versus indoor soccer, to the *well-known* fact that tequila does not actually get you drunk, to the *undisputed scientific* fact that archeologists have determined that the biblical Eden is actually located in Texas, he spun an amazing web of random opinions and interlocking conspiracy theories that he seemed to regard simultaneously as utterly preposterous and the gospel truth. And he kept at it: the Mustang was the best car ever made, the Hunza's (whoever they are) live to be 200 years old, the cold-fusion powered car that gets 1000 miles to the gallon (of tritium, I supposed) was being suppressed by the oil companies. I hadn't said a word in over 50 miles.

After a while, Jimmy Earl's voice became a continuous hum of background noise, his non-stop flurry of speech a blizzard of words, filling the air and accumulating without any impact. Between the mesmerizing effects of his monologue and the hypnotic stream of raindrops dancing in my headlights, I was worried that I was going to slip into a trance and drive off the road. But, hard as I tried, I could no longer concentrate on anything Jimmy Earl was saying. I guessed that going on and on like that was his way of drowning out the voices of his own personal demons. Meanwhile, mine were front and center, as real as my waking life.

Jimmy Earl kept talking ". . . and that's exactly the same thing that it says in the book of Revelations. Scary, huh. Hey--you OK?" I heard him ask. His voice seemed to come from off in the distance somewhere.

"Hm? Oh sorry, I was thinking about something else. What was that again?" I asked. I had no idea what he'd just been talking about.

"The predictions about the microchips and the mark of the beast."

"What do microchips have to do with the mark of the beast?" I asked.

"Well, that's what I was about to tell you," he said as he twirled a cigarette between his fingers. "I got this friend in Texas--Lee Harvey Garrison. Kind of a crazy bastard, but I'd trust him with my last dollar. If I had one. Which I don't. Anyhow, he told me something that happened at this Safeway near Fort Worth. Uh, that's near Dallas. In Texas."

"I know."

"Right. Well, it's been totally covered up by the government. And the media. I mean, you never hear about any of this stuff. Hey, you don't happen to have a spare beer do you?"

"Sorry, no. Had to quit. Permanently," I replied.

"Yeah, tell me about it. My ex-wife once sent me this bumper sticker that said 'Instant Asshole—Just Add Alcohol'. She had what you'd call a gift for understatement. And that was back when I still had a driver's license." He sighed. "Y'know, I'd probably be a billionaire if it wasn't for cheap beer. Someday I'm gonna stop drinking. Probably be the day after I die."

I interrupted. "About the predictions. If they've all been covered up, how did you find out about them?"

"Oh. 'Cause I knew the guy who was there. Him and the cashier saw the whole thing."

"So what happened?"

"Well, it's kind of complicated. The government has got this whole weird process going—"

"Which government?" I asked. "Are you saying that maybe the mayor of Moose Jaw is in on this?"

"No, no. The world government. You know--the UN, the New World Order, the Media--"

"The media? You mean I'm in on it, too?" I asked.

"You're in the media?"

"Well, no. Unless a career as a journalist counts as being part of the media."

"You a reporter?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Well, I used to be. It was a while back." In truth, it was a very long while back. I still think of myself as a reporter, even though I had been one for only a short portion of my adult life.

"A reporter, no kidding. For what channel?"

"For a newspaper actually. The Vancouver Mercury."

"Never heard of it. 'Course I don't read the papers anyway. It's all a bunch of propaganda. I mean, no offense."

"None taken. So, how is it propaganda?" I asked.

"Well for one thing, they only tell one side of the story."

"So, if there's a train derailment, you think that they should talk about the positive aspects instead of just the negative ones?" I asked.

"No, no. I mean like--OK, for example--the ozone layer. There's no such thing, but no one'll ever admit it. It's a total misnomer. And statistics. It's a proven fact that 95 percent of all statistics are totally false."

"95 percent? Are you sure?"

"Well wait--maybe it was 85 percent," he mused.

"How about if we just round it off to 90 percent."

"Whatever. The point is, you just can't believe anything you hear."

"Then where did you find all this out?"

"On the radio," he said. "Anyway, the guy I was telling you about--he was in the checkout line right behind this army guy at that Safeway near Fort Worth. And the army guy accidentally runs his wrist over the scanner--"

I cut in "-and let me guess. His whole life history comes up on the screen, because the army implanted a microchip in his wrist."

Jimmy Earl seemed genuinely surprised. "Yeah. How'd you know?" he asked.

"I can't tell you."

"Why the hell not?" he asked indignantly.

"Well, Jimmy Earl, no offense, but it's been my experience that some people can get really touchy about this kind of stuff. I've known a few guys that I could easily picture firing up a chainsaw and slipping into a Hannibal the Cannibal routine if somebody was ever foolish enough to disagree with their views on the Real Truth. I figure if somebody's gonna freak out and process their feelings by means of amateur meatcutting, I'd just as soon not be within carving distance. "

Jimmy Earl laughed. "Well pard, you can put your mind at ease. I make it a point to never, *ever* hack anyone up with a chainsaw while they're driving. Even if they piss me off."

"That's an excellent policy, and good enough for me. OK, the truth is, I've heard this story before. Several different versions, actually. The whole story is impossible."

"No it's not. I heard it from Lee Harvey first hand." Jimmy Earl seemed offended.

"Yes it is. To start with, when *he* saw it happen--if he really saw it--*that* was first hand. When he told you, it was second hand. As for the story, a supermarket scanner can only read bar codes. No microchips, no transponders, no implants. Unless the army drew a black and white bar code on his arm, the scanner couldn't read it. But let's just say it could. Then they'd have to input his vital statistics into the database of that particular store. Why would they bother doing that? And where would the data show up? On the register receipt? `Tomatoes \$1.59 a lb., Sergeant Jones 175 lbs., 5'10", pay grade E-3, thank you for shopping at Safeway'? I don't think so. And by the way, there aren't any Safeway stores in Texas."

It's been my experience that the truth doesn't stand a chance when it comes into conflict with a strongly held belief, and Jimmy Earl's response was no exception.

"Look," he said. "I don't know about all the details, but Lee Harvey swears that it's the God's honest apocryphal truth."

"Apocryphal, eh?" I asked.

"Every word of it," he said, grinning. "Well all right, he does tend to exaggerate things, but you can bet that there's some truth in it. Hell, even if there's not, it's a damn good story, you've gotta admit. And you just know that the government's out doing all kinds of secret stuff that we never find out about."

"Sure, but if you've heard about it, then it's not really a secret. The things you *haven't* heard of are the ones that you really ought to be worrying about," I said dryly.

Jimmy Earl laughed his deep, raspy, tequila and cigarettes laugh. "I know—and that's exactly what Lee Harvey always says. You and him have a lot more in common than you think. But seriously, take for instance this thing I heard on the radio yesterday. You ever wonder why there's bar codes on all the interstate highway signs?"

"So the invading UN troops can scan it, get a read out on their computers and know right where they are," I responded.

"That's it. Pretty good, pard—you're well informed."

"Oh, come on. Why don't they just use a map?"

"Cause they don't speak English."

"These sound like some seriously stupid invaders. They can't even read highway numbers?" I asked.

"Well, if they could, they wouldn't need bar codes on the damn signs," he countered.

"Aha. Now it's all beginning to fit together," I said with undisguised sarcasm.

"Funny you should mention that. I've kept files on this stuff for years. Once you start paying attention, it really does all fit together, no matter how weird it sounds."

"So what's the best one you've heard about?" I asked.

"The best one? Whadya mean?"

"The most bizarre theory."

"Oh. That'd have to be Operation Blue Book," he said, with a strong hint of admiration. "My personal favorite."

"Operation Blue Book?"

"Yeah. That's the one where the government is planning this fake second coming. And Jesus-- only it's not really him, it's a giant hologram that *looks* like him--he comes down and starts telling people to do all this stuff."

"Like what?" I asked.

"The usual I guess. Y'know--put the mark of the beast on your wrist, turn in all your guns, burn your bibles, submit to the U.N. And everyone'll all do it, cause it's Jesus telling 'em to."

"That won't work too well in Israel," I said.

"Oh, they got all the angles covered. In the U.S. and places like that, it'd be Jesus. But in Israel, it'd be Moses or somebody. And in Arabia it'd be—well, whoever it is they got over there. What's his name."

"Allah," I said.

"No, the other guy."

"Muhammad."

"Right, him."

"So, what about all the atheists?" I asked.

"Well, that's just it. The atheists are the ones behind it all. They'll be able to take over everything just like that." He snapped his fingers. "Conquering the world without firing a shot. Pretty slick, huh."

"Wait a minute," I protested. "If the atheists are busy running everything behind the scenes, then why are they always telling people not to believe in God? If they convince everyone that all religions are fake, no one will pay any attention to the phony Second Coming."

"Right. So what they're doing is infiltrating the churches so they can convert as many people as possible. That's why religion's become so popular lately."

"Atheists are out bringing people to God?" I asked, incredulous.

"Yeah, that's the beauty of it. Nobody'd ever suspect."

"So, organized religion is part of an atheist plot. That really *is* a good one."

"I got a million of 'em. It's practically a full time job just keeping track of it all and figuring out the connections."

I felt a twinge of envy. Everything Jimmy Earl thought about kept his mind occupied without being sad or depressing or painful. Everything I thought about made me miserable. Maybe Jimmy Earl was on to something.

Dense fog descended onto the road, clearing every quarter mile or so, then returning again. In the darkness, the fog had the effect of a movie screen, with images from my thoughts projected onto it as I drove. We were driving through a clearing and about to disappear into another wall of fog. A hundred yards ahead and just beyond the first veil of mist, I could see a pair of glowing yellow eyes, directly in the path of the car. Although I couldn't make out his face, I instantly knew who it was. From within the shadows ahead, Henry Petain had stepped out of the realm of the dead and back into the real world. As I swerved left to avoid hitting him, he darted left, too. I jerked the wheel to the right, and the car shot past him with inches to spare. In that instant I caught a glimpse of the leering face that had haunted my dreams. The yellow eyes looked defiantly into mine as if to say, 'I told you I'd be back.' There was some sort of strange key tied around his neck. What the hell did *that* mean? The key to life? The key to the afterlife? But it had finally happened. He'd returned--and I'd finally have my chance to settle things.

"Sweet Jesus!" yelled Jimmy Earl, recovering from being thrown against the passenger door.

"He tried to kill us."

"You saw him, too?" I asked, relieved that it wasn't just another hallucination.

"Saw him? We damn near mated with the son-of-a-bitch."

"My God," I finally said, bringing the car to a screeching stop. "He's done it. He's really done it. He's come back."

"Who's come back?" he asked.

"Henry Petain. That guy we almost hit. I knew him. He's come back from the dead. I have to go back there and finish this," I said, turning off the engine.

Jimmy Earl thought carefully for a moment and said in a sympathetic voice, "Whoa Pard, I think maybe you been driving too long. That feller you almost flattened was an antelope."

"It was Petain. I saw him. You saw him too."

"Yeah, I did, and what I saw was an antelope. You could go back and look if you want."

"I know what I saw. That was Henry Petain."

"If it was him, then he was hiding behind that antelope," insisted Jimmy Earl.

"He had a key around his neck. Antelope don't carry keys."

"No, but they do wear radio collars."

"I know what I saw," I said angrily.

"I know what you saw, too. It was an antelope."

"It was Petain."

"It was a pronghorn antelope."

"It was Hank Petain and he's alive."

"Whatever you say."

My mind raced. Maybe Jimmy Earl was in on it, whatever *it* was. Maybe he was part of the unseen entity that was making all this stuff happen. A member of Petain's legion of undead. Was it just a coincidence that I'd given him a ride? I knew what I'd seen. A man I'd killed years ago, appearing suddenly in front of my car in the middle of the Nevada desert, just as I was thinking about him. Right. That proves it, I thought. It proves that I'm losing my mind. I grabbed a flashlight, jumped out of the car, and walked back to the spot where I saw Henry Petain. Though the light rain and mist I saw two deer-like forms bounding away, along with my chance to finally fix things.

I got back into the car and we drove away in silence. Soon, Jimmy Earl had started his monologue again, slipping back into it as if he'd never stopped. It was like a protective barrier of noise; a conversation that prevented any real communication. But I had to talk.

"Sorry to interrupt," I said "but--have you ever felt like someone from your dreams sort of materialized into real life?"

"Well--no. But I've used a line like that on a couple of women." Jimmy Earl didn't miss a beat.

"This is a guy," I said.

"Oh," he said warily. "I wouldn't know about that kind of thing—not that it matters to me. I mean hey, what people do in private is their own damn business, but--"

"This guy in my dream that I keep having--he tried to kill me a few years ago. In real life. His name was Henry Petain. That was him that I thought I saw back there." I wasn't sure why I was telling all this to a perfect stranger. Maybe after all that time, I just felt like talking about it, and it was less complicated to tell someone who I knew I'd never see again, like going to confession.

"Was this guy a friend of yours?" asked Jimmy Earl.

"No. Not at all. He's dead because of me."

"So, he tried to kill you and you killed him instead." He pronounced the word killed as "kilt."

"Yeah, that's about it. I've been seeing him in my dreams ever since. Now it's like he's come back to life. Like he said he would. This must sound pretty weird."

Jimmy Earl thought seriously about what I'd said. "Well, the way I see it, it could be one of two things. Could be you're feeling guilty about what happened and--"

"Guilty? Why the hell should I feel guilty?" I snapped. "That parasite Petain is the one who's guilty! He killed Christa, for God's sake. She was just a girl—she never hurt anyone. Why couldn't she come back instead of him? He tried to kill me. He's still trying. If anybody deserved to die it was him. Guilty my ass."

"That's exactly what I meant," said Jimmy Earl. "Which leaves only one answer."

"Which is what?" I asked testily.

"An alien mind probe," he said in a solemn voice.

"A what?"

"Alien mind probe. Seen 'em happen everywhere. Well OK, technically I haven't actually seen one myself, but I've sure heard about 'em."

"Oh, come on."

"For real. The aliens tap into your brain and make you do stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"I dunno. Whatever they need you to do so they can take over the world," he said casually.

"Like what?"

"Hell, I don't have all the details. It's not like they call me up and fill me in on their master plan.

Trust me though, they're doing it."

"That's ridiculous," I scoffed.

"You got a better explanation? The government's been up to this stuff for years."

"I thought you said it was aliens."

"Who do you think runs the government?"

"Oh brother. The aliens?"

"That's it."

"Where do you get that from?" I asked.

"You really wanna know?"

"Sure, why not."

"All right, then I'll tell ya. Now stay with me here. When they wrote the Constitution--and this is over two hundred years ago--they put in there that everyone has these inalienable rights. In-*alien*-able. Get it? They knew about aliens even way back then. Those are the rights that protect us from the aliens. In-alien-able. That's why they killed Kennedy. He was gonna expose them. And that's why everything's been screwed up ever since."

"Uh huh. So did the aliens kill John Lennon, too? Or was Yoko really from Jupiter?"

"Alright, alright. Just wait 'til they come knocking down your door. Then you'll see how funny it is. They're taking away our rights, one after another--"

"Our in-*alien*-able rights?"

"As we speak. The right to bear arms, the right to redress of grievances, the right to have your home as your castle, to peaceably dissemble . . ."

"How about the right of the workers to control the means of production? You know—to each according to his needs, and all that."

"They'll take that one away too, if we let them. They'll get 'em all, before you know it." He was leaning forward in his seat now, chewing on his unlit cigarette, absently poking the dashboard with his index finger while he talked. "It's creeping up on us. Like that thing with throwing a frog into boiling water--it's a just little bit at a time, so nobody even notices. Then one day you wake up and the whole earth is a Venusian slave colony. And our women'll all be sex toys for some nine foot tall slime-dripping slug with suction cups for fingers-

As he spoke, I began to get the feeling that something slimy really was creeping up on me. Crawling, actually. Something cold blooded, reptilian. And with weapons-grade bad breath.

I believe that it is appropriate to briefly mention here a few relevant zoological facts. The Gila monster is one of only two poisonous lizards in the world. They are orange and black, a bit chubby by lizard standards, and can sometimes reach almost 3 feet in length. When agitated they make a loud, raspy hissing sound, and from this they got the "monster" moniker. Although their venom is deadly, few people have ever been killed by one. There are several reasons for this. First, Gila monsters are very reclusive, and are found only in the deserts of the Southwestern US and Northern Mexico. They are increasingly rare due to being illegally captured and sold as pets, and also because of the destruction of their habitat by an even larger predatory cold-blooded reptile known as the American Real Estate Developer. Also, Gila monsters are not aggressive toward humans and will avoid a confrontation if possible. But more importantly, most people have better sense than to get anywhere near a three-foot long, poisonous, hissing reptile. Which is probably why almost every victim of a Gila

monster bite was drunk at the time. Awash in the sort of insight and good judgment that only heavy drinking can provide, it happens something like this:

Drunk: "Hey! Lookit that ugly son-of-a-bitch."

Lizard: "Ssssss. SSSS! grrAAAAAH!"

Drunk: "C'mere ya ugly bastard. Ain't that the butt-ugliest thing you ever seen?"

Drunk's friends: "Ain't as ugly as you. Ain't as dumb neither."

Drunk: "I got yer ugly right here. Hey! Git over here, ya fat ugly salamander. Y'know, he's kinda cute. I'munna pick 'im up. C'mere boy. Here boy!"

Lizard: "grrAAAAAAAHAH! ssss..AAAAAAK! AAAAAK!"

Drunk's friends: "Better leave 'im alone. Them things're poisonous."

Drunk: "Sheee-it. I ain't afraid a no sissie-assed salamander. C'mere boy. C'mon. Gotcha!

Hey, lookit! Lookit! He's lettin' me pet 'im. See, I told you so. Yeeeeow! Son-of-a-bitch bit me! He BIT me! I'll kill ya, ya son-of—yeeeeow! Let go! Hey! Git 'im off me! Yeeeeow!"

"Jesus!" I gasped as the demonic thing on my leg snarled. I involuntarily lurched the wheel to the left. The car skidded left on the rain-soaked road, then right, then left again as I tried to regain control, in several respects.

Jimmy Earl shouted, "What in the hell?" as he was thrown against the passenger door for the second time in under ten minutes.

I finally brought the car to a stop in the middle of the highway, facing the wrong direction. The entire contents of the passenger compartment had rearranged themselves, except for the thing on my leg.

"Jesus!" I screamed. "There's a fucking python on my leg!"

"Whoa, take it easy now. Don't move." Jimmy Earl tried to sound reassuring. "It ain't a python."

"What the hell is it?" I demanded.

"It's just a . . . uh, well—it's a Gila monster.

"A what?"

"A Gila monster. Now, listen. Whatever you do, don't scare him."

"What do you mean don't scare him? Are you his therapist or something? Get him off me!"

The lizard's front feet were on my right thigh, his head tilted upward. It was staring straight at me as it began to snarl again.

With my left hand I gently slipped off my left cowboy boot, reached inside it, and began slowly moving it toward the hissing creature. Jimmy Earl jumped out, ran around the car, opened my door, and began trying to distract the lizard.

"That's good," Jimmy Earl coached. "They can't move backwards. Here. This should get his attention."

At that exact moment, as if part of some ridiculous, yet meticulously executed plan, Jimmy Earl pulled a pink Gila monster squeak-toy out of his shirt pocket, the real Gila monster simultaneously sunk its fangs into the toe of the boot that I was holding, and I launched the boot out the door, lizard attached.

Jimmy Earl dove for cover. "Hey, be careful! Don't hurt him!" he shouted.

The Gila monster ran under the car and began hissing in earnest. Jimmy Earl laid down on the pavement and began trying to calm the agitated beast down. After a few minutes, he had gotten the bewildered reptile out from under the car and back into the relative safety of his cardboard box. After allowing a few more minutes for the tide of adrenaline to recede, we set off again.

"Now let me get this straight," I said to Jimmy Earl. "You're hitchhiking from Salt Lake City to Sacramento carrying a Gila monster in a cardboard box? Don't tell me. It's a performance art piece, right? And you're making a statement about the plight of endangered species."

He gave an embarrassed laugh. "Naw, I wish it was something that interesting. It's a long story," he said, sheepishly. For the first time since he got in the car, Jimmy Earl had nothing to say.

"Listen bubba, it's 300 miles until we come to the next stoplight. I've got time to hear this."

Another moment of embarrassed silence. "Well, what the hey. You want the funny version or the true version?"

"Somehow I think they'll both be funny. How about the true version."

"Yeah, I reckon you're right. All kinds of funny stuff happened on the way here. Maybe the funniest thing is that when I started out from Tucson, I had a new four-wheel drive and a couple thousand bucks."

"You're going to Las Vegas from Tucson by way of Salt Lake City? You've gone about eight hundred miles out of your way."

"I'm a lot more out of my way than that. I was only headed to Phoenix."

"You're kidding."

"Wish I was, partner," he sighed. "See, I got a couple rules for myself. First is don't gamble. The second is--especially don't gamble when you're drunk. I was on my way to see my kid in Phoenix and somehow ended up in Vegas instead."

"And you broke your rules."

"Both of 'em. Broke my own rules, and now I'm broke," he chuckled to himself. "I was feeling lucky and figured that was a good enough reason to make a little exception. I was lucky alright. Lucky to get outta there alive."

"So where does the Gila monster come in?" I asked.

"Well, what happened was that I kept trying to win back my losses. You can see how well that worked. The crazy part is that I've done the same damn thing a dozen times or so that I can remember, and the same damn thing happens every time. I gamble away every last cent, max out my credit cards, hock everything I own. Hell, I've never left the state of Nevada in my own car. I mean, I *know* better."

"Then why do you keep doing it?"

"You mean gambling? I got the fever, that's why. It's like something takes over my brain. I walk into a casino just to have a look around. You know--take in the sights, have a few drinks, check out

the nice looking ladies. Next thing I know I'm waking up in a culvert somewhere. I don't even remember having a good time, although I figure I must have had one--seeing as all my money is gone. I don't know one day to the next when I'm gonna go berserk and blow everything I own in one short night of powerful stupidity. It's no way to live, I can tell you that. And there's only one thing that can explain it all."

"Compulsive behavior? Bad judgment?"

"Nope. An alien mind probe," he said in all seriousness. "They take over my brain and make me do all that shit. That'd also explain why I can't hardly remember doing it."

"Oh, come on. Do you really believe all that stuff?"

"I can't come up with any better explanation," he said cheerfully.

"How about that you got drunk and blew all your money like everyone else that gambles in Las Vegas?"

"That ain't a better explanation. More logical, maybe, but not better. 'Cause if that was true, it'd mean that I'm just another yahoo that can't control himself and pissed all his money away for no damn good reason. Screw that," he laughed. "I'll stick with the aliens."

"That's ridiculous. You *know* that's not true."

"Hell, yeah. But *you* know there's no guy coming back from the dead to kill you, and *I* know better than to gamble drunk. All that "knowing better" sure hasn't done either one of us any good."

"You might have a point there," I admitted.

"Right. So, if it turns out I'm wrong about the aliens, the worst that could happen is people think I'm a nut. They think that already."

"Unless the aliens get angry that you're snitching on them, and zap you into a pile of radioactive dust."

"Pard, that's a chance I'm willing to take," Jimmy Earl said grinning.

"I have to say, I think you're on to something," I said. "Maybe I should try it."

"Hell, yeah. It's a lot better to be pissed off at the aliens than to feel all guilty and pissed off at yourself for messing things up."

"I am not guilty about what happened," I said, lying emphatically.

"Didn't say you were," he replied, with the type of barroom diplomacy that seemed like it would come in handy when dealing with angry drunks, something that Jimmy Earl was no doubt experienced in doing.

"Of course, technically, I *am* guilty. I was completely plastered. If I hadn't been drunk, things wouldn't have turned out so bad."

"Y'know pard, I've said that exact same thing myself. More times than I'd care to admit."

"But," I said, beginning the same tired argument that I'd had with myself thousands of times before, "Petain was an evil scumbag. The world is better off without him—not that I'm saying that it's OK to go around killing people—even if they deserve to die. It's just that—well, I guess I'm still trying to make sense out of it all, you know?"

"Sure. But, see--it was the aliens along."

"Those bastards," I growled.

"There ya go."

"Right. I feel better already," I said sarcastically. The odd thing was, I really did feel better. Like the aliens had cleansed my soul of all the guilt I felt. I had experienced that same soul-cleansing sensation before—usually as a result of some form of opiate or one of many cathartic, but temporary, religious conversions. The relief never lasted very long, but I'd take what I could get. And getting absolution by pawning my guilt off on mythical aliens was likely to have far fewer nasty residual side effects than tearing through a bottle of black-market percodans or a giving all my earthly possessions to another cockamamie cult.

"Jimmy Earl, this may sound strange—but I really do feel better. This is bizarre."

"What'd I tell ya?"

The fog was gone now, and stars were beginning to break through the clouds. I knew that if I could keep going at the same rate, I'd probably still be able to make it to the airport with a few minutes to spare.

"You still haven't told me how you ended up with the Gila monster," I said to Jimmy Earl.

"Oh yeah. Well, the next day--after I pissed away everything I had--"

"You mean after the aliens made you do it," I said, with the fervor of a new convert.

"Right. After the aliens *made* me do it. That's what I meant. Anyway, I couldn't go and pick up my kid at my ex-wife's house flat broke with no wheels. So, I was hitchhiking out to Salt Lake to see my brother, and maybe get some work. This guy gives me a ride, and I tell him my story and he says he can help me out. Told me people in Vegas would pay a lot of money for this feller." He lifted the box up off his lap for emphasis.

"He happened to have a Gila monster lying around?" I asked.

"That did seem kind of odd, but I didn't ask any questions."

"And he just gave it to you?"

"Yeah, real nice guy. He was on parole or something and didn't want to risk getting caught with it. He also gave me these guys." He reached back over his shoulder and out of his duffel bag, produced a two-liter clear plastic pop bottle. "Bark scorpions. Tiny little things, but they pack a mean punch," he said proudly. "Poison as all hell. Huh." He began to inspect bottle closely.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Probably nothing. Just a crack. You got any duct tape?"

"Tell me you're kidding."

"Well, wait. Looks like they're all in there. False alarm," he said. "Anyway, they ain't goin' anywhere. They're hibernating."

"Like the Gila monster."

"Nah, they'll behave. Not like this bad feller here. He's gonna make me rich. Or at least get me enough money so I can get a set of wheels and see my kid. Gila monsters get this reputation, but you

just have to know how to treat 'em, that's all. Just like training a dog. A little know-how is all it takes. See? When he's calmed down he's just like a puppy. A regular Gila puppy. Hey, looky here. He's letting me pet him."

"Jimmy, have you been drinking?"

"Well, I finished of a seven-course meal right before you picked me up."

"A seven course meal?"

"Yeah—a six-pack and a possum. Minus the possum. Plus a half-bottle of tequila dregs. Why do you ask?"

So, the reason that I missed my flight had to do with the amount of time it took for me to convince a Reno hospital admissions nurse that the semi-conscious incoherent goat-roper I'd brought in really was the victim of a poisonous lizard attack. Incredibly, the nurse was a Canadian transplant who had recognized my name from my days at the Vancouver Mercury, and was convinced that I was writing some sort of candid camera comedy piece or something. I had to bring the Gila monster, hissing and snarling, into the emergency room before anyone would believe that it wasn't a joke. Then, of course, *everybody* wanted to see the enraged beast: doctors, nurses, patients, and especially these two inebriated knuckleheads in the waiting room, both of whom tried to pet it. Amazing. It's as if Gila monsters were guided by some kind of vindictive patron saint of sobriety. I managed to get out of there before the victim count rose.

Jimmy Earl Roswell, whom I was to meet again one day, was treated and eventually released, and the Gila monster was confiscated by the Fish and Wildlife Service and sent home to the Sonoran Desert. As for me, the strange adventure instigated by Wild Bill was only beginning—the real absolution was still to come. I was as yet unaware of the impending tidal wave of events that would soon overtake me. But that's another story. At this particular moment, I was content to be on my way to San Francisco International Airport with a welcome reprieve and one of the best excuses for missing a flight ever.