

# HITCHHIKING IS ILLEGAL IN NEVADA

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I'll ask you to picture me as a black dot in the desert, a period crawling across a straight line drawn on a vast white page, sweating literally and metaphorically, regretting everything, at ground zero in midsummer 1984. I'll ask you to picture this: The highway patrol on Interstate 80 outside Wendover, Nevada, had directed me to walk a mile of desert, back to Utah, in the blazing sun of noon. But first I have to explain what, at twenty-one, I'd misunderstood about the difference between hitchhiking in New England and hitchhiking across the deserts and mountains of the West. To do the story justice I need to rewind a few weeks, to a ride hitched from a hippie named Melvin in an orange Volkswagon bug.

It was the summer after freshman year. My friend Eliot and I had taken "leaves of absence" from college, then run aground at Eliot's family home in upstate New York. There we contracted with Eliot's mom to prep and paint the exterior of their large house in exchange for room and board, and in our desultory way we delivered—though the paint would soon flake away like psoriasis, due to shortcuts in our notion of prep. Each day we got stoned, stacked the player with vinyl—*Parliament*, the *Minutemen* and *Little Feat* were in heavy rotation—ascended the scaffolding and fantasized escape.

I'd left a girlfriend behind in Vermont. One June day, horny and sick of fumes, I defected from Eliot's and hitchhiked to Bennington to see her. Three hitching hours from one driving hour was the reliable ration among the small towns that dot New England. You stuck out your thumb and strung together ten or fifteen short hops, with bored salesmen, kindly dads and most of all, students from Hampshire or Bard in Toyota Corollas, who'd reliably get you high. Hitchhiking was low impact, low commitment—you made small talk and put a couple of towns behind you.

Melvin was thirtyish, bearded, intense. He stopped his Bug and within a few miles I was, yes, stoned, and letting him fish for my story. I laid it out: girlfriend, paint job, cabin fever. Eliot and I hoped to jaunt out west to visit his crazy uncle in Berkeley, I explained, but we needed a car.

"Well, I need to get this VW back to Colorado," Melvin said and explained something about driving back with a girlfriend. It was too easy. A week later, he dropped the Bug at Eliot's and vanished.

I want to say: We drove that car as far as we could, abandoned it out west, and we did—amid a thousand jokes about how the hollow surfaces were likely packed with cocaine, we drove it precisely as far as Golden, Colorado, where we found a giant M carved into a mountain and a pizzeria with a whole stuffed moose spread around the four walls—head, hide and hooves. It was farther west than I'd been, and it was where Eliot and I first recalled we hadn't considered how to cross the last third of this great land, hadn't even broached the subject.

We stalled for three days, at one point going to the Denver airport to try to cadge a lift on a mail plane, a useless notion we'd picked up who-knows-where. Then we found a ride board in Boulder and scored Eliot a lift to Berkeley in a two-seater convertible driven by a reputedly beautiful girl—I never did lay eyes on her. That was the sole ride offered, and so I volunteered to hitchhike to Berkeley, which I'd been daring myself to do for days.

This was an error of scale. Interstate 80 between Cheyenne, Wyoming, and San Francisco is a vast wasteland of desert and mountain dotted with a minimum of battened-down outposts selling gas, food and gambling. Reno and Salt Lake City are the only hubs for a thousand miles; the rest is Elko and Little America, names you'd only know if you'd stopped there to repair a

tire or wolf a hoagie. Hitchhiking in that Martian zone, where anyone who stops has per se volunteered to spend hours with you—unless they mean to leave you somewhere between towns, and let's not think about that, please—is a rather different proposition from hitchhiking in New England.

In fact, it stands in relation somewhat as facing a major-league pitcher does to swatting at a wiffle ball, or as making love does to jerking off. I laugh now, but when this insight came over me, which it did roughly fifty miles out of Cheyenne—between the ride with the Christian who warned me extensively about accepting rides from the lawless wildcat oilmen in western Wyoming and the next ride, in a pickup truck full of what were unmistakably lawless wildcat oilmen, with rifles and open beers in the cab—well, when that insight first came over me it was something akin to receiving a diagnosis of fatal illness.

I remember riding with a Chinese shopkeeper inexplicably delivering a vanload of soda ninety miles through Nevada. I remember riding in a rig with a trucker who had a sleeping baby on the bedroll in back and wanted me to sit and make sure the baby didn't roll off. I remember riding with a professional speeder with radar and a CB radio who advanced me a hundred miles in under an hour. I remember sun, boredom and fear. Most of all, I remember Wendover.

The ride that got me out of Utah—I thought—was with a guy who booked rock acts at one of the two large casinos in Wendover, Nevada, just over the Utah border, the easternmost place to gamble on Interstate 80. He picked me up at four on a Friday, the sun still high. We listened to Neil Young's "Everybody's Rockin'," and I soaked in his air conditioning and stared out the window at the marvelous, impossible salt flats, where lovers had trod off the highway to spell their names in the rocks that shone like black eyes against the white.

The sky was beginning to glow when he deposited me on the offramp outside of town, a mile or so into Nevada. Oh how I'd grow to loathe that spot! I waited there an hour at least, hungry and exhausted, gazing at the twinkle of Wendover across the highway and at the expanse of waste that surrounded it and me. There's nothing to stretch time like sticking your thumb out as darkness gathers in the desert, and that spot, on a Friday night when every car was packed with weekenders, was a hitchhiker's worst nightmare.

There isn't a town in America without a cheap motel, right? I finally gave up, walked into town and found no cheap motel. Wendover was two things: a pair of glossy casinos and a sprawl of trailers that housed the croupiers, security guards and maids. I went into the Stateline Casino. You've seen photos of the neon of a giant cowboy with a rising gun arm. That's it.

The woman at reception stared at me, with my sunburn and stink, like I was a flea in her carpet. I only remember my flood of relief as I handed over sweat-soaked cash in exchange for a room key. I'd meant to put this contemptible town far behind me, but now, coughing up my nest egg for a night inside the castle walls was a triumph. Up in the room I cranked the air, showered for the first time in two days and donned my good shirt. On the bedspread was a complimentary roll of quarters, meant to ensure that road-weary voyagers to Reno drop at least a bit of boodle here, instead. I went down and spent it on dinner.

Next morning I checked out and walked back to my spot on the offramp. That's when things got silly. I stood there in the sun from nine to noon. I counted cars, promised God I'd never hitchhike after this, and counted cars again. "One hundred more," I decided. The hundred passed. I cleared the score and started again. Three times that morning I was cruised by the highway patrol, but I didn't think much of it. I'd been searched and questioned in Wyoming and survived.

Sometime shortly after noon, when I'd begun to wonder if I was doomed to be in Wendover forever, they pulled over for a talk. Did I know hitchhiking was illegal in Nevada?

No, I told them, I didn't. "I'm just trying to get out of your town, sir. I'll be gone as soon as I

can.”

“It’s illegal,” they explained. “You can hitch in Utah, but not here.”

“I just came from Utah,” I explained. “I’m headed west.”

“Too bad,” they explained. Utah was a mile that-a-way—east—and I ought to walk back there, with my thumb down, please, so I wouldn’t be in violation of the law.

“But I’ll only be going back this way,” I pleaded.

“Whatever you’ll do, you won’t be committing a crime in Nevada.”

So it was that I became a speck on a page, a token moved in an absurd symbolic action across a cartographic line in real space—so it was that I was marched under a slow-crawling police escort along the shoulder in midday sun through the desert until reaching a road sign that read WELCOME TO UTAH!

The patrol car pulled a U-turn—as in back to U-tah. Like in a John Wayne movie, where the lawman escorts the undesirable to the county line.

Follow: Westbound, Wendover was the first stop on that road in hours. Follow: Every car would stop for at least gas and a piss. Follow: I could stand there forever and die. No one would stop for a hitchhiker two minutes before pulling into a rest stop.

So, the instant the cops abandoned me on the Utah side of that line, I turned around and walked back in.

I didn’t pause at the spot I’d worn out, the counting spot, the death spot. I slogged past it, went into town to the nearest gas station. Up close, I’d persuade someone, anyone, to get me a mile or two west and break the jinx.

The attendant was an ancient, shuffling black guy. In a film he would have been played by Scatman Crothers, circa *The Shining*. In a film it would be too much, I know, too easy, but this is true: He listened to my story and he laughed and he spoke in a patois so thick I could barely make it out.

“You want to wait for me to get off, I’ll get you down the road apiece.”

“I’ll wait.”

“You can sit back there.”

I sat, I waited, and when the time came I climbed into his battered Reliant. I shared space with his dog—which the attendant explained he’d rescued from the road, probably so I’d understand he was truly an angel and I was truly a stray, a whelping, a pup—and he got out of Wendover before I went under.

I hitchhiked only once again—that afternoon, to Reno. In the dingy bus station there, with my last thirty dollars, I bought a ticket for a red-eye Greyhound to San Francisco. I was in Berkeley by nine the next morning, at an outdoor brunch place, drinking fresh-squeezed orange juice and telling this story to Eliot.

In the breeze of the Pacific.