

## PAGOSA SPRINGS

I gradually made my way from Chicago to Denver. A kind hippie a few years older than me picked me up in Sterling, Colorado and put me up at his place in Denver for the night. In the morning, he dropped me off on a ramp for Interstate 25, headed south for Pueblo. As I stood there with my new sign, a trucker rolled slowly up the ramp. When he saw me, his face turned purple with rage and he stuck his face into the windshield and shook his fist at me. Some folks just don't like hitch-hikers.

By lunch I'd made it to Pueblo and headed west again on U.S. Highway 160. It was slow going, a lot of short rides with farmers in the back of their pickups, but pretty soon I reached the eastern gateway to Wolf Creek Pass. Wolf Creek Pass is a high mountain pass that crosses the continental divide. A narrow two-lane roadway lined with boulders and cliffs winds and twists its way up, past deep ravines and canyons. As I was standing there figuring out what to do next, a man strode out of the liquor store with a six-pack of Coors beer under his arm and climbed into an aging, pale green pickup. I walked over and asked him for a lift. He said "Sure." And I hopped in.

Pete was a ranger with the Park Service, and he lived in a cabin up on top of the the pass. As we climbed toward the summit, he made colorful small-talk about particularly tight turns where people lost it and flew down the sides of the canyons, or where overhanging rocks jutted out just far enough to occasionally split open the sides of a truck like a can opener and spills its goods all over the road. To punctuate his stories he would point to the bottom of the occasional steep cliff where the wrecks of cars and trucks still lay slowly decomposing amidst the dust and the snow and the rain.

As we rolled along, Pete would occasionally pause his narrative to ask me to open another can of beer. I obliged, and his driving style became more and more fluid as we approached the top. When we got there, we stopped at his cabin to unload supplies and listen to the shortwave radio. Since there was nothing immediately pressing, he decided to drive me down the other side to Pagosa Springs. If the ride up had been thrilling, the ride down was downright scary. He'd driven that road so many times that he knew exactly how fast he could take each turn, and the tires squealed and gripped as we made our way down the other side.

When we got to Pagosa Springs, Pete put me out on the road, and I thanked him as he turned and headed back up the mountain. When he was out of sight, I bent down and kissed the ground.