

## Oasis

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*Jenny Cornuelle*

It's early evening and many hours have passed since Mo and I hid our tanker in a secluded spot, checked the brake and left it in the dust of Dirt Flats and started out across the Sun's Anvil, towards Mexico.

Mo and I bought the tanker eight years ago and we've been hauling crude on and off ever since. We're the only female team in the business. The guys kid us a lot. It pisses off Mo more than me; I mean, if you're a babe in this line of work, you've got to expect a certain amount of ribbing; besides most of the stuff is harmless, like our nickname on the CB is Double Deuce because we both are, how should I put it politely, top heavy. Mo flat out refuses to answer those calls and has pulled the handset out of the dash three times.

Our visit to the desert was personal. We had to bury Mo's dad. He was too heavy for one of us to lug solo so we cut him in half and constructed two toboggan-like contraptions from a hollowed-out cactus. Mo pulled the head half and I pulled the bottom half. Needless to say, we thought it best to put his pants on for this leg of the journey. We had a long discussion about the proper etiquette in this situation, and we decided that the daughter of the deceased should haul the brain to the burial, not the balls.

The evening was so still it was soothing. Have you ever noticed that shadows don't creep up on you in the desert? Instead the darkness comes like a quick curtain. We walked until we could see no hills ahead or behind us. Mo announced that this was the spot. I was much relieved be-

cause my knapsack was heavy and the head of my shovel, which at the beginning of the hike had been just a nuisance to the small of my back, had rubbed me raw and it hurt like hell. I hadn't said anything because I felt it inappropriate to disturb Mo's mourning so I bore the pain and every time Mo turned to see if I was still with her, I forced a constipated grin and she would nod and continue to walk, following the cracks in the earth as if they were roads on an ancient map leading us somewhere, to Babel maybe. I remember Mo telling me once that all the bridges in Japan or China, she wasn't sure, were zigzagged because evil spirits could only travel in a straight line. That must be why we had walked on diagonals.

After putting the cactus cradles together Mo covered them with her tarp. She stood motionless, staring at the lump which now resembled a covered barbecue.

I poured two straight bourbons and handed one to Mo. I drank mine in one gulp and poured another. It had been a long day.

I had known for a long time that Mo and her father had a stressful relationship. Over the years and the miles we've had a lot of time to talk and she rarely talked about him. The odd thing was sometimes he was a saint or sometimes he had to reach up to hit the bottom, I mean, worse than the slim who slid into Mickey's Bar on Friday nights looking for a quickie, and from my perspective, there is no life lower.

I don't think I ever told Mo about my dad. I know she never asked. There's not much to tell since I never met him. He died in the Korean War. His plane was shot down and his remains were never found. Growing up, I spent many afternoons imagining he'd escaped and become a ruler of a lost kingdom on an unmapped island. But when

I was mad at him for being dead instead of being at my father-daughter picnic or something I imagined he looked like that dweeb in "South Pacific," the sailor who dressed up like an island babe for some USO show; the one with a coconut bra and a grass skirt and combat boots.

This morning, in Mo's apartment, I inspected the body. There was no question that Mo's dad was dead. Mo must have stabbed him close to a hundred times. His heart was on display and it was not beating. I had no words. I waited. Mo paced and smoked without inhaling. She had quit smoking when we bought the rig, so she was out of practice. Every once in a while she inhaled and coughed up a storm.

Mo didn't feel like talking and I didn't push her. I knew Mo had her reasons.

Deserts are peaceful places. I took the sawdust log out of Mo's knapsack and used sagebrush for kindling. The needles shimmered as they shot into flame. For a moment the sizzle caught Mo's attention but then it fizzled out and her stare returned to the horizon.

"Let's rest for a few hours and then start digging," I said, startled by the calm in my voice.

## II.

I lay down opposite Mo. I couldn't see her features through the flame. I struggled to stay awake but exhaustion got the best of me.

A few hours later I woke with a start. Mo was in the same position, staring into the fire. A line of tears plodded down her cheeks. Her eyes were blood red, but she didn't sob. I watched her. She was beautiful. I'd never noticed that before. She was like one of those statues of Mary on

Vatican postcards usually around Easter time: sad but not too sad because she's stone and the tears aren't wet.

I tried to get back to sleep but I couldn't relax, so I picked a spot close to the fire and began digging. After about an hour Mo joined me. We dug in silence. When Mo stopped the hole was a few feet taller than me and I'm close to six feet. I scrambled out and helped Mo roll her father into the grave and for some reason I had an impulse to laugh. I tried to swallow the outburst but it exploded as a kind of burpy giggle and echoed across the desert.

"I'm sorry. I'm overtired."

Mo just nodded and started to shovel the dirt in. I glued my eyes to the pile of dirt and when I rested I watched the light on the horizon. Dawn was approaching and the day was going to be a hot one; my palms moistened; sometimes the expectation of heat is worse than the heat itself.

We had to wait until dusk to head back; hiking in this heat would be stupid if not suicidal. Mo had not spoken; in fact I had to lead her to the shade as if she were blind or something. She took no notice of the sun. She just stared at the disturbed dirt and picked the dried blood from beneath her nails with her front teeth.

"Jen, if I ask you to do something important would you do it?"

"Sure. What?"

"No questions asked."

"Sure."

I was getting a little testy. The way I looked at it, I'd just sawed her father in half, hauled him across the border and buried him at least ten feet under; what more could I do?

"I'm going to go to that pile of dirt and kneel. When

you're ready I want you to hit the base of my head as hard as you can with my shovel. If you hit me hard enough it won't hurt. So give me everything you got, for old time's sake."

The tone of her voice was decisive and casual like she was ordering a ham on rye, hold the mayo.

"Don't bury me. Burn me. Cover me in sagebrush."

I opened my mouth a few times but nothing came out.

Mo walked over to the rectangle plot and fell to her knees. She placed her palms on the dirt.

"Forgive me, daddy," she said, then she straightened up and bowed her head. Her arms were at her side; her palms were opened and caked in dirt. Her palm prints on the grave were perfect.

It must have been five or six when I started back to find the truck. I had a handful of Mo in my pocket and a heap of thinking to do. After I had walked two or three miles I felt an urge to go back. I can't explain it. My shoes had left no footprints. The basin was so dry, even my hiking boots left no marks. The crinkled surface was unbroken, like puffed rice cakes. Following the smell of smoke more than my compass I began to make my way back.

I had hit her as hard as I could, and had covered her with sagebrush and used my last match from a pack I had gotten at a bar on Melrose to set her on fire. I was mad at Mo. She didn't even say goodbye. I knew she had heard me walk up behind her. "I'll miss you" would have been nice.

I've always read that bodies buried in desert graves are best left unmarked and perhaps undisturbed; along the logic of a tree falling in the forest, if a man is buried in the desert and there are no witnesses is he really dead. Sand likes to keep its secrets. But finding Mo's grave, or funeral pyre to be exact, is turning out to be a bitch. I've been wan-

dering around this sand pit for days. Yesterday I lost my compass. I've got about a day's worth of water left. Today I fantasized I was walking through an ancient city, that mound over there was a fat aristocrat's pad, that mound was the temple where virgins were sacrificed by the hundreds.

In the middle of the night I wake up and realize that I never changed my life insurance: Mo's my beneficiary. Son of a bitch, the tanker is going to go to the state.

An eerie blue surrounds me like one huge bruise. My hands sift a handful of grains. The earth seems as worn out as I am. What am I doing here? I'm going to die in the desert and be eaten by birds with unwashed beaks. I'm going to be pecked to death. I remember reading an article about the Valley of Martyrs in Egypt. No one ever left the desert valley once they were sent there. It was Egypt's answer to overcrowded prisons. They just herded the suckers into this secluded canyon, you know the kind with just one tiny trail leading in and out, and then made the condemned close themselves in with stones. Quick and easy.

The sun rises and I see the silhouette of my father in the distance. I don't even bother to pack up my gear. I just start running for him like one of those Kotex commercials except I'm not feeling confident or wearing white. As I get closer it looks like Dad is standing on a grave-size oasis. He stands in the center of a lawn measuring about three and half by seven feet. I run faster. He is black and white, a breathing duplicate of the photo I carry everywhere I go.

When I get just outside of an arm's length of Dad, Mo with eyes blazing steps out from behind him and stands directly in my path. The earth must be regurgitating their dead one by one or Mo has used my dad as a lure and had reeled me in.

"I loved you, Jen, and you didn't care."

"What?"

"I loved you."

"And I love you, Mo."

"No, I really loved you."

Mo and I are silent for ten minutes more. A kind of "you-heard-me" stare stands at attention in her eyes. Finally I break the quiet.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

I open my arms wide and walk toward Mo. My arms hug air and I lose my balance and fall head first onto the mini-lawn. I fall on something sharp and pain shoots through my body. One of the shovels pierces my heart. The shovels were the fold up kind and so the metal tip was sticking straight up. I had left the shovels because I was too beat to carry them back to the tanker. I never was good at putting things away. My mother always said that my laziness would kill me.

I count to three and throw myself onto my back, suddenly all is back. When I come to, I assess the damage. No question. I lie dying. I try to drum up the courage to pull the shovel from my chest but I can't. So I lie in the morning sun, waiting for death.

The oasis is just my size. It must look like I am lying on a green beach towel from above. Dad and Mo haven't reappeared but that's as it should be. My Mom told me that every one must face death alone. Serves me right, for saying "I'm sorry" when I didn't mean it. A shovel in my heart; perfect, I know it's her shovel too; I can see the downstroke of an M on the handle. I rock back and forth and burrow into the grass. The blades are cool between my fingers. I can't wait to be shapeless and quivering.