

Wed., July 19: The Dead of Deadwood and a Buffalo Jump

At 7:30 the next morning I walked back into the office, rang the bell, and when the same gentleman appeared, said, “Can I give you some money?” He said he had completely forgotten, and went on to paint an encouraging picture of humanity. In winter months, he said, they operated on an honor system. Either he described, or I pictured, him leaving a bowl of keys on the desk. He said they had only been stiffed once, by a drunk guy the police brought in rather than throwing him in jail.

Wanting more than a energy bar for the breakfast not offered by the motel, I wandered the town looking for an actual breakfast, there usually being at least one such place in a tourist town this size. Downtown Custer is basically two rows of two-story buildings along a couple blocks of an overly wide main street, Mount Rushmore Road. Contrary to my first impression from last night, I decided you get a sense of what it used to be like, but too much has been modernized; it mostly just feels like a modern tourist trap in a pretty setting.

The Mexican restaurant advertising breakfast did not fit the bill. Another joint didn’t seem right either, though what appeared to be an athletic team was gathering in front, given the build and attire of the young men emblazoned with Michigan State University logos. I exchanged nods with a coach in passing and wondered what they hell they were doing in Custer in the middle of summer. I settled for a blueberry muffin and Dole orange juice at a coffee shop, throwing a longing look at the menu board listing a chai.

Stopping for very expensive gasoline as we left town, I had a bit of excitement as a substantial RV pulling a car ever so barely squeezed between the vehicles parked in front of the quick-rip on one side, and the Sage’s nose and gas pump on the other. I couldn’t imagine what he thought he was doing, and indeed he gave a disgusted look at the pump he could not reach and drove on.

At the main intersection, I turned left to follow US 16 up a narrow valley, only to pull over shortly after. Another experiment I was trying on this trip involved headaches. In addition to my sad caffeine discovery, I realized had also gotten into the *habit* of headaches when driving. I found switching from my progressive bifocals to my cheap, around-the-house single-vision glasses helped. But then I realized I was carrying stress in my forehead when driving, anticipating the headache, which caused the headache. On Day 1, I began working to relax my face, if you will. It tried to hurt again, and I fought it off. Today I awoke with one and couldn’t shake it. Nine days without one seemed like a

victory. I then realized I'd been so overconfident, I took out the small container of aspirin that used to ride in the glove box. I found a wide shoulder where we could safely pull over, next to a helicopter tour business, and dug the bottle out of my toiletries bag on the side of the road.

Moments later, I turned to see another massive mountain carving. This one is visible from the highway, but having been forced to support Rushmore, I was damn sure going to pay the 15 bucks for this one. In 1939, Lakota Chief Henry Standing Bear was looking for someone to carve an answer to Rushmore, started 12 years earlier. The success of sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski of Boston at the World's Fair that year led Standing Bear to contact him. Ziolkowski agreed and came here to carve a massive monument to Crazy Horse.

The foundation supporting the ongoing work built a museum adjacent to the home Ziolkowski built himself, married in, and raised 10 children in across a valley from the mountain. It's an odd mishmash, starting with a Native American museum laid out at angles, with modern crafts and artworks of no interest to me. I passed through the edge of the gift shop to an outdoor plaza, to a gallery of larger works, and finally into the

Ziolkowski home. I found myself in a room of light wood with curved walls, trying to figure out what was going on, because it provided no clear history. Instead there was a hodgepodge of his art, collectibles, and photos, including a sweet one of him and his wife dancing in the



room. Hanging above one end was what looked like a half-attic with a bike, various pots and vases, and other miscellany, again with no explanation.

In one corner was a split door, top open to expose the kitchen and a tile-floored dining room beyond. A sign said it was built in 1949 and still in use; by whom, it did not say, but presumably some descendants still live there, at least part time. I wanted to see his workshop. Signs directed me out the far side of the living (?) room and at a slant along an outdoor sidewalk.

After passing through a door and a hallway, I was presented with the best example of a restored frontier-era stagecoach I've seen, from the Deadwood-to-Cheyenne (Wyo.) run. Other random historical items surrounded it, including a British Army uniform from the Revolutionary War era—the red coat that led to the epithet “Redcoats.” An active workshop appeared to be beyond a doorway behind them, but again, no signage indicated either rooms' original function nor the provenance of these items. Shaking my head, I made my way back to the plaza.



On the western end was a 16-foot high, 16-ton plaster model by Ziolkowski of what the mountain is intended to someday be: Crazy Horse on a horse pointing over its head. In a brochure from the museum, Ziolkowski is quoted as explaining it is a “response to the derisive question” a white man asked the war leader, “Where are your lands now?” Crazy Horse pointed and responded, “My lands are where my kindred lie buried.” (I must note, a few minutes on two search engines provided no reliable source for this story, nor a single answer as to the identity of the questioner.)



A panel next to it supplied planned dimensions, such as:

- Overall: 563' high, 641' long
- Face: Nine stories tall
- Eyes with lids: 9' high
- Nose: 28' high, sticking out 9'
- Horse's ears: 45' long

Preliminaries out of the way, it was time for the main attraction. I walked the rest of the way east across the plaza, split inexplicably by a fake waterway with two bridges. The left-side "Viewing Veranda" was busy, so I skipped my way through a large extended family hovering in front of the not-yet-open restaurant to the right side's railing. The statue's current version has his face and an incomplete arm and finger. Still, it is already impressive, even from three-quarters of a mile away. Zooming in with the video camera, I could see a two small cranes, a backhoe, a pickup, and safety fences atop the arm-to-be.



Back on the road, another scenic byway, soon enough I got a fuller understanding of why they're called the Black Hills. The evergreens on the hillsides grew thick and dark-green. They appear black on the shaded sides. The two small towns I saw were basically like

those in the Appalachians except for the pines surrounding them. It amuses me that some of the peaks are higher than the Appalachian Mountains, yet these are called “hills.” Like every Easterner I’ve talked to who has seen the Rocky Mountains, it is hard to see the Apps as “mountains” afterward. When I was at Los Alamos National Laboratory, I worked daily at a higher elevation than the highest mountain in North Carolina!

A green-and-white sign pointed me to Galina. I had decided against exploring this ghost town, but my early start and curiosity sent me off to the right and six miles down a clay-and-gravel road past occasional residences. The first seemed permanent, and then likely vacation homes showed up on the sides of the tight valley. However, no falling-down mining town emerged. Later the Web told me I was off by a letter: The ghost town is Galena.

Shortly afterward I pulled into the fabled Deadwood Gulch, named for the dead trees here at the time. Two years after gold was found in the Black Hills, miners tried out the creek beds here and found more. Soon these were crawling with men, and at least one woman, seeking their fortunes. In the gulch, below the junction of three creeks, other people showed up to make their fortunes off of those men by selling supplies, booze, and sex. Also arriving here were Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane, whom we first met in Hays. HBO did an entertaining series in the Aughts set in the resulting town of Deadwood.

Further introductions are due. Martha Jane Canary fit the mores and clothes of men of the day, in her appetites, style, and language. Her true history is obscured by tales told by and about her since. Supposedly she was brought west from Missouri by her parents, first to Montana and then to Salt Lake City, but they died by the time she was 15. For some years she worked a variety of jobs to support herself, though it’s debated whether one of those was prostitution. She claimed to serve as a scout for Custer and other commanders starting in 1870, but there is no evidence to support this. A reporter confirms she was a teamster on Custer’s exploration of the Black Hills, wearing a soldier’s uniform, already using her nickname of “Calamity.” It’s source is unclear, too. She also accompanied



campaigns from Fort Laramie, she claimed as a scout, but a reporter said as a camp follower—in this case maybe a prostitute.¹

One story has her meeting Hickok after arriving here in July 1876 (weeks after Custer's Last Stand). By all accounts she fell in love with him, a love unrequited. She panned in Deadwood for a time, and helped nurse smallpox victims, then moved about the West having adventures while prospecting, driving mule trains, and ranching. Meanwhile she became fodder for magazine features and cheap novels. Later in life she married and had a child, though whom she married is up for debate. In 1895 she became a star of one of Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows, which we'll explore more tomorrow. However, she got drunk and got fired. Eventually alcohol did her in, while working as a cook and washer woman back here at a brothel outside Deadwood.²



James Butler Hickok, born in Illinois, was a natural marksman who joined one of the Free State militias we talked about in Kansas as a young man. He drove a stagecoach a while, and as the Civil War broke out, killed three to five men when an argument over payment for a Pony Express station took a bad turn. This story made the national magazine *Harper's Weekly*, begetting his legend. He then scouted for U.S. forces during the Civil War. Shortly after, "Wild Bill" scouted for the first Western expeditions of Custer, among other military commanders. After a number of adventures, like fighting off a bear by hand and more gunfights, he became sheriff of Hays and brought it under control. Then he was marshal of Abilene, where he did the same, but he quit gunfighting after accidentally killing a deputy. He, too, joined a Buffalo Bill show, 20 years before Calamity Jane. Married

in Cheyenne, Wyo., after a honeymoon in Cincinnati he left for Deadwood, supposedly hoping to make enough money to bring his wife out. Some sources have him meeting

1 In the American Revolution camp followers were *not* prostitutes, nor all women, instead mostly families of the troops and others providing vital support services.

2 Of several sources I reviewed, this seems the most closely tied to documents from the day: <https://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/calamity-jane-heroine-west-or-ordinary-woman>

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Calamity Jane at Fort Laramie, and then riding the same wagon train to Deadwood. He became a peace officer, but gambling was his main source of income.

On August 2 he stupidly sat with his back to the door at a saloon. A vagrant who claimed Hickok killed his brother³ walked in and shot him in the back of the head while holding aces and eights, known ever since as the “dead man’s hand.” This is why I always want to sit facing the door in public places, as far from it as I can get—the “gunslinger’s seat,” it is called.

I wanted to pay my respects, so my first stop was the Mt. Moriah Cemetery. For once, signage was good, leading away from the edge of town up, and I do mean *up*, a winding path of small residential streets. The highest curled between a small visitor center and the cemetery entrance uphill, and down slightly to reveal parking spaces. The VC was really a gift shop with a few exhibits, not even selling cemetery tickets. I crossed the street to the ticket booth, paid two or three bucks, and map in hand walked past the vehicle gate and up the driveway to one unique graveyard.



I have been in plenty of hilly cemeteries. But the slope here is so severe, most of the graves are enclosed in terraces. Standing on the driveway, the graves to my right were at head height. The first section was newer, but soon I was by those dating to the cemetery’s founding in 1878. My first obeisance was paid, however, at one from 1934, that of Dora Dufran. She provided a

truly valuable service in Deadwood, as the madame of multiple brothels. One of these employed her friend Calamity Jane as a cook. Dufran is said to be buried with her pet parrot. I do hope he was already dead and stuffed at the time.

³ Freed on that basis after a quick trial in Deadwood, it was later discovered he had no brother, and the Deadwood trial wasn’t legal. He was retried elsewhere, found guilty, and hanged.

A few steps uphill in its own fenced-in terrace is whatever's left of Wild Bill Hickok, moved here from his first grave after Mount Moriah opened. Prior gravestones having been picked to death by souvenir seekers, the current memorial bearing his bust is from 2002. There is a picture from the early 1900s of



Calamity Jane standing at a fence already there with the memorial of the time behind her, to the right of this picture. She is just as close to him today, as she requested, buried in the terrace seen through the fence. Tradition holds locals did so as a final joke on Hickok.

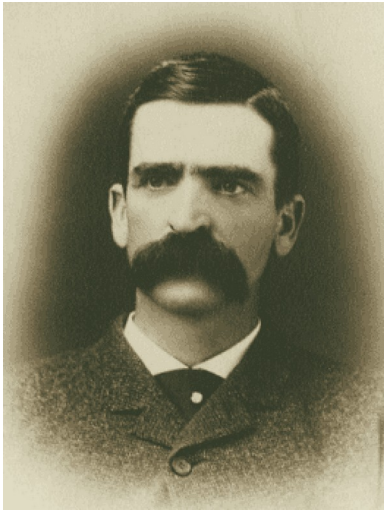
This place so entranced me, I walked the full tour despite having seen the only people I thought I knew. The flagpole was marked as having received special permission from Congress during World War I to fly the flag at night, to honor veterans. By it was a view into Deadwood, seeming a couple hundred feet below and yet only few blocks away.



A short walk uphill brought me to the segregated section for Chinese immigrants. In 1908 the Chinese community got permission to build an altar and a burner used for traditional rituals and ancestor worship. The original was replaced in 2013. A number of monuments were new as well, including this one for a child buried in 1899. Visitors had left around the base a pine cone, stones, and what I think was a mortar and pestle (used in this context for Chinese herbal medicines, I presume).



After a brief debate, I pushed myself up the hard quarter-mile climb to the top of the hill. Yet again I resorted to my trick of staring down at the ground and pushing up at pace. Still, I had to stop a couple times. “I’m going to pay for this tomorrow,” I griped aloud, panting at one curve. A view of the north side was discomfiting, the drop so precipitous.



At the crown was someone whose name didn't click right away, which pisses me off as I write this, because it should have, and I wish I'd taken in the moment. The HBO series anchored on the story of Seth Bullock, a Jewish man who moved to town with his brother when it was still a line of tents, to establish a hardware store. I mention their religion simply because positive stories of minorities are so lacking in the history of the Wild West. The real man is as beguiling as the character, the first sheriff in town, later a hotel owner and promoter of local business interests, who befriended Pres. Theodore Roosevelt. Not till I read a marker in town did I put the grave together with the show character.

Back at the base of the trail is a Jewish section, making clear again the West was not conquered by Gentiles alone.

My mistaken impression from the Web was that a historical museum was in a fancy Victorian home. The Adams House was basically the first in town with indoor plumbing and heat. I know this from a panel outside the house. There was no signage indicating where to go to get inside. I tried just walking in the front door past a knot of tourists on the front porch, who I assumed were waiting for the tour, only to find it locked. I turned back to them with a grin and jokingly complained, "Well, you could've told me!" They laughed, and one explained they thought I might be the guide. A few moments later, the door opened. I let the others in first, my usual wont, tried to follow, and was asked by the younger guide if I had a ticket. After my negation, he explained I had to go to the gift shop behind, likely the old carriage house.

"Some signage would be helpful," I said as nongrouchily as I could muster.

"Signage *would* be helpful," he agreed.

I decided not to await the next tour. The Sage was parked under a tree on the residential street. I rolled the windows down and the temperature was comfortable, so I read through a well-crafted Deadwood history site⁴ instead. It was 11:30, and a pleasant enough spot I considered eating a road lunch while sitting there. But I had planned on splurging on lunch in this iconic Western town. So I drove down, literally, and found a parking spot on a side street for compact cars, saying to the Sage, "We *are* a compact car!" A small sign down the block seemed to suggest I was supposed to pay somewhere, but again was not clear, so I decided to chance it.

4 <https://www.deadwood.com/history/>

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A block west, I was on Main Street, featuring several blocks of buildings, many brick, from the late 1800s through early 1900s.



A few steps down I turned into a saloon that claimed to have Hickok's death chair. At the end of the bar two servers looked at me like I was intruding. A sign said "Restaurant Upstairs," but there were no stairs. A family of four was slightly ahead of me, and in the back room, slightly higher than the front, they looked around in confusion just as I was doing. Deciding this restaurant didn't want my business, I moved on, never spotting the chair. Circling the commercial district, it became clear Deadwood has become another crap tourist town, with the addition of gambling in every bar/restaurant. There was only one plain ol' restaurant I could find on Main, and it was packed. Signs have been hung overhead at the addresses where Hickok was killed and his killer caught, but neither building dated from the time. The only significant old building was Seth Bullock's 1895 hotel, pictured at right.



I pee'd in public restrooms near a square used for public concerts, noting with some resignation another legit restaurant that was closed for renovation. About this point I decided I was just going to eat in the car and headed back. On the way, I spotted the actual history museum, but I was done with Deadwood.

Across the street behind the Sage, blessedly sans parking ticket, was a marker that answered a final curiosity: Where was Deadwood Creek today? Turns out it was under my feet, having been enclosed under the road. The town had flooded out several times—and burnt down twice.

We swung around the block and drove out over the creek. US 85 eventually took me back to my old friend from my first move west, I-90, eating as I went. Just across the Wyoming border I became a bit concerned, because a sign for the Vore Buffalo Jump was on the far side of lanes closed off for construction. But a detour exit appeared between orange cones, and soon I pulled into a small lot next to a small building by a big hole in the ground.

The 200-foot-wide sinkhole is centuries old. When I-90, which swerves around it, was being widened in the 1970s, engineers were concerned about the stability of its walls. They did a core sample⁵, and bones came up. Lots of them. Archaeologists were brought in, and their dig at the bottom of the pit found massive piles of bones in layers dating back to the 1500s. Further investigation showed Native Americans built lines of rock cairns from several directions and spooked buffalo herds this way, which ran right over the lip of the hole and fell at least 50 feet down. The hunters then slid down the sides to finish off any not already dead by bashing them in the head, and women followed to dress the animals (strip the hides, meat, marrow, and useful bones).

⁵ In effect, a hollow tube is driven deep into the ground and pulled up, bringing along inside a snapshot of the layers below.



In the gift shop, the young man took my money and offered to see if I could join the 3 o'clock tour, which had just kicked off. He ran out the back door to a building shaped like a tipi near the edge of the hole, and returned in a minute telling me to go ahead. The building in question was a museum, and also contained a college-age tour guide talking to a family of five with grandpa, and a young couple. She was telling them basic NA info I knew, so I skimmed the exhibits about the jump as she finished, and then thanked her for letting me join late. She asked if I had any questions, and I did something I was getting used to: I said I was a history writer, and thus knew the background.

"I'm a history writer." That was my job title, which took some getting used to after a career in project management and coaching. I used it again as I walked down next to grandpa, who was around my age. I'd asked him what he did. He was retired after building a logistics company. The management coach in me made curious, I asked a few questions before he inserted the obligatory what-do question in polite response. I got "semi-retired into history writing" out before our guide started her next spiel.

She was unusually knowledgeable, not just reciting from a script. She led us down the paved path with metal guard rails visible in the photo above, telling us the information I'm relaying. From below the lip it was easy, and horrifying, to imagine a waterfall of bison coming over one side or another. At the bottom a shed protected the ongoing archaeological dig, terraces of dirt carpeted with bones, plus more sticking out of the sides of the pit.



The guide taught us a couple of interesting facts about buffalo anatomy. First, to count the number of individual buffaloes in the pit, the scientists use one bone, a vertebrae at the base of the skull. It is the most common bone found in the pit because it was the only one useless to the Natives. I failed to ask, but I'm guessing they were too small to offer much bone marrow or use as a tool. Most of the remaining bones in the hole were broken and scraped. She also noted that circles of buffalo skulls have been found across the West, apparently for some spiritual practice, so counting skulls in the pit would not afford an accurate number.

The second fact is about the hump. I guess I'd never really thought about what was inside. Yet I was still surprised when she pointed out some sets of bones that looked like ribs, but actually underlie the hump. You can see one in the upper right corner of the pic above. There were sample bones you could touch, which I did.

On the way back, the guide commented to one of the tour members that it was humid. I didn't resist saying, "No, it isn't," jocularly, then explaining I was from N.C. and born in Florida. She smiled and acknowledged the difference, adding that the equivalent out here is when people say it's windy. Her response was, "It's 60 MPH... that's just Tuesday."

Out front, parked next to the Sage in the suddenly busy parking lot, was a phenomenal set of female legs sitting on the tailgate of a pickup with a high camper top. I did my level best to keep my looks flitting and uncreepy, especially after I picked up from their accents that she was part of a Swedish family on a Great American Road Trip. I didn't wish to be

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a black mark on American tourism and males in general, but significant discipline was required.

The side road emptied, as I'd hoped, onto Wyoming 111, which led to WY 24, a scenic byway added to my plans the night before because of where it led. Scenic it was, heading north and west as the Black Hills trees slowly gave way to high-country meadows. After a time, the reason for the addition materialized in the distance. As always in the West, it was not as close as it seemed, but finally I took a right and pulled into the parking lot of a "trading post." Having observed the long line of cars coming *out* of the nearby national monument, perhaps being searched for some reason; finding online that the fee was \$25 a car; and noticing a better view of the sight from another trading post advertising ice cream across the road, a decision quickly formed. I would instead spend \$5 on an ice cream cone. We parked at the east edge of the lot across the way, away from the madding crowds, and I went in to buy happiness in the form of huckleberry ice cream on a waffle cone. Long-term happiness cannot be purchased, but short-term absolutely can.

A word of explanation for Easterners is again required. When I lived in Pullman, Wash., I had occasion to drive out to Troy, Idaho, a couple of times. It was anchored by Huckleberry Heaven, a rustic bar/restaurant and motel in the mountains of the Panhandle. I soon was introduced to huckleberries, which grow naturally only in the West, more so in cooler climes or altitudes. Demarcated by a low-level sweet flavor with a touch of sour, they are more often used as flavoring than eaten outright. I hadn't tasted them since the last time I was in Pullman, sometime around 2006. So finding huckleberry as one of the flavor options here confirmed my decision.

I drifted outside and around back, finding a deck with a perfect view of the Devil's Tower, albeit in late-afternoon shadow. Almost any American born by, say, 1969, would recognize a set of five evenly spaced tones featured as a means of connecting with aliens who had landed on Earth. The movie featuring those tones, "Close Encounters of a Third Kind," was a cultural touchstone in 1977.



The aliens supposedly landed here at a mass of volcanic rock exposed through erosion to become a crenelated mesa. Like many entranced by the film, I'd wanted to see it ever since, and now I was staring at it on a shaded deck eating huckleberry ice cream.

Of course, the story has become more complicated. Native Americans consider the mesa sacred, for reasons that seem pretty compelling when you are standing there in awe. Not only did they dislike giving it up in some broken treaty, many became infuriated when EAs started *climbing* it. The climb is so popular, I was a little surprised I couldn't see anyone doing so. Maybe the late-day shadow, which made the folds hard to pick out, as you can see in the photo, also hid the humans. Or maybe they were all on the sunny side where I suppose it is easier to see. I was glad all I could see was the Tower.

Taking advantage of the shade, I booked a room an hour or so closer to tomorrow's destination. From the parking lot I snapped a phone photo and sent it off to Tom Herbert with the caption, "Now I'm having a Close Encounter."

"That is way too cool," he responded, telling me later he shared my life dream of seeing it.

A few miles south, the byway picked up US 14 back to I-90. We continued west happily at 80 on 90. As you do so, the Rocky Mountains heave up from the horizon. I couldn't believe it had been 15 years since I saw real mountains. The bluish haze brought up another image: I am on a bus in mainland Greece. It takes a curve and the mountains of the

Peloponnesian Peninsula appear like blue whales swimming in the Corinthian Gulf below, a view seared into my mind's eye.



At a rest area on the Powder River, a metal historic marker, unusually painted a peeling brownish-red, explained the genesis of the waterway's name. The quotation, "Too thin to plow, too thick to drink," was attributed to "early settlers describing the mud swept downstream each spring." The banks have a "black brittle gunpowder appearance." Unfortunately there was no direct access to the river, several hundred feet away, to observe this.

The sign added that Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Old West outlaws famous at the time and re-made famous through a star-studded 1969 movie by that name, had their "Hole-in-the-Wall" hideout 60 miles to the southwest. (I'd checked on visiting the night before, but it's part of a guest ranch now.)

Despite having recycled all my individual maps in lieu of the atlas before the trip, I couldn't resist grabbing a Wyoming one. Comparing it to my itinerary directions for the day, copied from MapQuest, made clear they were overly complicated. I had suspected many of the steps it inserted just boiled down to "stay with this highway," making it sound like you were changing highways instead.

After a veer northwest I pulled into perfectly named Buffalo, Wyoming, and found my passable motel, the Alamo Inn. The Southside Grill looked promising for dinner online, but that promise was not fulfilled. I sat at the bar having red beans and rice (hold the sausage), cole slaw, and cornbread, each edible but not tasty. I didn't care that the interior was slightly above "dive bar," but did care the loud drunk woman sitting in the corner belonged in one, loudly hiccuping as she engaged the workers. They were increasingly agitated, apparently not by her, a known quantity. Rather, the credit card machine was not working. They suggested this had become a frequent occurrence, and had to send a customer across the street to an ATM to get cash for his bill.

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When I was ready, after waiting a while for the bartender who kept disappearing to the back, I asked a server, “Do you want to try the card, or shall I head across the street?” She said the latter probably made sense. I said okay, I’ll leave this (the journal they’d seen me writing in, as collateral) and be right back.

As I left after paying, the experience was a bit redeemed by a child, as so often happens. Toward the end of dinner the drunk had finally left, replaced by a couple with a tweener girl. The place was small and acoustically bouncy enough that I had little choice but to hear some of their conversation. It seemed they were the grandparents, and her parents owned the place. Having laid down my cash, I grabbed the journal and headed out. Although we hadn’t interacted, she wished me a good night with the poise of a future owner, which I returned like she had already grown into the role.