

Navajo Land

by Michele Venne

BANG! Hearing the explosion, I grabbed the steering wheel with both hands and fought to pull the car off to the shoulder along I-40, just west of the Reservation. Looking over the hood, I could see how the front of my dark green Honda Civic listed to the left. Checking my side mirror, I braced myself for the shaking as three semis, traveling at least seventy, passed before I could open the door and check the damage.

“Shit.” This is not what I needed. I was returning from a ten day drive from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, had stopped to see a friend in Fayetteville, Arkansas on the way back to Phoenix, Arizona. I was due to leave for an Alaskan cruise the next morning and I still had another three hours of driving in front of me.

I looked around at the shades of red and brown and purple of the stone hills and rocks of this arid place. The heat of summer had dried up whatever vegetation might have been available for the goats and sheep and horses that always seemed to be on the wrong side of the fence in this near-deserted place. It wasn't long before I was sweating from the temperatures so vastly different from the cocoon of the car with its excellent air conditioning.

Being a strong, independent, usually intelligent woman, I made my way to the trunk of the car where I figured there was a spare and a jack. Unloading a suitcase and a near-empty ice chest, I lifted the carpet and thin piece of

particle board to find the donut tire, jack, and tire iron. Untying straps and hefting out these items that had been securely stored here since the purchase of the car, I tossed them behind me on the ground to join the party with the suitcase and ice chest. I'm sure, to those who passed me on the road, it appeared that my Honda had regurgitated all that it was forced to hold.

Carrying the jack and tire iron to the front left tire, I saw what was left of my radial, which was a bit of black rubber around the rim that exposed the tiny steel wires like that of rat hair. It briefly entered my mind that if I jacked up the car too far on the steep slope of the shoulder, it would roll over into the two-strand barbed wire fence that marked the end of the federally funded roadway and the beginning of federally funded lives. I placed the jack between the wheel well and the driver's side door. It was made of cheap metal and a spring and there wasn't really enough clearance room to turn the handle and lift the car.

From my squatter's position, I looked behind my car at the semi that had pulled over and stirred up dust in a land that had not seen rain for months. The driver climbed down, adjusted his pants, closed his door, and ambled over to where I was now standing next to the wounded tire.

"Need some help?" he asked. He was in his mid-forties, decent looking enough, and when I tapped into my gut, it wasn't yelling, "Get out of here! He's a serial killer!"

"That would be great. Thanks," I answered and I handed him the crank.

He repositioned the jack and seemed to have no trouble lifting the car. Since the lug nuts were tightened by an air gun, I was glad he came along, as there was no way my twenty-seven-year-old biceps would have broken them loose. Once the nuts were off, he pulled off what was left of the tire and placed it in my truck, right in the hole that was vacated by the spare. Rolling the donut tire back to the now-empty axle, he placed it on the bolts and screwed on the lug nuts. When he released the jack, we both watched as the spare was so flat that the car came to rest on the rim, the deflated thin layer of rubber the only thing separating it from the rocky shoulder of the highway.

“You won’t get far on that. Do you have an air pump?” He looked at me and probably figured I didn’t know what one was, much less have one.

I smiled and ducked into the back seat, retrieved the deluxe model air compressor that came with a flashlight on the front and a flashing red light on the back for those scary nighttime breakdowns. I also had an old gallon milk jug full of water for my radiator and a set of jumper cables. My mother indeed raised an independent, common sense girl.

I plugged one end into the cigarette lighter, ran the cord under the driver’s door, and snapped the other end onto the valve stem of the spare. I flicked the switch, and we waited as the obnoxious mini-motor of the compressor hummed away.

“I really appreciate you pulling over to help me,” I yelled to be heard over the near constant stream of traffic that didn’t seem to know they were suppose to move to the left lane when there was a disabled vehicle.

“No problem. My wife’s car broke down last month and a man stopped to help her out. I’m just returning the favor,” he smiled.

“Will this get me into Phoenix?”

“I wouldn’t trust it. You can go into Flagstaff, but by the time you get there all the tire stores will be closed. If I were you, I’d go back to Holbrook. There’s a tire place there that I’m sure will have something that will work,” he gestured to the east.

Since I had just come from the Four Corners Monument that morning, then making a stop at Canyon de Chelly, I had totally bypassed any town along the interstate. I couldn’t see any buildings from where we stood, and looking to the west, nor could I see the next exit.

The compressor whined, letting me know that was as much air as would fit into the poor excuse of a spare. The truck driver helped return everything to the trunk, and even waited for me to pull back onto the blacktop before he followed, and eventually passed me as I was only pushing 35 miles per hour with my hazard lights blinking.

Around the next curve in the road, there was a sign for an exit. Lucky for me, it led to a frontage road and an onramp going back the other way. Another ten or so miles east towards the forced heart of the Navajo Nation, there was a single exit for Holbrook. I took it, and pulled to a stop in front of a travel trailer with a white and red painted sign that advertised “Tires. Rims. Cheap”. I knocked on the door and a man wearing jeans and a loose plaid, short-sleeved

shirt over his large belly answered. After looking me up and down and adjusting his cap, he said, "Yeah?"

I explained to him my dilemma and asked if there was any way he could help. He eyed my Honda, then nodded. The man really knew what he was doing, as he exchanged the back tire for the spare and put another tire, the only one that was close, on the back. The ice chest resided in the back seat, and the donut tire was returned to the trunk.

"This one's too big to fit here, so I'll just swap 'em out."

I smiled pleasantly, trying to stay out of his way as he jacked up my car and went about with the swapping. Thirty minutes later, and only twenty dollars lighter, I was back on I-40 bound for the big city of Phoenix, the dusty, colorful landscape of the Rez disappearing in my rearview mirror.