

Fiction
3,520 words

Far West

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 Winslow jailer 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 had its share of homeless.

The town was so desperate for attractions, it had erected a statue of Jackson Browne on the corner of its main intersection. Then they built an annual festival around it. That's what you get out here, where nothing much is happening but the heat and dust and a rock-studded horizon.

"You wait here," I told SunMist. Wearing the crummy blue mask they'd given her, she was sitting on a sun-beaten concrete sidewalk bench. I positioned myself to shade her: a big woman with a black rope of hair to her waist. I don't mean ugly big, I mean tall and no-shit strong. Beautiful too. She was in such pain she could hardly talk. There was a blotch of red at her mouth, her lower lip bloodied from biting.

"Wait?" she said at last. "For what?"

"I'm getting us out of here," I said.

"Is that what--" She sucked in a breath. "You want? Prison?"

"You know what we are to them," I said. She leaned forward as if to brace herself for a sharp turn. When she recovered, I continued: "We're *recreation*. A side show. Like freaks at a carnival. That's all."

"We're. Almost. Home."

"Then let's get home," I said.

Zuni land. A sovereign nation. Sure.

I imagined she watched me walk off, maybe watched with affection, even love, because I was taking care of her. Or trying to. It was something I had to prove because nothing else had gone right.

Nobody sets out to be a fuck-up. But every time I came to a turn, it seemed I'd go the wrong way. Let me be clear: my *problem* wasn't about me getting my kicks no matter what. It was about something deep inside me that I couldn't get right, kind of like the needle of a compass that can't find magnetic north.

Didn't take me long to find Winslow's public library. In case you don't know, that's pretty much HQ for the homeless these days: the public library. You got computer access, clean bathrooms, and comfy couches. They'll let you stay till closing as long as you don't sleep on the furniture.

I wet my hair down at the water fountain outside, tucked in my T-shirt, tidied my mask. Did I look homeless?

Winslow had no Uber or Lyft, but it did have something called DriveLite. I was able to contact a driver using my Gmail and he got right back to me, said his car was in the shop but he'd borrow a four-wheeler from his neighbor. No worries, he said.

When I returned to SunMist on her bench, he was already there, pulled to the curb in a rusting Blazer. I saw him leaning over the passenger side and talking to her through the open window. Hardly more than a teenager--a still-pimpley skinny white kid, probably no more than a wisp of whiskers on his chin. He wore dirty jeans and, despite the heat, a denim jacket over a T-shirt that said, "That's All Folks!" His mask was black, decorated with one of those Day of the Dead skulls.

SunMist squinted up at me and said, "Fucker's trying to pick me up."

"He's our driver, sweat pea!" Then I leaned into the open window and said, "Hey, man, you couldn't borrow something better than this?" Joking.

The kid seemed to pucker as if to spit. Then: "Nobody forcing you to take a ride with me." He stared with eyes that reminded me of a rabbit.

I helped SunMist into the back. I took the front.

"What's her problem?" the kid asked.

"She'll be okay," I said. "Just get us out of town."

He glanced back at her. "She don't look okay."

Her face was the color of cold oatmeal. But here's the thing: nobody's ever died from passing a kidney stone.

She leaned back and closed her eyes. "Let's get the fuck outta here!"

The kid said his name was Timothy but friends called him Cochise. I couldn't tell if the nickname was ironic, racist, or what.

I said, "You know all about Cochise?"

The kid drove fast. The Blazer shuddered and quaked like it was full of steam and maybe about to explode. Hot wind roared through the open windows.

"Cochise!" the kid nearly shouted over the noise. "Apache warrior from right hereabouts. Fought the Spanish who were trying to settle these parts. Then fought the Americans."

I pulled off my mask. Just too fucking hot.

"You mean the white men," I said.

The kid nodded: "He didn't stand a chance!"

We were already on the interstate, speeding east. It felt good to be moving.

I said, "We're headed for the Zuni reservation."

"You ain't Indian," he said.

"Didn't say I was," I said.

"You married to her?" Like he wanted to be next in line.

"Her name's SunMist," I said. "We might get married." I was able to say this only because I knew she wasn't listening. Saying it made it sound like a wish.

"They didn't kill him," the kid said.

"Cochise?"

"He died on the reservation. Cancer."

"So he's your hero?" I said.

"I wouldn't mind scalping a few people." Then he turned and winked at me. I don't like a child winking at me. It was then I noticed the big Bowie knife in the leather scabbard he had strapped to his right calf.

Men and knives, it's a thing in the West.

At the Holbrook junction, I said, "You want to stay on 40."

The kid didn't seem to hear. He went south on 180.

I said, "You know a better way?"

"Fuck yeah," he said.

I've never had a kid, not that I know of. Couldn't really tell what this one was capable of.

A good kid? bad kid? High school drop out? Living in his parents' RV behind their house?

Just then SunMist said, "I've been reading him." She could do that, sometimes know exactly what I was thinking, sometimes read straight through a stranger.

I turned to her: "Who?"

"Him." She pointed. Her eyes were still closed, like she was meditating. "He's gonna rob us."

At first I didn't get it. "What's that, sweet pea?"

The kid glanced at her in the rearview. "She a shaman?"

"She *knows* shamans," I said. Then I got it: this kid wasn't our driver. Just some punk cruising, looking for an opportunity, and here he'd found one. How stupid am I?

I said to him: "Is it true--you're gonna rob us?"

"Yeah, pretty much," he said.

We sped past the south entrance to the Petrified Forest National Park. Tourist season was at its highest. News said everybody was in RVs and tents to get relief from the pandemic. You needed reservations at every campground. I was hoping we'd all get relief in autumn, but some said it'd be years.

I said, "All we want is to get to Zuni land, man. Just go north on 191, then east on 61. It can't be more than fifty miles. I can pay you."

The kid shook his head. "I don't have time for shit like that."

Then, for the longest time, I couldn't bring up a word, never mind I'd always been a talker when trouble came. I was thinking of life before the pandemic, before everybody went mostly crazy. When I met SunMist, I'd been waiting for something good. Like waiting for a bus that was late, that maybe would never come. And then I looked up and there she was. SunMist

opened her door and nodded for me come on in and I said to myself, "All right, sir, maybe you are a lucky man after all."

At last I said to the kid, "I got liberty head silver dollars. A whole bag of them."

The kid said, "I never seen silver dollars except in the pawn shop."

He said "the" pawn shop because he knew of only one. That's what we were dealing with.

"You can have them all," I said. "Just get us to Zuni land. It's right on the state line, at the end of 61."

"Told you I can't do that. But for sure I'll take your silver dollars!"

We were coming in to St. Johns, another nowhere town that once had a reason to be but now made you wonder, *Why would anybody...?*

I thought maybe when he slowed for a light, I could jump out. But how was I going to coordinate this with SunMist, who sat in the back holding tight to herself like a woman in labor?

I said, "If you're gonna rob us, maybe you shouldn't be driving. You think of that?"

"Hey, it's no big deal," he said. "I'm not gonna kill you."

"Really?" I said. "That's a relief."

"No way would I do that," he said. "Not somebody like you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The kid glanced at me like I was joking. "You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"You're famous, man. *Notorious!*" He handed me his cell phone. "Google 'Arizona Man Driving Stolen Truck.'"

Confused, I held his phone in both hands.

“Do it, man!”

I did as he instructed. And there it was: my mug shot and this headline: “Arizona man driving stolen vehicle caught with rattlesnake, uranium, whiskey, and firearm”

I groaned. That photo made me look insane.

SunMist tapped me on the shoulder. “Lemme see.”

I passed the phone back to her, then sat there thinking of all the people--like Marty Madeiros--who’d see me online and shake their heads in disgust and mean-spirited glee. *What a loser! What a laugh!*

But it isn’t like you think! I wanted to tell them. *It’s much more! It’s much less!*

“Holy shit,” said SunMist. “Why they pickin’ on you and not me?”

By this time, we were well out of St. John, speeding north on one of the loneliest highways in the state.

What a laugh! What a loser!

“I need that phone back,” the kid said. He held his hand out.

“You want it, you come back here and get it,” SunMist said.

“If I come back there,” he said, just audible over the wind noise, his voice muffled, “I’m gonna take more than that phone.” He extended his open hand farther.

SunMist grabbed his wrist and wrenched it down, hard against the seatback. I heard it snap loud as the crack of a stick. The kid yelped in pain and fright, reared back, letting go of the steering wheel with his left hand. I grabbed the wheel. Now SunMist had him in a choke hold.

“Don’t kill him!” I said.

“Little cockroach,” she growled, yanking him nearly over the seat. The kid was gargling, his rabbit eyes wide with terror. His right hand flopped useless from his broken wrist. His left hand clawed the headliner for purchase. I was holding the wheel steady. But then he stamped on the accelerator. The engine whined, the Blazer lurched, then the kid kneed the wheel and I lost my grip. We rocketed off the shoulder, rumbling over sage and creosote, their weedy woody scent engulfing us, the Blazer bucking like a shot bronco.

Then--boom!--we stopped nose-busted in a gully, the engine stalled, the smell of gas growing stronger by the second.

“Get out!” I said. “Fast!”

It wasn't easy, the Blazer end-upped about five feet. SunMist and I had to drag out the half-conscious kid. Surprise: the Blazer didn't burst into flames. But it reeked of gas. So all you'd have to do was set a match to it.

That's what I told the kid when he came to: “You wait till sundown,” I said. “Then set the thing on fire. You *listening?*”

He was whimpering, his mask gone, his face so red you'd've thought he was having a stroke. He held his useless hand in his lap, like a broken pet.

I butted the sole of his shoe with the toe of my boot: “If you burn it now, we'll make sure they charge you with kidnapping.”

He wouldn't look at me.

SunMist said, “It's stolen, I bet.”

“Oh, shit.” I kneeled in front of the kid and grabbed his free hand. “Is that Blazer stolen?”

The kid gave a feeble shrug with his head, as if to say *maybe*.

I emptied his wallet, took his knife and his phone. I said, "Wait till dark. They'll see the flame for miles."

"Fuck you," the kid said.

I tucked a five into his jacket pocket. "Peace, brother."

We were maybe thirty yards from the road. If you didn't know where to look, you wouldn't have noticed the up-ended Blazer, half hidden by the desert scrub.

A trucker gave us a ride north. SunMist's the one who got his attention. You'd be crazy to ignore a sight like her at the side of the road. It didn't bother him we weren't wearing masks. He had a red MAGA hat on the dash. He said he'd drop us at 61 but then I offered him the confederate bill (with authentication certificate) and a handful of silver dollars. He said he'd take us as far as he could.

"It's my lucky day!" he said. Then he lit a doob and passed it over as if to say, *Fuck Covid!*

I'm not stupid enough to ignore a pandemic but, *Yeah*, I thought, *fuck it*.

By sunset, me and SunMist had stepped over the line into New Mexico's Zuni nation, 723 square miles of it. It'd be just a matter of time before a *gran mal* seizure would take me down, pissed pants and all. But it hadn't taken me down yet. And SunMist seemed to be doing better, walking straight and tall, her mask tucked into her back pocket. "Already, I can feel the power," she said.