

# Reckonings

*by* Daniel Harris

The winter road trip to Los Angeles was becoming a taxing slog. The punishing monotony of the interstate system and an estranged wife lying in the back coughing up microbes in the petri dish environment of a closed car in winter were taking their toll on the man's patience and health. Worse, the low sun's glare off the windshield was like driving blind. Between coughs and other emissions, the interior of the car was a toxic zone, a veritable cesspit of microbes.

Marge, the man's estranged wife and passenger, agreed to pay him to drive her from Chicago to her sister's home in L.A. As a freelance jazz musician, he was about as close to being unemployed as a U.S. citizen can get. There were no conflicts for the trip in his date book. His last gig was New Year's Eve. It was the January slows. His car, a '67 Volkswagen Squareback, had 70,000 miles, needed tires and was not the preferred vehicle to make a 4000-mile trip in winter. With the rear seats folded down, two can sleep in the snug rear space. The couple spent the first night in a roadside rest stop in Arkansas. The state police chased them away at 4 a.m. Now they were about 50 miles west of Albuquerque on a snow-packed side road looking for a park which Marge found on an AAA map.

Marge was an actress and professional entertainer, a ventriloquist, who earned less money than her jazz musician husband. To pay for the move to L.A., Marge took a substitute teaching job between Thanksgiving and Christmas in Chicago's public schools. There, she caught a virulent flu. Even though Marge tried to be "extra careful," she lost her wallet and driver's license. Except for an hour the first day of the trip, she didn't drive. Now, Marge was too sick to drive. Worse, nothing protected her, she insisted, from the imminent full moon in Ares: turbulent times ahead. The all-powerful cosmos, she often proclaimed, controlled

her destiny. What bullshit, he thought. Astrology crap drove him crazy. It excused all nonsensical behavior. Now he felt the flu symptoms: scratchy throat, fever, headache, stomach cramps. He slammed the steering wheel with his fist and cursed his wife.

\* \* \*

The man was ready to turn back to I-40 when he saw a sign: *Lost Creek Park, Camping Rest Rooms*. Since his bladder was ready to explode, he wanted to piss, but the snow-covered road was too slippery to stop. The car might skid into the ditch. He turned north to the park. The gravel track to the campsite provided more traction for the near-bald tires than the crowned asphalt state road. Still, he had to fight the wheel to keep the car on the road. He drove through a gate in a barbed wire fence. A sign read *Canoncito Indian Reservation*. He could see the desert through the bullet holes in the a's and o's.

The park was a desolate place with a half-dozen fire pits and a cinderblock service building. An arroyo supplied enough water to support a patch of chaparral. Besides the six-foot-deep arroyo, the only other feature in the high desert land was a mesa, twenty miles west.

A battered Chevy pickup truck with a large camper and a horse trailer in tow stood next to the service building. Only the Volk's tire tracks marked the snow-covered parking area. The man assumed the pickup arrived before the snow storm. Two Navajo men stared under the raised hood of the Chevy truck. One, a slim fellow, wore full Western cowboy regalia; the other, a giant of a man, wore practical winter clothes. He saw the rumps of two horses in the covered trailer.

At the fire pit closest to the service building, a Navajo woman with a single long braid of black hair, dressed in men's winter

clothing, and wearing a fedora, stirred a pot. Two young boys sat on rocks next to the woman spooning food from steaming cups.

For everyone's privacy, the man parked the Volks at the fire pit furthest from the service building. He needed to piss and thought of letting go next to the car, but hurried to the service building. The high dry air relieved the stuffiness of his clogged sinuses. Compared to the interior of the vehicle, outside was healthy. As he jogged past the men at the pickup truck, he flashed the peace sign. They ignored him.

Inside, empty vending machines riddled with bullet holes lined one wall like dark sentinels guarding the toilets. The toilet was old but well maintained. After doing his business, he took a long drink at the water fountain in the lobby. The water was sweet and crisp. He checked the women's toilet. It was tidy with a stock of toilet paper. Given the evidence of lawlessness, the cleanliness was a pleasant surprise.

Back at the car, the man put a Filson vest over his wool shirt. The air had a chill, but it was not cold by Chicago standards. The fresh, dry air cooled his feverish skin. Marge was sleeping, or feigning sleep, in the car.

As he stood trying to decide whether to make a fire or use their gas camp stove, the two Navajo men approached him. As a street smart city guy, he didn't expect trouble out in the desert west, but he had to be cautious. He was defenseless in a desolate place near nightfall. The man thought they might live on the reservation; if so, it was their territory. He was trespassing on their land. While he had no affection for his soon-to-be ex-wife, he didn't want either of them to come to harm.

Both men walked with the bow-legged gait of longtime horsemen. The two men were physical opposites. One, a slim man, wore tight

Lee blue jeans, a Sherpa-lined denim jacket, polished Tony Lama cowboy boots, and a white Stetson. The big man wore baggy wool pants, a Mackinaw jacket, scuffed harness boots and an old fedora with a scraggly eagle feather in the hatband. Both men had long black ponytails and the leathery, weathered skin of men who lived life outdoors. Their impassive faces gave no clue of their intentions. The two men weren't menacing, but his instincts told him to be alert.

"Howdy, said the slim man.

"Peace," he replied, giving the peace sign.

"Reckon you can sell us some gas, our truck's bone dry," said the slim man with a tight smile.

The big guy stood mute, staring at the horizon.

He didn't know what to answer. The Volks' gas gage showed less than a quarter of a tank, but he didn't know how far or where he'd find the next gas station. He had filled up west of Tucumcari, 170 miles ago

"I've only got about a quarter of a tank."

"Reckon you can give us two gallons? We're stuck. Our house is twelve miles from here."

The man grasped the change in verbs from "sell" to "give." Was the request for gas the opening gambit for further demands? If they had weapons, he would be at their mercy.

"Sure, I'll give you two gallons of gas. It's the friendly thing to do. Do you have a container?"

The slim man hocked his sinuses and spat out a big wad of phlegm. He crushed it like a bug under the heel of his boot.

"We got a gas can," said the slim man, squinting his eyes in the setting sun.

The big guy stared at the horizon. The man sure as hell didn't want trouble from someone who looked like he could throw a charging buffalo to the ground. He watched the big man's impassive face. Was evil intent lurking behind that mask? Was Slim setting him up? What terrors lurked in this simple request? To his city street smarts, it sounded like the prelude to a mugging.

Slim returned with a red dented gas can. Without asking, Slim unscrewed the gas cap and inserted a length of green tubing into the Volks' gas tank. He sucked the hose to start the flow but didn't remove it from his lips fast enough.

"Damn!" Slim spat out a spoonful of gasoline while inserting the hose in the gas can. "There's more than half a tank in there," he shouted. "Shit! I wouldn't have gotten gasoline in my mouth if you only had a quarter of a tank."

The big Indian stared at the nearby mesa.

"Goddamnit," said Slim to no one in particular. He wiped his mouth with a red bandana.

"Why you waste gasoline?" said the big guy.

Slim ignored his partner's question and pocketed his bandana.

"What's your name, mister?" asked Slim.

"It doesn't matter what my name is," the man replied. He was furious at his impotence and the brazen theft of his gasoline. The pair had him by the *cojones*. He had no defenses, no weapon, and no help.

"Well, Mister Sociable, my Navajo name is Jumping Horse, but people call me Cowboy. I ride rodeo. You can call me Cowboy. My cousin here is Thunder-in-Morning, his mother calls him Tim, but everyone calls him FBI. He's a bull wrestler."

"FBI?"

"Fucking Big Indian," he said with a wry inflection.

No argument from me, thought the man. FBI was one big *hombre*, almost seven feet, and over three hundred fifty pounds.

Cowboy pulled the tube from the can as the last drops left the Volks.

"Hey, goddamnit, you took all my gas!"

"No way, said FBI, this car will drive twenty miles on a gallon. You can't siphon the last gas from the reserve tank. Four miles west on the interstate is a Phillips 66."

"You lied," said Cowboy. "You've got plenty of gas. We don't take well to strangers lying to us."

Now the man was trapped. He'd never make it to I-40. Cowboy was threatening him. Is this how it would play out: steal the gas, rob us, murder us?

"You took over two gallons, Cowboy. I'm almost out of gas. You might offer money for all the gas or put gas back in my car.

"We owe you nothing, mister," interrupted FBI. "You think you're the law on our land. No, sir. You obey our laws here."

The man knew this race card. He better shut-up and hope tomorrow morning there was enough fuel to reach the interstate.

FBI pulled a Bowie knife from his belt sheath. It was big enough to disembowel a moose. Fear gripped the man. One swipe of FBI's knife and he was history. The tang of copper filled his mouth. He was no match for FBI. Who would search the Indian reservation for a dead jazz musician and his ventriloquist wife? Would FBI nail his scalp to his hogan's door like a mezuzah?

"Your woman?" asked Cowboy, gesturing to the Volks with his head.

"Hey, I'm friendly. I'll give you the gas. Leave my wife out of this, okay?"

The man looked into the car. Marge's nude body lay outside her sleeping bag. No wonder Cowboy adjusted his package in his jeans. Marge was a woman worth seeing naked. She had a sexy body.

"I take wife; then I give you half the gas," said FBI, who flipped the knife in the air and caught it by the handle all the while keeping his eyes on the man.

"What kind of deal is that?" he asked, watching the blade. "You stole my gas."

"You lie. You gave us gas. Best deal. I take wife and keep gas. Cowboy take wife, too."

"You ask *her* about the *that*, but give *me* the gas."

"White wife no good. My wife make fire, cook food. White wife only good for sex."

"If she lets you, fine, but give me half the gas."

"You crazy, man. I take gas and wife. You lose both."

"I'll sell you my wife for the can of gasoline."

"Your wife not worth a can of gas," said FBI, as if stating an accepted axiom of economics.

FBI had to be drinking. But, he might be right. What was sex worth? Marge sure as hell had been free with her sexual favors. A film of the big Indian slitting the man from groin to chops in one swipe of his knife flashed before his eyes. The film ended with the man's bones weathering in the arroyo, picked clean by turkey vultures and cracked by coyotes.

The two Navajos considered the man. FBI gave a curt nod to Cowboy. This is it, thought the man. FBI will kill me. His mouth went dry.

"You want hot food, mister?" asked Cowboy, picking up the gas can.

"None for me, thank you. I have a bad stomach."

"Indian food good for you," said FBI, sheathing his knife. "Big storm coming."

"You're right, but I'm too sick to eat. Thank you. Keep the gas."

Marge stirred. She pulled on her clothes with no attempt at modesty. The three men watched the show. Marge pushed the front seat forward and exited the Volks.

"Who are these men?" she asked, slipping into her down parka.

"Stranded travelers. Cowboy and FBI. I gave them gasoline."

"Hi, I'm Marge. Glad my husband helped you."

She tried to continue but hunched over in a coughing fit.

"I had that same cough," said Cowboy, snorting up another large gob, which he again spat and ground into the snow.

"Well, excuse me, gents, I have to go potty."

Marge shuffled to the service building. Her Wellies left perfect parallel tracks in the snow.

The three men heard Marge coughing in the toilet.

"Thanks for the invite, but I'm too sick to eat. It would be a waste of food."

The taste of copper lingered in his mouth. He knew after the adrenaline subsided he would be too weak to fight the flu. His last food, a Slim Jim and two Oreo cookies, was hours ago. Fear nausea had him close to vomiting.



When Marge left the service building, all the Indians sat around the fire eating. The man huddled, shivering in the car. The flu had arrived. He was sick and weak. A freezing pathetic specimen.

"Lady, hot food? said the Navajo woman.

"Oh, I would love some," said Marge, zipping up her jacket.

The man sat behind the steering wheel watching Marge with the Indian family. A professional ventriloquist, she soon had the group laughing at her routine of a man disciplining his dog. She used a mitten-covered hand as her dog dummy. The Navajo wife and children watched in wide-eyed amazement. The two men regarded her with lustful eyes. Most men Marge met wanted to bed her. She let many of them try. Beware a woman you meet in an after-hours jazz club.

Cowboy rose from the fire and walked to the Volkswagen. He rapped on the driver's side window. The man lowered it halfway.

"Mister Sociable, Marge says me and FBI can take her tonight. When FBI finishes with her, she'll think she was served by a stallion. Thanks for the gas. *Adios, amigo.*"

The man smelt whiskey and meat on Cowboy's breath. He was a fool. Those Navajos approached him on whiskey courage. If he didn't threaten them, he had nothing to fear. He should have measured out the gasoline, instead of letting Cowboy do it. Now they were feeding Marge, and she was offering sexual favors. He was double-fucked. On the other hand, maybe she saved his life.

\* \* \*

In the morning, there was no sign of Marge or her backpack. He remembered hearing the pickup truck leaving before daylight. He checked the bathroom for Marge, called her name, and looked for

her in the arroyo. Only a few of Marge's footprints remained in the melting snow.

He started the car. The fuel gauge read empty.

"Nothing to lose by trying," he said, turning around and heading toward I-40 and Chicago.

"*Goin' to Chicago, sorry but I can't take you*" he croaked to the empty car, tapping a backbeat on the steering wheel.

The flu had his head, throat and stomach. The overcast light hurt his eyes. Every time he coughed he jerked the steering wheel.

The Volks' engine knocked and sputtered.

"Shit. God dammit to hell!"

The engine stalled a few miles from I-40. Wrapped in his down jacket and sleeping bag, the man waited for rescue. He lay in the car, sweating when his fever broke and freezing when it returned. The man wondered if Marge had sex with Cowboy and FBI. Not his problem. Their marriage was over. Now, he waited for help on some god-forsaken Indian reservation. Chicago seemed far away.

The next morning, he heard trucks on I-40. His fever had subsided. Dark lowering clouds filled the sky, but the weather was mild. He would walk the mile or two to the interstate. He considered cutting cross country but thought it better to walk on the road. He didn't want to miss a passing car or truck and possible rescue. Head down he plodded toward I-40. The man never looked over his shoulder. A mile from his car, a storm struck with a violence so sudden and powerful that its 80 mile-per-hour winds drove him to his knees. Too weak to fight the blizzard and with no visibility, he cowered behind a large rock.

\* \* \*

Three days later, two state troopers in a Ford Bronco discovered the man's abandoned Volkswagen. The warm chinook wind caused torrents of snowmelt to fill the ditches on the side of the road. Turkey buzzards circling the man's corpse caught the troopers' attention. Down feathers from his ripped parka covered the melting snow. The vultures and coyotes had feasted on his viscera. Eyeless sockets stared at the bright sun.

"Reckon he must be the guy from the Volks," said the senior officer. "Chicago boy. No sense, no respect for the big country. He might have lost companions. Keep an eye out for more buzzards."

The younger trooper covered the eviscerated remains with a black plastic sheet.

"Let's check the Volks. See who this guy is," said the older man. "Someone is probably wondering where he is. Damn fool."

\* \* \*

Cowboy lay naked in the natural hot spring near FBI's hogan watching Marge. She was astride FBI, easing onto his erection. Seventy-degree chinook winds, he thought, perfect for naked romps at the hot springs.

\* \* \*

