

Such a damn gorgeous place. Why paradise is here

By Steve Friedman

Photos by Chris Myers

Photo collage by
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photos by Chris Myers
and Catherine Lutz

Come here in July and Silverton, Colorado, will play you for a sucker, as I sometimes fear it has played me. Summertime here is wildflowers and rhubarb festivals and sticky-faced children gorging on funnel cakes, long days and laughing locals playing soccer in the soft twilight at the park, next to the gazebo, down the hill from the century-old cemetery. It is instant gratification and endless possibilities and an abiding, sun-drenched belief that little mountain towns can save lives.

At night the creek by the gazebo burbles and in the morning light floods the hidden valley, warming the knots of tanned, limber climbers sprawled on the wooden porch outside the Avalanche Coffee House, where they sip steaming drinks and trace adventures on topo maps. I know people who have visited here

in the summer, hiked and swam and made themselves rosy and brown, drifted to sleep under falling stars, dreamed of rhubarb pies and blue skies, cappuccino and first ascents. They have sold their homes and businesses and moved here, and by mid-January they are eating dinner at five o'clock, in bed by eight.

By February they are pasty and soft and surly, and in early spring, when snow is still falling and pipes still freezing, they have gained the rueful wisdom of enlightened suckers and they are calling their realtors back home.

It is mid-February now, and I am sitting on a peeling plastic yellow chair in a small, wooden shack where I sometimes live in Silverton, considering mountains and the difference between seeking salvation and running away.

More than a family visit
The shack is 18-feet-by-18-feet, with windows that don't open and a door that has no lock and a faucet that froze and cracked a year ago and still lies in the sink. In the moonlight it gleams, the long cold neck of a wounded bird. A black stove hunkers in the middle of the splintered plank floor and two paces from the stove is the peeling chair and a scratched-up card table I pretend is a desk. Up a ladder on another plank floor is a lamp and a mattress.

I tell people I'm here to visit my sister and her toddler and husband, who live cross town. But 15 feet of snow, on average, fall here every year, often closing Molas and Red Mountain passes, the only ways into or out of town. Even on clear days, it's more than an hour over the most avalanche-prone stretch of highway

in North America to things like fresh vegetables and bookstores and a restaurant that stays open past 8 p.m. So this is more than a family visit.

There are 1,000 citizens, half who depart before the first snowfall every year. I notice a disproportionate amount of dental problems, but voters regularly reject the state's standing offer to fluoridate the local water supply. At a town meeting not too long ago, a resident called a dentist testifying on behalf of oral hygiene a Nazi. Until this past winter, Silverton was the only town of the only county in the state with neither a stoplight nor a 911 emergency number. It still has no stoplight. It's a community where a 10-year-old child boasts that his parents home school him because "I didn't come from no damn monkey."

My shack squats on a mound of gravel across a dirt road from an icy meadow that slopes down to El Rio de las Animas Perdidas, The River of Lost Souls. Two hundred feet on the other side of the Animas is Kendall Mountain, its forested slopes scarred by long white avalanche chutes. Some nights, bellowing gusts of wind rip from Kendall and Boulder and Macomer and Garnett and Sultan and Grand Turk and all the other gentle monsters that ring the town and they rattle the shack and shake me from sleep. Other nights, a deep, uncaring silence rolls down the looming slopes and keeps me awake.

In February, the shack stays in the shadow of Kendall until 10 a.m. and the temperature sometimes drops to 30 below zero. On those mornings I lie on the mattress upstairs under two sleeping bags, reading. I read *The Great Gatsby*, *The Odyssey*, *Endurance*, the journals of John Muir. I read the first volume of a two-volume biography of Adolf Hitler. I study a book called *Bone Games*, by Telluride writer Rob Schultheis, which explores spiritual transcendence through extreme adventures in the mountains. It quotes Milarepa, "the patron saint of all mountain mystics," who wrote:

"Deep in the wild mountains is a strange marketplace where you can trade the hassle and noise of everyday life for eternal Light."

That sounds very good to me.

People who need people

Tuesday, midwinter, mid-morning at the Avalanche Coffee House, where Bruce Conrad, Dave Emory and I gather over pastries and coffee to discuss road conditions, average annual snowfall in town, the future of Silverton and the secret to happiness. This is not an atypical discussion around here. Conrad is 32 and Emory is 48 and I am 46,

and none of us is rich, or disabled, or technically on vacation. Yet here we are late on a weekday morning, hoisting thick, handmade mugs with our names on them, manhandling cinnamon rolls fresh from the oven, philosophizing like internet millionaires who got out in time. This is one of the things I love most about Silverton.

Before Silverton, Emory worked as a high school teacher and a Peace Corps volunteer, and he tells me that Silverton has more former Peace Corps volunteers per capita than any place in the United States. Which might or might not be true, but which indicates the pride Silvertonians take in the town's various claims to singularity, which are considerable.

Emory wears rectangular, metal framed glasses, and has short, neatly trimmed hair. He runs 6-10 miles every other day. For the past nine years he has lived in a rooming house called the Benson, in room seven. He has no phone and he shares a bathroom. He spends a lot of time at the library because he likes reading. He comes to the Avalanche because he likes the coffee. Also, he says, because "I feel like I don't get along with people but I need them."

Bruce Conrad came to Silverton in the summer of '94, to visit his father, and stayed. When not hiking, he might be snowboarding. When not snowboarding, he's often on his motorcycle. He has broad shoulders, blue eyes, and a brown beard and ponytail. His girlfriends, of which there have been more than a few, tend to be seasonal. Conrad's checkered work history — a great many Silvertonians possess a checkered work history — includes stints bartending in the Miner's Tavern, which is frequented mostly by former miners, descendants of miners and people who wish the mines never would have closed. If I can be permitted to make a vast and sweeping generalization, I would say the Miner's Tavern crowd tends to distrust the federal government and to believe deeply in the right to bear arms and ride snowmobiles. You can guess how they line up on the fluoride issue. "Toothless old rednecks," according to one of the regulars at the Avalanche.

Conrad has worked at the Avalanche, too, as a counter person. The Avalanche is frequented primarily by a younger crowd, one more likely to own climbing rope and cross-country skis and computers than snowmobiles, or guns. Phyllis Belner, a co-owner of the Benson and a former Miner's regular, calls the Avalanche crowd "Trust fund babies."

(In my five years of periodic visits and extended stays here, I

have yet to meet a single obviously toothless person or anyone wealthy enough that they can afford not to work, though there is an Avalanche waitress who drives a Volvo and quotes Hegel, and whose cashmere sweaters have prompted talk.)

I ask Conrad if he treasures the sense of community here. Does he fully appreciate, as I'm beginning to, how even though Silvertonians might sometimes dislike each other, might constantly discuss one another, they're comforted by the knowledge that when they're in trouble, they can always count on their neighbors in this little mountain valley; men, women and children bound together by the harsh and unforgiving climate and the riotous wildflowers and the star-drenched night sky? Doesn't Conrad agree?

Conrad works over his cinnamon roll, then takes a sip from his handmade mug, which has "Bruce" written on it. He squints at me, so I take a sip from my "Steve" cup and try to squint back. But it's no use. We both know, mug or no mug, I'm strictly a part-timer.

"Here's what I want people to hear about Silverton," Conrad says. "I want them to hear that they might not be able to get in, and once they get in, they might not be able to get out. That's what I want people to hear."

Does he mean me? This is my first winter at altitude, and other locals have told me they won't even bother learning someone's name, much less inviting them to dinner, until that person has endured a trio of Silverton's cold, lonely seasons. On the other hand, I've started running a tab. I own a coffee mug with my name on it. There's a photo of my nephew taped to the cash register. I can hold up my end of the conversation when it comes to road conditions and annual snowfall.

I hope he doesn't mean me. The truth is, I'd much rather belong than be bathed in Eternal Light. I'm starting to think that belonging somewhere might be better than Eternal Light.

Why the deli guy scares me

New York City, three months earlier:

"What're you working on?" a friend of mine asks, when I telephone her office one day.

I hate this question. Two years ago I quit a full-time job so I would have time to write. Since then, I've produced a leering profile of a starlet in which, to my continuing shame, I compared her laughter to a melody. Twice. I have also created a smug internet dating advice column under a pseudonym and accepted an assignment to write a weekly online horoscope, which, after I learned how difficult it was to actually research planetary movements, I

simply made up.

"The usual whore work," I respond.

Wrong answer. My friend is the editor of a woman's magazine. Even though I'm not referring to any assignments I've completed for her, she can feel my self-hatred, and she takes it personally. I suspect I intend for this to happen.

"That's a nice attitude," she says.

"It's honest."

"You know," she says, "you're getting a reputation among a lot of people as a hothead."

"What people?"

"I'm not going to tell you that."

"Why?"

"I don't want to get in the middle of anything."

"C'mon. You're supposed to be my friend. This is my professional reputation on the line. You won't be in the middle of anything."

"No, I'm not going to put myself in a position that ..."

"Look, if you're talking about that bald, fat-assed, weasel-headed prick over at ..."

"You really need to work on your anger," she says. "You are becoming someone who is not pleasant. And I have to get back to work."

I hate it when people with office jobs tell me they have to get back to work. Actually, I hate them.

After hanging up, I hold the receiver inches from my face.

"Bitch," I say. "Bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch."

It's been a bad week in a bad month in a bad year. Last night I argued with my girlfriend, who has been married for the three years we have been dating. We argued about what a liar I am, and how manipulative she is, and why I'm incapable of love. Last night we argued about whether I secretly wanted to sleep with her little sister. (I articulated the negative position; I might be unhappy, and profoundly disturbed, but I am not stupid.)

After we hung up, I grabbed the television remote control and the phone and called the deli across the street, my usual evening routine since I quit going to the gym a month ago because all the people there seemed so smug, and successful, and like they would always have to get back to work. I have gained 10 pounds.

The guy at the deli recognized my voice on the phone. "Ah, apartment 40-F," he said, "perhaps another pint of Chubby Hubby tonight, am I correct?"

He is Indian, and on the rare evenings I have human company, I imitate him, which invariably gets a laugh and makes me despise myself even more.

In the two years since quitting my job, I have seen my savings nearly disappear and my dream of meaningful work remain

deferred. I do whore work.

Which makes me a whore.

That night is when I started to think that Silverton might be a good place for an extended visit.

Rubber tomahawks and the evil within

Spend enough time at the Avalanche, which is tough not to do if you spend any time at all in Silverton, and chances are before long you'll have your own hand-made mug with your name on it. It will hang on the rack just inside the door, next to "Ranger Rick," above "Bear," just below "UPS Dave," who without much prompting will proffer the opinion that "the FedEx guy is a faggot," because the FedEx guy won't drive over Molas Pass during heavy snows.

It's not just the delivery guys at odds. Cross-country skiers telephone the sheriff's office on a regular basis to complain about teenagers racing their snowmobiles, and snowmobilers threaten to recall any city council member who votes to limit their rights to ride wherever and whenever they want. Many of the local artists fear and distrust the out-of-town developers, and seven years ago those artists played a part in thwarting the plans of a man who wanted to build a heli-pad outside of town, which still irritates some of the chamber of commerce members who would have liked to



do business with the heli-guy's rich clients.

"Innovative ideas that might pull us into a more prosperous future," wrote editor Jonathan Thompson in the inaugural issue of *The San Juan Mountain Journal*, in June 1999, "are often smothered by political infighting and personal vendettas."

(Thompson started the newspaper after trying and failing to purchase the 125-year-old *Silverton Standard*. Consequently, Silverton almost certainly publishes more newspapers per capita than any other community in the U.S.)

Even animals cause squabbles. San Juan County officials counted 103 dogs in town a couple years ago (many unlicensed), which probably means more dog owners per capita than anywhere else in the U.S. It also, until very

recently, was the home of a pet mountain lion, whose dramatic and contentious life is still being mulled over at the Avalanche Coffee House and The Miner's Tavern. (More on this later.)

The latest local brouhaha involves a 31-year-old by the name of Aaron Brill, who came to town in the fall of 1999 with plans to build a backcountry ski center, Colorado's first new ski development in 17 years. He told Thompson of the *Mountain Journal*, regarding his business plan for Silverton Mountain Ski Area, that "profits are not the dominating factor here." He also confided to an Avalanche regular he dated before his girlfriend moved to town that "My goal is to retire at 35 and move to Costa Rica." Brill swore that he wanted a "retro" ski area, ecologically sensitive, dedicated to preserving the

land. But he started chopping down trees before the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) approved his plans, and he — or his father, under whose name the purchase is recorded on the city books — has purchased 12 lots of property within the city limits, land that would be useless for a ski area, but extremely valuable for a speculator. (Or, to be fair, it could provide a good location for employee housing.)

The entrepreneur has stirred up passions and enmities that are strong even by fluoride-hating, invective-hurling Silverton standards. Those enmities erupted last February when five Silvertonians skied onto public land next to Brill's property, public land that Brill had marked "closed." The BLM requires Brill to close public land while conducting avalanche studies, and he claimed that's exactly what he was doing. The skiers said that the "closed" signs were permanent fixtures, had no connection to studies being conducted or not conducted, and represented nothing more than an attempt by Brill to limit access to public land. The skiers accused Brill of setting off explosives above them, and asked the San Juan sheriff to press criminal charges. Brill accused the quintet of a campaign of "harassment," and asked the county to up penalties for trespassing from \$300 to \$1,000

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or jail time.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, long-time Silvertonian (and former Peace Corps member) Wiley Carmack wrote to one of the five skiers, who happens to be my brother-in-law:

"What a bunch of garbage you and your fellow ecoterrorists are spouting. Over 90 percent of the citizens of Silverton think that you are all totally wrong and should 'get out of town.' Grow up or face the consequences which could be very dire for all of you. This is not an idle threat."

Silverton, I am coming to learn, is an old-fashioned kind of mountain town. Which is to say, it's the kind of mountain town where old-timers don't trust newcomers, newcomers make fun of old-timers, and almost everybody hates outsiders, especially the out-of-state seasonal shopkeepers who cater to the tourists disgorged, as many as 1200 a day, by the Durango & Silverton narrow gauge coal-powered train that chugs into town from May until October.

"Train people," is what the locals call the tourists who stuff themselves with cotton candy and funnel cakes and load up on belt buckles and rubber tomahawks and T-shirts that say things like "Life is Too Short to 4-Wheel with Ugly Women" and "Your Proctologist Called, They Found Your Head." (Local kids sell the tourists rocks. Plain rocks.) While it's true that in winter a dog can snooze on main street and you can hear the snow squeak beneath your boots, summertime brings so many tourists that, as former Silverton restaurateur Josh Formea says, "you could put shit in a bag and make money."

"Train rapers" is what Avalanche co-founder Chris Nute calls the seasonal merchants who profit off the train people. (He's not talking about Formea, who lived here — and kept his restaurant open year-round).

And it's not just the train folk. Developers — until Brill at least, and some Silvertonians still aren't so sure about him — are not to be trusted.

Texans are hated, in part because they make up a fairly large percentage of the train people, and tend to adore rubber tomahawks and "Your Proctologist Called ..." T-shirts. Southern Californians qualify for some nasty mocking, as do their tastes for skim milk and cell phones (which don't work up here, anyway, a phenomenon that might provide a source of rich ironic metaphor, if Silvertonians were interested in either irony or metaphor, which they're generally not). Wealth in general is resented, particularly when it is owned by Texans and Californians. I spend many hours on The Avalanche's sunny porch (when

I'm not contemplating road conditions, average annual snowfall, etc.), bitching and moaning about rapacious flatlanders, snickering at the well-coiffed, skim-latte-sipping poseurs adjusting their reflector shades before they climb into their BMWs with out-of-state license plates, doing my best to forget — my temporary life in the shack notwithstanding — that, basically, I'm a New York Jew with a laptop and a mutual fund.

But I'm also a Silvertonian, at least part-time. So I continue bitching and moaning and snickering, until the day an otherwise mild-mannered and polite citizen remarks to me, regarding local property values, that "the wet-backs sure aren't helping."

Then I wonder. Can one keep developers out and basic decency in? Do isolated mountain towns inevitably turn insular, and does that insularity curdle inexorably into xenophobia? Can I fear Brill, loathe the Los Angelenos and still hold on to some vestige of compassion? And if I belong here, what exactly do I belong to?

More than zero

Nature lovers fleeing the stink of civilization and, one suspects, the whore work, suspicious girlfriends and other personally unpleasant realities of their own lives, have historically found peace, happiness and meaning just over the next snowy range, or into the next deserted valley, or on that nearly uninhabited speck of land in the deep blue sea, the one dotted with comely savages and fruit bearing trees. At least according to some of the more reverent travel literature that draws people like me to places like Silverton.

A closer reading of the historical record, though, undertaken beneath two layers of down, in very cold temperatures, reveals some unsettling truths about pioneers in paradise.

John Muir, a shepherd by profession, cared so little about physical comforts that he would cook a pot of beans, eat his fill, then stuff his pockets with the leftovers before he left for hikes that lasted days and weeks, jamming his hands deep into his pants whenever he was hungry. (Is it any wonder he spent so much time alone?) Henry David Thoreau feared psychic contamination enough that he felt compelled to fast and meditate for a full day whenever he needed to take a trip to that notorious den of iniquity, New Hampshire. Paul Gaugin landed on Tahiti in 1891, found it as repressive and stultifying as Europe, then sailed farther, to the Marquesas islands, where he kept a 14-year-old mistress, infuriated the local police with his repeated public drunkenness, got thrown in jail, then died of alcoholism.

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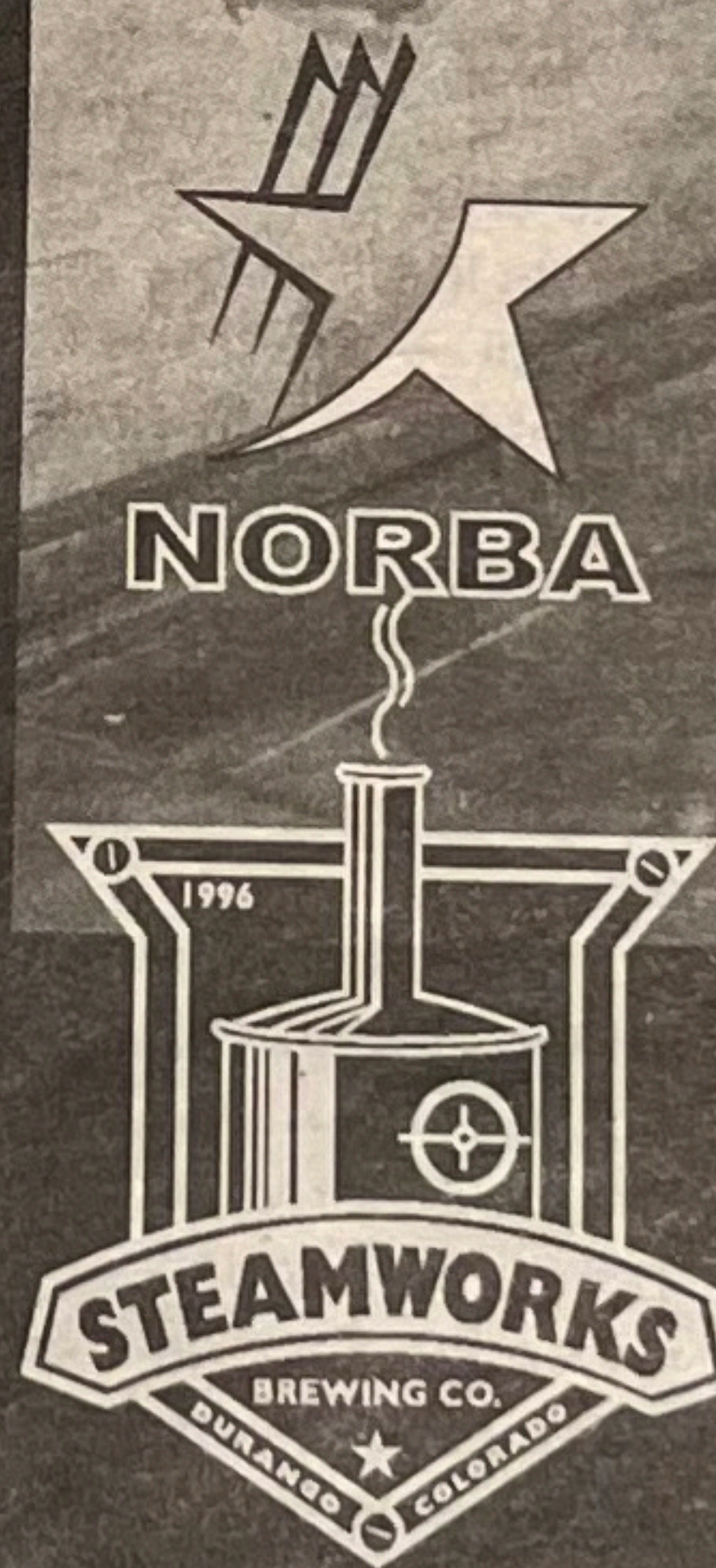
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sniffing helps, but it will not heal. I know this. And I'm not looking for 14-year-old mistresses or week-old beans. I just want to be an Avalanche regular, a good Silvertonian. Is that too much to ask?

"What good is an escapist fantasy if it doesn't really exist out there somewhere?" asks Kevin Patterson, a 32-year-old doctor who wrote about his sailing voyage to Tahiti and his search for meaning in *The Water in Between*, another book that keeps me company in the shack. "It's like lotteries — they represent hope because even though the chances of winning are effectively zero, they aren't zero."

In the early morning shadows of Kendall Mountain, with snow falling, in the chilly loft, those three words are a great source of comfort. "They aren't zero."

The wisdom of Fred

The forest ranger cuts my hair while I sit in her kitchen, and we chat about Yeti sightings and road conditions and annual snowfall and the future of Silverton and the rhubarb pie recipes (Silverton is the rhubarb capital of the world) and the secret to happiness and whether Aaron Brill is a visionary or a lying profiteer. The librarian greets me by name, and she always asks if I'm having a good time. A construction worker invites me to join the Sunday night pickup basketball game at the high school. There, I elbow a visiting train raper, right in the gut.

I cross-country ski up and across Kendall Mountain. Or I clamp on snowshoes and tramp toward a deserted mine. Wednesdays and Fridays I drive the shack's trash to the town dump, run by a rosy, bearded guy named Fred, who also works as a massage therapist and musician.

"Stay in the right side of the brain, dude," Fred says when I drop off my scraps of paper and empty cookie boxes.

Even the dump is serene, silent. It hugs a hillside above the frozen Animas. Fred and I consider forested Kendall, ponder King Solomon Mine Mountain, visible from no other vantage point in Silverton.

"Pretty day," I say.

"Beautiful day," Fred says.

"Beautiful spot, beautiful place on this earth. Figure out how many hats you need to wear, bro, and you can work it so you don't ever have to go back to the world."

"Yep," I say, "it sure is pretty."

"Bro," Fred says, "if you figure it out, you can stay forever inside the walls of Kong."

"Uh huh," I say. "Um, did you say 'walls of Kong?'"

"Yeah, dude," Fred says, "the walls of Kong. Those mountains." He sweeps his arm wide, pirouettes 360 degrees. "That's the secret. Staying inside the walls of Kong."



Saving sweet pea

I branch out from the Avalanche. I shoot pool at The Miner's Tavern and discuss literature with a county employee who believes the federal government uses black helicopters to spy on its citizens and that it has discovered the cure for AIDS but is withholding it, naturally, to protect pharmaceutical profits. One of the town's most personable fluoride fighters cooks me lasagna on a still midwinter's night, and after dinner I sit on the floor with her three-year-old son and play catch. I kick a soccer ball in the twilight with a teenaged snowmobiling thug. And I attend the Super Bowl party thrown by an NRA member who refuses to use banks. I bring chips. I even, I must admit, leave the shack one cold and clear winter night and walk to the other side of town, where I watch ER with the Hegel-lover, who owns a television set, and with whom I have been keeping company for the past few, very cold weeks. (When Avalanche co-founder Jodi Harper-Nute finds out — there are no secrets in Silverton, especially from Jodi — she takes me aside and warns me that small populations and mountain passes have been known to warp judgement, especially when it comes to romance. "We call it seeing the world through Silverton goggles," Jodi says.)

One of my most constant companions at the Avalanche is Ronald Kenneth "Bud" Maynard, a 77-year-old bachelor with unkempt white hair and clear hazel eyes and a slow, deliberate gait. Maynard took his first job in the Silverton mines in 1947, when he was 18, which was the same year he fell in love. ("I didn't know her name, but she had a place in the Grand Imperial Hotel. All the whores had rooms in the saloons.") He left the next year, for college, then settled in San

Francisco and designed dams throughout Northern California. He drank too much, quit drinking, married, got divorced, retired, moved around. He returned to the mountains in 1995.

Maynard spends most mornings at the Avalanche, and most evenings at home watching television. He drives into Durango once a week to do his shopping, and every afternoon at three he takes his 12-year-old mutt, Sweet Pea, for a three-mile constitutional along the dirt road that skirts the bottom of a talus field on the hill that shields the town from the world to the west.

If he starts feeling restless, he drives to a trailer he owns in Santa Fe. If the passes are closed, he stays put. "The universe speaks to us," he tells me. "If we'll just listen, we can hear it. Life is really very simple and easy if you don't fight it."

The only time I see Maynard get visibly upset is over the mountain lion.

The man who bought the mountain lion is named Howard Drake, a friend of Maynard's. Until he bought the mountain lion, that is. Maynard is absolutely certain Drake bought the cat to wreak vengeance upon the town dogs, who had bedeviled Drake for years. Drake had suffered dog bites, and no dog had been punished.

Maynard sympathized. He thought the town was lax about enforcing the leash laws. But a mountain lion?

Maynard complained to the city council. He complained to Drake. He complained to everyone in the Avalanche.

"But it was just a kitten, so everyone would go over to Howard's and pet it and say how cute it was," Maynard tells me over coffee early one morning. I have never heard anyone say "cute" with such violence.

"I could see it growing up and I

could see Sweet Pea being chewed up. I said, 'that's against the law in Colorado.' What bothered me was the town people didn't seem to care. Yes, I complained about it. I called the mayor a lying son of a bitch."

Even after state officials took the cat away (a veterinarian Drake had called asking about immunization shots tipped them off), Maynard kept complaining. About Drake. About the mayor. About his friends who had petted the cat. And some of the locals told him to get over it. They told me they were sick of being told they had to choose sides regarding Maynard and Drake, Sweet Pea and The Mountain Lion. (Besides, the kitten had been awfully, well, cute.) Others told me they could not stomach Maynard's constant philosophizing about the universe.

But on a morning he didn't come in for his coffee, four people in the Avalanche asked each other if they knew where he was. One called him. Another drove by his house. (He had driven into Durango, but hadn't told anyone).

Maynard doesn't know it, but one day I stand outside my sister's house and I watch him climb the dirt road on the hill on the western edge of town, embarking on his afternoon walk. Mid-winter, late afternoon and silhouetted by are Bud and Sweet Pea, an old man and his old dog skirting the edge of a talus field, carefully plodding to nowhere in particular.

In every other place I've ever lived, at this time of day, I would be at a gym, or in an office, checking messages, returning a phone call. Or perhaps railing against whore work while I day-dreamed of enough wealth to crush my enemies and impress my friends. Or maybe I'd be watching an afternoon matinee, or shopping for something I didn't really need. In Silverton, there is nothing to distract you from what you most want, from what you most fear. I want peace, fear, solitude. So I spy on Maynard and Sweet Pea, trying to learn something.

Good Silvertonians

A good Silvertonian should be civic-minded, I know. That, plus the fact that there are no movie theaters and I don't have a television in the shack and the Volvo-driver and I have stopped keeping company, prompts me to attend my first public hearing. I sit with ten other Avalanche regulars, in the back of the second-floor meeting room at the 100-year-old town hall. We are here to offer local input to our county commissioners on proposed federal legislation that would close parts of nearby public land to jeeps, motorcycles, snowmobiles and All Terrain Vehicles. It seems an eminently reasonable idea, especially in an area whose most precious

natural resource is wild backcountry. At least it seems reasonable to us Avalanche regulars.

Others, though, have spread the word that the law would close much of the Alpine Loop, a heavily traveled jeep road that brings in tens of thousands of tourist dollars to Silverton every summer. In fact, the legislation explicitly won't close the Alpine Loop, but the outrageous canard has succeeded in stirring up anti-government sentiment, never too difficult to stir up in San Juan County, and in packing the meeting with scores of people opposed to the legislation.

Of the 150 people in attendance, at least 50 speak out against the law, while another 70 or 80, with their cheers, clapping, jeering and shouting, let it be known where their sympathies lie. Most of them, it becomes clear, belong to the well-organized motorized vehicle lobby, a coalition of jeep tour operators, snowmobile and ATV manufacturers. A good Silvertonian should not be overly judgmental, I know, but the lobby people and their acolytes seem to me a uniformly rude, offensive, dishonest bunch who could all afford to dismount from their machines, hit the hiking trail and drop a few pounds.

"Motorheads," mutters an Avalanche regular. "Rednecks," grunts another.

"Outsiders," I grumble.

Whenever one of us speaks in favor of wilderness, cries of "enviros," or "environmentos," which I suspect implies even more egregious characterological failings,

... the lobby people and their acolytes seem to me a uniformly rude, offensive, dishonest bunch who could all afford to dismount from their machines, hit the hiking trail and drop a few pounds.

ring out. A jeep tour operator from Texas turns and glares at newspaperman Thompson — whose great-great-great-great grandmother settled in the Animas val-

ley 125 years ago, whose wife works as a waitress, clothing salesperson and part time FedEx driver, and who happens to support the legislation — then delivers a loud, bitter screed about "elitists" who "want to take our land away."

Cheering, jeering, yelling. Stomping. Wild applause.

John Poole, a Maryland native who has spent the past 30 summers here and who recently bought local property, says he loves to snowmobile. And some of his best friends are jeepers. And he's not sitting anywhere near the Avalanche crowd. But, and here he drops his voice, almost apologetically, he also can't help but believe that some land would be better off without motorized vehicles. "We all love the open space," he says. "We all want the same thing. No one here doesn't appreciate the wilderness." He drops another octave now, until he is almost whispering. "I think we need to respect each other. We all need to learn to get along."

This guy is the Gandhi of the San Juans. How could anyone oppose his message of peace and tolerance?

"Go back to Maryland!" more than a few members of the mob shout. More catcalling, more jeers. A grim promise from a snowmobiler to spread the name of any local politician who dares

to trample on his rights to "people who will know what to do about it."

"The environmentos have taken away our mines," shouts a man with a white beard who I recognize as a regular from the Miner's. "They've taken our grazing rights. Now they want to take our tourism, and our forests, too! I want to quote Joseph Welch.

"Gentleman, have you no decency, have you no shame?"

More yelling. Ugly stares toward our lonely little knot. Name calling. Threats against any who oppose them. A good Silvertonian should be fair-minded. I know this. But I can't help but think of other political meetings I've recently read about in the shack, equally enthusiastic affairs held in 1919 and 1920, in Munich beerhalls named Eberbraukeller and Hofbrauhaus.

At the Avalanche the next morning, all we talk about is the meeting. The well-financed lobby's embrace of the big lie, the bullying snowmobilers, the not-so-thinly veiled threats.

"Damn motorheads," one of the regulars says.

"You can't blame them," another replies. "A lot of the merchants are living year-to-year. They can't afford to piss anyone off. We can't judge them."

"They're a bunch of angry, bitter, frightened old miners," I say. Then I add, with an ease that



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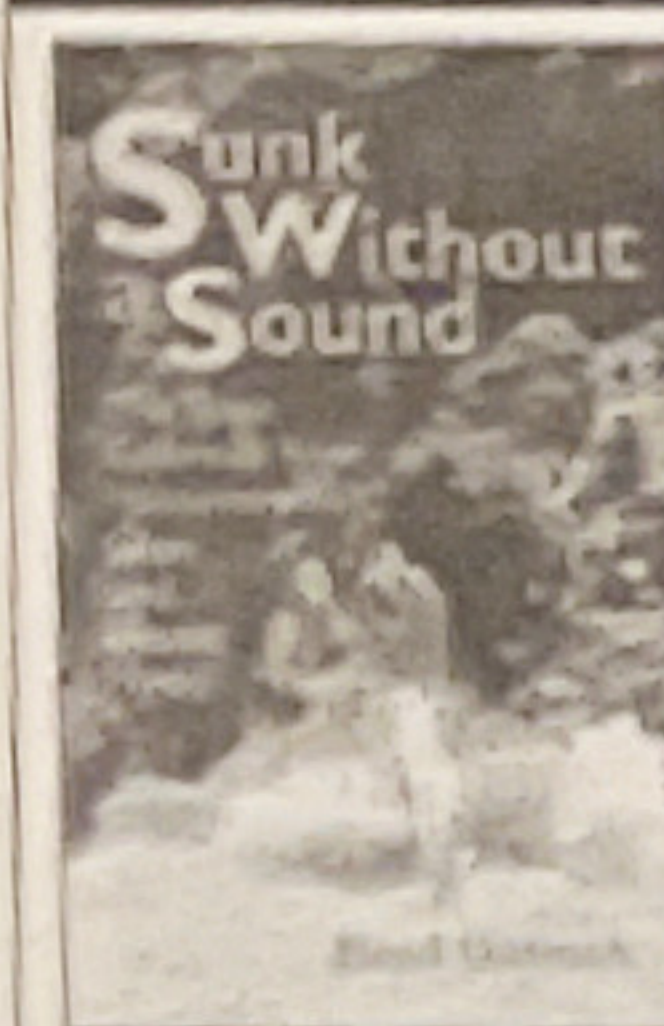


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should — but doesn't — horrify me, "Fucking toothless old miners."

The house on the hill

There are not enough jobs. A higher proportion of divorced people (almost 20 percent) live in San Juan County than in any other county in the United States. The school population, which includes kindergarten through 12th grade, just dropped from an all-time low of 71 to an expected enrollment of 45 next fall. Unemployment is at 12.5 percent, and it's estimated that it rises to 30 in the winter. Almost 20 percent of the county's residents live in poverty, including more than one out of every four of Silverton's children. All of which gives rise to motorhead rage, nervous merchants and a local populace bitter and frustrated that many of its offspring peddle rock — plain rocks — to seasonal tourists. "The economy is so unbalanced," newspaperman Thompson writes, "that it is worse than having no economy at all."

None of that matters, of course, when you drive over Molas Pass on a summer afternoon, as I did five summers ago, and drop into a valley of mountain peaks and lush forests and wildflowers. None of it matters when streams are singing, fragrant breezes sighing. Who cares about an unbalanced economy when

paradise is stretched below, waiting?

Wylie Carmack says visitors to Silverton will learn, whether they want to or not. Carmack moved here in 1959, five years before he did a two-year tour of duty for the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone, a couple of decades before, one presumes, he took up his poison pen.

"What they will learn up here," he says, "is that when hope is balanced against reality, reality always wins."

Here's what I hope: I hope that if Brill's plan does go through — last winter he took 20 skiers a day up his lift for guided, steep, back-country skiing on private property he owns or has rights to, and he hopes by the winter of 2003-2004, the BLM will have granted final approval for up to 475 backcountry skiers a day to ride his lift and, unguided, head down 1,300 acres of public land — that it doesn't turn Silverton into another overpriced, precious mountain town like all the other overpriced, precious mountain towns in the West, where the only people who can afford to linger over cinnamon rolls like internet millionaires who got out in time are internet millionaires who got out in time, where locals can't even afford to rent, where people with office jobs won't have time to talk because they have to get back to work, which will no doubt be where

work. I hope the Avalanche and the Miner's Tavern continue to prosper. I hope that Silverton remains a place of extreme weather and extreme opinions, where I can while away the day and trash the FedEx guy with UPS Dave and drink coffee with Bud as we mull road conditions and average annual snowfall and philosophize about the universe.

And here's the reality: Silverton is starved for money, weary of the train people and the train rapers, filled with former miners who lost their careers long ago and who, I suspect, would welcome a coal-belching, dioxin-leaking biochemical weapons plant, as long as it offered decent wages and year-round employment. The reality is that even if Brill means it when he says "My goal is not to turn this into another ski town," and "profits are not the dominating factor here," there will be other developers who take a less nuanced view of the bottom line. The reality is this cranky and wondrous place of unpaved roads and unleashed dogs and the occasional illegal mountain lion might not be around too much longer. The motorheads are coming. Or the trophy homes. Or both.

"Climb the mountains and get their good tidings," John Muir wrote. "Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you and the

storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves." It's the only Muir passage I ever memorized, at a time when I put more stock in the power of words and wildflowers. Now, I sit in the shack and watch snow fall and listen to my paunchy stove while I weigh hope and reality and wish I knew what salvation felt like.

I will continue to visit Silverton. To play with my nephew, to ski, to hike. To check on the property I have blown the last bit of my savings on — a plot of land on the hill that rises from the western edge of town, just below Anvil Mountain. If I ever build, I'll be sure to put in a big window that looks onto the road that skirts the bottom of the talus field. I'll sit at a desk and watch Bud and Sweet Pea, if they're still alive, taking their slow, late afternoon strolls. And if what I fear comes to pass, property values will soar and people who love heli-pads and drive BMWs with out-of-state plates will make me rich, which I hope will make it easier to be lost.

Steve Friedman has written for Esquire, GQ, and Outside. In October, his work will appear in The Best American Sports Writing for the third time, as well as The Best of Outside: Classic Tales and New Voices From The Frontiers of Adventure.

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