

Ghost Highway

By Kim Cushman

It was almost cocktail hour as I drove my Miata up into the snow-covered pinyon-juniper forest on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. After stopping briefly at the Mather Point overlook, I registered at Yavapai Lodge, where I had a reservation for two nights. I told the clerk I'd been planning to spend the following day hiking on the Bright Angel Trail and asked if it was closed on account of the snow. "No, it's open," she replied, "but be prepared for boot-sucking mud."

I freshened up, had dinner in the El Tovar dining room, which was near capacity with Germans and Japanese. I savored a postprandial cognac by the fire in the lobby, then went outside and stood at the railing, staring down into the profound darkness of the chasm. A few lights glimmered in the depths.

The next morning was sunny and a crisp 45 degrees when, wearing a baseball cap, orange windbreaker, jeans and knapsack containing nuts, dried fruit, Gatorade and water, I set off on the Bright Angel. The top of the trail zigzagged down a limestone cliff and was positively treacherous with snow and ice and green shit from the mule trains which carried tourists into the canyon for day trips and overnights at Phantom Ranch. It was no more than five feet wide at any given point and unrailed, even where the outer edge dropped off to certain death. After half a mile, the snow gave way to red mud - boot-sucking, as advertised. Farther down, where the temperature approached 70 degrees and the trail began to level off, conditions were good - except for the ubiquitous shit. A number of people had ventured just below the trailhead to have their pictures taken, and I paused to snap a group photo for some grinning Japanese kids. But after that my fellow hikers were few and far between, most of them using trekking poles and picking their steps with great care.

I descended six miles - 3,000 feet in altitude - to Plateau Point and sat for a long time on a ledge, drinking in the prodigious landscape - Isis Temple, Cheops Pyramid and the numerous other formations of variegated stone, the turbid green waters of the Colorado still carving their way to the Gulf of California - and recalculating the scale of my existence. Finally I went back to Indian Garden, a picnic area and campground - and, I decided, the source of the lights I'd seen the night before. Having lunched with a Steller's Jay and several audacious squirrels, I started toward the top.

I'd overtaken a mule train, asking permission of the 'trail boss' to pass, and was nearing the rim, sweating profusely, coping again with the mud and with an incipient case of black toe, when I heard a shout and a scream from high above. I stopped, looked up into the glare of the sky and - much to my horror - saw the silhouette of a human being plunging feet-first toward me. Stepping quickly to the inside of the trail, I flattened myself against the rock wall. I had a split-second impression of a red blouse, black skirt, blond hair, arms outstretched in a seraphic pose. Then I heard a sickening thud, screams from the mule train, a plea for calm from the trail boss and the crackling of his hand-held as he radioed park dispatch.

Something about the clothing rang a bell.

I forced myself to look over the edge. She lay on a limestone outcrop some twenty feet below, one of her legs bent at a grotesque angle.

It was the vaguely exotic young woman I'd seen running from the Motel 6 in Tucumcari two days earlier, wearing the same red blouse and black skirt. My thoughts turned immediately to the brunette who'd fled with her, the two of them speeding off in a green Jeep Cherokee. And to the men who'd given chase in a black Dodge Durango, accompanied by a third young woman, a groggy redhead with bruises on her limbs.

I climbed as fast as I could, pausing only to make way for a party of EMTs in green and gray uniforms hurrying down with a stretcher, and reached the rim in less than ten minutes. The temperature here was now in the high 50s or low 60s, and the promenade in front of the several lodges was swarming with people, the great majority of whom seemed ignorant of the tragedy which had just occurred. They were soaking up the sun, laughing, squabbling, eating ice cream, marveling at the panorama. I worked my way through the crowd to the west, toward the spot on the Rim Trail from which the girl must have fallen, trying to check every face coming at me. Hermit Road, which also led in that direction, was restricted to the occasional shuttle bus, so if the men and the other girls had been with the blonde, it was a good bet they were returning on foot.

Almost immediately I spotted the brunette and the middle-aged white man I'd pegged as being in charge at the Motel 6. Wearing a gray sweatshirt and tight jeans, she had a black eye and a fat lip and was crying, while he was dressed in a yellow polo shirt, khaki cargo shorts and sneakers, tense and vigilant behind his sunglasses, guiding her firmly by the arm. I made eye contact with the girl, gave her a significant look and thought I detected a spark of comprehension, then desperate hope. Up close, she was even better looking than I'd first thought - in her early twenties, Slavic, buxom, with lustrous black hair cut short and parted on the side, a broad forehead and cleft chin. She gave off a strong animal magnetism. I felt his gaze upon me and willed my face into a neutral expression, looking out over the canyon. I was sure he hadn't noticed me in Tucumcari. I went past them about ten yards, turned and followed. With his other hand, he was prodding her in the small of the back with something wrapped in a plastic bag - a gun, I assumed.

The girl glanced at me over her shoulder, and then he did the same. She flinched and they quickened their pace. Suddenly they cut in front of a slow-moving cluster of tourists, into the Bright Angel Lodge, and I had to wait for the group to pass before going after them. I checked the lobby, bar, restaurant, men's room and museum, then went out the far side of the building, but they had disappeared.

I went back in to the reception desk, where a tall, elegant Afro-American in her thirties presided with an air of cool efficiency. "Yes, sir, may I help you?" she asked.

"Did a man in a yellow polo shirt, sunglasses and shorts, and a young brunette in sweatshirt and jeans, pass through here just a moment ago?"

"They may have come through, but I didn't see them. I'm afraid I've been terribly busy."

"Where do I need to go to report a crime?"

"What sort of crime?"

"Murder."

Shock took possession of her chiseled features, but only for a moment; the poise reasserted itself, and she scrutinized me. I knew I probably looked a little wild: I was disheveled, still panting and sweating from the exertion of the climb, and I hadn't shaved in a week. If she'd concluded that I was a crackpot, she didn't let on. "You should

proceed to the Rangers Office,” she pointed at the south exit, “which is just over here, on the corner of Center Road.”

“Thank you.” Hurrying outside again, I started to have second thoughts. By the time I’d told the rangers my story - the whole megillah - it would probably be too late for roadblocks at the south and east entrance stations. And I realized that I’d have trouble giving a distinctive description of the parties involved. A middle-aged white man and two Hispanic men in the company of two girls, probably Eastern Europeans, riding in SUVs with California plates, numbers unknown? The park was full of foreign tourists and Hispanic employees, and nowadays everyone drove an SUV. Furthermore, I had no hard evidence of criminality. Maybe the girls’ bruises were the result of something other than abuse – too many rides on a mechanical bull in an Oklahoma roadhouse, perhaps. Maybe the blonde’s death had been an accident. I had no doubt the rangers would detain me for questioning, take a statement, and by then they’d be out of the park and gone.

Given their license plates and course thus far, it made sense that they were bound for California. There wasn’t anything in it for me, at least not financially, and I’d forfeit my second night at the Yavapai, but I was headed in that direction anyway, and for some reason I couldn’t bear the thought of letting the brunette down. I was probably the only hope she had. With any luck, I’d come up behind them, note their tags, phone them in to the highway patrol and get on with my spring vacation - checking into the Luxor Pyramid Hotel in Las Vegas the next day, then visiting my brother in San Francisco.

I returned to my room, packed, left the key card and a housekeeping tip on the dresser and got in the Miata. Quickly consulting my road atlas, I realized that they might go south through Prescott to I-10, thence to California, but I had a hunch they’d stick with I-40.

Twilight was falling and the traffic thin as I came down out of the forestland west of Williams, barreling toward the Mohave Desert at 95 mph, the last traces of snow vanishing from the roadsides. The Miata’s four-cylinder engine was straining, her frame quivering. I was passing a big rig outlined in orange lights, Betty Boop dressed as a carhop painted on the cab, when I thought I saw two SUVs getting off at the next exit, the sign for which read: *Historic Route 66* – the old Mother Road that used to link Chicago and Los Angeles. I’d first noticed sections of it in the Texas panhandle, a brownish ribbon of two-lane running beside the interstate like a ghost highway. I dropped back behind the tractor-trailer, took the exit and followed the taillights.

It was a desolate stretch of road, angling away from I-40 through flat, sandy terrain with sparse vegetation, a jagged mountain range looming ahead in the distance. After a few miles I saw their brake lights. As I went by without slowing, the cars (SUVs, yes, but the ones I was after?) were pulling behind an abandoned filling station, a squat cinderblock affair with rusted pumps, a faded green dinosaur and, in red letters, *Sinclair* painted above the twin garage doors. There was another derelict, single-story building right next to it, the Mustang Motel, with ten or twelve units.

I continued for half a mile, past several more abandoned buildings, until I’d gone around a low, rock-strewn hill, then parked on the shoulder. I took my mini Mag-Lite, a pencil and scrap of paper from the glove compartment, locked the car and started jogging back, ignoring the growing discomfort from my black toe. It was almost full dark now, the temperature mild, and the only sign of life was the trucks on the interstate, so far away that the sound of their passage was but a whisper.

As I neared the motel, I left the pavement and circled among what appeared to be yuccas, hoping I didn't chance upon a rattlesnake. A faint light showed in a rear window. When I was fifty or so yards away, I crouched by the hulk of a car – it reminded me of the Ford Falcon my mother had driven when my brother and I were boys – and watched for movement in the shadows behind the building and around the SUVs, parked side by side on the left. Satisfied that no one was standing guard, I approached the window, which was closed, and peeked in.

It was them, all right. The room, a kitchen with red Formica counters and a red linoleum floor, was lit by a lantern on an inverted produce crate. The two Hispanics stood to the right, the thin one still wearing his blue track suit, talking, grinning. The big fellow with the soul patch was still wearing baggy jeans, a bandanna on his head, pirate-style, and that strange little smile. The carrot-haired girl sat on the floor beside them in very short-shorts, against a fire-blackened wall, arms clasping her drawn-up knees, eyes vacant. To the left, stripped to lavender bra and panties, the brunette sat in a wooden chair. Her wrists were bound to the arms of the chair with gray duct tape, likewise her ankles to its front legs. The man in the polo shirt had passed a rope under her breasts and armpits, through the chair-back, and was cinching it behind her so that it dug into her flesh. She was furious, tossing her head, a stream of what I guessed was invective issuing from her lips. Suddenly, the man stepped around in front of her and slapped her across the mouth. She fell silent, although her eyes still blazed with defiance.

Time to summon the cavalry. I knelt behind the SUVs, shone the flashlight on the plates and wrote down the numbers, admonishing myself for the umpteenth time that, like it or not, I was going to have to get a cell phone. Being an anachronism held a certain romantic appeal, but, without a cell, I'd soon find my career as a private investigator going the way of that dinosaur on the filling station façade. And taking me with it, no doubt. I ran back to my car, turned around and drove to I-40 West. As luck would have it, the first call box I came to was out of order. I decided against pushing on to the next, did a U-ie across the median and went back toward the exit for Route 66, stopping at the call box I came to on that side of the interstate, but it, too, was on the fritz. *So much for the cavalry*, I thought, *it's up to the Lone Ranger*.

I'd parked on the near side of the old Sinclair station and was walking past the SUVs toward the kitchen window, thinking about how I might create a diversion and free the girls, when the sky exploded. I stepped through a curtain of blood-red beads into the abyss...

A dirty red linoleum floor... A whiff of cologne... Kerosene... I shivered and fought the nausea rising in my throat...

"Did you hear the one about the Polish girl with the vibrator? Chipped her teeth."
Someone snickered.

The base of my skull was throbbing, and my right eyeball felt as though it had been sprung from its socket. The optical nerve was a red-hot wire. I lifted my chin and tried to move my arms but couldn't. Nor could I move my feet, which were bare. It seemed I'd been stripped to my skivvies and bound to a wooden, cane-bottom chair with duct tape. My baseball cap, sweater, shirt and jeans lay in a pile on the floor beside me.

"I was afraid Manuel might have hit you too hard. Sometimes he gets a little carried away, but he's a true professional. An artist, really."

The voice was subdued, with a slight accent. It was the man in the polo shirt and cargo shorts, squatting before me. He had a round face with pale blue eyes, curly gray-brown hair, bushy eyebrows, a thick red nose and a weak mouth. He studied me with a curious - one might have said sympathetic - expression. A brown wallet lay open on his knee. On the floor to his right were a pistol, a box of X-Acto knives, a small camcorder and a bottle of beer.

"If that's an example of his artistry," I said, surprised that I still possessed the faculty of speech, "remind me not to stick around when he paints his fucking masterpiece."

The man chuckled, glancing over into the shadows on his left. "Did you hear that, Manuel?"

I followed his gaze and saw the big Hispanic with the soul patch. He leaned against a wall and said, "I heard, Doc."

"Manuel Chinchilla," said Doc, as though making an introduction in polite company. He drank from the bottle, a fancy import, looked down at my wallet and read my driver's license in the I.D. window. "Willard Mix, North Bennington, Vermont. Willard. Wasn't that the name of a movie about rats?"

"Yes, a bad one."

He stood, and I smelled his cologne again. The skin on his jaw and neck had slackened with age. I put him in his late fifties - but he was physically fit, with a medium build and low center of gravity. "Who sent you?"

He'd also seen my P.I. license. Even in my addled state, I realized that my life might well depend on how I answered this question.

"So you don't know nothin'?" he said, when I made no response. "Well, we'll get you to talk. Won't we, Manuel?"

"We'll get him to sing like a little bird," the big man replied. He had to be about thirty-five and weighed 250 if he weighed an ounce.

"Just give me a few minutes, will you? Then I'll explain. I've got a splitting headache, and I can't think straight."

Suddenly I decided how to play it: as if from a position of strength. It was my only chance. "Don't know anything."

"Huh?" said Doc.

"You used a double negative. What you should have said is, 'You don't know anything.'"

"Ah, so," said Doc. He came at me quickly and I braced myself. But instead of hitting me, he grabbed the back of the chair and turned me around. I saw the brunette, no more than ten feet away, pretty much as I'd seen her through the window, except that now her mouth was taped shut and she had blood on her cleft chin. "This is Zyta," he said, moving between us. "We're going to make an example of her, so that the other girls understand how foolish it is to try to escape."

She'd been crying, but there was still a bloom in her cheeks and a fire in her gray-green eyes. She wore a silver ankle bracelet and her toenails were painted red. Goose bumps stood out on her thighs. I gave her a reckless grin, and, after a moment of surprise, she did her best to respond in kind beneath the tape.

The kerosene lantern stood on the crate to her right. The man in the blue track suit and the redhead were no longer in the room.

Unlike Zyta, I hadn't been tied around the middle. While Doc was looking at her, I shifted my weight – there was some play in the joints of the chair but not much. “Escape? This is a free country.”

Doc observed me as though I were a slow learner. “Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh,” he intoned rapidly. “That’s what they keep telling you, Willard, and it might have been true at one time, maybe back when this motel was open, but take a quick look around and you’ll see it’s a lie. Unless you’re very rich. But a private dick ain’t rich, and neither is a Polish girl on a three-month work visa.”

“You’re a foreigner, don’t lecture me about America.”

“I have dual citizenship,” he said, a little defensively.

“But originally you’re from, where? Germany? The Balkans? Some place where a barbaric past is always moving just beneath the surface.”

“Barbaric? Sounds like the U.S. government. Manuel can tell you all about it. He trained at the School of the Americas. Who sent you?”

“Mr. V.”

Doc raised an eyebrow.

“Let’s just say he’s one of those rich people you mentioned, and for reasons which I’m not at liberty to disclose, he has an interest in Zyta and the others. Not a humanitarian interest. He doesn’t go in for that sort of thing. It’s financial, pure and simple. You had no way of knowing, but he’s very upset by what you did to the blonde at the Grand Canyon. He’ll be even more upset when he finds out about this, and when he gets upset, heads start to roll.”

“We didn’t push Elzbieta, she jumped.”

“I’m afraid Mr. V won’t recognize that distinction. You killed her just the same.”

He searched my face, doing some sort of calculation, then made up his mind.

“This isn’t how I do business,” he said petulantly, shaking his head. “No. Manuel.”

The bluff had failed.

Presently I heard a shuffling sound and the big man appeared before me, wearing his perpetual look of amusement and holding an orange caulking gun. My bowels tightened. Doc went behind me and came back, filming with the camcorder as Manuel removed the cartridge, used the spout cutter in the handle of the gun, reloaded and squeezed the handle until a bead of caulk nosed out like an albino worm.

He backhanded me across the face and before I had a chance to recover, he grabbed me by the hair with one hand - while with the other, he jammed the spout into my mouth and started pumping. The caulk was cool, its synthetic flavor mingling with the taste of my blood. I pressed my tongue against the roof of my mouth to prevent it from blocking my windpipe.

Zyta looked on in unbridled terror. I winked at her as if to demonstrate that I was unfazed, but in truth I was on the verge of losing control. I might well have gibbered and begged for mercy if I’d been able.

When Manuel had filled my mouth, he taped it shut - and with an unexpected theatricality, read the warning printed on the cartridge: “Causes eye, skin and respiratory tract irritation. May be harmful if swallowed. Keep out of reach of children. This product contains a chemical known to the state of California to cause cancer.”

“Now the ears.” Doc was pleased with himself. “We can’t let him go off half-caulked.”

Manuel laughed a high-pitched laugh and obeyed. Eyes and nostrils he left alone. For the time being.

The muffled silence gave way to the torrential roar of the blood in my veins. I closed my eyes and tried to regulate my breathing. My life in the rolling hills of Vermont seemed far away, like something I remembered from a novel. I pictured my bungalow in North Bennington: the colorful posters on the walls, my books, the little Jotul woodstove, the braided rug, my antique cherry desk. I thought about the peeper philharmonic that would soon play in the wetlands nearby and the scent of the lilacs that would bloom in the yard. Then I thought about my brother, his place on Russian Hill and my two young nieces. You will do whatever it takes to get back to your home and family, I told myself. Whatever it takes!

When I opened my eyes again, Manuel was choosing an X-Acto knife from the box. He set the box down on the floor, walked slowly over to Zyta, lay on his back beside her chair, then slid his head under it and started cutting away at the cane seat. Doc was still filming, the beer in his other hand, pistol stuck in his waist.

Zyta's eyes fluttered and rolled back in her head. I made an urgent noise in my throat. Her eyes met mine, fluttered away, returned and held steady, even as Manuel finished cutting and her bottom sank through the chair.

Now Doc said something and Manuel heaved himself upright, retrieved the caulking gun and lumbered toward me. Doc, panning with the camera, was still giving instructions. This time he sealed my left eye and right nostril. My breathing became labored – I had a deviated septum, the result of being punched out during my last case – and yet I was deadly calm, seeing everything with the utmost clarity through my one good eye.

Manuel went back to Zyta, cut her panties on either hip, pulled them off with a flourish and slid under the chair again, holding the caulking gun.

Lowering the camcorder for a moment, Doc took a swig from the bottle and gave me a sidelong conspiratorial leer - as if I, too, would enjoy the show.

Suddenly, with every fiber of my being, I revolted against the depravity of our predicament. I refused to die like this, in some godforsaken place, getting my orifices plugged in a snuff movie with Zyta. I threw myself over sideways, felt the chair break beneath me. Discovering that I had freedom of movement with my right arm and leg, I managed to get to my feet. The armrest was still taped to my wrist, but no longer attached to the back or seat of the chair; the wooden rods which had supported it were now spikes. Doc had put the camera and the beer on the floor and was reaching for the gun. I took a couple of hunched, one-legged hops. Just as he straightened, bringing the pistol to bear on me, I lunged, driving at his midsection with the broken rods. The pistol discharged, cordite stinging my open nostril, and he went down hard with me on top of him. Was I hit? I sensed rather than heard him scream and rolled to my left in order to pin his shooting arm, but then I felt him go limp and saw that he'd let go of the gun.

He looked at me with mild reproach before focusing on something behind me.

I stood and whirled, attempting to snatch up the gun, but the armrest got in the way. Then Manuel bulled into me, knocking me down. His hands were at my throat.

Moistening his lips with his tongue, watching me with keen anticipation... A diamond-studded crucifix dangling from his neck on a gold chain... My larynx crunching... Couldn't breathe, eyes bulging, burning, my right hand touching something

metallic, cylindrical... The X-Acto knife. Fumbling, grasping, swiping blindly at his face... The chokehold loosening...

Manuel staggered to his feet, blood pulsing from his jugular in crimson gout. He smiled with a faraway, masochistic pleasure, as though making love to the idea of his own demise, and fell over backwards with arms outstretched, skull bouncing off the linoleum. His legs twitched, and then he lay still.

I stood. Doc had assumed the fetal position, lying in a pool of spilled beer and blood, clutching his guts with both hands. He said something, grimaced and closed his eyes. I kicked the gun across the room.

Having picked up Zyta's sweatshirt and covered her loins with it, I freed myself from the chair then untaped her mouth, wrists and ankles. While she got dressed, I peeled the tape from my own mouth and, with two fingers, scooped out most of the caulk. I went over to the sink and spat repeatedly, but some of the goop still adhered to my teeth and under my tongue. I tried the faucet but it didn't work.

"*Dziękuję*," she said, once I'd unplugged my ears. "That means 'thank you' in Poland."

"Are you hurt?"

"No. Are you?"

I touched the lump at the base of my skull and looked down at my T-shirt, soaked with blood. Feeling a sense of revulsion, I pulled it off, used a dry corner to wipe the caulk from my eye, and cast the shirt aside. "I don't think so. Where's your friend, the redhead?"

"Other man take her away."

"Where?"

"In the San Francisco, I think. They shoot her with heroin."

"I'm going to San Francisco. What's her name?"

"Katarzyna. They kidnap us in New York before we can get on the bus to housekeeping jobs in Florida hotel. They make us to be prostitutes."

I checked my torso, arms and legs to make certain I hadn't been wounded, put my clothes on and unblocked my nostril with a splinter from the broken chair. I picked up the gun – a Glock 9mm – and the camcorder, retrieved my wallet.

"Let's get the hell out of here," I said, moving toward the door.

Zyta went over to Doc, who blinked up at her and moaned. "You never exist," she said. The lamp was burning low.

Outside, the moon had risen, bathing the landscape in a ghostly light. The Jeep Cherokee was gone. We got Zyta's luggage out of the Durango and in Doc's bag, found the girls' passports and a shoebox filled with cash, mostly C-notes, which I confiscated.

"I want find Katarzyna," she said. "Will you help?"

"Yes."

I threw the Glock into the night, and we walked down Route 66 toward my car.

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