

## Rod Beal

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CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

End of April, Oregon coast. Route 101: Setting out from Gold Beach heading for Brookings and beyond. Night spent in colorless, chaste Motel 6 situated in the woods overlooking where the Rogue enters the Pacific. Wake to a sort of Zen dreariness. Rain all night, wind, loud drumming on the windows.

In the morning I survey the downed branches strewn across the parking lot, the debris on the roof of my car. I'm one of last to leave. No rush. I drop my key off and go. Leave the lookout point and ease back down onto 101. No traffic.

Sky beginning to clear, with a low ceiling of gray, spindle clouds. Gazing at the sky is claustrophobic, like finding myself in a small pup tent sagging in a night rain. Glimpses of the ocean beyond the estuary wake me and get my motor going.

Coming up a rise, in the bike lane ahead, I see a heap of wet laundry slowly grinding toward the top, one foot in front of the other. I slow down and ease over. Open the passenger-side door. He shuffles up and grunts. Maneuvers his knapsack off his back. I can smell him — moldiness mixed with vodka.

I look at what I imagine to be his face beneath the watch cap and the black hoodie covering. Can see nothing but his dun-colored brow and brown whiskers and curls from the cap and the reflection of clouds in the thick lenses of his taped glasses. It was like looking in a mirror.

"Have a seat," I say. He does just that, no difficulty, letting out a groan after setting his knapsack in the well of the front seat.

"I'll leave the window cracked," he says. No need, I tell him; not to worry.

for vodka. But everywhere wasn't as accommodating as Hood River.

"You smell like 'Blue Label,'" I told him. He jumped on that. If I knew Blue Label, I was all right by him. And he opened up. Told me his whole life story. A warp; he looked like something from the beginning of the last century. Before that, even! Like Huck Finn refracted through the American Century (such as it was). I've had time to think about what he shared with me, and I believe it was about as good a representation of an American loner, an American floater, in these times of the failing, flailing American Dream, where the same suckers fight The Man's wars and cling to the myth and delusion of American exceptionalism, and won't know from nothing about being on the road. I felt, in short, that I was in the presence of greatness (after a fashion).

But really, Rod Beal was merely a messenger of things to come. View of the future from the very bottom.

He said the edge of Brookings would do, wherever he could do some canning. I could drop him off there.

I said I'd done some major canning back not that long ago. Paid my way with this fella back in the '80s who drove me from Atlanta to Jacksonville. I paid my way by bumming change wherever we stopped. Truck stops and shopping malls off the interstate. Since I wasn't one of the familiars, people tended to be generous. That change paid for the gas and food, and we drove non-stop. Quite a trip. He was an old Marine, this one, and he was going to find his old lady to start up another thriff

store. They had had success going around buying from the drunks who took donations at the Goodwill sites. Five or 10 bucks would get a lot of clothes. They then had rented a cheap storefront and filled it with these clothes, selling them on the cheap. Made out good.

It had been several years now since they got busted and he left town. He knew the cop who got him and he knew he was close to retirement, so it seemed likely that cop would be long gone when he got back to start up the enterprise again. He was willing to take the chance, if he could find his old lady. She'd been the brains of the operation. "I've been in JAX," Rod Beal said. "Spent a month in their jail."

I spent a week there in '83 when that guy drove me down and dumped me after I'd paid for the whole trip. He promised me there were fishing boats looking for workers. But all I found was a lot of locals looking for work and resenting the Hell out of outsiders taking that work. I have a ridge on the side of my skull from where this fella blindsided me and kicked me in the head.

He'd been from Maine to the Keys on the Eastside. "You know that movie with Tom Selleck and Jamie Lee Curtis? Where she escapes on that seven-mile bridge down there? I road my bike on that bridge!"

Damn, I said. I missed that one. Jamie Lee Curtis? Saw her in an ad for something-

Depends, or some goo for hemorrhoids. Can't remember.'

He said he'd missed that. He was still seeing her on that bridge.

Said riding his bike up and down the coasts, that trip across that bridge in the Keys was scary but a rush. He said, however, there was nothing scarier than crossing that bridge from Astoria over the Columbia River right here in Oregon. Blue Label or no Blue Label.

I said I could imagine.

"Yep. I spent the winter in Hood River. Lost my bike. My glasses. Everything I needed, gone. Stayed there till a week ago. One day it was warm out and the clouds had disappeared. I left."

He wanted to go to the Olympics again, then down to Seattle and Tacoma. Get a ride one way or another. He didn't have a bike this time out, but the hitching had always been easy 'til he got close to L.A. He hadn't counted on the rain and cold though.

Who's gonna pick up the Green Man straight out the forest, with the leaves and needles still stuck in his hair? He was indeed a heap; his wet clothes looked like foliage, a leaf pile.

As Rod Beal rehearsed his story, one he'd told many times I'm sure, it became obvious that his whole life was about moving on. No roots, no predictability, just constant moving. When he was ten it was a step up for him to get into foster care. Up to that point, he went with his mother, whom he loved and who still lived down in Santa Monica. Her life was always there in Santa

and hauled him all the way back to Santa Monica by plane. Shackled the whole way. I never pursued the fact that he spent a lot of time as a fugitive from justice for a guy who never bothered anybody, who had "never become a career criminal" — something he was obviously proud of, even if a lie. He just wanted to stick to his side of the road.

But in fact, his life was a chain of inconsistencies. His wife was waiting for him back in Santa Monica. As was his long-time stepdad toward whom Rod Beal by now directed some notes of being loved and missed. Rod Beal seemed forever to be leaving home and longing to return. But what home did he have in mind?

So he was quiet now. But only for a moment. He went on but never seemed to mention anyone besides his family, such as it was. He didn't know his birth father and had nothing to say about his mother's previous husbands before "the one that took." He didn't talk much about his wife after the incident he "didn't do" that would him up in jail. His life story was honed and something of an idyll but at the same time it didn't add up. Except in the sense that such a chaotic, removed existence must have produced in him a sort of fantasy state, an alcoholic bubble where everything connected. Everything in the Blue Label sunlight sublime made sense. And was beguiling to whoever gave him a ride. In exchange for the ride, he produced his story. It was taken for granted. It was all he had to give. He deposited it as mechanically as feeding the fare to the open mouth of a TriMet bus.

It seemed as though Rod Beal didn't trust being at rest, or stability, or pursuing and

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"Where you heading?"

"Santa Monica. Or anywhere south you're heading."

"I can get you to Brookings."

"That'll do. I know my way around Brookings."

"Well, when we get there, just let me know where you want off."

The ride was roughly an hour, with very little traffic or distraction. He said his name was Rod Beal. Been a roader for years. He was 53. Just lived for getting a bike that was sturdy enough and a 12-pack of malt liquor — Olde English the preference — and hitting the road. Had been all over the country. Covered all of it, he said, in decades since he was small. "Top to bottom and side to side."

Came up from Santa Monica last Fall heading to the very tip of the Olympic Peninsula and eastward to Maine and up that coastal highway which he'd done a few times but not enough, then down South as the weather got colder.

But someone ripped off his bike and gear in Hood River. Then he lost his glasses. "I'm blind without my glasses." Then, a friendly cop told him about an interfaith coalition that provided overnight shelter. The churches switched off week to week.

So, Rod decided to spend the winter on the Columbia. Canning for "redeemables," snagging for pocket change, diving for whatever and staying warm and dry. The winter days had a similarity, he says. Good to have a shelter to get out of that stuff when night fell.

A week ago, he left Hood River and headed for Santa Monica. But his trip had been roughly a week long by now and the rain had done a number on him. He was OK as long as he could find cans and get money