

One

Apache County, Arizona

The Arizona DPS officer ambled slowly from his parked cruiser, the July sun brutal even at midmorning, thankful that it was to his back and he could walk in his own shadow. To the North he could make out the dark edge of the Defiance Plateau and Balakai Mesa, Canyon de Chelly, and Utah beyond the horizon. Clouds were already starting to build; blessed rain would come before long.

He approached the pickup truck from the rear, noticing the Oklahoma plates, the current registration sticker in the upper right hand corner, the right brake light burned out as the driver even now had the pedal depressed, clutch in, engine idling. The officer wondered if the gearshift was in first, the driver ready to take off. He wondered if the driver was an Indian, off the rez, either still drunk from the previous night or getting an early start on tonight.

He glanced in the bed as he carefully came around the side. When he had hit the light bar at mile marker 330, twenty-nine miles inside the state line on I-40 and three miles east of Chambers, the truck was traveling seventy, five miles under the speed limit and ten below the sparse traffic. But when the driver had touched his brakes, the right rear light was out, and the officer decided that on a slow day, why not be helpful.

They'd pulled over on the remains of old Route 66, off the Interstate, on a sad patch of broken concrete that reminded the trooper of a different time, when traffic slowed down through the little towns, when a highway actually had a soul. But no more.

The truck bed was empty except for a duffel bag, a battered suitcase, and a toolbox, chained through the corner opening in the pickup bed where a stake could hold wooden side extensions. The truck was old but in pretty good shape, better than an Indian would keep it, he thought. The officer believed it was a '62 or '63. He remembered a difference in the chrome along the side but not much else.

He saw two weathered hands on the steering wheel as he moved beside the door—no watch, no jewelry. Good, he thought, I won't have to worry about where the driver's hands were. The driver was male, White or Hispanic—hard to tell—late fifties and slight. The man's face was weathered, and was dressed as any laborer might be in work shirt and jeans, old straw cowboy hat on his head, pushed back so the officer could see the driver's eyes. They were okay.

"Afternoon," the officer said, one hand on the windowsill and one lightly on his loosened service revolver. Before it had become his sidearm, his older brother Sam had carried it for seven years. It had been in Sam's hand when the escapee from Florence had dropped him two miles off Route 87 near Bapchule. It was a big Smith and Wesson .38 revolver, Bakelite grips, bluing that showed the wear of thirty-three combined years of service. A crisp trigger pull that spoke of a time before the legal system

made it their responsibility to idiot-proof firearms. Not a piss-ant nine-millimeter, he often thought. A modern automatic didn't have enough barrel, enough heft, enough impact. He'd used a standard issue military .45 as an MP in Korea. Fired it twice on the job. Both times one shot had done the trick.

"Afternoon, officer," the driver responded, not moving his hands from their position on the steering wheel. "Was I speeding? I didn't think this old thing would do more'n seventy." Slight accent, unidentifiable.

"No," the officer explained, glancing over the truck's interior behind his silver Ray Bans. On the seat beside the driver was a pair of cheap sunglasses, a SoCal Motor Club map of Arizona Indian Country, the remains of a McDonald's breakfast—coffee, Egg McMuffin with cheese, gallon jug of water. At least the guy knew how to travel.

But incongruous with the laborer was a satellite phone, worn and well used. The thing must have cost more than a grand.

"You have a brake light out," the trooper said, not mentioning the phone right away.

"I do?" the man responded, obviously surprised. "Are you going to give me a ticket or somet'n?" Still nothing unusual. "Been on the road two days from Oklahoma but I got spare bulbs in my toolbox. If I change it are you still going to give me a ticket?"

The man was worried about a ticket. The officer thought about running the guy's plates, see what might show up. Might take some time though, if there's nothing

national, the Arizona computer would have to talk to the Oklahoma computer. He could let the guy change the bulb and he'd run the plates.

"Can I see your license, please?" the officer asked, turning the hand on the door over, keeping the other on the butt of the Smith.

"Sure, officer," the man said, moving to his right and digging his wallet out of the left rear pocket. Thin, worn. Not many credit cards, if any. Or bills. Or pictures. The license was offered and the officer took it and stepped back away from the truck so he could keep the driver in his sight while looking at the information.

Oklahoma license: Vernon Charles Cabazos, age 58. Home address: 5629 West Shawnee Highway Number 18, Bowlings, Oklahoma.

"Apartment?"

"Motel," the man explained. "It weren't much of a place to live but it was close to the fields."

"Farm hand?"

"Wheat mostly, and some alfalfa. But I took care of the machinery," the man said with some pride, distinguishing himself from a common laborer. "I'm a mechanic."

"Pretty fancy telephone for a mechanic," the trooper observed, nodding to the phone on the seat. The driver acted nervous.

The driver squirmed a little. "I suppose it's really not mine," he admitted sheepishly, taking his eyes off the officer.

"How's that?"

“The company I worked for in Oklahoma gave each work crew one of these ‘cause we’d be out in the fields, no telephones, even cell phones wouldn’t work. If something went broke, you couldn’t have a couple hundred thousand dollars of machinery tied up while someone drives eighty miles to a phone.” He eyed the trooper.

“But when the company shut down, I had the phone and they never came around to pick it up. We all had our own tools so the bank must’a figured it wasn’t the company’s. I thought it was odd, but...I kept it.”

The trooper thought. “Not that odd. My brother’s girl was a student in Tempe, rented a washer and dryer from someone who ended up going bankrupt. She kept sending the checks and they kept bouncing back, undelivered. When she moved, she sold them both because there wasn’t anyone to give them back to.”

“Same thing,” the driver said knowingly, agreeing with the similarities.

“What are you doing in Arizona, Mr. Cabazos?” He said the name slowly, sounding out each syllable.

“I got a job at the Indian School in Red Lake starting next week...maintenance for the school, the busses too, I guess.”

“Long way to come for a job.”

The man looked at the officer for a moment. “Not if you don’t have one,” he answered.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. How you planning on getting up there?”

The man glanced over at the open map, hands remaining on the wheel. “They said to take 99 out of

Leupp Corner, then Indian Route 2 to, let's see, K-y—k-o-t-s-m-o-v-i, he spelled it out. Then 264 to Tuba City, and then 160 on up to Red Lake.”

The officer thought that the man must have studied the map pretty good.

“Sounds right,” the officer said, replaying the route from memory. “But you need to be careful north of Leupp on the Leupp-Oraibi Road. Road may be washed out at Burro Springs, had a big rain up there yesterday.”

“I’ll be careful,” the driver acknowledged gratefully.

The license was current but showed the telltale holes of having tickets stapled in the middle. “You had any trouble with the law back in Oklahoma?” the officer asked. He pronounced it “oak-lee-homer”.

The man looked away for a moment but answered without apparent disguise. “Not much. A few beers after a long week. You know, a lot of times we’d have to sleep on the ground, miles from the farm house, right where a combine or tractor broke down, wait for parts out from Oklahoma City. A man gets pretty lonely...and thirsty after a while.”

The officer looked at the picture on the license. Same man, but younger, not as weathered, little heavier. The eyes held a glimmer of youth, he thought. But that was gone now. “You’re younger here.”

“Yeah, they let you keep the old picture if you want, when you get your new license.”

“You done that a few times.”

“Mor’en once. That’s how those old ladies have great pictures.”

“Where?”

“In the obits, man. You never noticed that? Some lady dies at 92 and her picture looks like she’s still 40.”

“Why’s that?”

“They use her driver’s license for the paper,” the driver proclaimed, like it was something he’d discovered all on his own. The officer thought probably not, but it was obvious this man had no idea that some people had lots of pictures of themselves—even had their own cameras. That flat wallet was a sign. Probably no other wallet held pictures of him, either.

“You work in Arizona,” the officer warned, “you got ninety days to get a new license, plates for your truck, too.”

“Will they let me keep the picture?”

“I doubt it,” the officer concluded. “But once you get one here, you can probably do the same thing.”

“Better look good then.”

“Haven’t seen a good one in a long while,” the trooper admitted. “Shut the engine off and bring your keys,” the officer said finally, punching the door open. “You change the bulb and I’ll wait in the car.”

“Pretty hot,” the driver said, opening the door and stepping onto the searing concrete.

“Pretty normal.”

“No bugs like Oklahoma,” the driver observed gratefully, leading the officer to the rear of the truck. He unlocked the chain securing the toolbox, picked it up out of the bed, and moved to the right brake light. The officer kept his hand on the butt of the big Smith and turned slightly so he could keep the man’s hands in view. The

driver unlocked the hasp on the toolbox with another key on the ring, chained now to his belt, like a biker. The officer figured that out in the field you couldn't afford to drop them. Needle in a haystack. Yeah. But everyone he'd ever seen have one of those chains didn't have shit in their wallets or in their heads. You didn't see Scottsdale stockbrokers with chains hanging outside their Joseph Abboud's.

The toolbox was organized, the tools old, worn, but in pretty good shape, good selection. "Nice tools," the officer said as the man lifted the top tray, set it on the ground beside him, and pulled a folded rag out of the bottom. Inside was an assortment of light bulbs and fuses for the truck.

"That was part of the job," the man explained.

"What was?"

"Tools. You had to have your own tools, for the job. It's probably the reason I have the phone."

"Probably good, having your own tools."

"Yeah, especially on the road, like I been. Can't be without your tools, never know when somet'n come up."

The officer agreed and glanced into the bottom of the open box. Crescent and pipe wrenches and a couple of those multipurpose things you see advertised on TV late at night, screw drivers; dwell meter and timing light, spark plug gapper and socket set. Don't see those much any more, the officer thought. Old truck. Old tools.

The driver carefully picked a bulb from the unfolded rag and a Phillips screwdriver. "It won't take a minute," the

man said. “When I’m done, can you check them all out? You know, brakes and turns, just in case another’s bum.”

“Sure,” the officer said. “I’ll just be in the car.”

The man nodded his head. The first screw was already removed and held between his lips, his skilled hands working on the second one. In the patrol car, the officer called into headquarters in Flagstaff, reporting plate number, and driver’s license information. The man had the rear brake reflector off and was working on the dead bulb. Once removed, he brushed out the socket with his finger and peered closely at the connection. Dissatisfied, he reached into the toolbox and withdrew a small wire brush and quickly dressed the connection. Then he found a tube of lithium grease, the kind you put on door hinges, and with a dab on his little finger, lubricated the socket. Pleased with his effort, he took the new bulb from the cloth and with a twist, finished the operation.

The officer called in again. Still no word from the DPS computer in Phoenix. No word from Oklahoma. The man took a handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wiped the dust and bugs out of the inside of the reflector. That’s why the truck is in such good shape, the officer realized. You don’t see that very much any more, someone taking care of their tools, taking care of their truck. Another dab of grease carefully applied to the rubber gasket, before tightening down the screws. Red Lake Schools was getting a pretty good worker.

The reflector was back in place and the man stood up. The officer reluctantly left the air conditioning. “Check the other lights before I put the tools away?”

“Sure,” the officer said, returning the man’s license. It was slowly returned to the worn wallet. No plastic windows. Old style where everything had a little pocket of its own. Nothing sticking out. Just like his tools, everything put away.

The man returned to the cab and went through the front lights, and then the back, the turns, and everything checked out okay. Wrapping up the bulbs and putting the tools away in their places, the man reflected on their meeting. “You know,” he volunteered, “a man don’t have a wife or a friend, he might go on forever and never know something’s broke.”

The officer agreed. He had never thought of it that way. “I reckon,” he said, watching the man finish up the job. His wife was always fussing over his uniform, his haircut. “It’s my job, I guess,” he concluded finally. The man agreed, snapping the lock closed. They walked to the left side where he lifted the toolbox over the side of the bed and chained it again. They shook hands before the driver got back in.

“I appreciate the stop,” the man said. His hands were smooth but hard, beyond callus, beyond blister. Hard all over. “And the conversation. Long drive with no one to talk to.”

“No problem,” the officer answered. The man got in and closed the door, smiling. Behind the officer, on the Interstate, there was a pause in the incessant truck traffic between Dallas and Los Angeles. The officer stepped back and raised his hand to touch the brim of his western hat as he had a thousand times before. He used the hand that had

so carefully guarded the butt of his revolver and when the tips of his fingers touched its brim, the mistake barely registered. The driver raised an automatic over the edge of the windowsill. He could tell it was a nine-millimeter, the barrel smaller than a child's finger, piss-ant excuse for a gun but dark, pointing right at his chest.

No one heard the sharp crack before the emptiness of the high desert swallowed it up. No one saw the officer drop or the driver pull away, using his turn signal to merge onto the empty Interstate highway.

The man had seemed so nice, so tidy.

He pulled off the highway the first chance he had, took a graded dirt road west of a dead cluster of buildings called Navajo, south, driving slowly so that he didn't kick up too much dust. Someone without the Indian Country map would never know the unmarked trail was there. To his left was reservation land and out the passenger window he could see Carrizo Butte beyond the Petrified Forest.

He mulled over what he'd just done, and what it meant. He knew he didn't have to kill the trooper, probably shouldn't have. But like the other times, it was done, and he couldn't do anything about it. Just move on, he told himself. There were no remnants of his former life; the transformation was so complete. Everything changes, he thought. Like his mother had told him from an early age, he could be whoever he wanted to be.

While he drove, he fished his wallet out again, removed the Oklahoma driver's license. Using his thumb and forefinger, he tore the license into little pieces, letting them flutter out the window and into the dust and creosote bushes.

He pulled the truck off the roadbed and down into an arroyo. It was dry and hard, and lacked any indication of vehicle or horse traffic. His own tires barely disturbed the sun-baked surface, flattening only the tracks of small animals as he made his way off the dirt road. He followed the wash to the east, alternating left and right branches until he could navigate no farther. He shut off the engine, leaving the key in the ignition, windows down. If found, someone would think the driver had just gone for a walk, maybe hunting. He took his map and the telephone, collected the remains of his breakfast.

The man that had most recently been Vernon Charles Cabazos went to the back of the truck and stopped. What to do about the license plate? He was sure that it was now logged into a computer at the Arizona Department of Public Safety, waiting to be put on an all points bulletin once the trooper's body was found. Would an Indian care that it didn't have a plate, be suspicious? Probably not. He took a screwdriver out of the toolbox and removed the plate, putting the screws back in. He'd miss the truck. He'd miss the tools. But he had enough money to buy anything he wanted, any one he wanted. If he worked it right, he might even be able to buy self-respect.

Having no watch, he estimated the time from the position of the sun, hinged the phone's antenna out until it

was fully extended, and pointed it eastward, where a communications satellite hung in geosynchronous orbit over the population centers of the eastern seaboard.

“It’s me,” he said simply, once he had punched in the number and the connection had been made. “You have the identity sheet?” The man on the other end grunted in the affirmative and flipped a notebook to the appropriate page.

“Column 4, row 14,” he recited from memory. The instructions pointed to a number, and the number referenced a new identity. The man on the other end gave the caller a Post Office box number in Flagstaff and a combination.

No pleasantries were exchanged, no good-byes said. A simple flick of a button on the handset terminated the call.

Lifting his duffel bag and suitcase out of the bed, and with an agility that belied his age, he scrambled up the arroyo wall. He began hiking south, where the map showed the dirt road turned east, to intersect Route 666 north of St. John’s. The Devil’s Highway, he thought, ironically, as he walked purposefully, stopping occasionally to bend the license plate until it fractured, scattering pieces left and right as he walked into the Arizona desert.

“Fuck that Ciprian”, he said out loud. “Let him try and find me.”