

In the Fall of 2001 I shared an incident with two friends which I never shared with anyone. I had to write things down to remember it carefully at the time because I was quickly losing grip on it. The memory just buried itself away on it's own, like I didn't want to think about it... and the same happened to my friends as well. Also, it's as if we subconsciously didn't want to talk about it. Two decades later I thought about it again and decided I'd better look back into my old photos that I'd taken that day & evening. They were still there, and a flood of what had happened came back to me again. So I added the pictures into the events I'd saved, below.

The friends who shared this event with me I will call Bill and Carl. I had worked with Carl for a time at a large software company before he effectively retired in his 40s having succeeded very well financially. Carl invited me to fly to Las Vegas to join him in exploring petroglyph sites between the towns of Searchlight and Laughlin, near Spirit Mountain in Nevada. My friend Bill came with me to share the adventure. We departed on Monday, September 17th, 2001. Flights had all been stopped the prior week due to the events of September 11 and for a while we didn't think we'd get through on a flight at all. However after a week, with the newly added security procedures, our flight was set to go. Flying itself felt a little anxious and there was of course that new, weird feeling we all had that the world was now different and that more endless war was about to happen.

Carl had driven himself down to Nevada the previous week and picked us up at the airport that afternoon in his big new Dodge Ram pickup. We drove south toward our hotel in Laughlin which was about an hour and a half away. On our way down the hill descending toward the Colorado River, Carl pointed out a dirt road that headed north into the hills which he said had a great petroglyph site. It was only a few miles away from Laughlin and he suggested that after we checked in to the hotel and grabbed something quick to eat that we come back for an early evening exploration.

We returned to this location a couple hours later. It was about 6pm and still quite daylight. From State Route 163, known as the Laughlin Highway, Christmas Tree Pass Rd heads north. A couple miles up this road, another sandy dirt road branches off to the west going into Grapevine Canyon.

The road ends at an open expanse of sand and brush leading up into looming rocky hills. Petroglyphs lay out in plain sight and in alcoves all over these rocks - the more you look the more you'll find.

I took many pictures during this trip, some of which I'll share for some backdrop. All these pictures are mine from that trip.

This is how our approach to Grapevine Canyon looked in the daylight:



By the time we arrived near the entrance to Grapevine Canyon it seemed we had maybe an hour before sunset. Carl parked the truck and we got out and hiked across the sandy drainage. At the canyon entrance, we clambered around on rocks walls covered in broad murals of petroglyphs. I had a new (at the time) digital camera which felt like a novelty in those days, and I was enjoying taking lots of pictures.

Here is Carl adjusting his hiking gators next to some petroglyphs:





More petroglyphs:







Sunset:



After about an hour, the sun had set, the light was getting dim, and we made our way back to the base of the rocks where we had started. We sat together on the ground resting and looking up at the stars as the crickets (or cicadas) began to chirp and buzz steadily louder in the dark. We may have lingered for a half hour, being in no particular hurry because the night was young and it was still fairly warm. It was quite dark now and there was no moonlight so we decided to head back to the truck. We followed the sandy drainage back the way we had come



while my eyes strained to make out any silhouette. Progress felt a bit slow and several times I walked right into a bush or stepped awkwardly on a rock which I did not see coming. I was still holding my camera on its strap hanging around my neck. Steady, loud buzzing of the cicadas indicated a desert full of life.

I was looking down towards my feet carefully navigating the occasional obstacle when my vision was filled completely and painfully in piercing bright white light. I froze in shock and as my eyes adjusted I could see the sandy desert floor and my shoes below me, as if it were daytime. Stopped in my tracks, I whirled my head around taking it all in even as my eyes still strained in the brightness. I looked up at the landscape and it appeared to be daylight everywhere but with no discernible light source. The light had a seemingly unnatural brightness which was perhaps just my eyes adjusting. I saw Bill about 20 yards ahead and to the left of me stopped with his hands up to his face. Carl was slightly behind me to my right, squinting. The road was further ahead to our right and the truck about 100 feet away, much closer than I had expected. Absolutely everything - the truck, the hills behind it, the landscape beyond and the far horizon as far as I could see across the valley, every rock and bush and cactus - all of it was lit up brighter than day with no shadows and visible in every detail. To add to this spectacle, eerily surreal, was that the buzzing and chirping of the cicadas had suddenly stopped. The desert was lit up but frozen in complete silence. There was no temperature change or feeling that I noticed. It still "felt" like the cooling yet comfortably warm early desert night. Recovering from my shock and looking for an explanation, I was about to say something when as instantaneously as it had arrived, the light was then gone and we were cast back into complete blackness. Thinking about it, I figure the light had only been turned on for maybe 10 seconds or less. Back in the dark, my vision pulsed with cascades of orange & green as the afterimage of visual stimulation slowly ebbed from my retinas. We were blind in the dark again. This was the scariest part, feeling alone, but not alone? In silent darkness. I started to feel strong anxiety and I just stood there silently, listening out for 'what' was out there, or expecting some subsequent thunderclap. But the desert remained absolutely silent and nothing happened.

Bill spoke first: "What... The... Hell??? ... You guys saw that?"

I looked steadily towards the ground hoping to make out anything close. "Yah..." was all I could say. I just stood there with my eyes trying to adjust to the darkness again. We waited for a moment, still thinking there should be some follow-up event, thunder, or a shockwave or anything. But nothing happened. A few moments passed as we waited, still in creepy silence. Then the crickets started in again, very slowly with what seemed to be apprehensive chirping, bringing us back to some reality. It was night time. Carl gave a nervous laugh and I could tell that he was no longer feeling relaxed. "Let's get to the truck!" he urged us, and I could hear him trudge forward with a renewed determination.

I grabbed hold of my camera still dangling and took a random useless picture of the desert in front of me with my flash, for no real reason other than wondering what I might catch out there. Apparently nothing:



I guess I wanted to document whatever I could about what was happening.

The flash from my camera startled Bill, "Jeez!" I remember he said. Sorry! We moved fast, wanting to get out of the area entirely. I stumbled up the berm to the road and reached the truck. The flat walking surface of the road gave me a feeling of security. At the truck I waited nervously as Carl approached.

At this point I took a few random pictures of the landscape around us with my flash in the dark, thinking maybe something was out there. I can see nothing in any of my pictures. In the vulnerability of the darkness and the strangeness of the floodlight event, I had the feeling that we were being watched.

We got into the truck and I didn't notice that the overhead cab light remained off when the doors were open. Doors closed, key in the ignition, Carl turned the key forward and nothing happened. There was not even the usual clicking sound of a weak battery. No awakening dashboard or any indicator lights whatsoever. It was absolutely dead. I was feeling impatient, not understanding the delay. Carl turned the key back, and again turned it forward and there was simply no response in the truck's electronics. "Oh no..." Carl sighed. The battery was apparently not just low but maybe disconnected. Carl unlatched the hood, got out and opened it. I didn't want to get out of the cab but Bill and I hopped out anyway to see what was up. Carl's truck was new that year and the three of us looked at the engine and battery naively with the help of his flashlight which, like my camera, apparently still worked. Everything under the hood appeared brand new and tip top. The battery was connected, no corrosion or wear, wires all apparently going where they needed to go. I was not looking forward to the prospect of a long night either staying in the truck or walking the road.

Carl dug out his cell phone which did have power but not cell service. No surprises there given our back country location way back then, but it served to reinforce our unfortunate situation. We were at a loss of what to do. Carl had plenty of water and a few snacks and we weren't worried about making it out to the highway, but it would make for a long and scary night. Perhaps during a walk along the road as soon as we cleared some hills we could get cell service and call for a tow.

I felt restless and a weird sense of courage. I got out of the truck to take a picture down the road, for no good reason but to maybe capture something. Nothing:



Here's a picture I took of Bill next to the truck around this time:





... my camera bag to the left, faces blurred out.

Here are Carl and Bill discussing the situation:



After about 15 minutes, Carl got his keys out again just to try the ignition for sanity's sake. He turned the key a notch and strangely the console lights, headlights, and radio all burst to life, full of power, music playing. He turned the key further and the truck started right up and roared. We were baffled. Bill said something to the effect of,

"Let's get the hell out of here," and we both jumped in the truck. Carl promptly took off and it was surreal to be suddenly flying back down the dirt road as if escaping from a near miss with something creepy.

Carl is a very calm, deliberate, and patient person, but he drove down that dirt road at a pace that had me holding onto the "oh-shit handle". The 2 miles back to the Laughlin Highway felt longer than I remembered. The washboards and corners were scary enough but I felt very tired. I was zoned out & staring ahead while we roared forward on a straightaway when suddenly a grayish-white object flew at the truck from the driver's side and swooped across the front of the windshield, so close that I'm surprised it didn't hit us. My heart leapt and I jumped back in my seat while Carl hit his brakes.

I was sitting in the front passenger seat and this is what I remember seeing as it flew by:



(stock image is not mine but is representative of what I saw at the time.)

What appeared to be an owl soared across our view and flapped away into the darkness. "What next??" Carl joked wearily. At this point we were all just rattled and I briefly felt very awake again. We all wanted to be off that road. When we finally got to the Laughlin Hwy and headed back to the hotel, I was beyond tired. Carl said something about everyone getting some sleep, having breakfast in the morning, and getting his truck battery checked. At this time in my mind it was not even midnight – maybe a couple hours after sunset. I figured we had been out looking at petroglyphs for a couple hours with perhaps an added hour of complication and driving.

The lobby area of the hotel was effectively a casino gaming area which is not my thing. A few people were playing at slots and things seemed normal but surreal, like nobody here knew of anything going on except their smoky gambling. Carl, Bill and I took the elevator up to our floor and bid each other goodnight as we headed off to our separate rooms in delirium. The events of the evening didn't seem real and I just wanted to sleep. We could catch up in the morning.

I got into my room, set my camera down and sat on the bed. I reached for the hotel's clock to set the alarm for breakfast. The digital face showed it to be just after 5am. Figuring I'd have to change the clock to set a proper alarm, I checked my old flip-open cell phone clock which also said it was after 5am. I sat there baffled for a while, recounting the events of the night, and couldn't figure it out. I was just too tired. We were out there in the desert for over 10 hours? There was no way, as I recalled the thread of events. I kicked off my shoes crashed hard.

With vague intentions of "getting up for breakfast," I didn't wake up until 1pm the next day. It was slow getting going and I felt groggy. I called Carl on his cell phone. He'd slept a little but had pried himself out of bed mid-morning, went to a service station and had his battery tested. The battery tested fine and continued to work with no problems. I mentioned briefly the light from the previous night. We both remembered it happening and felt vague confusion, it seemed hard to talk about. We didn't know what to say about it, other than yes, it was a weird, long, bright light, showing everything all around, no thunder, no apparent source. Was it something military, was there any news about it somewhere? Not that we could tell. Mostly we were thankful that the truck had started and



we hadn't had to walk the miles out. Within hours my memory of everything was fading, like a dream that one has and while trying to remember details things just slip away. I had to start writing some things down, and much later all the pictures I took (which I didn't look at for years) helped jog my mind.

Bill didn't want to go out with us again, instead lingered for casino-adjacent entertainment along the Colorado River. Over the next couple of days, Carl and I traveled to other petroglyph sites and hiked around other hills southeast of Vegas. Carl at a hilltop:



Me at the hilltop:





(No I don't build rock cairns... we found this one... that is another long story)

My life seemed to just return to “normal”, with nothing normal post-9/11. Shutting away memories from that night, getting home, returning to work. It's like I had a block on the event or just didn't know what to say about it, so why bring it up. I didn't even tell my wife any of that. All the mainstream discussion at that point was about 9/11, war, terrorism and politics. All. The. Time. So it was easy to mention nothing of these events to family or friends. I spoke only generally of the trip and the petroglyph hiking explorations. I've long lost track of Bill, but Carl and I occasionally stay in touch. We both remember this night but I think neither of us know what more to do or say about it. Years have passed and we both left it behind perhaps awkwardly as life moved on. I never again mentioned the flood of light, the missing time... or the "near miss with an owl" to others until now. These could all be explainable coincidences... but weird specific details like the owl's face still sticks out in my mind as vividly as anything.

