

Flaneur: A Memoir

by [Carl Nelson](#) (February 2020)



The Hitchhiker, Alan R. Pearson, 1960s

When you are a *flaneur* by nature, it can be difficult question as a youth to describe what it is one wants to become—even to oneself. A flaneur is certainly not a recognized profession. In fact, it is mostly regarded as a diversion from the hard question itself. But one begins where one can. I began where anyone would have to begin with any pursuit—by finding the time. Not that I did this consciously, but rather along a

Darwinian imperative that if we persist, our nature will accomplish everything eventually. Mine has.

Perhaps I did not exorcise the bohemia from my nature fully as a child. Our family was a very pragmatic one. There was no music, art or literature in the home. Letting one's mind wander left you out there, as prey. If you sat out in the open, either reading a book or just fiddling, our mother would assign us one of her many tasks, as she was constantly 'on the go'.

Rather than hightailing it on my graduation from high school, I went to college. You might think, considering my nature, that the former might present the better opportunity to gambol. But I would guess most flaneurs by nature are not assertive and are drawn with the crowds to the boulevards. In fact, their currents interest me. Then I signed up for the pre-med path.

You might not think this would offer an opportunity either. (For an expansion on this opinion you might read Pg. 151 of *The Dutch House* for a rendering therewith by author Ann Patchett.) But the option had several elements going for it. I had this belief that I would learn worlds about people through medicine. Near all of my family and relatives were engineers, so that the human element was a vast mystery. And a doctor is a bit like an engineer, employing physics and science for people. My parents were very happy to anticipate having a doctor in the family. And I found I was generally left alone to study by my peers and any other inquisitor, which was the clincher. They admired my 'dedication'. So, in retrospect, this was a reasonable channel down which a budding metaphysician might drift.

It was rather like being a dilettante on sinecure, though with a quite hefty payment plan. If I did the strenuous rowing then I was able to drift as I wished. This was my arrangement. But, isn't this the way of the world? The novice

monk cuts wood and hauls water. Afterwards, the sage hauls water and cuts wood. When you chase enlightenment—which, as I was later to apprehend, is not exactly what flaneurs do—mundane tasks are necessary to the quest. For a flaneur, chasing wisdom would characterize their endeavor too practically and too constructively. Rather, they sniff around, rather like bloodhounds, investigating for the pleasure of surprise and the occasional epiphany.

To quote Leonard Cohen, “a scheme is not a vision.” He doesn’t mention experience as important to vision, but it’s important, too. And neither does he mention ballooning payments. The third year of medical school, the book learning transitioned to clinical practice. The rubber met the road, and I didn’t transition well. Medical students were not initially expected to practice much clinical medicine, and so my ineffectiveness did not manifest itself straightaway. But, whereas the knowledge I accumulated I could make sense of—the notion that anything I learned could be used by me to heal was emotionally implausible, personally laughable. And so I majored in good relations and harbored in empathy, which in the 70s was all the rage. I was certainly more comfortable chatting with people than healing them. And since neither the patient nor I particularly liked their condition, we often found each other enabling.

In dermatology clinic, I missed the basal carcinoma growing like a wart right on the end of the patient’s nose. I had glanced at the thing from out of the corner of my eye, while chatting. But to have drawn attention to the barnacle-sized thing by examining it would have seemed insensitive.

Another patient and I had been having great rapport when the attending doctor stopped to talk to me about her spiking glucose. He gave me a gift she had wanted to hand me and then he said, “Do you realize you almost killed her?” This was sobering.

Sometime later, while chatting up another patient, the insight suddenly struck me. "She doesn't want a friend," I realized. "She is sick and wants to get well." Now there was an epiphany! It was rather like Saint Paul falling from off his horse. What had I been thinking?

Of course, before one realizes what one is, it is quite impossible to imagine whatever one should be doing to become what, as a thing which isn't it yet, is. (A tortured path quite as confused as this past sentence.) And then there is the clash between how one normally proceeds to accomplish something, and how a flaneur proceeds—which is basically to stray, until revelation—or the crippled dwarf, who is actually a divine, offers you the magic object. And there is very little advice or sympathy out there for this kind of strategy. In short, my medical technique up to that time was to stare at the patient—until something occurred to me; some numinous thought would beckon to the correct path. Hopefully, before they died.

The only defense I offer now is to argue that I have probably saved more lives by quitting medicine, than a lot of doctors have by continuing. And that quitting wasn't so easy. In my day, it took a bit of pluck. Only one in five pre-med aspirants were admitted to medical school, whereas only one in fifty, once admitted, got out. The odds were quite steeply stacked against me. I figured I needed time away to think. A flaneurish reaction, if there is any.

I had six months off from school. Without any prospects, a day or so after the winter term's end, I walked down to the freeway entrance with my backpack and stuck out my thumb. At the time hitchhikers representing disconnected youth still flooded the highways. These were sunny days. I had a sleeping bag wrapped in a plastic tarp roped to the bottom of a pack frame. Inside my pack I had some clothes and trail mix, apples, jerky etc. I didn't like planning much. My method at the time was drifting and happenstance. The God of

Happenstance had me.

Still does, but don't get me wrong. I genuflect to the other god, Prudence. But even within restraint's narrow corridor, the God of Happenstance still rules, Her miracles to perform. And the open road is a buffet of just the sort of thing which was so sorely lacking in the very disciplined corridors of medicine. Actually, I had no idea at the time how impatient seven years of collegiate schooling had made me for cutting the umbilical cord.

Which way to go?

At one point I would try heading north to Alaska, only to get turned back at the Canadian border for lack of sufficient resources. It hadn't occurred to me that an American might not be welcomed everywhere. And as it worked out, this was especially true of the American border guards! After I had been turned around, my countrymen searched me up and down. An hour ago they had let me leave, and now they were being pissy about letting me back in! I couldn't believe that being an American didn't impress them at all.

After my rejection, I sat in the field grass by a two lane road wondering whether I should try my luck crossing the border into Canada a little further west. I was approached by a chubby, sunburned, barefoot fellow in a thin short sleeve shirt and shorts. He had no other belongings. I don't remember him even having a belt. It had been a fairly warm, clear day. But soon it was sundown and the breeze was cool. He had goose bumps prickling his arms, but he gave me an upbeat and cheerful pitch. He said he was heading to Alaska himself! Why didn't we hook up together? This appeared to strike him as a no-brainer. To me he looked to embody pathos—all the way back to the Greeks, if it had been born yesterday. And before I could suffer too much of his condition myself and my better side would allow him to attach like a limpet, I headed south. That's when I caught a ride with a shriveled, mentally

challenged middle aged fellow in his grandfather's top of the line, luxury Cadillac.

This charming little innocent was thrilled to demonstrate all of the Cadillac's features and burble his babble as he toured me. The seats went up and back, and down, and reclined. The windows opened and closed—first the right bank, then the left, then the rear alternately, as we rolled along. He was obviously sorry to have to drop me off when he did, but he had reached the southern limit of the distance his grandfather would allow him to go. We said our goodbyes and he drove off, his head showing just above the driver's door and with the window going up and down.

Anyway, so that first time out, I ended headed south. The initial ride took me all the way from Seattle to San Francisco. Quite a coup. We squatted at various locales along Hwy 101 to overnight. Locals we picked up from time to time would tell us of good places to "crash". The immigrant owner of an "all-you-can-eat" restaurant ran us out after noting eight or so of us starved hippies settling ourselves in for a good feed. I was taught to use chopsticks around a meal in Chinatown. The core people were a freewheeling bunch in a VW bus on their way eventually to demonstrate at the Republican Convention in Florida. Bright, but not practical, the driver was a thousand or so miles into his trip from back East via Canada when one of his riders told him it was necessary from time to time with a vehicle to check the oil. "The oil?" He mused.

The in-between portions of hitchhiking are mostly vacant periods of meditation with the aloneness, the wind moving across the prairies and fields and stretching deserts, the far off blue mountains, the rush of a car passing, the shudder of a semi, the pieces of gravel in the roadside shoulder, animals who would pop up to take a look at me from the nearby field, a hawk circling. I'd think about the girl it didn't work out with. Isn't it more natural to marvel over the

pearls in a string than the cord itself? For a flaneur, the narrative never rivals the scene, as something will happen; it always does.

After San Francisco, the group in the VW microbus turned east, and I found myself somewhere south of there on another entrance ramp shoulder. Thirty yards or so further south sprawled another hitchhiker in a kind of Afro and bandana, but wearing a camera. The camera was just for show, he later explained, in order to separate himself from the legions of other hitchhikers and to make him appear more, established perhaps, and touristy. He was a teacher from Michigan, on his own dime sabbatical to Mexico where he intended to seek instruction from some educational seer. Seers interested me. I wasn't a seer (Well, yet! Okay?). But the occupational work seemed at the time a bit like what I was doing. His name was Fred Belinsky (though I didn't know his name at the time). And I can't remember if he was wearing a hat, but I think he wore a red bandana headband.

The reason I note the headwear, is that the other day I Googled his name out of curiosity, and his background synced with a former notable owner in the San Diego area of a number of upscale hat shops. Apparently he came to be quite a well known local figure thereabouts.

Anyway, this white van stops while we're chatting. The window lowers and this attractive, curly haired strawberry blonde of around our ages asks if we want a lift?

“Uhh . . . yeah!”

Fred, the more extroverted, chose the front seat and they began chatting with great chemistry, while I sat in the back. It seems she had been going somewhere in order to do something and seen all of the hitchhikers lining the entrance ramps and the thought occurred to her, that “maybe I could help to get them where they are going?” So she was now headed

south down 101 and picking up and dropping off hitchhikers as she came across them. Rather like a bus, I supposed.

My thoughts wandered off. An hour or so later their conversation suddenly took on a very animated quality when I heard Fred say, "You can not."

"Can too." She smiled.

"Can not."

"Can too." She pointed as a car flew past going the other way. "There's one."

Fred shook his head. "No way. Okay, how about that one?"

She looked. "Nope."

"That one?"

"No."

They watched the cars pass for a time.

"There's one." She nodded eventually.

"You cannot tell who's Jewish just by looking," Fred said. "Especially going 50 miles per hour the other way."

"Can too," she retorted. She turned her head with a perky smile and a nod. "For example, you're one."

"That's very good!" Fred exclaimed.

We picked up more hitchhikers as we motored along until the van was full. Near Monterrey we picked up a local who led us to vacant land which was treated as a sort of preserve. Parking off the highway we picked our way through the grassy dunes in darkness towards the pounding sounds of rolling surf. Eventually, I had lost the others, and was

walking down the beach in a black void, oriented only by the crashing sounds of the surf, and looking for wherever it is we were to stay, when I stumbled over a hillock emerging from the level sand and flew forward over a fire pit and through the flickering faces of five or six other hippies gathered in the blowing fog.

I did a rather graceful roll I thought and joined the group. They conversed as I worked to assemble faces from the flickering slices of light in the foggy mist. Some were high on cannabis. You could tell by the awe with which they spoke about the natural state of our situation in the misty black with the roll of breakers. Another clue was the glowing joint. Others spoke with whole sections redacted. One or two seemed to be phoning it in from wherever they were. And finally, there's one whose voice was a bit deeper, sounding a bit older or like he might like to be thought of as a 'travelled' person who spoke a dialect of what I'd come to regard as laconic hippie with a vague predator's authority.

When the black of night was pulled back, I awoke to hear and see all of those people chattering in the light of day. It was as if I had passed through a future vale of haunts to the present sunny morning with the surf still crashing, a seagull spiraling, and the mist burning away with the laconic hippie walking in from his morning swim in the surf, bearded, naked and shaking his long black hair out and with his tattoos glistening. It was nice, if a bit out of my comfort zone, but I shared some of what I had in my pack for breakfast.

One noon I was squatted on an entrance ramp somewhere near Yuma, Arizona to the occasional buzz of an insect. It was getting hotter, and again I had neglected to carry water. After an hour or so, I stood to stretch my legs and saw written on the entrance sign post, "If you think you're going to get a ride here, you might as well stick your thumb up your ass."

I sat down to wait some more—when a blurry grayish dot appeared where the road disappeared into the sky, and gradually grew in size through the wavering heat as it approached, slowly enlarging like foraging bug. I found it very pleasant to meditate upon something which was actually evolving and which might actually mean something, to me. It was a small particle of intrigue solved, when it arrived and slowed to a stop as an old grey '51 Chevy coupe. The smiling, sandy-haired fellow inside gestured to me, saying, "Hop in."

He was returning to Florida after fighting forest fires in California. He was driving straight through, fueled by a chest full of champagne jammed in the foot space behind the front seats. "Go ahead and grab yourself one."

It was difficult to realize my good fortune. This must be like the sound of one hand clapping, I decided, as we pattered on down the highway with big smiles and sweating bottles lifted to the wind blowing through our open windows. The desert sands will never look more pleasant to me than from under the shady bonnet of that motoring '51 Chevy. If I were to ever create a motivational video for serendipity, it would re-create that scene.

Hitchhiking is long periods of idle time spent by the roadside ruminating as to why various cars stopped or passed by; wondering what would happen if days passed and no one stopped; wondering just how isolated I was? Sometimes I felt as one with the ants and other small bugs who struggled to find their way through the dirt and around the chunks of gravel. For a while I played God with toothpick sized sticks. I stared at the wildlife which passed by or stopped. I returned the stare of two lizards which were staring at me from across the blacktop. I made small creations or assemblages of this or that and drew designs in the dirt. Again, very much like the life of a poet, excepting that I had yet to employ words.

Then there were the rides offered. About a third would have been better declined. Some were terrible drivers. I got a ride with two kids on a rainy afternoon. My gut feeling was that they were delinquents from some reformatory just up the road who were escaping in a stolen car. But I had no idea. What I do know is that we were going far too fast on a slippery highway and each time we passed under a dry underpass, we would fishtail as we came out the other side. I noted over the back seat that the road "seemed 'slippery' at this speed". They readily agreed, nodding vigorously! Then, as if to prove my point, coming out from under a third underpass, the fishtail swung into a spin. I was crouched behind the front seat as we spun 'round and 'round. The guys were screaming, when we sunk to a halt in the soft roadside gravel and the engine stalled. The passenger side rider, after catching his breath and sighing with relief, got out to look around. He reappeared soaked and bleeding with a scalp laceration. "I fell into a river!" He shivered.

Another fellow out in the middle of a huge prairie asked me if I knew why he wasn't afraid to pick up a hitchhiker? I didn't know. He pulled a big dark gun out from under his driver's seat. He stared. I raised my brows.

I was given a ride by a cadre of Marxists out of a Maryland university in a red VW microbus. They were a cheerful bunch. While we road along I thumbed through a nearby copy of *The Little Red Book* by Chairman Mao. I'd never seen one. It was interesting. Stopping at the Grand Canyon Concessions area they 'liberated' several five gallon plastic jugs of condiments in a kind of farcical display of Guerilla Theater.

One ride asked me what I knew about stealing gas. Other drivers were drunk. Some were just peculiar, monopolizing the conversation, and then all of a sudden regarding me with suspicion.

Outside Phoenix, I got picked up by a fellow in

convertible MG trailing smoke. He waved me to hurry up and get in. Apparently, the transmission was burning up and we needed to keep moving or choke from the fumes.

He was the only black cook in Northern Arizona, he said. Offering me a berth for the night, he dropped me off at his mobile home out in the desert near Sonora with his girlfriend and new baby, then headed off to work. A little later that evening the phone rang. He had gotten arrested for threatening someone in the kitchen with a knife, his girlfriend tried to relate this whole scenario to me through exasperations. When she left to bail him out of jail, I became the babysitter.

Other rides were notable. I went day sailing in a slender classic wooden open cockpit racing sloop, whose young owner picked me up off the highway for crew. He was deft on the tiller in a boat which had no motor. He made our zig zag way, under sail, in and out of the slip and around the breakwater with evident skill. The sunny California day was beautiful with a light breeze. We sailed off Dana Point on what were calm waters but which rose and fell in immense swells. He pointed out to me how the tall homes along the coastline nearly disappeared. He complemented my on my calm nature.

A couple furniture movers hired me out of a truck stop. In Nevada I found a job picking up scrap metal and tossing it into semi trailer way out in the desert. A fellow offered me a bunk for the night at his apartment in Reno where he filled me in about working the casinos with Elvis. John Denver strode into a Gas and Go outside Aspen to fuel his red Jeep. He was a friendly figure in the morning's assemblage, talking and appearing confident as an immortal.

I stayed overnight with a fellow who was living in the cleft of some rocks on the Hopi Indian reservation. His car had appeared in the midst of a long vacancy of vehicles,

and grew in size about half as fast as any of the others had. The car, which moved so slowly, even came to a stop slowly, almost comically so. And then, I had to speak first to ask if he was offering me a ride? The answer came out slow, as if my fate were waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Later, he noted during our chat, that it had taken him six years to get his metallurgical degree from Stanford and six months into his first job to decide he couldn't stand it. He quit and was then living in his cave-of-sorts in a dirt pile of jagged boulders within an area just large enough to crawl about in, on nuts and dried fruits and whatever. I gave him some of my own food stash and he gave me a lecture on the use of the I Ching. He also threw in some conversation on the historical relations between the Navaho and the Hopi, and the observation that the bite of the little 'greener' scorpions (mostly the kind he would see in his 'cave') would not kill you, but just hurt like hell.

The only other person I've met in my life who spoke this slowly was a cabaret dancer in New Orleans who performed in the Live Sex Act in the French Quarter and would wash out her pasties and hang them on the balcony opposite mine each morning in the Garden District where I roomed. Suffice to say, she had tremendous melon breasts and I schemed for way to speak with her. I met her one day by the front gate while leaving. Just waiting through her answer to my "Hello" seemed endless. I'm a talker and decided she was just too slow, melon-sized breasts or no.

Other rides were ordinary enough. I got rides with Christian evangelizers, and Jews in big cars with "Fiddler on the Roof" playing on the 8 track. But the ones I liked the least were those who wanted to help me, learn about what troubles had sent me out on the road, thought perhaps I must need a meal, asked about my parents and how they felt. If it were me, today, I would have offered them different answers. I can't remember any of my replies now, so they mustn't have

been significant.

Theodore Dalrymple noted in one of his essays that “few people have any real idea of a better life than the one they are leading”. The corollary to this, I would suppose, is that we are living the life we want.

One of the last rides of that trip that I remember was with another student of medicine, as it would happen, travelling to and from somewhere between residencies. We discussed things, and he tried to pull me back into the ‘club’ I suppose. He suggested taking the time to share some of the sights around there, together. I declined. Before he left, he dropped me off where the Little Grand Canyon was just a hundred or so yards through a fence and across a stretch of sage. As it was a canyon, you couldn’t see it though until you were nearly on it.

I thanked him, said goodbye and took off across the field, and there it was, immense. The Canyon dropped away so far, atmospheric perspective played a large role and one could imagine that it wasn’t real at all, but some studio canvas backdrop with a thin ribbon of water painted in the bottom far, far away. There was a long slab of rock jutting out like a diving board above it all. I walked out and sat there. Years later I penned this short poem which seems to have encapsulated it all:

I’m a Dog for Thought

I’m a dog for thought,
for it has collared me
and made me it’s pet,

rather than the other way 'round.

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Carl Nelson has recently finished his book, *The Poet's (40 Pound) Weight Loss Plan*, comprised of instructional prose and poetry. Using his method he is walking forty pounds lighter with normal fasting glucose levels and not snoring at night, while currently working on a second volume of Self-Help poetry, *The Poet's (29 Year) Marriage Plan*. He lives in Belpre, Ohio where he considers existence while walking his ginger dachshund, Tater Tot. Read about the author and his newest book [@NERIconoclast](#)