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Slab City: Life on the Fringes

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SLAB CITY: LIFE ON THE FRINGES

Scot Meyer finally decided to quit it all when he woke up in the hospital in Nederland, Colorado to the sound of a priest administering his last rights. He ripped out his IVs and told the doctors and nurses that were swarming around his bed that he had had enough. He got out, hopped on an Amtrak train and headed to the last place there was to go, Slab City, California.

From the train Scot and his service dog Lance took a Greyhound as far as that would take them, and hitchhiked the last leg of the trip, which took some extra effort—no one wants to stop for a haggard-looking man and a dog in the middle of the desert. In the more remote parts of the Valley you can drive for miles without seeing a soul. When you do see someone you view them with suspicion, because sane people don't belong in a place like this. I don't stop for hitchhikers.

Scot finally got a ride from a 80-year-old woman named Pinky, who didn't mind taking him and Lance all the way to Slab City. She asked where he was going, and Scot told Pinky his only destination was The Haven, a small church operating out of a trailer in the middle of the squatter camp. It turned out she lived right next door. When Scot arrived, he found a cozy, abandoned concrete bunker and made himself at home.

You are sick and you hear ringing in your ears. It is the sound of your own life reverberating through your body. Life asserting itself against whatever threat brought you to your sickbed. Life. Life. Life. Every beat of your heart shouting, blood rushing through all arteries, sending the message. I have been very sick, fevers drowning out all sound but that, the shrill pitch of precious life rushing through my veins.

There is fever and there is burning. And there are many ways to burn.

It takes a unique type of person to weigh the pros and cons and still decide to call a place like Slab City home. Slab City is an unofficial community of squatters living on the concrete slabs left behind after the Marine Corps abandoned Camp Dunlap in 1956. Just outside of Niland and a few miles east of the Salton Sea, the slabs are as close to nowhere as it comes and just about as far as you can get from anywhere that feels at all connected to the rest of the world.

Slabbers live in R.V.s, trailers or tents, on the concrete slabs if they can get them or on the dirt if they can't. A few, like Scot, live in bunkers, but vacancies are hard to come by. Scot's bunker is a raised curve of concrete covered with dirt. It looks like a hill from one side and fades

into the landscape. Scot was lucky to find it, because he has no trailer or car and shelter from the harsh desert winter and a sturdy home to weather out flash floods and dust storms is a must.

Water doesn't come easy in the desert. Slabbers drive into Niland to fill up their water tanks for free at a gas station, or they get it on the slabs from the "Water Man," an entrepreneur who sells city water for \$.15 a gallon. Scot said it sounds like a great deal, except for the fact that you also have to buy the containers. Scot knows of a secret water tank by The Haven, where he fills up four gallon jugs at a time and brings them back to his bunker.

Electricity comes from generators or from the sun. "Solar Mike," another slab entrepreneur, attaches solar panels on top of the rigs of long-term residents. The sun shines almost every day, so the solar powered slabbers have complete energy independence. When it gets too hot, the slabbers go swimming in a nearby irrigation canal. When it's chilly, there is a hot spring they bathe in.

Every need is provided, but the slabs aren't pretty to look at. It has a Mad Max quality. After the apocalypse, these people will have it made. But the world isn't over yet, so you have to wonder; why are they here? During his first month on the slabs, Scot worked on figuring that out, and he categorized his fellow slabbers into three groups.

"They're all running from something," he said. "Either running from the law, running from a mental disability and they don't know where to go, they don't fit in. It's like the Isle of Misfit Toys. That's good, that people like that have a place to go. And they're running from bad relationships."

Scot never did say which group he thinks he belongs to.

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Away from the fever dreams, I seek out silence to hear the song of my veins in a different way; steady and throbbing, a constant hum. I've sat on the top of a dune looking out across a long expanse of sand, a frozen sea stretching to the horizon, a long stretch of sterile, empty landscape, and I've heard that same note, continuously droning on. The song of the universe, I imagine.

East of San Diego, over the mountains the desert that continues through the rest of California—and on through Arizona, New Mexico and Texas—begins. I go there often. I drive on empty highways. I poke around abandoned farm houses, trespass in burnt-out hotels and gas stations left to mummify in the dry hot air. I take photos.

There's decay and there's beauty. And there is nothing in between.

One house I visit stands alone on Old Highway 80, the southern cousin of Route 66 which used to connect San Diego to Georgia. There are piles of old food cans piled up in the corner of one room, a blue recliner still looking inviting in spite of its dust. The plaster has eroded in the walls to reveal a chicken wire foundation, rusty crisscrossed hexagons throwing interesting

shadows through the shafts of dusty sunlight. A swarm of bees has taken up residence in all the walls, building their waxy cells in between the honeycomb wires. The house vibrates with them, my biorhythms begin to give way to the hive and I throb for some time after leaving them.

Madmen and prophets have called the desert home now and forever; Moses and Christs and John the Baptists. I consider adding a fourth category to Scot's list of slab characters; the God seekers. Or maybe that is just a consequence of the other reasons for seeking refuge there. The most recognizable landmark in Slab City is Salvation Mountain, built solely by Leonard Knight, a withered and stooping 79-year-old man made up of nothing but bones. I consider Leonard to be the symbolic leader, not necessarily of all the slabbers, but at least of those who are seeking.

For the past 30 years while the desert air has dried his skin to leather, he has been painting waterfalls on a mountain of mud. Every spring, as the stench of rotting birds and fish from the Salton Sea waft into Slab City, he paints new flowers of every color on his masterpiece. On top of the mountain is the proclamation "God is Love," and this is the simple essence of his message to the world. From the peak you can catch the reflection of the Salton Sea—where people still live, eating salty tilapia and ignoring the stink of carcasses coming off the water. It's hard to say who is holy and who is mad—maybe they are all a little of both.

Leonard started his crusade to spread the message that "God is Love" in 1967, when he was in San Diego visiting his sister, a Christian who tried to teach him about Jesus. At the time Leonard wasn't religious and resisted her attempts, but one day he sat alone in his van praying "Jesus, I'm a sinner, please come into my heart" for about 20 minutes. After that, he felt transformed.

"God touched me a lot," he told me. "He got me deep in my soul. Without an education or any know-how or nothing."

After that experience he spent a decade attempting to make a huge hot air balloon that said "God is Love." Winter weather destroyed the balloon, so he set his sights on building an eight-foot monument out of cement right on the spot where Salvation Mountain now stands. He started with a single bag of cement and kept adding more and more paint and cement until he had an impressive hill. The first mountain collapsed after a storm, but unwilling to give it up, Leonard set to work building a second mountain, this time made of adobe and hay, and the precarious structure is still standing.

"Nothing worked for a long time. But I got stubborn about working for God. I want everybody to know that God loves us all. He's a universal God."

People come from all over the world to see Leonard and his mountain. He was featured in the film "Into the Wild," where he played himself and interacts with the movie version of

Christopher McCandless, who actually did visit Slab City and Leonard in 1991 before famously dying in Alaska. He doesn't do much work on the mountain these days, but he loves to give tours, hand out post cards and magnets and puzzles and tell people his message. He is humble and characterizes himself as a simple, uneducated man, but the words "prophet" and "saint" are often muttered by awestruck visitors.

The desert is the most powerful setting for messiahs—the barrenness, the closeness of death, the sense of self-sacrifice, of letting the very moisture burn out of your skin, wasting away on your bones. Heaven seems closer there, but it isn't accessible. It presses you to the burning ground.

In the month that Scot has lived on the slabs, he has been working on a mural to cover the front of his bunker. He described the overall vision; he will have a sunset fading into constellations in the sky, and in the foreground, he intends to paint the Chocolate Mountains, the purple and brown tinted mountains on the northern horizon. He even plans on painting photo-realistic representations of native plants.

"I pay close attention. I took the plants in my hand and I embedded it in my retinas, you know, exactly how the plant looks."

I imagine the bunker fading completely into the landscape, the scene matching perfectly with the reality just beyond itself. When I visited Scot, though, there was only a band of orange at the bottom and a band of blue at the top, and "Jesus Lives" emblazoned in large, red, block letters. I wondered if maybe he confused the more common "Jesus Saves" with my personal favorite "Frodo Lives," but I didn't mention this to him because he seemed very proud of bringing Jesus to a Godless and lawless community—never mind the fact that his bunker is right in sight of Salvation Mountain.

In fact, if you didn't know better you might assume that Scot's bunker mural, with its similar theme and use of color, is a continuation of Leonard's creation. Scot told me that one of Leonard's caretakers once came over to Scot's bunker to complain about what he claimed was "copycatting."

"He came out and bitched at me because I used blue and red. I couldn't change the colors of the sunset, so I don't know. I said, 'you want to do some talking at God and see if he'll change the colors of the sunset and we can do something about my desert thing.'"

Scot first heard of Slab City by learning about Salvation Mountain. His second day on the slabs, he was sitting in the hot springs and struck up a conversation with an old man there. He told him he had just arrived in town and that more than anything he was hoping to meet Leonard Knight. The old man perked up and said, "that's me!" and told Scot that it was his birthday the next day. Leonard's 79th birthday celebration was a big event for Slab City and Niland, bringing

out local newspapers and photographers. Scot made a miniature Salvation Mountain-shaped birthday cake.

Years ago Scot worked as a cake designer and caterer in Key West, Florida. He created eight foot tall food sculptures in the shapes of palm trees and Aztec warrior symbols for the grand opening of the Hard Rock Hotel in Key West, and was generally well-known and successful. He parlayed that success into a medical marijuana business in Colorado, making cannabis-infused edibles for cancer patients. Now, he imagines himself famous once again since pictures of his Salvation Mountain cake have been posted on the web. He wants to be important, and he is quick to differentiate between the work of a true artist such as himself and Leonard's "childish art."

But he also seems to care a lot about the message. Scot works closely with his church, The Haven, and regularly attends Bible studies there. He draws parallels between the lives of the slabbers and the men of the Bible.

"God sent a lot of his followers, and the people he wanted trained were sent into the desert. Like Moses. Those guys. He turned them all out into the desert. He told Abraham 'go in the desert and kill your boy.' He stopped him from that and offered a lamb instead. A lot of crazy things have been done in the name of religion. In the name of God."

I have a friend, Marisa, who came to San Diego from Phoenix. She would tell me what it meant to grow up in the desert. She told me the desert is a beautiful place, a spiritual place, but it's also a place to go to die and not much else. There, dreams die, plans fail, ambitions are forgotten. But she remembered something profoundly spiritual about the desert; it hums with energy, with life. At night you can feel it come to you from across the broad expanse of empty horizon. You can hear the machinations of the universe at work under your feet.

In a place such as this you are pushed up against yourself. Many go there seeking God. Many only find themselves. Sometimes there isn't much of a choice. In this land of nothing you have no other option but to see; your true self comes at you like an attack, because reality out there is just survival. Those who aren't able to face what they discover, destroy themselves instead. There is no other option.

Marisa focused on this point. Her speech is fast and frantic, anxiety always at the edge of her voice. She has that quality of a refugee, of still being hunted. I wonder what she found out there, what she was running from.

The threat of the desert comes not so much from real physical danger, although there is plenty of that. Wild javelinas roam the night, Gila monsters and poisonous snakes sneak into

houses, elderly residents without air conditioning die in their homes in the hundred-plus degree summers, and the ruined corpses of hikers are found days after their departure, their bodies' moisture sucked from their eyes.

Aside from the physical threats, Marisa insisted that the real threat of the desert is psychological. It's in the oppressive air that weighs you down, bringing you closer each and every day to your end. It's in living in such close proximity to death at all times; survival becomes an intensely personal and intimate matter. Pushed up against death, a person is ultimately alone, and there's nowhere you can hide from yourself.

Scot told me that people die in Slab City and in the surrounding desert everyday. He thinks the previous occupant of his bunker was an older woman who lived alone and grew plants. Scot still hasn't figured out what plants he can grow out there, but that's his next project, as soon as he completes his mural. He suspects the woman may have died before he got there. The population in Slab City swells in the wintertime when elderly "snow birds" come in from the north in expensive RVs seeking warmer climates. They soak in the hot springs when it gets chilly, and sometimes they don't make it out alive. They get disoriented and can't clamber up the steep steps to get out, or the heat of the water causes heart attacks.

Scot suspects that other deaths may have something to do with drug use, which is very common in the slabs. Some residents manufacture methamphetamines or grow marijuana and like to be left alone. On one of his first nights in Slab City, Scot experienced firsthand how dangerous some residents can be.

"They'll pull a gun on you if you go out to the wrong camp. It happened to me. I was lost! It was pitch black when I came in, there was no moon. You couldn't see your hands in front of your face or your dog. I was totally lost in the desert... And I just heard a generator. Wrong thing to do. Don't ever approach a trailer with its generator running. Because they got it running because they're growing weed."

It's not something we like to admit to often, but for all its green lawns and lush gardens, Southern California is still a desert. Summer brings that realization home all over the state. At 110 degrees only the dust moves. The air is heavy, the sun inescapable and scalding. With eyes sealed shut it bores through the skull. Even on a short walk, the compulsion is just to stop, to go no further into what seems to be a bleached out, harsh empty world.

Californians cling to the belief that we can ultimately shut out any part of the natural world that inconveniences us. Central air seals us off in our own private worlds. We steal all the water we can find to transform the land into a new Eden, and tell ourselves that this is truly the Promised Land.

In Slab City, there simply isn't the option of denying the power of nature. The most basic, animal needs occupy the minds of the residents: how to keep warm in the winter, how to keep cool in the summer, how to get food, how to get water. For Scot, who is living with Addison's disease, a debilitating disorder affecting the adrenal glands, medical care becomes another urgent necessity. Lance's main job is to look after him if he starts having convulsions. The black Labrador seems to take his duties very seriously and keeps an anxious eye on his master wherever he goes. That may also have something to do with the fact that they are both the only family the other has, and even aside from any sickness, Scot's nervous, frantic energy inspires anxiety all on its own.

Aside from Lance, the other thing keeping Scot alive is twice-daily injections of Solu-Cortef, a powerful steroid that helps regulate his adrenal gland. Once a patient has been taking a drug like Solu-Cortef for an extended period of time, it can be very dangerous to suddenly stop using it. Scot told me that without the drug he's as good as dead, which was nearly the case a few days before I first spoke to him. Early in his stay at Slab City, Scot made the mistake of loaning some money to another Slabber named JoJo. He went to collect on the debt while JoJo was talking to his friends, and he persisted even when JoJo denied owing him money.

"I said 'you all know the story.' I asked them, I said, 'Do you know this guy? Do you know the truth? Do you know the truth? Do you know the truth? There you go JoJo. You've got four people calling you a big fat liar. I'm the fifth guy, but don't take my word for it. Just look in the mirror JoJo!'"

"I turn around, start talking to one of them, and he took that cane that he walks around with, just cracked me here in the back of my neck, knocked me down on my knees, and started beating on me."

JoJo broke all of the vials of Solu-Cortef that Scot had with him in his backpack, and Scot said the local clinic doesn't carry the drug. Luckily, they do have access to a similar drug—the canine equivalent of another steroid, Prednisone, which makes Scot sick but keeps him alive until he can get a replacement of Solu-Cortef. He told me that if he lost access to either medication he wouldn't make it to the hospital, which is a two hour bus ride away to El Centro.

Even after that encounter, and with the expectation of violence that he seems to be resigned to living with, Scot said he is much happier and feeling much healthier than when he was living in Colorado. His business was successful and he said he became very well-known in the community, so much so that he felt the need to barricade himself in his house. Otherwise, people would visit him at all hours, people all needing something from him: cancer patients looking for some of his marijuana-infused soups or cheesecakes, which they could eat without

nausea and which would also combat their pain; other members of the medical marijuana business community, looking for advice on cultivation or licensing; even Congressmen, who Scot said were looking to become connected to a prominent and popular figure in the marijuana subculture. It became a regular onslaught for Scot.

"I had to barricade myself. I put up fences around and I said 'you gotta call first.' I gotta have a filter system. I laminated things on the outside, very nicely, 'Please call first if you haven't been invited.' If they were invited they knew how to open that door. There was a little trick. I had a little step ladder next to the garage and they could reach over and pull a string which lifted a latch and they could get in. If it was a friend they knew that trick and they could just come in. The door was always open on the inside. I never locked my doors."

Considering the fact that Scot dresses in a camouflage jacket and pants and lives in a bunker, I am not surprised to find out he is paranoid. But his health issues add a sense of urgency to his need to avoid stress at all costs. In addition to the constant onslaught of uninvented guests at his home, medical marijuana licensing restrictions became stricter and stricter, putting many dispensaries he worked with out of business and keeping Scot on his toes jumping through new legal hoops. Stress triggers Addisonian crisis, and Scot was regularly in and out of the hospital. During his last stay in the hospital said he was near death. He told me that he realized that it was being in the hospital was killing him because it aggravated the stress that had worsened his condition in the first place. He couldn't rest because the nurses and doctors were constantly at his bedside and he was hooked up to IVs and to electrodes that regulated his heartbeat. He lifted his shirt to show me the marks they left: circular scars across his bony, unnaturally-tanned torso.

"I couldn't sleep because they're like buzz! I couldn't take it anymore. You see the burn marks? I pulled them off. They were so mad! Oh geez, was that a room full of nurse's aides and nurses yelling at me and telling me."

"I'm like 'look, you guys are making me sick. I can feel that. I've gotta get out of here.' And I escaped. And here I am. And I'm living proof."

Proof, he said, that you can escape stress, that you can escape the rat race and find health. There isn't a cure for Addison's, but he is living with it much more successfully in his bunker, with his dog, eating free canned food from the church and drinking stale water in the middle of nowhere. His needs are real and pressing, but he has no nine-to-five; he has no bills; he has no one but Lance and the other misfits to impress. Once his needs are attended to he can spend the rest of his time memorizing plants and dreaming up a fantastic mural to rival Leonard's mountain.

I won't deny I'm jealous, in a way. This is why I return to this place again and again. My surroundings are plush and green. When I want water I open a tap. When I want light I flip a

switch. When I'm hungry I forage in my refrigerator. But I suspect I'm not the only living this modern life who yearns to have a more direct connection to the fulfillment of those needs. I also imagine what my Southern Californian home will become if the threat of global warming is fulfilled.

What if nature continues along its current course? What if this land becomes once again the desert it has always been? My precious tropical landscaping, my illusion of paradise would wither and die. The world outside my window would become yellow and brown with death and decay. Will humanity once again be ejected from the Garden, this time into a wasteland of our own making? A punishment for the original sin of the west; the denial of nature.

How will our glitz-and-glamour obsessed culture cope with being forced to face our true selves? This is a world motivated by keeping up the appearance of success, devoted to the cult of youth and beauty, willing to go under the knife to remove all the markings of age that fanatical exercise and diets still leave behind. Our goal has been to push away our true selves as much as possible, to hide the marks of time, to erase the stories of years gone by written in the lines upon our faces. Looking in the mirror, with nothing to read in our faces, we can pretend that our lives never happened. We can be new, fresh and innocent under the surgeon's knife.

But that isn't the way of the desert. This is the way: middle-aged women tend the bar in the Lazy Lizard Saloon in Ocotillo in the Anza Borrego Desert. Their faces are burned and folded, embalmed, and there's no denying the ugliness of their existence. The desert seeks you out, throws you up against yourself.

Even in the city, away from the desert, in the white hot and bleached out days of August, you can feel a sub-audible hum. The ears can't hear, but in your bones, in your stomach, it's there. The air tingles with the heat, it's charged with a different energy that sets your nerves on edge. It penetrates you and lays bare everything that you are.

Where else can we go to hide from ourselves, since California has always been the last place, the edge of the continent, the edge of the world, the last place to run to escape from your self. We might as well jump into the sea, take our sins and drown them forever with us in forgetfulness. I might just join Scot and Leonard in Slab City.

Sitting in bed listening to your heart speed up, feeling the fever burn, you feel intensely conscious of your own life pounding through your veins. To hear the humming of life is to know own death on the other side. Maybe God is in the desert. Maybe the silence of the desert just brings us closer to ourselves. Maybe there is no silence until death, and nature is silent and dead and does not speak to any man or woman.

We are such fragile, untenable beings. A whistling kettle is so easily shut off. Just remove it from the fire.