

Felix Thomas

Of Uranium and Tundra Tires

One of my biggest pet-peeves when camping is when people cross through my campsite or visit unannounced. I camp to get away from people, not to have to listen to them. I have been for the most part a backpacker, but on this particular evening I was car camping on a trip around the Southwest. I was a geology student, and had been on a trip with my class, and was now back on my own to see everything at my own pace. It was the middle of May, and I was cooking my dinner using a propane stove at Colorado National Monument. The campsite was well-positioned, inexpensive, and rather pleasant. Other campers were around as well, but nobody was bothering me.

The mushrooms in the pan were just about done when a 1990s forest green camper van pulled up into the spot next to mine and an older man with a fluffy white beard emerged, wearing cargo shorts. He set out a small red Honda generator, and I was glad it wasn't too loud, though its drone wasn't exactly something I loved. His wife was at least twenty years his junior. She started making their supper while the old man continued unloading the van and puttering around. They appeared to be seasoned campers, their movements were well-rehearsed, their ways settled. And yes, I was paying close attention to them, for the man's beard caught my eye. It was whiter than clean linen and had a certain airiness to it, as if Zeus himself was my neighbor, and had brought some of Olympus' clouds along to keep his face company. His attractive wife was probably around sixty.

My dinner came along nicely, it was a classic one-pot hodgepodge of veggies, cubes of tofu, all topped with some fiesta seasoning I kept along – it went with just about everything. The cumin and chili pepper hit my nose in a familiar way. I felt at home, even though I was on the other side of the Rockies. I cracked open a can of local craft beer I had bought in Grand Junction, and settled into my meal. Not long after, the couple settled into theirs. I could hear snatches of their conversation. The old man said something about 'moisture' while he was eating what looked to be some sort of crazy pasta.

The evening light made the red rocks and the deep evergreen of the juniper come to life with color, and though I was in a public car camping spot, I was in heaven. I took my time with the last of my beer before washing up. I hung a mesh bag with my dishes from a nearby juniper and sat down with another beer. It was at this moment when the man crossed into my campsite and sat down at the brown painted picnic table. My veins coursed with fire – he had committed the unforgivable sin of bothering me in my campsite. He didn't mind, he began speaking as if he was picking up from where he'd left off from an earlier conversation of ours.

"The only reason I'm still around is because I quit mining and started prospecting," he paused to see if I knew what he meant.

"Gold?"

"Uranium. Once we got the bomb, there was a bonanza for uranium out here like you wouldn't believe. I had done some mining, but my Dad

had told me to get out of there, and boy was he right to tell me. I lived longer, and I made more money. Lots of it." He smiled through his beard. He could have been Santa Claus. "The men who kept on mining died out decades ago. That was before anyone was talking about safety and all that. It was dangerous work, and before long, the only people who would go in and mine were the Indians – they were too desperate for money. Those men and boys gave their lives to the dream of breaking out of poverty, but their illnesses drove them deeper into want than they ever could have predicted." He paused and looked out at the cliffs for a moment, then continued, "The first time I saw these cliffs from the air, I had just bought a Piper Cub from the Army, bought it cheap right after the war. They gave me some lessons in it before signing it over, and there I was, flying at low altitude with my instruments, looking for signs of radiation so I could stake claims. I would submit my claims, then set off with a crew to see how profitable they would be. I remember flying right along these cliffs. I'd cut the engine for a moment and glide – you can do that in a Cub, you know. I'd cut the engine, check my instruments, and start the engine and make another pass. It saved me a lot of time, flying around, mapping promising spots, then staking a flurry of claims at the BLM office. I spent most of my time in Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. You've heard of Moab, right?"

"Yeah, with the four-wheeler trails and all that."

"Exactly. All those popular off-roading routes were cut and used by uranium prospectors and miners. Moab was originally about as conservative and Mormon as you can imagine, until the uranium business brought in the drinkers, gamblers, and smooth-talkers. It was the Wild West all over again, and over time, the town changed to what it is today. There was a time when all the women wore prairie dresses and bonnets, not even fifty years ago, and now they go around in tank tops and shorts. You can have a beer without being judged, and no one checks if you're married if you stay at a hotel with a woman. Go further though, and you'll still see parts of Utah that haven't yet changed with the times. You'll know you don't belong well after the locals have figured you out, so just keep that in mind."

My irritation at this man's trespass had long since washed away. I was entranced at his story. He told it so well, he was so well spoken. His dictation was perfect. I noticed an interesting silver and turquoise ring on his finger. It contrasted oddly with his cargo shorts and t-shirt.

"If you drive west on I-70, west of Fruita, into Utah, there'll be the town of Cisco. It's nothing that would grab your attention, mostly shacks and abandoned houses. Past there on a winding dirt road is something most people, even the locals don't know about. Petroglyphs. They're all over the place out here, and the best of them are usually behind a fence and can be found with roadside signs. Not these. I found them with my crew out prospecting years ago. The glyphs were unlike anything I'd ever seen. Generations of people had carved those for whatever reason. Religious, historical, I have no idea, but I spent the rest of that day studying them. My crew had some high-quality cameras, so we took pictures. I still have them up in my house. I'm glad that those particular petroglyphs aren't so well-known. I like that there are still some things you can't find on the internet, or on the side of a road. Some of the best things in the

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world have to be found yourself, especially if you weren't looking for it." His wife brought him a beer, then went to read in the shade.

"Have you spent much time in the Navajo territory?"

"I drove through, but didn't see much."

He gave me a knowing look. "That's because you didn't get out of your car and look," he smiled, "The Navajo Nation is full of surprises and mystery. They are a pickup truck people, if you know what that means. The pickup truck is central to their lives. They are always moving sheep, supplies, men, whatever else in their trucks. They keep them up, too. When you see a dead pickup truck in the Navajo Nation, you know it's good and dead, otherwise they'd still be using it. An honest people, too. Honest to a fault. I prospected up and down the entire Nation with a crew that was all Navajo. They couldn't lie if they wanted to, and I treated them right. It would have wounded me to treat them poorly. The Apache used to attack them all the time for their resources, but that was ages ago," he waved those ages away with his hand.

"The desert has a certain slow magic about it. If you're in a hurry, it punishes you with boredom. Slow down, and the land will open up to you. Also, never underestimate the people. That slow magic I mentioned is linked to the people. Make time for them, and be kind – you'll find yourself rewarded with goodness, with stories, and a new friend or two.

"Southwest of here is where the good uranium claims are. I've still got a few out there, worth millions, but it would take millions more to mine them now, and that's after all the red tape with the federal government. If they suddenly need a lot of uranium, they know where to get it, but demand has eased off. The environmental protections have more or less killed the industry here. We buy most of our uranium and plutonium from the Russians these days. They haven't yet discovered the value of their people's lives and that of the environment, I suppose. I have mixed feelings about it. My wealth came from a time before all the worker and environmental protections came about. I treated my crew like family, and luckily for us as prospectors, we weren't subjected to the hazards that the miners were, but the claims I had worked had to be worked by someone." He blinked slowly. We watched the sun descend below the horizon, the sky was a pleasing orange in an ocean of Colorado blue – not a cloud in the sky. I offered him a beer. He signaled no with his hand and resumed his tale.

"I haven't flown in years. That old Piper Cub was easy to fly, and with a set of tundra tires, I could land it anywhere. Its stall speed was so low, I could cut the engine and glide – nothing but the wind, though inside the cockpit, with my headset on, it was silent. Coasting above the Colorado Plateau, silent above the Painted Desert, the Grand Canyon – it helped me to discover my inner calm. Once I was low enough, I'd fire up the engine, climb a few thousand feet, and glide again. It was so cheap to fly, I flew it until it would've been too expensive to keep it airworthy, but until then it gave me so much. As a result, I not only exceeded my wildest dreams as a prospector, but I explored the desert and myself beyond what would have been possible otherwise. Traveling from the main roads out to investigate my claims brought me deeper. Trucks couldn't handle most of

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the places we needed to go – there were no trails yet, so I'd head out on horseback with a few Navajo to check the claims I had mapped from the air. The good ones we sold to the mining companies, and the others I kept in my pocket in case they came of use later on. Sometimes we would have to take core samples. I had a small drilling rig that could be operated with myself and two others. We'd break a trail through the desert and take our samples. Those trails are now popular with Jeep clubs and whatnot. It's an interesting legacy I suppose, those people have no idea what came before, what sacrifices were made, and why you can drink a beer in the open in places like Moab. Something similar is happening again, only slower, and that's because of the oil and gas industry. Have you been to Vernal?"

"I haven't. What's there?"

"People go there for two reasons, oil and gas, and Dinosaur National Monument. The Monument has a fine collection of petroglyphs as well – you should check it out. But the town of Vernal is slowly going from conservative Mormon to being a typical oil and gas town. You can order a beer, but the waitress will probably give you the eye. You won't see many people drinking coffee, and if you do, you know they aren't local. In another twenty years or so, it'll be more like Moab – it's only a matter of time before the restrictive old life fall away.

"Now I had said that the Navajo are a pickup truck people, but they're also a turquoise people – I bet you already knew that they value this mineral." He fingered his ring, "This was made for me by the father of one of the men who worked for me. I've worn it so long that hand soap, oils, and whatever else have effected the color, but it's precious to me, beyond whatever dollar amount it could be worth. It was given to me for treating his son so well. Working for me brought his family fortune, and as a prospector, he didn't suffer the ill effects of the radioactive dust like so many others. He was wise with what he made, so were his children, and that legacy will only build over time. There were certainly others that drank and gambled their wages away, and those types didn't keep on with me for long, that kind of living put a strain on my tight-knit crews, and before long, we'd cut 'em adrift and hire on someone else. What do you do?"

"I'm a studying geology at Mines."

"Great school. After high school I was done with classrooms. After the War, I was too restless, too busy. If I'd have gone to college, I would have missed out on all this. That's the way it works though, you walk down one road, and at a certain point, you're committed until there's another fork up ahead. You can't go backwards. You'll see for yourself." The man stood up and shook my hand, "Thanks for sharing your camp with me this evening..."

"Jason"

"Jason, I'm Cal. I suppose we should've introduced ourselves earlier, but anyways, I'm ready to hit the hay. Jen and I turn in pretty early these days." The sky was a rich dark blue, giving way to the stars. The moon was a slice of Navajo silver.

"I understand, and I appreciate you sharing your story with me, it really fills in the blanks. Now when I'm out there, I'll see things a little

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clearer.” Cal patted my shoulder and turned the little generator off before climbing into the van and sliding the door closed.

When I woke the next morning, they were already gone, but his story stuck with me, and even now I share his anecdotes about the wild days when the Southwest was alive with the uranium boom. I tell people about how the miners carved those now popular Jeep trails into the desert, caused a ruckus and eventually turned places like Moab into completely different towns, and how a Piper Cub can go just about anywhere when it’s got a set of tundra tires.