

The Great American Road Hotel, Motel, Holiday Inn

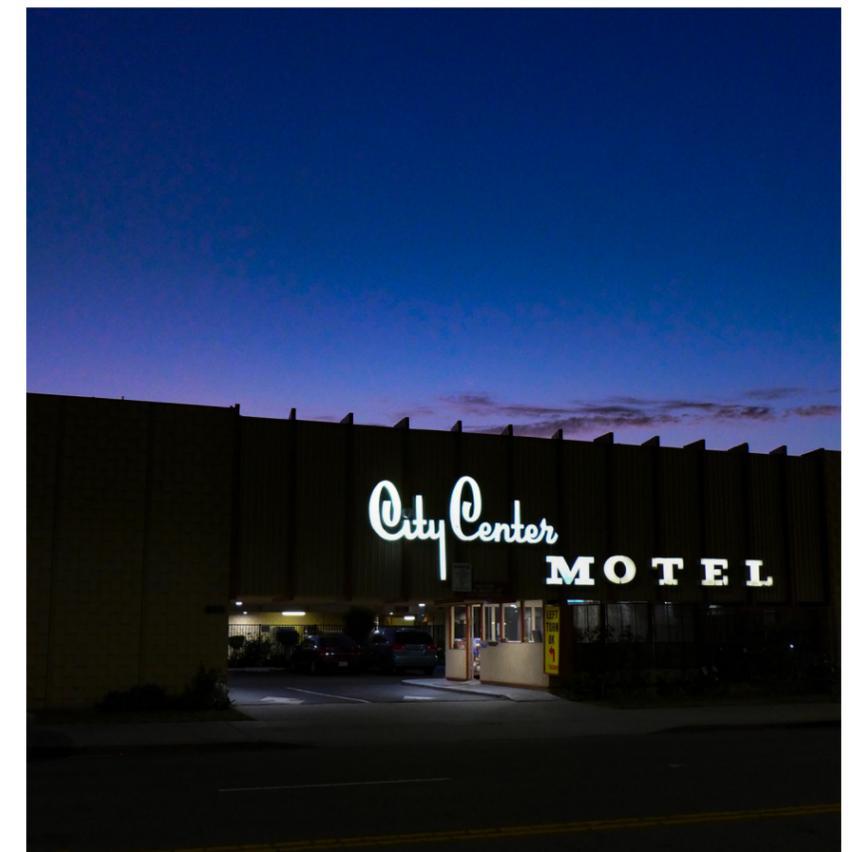
A road-trip back to the 1960s and 70s.

Words and Images: *Sarah Feeney*

I spent a lot of my Summer in Long Beach California; endlessly photographing the glorious 'City Centre Motel' or – as I had begun to call it – Overdose Motel.

It was the kind of place you'd expect to see in a not-ending-well pulp fiction paperback, or film about being on the run, on a road-trip, or some other mythology tale from the 'Great American Road' circa. 1960 onwards.

At this time in fiction, these Motels would have been 'Cash is King – in advance – No cheques' and would probably have boasted a bath in every room and / or a *Color* TV, or later, a Fax Service. Out front would have been a 1961 Chrysler New Yorker Station (a bit wonky but cool details) soon to be replaced by a 1962 Pontiac Bonneville, and in the mid-60s, any of the Buicks or Impalas. The guy at check-in would've taken guests' unmarked dollars in a dirty vest, stretched around his somewhat rotund middle. He'd have a disinterested atti-



City Centre Motel, Atlantic Boulevard,
Long Beach (*right and opposite*)



tude and all-round lapse and disrespect for morals and / or legal, beaurocratic requirements such as valid identification.

If it wasn't him at check-in, it would instead have been his ferocious, gin-swiggling redhead wife in a pair of nose-pinching glasses. She'd have been running Annie's orphanage if it weren't for the fact that her life had taken her West - to Vegas or California - instead of East - to New York or Brooklyn. In the 19th century she'd have been the brothel madam and he'd have been 'out front' on the porch in a rocking chair with a shotgun 'cross his lap. They'd have made a lotta money - strangers in town always being welcome (despite the presence of the shotgun). But they're not, they're stuck in a Motel reception at the edge of a major freeway and on the margins of society. The sports and soap operas screaming away in the room 'round back', the pre- a/c fan being feeble, and the buzz from the neon Motel sign so persistent it's literally driven them doolally. (I'm laying out some pretty grotesque stereotypes here but don't forget we're in an early 1960s pulp fiction paperback so I've got a good excuse.)

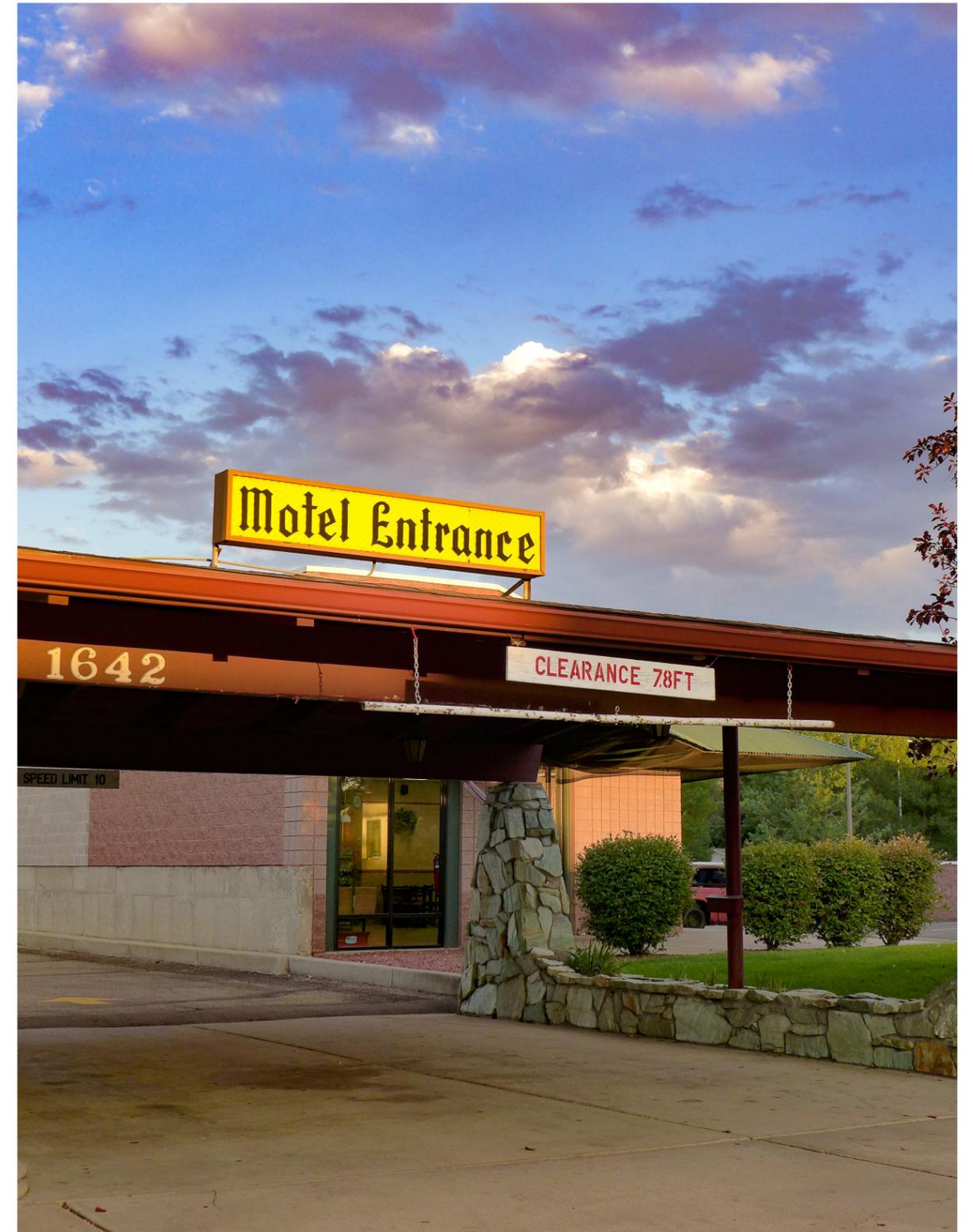
Come the next day, the maid would either discover the occupant dead in a bathtub or the bed unslept in altogether due to the place having been briefly used as a convenient, private location for some quick clandestine activity or transaction. That or the occupant long gone, having legged-it during the night after being successfully hunted-down by someone's husband, the person owed money, or the Terminator. (Or other visitor from the future). The extraordinarily heavy ashtray next to the extraordinarily heavy TV having been of no use during the fisticuffs, despite both having the potential to crush with one deftly executed blow.

For a stay in Overdose Motel the wearing of Snakeskin boots - or jacket à la Nicholas Cage in Wild at Heart - would have been mandatory as was the consumption of cheap liquor swigged straight out of a quart bottle preferably whilst still behind the wheel. Smoking in the No-Smoking rooms was standard, if there was even a No-Smoking room at all, there would have been no natural daylight once inside your room, the curtains were always drawn, and the pool not swam in since 1955.

By the 1970s the Overdose Motels whereabouts would have been well known to the Vice Squad, drug dealers (and takers), Columbo, Dirty Harry and the local fire department.

Their destination as a viable, cheap lay-over while conducting legit business would probably still have been popular. The businessman or indeed salesman (he would most definitely have been a man) would have frequented a cheap Motel when in need of a much deserved, always-be-closing celebratory Martini (or commissary Whiskey) after a long trip round North America with a trunk-full of vacuum cleaners or window cleaning equipment.

The Lamplighter Motel, Main Street, Longmont, Colorado (above and opposite)



By this point in time the car out front would have switched – I want to paint the picture with a period correct Studebaker, as this was the car owned by probably the most iconic of American salesmen: Willy Loman. Indeed the 'Death' in Death of a Salesman took place in his Studebaker. But the Studebakers of the 1970s don't feel right so let's go with imagining our salesman in a battered 1966 Studebaker Lark instead – he's still driving the last one off of the production line well into the 1970s. Probable.

He would have swung his Lark into the convenient parking spot outside the door, hopped into the welcoming steamy shower, hopped into the convenient dive-bar next door on the freeway, hopped into bed and then hopped straight back out onto the road the following morning. We suspect there would have been the odd secretary or old love involved somewhere in one of those 'hops' – roadside call phones leave no trace and tell no tales. All he'd need was a Quarter and no sense of regret or guilt while organising his night of illicit, middle-aged (and slightly past-it) passion between the (polyester) sheets and Vacuum accessories.

It's all a somewhat dark nostalgia that clings around America's Motels. To those outside the US this is their main appeal – they're a part of America's cultural heritage, the sort that goes hand-in-hand with some of its best crime and road novels. Sadly, many are being torn down or neglected. If they're not of architectural worth they seem to be considered of very little value, not worthy of a preservation order. I hear that a few have been 'revived' into a more gentrified, overly-stylised, overly-expensive version of their former gloriously-grubby-glory.



The annual car meet of the Road Devils at the Caribbean Motel, a historic motel located in Cape May County, New Jersey in an area now known as the Wildwoods Shore Resort Historic District. The motel was built in 1957 in the Doo-Wop style by Lou Morey, whose family built many of the Wildwoods' original Doo Wop motels, for original owners Dominic and Julie Rossi. It was owned by the Rossi family until the early 1990s, when they sold it to multi-billionaire Mister Bolero, and was the first motel to use the full-size plastic palm trees that now adorn most of the Doo Wop motels in the area. The Caribbean Motel was added to the National Register of Historic Places on August 24, 2005.

To be fair, most of the damage has already been done. Many had 1990s refits that saw pretty much everything torn-out and replaced by chintz – except the bathrooms which still well-performed their original function, so no need. Some Motels, therefore, still have glorious shower and bathroom hardware that looks straight out of the jet-age or as though someone's nicked the taillights from a 1963 Ford Thunderbird and re-worked them as taps and showerheads.

To end my Summer in the US – and in order to complete the Hotel, Motel theme, I spent the night in the newly renovated TWA Hotel at JFK. A 'modern' Hotel, and why not, that still has one foot firmly planted in 1962, the main building was originally built as a terminal with the hotel wings added later during its 2016-18 renovation. Being conveniently located right at the heart of the airport, the hotel now marks the beginning, or indeed the end of, a road-trip across the states and as such, seemed a fitting place to spend my last night. As though reading my mind, and conveniently for this piece, there's a Lincoln Continental parked right out front.

Happily, I survived the night. No overdose, no being bludgeoned to death in the bath. Indeed, I continued the legacy of petty-criminality by 'removing' a good handful of TWA pencils from the room. Sorry, TWA Hotel.

I didn't get chance to stay in a Holiday Inn so it's on the list for next time. As is the wearing of a Snakeskin jacket whilst driving around in a Studebaker with a trunk full of Vacuum cleaners.



The Overniter Motel, Salt Lake City, Utah.



Above and left, the TWA Hotel at John F. Kennedy International Airport in Queens, New York. It utilises the headhouse of the TWA Flight Center airline terminal, designed in 1962 by renowned architect Eero Saarinen