

Oakley was a Norman Rockwell painting. And like most small towns Frank had visited, there was a supermarket on the main drag.

He swung into the parking lot of Bob's Ideal Market and steered the wagon into a slot. There was plenty of room. He got out of the car, surprised how stiff he was, and went into the store. There he grabbed a large Styrofoam cup of coffee and two pieces of fried chicken and some deep-fried potato quarters from the deli, the scent of the greasy treats too tantalizing to resist.

Getting back to the car, his stomach now a little queasy from road coffee, cigarettes and no food, he put the potatoes in his cooler for later and grabbed a chicken thigh.

He sipped the coffee and took a bite of the greasy chicken and gazed out the car window at the comings and goings of the locals. Then for no apparent reason the anxiety started up again and he didn't feel like moving quite yet so he reached into the back seat and grabbed the little going-away-gift box that hippie boy Keith Waverly had given him back in Zenith.

He lifted out the two dog-eared paperbacks.

One was an old Raymond Chandler novel, *The Little Sister*, which Frank suspected was Waverly's off-handed comment on the adventures in Frank's recent past. The other one, *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac, was a famous book Frank knew about but had never read, and was probably Waverly's comment on Frank's current situation.

And immediate future, Frank was thinking as he put the Chandler novel back in the box and turned back the wrinkled cover of the late Jack Kerouac's claim to fame.

He looked at the copyright.

1957.

Twenty years ago.

He started to read.

Once he adjusted to the scattershot prose it seemed to sync with his discordant mind and bring on some form of calm. Got him feeling like he was sitting placidly in a giant egg cup. A strange image, for sure, but that's exactly what he felt like, that's what came to him.

He read for an hour straight, looking up only occasionally to glance at the old pickups and dusty sedans going by on Main Street, USA.

Story so far was about a bunch of people under the age of thirty traveling across the country on the cheap, doing a lot of drinking and drugs. And sex, if they could get it.

Basically turning dissipation into a religion.

The Beat Generation. Predecessors to the hippies.

Story took place in 1947. Thirty years ago....

The characters kind of reminded Frank of the crowd he'd spent the last ten years serving drinks to at the Metropole Lounge in Zenith, Minnesota. And if that place wasn't the heart of the American night, he didn't know what was.

But Frank was hard pressed to find much wisdom or universal truths from his days at the Metro, unlike the characters in the book, who seemed to readily extract profundities from their own similar experiences.

Frank guessed things just looked different from the working side of the bar.

But the book made letting your wild side out sound fun and exciting. And now Frank had a craving for beer. And there were two more black beauties remaining in Waverly's gift box.

He could swallow one down, get back in the groove and drive all night, be like those crazy, sad bastards in the book.

And damn near to California by tomorrow morning.

But shit, that wasn't going to cut it. Along with the fuel supply problems, thoughts of being alone on the freeway in the middle of the night and having the Hater come back on center stage were turning him cold. It could really get dark at night out here in the West, even on a freeway.

His life was already dark enough without adding to the blackness, he thought. And he was just too burnt for another all-nighter, the accumulated stress of the last few months choosing now to turn him inside out and sideways.

But the book did give him an idea.

Kerouac's protagonist, Sal Paradise, was on his own journey to California, and made his first prolonged stop in the city of Denver, with the purpose of looking up an old friend and possibly scrounging some cash for the remainder of his journey.

Frank also had a friend in Denver, an old high school buddy, former Arizona Amateur Tennis Champion Larry Richards. Who, the last Frank had heard, was now a divorce lawyer in Denver, allegedly raking in the cash hand over fist, divorce a growing concern in 1977.

Frank possessed adequate funds and could afford a place to crash if necessary, so that separated him from Sal Paradise. But he was craving rest, recreation, fun and excitement—without any fear attached—and Denver was only an inch away on the map.

So...