

too close to their neighbours. Past the homemade signs saying “Jesus Saves” and “Pyramids for Sale” (don’t ask), I enter the town of 29 Palms. Most people come here for two reasons — the Joshua Tree National Park, and the Marine Corps Ground Air Combat Centre, California’s largest marine base. In town, crop-haired young men wait in trucks at the Carl’s Jr drive-in window, or patronise one of the improbable number of barbers, advertising a choice between “marine” and “civilian” cuts. Marines are sent to the base for “Mojave Viper” combat training before they are deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan — there’s a fake Iraqi town behind the wire, complete with a mosque, shops and Improvised Explosion Devices.

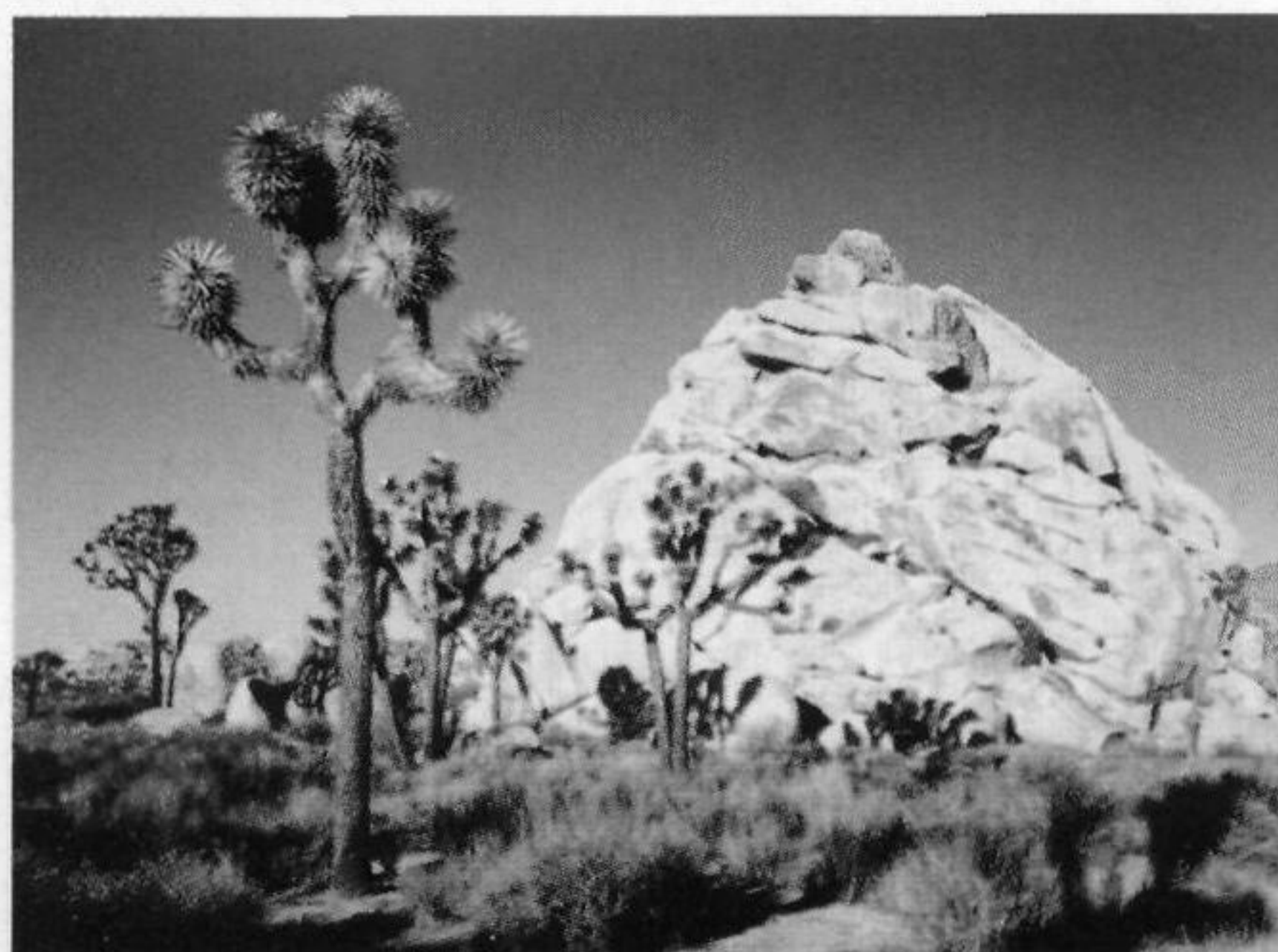
I wind up at the Harmony Motel, in a room the owner claims was occupied by the members of U2 while being photographed for their album, *The Joshua Tree*. It’s painted purple. I play the CD as I drive around. It’s hard to see what the music has to do with the place. The other musical ghost in 29 Palms is Gram Parsons, the country-rock singer who overdosed in room eight of the Joshua Tree Motel. Parsons loved the desert round here, and in a bizarre tribute, two drunken friends stole his corpse from the Yucca Valley morgue and burned it at Cap Rock, a landmark in the park.

That night, I eat the only Chinese meal I’ve ever been served with a slice of cheese melted over it, and go drinking in a bar decorated with Marine memorabilia. A toothless old guy in an Operation Enduring Freedom baseball cap buys me shots of Jim Beam and reminisces about the break-up of his first marriage, which ended after he put a rope around his wife’s neck and dragged her two miles behind his car. “I’m an asshole,” he says with a shrug. “Don’t know why. Always been that way.” Down the road, two men sit in an idling car outside the Oriental massage parlour. I end up at Smith’s Ranch Drive In, watching a Jim Carrey movie, parked between pick-ups that are reversed so their owners can sit in lawn chairs and chug beer under the stars.

THE NEXT DAY, I make a pilgrimage to the Integratron — one of the stranger monuments to man’s obsession with longevity. In 1947, George Van Tassel, an aerospace engineer, moved his family to live inside an enormous boulder, sitting alone near the settlement of Landers. One night, a Venusian spacecraft floated to earth outside and the good-looking Aryan aliens gave George a tour of the ship, explaining to him that it was Man’s destiny to take his place among the

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sentient races of the galaxy. Sadly, humans were condemned never to learn from our mistakes because of our short life span. They explained how to sort this out and George started to build the Integratron, a dome whose upper storey would spin round a central axis, generating a positive charge. People would enter downstairs, get bathed in a cloud of negative ions



FROM TOP SALVATION MOUNTAIN: LEONARD KNIGHT WENT INTO THE DESERT TO SPREAD THE WORD; STILL HAVEN'T FOUND WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR: THE JOSHUA TREE; THE SALTON SEA IS DEAD, POLLUTED BY AGRICULTURAL RUN-OFF

(very good for you, according to the Venusians) and emerge ready to evolve to the next level of cosmic community. Van Tassel gathered a huge following. UFO conventions were held at the Integratron, which attracted thousands of attendees.

Sadly, his own life had an entirely unremarkable span. When he died in 1978, men in black arrived and took away his notes and electronic equipment. The Venusian secrets were buried, presumably in a filing cabinet in Area 51, and the Integratron fell into disrepair. A few years ago, it was reopened as a meditation and healing centre. The dome is an acoustically perfect chamber. I take a sound bath — a good word for the intense experience of lying on a mat in the beautiful wooden space while someone plays crystal temple bowls, generating pure tones that seem to fill your head and body, producing relaxation and all-round good vibes.

At last, in all that emptiness, I find Salvation. To get there, you have to drive south, past the golf courses and sprinklers of Palm Springs to the Salton Sea, California’s largest lake. Once a tourist playground, it is now polluted by agricultural run-off, a glittering expanse of dead water whose banks are dotted with ruined motels. Only a few dying communities survive, mournful places like Niland — a dusty spot where I stop by the local store to ask directions. The place I’m looking for is just inland, on the site of an old army base. Slab City is a haven for people who want to live free: an unregulated trailer camp, one part Mad Max to one part retirement community. Its population of outcasts is swelled in the cooler winter months by “Snowbirds”, retirees who drive their RV’s south, following the sun.

Nearby is Salvation Mountain, the work of Leonard Knight, who went into the desert to tell the world about God’s love. Knight, now in his seventies, lives in a truck next to his creation — a vast structure built from adobe and straw, topped by a cross and painted all the colours of the rainbow. He’s worked on it every day since the late Seventies, and it keeps getting bigger. There are flowers and rivers and biblical quotations, and a flight of steps to take you to the top. Leonard’s a friendly guy, bounding out and waving as soon as I drive up. We spend the afternoon together. The mountain is getting famous now, he says, and that’s the point. He wants to spread love to the world, to get people to realise that love is the meaning of life. It’s the thing that fills the void. ☸