

A Needles Story

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From its source in the high country west of Mount Whitney the Kern River cuts a dramatic canyon, following an ancient fault line straight south for 60 miles. 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 can disappear into the Golden Trout Wilderness. Shortly before finding these trailheads and their call to adventure, the Kern Canyon road passes beneath the striking granite spires of The Needles.



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 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.

It had been two years since Erik, Guy, Jason and I made a late September trip to climb on Voodoo Dome, the massive eastern buttress of The Needles. 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 a faint glow coming from the bulbs surrounding the vanity mirror. I put the key in the ignition and turned it. 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.

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 a ranger might drive by. That, or we'd walk out the next day. 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, four wheel drive road warrior growled up and lurched to a halt, stopping diagonally across the road in front of my dead car. In the cab rode three 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. Somewhere in the back of my mind 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. 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 knife which he brandished about with a wild look in his eyes. As I took a step back I heard Guy yell out "Hey! Where'd you get that? Bundy Drive?" The blade wielding woodsman laughed at Guy's joke. The knife went back into the cooler and a beer was in fact offered. I took it.

"Where are you from?" "What are you doing up here?" "How did you kill your car?"

An hour passed. 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. I couldn't get past the feeling that this was not going to end well.

"So, I s'pose you figure it's about time to git rollin', don'tcha?" Not knowing what to say I mumbled something about having a job in the morning. The lawn chairs and coolers were stowed away, jumper cables were found, and the car was brought to life. I thanked the man who just an hour before made my blood run cold. "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 Erik's climbing gear.

So here I was two years later, standing below the Needles remembering that bizarre scene. I wondered if I was being paranoid, or did we pass some kind of test that night.



I was shocked out of my reverie by a white, orange and green Tulare County Sheriff's cruiser as it rolled to a stop on the road in front of me. 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 types monkey wrenched a bunch of bulldozers and other logging equipment. They punched holes in the engine blocks, leaving big pools of oil and antifreeze on the ground. There were law enforcement officers poking around for a while, but that was more than ten 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 driver's door 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 from the ignition. 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. 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 paid attention to the formations towering over our heads until this moment.

"You... you... climb that thing?" "Actually, it's those things. There are nine or ten 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. The one furthest away is the Magician. If you look carefully you can see a fire lookout tower on top. The nearest is Voodoo Dome. In the middle are the Witch and the Warlock."

A moment passed. "Show me! Show me where you go up!" "Okay... The big

round formation on this end is called Voodoo Dome. To its left there's a 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 end at a small ledge about halfway up. See where I mean? Now, from that ledge a corner goes up into the overhangs..."

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

His partner was less enthusiastic. A Deputy Sheriff was 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. Then he turned the car around and they left me, once again, alone.



The sun was low now and The Needles had taken on a rich orange glow which appeared 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.