

Cliffs at sunrise along Green River at Mineral Bottom

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT SMITH

Hermit Truths and the Body Electric

An illuminating night on the Green River

ALAN JACKSON HAS A LONG, TANGLED, GANDALFIAN beard and almost no possessions and he will tell you, if you stop and talk to him, that electricity is driving the world mad.

Our family found him at Mineral Bottom near Canyonlands National Park among the castles and pinnacles of the red rock, where we had come with a Jeep intending to plumb the backcountry. Jackson lives at Mineral Bottom in a trailer alongside the purling of the Green River, where he collects muddy and torn permits from the canoeists splashing out of the nowhere upriver. He does this all summer long, quite alone but not lonely, a volunteer for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, subsisting in ur-simple fashion, a former electrician from somewhere East.

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Night was falling and our tent was set when Jackson proposed a campfire in his old cast-iron fire pit. My 11-year-old daughter Lea and I gathered the dried skeletons of tamarisk trees. Jackson brought scavenged camping chairs, and he brought brownies and cigarettes. Then he began:

“You do know about alternating-current electricity? Making people all nervous-like. AC voltage creates a magnetic field that reverses itself 60 times a second, too fast for the magnetic bacteria in your cells.”

Silence from our party. We were an odd group, no doubt—as odd as Jackson by any common judgment: There was Petra, my wife, but also Carole-Anne, my ex-girlfriend, and Lea, who is my daughter by Carole-Anne, and Elvis the dog, a Jack Russell terrier who loved the pack.

Jackson had a captive audience and the fire was going high now, and all faces were in shadow or lit strangely. He nodded at his trailer with its mass of



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Alan Jackson



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taped-together, busted-up, falling-down solar panels. “My panels are all direct current—ol’ DC. Safe. This is all part of the theory of magnetrition, mind you. Animal life began in the water, came out onto the land, went up into the trees,” Jackson said. “In the treetops we learned the rock-a-bye baby effect—swinging in Earth’s magnetic field. All warm-blooded animals show this lesson: the possum, the kangaroo, the primates—keep their young moving good and strong before the young know how to do it. Good mothers do the same thing—babies on their backs, moving! And birds turn their eggs. Aligned in Earth’s magnetic field!”

Jackson himself had picked up the habit: You noticed immediately that he was always moving, but very slowly. Shifting his weight. Standing up, sitting down. Turning in cardinal directions at the rate of molasses. Slow-motion fidgeting, a critic would call it. Transforming in the north-south of the true magnetic pulse is what Jackson would call it.

The fire died, and finally everyone slept, and the moon rose, and I thought about Charles Dickens, who also believed in magnetism: When Dickens traveled the United States on book tours, he changed up his hotel furniture every night so that the head of the bed faced north, his feet pointing south—his body axial. Hundreds of hotels were affected.

AT THREE IN THE MORNING, I awoke and listened to the bank of the river softly falling away, chunks of mud burbling, a tar-bubble sound, the forever-erosion that

made this place. I sat up, checked that all was well: Elvis the dog at the head of our tarp, eye half-open like a senator or centurion. Petra in her unbreakable sleep, my envy. In the tent, Lea by her tossing had pretzeled the cotton bag, and she was splayed over her mom, who snored gently.

It had been some time, several weeks, since I’d last gone camping, and I could feel its effects as clearly as drug or drink, and I thought of Jackson’s lesson and I began to think that this bodily feeling of wholeness and of richness, of quiet and of calm, this sense of being present and *nothing more*—no worry of future, no remembrance of past—might have something to do with having no electricity nearby. There was no city or town or permanent habitation for a hundred miles upriver or two hundred down, or two hundred miles west or a hundred miles east over the desert.

Hermit gospels, like all others, contain their germ of truth. Alternating current, which is magnetized because it switches its charge 60 times a second, today travels through every household, sending out an electromagnetic buzz akin to a dog whistle. It washes over our brains and bodies unheard but recognized by a secret ear of the soul that it perturbs. Consider utility technicians who spend too much time next to the electromagnetic fields of high-tension wires: the workers are said to suffer higher incidences of depression, mania, and suicide.

The buzzing of cell phones, the shiver of microprocessors in laptops, the flashing of the cathode ray tubes in



televisions, even the *shhhhh* of light bulbs (hold your ear close, as to a seashell)—who knows what will come of our romance with electromagnetism? Once upon a time in France, Louis Pasteur was mocked for the notion that infinitesimally tiny creatures called bacteria flitted about catalyzing ferment, spreading disease, carrying packages of life and death. Alan Jackson on the Green River tells us that “magnetotactic bacteria” exist in cells and “may be seen as a cause of cell division.” He writes in a treatise: “Awaiting mankind’s acceptance, the study of magnetrition offers man a healthier and longer life.”

IN THE MORNING, WE PACKED OUR GEAR into the Jeep and roared out of Mineral Bottom with appropriate kisses blown and handshakes of thanks to Jackson and crossed into Canyonlands National Park, following the cool of the river. But soon the canyon felt desolate, and terrible. Drive 30 miles on washboard roads in this howling sunlight? The air was hot enough that nakedness was too much clothing. The 11-year-old spoke up first. “Go back to Alan,” she said.

And within 10 minutes we were back with Jackson under the cottonwood tree shading his trailer. Jackson got out life vests and old inner tubes. He suggested that we float the river to a beach a half-mile downstream. The heat poured from the rims and turrets and from the bereft palaces of rock that meet with the sand of the river bottom in a 100,000-year dance—the rock, the river, the sun, aligning in earth’s magnetic field.

We loped into the river. There was a moment of doubt. Carole-Anne, Lea’s mother, got hysterical—worrying for her daughter. Jackson, with his beard bobbing on the silt of the flow, smiled behind the beard: “It

may be too much fun. Very dangerous.”

So we dropped in and let the water do with us what it would. Occasionally, it twirled us in eddies, and sped like a punch, and went cold in spots where we plunged deep. But mostly it was slow and warm and soft. There we spent the balance of our two days on the Green River. No conquests with the motor on the Jeep. Born out of the water and back to the land, sitting with Jackson under the cottonwood, watching him turn his panels to the light. ❏

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