

Some Indian

by Dan Cafaro

We had been drinking. The red rocks of Sedona were glistening from an uncommonly hard rain. It was nearly dusk and the sun had finally surrendered to tribes of dark, ominous clouds. We pulled our rental car to the side of the road in hopes of getting one last good look at Oak Creek Canyon.

I took a quick hit from a roach and stepped out from the driver's side, a bit unsteady but cautious enough to stay a few feet from the guard rail. I leaned on the car's hood and imagined the jagged stone buttresses were Indian gods laughing at me. I pictured their faces carved in a silhouette profile and listened intently for voices.

My wife and a stranger stood at each other's side, alternately taking photos. I quietly summoned a long-dead Hopi for enlightenment.

"You might want to use your flash," said the stranger, a bearded long-haired guy with a wicked looking hat. "We're losing light fast."

"I'm just experimenting," my wife said. "I like flirting with different undertones."

It might help if you took off your sunglasses, I muttered inaudibly.

"The arches are so menacing," my wife said. "They demand respect, don't you think?"

"They're indifferent to us," said the stranger. "And yet, we're mesmerized by their mystery."

My wife stifled a nervous cough, a surefire sign that she wanted to add something profound. After all these years, I read her body language like a trail map.

"Honey, would you get me the binoculars?" she asked, knowing we had a half-pint of whiskey stashed in the carrying case.

As you please, Mademoiselle, I mumbled.

"Are you visiting for long?" my wife asked the stranger.

"I live here," he replied.

I ambled up to my wife with the hooch and gave the stranger a once-over. He wore an over-sized beaver hat sans the wide flat tail,

and the backpack at his feet loomed larger than the luggage favored by many a roadside gypsy. Instead of standing in a person's presence, he hovered.

When I glanced at his feet, I did a double take. He was barefoot. Chapped, bruised feet and cuffed, torn dungarees. A veritable sight for stoned eyes. My trust wavered and my stare penetrated. I was far from discreet.

"I've hardened my soles for climbing," he said at once, not self-consciously.

"Aren't they cold?" my wife asked tenderly, after taking a healthy swig of whiskey.

"Warm heart, warm feet," the stranger said soberly.

I took the bottle from my wife, quenched my addiction and offered a shot to the stranger, my hand extended in a Thanksgiving-like gesture of peace, if not brotherhood.

The man declined with a shake of his head, the dying sunlight casting a shadow over the lines of his craggy red face. A Native American face, stoic and sure, I now recognized.

"This camera was a gift from a couple much like yourself," said the Indian. "I've used it now for many years."

"You must have some incredible shots," my wife said. "An album, I bet, full of delights."

"Yes, I do," the Indian said softly. "They're stored in my memory."

My wife nodded. At this point it wasn't pitch black but dark enough to get creepy. The Indian pointed the camera at us and snapped. No flash. He turned his back.

"It's getting late," I said to the still wind.

"It's too bad, isn't it?" the Indian answered to the canyon.

After a few moments of crow-swooping silence, we exchanged awkward goodbyes and bid off. Our newfound friend descended a steep, unmarked trail. The wilderness engulfed him.

I hopped in the driver's seat. My wife sat beside me and buckled her seat belt. I started the car, turned up the heat, and reached over to hold her hand. All that remained was a head full of memories and the telling of a strange, fleeting occurrence with some Indian.

