

## Far West (part 1)

### **News headline, July 12, 2020**

“Arizona man driving stolen vehicle caught with rattlesnake uranium, whiskey, and firearm”

We were about twenty miles from Zuni land when the troopers nabbed us. Could've gotten in on the Arizona side and then they'd've had to petition for extradition. It's a sovereign nation. But our luck broke bad in Reno, where Marty Madeiros hung us up for five days as we bargained with him for a truck. By “bargain” I mean argue. Marty owed me \$2500 for some gold dust I'd traded him, won in a game of miniature golf--I'm still good with a putter. Marty gave me 27 Liberty-head silver dollars, a Confederate five-dollar bill that he swore was real (came with authentication certificate), a sawed-off shotgun, which I hocked as soon as I could, and a truck. Not the truck we ended up with, though.

Me and SunMist were crashing at his place, which was kind of a junk yard. Marty was a fabricator and scrap man. He's the one taught SunMist how to weld. She was hardly out of her teens back in those days and Marty was already near thirty. She won't admit it, but I'm pretty sure he took advantage of her. So our connection was kind of messy and Marty wasn't ever one to deal straight, one way or another, anyway. That's how reduced my lot was, that I had to deal with a low-life like Marty Madeiros.

The jailer in Winslow wasn't a trooper. He was a county employee--a skinny nobody with a tidy potbelly and clown-big feet. He stood there, on the other side of the bars, and stared at me for a while. I was sitting on my stainless steel bunk, trying to cool down, a migraine coming on. Just a matter of time before I seized.

I nodded a greeting, tried a smile. Neither one of us was wearing a mask.

He said, "Heard you fed a rattler uranium."

Where do they get these people?

"Yeah," I said, "I've been experimenting. Got me some rattlers fifteen, nearly twenty, feet long back home."

He nodded as if to picture this. Then: "Bullshit."

"They glow in the dark, man. You should see them."

He reached to one side and flicked the overhead light off and on. "They tell me you're epileptic."

I closed my eyes and covered them with both hands.

"I could do this all night," he said.

"Would you?" I said. "Please?"

Just then I heard SunMist vomiting in the next cell.

"Oh, that's just fucking fine," the jailer said in disgust.

I uncovered my eyes.

He left the light on, then went to fetch the Matron.

"Honey bun," I said, "are you passing?"

SunMist groaned: "God. Damn. Devil!"

"Hold on," I said. "I'm here." Like this was supposed to be comforting.

Hearing SunMist's pain--the way she moaned and growled and gasped--gave me the shakes. As bad as watching a dog fight.

"Hey, can we get some HELP here?" I hollered down the hall, pressing my face against the cool bars, my tongue soured with the taste of iron.

The best the Matron could offer was two Tylenol-plus and a paper cup of water.

“She needs oxycontin,” I said.

“Is that what you think?” said the Matron. I could tell she was smirking behind her pink mask. Her hair dyed orange and pulled back in a pony tail, she had the build of an Olympic swimmer.

“It’s kidney stones,” I said. “We’re talking heavy duty pain.”

The Matron turned away. “No, sir,” she said. “We’re not talking at all.”

It didn’t seem to bother her that the jailer beside her—now wearing one of those cheap blue plastic masks—hadn’t covered his nose.

He said, “That means good night.” He winked at me, then flicked off the light.

All night I listened to SunMist fight her battle. By the time I saw daylight glowing on the hallway skylight, I was sick with grief. A migraine hammered the back of my eyes.

*Knock knock.*

*Who’s there?*

*Police!*

*Police who?*

*Police let me out!*

Nonsense like that reverberates through my head when I’m in migraine mode. I’m idiotic with pain. Still, I managed to stand straight when they brought me before the judge. They left SunMist writhing on the floor of her cell. “Indisposed,” they told the judge, a silver-haired woman with pink-framed eyeglasses and a small nose. Her forehead was peeling from sunburn. I pictured her fishing all day at the local reservoir.

"You the one with the stolen truck?" she asked.

Her mask was fancy cloth with a big sunflower over it.

Blue Eyes and Sideburns--the troopers--were there, beside me, Blue Eyes with his notebook open, both of them tightly masked.

I raised my voice to make it clear through the mask they'd given me: "As I explained, your honor, that truck was gifted to me by Marty Madeiros in Reno."

"Was Mr. Madeiros with you when you were stopped?"

"No reason for him to be with us. It's not like we're friends."

She studied the charge sheet, then looked up, narrowing her eyes at me: "You don't look well, Mr. Dennis."

"I suffer from migraines," I said. "And epilepsy."

"And your wife?"

"Not my wife," I said. "She wouldn't marry me in a million years. It's kidney stones for her. She's passing one as big as a marble."

Her Honor considered this a moment. "You know as well as I, Mr. Dennis, nobody can pass a stone that big."

I nodded. Then said politely: "I wouldn't tell her that."

Her Honor took hold of her gavel, like she was tempted to make a noise but then thought better of it. She seemed to grimace and said, "We've impounded your truck, confiscated your gun, and euthanized your snake."

"Oh, the poor thing!" I blurted.

"Nothing poor about a rattler," she said.

“He didn’t deserve that!” I must’ve sounded heartbroken. “He did *nothing to nobody!* It was all MY fault.”

“Well, there you go,” Her Honor said. “That’s the key to the whole affair, isn’t it--your poor judgment.”

I sighed, pulled off my mask to wipe my face.

“Your mask, Mr. Dennis.”

I put it back on, those elastic straps biting at the back of my ears. The overhead lights were making my eyes smart. The room seemed to sparkle. At last I said, “With due respect, your honor, what *affair?*”

“Your scheme with the uranium and the illegal liquor.”

“That’s homemade liquor, nothing illegal about it. Uranium’s legal at that weight. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Expired license, Mr. Dennis? Unregistered handgun? Stolen truck?”

If they want to get you--because they’re bored or desperate or just hard-hearted--they’ll get you. Doesn’t matter what you might say. And it’s not like I had money for a lawyer. Nothing about me gave them pause, much less a scare. To them I was as common and unsavory as roadkill.

We were two days in holding, then the Public Defender got bail low enough to put us on the street, probably because SunMist’s pain was freaking them out. They knew we couldn’t run before our court date. Hell, we could hardly walk. I’m not sure where they expected us to stay. Maybe in an alley? Like everywhere else, Winslow has its share of homeless.