

Leg 6

The Sandy Coulee Empire Of The Southwest

“If California were pretty, then the desert is the image of masculinity.” - A.L.

Leaning against the front grill of Taco with my arms crossed, I watched amused as heat shimmered off the surface of the asphalt, then danced across the thirsty earth with a seducing, almost mesmerizing effect. The landscape was different now; red, desolate, barren, and baked by the relentless sun, it felt unforgiving, but provocative too.

Pulling the brim of my cap down low to deflect glare, I examined the dirt beneath my fingernails from nights spent camping beside giant cacti, and smiled wondering if I could even count on that same hand the number of vehicles I'd seen pass in the last few hours. Then looking back over my shoulder at the spinning blue cherries of the Highway Patrol car parked behind me, I laughed to mock my own misfortune and said, “Actually...I think that's the only one.”

Moments earlier, he had been set up behind a large boulder on one of the countless blind corners I had careened around that morning

when he tracked us doing sixty nine in a fifty five. After pulling to the shoulder, I watched through my mirror the officer's hawkish demeanor as he exited his white cruiser, gave a big two fisted heave of his pistol belt, then with a sigh, pulled a pen and notepad from his breast pocket to approach.

I waited for the tap, and when it came I rolled down my window to greet him. The instinct was to be cordial and so I tried to offer an apology, but he beat me to the punch with the bluntness of a twitching moustache and a half polite, half sarcastic, “Do you know how fast you were going?”

I really didn't, but for the sake of argument and to expedite the whole process I weighed my options then responded in jest, “Not nearly as fast as I had been going before I saw you.”

I could see the admission took him by surprise, because with it his guard dropped to reveal rolling eyes and a slight toothy grin beneath that monstrous cookie duster of his. He began to lead the conversation with talk of safety as he wrote notes and subtly prodded for details of just exactly why I was literally flying through his parched neck of the woods. In turn I revealed my grand trip and the events in my life that lead me to him that day. Then once I finished explaining, I asked his pardon again for the speeding, but confessed also that I had been doing so pretty much since I left Los Angeles a week ago on the hypnotic, nearly abandoned, always iconic, American Route 66. Based on his approving nods, I gathered he had heard the story a time or two before.

After grabbing my licence and registration he clicked his pen back into its sheath with his thumb then put it back in his breast pocket, and told me he'd be right back. Twenty minutes later he returned with my

papers in one hand and a folded ticket in the other. Looking me sternly in the eye, he handed them back and said, “Enjoy your trip, Aaron,” then turned to jog back to his patrol car where he got in, slammed the door and sped off.

“*Weird*,” I thought, figuring that he must have had another call. Opening the ticket to take a look at the damage inside, I giggled at his lenience. In large block letters and written in still wet ink, it had a voiding line drawn through it, but read in lieu, “WELCOME TO ARIZONA, SLOW DOWN PLEASE!”

Welcome indeed. Deserts for me have always felt like home, and I had looked forward to the Southwest leg since even before I left Calgary. Having grown up not far from the skin cracking dryness of Alberta's own Badlands, I've always had an affinity for their arid beauty. And it seemed that the affection was now paying dividends with good luck, because the run in with the cop was the second close call I had.

A few days earlier I had been camping up North in one of the many Canyons I had pulled over to photograph. While star gazing that night, I got up to top off a drink and my Canadian themed chair, whose name is Rosy by the way, also got up and floated away. By that I mean a gust of wind had taken her, and although I could hear the frame clamor somewhere near, with a moonless sky, and darkness as black as a basement with no lights, I knew there was no way I'd find her. “*Oh well*,” I thought, as I took it as a sign to go to bed, and resolved to resume the search in the morning.

At first light, I got up and walked over to take a gander over the ledge she tumbled, and scoffed hard at what I saw. Standing completely

erect and even facing me to project pride with its Red Maple design, was my ambassador, Rosy the chair. “Murph,” I smirked, wondering what the odds of her landing on all fours were.

Hopping from one boulder to the next, I began to make my way into the coulee to rescue her, but was stopped about halfway down by the strength of intuition. My spidey senses were tingling, those are the “sixth sense” that usually warn the eyes have seen something the mind hasn’t yet. In the moment my intuition was telling me there was something near the chair. Leary, I strained through squinted vision until a clear picture began to emerge.

“*You sly bastard,*” I thought as I considered whether or not I really needed the chair moving forward. It was an appropriate question, given that just abreast of it, and guarding it like a prize, was the body of a cocked, loaded, and ready to strike, little rattlesnake.

The serpent lay nearly motionless as I arrived to the bottom with a clear case of the collywobbles. I’ve always enjoyed catching garter snakes back home, finding the texture of their sleek, scaled backs deceptively inviting to touch. But with a sinister bite, I knew this guy wouldn’t appreciate that, so I kept a bit of distance between us. Within a few feet now, I remained cautious and smiled while kneeling and offering words to relate, “You look almost like the sunning rattlers I’ve met in Alberta.”

Unimpressed by my name dropping abilities, he stared back with a cold reply and tasted my scent on the air with his flickering black tongue. Not wanting to test his patience, I admired him only for a minute before reaching slowly for the chair and asking rhetorically,

“Surely you don't mind parting with this one item.” I snatched it away as fast as I could.

Once I had it in my possession, I ridiculed my apprehension because this snake, I was sure, could neither fly, nor run, nor would he want to. In fact he probably doesn't even care for chairs so why would he take exception. After apologizing for the interruption, I made my way up the slope again, then turned back at the top for one last look. He had slithered into the rocks.

The chair's perfect presentation lingered in my mind as I drove away and conjured a memory of a time, while serving with the Army in Afghanistan, Willy and I affectionately did nearly the same thing to our old buddy Tom Hamilton, or “Hami” as he was called by friends. The three of us, like the Stooges, were tied at the hip from innumerable experiences shared over the years, like the tour we did together there, and so practical jokes were inherent.

On this occasion we had hauled all of his kit; sleeping bag, cot, barrack boxes and everything else he owned, into the middle of our ball hockey field, opposite the sandbag castle we called home. Once there, we set it all back up to resemble the exact same layout he had inside, even going so far as to use a ruler to measure his bug net, boot alignment and the placement of the pictures he had levied about.

It was a painstaking endeavor, but the look on his face after was worth every bit of the effort. Hami wasn't laughing though, and in fact he seemed downright irate about the whole ordeal. Willy and I still joke that never once after did he even give us a pat on the back for the hard work it took. Fortunately though, his sense of humour was sound, and although we knew he would strike back somehow, for now he relaxed

and showed his class by simply insisting, in not so many kind words, that we best help haul his kit back in.

It's one of the many imprinted memories from a place that really wasn't all that nurturing to begin with. The Canadian Army in Afghanistan suffered thousands of casualties in one form or another, so those rare occasions of forced laughter were the escape we needed from reality. Plus they were the lesser of two evils when you consider our other pastime was to cheer on American Bombers flying low overhead on route to drop their payloads in the mountain passes. A nightly show for us to watch from observation posts on the sides of those mountains as they lit up the sky with enough flash to make thunder and lightning blush.

The Islamic Republic was once the cradle of society, but for generations it has been contested by many sides. Her rugged mountains, deserts and vine-lands harbour angelic, often nomadic people who are humble, kind and touching. But if pushed to the edge, are as ferocious as any warrior culture that has ever walked. When you look into the eyes of a Jihadist Warrior for the first time, you'll see what I mean. They are fearless and piercing, and no words could explain to the know-it-alls back home who give their two cents on how to win a war they'll never fight in, that you can't beat people who aren't afraid to die, it's just that simple.

It is a country of contrasts, so hostile, yet so enchanting that when you're there, you count days down to come home. Then with addictive paradox when you're home, you count days until you can once again return to bathe under the bluest sky God ever made. Of course for a twenty something serving on a NATO tour there, it doesn't feel so

inviting; in fact it felt outright deadly. The life of an infanteer is always one of hardships where blistered feet, sore backs, cold food and sleepless nights dominate the routine. But in that place, even those inconveniences can't distract from the certainty that any sunset might be your last.

The work environment is nerve racking, and with heightened senses constantly being tested, it's not uncommon for a single tour to visibly age a person's mind, body and soul ten years as they battle, then and now, the sensation of sand storms, dehydration, and close calls, never mind habits that will forever make you tap your boots for scorpions in the morning. It's fair to say that the American Southwest Desert leg was summoning all manner of memories I had forgotten. And although I was looking forward to catching up with Willy and Hami once I got to Halifax, which was still a half a continent away, I also felt a bit of trepidation about the meeting because it had been so long, and because I knew we had a lot to talk about...