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Origins III: Seldom Seen Smith

Born by chance into membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), Smith was on lifetime sabbatical from his religion. He was a jack Mormon. A jack Mormon is to a decent Mormon what a jackrabbit is to a cottontail. His connections to the founding father of his church can be traced in the world's biggest genealogical library in Salt Lake City. Like some of his forebears Smith practiced plural marriage. He had a wife in Cedar City, Utah, a second in Bountiful, Utah, and a third in Green River, Utah—each an easy day's drive from the next. His legal name was Joseph Fielding Smith (after a nephew of the martyred founder), but his wives had given him the name Seldom Seen, which carried.

On the same day that George Hayduke was driving up from Flagstaff to Lee's Ferry, Seldom Seen Smith was driving from Cedar City (Kathy's) after the previous night in Bountiful (Sheila's), on his way to the same destination. En route he stopped at a warehouse in Kanab to pick up his equipment for a float trip through Grand Canyon: three ten-man neoprene rafts, cargo rig, oars, waterproof bags and war-surplus ammo cans, tents, tarpaulin, rope, many many other things, and an assistant boatman to help man the oars. He learned that his boatman had already taken off, apparently, for the launching

point at Lee's Ferry. Smith also needed a driver, somebody to shuttle his truck from Lee's Ferry to Temple Bar on Lake Mead, where the canyon trip would end. He found her, by prearrangement, among the other river groupies hanging around the warehouse of Grand Canyon Expeditions. Loading everything but the girl into the back of his truck, he went on, bound for Lee's Ferry by way of Page.

They drove eastward through the standard Utah tableau of perfect sky, mountains, red-rock mesas, white-rock plateaus and old volcanic extrusions—Millie's Nipple, for example, visible from the highway thirty miles east of Kanab. Very few have stood on the tip of Mollie's Nipple: Major John Wesley Powell, for one; Seldom Seen Smith for another. That blue dome in the southeast, fifty miles away by line of sight, is Navajo Mountain. One of earth's holy places, God's navel, *om* and omphalos, sacred to shamans, witches, wizards, sun-crazed crackpots from mystic shrines like Keet Seel, Dot Klish, Tuba City and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Between Kanab, Utah, and Page, Arizona, a distance of seventy miles, there is no town, no human habitation whatsoever, except one ramshackle assemblage of tarpaper shacks and cinder-block containers called Glen Canyon City. Glen Canyon City is built on hope and fantasy: as a sign at the only store says, "Fourty Million \$Dollar Power Plant To Be Buildt Twelve Miles From Here Soon."

Smith and his friend did not pause at Glen Canyon City. Nobody pauses at Glen Canyon City. Someday it may become, as its founders hope and its inhabitants dream, a hive of industry and avarice, but at present one must report the facts: Glen Canyon City (NO DUMPING) rots and rusts at the side of the road like a burned-out Volkswagen forgotten in a weedy lot to atrophy, unmourned, into the alkaline Utah earth. Many pass but no one pauses. Smith and girl friend shot by like bees in flight, honey-bound.

"What was that?" she said.

"Glen Canyon City."

"No, I mean *that*." Pointing back.

He looked in the mirror. "That there was Glen Canyon City."
They passed the Wahweap Marina turnoff. Miles away down the

long slope of sand, slickrock, blackbrush, Indian ricegrass and prickly pear they could see a cluster of buildings, a house-trailer compound, roads, docks and clusters of boats on the blue bay of the lake. Lake Powell, Jewel of the Colorado, 180 miles of reservoir walled in by bare rock.

The blue death, Smith called it. Like Hayduke his heart was full of a healthy hatred. Because Smith remembered something different. He remembered the golden river flowing to the sea. He remembered canyons called Hidden Passage and Salvation and Last Chance and Forbidden and Twilight and many many more, some that never had a name. He remembered the strange great amphitheaters called Music Temple and Cathedral in the Desert. All these things now lay beneath the dead water of the reservoir, slowly disappearing under layers of descending silt. How could he forget? He had seen too much.

Now they came, amidst an increasing flow of automobile and truck traffic, to the bridge and Glen Canyon Dam. Smith parked his truck in front of the Senator Carl Hayden Memorial Building. He and his friend got out and walked along the rail to the center of the bridge.

Seven hundred feet below streamed what was left of the original river, the greenish waters that emerged, through intake, penstock, turbine and tunnel, from the powerhouse at the base of the dam. Thickets of power cables, each strand as big around as a man's arm, climbed the canyon walls on steel towers, merged in a maze of transformer stations, then splayed out toward the south and west—toward Albuquerque, Babylon, Phoenix, Gomorrah, Los Angeles, Sodom, Las Vegas, Nineveh, Tucson, the cities of the plain.

Upriver from the bridge stood the dam, a glissade of featureless concrete sweeping seven hundred feet down in a concave façade from the dam's rim to the green-grass lawn on the roof of the power plant below.

They stared at it. The dam demanded attention. It was a magnificent mass of cement. Vital statistics: 792,000 tons of concrete aggregate; cost \$750 million and the lives of sixteen (16) workmen. Four years in the making, prime contractor Morrison-Knudsen, Inc., sponsored by U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, courtesy of U.S. taxpayers.

"It's too big," she said.

"That's right, honey," he said. "And that's why."

"You can't."

"There's a way."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. But there's got to be a way."

They were looking at only the downstream face and topside surface of the dam. That topside, wide enough for four Euclid trucks, was the narrowest part of the dam. From the top it widened downward, forming an inverted wedge to block the Colorado. Behind the dam the blue waters gleamed, reflecting the blank sky, the fiery eye of day, and scores of powerboats sped round and round, dragging water skiers. Far-off whine of motors, shouts of joy. . . .

"Like how?" she said.

"Who you workin' for?" he said.

"You."

"Okay, think of something."

"We could pray."

"Pray?" said Smith. "Now there's one thing I ain't tried. Let's pray for a little *pre*-cision earthquake right here." And Smith went down on his knees, there on the cement walkway of the bridge, bowed his head, closed his eyes, clapped hands together palm to palm, prayer-wise, and prayed. At least his lips were moving. Praying, in broad daylight, with the tourists driving by and walking about taking photographs. Someone aimed a camera at Smith. A park rangerette in uniform turned her head his way, frowning.

"Seldom," the girl murmured, embarrassed, "you're making a public spectacle."

"Pretend you don't know me," he whispered. "And get ready to run. The earth is gonna start buckin' any second now."

He returned to his solemn mumble.

"Dear old God," he prayed, "you know and I know what it was like here, before them bastards from Washington moved in and ruined it all. You remember the river, how fat and golden it was in June, when the big runoff come down from the Rockies? Remember the

deer on the sandbars and the blue herons in the willows and the catfish so big and tasty and how they'd bite on spoiled salami? Remember that crick that come down through Bridge Canyon and Forbidden Canyon, how green and cool and clear it was? God, it's enough to make a man sick. Say, you recall old Woody Edgell up at Hite and the old ferry he used to run across the river? That crazy contraption of his hangin' on cables; remember that damn thing? Remember the cata-racts in Forty-Mile Canyon? Well, they flooded out about half of them too. And part of the Escalante's gone now—Davis Gulch, Willow Canyon, Gregory Natural Bridge, Ten-Mile. Listen, are you listenin' to me? There's somethin' you can do for me, God. How about a little old *pre*-cision-type earthquake right under this dam? Okay? Any time. Right now for instance would suit me fine."

He waited a moment. The rangerette, looking unhappy, was coming toward them.

"Seldom, the guard's coming."

Smith concluded his prayer. "Okay, God, I see you don't want to do it just now. Well, all right, suit yourself, you're the boss, but we ain't got a hell of a lot of time. Make it pretty soon, goddammit. A-men."

"Sir!"

Smith got up off his knees, smiling at the rangerette. "Ma'am?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but you can't pray here. This is a public place."

"That's true."

"United States Government property."

"Yes ma'am."

"We have thirteen churches in Page if you wish to worship in the church of your choice."

"Yes, ma'am. Do they have a Paiute church?"

"A what?"

"I'm a Paiute. A pie-eyed Paiute." He winked at his truck driver.

"Seldom," she said, "let's get out of here."

They drove from the bridge up to the grade to the neat green government town of Page. A few miles to the southeast stood the eight-hundred-foot smokestacks of the coal-burning Navajo Power

Plant, named in honor of the Indians whose lungs the plant was treating with sulfur dioxide, hydrogen sulfide, nitrous oxide, carbon monoxide, sulfuric acid, fly ash and other forms of particulate matter.

Smith and friend lunched at Mom's Café, then went to the Big Pig supermarket for an hour of serious shopping. He had to buy food for himself, his boatman and four customers for fourteen days.

Seldom Seen Smith was in the river-running business. The back-country business. He was a professional guide, wilderness outfitter, boatman and packer. His capital equipment consisted basically of such items as rubber boats, kayaks, life jackets, mountain tents, outboard motors, pack saddles, topographic maps, waterproof duffel bags, signal mirrors, climbing ropes, snakebite kits, 150-proof rum, fly rods and sleeping bags. And a pickup and a 2½-ton truck, each with this legend on magnetic decals affixed to the doors: **BACK OF BEYOND EXPEDITIONS, Jos. Smith, Prop., Hite, Utah.**

(Twenty fathoms under in a milky green light the spectral cabins, the skeleton cottonwoods, the ghostly gas pumps of Hite, Utah, glow dimly through the underwater mist, outlines and edges softened by the cumulative blur of slowly settling silt. Hite has been submerged by Lake Powell for many years now, but Smith will not grant recognition to alien powers.)

The tangible assets were incidental. His basic capital was stored in head and nerves, a substantial body of special knowledge, special skills and special attitudes. Ask Smith, he'll tell you: Hite, Utah, will rise again.

His gross income last year was \$64,521.95. Total expenses, *not* including any wages or salary for himself, ran to \$44,010.05. Net income, \$20,511.90. Hardly adequate for an honest jack Mormon, his three wives, three households and five children. Poverty level. But they managed. Smith thought he lived a good life. His only complaint was that the U.S. Government, the Utah State Highway Department and a consortium of oil companies, mining companies and public utilities were trying to destroy his livelihood, put him out of business and obstruct the view.

Smith and his driver bought \$685 worth of food, Smith paying

in warm soiled cash (he didn't believe in banks), loaded it all in the truck and headed out of town for the rendezvous at Lee's Ferry, into the westerly wind across the sandy red-rock wastelands of Indian country.

WELCOME TO NAVAJOLAND the billboards say. And, on the reverse side, GOOD-BYE COME AGAIN.

And the wind blows, the dust clouds darken the desert blue, pale sand and red dust drift across the asphalt trails and tumbleweeds fill the arroyos. Good-bye, come again.

The road curves through a dynamited notch in the Echo Cliffs and from there down twelve hundred feet to the junction at Bitter Springs. Smith paused as he always did at the summit of the pass to get out of the truck and contemplate the world beyond and below. He had gazed upon this scene a hundred times in his life so far; he knew that he might have only a hundred more.

The girl came and stood beside him. He slipped an arm around her. They pressed together side by side, staring out and down at the hazy grandeur.

Smith was a lanky man, lean as a rake, awkward to handle. His arms were long and wiry, his hands large, his feet big, flat and solid. He had a nose like a beak, a big Adam's apple, ears like the handles on a jug, sun-bleached hair like a rat's nest, and a wide and generous grin. Despite his thirty-five years he still managed to look, much of the time, like an adolescent. The steady eyes, though, revealed a man inside.

They went down into the lower desert, turned north at Bitter Springs and followed Hayduke spoor and Hayduke sign (empty beer cans on the shoulder of the road) to the gorge, around a jeep parked on the bridge and on toward Lee's Ferry. They stopped at a turnoff for a look at the river and what was left of the old crossing.

Not much. The riverside campgrounds had been obliterated by a gravel quarry. In order to administrate, protect and make the charm, beauty and history of Lee's Ferry easily accessible to the motorized public, the Park Service had established not only a new paved road and the gravel quarry but also a ranger station, a paved campground,

a hundred-foot-high pink water tower, a power line, a paved picnic area, a motor pool with cyclone fence, an official garbage dump and a boat-launching ramp covered with steel matting. The area had been turned over to the administration of the National Park Service in order to protect it from vandalism and commercial exploitation.

"Suppose your prayer is answered," the girl was saying in the silence. "Suppose you have your earthquake at the dam. What happens to all the people here?"

"That there dam," Smith replied, "is twelve miles upriver through the crookedest twelve miles of canyon you ever seen. It'd take the water an hour to get here."

"They'd still drown."

"I'd warn 'em by telephone."

"Suppose God answers your prayer in the middle of the night. Suppose everybody at the dam is killed and there isn't anybody left alive up there to give warning. Then what?"

"I ain't responsible for an act of God, honey."

"It's your prayer."

Smith grinned. "It's His earthquake." And he held up a harken-finger. "What's that?"

They listened. The cliffs towered above. The silent evening flowed around them. Below, hidden deep in its dark gorge, the brawling river moved among rocks in complicated ways toward its climax in the Grand Canyon.

"I don't hear anything but the river," she said.

"No, listen. . . ."

Far off, echoing from the cliffs, a rising then descending supernatural wail, full of mourning—or was it exultation?

"A coyote?" she offered.

"No. . . ."

"Wolf?"

"Yeah. . . ."

"I never heard of wolves around here before."

He smiled. "That's right," he said. "That's absolutely right."

There ain't supposed to be no wolves in these parts anymore. They ain't supposed to be here."

"Are you sure it's a wolf?"

"Yup." He paused, listening again. Only the river sounded now, down below. "But it's a kind of unusual wolf."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's one of them two-legged-type wolves."

She stared at him. "You mean human?"

"More or less," Smith said.

They drove on, past the ranger station, past the pink water tower, across the Paria River to the launching ramp on the muddy banks of the Colorado. Here Smith parked his truck, tailgate toward the river, and began unloading his boats. The girl helped him. They dragged the three inflatable boats from the truck bed, unfolded them and spread them out on the sand. Smith took a socket wrench from his toolbox, removed a spark plug from the engine block and screwed in an adapter on the head of an air hose. He started the motor, which inflated the boats. He and the girl pulled the boats into the water, leaving the bows resting on the shore, and tied them on long lines to the nearest willow tree.

The sun went down. Sloshing about in cutoff jeans, they shivered a little when a cool breeze began to come down the canyon, off the cold green river.

"Let's fix something to eat before it gets completely dark," the girl said.

"You bet, honey."

Smith fiddled with his field glasses, looking for something he thought he had seen moving on a distant promontory above the gorge. He found his target. Adjusting the focus, he made out, a mile away through the haze of twilight, the shape of a blue jeep half concealed beneath a pedestal rock. He saw the flicker of a small campfire. A thing moved at the edge of the field. He turned the glasses slightly and saw the figure of a man, short and hairy and broad and naked. The naked man held a can of beer in one hand; with the other

hand he held field glasses to his eyes, just like Smith. He was looking directly at Smith.

The two men studied each other for a while through 7 × 35 binocular lenses, which do not blink. Smith raised his hand in a cautious wave. The other man raised his can of beer as an answering salute.

"What are you looking at?" the girl asked.

"Some kind of skinned tourist."

"Let me see." He gave her the glasses. She looked. "My God, he's naked," she said. "He's waving it at me."

"Lee's Ferry is gone to hell," Smith said, rummaging in their supplies. "You can't argue that. Where'd we put that goddanged Coleman stove?"

"That guy looks familiar."

"All naked men look familiar, honey. Now sit down here and let's see what we can find to eat in this mess."

They sat on ammo boxes and cooked and ate their simple supper. The Colorado River rolled past. From downstream came the steady roar of the rapids where a tributary stream, the Paria, has been unloading its rocks for a number of centuries in the path of the river. There was a smell of mud on the air, of fish, of willow and cottonwood. Good smells, rotten and rank, down through the heart of the desert.

They were not alone. Occasional motor traffic buzzed by on the road a hundred yards away: tourists, boaters, anglers bound for the marina a short distance beyond.

The small and solitary campfire on the far-off headland to the west had flickered out. In the gloom that way Smith could see no sign of friend or enemy. He retreated into the bushes to urinate, staring at the gleam of the darkened river, thinking of nothing much. His mind was still. Tonight he and his friend would sleep on the shore by the boats and gear. Tomorrow morning, while he rigged the boats for the voyage down the river, the girl would drive back to Page to pick up the paying passengers scheduled to arrive by air, from Albuquerque, at eleven.

New customers for Back of Beyond. A Dr. Alexander K. Sarvis, M.D. And one Miss—or Mrs.—or Mr.—B. Abzug.