

Mikey Kerowack Brownlow in the Wild West: Nevada-Utah

Darling Breadwinner Peter,

The psychologically bloated Sir Bluey Bligmund approves of Mikey's literary endeavour despite ursine delusions of beatnik grandeur. And I quote: 'Harrumph. Let it all hang out, daddy-o.'

*Your loving wife who has nothing else to do all day but be
AFT-typist Deirdre*

Notes from author to self

1. Intro WHERE: from bed, Sturgess at my side; WHY: to regain mental stability and because
2. People might enjoy a look at the modern Wild West.
3. Is focus too diffuse? Should I scrap the whole thing and write about myself?
4. Make it descriptive. Jack Kerouac thought that's what counted most: raw experience as the essence of literature as art.
5. Delete Intro (#1 above)

I was drugged! Seriously so. Goody! It all came back: I entered the wrong door, stepping into a Chinese dry cleaner's instead of the Krispy Kreme donut shop and ended up in a back room. Opium den. Strip mall. Cut-N-Shoot, Texas.

I'll say this for Picasso and company: they had honour. No one robbed me. They just put me and my backpack in the wrong truck going the wrong way and me

being so close to New Orleans, barely ten hours' drive from that rainbow mixture of Ree-laxed people and their gumbo pot of shared sins.

Dream demons unleashed. Yes I've got them. Welcome to the ursine race. So what if my spectres dog me? That doesn't make me a criminal or any more damaged than the average bear. It gives me depth and makes me Interesting.

Early morning chased the dark down the road. No more night-time headlight chrysanthemums shooting like bowling balls past our truck. My horse-powered diablos pursued me through boring suburbs and the fumes of diesel trucks. Sage brushed my boots as Silver and I rode the fragrant West across parched arroyos. The ghouls gained on me in the back of the truck. I needed more opium to keep them at bay, yet at the same time I retained some of the clarity obtained from my first pipe session.

The driver just kept on keepin' on in the front.

A *Welcome to Nevada* sign whizzed past as I struggled upwards into consciousness from the opium haze.

Wait a minute. Arroyo? Sagebrush? *Nevada*? We were supposed to be driving through live oak trees and Spanish moss on our way to New Orleans!

I must have been unconscious at least two days! Dim memories assailed me of being hoisted onto shoulders redolent of dry cleaning fluid, carried outside past the donut shop and tossed into dark coolness, along with my little backpack.

I swivelled my head like a maniacal bobbing toy dog. Something smelled different. These weren't the familiar boxes from the trip east. No pink elephant's proboscis nudged me in the ribs. It was almost too chilly. I read a label on a nearby box and hooted with laughter.

Not only was I seeing the Wild West backwards but now I had refrigerated chicken wings for company. Not exactly the Moriarty sidekick for which an ursine Kerowack yearned.

Thoughts among the chicken wings:

1. Would the little boy to whom Mistress had given me notice my absence when they unpacked in New Orleans?
2. Was I lost forever, a wandering bearbatross in the twenty-first century?
3. Did Bluey Bligmund miss me? I felt in my waters that Master Peter was conniving to get me back, but how would he find me? I clutched my backpack for comfort.

Another road sign whizzed past too fast to read. I wriggled between cardboard boxes observing life backwards. Once again I was lucky to be in an eighteen-wheeler with a peephole to the outside world. I struggled to keep the lonesome feeling from the first leg of the journey from overpowering me. The new truckie sang exuberantly out-of-tune about all the girls he loved before. Interchangeable drivers. Same songs. Same yearning. Same love, twenty-first century-style.

Enough background. Here's another kind of love song gestated by donuts, dry cleaning fluid and chicken wings. Hot from the opium-soaked pen of Mike.

Herewith I present my literary efforts. Please be gentle. Don't forget I'm trapped in a prison of my own making necessitated by early survival issues.

Nevada used to be known for nuclear testing, no state tax and legalised gambling and prostitution. A desert of wild horses, wild burros, wild women, and hard men. One of those men was The Desert Watcher. He had a past.

No early morning Nevada scented now, no dung, no sweet earth after a hard rain, no sagebrush tickled your legs and your horse's haunches, no daytime dust in your nose. The Desert Watcher's mind smelled the other Nevada, the night-time one down the road a'ways: cigarette smoke swirling through air conditioning vents; round-the-clock

bacon, eggs, hash browns and toast; the sweet sweat of sex; the dependent dread of the next throw of the dice.

And pigs. The Desert Watcher inhaled. Maybe it was time to feed One-Eyed Bessie again. He wondered not for the first time how she'd lost her left eye.

The slammer in Utah changed him, the high security one where they gave him a new identity. He didn't know which is worse: being locked up or being free.

At least at the prison he saw the barbed wire, the electrified fences, the dusty earth bare of trees, shrubs and flowers for half a mile around, the solid door that dragged shut on him with a thud.

The only thing that reached to the sky was the guard tower.

Codes, passwords, keys to get in, keys to get out and keys to move around inside: they clawed down to the depths

Baked beans, cheap burgers, wilted lettuce and weak coffee: you were never quite sure which gourmet delicacy the cook had spat into that day. Protein and seasoning they called it, those punks with hairnets and tattoos. You always dreamt of the food you'd eat on the outside, but it was a different matter when you had to cook it yourself. Now he fed himself cans of baked beans, cheap take-out burgers and strong coffee.

The wailing wind had sunk to a moan. The Desert Watcher heard his Bess snuffling underneath the living room window. Only he knew the truth about the bureaucrat who bothered him. He didn't like people and he especially didn't like bureaucrats, not after what happened. This one showed up unannounced and did not return home for his dinner. People whispered that he fed the Fed to his one-eyed pig and companion.

If he had known what was in store for him, would he have turned informer back in Jersey? The Desert Watcher asked himself that a lot. He

was fed up with his life: a wife with an excuse never to have sex, always wanting more money, greedy kids who were never happy, always wanting more money and odd jobs that never amounted to much, for a boss he never saw that never paid enough.

One night he was in the wrong place at the right time and ended up with information to sell. The Feds were the highest bidder, so a little more money came his way, enough to keep the kids from petty crime and the wife at his side, asleep. By now he didn't love any of them anymore. He just wanted peace and quiet on the home front.

Now he had more of that than he could handle. Witness Relocation Program. What a laugh. They didn't tell you that you'd be sent to a maximum security prison until things blew over. Word travelled fast and the other inmates ostracised you. They made life miserable in little ways, worse than his wife and kids, something he never thought'd happen. He didn't hesitate when the Feds finally asked him where he wanted to get lost. As far away from my fellow man as possible, he told them. He hadn't been that decisive since he asked his wife to marry him.

And they did: one thousand acres of prime desert scrub in the middle of nowhere. Lotta land, he'd said. Not really, not in your position, they'd replied. Just stay outta trouble. We'll check up on your sometimes.

All his life the Desert Watcher managed to hold on to a code of honour that kept him out of prison. Lord knows it wasn't easy, but being unincarcerated meant something to him. His old man had been in and out of the slammer his entire childhood. Never anything much, just robbery, which he justified by saying that he wasn't doing anything worse than those fatcats on Wall Street, but they had their sharp lawyers. Maybe that was true, but he still wanted his daddy home at Christmas. Never happened. If his old man wasn't behind bars he was out with the boys, anywhere but

with his woman and son. His mother Managed — a word on which she placed great emphasis and pride — and always told him to keep out of prison. He did that, for Mama. Then they made prison his first stop in a new life for no crime at all other than trying to take care of his family and their never-ending needs.

Nevada gave The Desert Watcher plenty of time to think. He had no one to talk to but One-Eyed Bess and he liked it that way, most of the time. He'd never planned to turn informer. It just happened. His wife threw away his favourite old *Playboy* magazine, the one he kept hidden in the dresser on his side of the bed, under the Louis L'Amour westerns and the tissues. When he confronted her, she said she was fed up with having it in her bedroom year after year. Why didn't he treat himself to a new one? Yeah, well, you may be sick of that but I'm sick of you, and besides, those girls were like old friends. Those were his last words to his wife of twenty-one years, the last intimate interaction he had with anyone.

He never thought he'd miss her. And he didn't, not really, just sometimes he had a hankering for her tuna casserole. She didn't do anything a wife wasn't supposed to, like nag about money, and always have headaches at night, and never be happy with the way a man was. Every husband he ever knew told the same story. Those were just the things you put up with, the price of gettin' what you needed now and again.

Sometimes he thought of calling to say hello. But it'd been too long now. She'd probably remarried and wouldn't want his ghost dirtying up her life. And she'd be old now. Her face and figure were poised on the brink of collapse when he left. He didn't want to have to pretend to find her attractive, not that he was any catch himself, but it was different for men, everyone knew that.

Lin missed his boy, though. Did he ever wonder what happened to his old man? God knew how his wife was poisoning the boy, a drop at a time, day after day, year after year. It added up, to a son who hated his father. The worst part was that he was doing to his own son what his father did to him, something he vowed would never happen.

Maybe just one little phone call ...

No, the Fed'd warned him he'd have days like this. He just had to ride it out like the alcoholics do, but he didn't have anyone to call.

His wife and son were the least of his worries. Those people he informed on, were they still looking for him? If so, they'd probably find him and fix him, like they threatened. Sometimes loneliness overtook him and he almost wished they would.

The Desert Watcher looked in the hall mirror. His new face still startled him. Oh, they didn't do much, just a little around the nose and eyes — nothing that cost them much money. He had no illusions about his worth. And they shot him full of an experimental drug, something that affected his liver and made his face and skin yellow all the time. He saw an A1 set of vertical wrinkles rimming his eyes and forehead like ivory spokes on an antique oriental fan. Too much squinting in the summer sun without sunglasses, but he'd always hated those things. A hat should be enough for a man.

Three large veins ran down his forehead, the middle one straight down the centre into his nose. His jaw and chin were smooth. Only around the eyes had time invaded. They were still as blue, with long, dark lashes — wasted on a man, his wife said in their courting days — and he still had most of his hair, except for a bald spot at the crown that spread like seaweed on the sand.

This name they gave him: Lin Boggs. They had fun with that in the slammer. He'd always wanted a cowboy name and a face to go with it. As for the lifestyle, he wouldn't mind a little company. This was the real cowboy life, the lonely one they didn't talk about much in the movies or songs, 'cept Waylon singing 'bout the cowboy misery of bein' alone too long.

Maybe he'd say yes to that request from his buddy in the slammer in Utah. The Feds warned him, but so what? It was their fault he was in this mess.

The Desert Watcher rattled the front door, making sure it was locked. He passed the hall mirror again, which trapped a set of headlights in the black night.

If he peered hard enough down the road and into his imagination, The Desert Watcher could see the Beaumonts in the casino, originally from Iowa but now retired to a small town in Utah. Les and Ida Beaumont uprooted to be close to her big brother, who was warden of the highest security prison in the West, stuck way out in the middle of nowhere.

Ida had a broad face and wide forehead, with eyes set deep inside a highway of wrinkles. The blue rinse in her frizzy hair made her eyes dance in certain lights. A lot of years of baking what she was famous for had given her love handles extraordinaire. She may not look like a supermodel, but Les said — a little too often — that he was lucky, there was more of her to love. And love her he did. When Les bought an anniversary card, he thought of good cookin' and the wasteland of good lovin'.

Les was not often seen in local Walmart, rough eyes and dented fingers wandering over Hallmark hearts and glitter. He was too busy driving. The truckie life had kept him lean all over, from his long face to his

narrow feet. Two deep furrows dragged down the sides of his mouth to his jaw. His hair was flat and sparse above the rimline of his hat and bushy and strong below it.

Ida was always ready with a cup of coffee. You felt her hospitality as soon as you unlatched the chainlink gate and walked past the massive Winnebago — the biggest one they made — parked in the driveway, like the ones that always blocked your way on a highway hill. Two pink rose bushes, a few marigolds and lots of bright red flowers in plastic pots led you to Ida's back door. Nobody used the front door except somebody with something to sell or a soul to save.

Any afternoon any time of the year you showed up, Ida would serve you a piece of Americana: chocolate-covered, peanut butter-filled Ritz crackers. They tasted better than they sounded.

Here is her recipe.

Ida's Famous Chocolate-Covered Peanut Butter-Filled Ritz Crackers

Melt some chocolate and dip into it two Ritz crackers held together by a thick layer of peanut butter, crunchy or plain, your choice. Let them harden on a piece of waxed paper. Ida uses white baking chocolate, but if you cannot find that, then use regular baking chocolate, which works just fine.

Les and Ida drove their motorhome to Vegas twice a year — slowly, they didn't need to hurry anymore — once with Les's old Army buddy and his wife from Indiana and once just the two of them. They always stopped to see their son and his family, who lived on the way.

Near Les and Ida playing the one-armed bandit, the Desert Watcher's imagination saw Ingrid Larsen, the animal activist from the rodeo on television earlier, waddle past the Beaumonts on her way to the ladies' room. If he followed her, the Desert Watcher would see her lean into the

mirror. Only when her face was so close she steamed it up did Ingrid remove her glasses — no-nonsense and tough, like their owner.

She led with her chin and examined the face in neat little rows, like squares on graph paper. She was prospecting for changes but came up empty this time.

Inky, short for Ingrid, escaped from the green and rainy Midwest to parched and bleak Nevada, where people insisted on being left alone, unlike her home state, an interfering place where everyone was his brother's keeper. Inky was a water rights lawyer who wished she'd become a veterinarian. She preferred horses to people trying to squeeze every drop from their neighbours.

Mirror inspection of nose. Tiny. Fine-boned. Inky centred glasses on nose bridge and strode back to the casino.

'What do you think, Sturgie?' Mikey Kerowack asked. 'Should I follow my muse through the Wild West or throw these opium-soaked scribblings into the nearest dumpster and eat donuts with the truck driver? Honest answer, if you can drag your mind away from your perennially reascended genitals.'

Sturgess: 'I'm all for anarchy.'

'And you, Bluey?'

'Harrumph Carry on.'

We left the Desert Watcher beginning nightly ablutions in the hallway. He was thinking about his son again. Had the boy taken after him and turned out tall and lean? Lin Boggs was unprepared for the shortness of cowboys. Back in Jersey, if anyone had asked him, he'd have described the average cowboy as six feet tall, lean and wiry, with leathery skin and a big grin. Gary Cooper. A thousand anonymous stuntmen.

Short, bandy legs, a beer belly and yellow, rotting teeth never occurred to him. Nor did a liquid laugh followed by a coughing fit that necessitated lighting another cigarette. Such was Bill Easton, the sleeping passenger in the pick-up passing the Boggs place.

If Euliss Grimes, the driver of the truck whose headlights were trapped in the black night, were looking, he'd see a scrawny man moving stiffly down an empty hall toward a barely-furnished bedroom.

Euliss Grimes was headin' home after Market Day in Nevada. He didn't usually come so far, but this time a whole pack of reasons nudged him along. Maybe his wife had something when she talked about converting to organic beef. Those buyers today didn't think it was such a lunatic idea. Euliss the compulsive talker was telling his life story again, to himself since his passenger was asleep.

Euliss began cowboyin' when he was thirteen, helping his father drive one hundred head of cattle through Mistake Creek. He spent the next thirty years among cattle, horses, dogs, pigs, the men who tend them and the men who feed them. Euliss always liked breaking horses. He broke over a thousand head, from Shetland ponies to draught horses, and he'd still be doing it now except that his forty-one-year-old right hip had been fractured by a frisky mare.

So he got himself married eleven years back to a rancher's daughter down at Black Rock.

His discontent finally settled, like something that'd been simmering so long it finally boiled dry. Or maybe it was worn out of him from worrying about his boy, his ten-year-old son, who'd recovered miraculously from a brain tumour. They have just the one boy, the only child of the last of the line.

Euliss was spelling his cousin, the Texas cowboy catnapping in the passenger seat. As Bill dozed, his boots keep sliding along the hay and empty beer cans on the floor. His legs were too short to give him a solid grip.

Euliss paused in his tale to observe, 'We're passing the Boggs place, Billy. He's the one they say got that hungry pig.'

Bill grunted in his sleep, dreaming of a Guernsey bull on a sunny Idaho day. It was a good, clean ride until he let up at the end and went flying. Last thing he remembers was a big horn coming down and a blinding pain in his side.

Bill was on his way back to the prison in Utah, where he ran the Wild Horse-Inmate Program. He liked to joke that he cracked the WHIP. The job offer came at a good time. Being around horses was all he knew, and all he wanted to know.

'Hey cousin, wake up,' Euliss said, jabbing Bill with his elbow. 'You're having yourself some nightmare.'

'Riding bulls,' Bill mumbled. 'Can't do it no more. The ground keeps getting closer and harder and the competition keeps getting younger and meaner, and I got myself a family now.'

'Those horses you're breaking at the prison.'

'You mean the ones that belong in the wild.'

'We agreed to disagree on that, remember?' Euliss said. 'Do you want us to starve? Have to sell out 'cause a what they do to the land?'

'I'll tell you what, Euliss,' Bill said, still half asleep. 'There's room on the range for everybody. I remember when we was growing up you felt them hooves thundering a mile off.'

'I went out on a limb to get you this job, Billy. Don't blow it.'

'If this job's so great, why ain't you doin' it? I can think of plenty other ways to occupy my time.'

'You know why I quit. The old lady squawked too much. Wanted me closer to home.'

'You mean you missed your nookie.'

'You always was an ill-mannered son-of-a-bitch,' Euliss said. 'I oughtta tell Frank to can your ass.'

Mikey: 'How'm I doing for veracity of dialect?'

Bluey: 'Swearing lowers the tone, Mike. Lift your game.'

Sturgess: 'Don't be so stuffy, dog. Bring it on, Mikey!'

If buddyin' up to some moustache-twirling warden goes with the territory, I wish you would.'

'What's botherin' you, Bill?'

The cowboy sniffed under his arms, something he'd been doing only since he met Denise. She told him to save this shirt for the meeting tomorrow, but he felt like wearing it and today was a scorcher. 'I got to attend some bureaucratic meeting in Salt Lake with the Feds and the state boys. Couldn't get out of it.'

Bill hit the dashboard with his fist. 'Some jackasses'll be there, like Steve Kazinsky. They put him on the horse program as supervisor, and he ain't never even seen the back of a wild horse. Then I got to hurry back to the horse program to get ready for this lady journalist they got coming.'

'It's a job.'

'Yeah, well, they won't insure me and it's makin' Denise wild.'

'I'll bet.'

'She keeps askin' what'll happen if one of those cons causes me to have an unpleasant encounter with the ground from the back of a horse. It'd be alright if they'd just leave me alone with the cons and the horses, let me do my job in peace, instead of all this other bullshit.'

'Don't do anything stupid.'

'Frank may be your friend but he's a lousy boss. All he cares about is results with honour. Feel like I'm in the frigging military.'

'What's wrong with wanting success?'

'Nothing, man, but at the expense of the animals?' Bill ran his tongue over dirty teeth.

'Like I said, just don't do anything stupid.'

'You know better'n that.'

'Just watch it, Bill.'

The cowboy drifted back into half-sleep and dreamt of riding that Guernsey.

Euliss fiddled with the radio. Reception was patchy. An oldies station came and went. He craned forward to see the starry moonless sky, one eye on the road, arms curled around the grimy black steering wheel.

Euliss was going home. When he arrived tomorrow night, he knew his wife will have all the lights on, every last one, because when she was a child her mother never let her leave a light on for when Daddy came home, which he sometimes did. Euliss looked forward to rounding the last curve in the road and seeing the house blazing and blinking against the black velvet hills. The kitchen table was always crowded with warm food. Emily fed him rabbit food — as he called her health food — but that was okay. He'd stop on the way for a burger hors d'oeuvre and roll down the windows to air out the car in case she ran out to greet him.

No doubt about it, Euliss loved his Emily. But he missed the old days. One last round-up and he'd die a happy man. Just one more.

As dawn's pink and silver fingers grab the midnight blue sky:

Euliss steered through the long miles and glanced at his passenger and cousin Bill Easton, who was snoring, still dreaming about a bull.

The Desert Watcher shifted painfully in his sleep, awoke groggily and groped his way to the bathroom, revolver and pain pills in the top drawer, bedroom, hideout, Witness Relocation Program.

Bessie the one-eyed pig kept watch outside his bedroom window, nose to the ground. She'd become more nocturnal because of the heat, and she was hungry now.

Les and Ida made their tired way back to the trailer park. Les's left hand rested on Ida's left love handle and a little less silver jingled in their pockets. Inky went home to the ranch and a cheatin' husband she hoped would be there and hoped would not. Good thing their youngest had left home last year.

If the Desert Watcher could see inside the toughest prison in the West — the one that Ida's brother ran when he wasn't eating her Ritz crackers dipped in chocolate and hardened on wax paper — he'd recognise a lost kid damned from birth, his only friend a wild horse.

'This is where you lose me, Mike,' said Bluey Bligmund the editor. 'Why bring in more characters? Develop the ones you've got.'

'Follow your heart,' Sturgess retorted.

Bobby Slopes opened his eyes on two bars. Many bars. Too many bars. He arose shivering to urinate in a basin. Morning ritual: Bobby looked

down, holding his penis with a heavily tattooed forearm. He had to stand about as far from the basin as most men. A few drops strayed to the rim, joining congealed golden mates — not that it mattered, they're all men here, no women to complain. One more look down and he blocked out recent memories of what happened when they took him out of solitary.

The first chilly mornings of autumn brought to mind dusty summer days bookending warm starry nights. He'd spent his entire life among these cold Utah mornings, mostly in a small town about five hours' drive away, on a windy plateau with a Spanish name. He hoped he never had to go back there. So did the townspeople, including his mother.

'Stop playin' with yourself, Slopes!' the guard yelled through the bars. He saw short sparse blond hair above a weak neck atop a narrow back supported by unexpectedly fat buttocks protecting a prison treasure. Bobby's pale blue eyes and twenty-six-year-old face should be out pumping gas in the local service station. No sharp intelligence moulded his face, only soft daubs of stub nose and tiny teeth like two rows of stunted kernels on a devoured corncob. This was the face of murder. One of them.

Bobby thought about a grey stallion, and about time. He was sick of being cooped up in his cell just because Bill Easton was away until tomorrow. Bobby's grey stallion was one of fifty trucked in last week from the mountains of Nevada. Bobby and some other cons were learning to break them, as the cowboys said, or tame them, as the animal activists insisted.

One more day of bad men and their sour smells. One more lunch and dinner, then he'd be out with his grey. He'd do one more night easy: television and a good wank, then up fresh and sassy to a bright cold autumn morning.

As for the other guys on the wild horse program, they could do what they liked. Bobby didn't care, as long as they left him and his stallion alone.

Back in Nevada, The Desert Watcher was eating breakfast with the television newscaster. Maybe he'd take the pick-up truck and check the boundary fencing around his thousand acres. He hadn't done that in a while. His pig Bessie snuffled outside.

Euliss Grimes hid in his shed, furtively devouring a salami sandwich before breakfast. He exhaled with his mouth open and fanned his breath with an experienced right hand. His son knocked at the door, rattle rattle, but Euliss pretended he wasn't there.

Animal lover Inky paced her office, devouring M&Ms. She knew the rap. It went like this:

- The warden loved the program because it wore out his cons, who were too tired to make trouble in their cells after a day with the horses.
- The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Federal Government agency that paid wranglers to catch and transport the horses from federal land to several state prison systems, loved the program because it received much-needed good press: inmates tame horses to make them adoptable by the general public, which generally meant starter horses for children.

- Disciplinarians loved it because it showed that everyone can obey orders: if the inmates did not do what the wrangler told them, they might end up with a broken neck, or worse.
- Prison reformers asserted that bonding with other living creatures rehabilitated prisoners, thereby lowering the recidivism rate.
- Television and magazine editors loved it because their readers devoured heartwarming animal stories. They all sent their journalists to do the same story: wild men tame wild horses.
- Or is it the other way around?

Yes, Inky knew the score. She doubted lady writers with stars in their eyes. Reminded her of her youngest daughter. Had she been too busy with her newly resurrected career to heed what the girl was saying about the father/husband? Bastard.