

A Needles Story

Kristian Solem

From its source in the high country west of Mt. Whitney, the Kern River carves a magnificent canyon through the southern Sierra Nevada Mountains. A single road winds its way up this canyon, ending at remote trailheads where a kayaker might put in to run "The Forks of the Kern" or a hiker could disappear into the Golden Trout Wilderness. Shortly before finding these trailheads and their call to adventure, the Kern Canyon road passes beneath the majestic granite spires of The Needles.



The Needles, Giant Sequoia National Monument, California.

Photo: Kristian Solem

It was there that I stood, on a perfect July day, listening to the wind in the trees and the bubbling waters of tiny Needlerock Creek. I watched the late afternoon sun play on the gray, green and orange streaked towers above. My friends would arrive tonight, but for now I was alone with my thoughts. Thoughts that wandered back in time to strange memories of a previous visit to this very same place.

It had been two years since then, when Erik, Guy, Jason and I made a late September trip to climb on Voodoo Dome, the massive eastern buttress of The Needles formations. At the end of our last day of climbing, we hiked down from the crag and began making preparations for the drive home. As we were loading the car I noticed the faintest glow of light coming from the bulbs surrounding the vanity mirror. My heart sank. We were 30 miles from nowhere on a dead end road with a dead battery. After extracting a confession from Jason - he had used the mirror that morning - we agreed to spare his life so he could help push. Off we went, downhill, like an Olympic bobsled team. Push! Push! Run! Everybody In! We careened down the road with no power steering or brakes for a mile or two until we came to an uphill stretch no amount of momentum could get us over. We were stranded.

Without hesitation Guy mumbled something about an important sales meeting in the morning and took off down the road on foot into the darkness. Erik, Jason and I stayed with the car, hoping maybe a ranger would drive by, or we could walk out the next day. It was a still, quiet night and the hours went by easily. Then, at about 2:00 A.M. we heard the distant sound of a motor working its way up the canyon road from the south. Eventually a rumbling, road warrior, four wheel drive monster truck growled up and lurched to a halt, stopping diagonally across the road in front of our dead car. In the cab rode three large bearded woodsmen. Riding in the back, a beer in his hand, was Guy. The three woodsmen slid out of the truck and stepped into the glow of their headlights. They wore western style holsters with large pistols. They were drinking whiskey. They were stoned. Somewhere in the back of my head I heard a banjo playing.

They surrounded our car with lawn chairs and coolers. One of our new friends offered me a beer and motioned toward a cooler. I declined. The offer was re-stated. It was uncanny - an instant replay. The same words, voice, accent, but this time icy cold, not friendly. "Have a beer..." Taken aback, I accepted. He reached into the cooler and produced not a beer, but a large machete which he brandished about with a wild look in his eyes. Through my fear I heard Guy yell out "Hey! Where'd you get that? Bundy Drive?" The blade wielding woodsman laughed at Guy's joke. The blade went back into the cooler and a beer was in fact offered. I Took it.

An hour passed. We were asked many questions. Where were we from? Who were we? What were we doing up here? How did we kill our car? Every so often one of the woodsmen would wander around in the dark, pistol in hand, on an unknown mission. I was waiting. Sooner or later it would happen. One of us would say the wrong thing. Offense would be taken. Things would go bad. Then, the one who seemed to be the top dog turned to me and said "So, I s'pose you figgur it's about time to git rollin', don'tcha?" I tried to answer. Not knowing quite what to say I mumbled something about a job in the morning. I watched in amazement as the lawn chairs and coolers were stowed away, jumper cables were found, and the car was brought to life. I turned to thank the man who just an hour before had made my blood run cold. He said "No problem, my friend. Just do a good turn for the next person you come across in need of help."

My three companions went immediately to sleep leaving me to drive. Adrenaline coursed through my body. I was fully awake. I stopped the car a few miles down the road at a forest service dumpster and tossed several bags of camping trash from the trunk. Later, unloading the car in the early morning light in L.A., it became apparent that one of those "trash bags" had contained most of Erik's climbing gear.

Standing there staring up at The Needles remembering that bizarre scene I kept wondering - was I just being paranoid, or did we pass some strange test that night?



The Witch, Necromancer and The Warlock

Photo:Kristian Solem

I was shocked out of my contemplation when a Tulare County Sheriff's cruiser rolled to a stop on the road in front of me. Now, I've spent a lot of time in these parts, and the only other time I've seen a cop up here was when some Earth First activists monkey wrenched a bunch of bulldozers and other logging equipment on the upper Needles road. Holes had been punched in the engine blocks allowing gallons of oil and antifreeze to run out on the ground. There were law enforcement officers poking around for a while then, but they left empty handed. That was more than fifteen years ago.

Now they were here again, checking me out. *Me*, standing in the middle of the road with a beer in my hand, my car parked to the side with the doors open, keys in the ignition. My casual "Hey, what's up?" was met with a seriously intoned

"What are you doing up here?" from the driver, while the passenger, presumably in charge, approached my open vehicle and took the keys. I quickly explained that I was camping here, awaiting the arrival of friends. I pointed out my tent visible in the trees across the road. We all relaxed a bit as the deputies decided they were not about to make a drinking and driving collar, and the keys were tossed onto the seat.

"So, what brings you up here to camp, going fishing?" asked the driver, while nodding sarcastically at tiny Needlerock Creek. "No," I answered. "I come here to rock climb." His gaze followed my gesture, up to the sweeping spires of granite above. His jaw dropped. He hadn't noticed the spectacular formations towering over our heads until this moment.

"You... you... climb that thing?" he stammered in disbelief. "Actually, it's those things" I pointed out. "See, there are really a number of separate spires which as a group are called The Needles." He glanced down at the pavement to check his footing. Then, looking back up at the massive formations he said "Oh, ...yeah." I was beginning to enjoy this. "Each tower has a name," I explained. "The one furthest away is 'The Magician'. If you look carefully you can see a fire lookout tower on top. The nearest is Voodoo. In the middle are 'The Witch' and 'The Warlock'. You're looking at about a thousand feet of vertical granite. Those tiny looking trees at the base are actually much taller than these here along the road. They haven't been logged."

A moment passed. "Show me! Show me where you go up!" the deputy demanded. "Okay," I continued, "the big round formation on this end is called 'Voodoo Dome'. To its left there's the huge tree filled gully. See that? Good. The next tower, the really tall one is called 'The Warlock'. Some of the best climbs here are on The Warlock. If you look closely, you'll see some cracks starting up next to the big tree by the corner there. Got it? Okay. Now follow those cracks up. They get steeper and end at a small ledge. See where I mean? Now, a little to the left a corner goes up into the overhangs..." and so forth.

Taking my time, I patiently led his eyes pitch by pitch up the fabulous "South Face Route," a Needles classic first climbed by Dan McHale, Fred Beckey and Mike Heath in 1970. When we finally reached the summit, the deputy looked as if he had actually done the climb himself. He swayed on his feet and rubbed his sweating palms together. Then he turned to face me, took a step back, paused for a long moment, and pronounced: "You guys are truly hard core."

His partner was less enthusiastic. A Deputy Sheriff was most certainly not supposed to show respect to a beer drinking, roadside camping dirtball. They resumed their places in the cruiser, the passenger turning gruffly on his heel while his partner lingered a moment for a last look upward.



The Needles, Giant Sequoia National Monument, California.

The sun was low now and The Needles had taken on a rich orange glow which seemed to come from within the stone itself. The proud scream of a peregrine falcon echoed among the spires. I hoped my friends would arrive soon.