

From the high country northwest of Mount Whitney the Kern River cuts a dramatic canyon, following a ruler straight fault line south for 60 miles. Parts of this canyon are more than 2,000 feet deep. In the spring, when the snow melts in the mountains, the Kern River becomes a raging torrent of whitewater. A mountain road winds its way up this canyon, ending at trailheads where an expert 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, this road passes below an array of granite spires and domes known as The Needles. These Needles are a paradise for rock climbers.



In the 1970's a small number of climbers had the place to themselves and did their best to keep it that way. Rumors of a great collection of granite spires spread through the climbing community, but still these rocks remained a mystery to most. The word was also getting around that climbing at

the Needles was not for the faint of heart. The climbers who did go there were among the best of their day. Adding to the aura of the place are the names given to the formations by the early pioneers; the Wizard, the Warlock, the Sorcerer, the Witch, Voodoo Dome...

Today, while it's common to meet top climbers from around the world at the Needles, the area's reputation for seriousness scares away many who lack the required skills and confidence. Of course, climbers who visit the Needles most frequently are Southern Californians who can drive there in a few hours. I'm fortunate to be among these regulars, and I've climbed here several times every summer for 30 years.

On one perfect July afternoon I set up camp by the Kern Canyon Road, below the Needles. I watched the afternoon sun play on the gray, green, and orange streaked towers above. The only sounds were the breeze in the trees and the bubbling waters of Needlerock Creek, a small mountain stream which begins below the Needles, goes under a bridge in the road, and continues its ever-steepening dash to join the waters of the mighty Kern. 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 back down to the road and broke camp. As we were packing the car I noticed a faint glow coming from the bulbs surrounding the vanity mirror. I'd brought a company car, some sort of Chrysler with enough bulbs around that mirror to illuminate grandma's face in broad daylight. 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 to preen himself 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 the 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 glare of a half dozen 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 the car with lawn chairs and coolers. One of our new friends offered me a beer. I declined. The offer was re-stated. The same words, but this time icy cold, not friendly. "*Have a beer...*" Taken aback, I accepted. He reached into a 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 Guy asked "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, more questions. 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 things would go bad. 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 figger 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."

I drove, my companions were sound asleep. I stopped the car a few miles down the road at a forest service dumpster and tossed several paper 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 bags had contained Erik's climbing gear.

“Dude, you threw away my gear?”

“What the fuck was your gear doing in a trash bag?”

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.

"Hi Officers. It sure is a beautiful day."

My casual greeting 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. He tossed my keys 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 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."

"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 bottom left corner there. Got it?"

"Umm... yeah."

"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 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 away while his partner lingered a moment for a last look upward. Then they turned the car around and left me, once again, alone.



*Kristian Solem Collection*

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 cry of a peregrine falcon echoed among the spires. I hoped my friends would arrive soon.