

AUBURN

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Chapter 5 - Pickup Truck

I had become tired of working in Amarillo, Texas, where individual people were nice enough. But the general attitude of ranchers, petroleum, and Defense industries were hostile to any disagreement with them. Being a boy in a dress was seen as disruptive. Those people talked in the language of domination, or physical violence, such as oil well drilling was called 'punching' for 'punching holes in the ground'. They felt so mean spirited to me. I rode a bus from there to Albuquerque, New Mexico, but was fascinated with what I had read of Santa Fe. I delightfully caught a train for the last sixty miles.

I loved the museums in Santa Fe. Nobody said a thing about a boy in a dress. Several people tried speaking to me in a Indian language, which of course I didn't understand. When asked they had thought I had to be a Native American. A kindly man did say my big knife might be better off out of sight.

I found a struggling motel that had been cut off from the traffic when the Interstate had been built. When I asked about weekly or monthly rates they gave me a price I couldn't refuse. A nearby Self Storage sold me packing boxes, several rolls of plastic bubble wrap, and sealing tape. The one box with my money went in the back corner under and behind the other boxes weighted with bricks and filed with bubble wrap.

Santa Fe served as a Mecca for artists. I saw an Indian dress I really liked, and spent three times as much money on that than I had ever spent on a dress. Twice people on the street asked me where I performed as a re-enactor?

After ten days of loafing around I went looking for work. I must not have put much effort into that as I wasn't finding an opportunity. Stupid me as I should have started at that motel. One evening I returned there late after a music show when I discovered the clerk worked overtime filling in after another clerk had quit. The entire staff had become so tired of emergency night work they were thrilled I could take that job. They thought my dress could be acceptable as an Indian motif. Not much happened there at night. I read mounds of books, and the public library allowed me check out privileges. I borrowed many of their books on Santa Fe art. In the art books I found a few artists from Europe and America in the 1800s whom I really liked. I found

their best works on the internet which I downloaded to my laptop.

There were two big trailers parked on one side of that motel's parking lot for a railroad right of way crew with their track supplies. They came and went in another big tractor trailer truck. They were big, muscular, over weight, noisy drunks, and didn't cotton to a little Indian telling them to be quiet. I asked the management, and the next night they arranged for a policeman to be sitting nearby as they waited for a call someplace else. When that crew arrived half drunk and very noisy that officer and I had a little heart to heart chat with them about the other guests. They went to bed in a huff that night, but they couldn't find another motel where they could park their big supply trailer.

My leisurely existence came to a dramatic halt when a drunk driver ran his eighteen wheel tractor trailer truck through the motel restaurant. It had kept going into the lobby. Fortunately I wasn't hurt as I had been making the rounds for locked doors. That accident closed the motel.

No other motel needed a clerk right then, but a restaurant needed a delivery boy. The tips were great, but they caught on and hired a service.

One night three drunks got mean with me on the street as if I had to be an Indian. My knife was with my backpack at a motel. I ran and they couldn't keep up. But somehow Santa Fe wasn't the same anymore. I caught the train again and went to Albuquerque.

I found a restaurant in an Indian motif specializing in Tex-Mex that loved my Indian dress for deliveries. A motel nearby charged for \$60 a night, but they reduced that for a monthly rental. I bought swim trunks and enjoyed their indoor pool and Jacuzzi. The tips were so good I could afford their rate, the rental car, its gas, and whatever. I developed quite a liking to some of the Tex-Mex menu. They had Fedora style broad rimmed hats for sale, and I bought one in a pinch-front style.

My beloved Santa Fe Indian dress tore a seam. The dry cleaner and tailor had trouble repairing it as the cloth had become too worn. When it tore the seam on the other side, the time had come to sadly say good bye to that dress.

I quit that delivery gig when my backpack had \$10,000 hidden away plus a few hundred in my wallet. I bought a new denim shirtdress, filled my canteen and water bottle, and turned in the rental car. Strapping my camp knife to my waist at the rental car agency, I hefted the backpack's straps over my shoulders. I stocked up on freeze dried food at an outdoor camping store. They had a French brand of citrus flavored sugar sweets. I loved the lemon flavored ones, and bought all three of the tins they had in stock. I walked west through town on what had been the main street of the US highway before the Interstate.

I came to a run down store and gas station which might have a patron I could

use. I bought a soda inside as a way of asking if I could sit around outside. The older woman behind the counter put a bored wave of her hand towards the glass windows into her response. I dropped my backpack next to a plastic lawn chair. I tied a strap from it to myself against it's being stolen if I dozed off. I pulled my Fedora hat lower on my forehead and watched.

In the fullness of maybe half an hour an old thin man arrived driving a dusty battered red pickup. He stopped at a gas pump and went inside. That could be for the restroom, or for paying cash.

Putting on my backpack, I went and leaned against the pillar next to the gas pump at his gas tank filler flap.

He came out, barely glanced at me, and put the gas nozzle into his truck.

I said. "Going west? Could I hitch a ride?"

He eyed me more closely. "Ya' safe?"

Maybe openly wearing my knife hadn't been such a good idea. "Don't take my stuff, and I don't take yours." That had worked before, so why not again?

He squinted at me until the pump quit at a \$40 sale. "How far?"

"Dunno." I gauged his manner. "Just a-headin' west. Don't matter none just how far. How far ya' goin'? Donation for gas?" I pulled out my wallet.

"Two hours on the Interstate before I turn off for Sis' place. OK, sonny, hop in."

I held out a twenty which he accepted. I dropped my backpack in the cargo area right behind the cab. "Buy you a soda?"

"Nah. You get one if you want. Bring me a coffee."

I took my backpack with my money with me to the Coke machine, went inside for a hot coffee, and returned. The backpack went into the cargo area again, and I climbed in the cab handing him the coffee.

He twisted the key, that old starter cranked the engine to life, and off we went with the windows wide open. It sounded a little bit like it had a hole in an exhaust pipe which almost disappeared the faster we went. That old truck never had air conditioning.

He waited a few minutes. "You on the lam from the law?"

"Naw. Sometimes I go to a police cruiser parked along a road and ask where a homeless shelter is. Or ask should I turn myself in? They look at me funny and send me

away which is my license to sleep in the park. That's when they arrest me and I get a free shower and shave."

That story had become a little dated and a little over stated, but it had grown more fun to tell.

An end of his mouth curled up just a little. He understood bumming around. That's when he started talking. He was Navajo Indian. He'd enlisted underage in the Second World War, been wounded, and been called back for the Korean War which had been awful. He felt unappreciated for his sacrifices. He had wanted to be a patriotic American, and to be seen as one. He'd been all over the country after his wife had died while he did lots of things. He had Social Security now, and did odd jobs when his truck cost him more than he had. He had grown fond of his old red truck.

"How do you say 'hello' in Navajo?"

He made a small smile. "Ya-at-eeh."

"Yah-tee. That's not quite right. Say that again, please."

"Yá' 'át' 'ééh."

"Ya at ee. Sorry. I'm not that close."

"Different sounds than in English. Keep trying. Yá' 'át' 'ééh."

I tried that several times, but never came very close. "Yah ah tee."

He grew a small smile. "Yá' 'át' 'ééh. Keep trying. Anglos never get it right."

"Does Anglos mean European Americans?"

He nodded ever so slightly. "Anglo-Americans."

"Yah ah tee." I didn't ask him what he would call an Asian-American.

He seemed more relaxed for my efforts. He told jokes once in a while. He talked of a grand motherly type he had met in the mountains in the east. She felt to him like people he had known on the reservation. Most of the teenagers and young men that arrived at her door step and stayed awhile seemed to do better in life. He admired her for letting those lost people camp out on her old sofas.

I felt awkward with his reference to lost people.

He had the most fun telling a story of Turkey Tail Feather Woman escaping from the Army over a hundred years ago. While in captivity she had built a large drum. He

said that had been made into a popular dance story with the Native Americans.

The road joined the Interstate. We whizzed along with the wind drying the sweat in my long hair. My hair was re-enactor Indian length, combed, and trimmed to a clean cut end just above my shoulders instead of hippy scraggly. We didn't say much over the wind noise. We passed the 'Welcome to Arizona' sign. Some time later he asked if I wanted out when there as one of those signs for a big interchange with gas stations, motels, and restaurants.

"Not really. How much further?"

"Oh, twenty minutes or so. Then you get out in the middle of almost nowhere."

"Nowhere is just fine. Nice and quiet."

"OK, you got it." About that twenty minutes give or take later he exited the Interstate and turned left crossing the bridge over the Interstate. He drove a short distance into the little town and stopped at a store with a sign over the door of 'Joe Nelson'. Inside it was a mixture of a small grocery, a convenience store, and a local meeting place with a few tables and chairs. One table had two men, and the other table had three women.

One of the women had become elderly with white and black streaks running through her hair. The other two were much younger more my age. They had used paper plates in front of them, and hot cups. There was a white porcelain tea pot in the middle of the table with a litter of tea bags on the saucers and plates. The box of green tea sat too far way for me to read which brand.

I had been surveying the general organization of the shelves when a man appeared behind the counter. He seemed one of those people I couldn't tell the difference between Mexican and Indian.

The man with the truck went to the counter. "Hi, Joe. Use the restroom?"

Joe nodded he could and eyed me.

I seemed drawn to him. Now or never, so I tried my new Navajo word. "Yah ah tee."

He responded in a language I didn't know, but he had a friendly tone.

"Sorry. That's the only Indian word I know. That man taught it to me as I rode with him this afternoon."

He smiled. "Ah. Not bad, although you spoke it like an Anglo. Welcome. Glad you tried. Not many Anglos even try. Where are you headed?"

The truck driver came out and had a brisk conversation with Joe in the Navajo language. The driver bought a few groceries for his sister down the road.

Joe smiled slightly. "How is she?"

"Oh, sounded the same on the phone." He lapsed back into Navajo before switching back to English. "I picked up my friend here in Albuquerque and he rode with me. He's been bummin' around and doing odd jobs across the country." He eyed me. "You're a good kid. Do what you have to do." He picked up the groceries, went outside, and we heard that old starter crank that engine.

Joe tilted his head a little. "How have you been getting by?"