

# MOTEL LIVING and SLOWLY DYING

---

*By Craig Lancaster | Fall 2017*



**Originally published in the Los Angeles Review of Books**

BY TRADE AND BY SELF-IDENTITY, I am a novelist. But to keep the groceries coming, I am also an oil pipeline worker. They call me a “pig tracker,” which means I monitor the location of cleaning and diagnostic tools traveling through pipelines, and when I’m not in the field, I’m in a hotel somewhere along the line, sleeping my way toward my next shift.

The particular rhythms of what I do — track the pig in its journey beneath the prairies, hand off the job to my counterpart on the other shift, find a hotel near where I’ll rejoin the line, sleep, lather, rinse, repeat — have made me something of an unintentional expert on hotel living and on the America nobody dreams about seeing on vacation.

I travel by secondary and tertiary roads, skulking around the pipeline on 12-hour shifts, either midnight to noon or noon to midnight. I work alone, mostly. And when the shift is done, I catch my rest in places like Harrisonville, Missouri, and Iola, Kansas. Lapeer, Michigan, and Amherst, New York. Toledo, Ohio, and Thief River Falls, Minnesota. I’ve learned that Super 8s are not always super, and Comfort Inns sometimes afflict the comfortable. I rack up IHG points and Wyndham Rewards and Choice Privileges. I may never have to pay for a personal car rental again, so fulsome are my Enterprise points.

Sometimes I lose track of what day it is, or when, exactly, I’m going home again. But the places where I set my head stand ready to reorient me with a comfortable sameness. There’s the antiseptic smell of a well-cleaned lobby, the paper coffee cups in my room wrapped in plastic, the rattle and hum of the air-conditioning unit. When I arrive in the wee hours, the lonely night auditor is often all too happy to talk. When I leave at 11 p.m. for my next night shift, I often have to talk the clerk through my reasons for arriving and departing in the same 12-hour period. Twenty-four hours a day, there’s coffee of varying age and quality.

I’ve come to value the simple things: a clean room, reliable hot water, and a staff that respects a do-not-disturb sign. And learned the sublime wisdom of a song called “My Favourite Chords” by a Canadian band called the Weakerthans.

I want to fall asleep / to the beat of you breathing / in a room near a truck stop / on a highway somewhere ...

The words are a concise demonstration of language’s power to inspire cinema in our heads. They also form a picture of my life. Because the truth is, I’ve been living in motels since I was a child.

MY FATHER WAS AN EXPLORATORY WELL DIGGER, and I traveled with him every summer through the American West, far off the interstates, in a nomadic way that was worlds different from my life at home with my mother in Fort Worth, Texas.

In the summer of 1981, when I was 11 years old, I lived with him and my then-stepmother in a bottom-floor room at the Park Plaza Motel in Sidney, Montana. Dad was working near

Watford City, North Dakota, about 50 miles east, but he used Montana and its lack of a sales tax as a home base. I'd ride out to the fields with him during the day, peeling around on my motorcycle, then return with him and his crew to Sidney in the evening, reuniting with my stepmother. The three of us would have dinner, watch some TV — it was the summer of Fernando Valenzuela's miracle stint with the Los Angeles Dodgers — and then start the cycle again.

I catalog my boyhood summers by where dad was working at the time — Elko, Nevada (1976); Baggs, Wyoming (1977); Montpelier, Idaho (1978); and so on. But that particular summer in Sidney stands out from the others in all sorts of ways. For one thing, the festering anger between dad and his wife, making their second failed attempt at marriage, was too near and threatening. I tried to escape by hanging out with dad's helpers when I could. Once those guys helped me score a bag of Beechnut, which I chomped happily until I got desperately sick. They teased me, almost to the point of cruelty but not so badly that they'd provoke dad. They introduced me to Aerosmith. So, yeah, it had its upsides.

I returned to Montana at age 36 for the last leg of my career as a journalist. My first wife was a woman who grew up just north of Sidney, and thus the next several years were spent driving into and out of that town, passing the Park Plaza coming and going, watching it age right along with me. And now in this era of the Bakken Shale, my frequent trips to pipeline jobs in North Dakota — Williston, Minot, points beyond and between — also carry me through Sidney. Each one sends the summer of 1981 a little deeper into the memories and brings the place I know now a little more to the fore.

It's still oil-soaked. Still a little rough-edged. Still pleasant in its own way. Probably still a place where a little guy can swallow too much tobacco juice if he's not careful.

Some people have Paris. I have Sidney. I'm okay with that.

MY LIFE IN MOTELS DOESN'T BEAR MUCH RESEMBLANCE to what I've read or seen; it's too ordinary, too predictable. I'm not Humbert Humbert, dragging his Lolita through the West, a step ahead of Clare Quilty. I've never met someone like Juan Chicoy, the impromptu innkeeper from John Steinbeck's *The Wayward Bus*, or the precocious little girl Moonee and her crazy mom from the recent movie about permanent motel existence, *The Florida Project*. My stays are straight credit-card transactions, reimbursed by my employer, and generally last just a few hours before I move along again. My intimacy with these places runs no deeper than: "Welcome back, Mr. Lancaster."

There is, of course, a darker, seemingly hopeless side to these homes away from home. In left-behind precincts of cities and towns — indeed, on the main drag that connects my comfortable suburban neighborhood in Billings, Montana, with downtown — you can find

bedraggled motels where single-room occupancy often means a family of five sharing a sink, a shower, and maybe a kitchenette. These are the working destitute, or the pensioned-off. These folks are able to scrape together several hundred dollars for rent, but not the first and last months and a water deposit and a credit score required for a less expensive apartment, let alone the three-percent down on an FHA mortgage.

We tend to think of homelessness in terms of cardboard boxes on street grates and cars that double as living spaces, but that's a small aperture of the overall problem. These past-their-glory motels house people who work hard — and who face crushing odds of ever getting ahead of their circumstances. And as we run the average rents in places like Seattle and San Francisco to the stratosphere, without an attendant increase in affordable housing, we're falling deeper into crisis.

In Billings, where I live when I'm not in a motel, we have 110,000 people, and 621 of them are homeless kids in the public school system. That's the total from the most recent full school year. Of those 600-plus, 104 live the peculiar form of it at motels with names like the Lazy K-T. By any measure, it's a shameful number. Teachers and administrators at the schools write grant proposals for supplemental breakfast programs. My friends who oversee classrooms have mastered the subtle art of pulling a kid aside and, without shaming him, learning whether he has a winter coat. When the answer is no, they find a way to get him one.

Elizabeth Lloyd Fladung, who has photographed American families on the margins for the past two decades, told *The Nation* in 2015: “The sight of these iconic structures now serving as home to scores of destitute people who don't seem to have any chance at the American Dream really shows just how little infrastructure there is to help poor people in need, and how much damage decades of wage stagnation has done.”

It's the what-might-have-been scenario for my father, the formerly nouveau riche exploratory driller whose fortunes crashed in 1983 along with that wave of the oil economy. He's now on Social Security and a small VA disability, mostly blind, although stubbornly semi-independent. A decade ago, I persuaded him to move closer to me, found him a one-bedroom condo he could afford, and have helped him when I'm able and when he's needed it. I drive him to doctor's appointments and weekly grocery store visits. When I'm at home, I spend an hour or so with him a day, watching TV, playing backgammon, listening in the rare instances when he wants to talk.

A good deal of my mental energy is expended on making sure I see him off this mortal coil with love, and on hoping nothing happens to me before he's gone.

I'M WRITING THIS FROM A MICROTEL IN WILLISTON, NORTH DAKOTA, on a pleasant mid-October day when the air carries a hint of what's coming to the northern

corridor. I'm here for a pipeline run, of course, and I'm feeling the uncertainty of what's ahead. I might be here three days and then drive back home, five hours away, before returning next week. But there's talk of stringing together the three jobs ahead of us into one unchecked block of work. If that's the case, I'll be here 10 days, maybe 12. Fourteen hours ago, I kissed my wife back in Billings and said, "I'll be back when I'm back." The gaping unknown is something we've learned to manage.

However long I'm here, the Microtel is a humane enough facsimile of home. The room rate includes a hot breakfast, fresh cookies await on the front desk in the afternoon, the towels are plentiful and clean, and the bed is comfortable. I have a generous per diem. If I take care of my responsibilities out in the field and drive prudently three or 12 days from now, I'll make it back safely to my wife, my cat and dogs, and my father. And that's the whole point. The Microtel is where I live when I'm here. But I'm going to leave it behind, shed it like a skin, and I don't ever want the impermanence to be permanent.

