

Personal Space

I pulled into Schnebly Hill Vista. The way up from Sedona had been a rough and rocky off-road climb that battered the poor rental along with my brainpan. The 4-Wheel drive I'd selected had been press-ganged into seasick service. The drive was full of sweet and sour sensations, the rough road shaking and jerking me like a rag doll, while majestic scenery bounced around my eyeballs.

I'd driven north to Sedona from Phoenix on a Friday in a brand new Rav 4, escaping for a few much needed days off, taking a low-rent mini-vacation. I'd rented because my truck was on its last leg. The poor beast had barely survived the summer, reeking of burnt oil and melted air compressor belts, the front end weaving in and out of freeway traffic like an addled, broken machine. It would not make the five thousand foot climb from Phoenix to Northern AZ.

For the trip I'd also borrowed manly outdoor gear from an ex-marine friend: A nice Northface tent, a deluxe cool chest, an extension cord and power strip that plugged into the cigarette lighter, as well as a flashy utility knife and headlamp. The ice chest brimmed with beer and sandwiches, my backpack stowed toilet paper, bug repellent and laptop. Today I would camp, tomorrow explore the woods, full nature-boy.

In addition to the camping gear I had a suitcase full of clothes and other accessories of modern life. Today and tomorrow I'd roam free in the woods, but come Saturday night I had a hotel reservation in downtown Flagstaff. Then I'd overwrite whatever serenity I found outdoors with some good old fashion out-of-town carousing.

Today, however, it was just me, the monumental red rocks, Schnebly Hill Road and a desire to camp somewhere on top. I had a *desire* to camp, but like so many things in my life, no real understanding of how to bring that wish to fruition.

I'd never been on Schnebly Hill Road before. I'd read it was rough. It was. The serpentine and precipitous climb to the vista might only be six miles, but it had taken over an hour. Rainwater lapped and splashed in craters. Jagged red crags jutted from rutted road. Crumbling orange earth had, in places, been rubbed smooth and slick by natural and manmade erosion. The sharp outcroppings were vibrant from bursts of intermittent rainfall. Huge monster-truck sized gouges were filled with fresh, roiling mud. Some hard rain fell, but mostly it drizzled, patches of cerulean blue punching through swollen mashed-potato clouds.

Water ran down the road as I climbed. It pooled in tremendous refrigerator-sized potholes. Once I rolled too far up an embankment and had to reverse. In the rocking pause between mechanical momentum, I noticed a puddle mirroring a fractal universe of red rocks and wet sky.

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The joke was I'd come up here to spend some time alone. It's a joke cause I live alone, have for fifteen years. I don't have a lover and my family is mostly dead, or mostly dead to me. I used to have these things. One day I woke up and noticed they were gone, and it's been that way since. I was lucky and didn't know it, now I'm not and I do.

In my life there are islands of time, days, when I don't speak. Except for when these silent islands are contrasted by my full-time job, where I speak on the phone non-stop for eight hours. I take endless back-to-back calls handholding incompes as they try to interface with technology they cannot fathom. It's not unlike yelling instructions through a megaphone to a caveman lost in the dark. It's your job, without being able to see what the caveman is doing, to cheerily instruct him how to find the Bic lighter obscured in darkness. After the successful location of the fire-making device, you then must teach his blunt digits the delicate movement of pressing down and scrolling the wheel. It's magic when they spark the flame, but most remain in darkness.

I am a bastard, I admit. I'm trying very hard to cultivate more empathy for the poor creatures. But Fuckin' A, some people just shouldn't be given smart phones.

I was glad to escape the routine of speaking rapidly for eight-hours, coming home and plunging into a close, personal silence. Shit, driving the Rav 4 itself was an escape, to be able to pretend I owned a ride that didn't reek of burnt oil and imminent mechanical death.

I thrilled as the land morphed from flat, dusty and dry into orange, dark-green high desert. Even happier when that gave way to eruptions of majestic, many-hued red mountains and the swaying, stream-fed trees of Oak Creek. On arrival I'd hiked around some gorgeous trails, entranced by the landscape, ever amazed and grateful that such beauty exists only a hundred miles from home. Yet my enjoyment and awe mingled with a low sadness. I was there alone, flashing on all the people I'd hiked around Sedona with in the past.

In the past a high-elevation drive with sheer cliff drop-offs and ruddy, wet, unpredictable road would have thrown me into a howling anxiety attack. In recent years I'd somehow found a way to channel my distress and sadness, gained a modicum of control over some of my base emotions.

This time I simply turned onto Schnebly Hill Road, and drove. The only way to it is through it. At least I *understand* this concept. Regardless, today I drove on and embraced the off-road wild ride, knowing the reward would be camping on top of a mountain range.

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When I reached the Vista another car sat parked in the gravel pullout, a shiny tourist 4-wheel drive like mine. I pulled in behind it, leaving plenty of room on the outer lip of the semi-circular pull-off. As I did I noticed a middle-aged couple nestled among an outcropping of boulders. They held each other looking down on the still brilliance. I'd found the couple in a relaxed, private moment, maybe casually honoring an anniversary. In the valley below hawks sailed through misty beams of light bursting through pillowy clouds.

She was brunette, petite and wore open strappy sandals and billowing magenta slacks. He was big and sturdy, wearing a polo shirt, creased jeans and topsiders. She was bear-hugging the man, the tableau almost comical but mostly tender, like a koala bear bear-hugging a grizzly. When I pulled in they were embracing, absently smiling at the valley.

As my tires crunched on the gravel her head jerked from the vista, craning to look at their car and then mine. The sound seemed to have wakened her from a dream. Her expression showed irritation and a note of fear. Her stare lingered on me too long, well after I'd gotten out of the vehicle, clear from her glare I was intruding. I didn't know she owned the mountain.

I shook it off, breathed the rarefied air and walked toward the edge of the vista, crunching gravel and broken rocks underfoot. I found a great spot, out of sight of the revelers, and lost myself in the valley.

A winding section of the road I'd travelled up could be seen at a distance, perhaps a mile down the trail. There a pink off-road tour jeep had momentarily stopped at another scenic pullout to let tourists take photographs. I could somehow hear the conversation of the tourists seated on a raised bench in the back of the jeep. How small they seemed in every way, giddy and pathetic trying to capture something unfathomable on a cell phone camera, trying to frame the infinite.

I counted breath and looked over the monumental landscape, casting contemplations to the clouds.

The sun was low in the sky and I still had no idea where to camp or even if camping would be allowed up here. All the signs so far indicated I couldn't camp before this vista. I stood up, brushed dirt off my ass and started crunching my way to the rental. Back at the SUV I glanced at the koala and the grizzly seated on the rocks below, she still holding on for dear life.

As I opened the door she suddenly turned around and started boring holes through me.

As if my body belonged to someone else, I closed the car door and started walking toward the couple. She continued to stare. I smiled, she did not. Unsure of where my feet were carrying me or what I was doing, I continued to walk toward

them. As I neared them the man was oblivious, but the woman locked onto me like prey.

I did the only natural thing and sat down right next to her. Our thighs nearly touched. I could have touched her arm still clinging to her bear. As a visitor to a cathedral of geological proportions, an ant at Olympus, I'd elected to be petty and bring the focus down to human scale. To sit beside the only other humans within miles because a stranger gave me the evil eye. As I said, I'm a bastard.

That said, it seemed the only possible response to her unkindness. She finally looked away. As she did, her leg swung out slightly and for a moment our thighs touched. She jerked her leg away and shook her companion. For the first time he noticed me on the other side of his woman as if we were all sitting on a love seat of stone. I cast a loving gaze at the couple, a lazy smile playing over my lips, resisting the urge to blow a kiss.

She whispered something in his ear. The man glared at me and rose, the woman still clinging as if an appendage. He was taller than me. I considered the danger inherent in the location.

Unquestionably I would walk away, having wordlessly executed an impromptu protest against the notion of ownership, territory and personal space.

A part of me wondered what it would feel like as I hurtled over the edge.

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After the vista I continued on the road east toward the Flagstaff side. Here the road smoothed out and widened. The landscape changed from dramatic red sandstone and scrubby desert brush to forested blue mountains. Though I was at the base of the Colorado Plateau, the land became flatter, and the road more reasonable. As I drove entrances to canopied off-road trails appeared, snaking off Schnebly Hill Road like dirt tributaries.

I found one that looked passable and pulled onto it. The trail was rough, made more difficult to traverse because of the rain, but I slow-poked it back into the

canopy, at times wondering if I was going to tip onto two wheels. I found a place to pull off that looked flat and backed in. I pulled the parking brake with satisfaction, realizing I was now literally off-road, off the map. It was dusk. The tall pines and billowing cottonwoods cast shadows on the tan, needle-covered underbrush.

The borrowed one-man tent had been pitched with some confidence. I'd practiced in my dead-grass front yard in Phoenix before leaving. Also for now the wind was not a factor. Not like the time my sister and I had tried to pitch an enormous tent in a sandstorm in the Nevada salt flats, only to have the thing blow away like a tremendous square kite or some boxy sea creature adrift in the air.

Eager to make my mark I wandered off a ways, found a suitable stump and left an offering. Once and for all I'd resolved the Zen Koan about a bear shitting in the woods. What is it about communing with nature in this way that is so satisfying?

Too warm to make a campfire for cooking, I cracked open the cool chest and found the zip lock bag of grilled chicken. I submerged my hand in the ice, fishing. My cold fist emerged with a tub of macaroni salad. Sitting in a camo hunting chair poking at pasta with a Swiss army knife Spork, I managed to send some sustenance down my throat.

Darkness came on quickly. I sat outside the tent in my boxers and drank a couple of beers. I felt the absolute solitude of my current position. Alone time indeed.

Under a sky dotted by unknown constellations, I piled into the tent. One-man tents always feel like a big cocoon, like maybe overnight one might molt or metamorphose. The mesh tent-top revealed stars and pine branches arrayed in conical musical arrangements. The soft moon wore a scarf made of wisp. Freckle-patterned stars and moonlight shone on prehistoric bugs strolling over the tent like an insect catwalk.

I turned on one of the little battery-powered LED lamps purchased at the dollar store. As I did I heard a huge metallic thump, and a pebble-sized indent appeared in the side of the tent. It looked like Sasquatch had poked at the fabric. Jumpy from the thump and poke, my shoulders and hands tensed. I tried to puzzle

out the source of the collision. Could there be a rogue squirrel trying to find it's way into the tent?

I shrugged off the intrusion as a wayward beetle, hung another LED lamp from a clamp at the tent's apex and opened my laptop. As I did, other thuds sounded, like rocks shot from triangulated slingshots. Soon after I saw a cicada speed up the mesh top of the tent, a diaphanous wing unfurled beneath its green shell, scrambling and circling in the LED's aura. Along with the locust, giant daddy long legs and other ancient, many-jointed winged things circled the light.

I was confused but finally understood, the poor buggers thought my AAA-battery-powered lights were the moon and were trying desperately to orient themselves in relation to it. In some instances, like the cicadas, doing anything in their power to become one with it. I was at once unsettled and mesmerized by the tiny menagerie on display.

Laying back on the sleeping bag I looked for my water bottle on the floor only to see something about the size of a gherkin pickle root under the tent. Being a desert boy this disturbed me, knowing that the smallest scorpions are the deadliest. I stomped the tunneling gherkin with my shoe until it ceased. As I did another kamikaze cicada crashed and dented the wall of the tent.

The suicidal collisions, moon-drunk monstrous bugs and rooting mystery animals weirded me out so I turned off the LEDs, opened the laptop and floated in its aquatic light. Not exactly hearty nature-boy, but I was on vacation.

A while later I wanted to go to sleep. Careful not to agitate the miniature natural world that ambled in the darkness outside, I flipped on the headlamp to low, took off my clothes and turned off the light. I bedded down in real darkness.

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I slept like shit, the even silence proving a less than idea backdrop for slumber. Or maybe it was the rocky ground, not as flat as I'd thought. That and the fact that the roll I was laying on was about an eighth of an inch thick. I'd thought it

was some kind of space age material for ultra-light hiking, some super thin mattress. Had no idea I was supposed to inflate it.

All night I heard the ground crunch and the continual sound of insect legs clacking on the tent. Once I'd woken up and stared out the mesh ceiling at what stars I could see through the clouds. As I did I saw an actual scorpion scurry across the mesh. I drifted in and out of sleep, rustling and uncomfortable, sometimes inside, sometimes out of the warm bag.

I dreamed the tent unzipped and unfolded like stitches being unthreaded in a boulder-sized, bloated body. I became the body somehow embedded, maybe buried, in a grassy hillside. Something unholy was unspooling a gully that ran down one fold of me, opening me, rousing all the dormant blind creatures that scabbled within.

This body rose from the ground and became a fleshy a hot air balloon hovering over Schnebly Hill Vista, lolling and bobbing in the vectors and currents, moribund flesh dappled in sunlight beaming out of mashed-potato clouds. Hovering in the mountain air, I spotted a koala bear hugging a grizzly in a canyon wall cave.

I drifted and soared until a mountain-sized, disembodied hand cranked open one of my seams like the lid of a sardine tin. Cold air overtook the lift-giving heat in my enclosure and I plummeted to the valley below. Broken and deflated, swarmed by carrion loving insects, I melted into the earth.

I awoke shivering and stared in shock at the open mouth of the tent, mosquitoes and little winged bugs circling the entrance. I groped for the headlamp and felt something large and warm beside me. In darkness I felt something brush against my thigh. I could barely make out a human figure lying next to me. A naked thigh rubbed up on mine. As my eyes adjusted I realized the woman from the vista was lying next to me. She smiled pleasantly, her glowing eyes staring into mine. In the moonlight I watched her silhouetted hand zip up the tent.