

Excerpt "Thirty Days in the Desert", Day 10 through Day 18

Day 10

The day after and morning brings a light first cup of joe at the house and repaired bike I'm off after a series of switchbacks fifteen minutes the climb to the higher desert a coyote stood in the middle of the road monitoring my approach I slowed not wanting to antagonize as I waited two then three four five then six appeared crossing the road appearing then disappearing into the brush soon only the first was left he gave me one last glance then exited with the others as I rode by there was no trace finishing the ride I stop at the health foods cafe natural sisters for a second cup of joe it has been become a habit lately after morning treks through the park conversations with locals tourists the highway stretches in front two young ladies are intently staring at the park guide and a couple from the Netherlands who have rented a RV there is a dog painted on the side door window I initially mistake it for the real deal and laugh when I tell him he has a nice looking dog where upon he looks at me oddly then I realize my error I slide into a conversation with a man recently divorced he has bought about 10 acres with a cabin he is a retired fireman but works a few days as a dispatcher his teenage daughter stays with him sometimes and he says she is as much interested in fixing up the cabin as he is she likes the stars we swap stories about teens soon I realize I need a shower the coyotes confirm dude you smell like humans

Day 11

Writing less not more ran the mountain again maybe that is the issue be less involved with yourself will that bring clarity Sunday I will hike no run no bike it will be my first hike into the park off the main roads me and the images I will collect to reflect upon to bias to contemplate in an hour I am getting a massage at two bunch palms setting for altman's the player now I'm a playa ginger tea and guacamole no rhymes for joshua that's funny who's money better make some get done wind me up last night I heard the coyotes dogs answered in response I considered joining but went back to sleep

Day 12

This morning I saw coyote tracks when I rolled down the trash can. Maybe they are requesting that I join their pack at the entrance to the park exists the booth I show my pass which I've purchased on the first day a senior pass for ten dollars any national park for the rest of my life your tax dollars at work usually the kiosk isn't open when I arrive as I'm there by six forty five or seven to beat the heat on days I ride my bike I leave the car parked just inside the entrance by the restrooms and last water fountain on days I run the mountain I keep driving its a half an hour to ryan mountain passing quail springs Boy Scout trail Hemingway intersection rock key view Ryan ranch oyster house of horrors finally the mountain if I'm riding my bike it's on to jumbo rocks about eighteen miles or an hour and a half to where I turn around I recognize all the markers by the second week at first I couldn't figure out why it was so difficult then I realized I was at altitude forty four hundred feet that's up there for sea level dwellers on the way out I always stop at the kiosk they check passes both ways to make sure the early risers have indeed paid they began to recognize me and we have conversations depending upon whether anyone is behind me most mornings at this time people are just coming in not leaving we talk about the park the weather the town that's part of the job and they enjoy it and are good at it I thought if I move here I could do it they could use a part time black ranger I always feel good when I arrive or leave

Day 13

There is a yellow jeep with a black cloth top that I have seen many a morning on on the days i ride my bike or drive to Ryan mountain for that matter it stands out from the smell of creosote the morning color of the rocks and the absence of other vehicles on the road it is generally parked at the same spot or one driving down the shoulder two wheels on dirt two wheels on pavement the driver sometimes is sitting other times standing outside with binoculars looking across at a formation of maybe he is looking for the coyotes or maybe sheep before i leave i will stop and ask him but probably like me he does not want to be interrupted by strangers he has his well defined mission that he prefers each morning a calming routine communion with what he watches

Day 14

hiked to sorensens rock creosote nothing in the middle no other walkers hikers climbers at parking lot a jack rabbit hip pity hop the desert looks much different at ground level walking speed things are noticed that aren't readily apparent otherwise the trails are not marked that clearly and you need to follow boot prints and think logically about what might be the trail and what might be someone else getting lost I didn't get lost as you walk the face of the rocks change only so slowly not a whiz blurr as if you are biking or driving you see the cracks crevices subtle shadows rocks perched openings exposed old fence posts washes hard pack miniature desert lizards scurrying about thorns scrapping your legs as you wore shorts it's hot but the rule is don't wear shorts in the forest luckily there are no mosquitos of course you wouldn't expect to find any in the desert clouds clouds more clouds blue backdrop decaying trees felled by nature as their time expired feeding the next crop rocks sand scrub and more clouds there is supposedly a turn off to round a peak clearly at this point I've missed it but I continue until I finished off one of my water bottles another rule of thumb is when you've drank half your water it's time to turn around this one I follow retracing your own steps can prove to be difficult when the landscape generally appears to be homogenous luckily I only veer away on a few occasions as going out I had made a practice of always turning around every so often to gain perspective so I would know what coming back looks like trust me it doesn't have to look like going out when I reach the parking lot there is a couple and their younger son rock climbing I watch then leave another metaphor but this one I am not familiar with

Day 15

Every morning is stillness Mondays after everyone has left the park for the weekend only the whirl of bicycle wheels wind rushing past my helmet birds have already taken shelter from the desert heat shadows early morning rubble piles fields a forest in the desert seems incongruous but that is what we have evenly symmetrically placed trees

Day 16

the mountain hikers are impressed as I wheeze push by them walk running on the trail I'm not forty twenty years ago I was competitive now I remember and enjoy that I am still able now it is work relief when the goal is reached exhaustion not exhilaration why do I still do it in life choices are sometimes limited persevere with the ones that where you have found connection good habits as well as bad ones are hard to break touching the sign at the summit I turn and head down the hikers are still climbing they step aside as I continue down

Day 17

this day intentionally left blank a time for reflection of what is to come as i go up and down the mountain and through the park

Day 18

Pioneer town but the most famous bar owned by two transplanted lesbians from New York which is the rationale for the side trip is closed on wednesday on the way back I stop at an antique store in Yucca Valley there is a row of shops and a store that sells succulents and dirt there is an attractive thin dark haired lady in her early forties one of the owners wearing a black lace camisole and tattoos on her arms who is from Iowa I tell her I understand why she is there as I am from Minnesota we both laugh in browsing around the shop I spot a kodak brownie super eight projector for fifty dollars being a camera freak I ask if it works we try it out and the bulb pops oops we go online a find a replacement bulb for forty-two fifty after seeing that she thinks she should increase the price instead we open it up reseal the bulb and the projector works fine I'm wearing a white tee shirt that day and we use that as a screen which is cause for another chuckle she says she'll still let me have it for fifty I said I might return but don't I wonder if she'll remember if it's still there when I return the next time I'm in town the camera moving or still is a funny instrument an aide in remembrance of things past singling out exact moments to revisit to reinterpret we think they hold some fundamental truth but they are as subjective as we want them to be artists use them to tell fantasies and fairy tales evil men use them to lie to set one against another scientists use them to discover moments in space and time to be used to as a milestone of a generalized principal of objectivity but they are not you can ask Heisenberg Schrödinger

Einstein they will confirm and say no I've owned many cameras starting with a gift from my uncle to my mother which I appropriated when I was seventeen the latest is another nikon digital black body which was not always the standard professionals or aspiring pros used black tape to mask the chrome a sun drenched tell so the camera would be less intrusive and less positionally defining now chrome is making a comeback along with coats of many colors for the casual photographer and phone cases to accessorize I like to think of myself as an artist I tell stories there are many I have found in the desert the stories of shadows earth and sky leaving the dirt store there are two other antique shops I browse the owners are very friendly and try to convince me to move to the area I think they're working on the critical mass of artists theory necessary for economic revival and hipness or maybe the coyote smell has rubbed off on me