

THE QUARRY

Long Strange Trip

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The Saguaro Cactus of the Sonoran Desert is found all the way from Arizona to Mexico. With two arms on either side, they were used for shade by outlaws and water by the Comanche. However, rumour has spread that they were once American Indians but Hochunk (the spirit of the Earth) petrified them, like Medusa, and turned them to cacti. Deserters, trespassers and transgressors alike they now lay scattered across the desert floor haunting the lonely traveller.

Alex strode down the desert line possessed by some feverish determination. The sun burned hot as it sank in honey light.

Kicking up dust and foaming at the mouth Alex's chestnut Stallion was led to the water's edge. She called him 'Breeze', and he was typically a proud horse when not a little hunched from thirst.

Now dirty and brown, his legs half gave as his head touched the water. Alex bent to fill her enormous 4L water bottle.

‘Tough day eh?’

Alex shot around.

A man pointed a gun at her.

‘We just want some water then we’ll go,’ Alex said raising her hands.

‘Ah no no. I see water and a meal here.’ He flicked his eyes towards Breeze who was now looking back at him.

‘It’s a mighty shame too. He must be one of the only horses left. Ain’t that so strange. All my cows died. I had sixty-five good Jersey cows and they all died along with my two mutts,’ a crazed look glazed his eyes as his voice rose. His twisted beard and hair were matted with mud. Alex retreated into the water as the man advanced. Breeze walked up the lake’s bank.

‘Then all my neighbour’s cattle went n’ died; horses too. It’s fucking crazy. All in one night they just fell flat on their asses and kicked the bucket.’ Alex was almost waist deep now.

‘Now I’m out here and I don’t even know how. My mind doesn’t feel like my own. My wife’s dead and... and...’ The man fixed his gaze on Alex.

‘Look why don’t I cook us up a nice horse steak. And then who knows, maybe we can have a little f...’

Breeze reared and kicked out at the man, breaking six ribs and a collarbone. The man collapsed in the sand, and his chest caved.

Alex filled her water and let the man die, taking his 42 revolver and ammunition. He would have become another casualty of the illness any way.

It was not dark yet, but it was getting there. Breeze grazed beneath the lakeside trees, and Alex started a fire. While it spat into life she removed the jerky from her saddlebags and laid

them back in the sand. The jerky, thick with gristle after having baked in the sun for so long, was dry as the desert that swallowed her.

Breeze came to hang his head by the fire, and Alex lay hers back on the saddle, looking up at the night sky. It looked like a black diamond, flawed with a million stars.

Alex's hand lay on her waist, and her thoughts branched out like tendrils in the night. She had been born with an extra rib on the left side.

'You're so pretty Alex. Maybe one day I can be as pretty as you.'

It's her most favourite memory. Her mother is smiling down, brown hair touching hers.

'Okay buckle up you two!'

Her brother Billie Ray is sitting beside her making friends with a lollipop.

The radio blares a new blues hit, *'Truckin' got my chips cashed in. Keep truckin' like the Do-Da Man.'*

'HA HA, Doooo Da Man,' said Billie.

A three-day storm is just relenting. Worst daddy has seen in years.

Snow falls softly as the car whirrs by. It keeps on falling, yet the pass is clear. Up and up and up they go along the winding road that ribbons across the mountain's skirts. Ice clings to the road, and a sheer drop awaits a mistake.

'Sometimes the lights all shinin' on me. Other times I can barely see. Lately, it occurs to me what a long, strange trip it's been.'

THUD. Dull and hollow. Time slows. The window shatters in screams. A million tiny pieces.

The car had hit a deer. And Alex's mother's body broke the windscreen. Forgot her seatbelt.

The memory of this trauma crystallised, in time, into a thin hardened shell around Alex. Melting down inside her chrysalis of loss she would one day emerge a butterfly. Alex was pinned by the front seat that day, and if not for the support of her extra rib, the steel frame would have broken her sternum instead of cracking it.

Alex lost her mother and brother. Her father fell into hard drinking and ended up in cuffs, huh, same old thing. Having lost the last of her family photographs to the desert Alex

had even begun to forget the face of little Billie Ray, the details faded like washed out watercolour paints. But who knows, perhaps memories distorted by nostalgia are warmer at night than clear-cut reality. Alex's eyes closed and she swam down into slumber.

As the morning light spilt into the desert and gloved the cold fingers of dawn, Sherriff E. Dennerly put out his cigar. He wasn't sure why but he had always smoked cigars. I guess he just liked how they looked in the movies. Especially on men with beards, real men, not like the young bucks nowadays. He tipped his hat (although no one was looking), put his hand on his colt pistol and walked off, boot heels scuffing the desert floor.

The familiar weight of his pistol had become like an old friend. Although now it felt phantom, with almost everyone gone there were no criminals, no judges, no law. And of course, law was the great rational equalizer to Man's ultimate game: war. The bossy kid to knock over your blocks and ruin the fun. *Maybe this badge just deludes me, for all I know I'm the only cop left.*

There was a subtle beauty to the desert, the Sherriff thought, like a woman whose laugh was more beautiful than any curves. Only you had to wait for the perfect joke to hear that laugh of gold. Desert dawns were like this. The sand had settled, the trees were greener and the red tongue of light spread across the valley as the beast awoke to meet the sun. All through the day, its jaws would lay open for unwary things to fry and die until it slept again at dusk. The desert was a beast. And there is certainly a beauty to any beast on earth.

The Sherriff's thoughts wandered on as he glimpsed the town.

What was once a bustling trade route on the Sonoran desert line was now empty as anything. On the Arizonan border, Sherriff Dennerly had heard there was to be a small settlement of survivors here, and he was to be their law.

Every since the plague, or disease, or bloody wrath of God, law had been an empty vessel floating on the open seas. It had not wiped out all the population though, but almost all. Sinners and good folk alike just keeled over in the night. The ones that were left had to flee to drier lands to avoid the bacteria of rotting corpses that would spread like wildfire in spring.

His boot heels scraped tar as he found the roads edge and headed for town. A shiver draped him. He felt like he was being watched. Now, for a paranoid man, the Saguaro cacti were not your friends. They loomed over shoulders like the demented spectres some Comanche ritual. Sherriff Dennerly kept looking behind, memorising, making sure they weren't changing shape or form.

The Garden Inn. It tolled like a bell in his mind. A voice had spoken of the Inn and told him to go there. He was sure his mind was becoming unhinged in the lone sands but he had to see it through, for the sake of sanity.

The Sherriff was more than a little surprised to find the Garden Inn was actually surrounded by a small garden. It was nothing spectacular but tufts of green grass burst out of the buildings skirts for a metre or so and were dotted with desert daisies.

The owner must have one deep well to keep all this green, he thought. Furthermore, hiding amongst the tussocks were little ceramic bunnies and deer, peering out so shy. Not paying it much mind he walked in under their opaque stare. A horse reigned to the building's handrail whinnied as he entered.

Dust motes cycloned as he passed through the saloon doors. A lone wind howled in the street. Dennerly ran a finger along the bar like the trail of a snail. The floorboards creaked.

'Hello?'

No answer.

'Anyone home?'

Only silence.

It's empty, he thought, *I am going crazy after all.*

That's when a door gradually groaned upstairs. The squeaking slowed as he turned his head upwards.

'I have a gun. If you make any sudden moves you're dead.' A slender woman with brown hair looked down at him.

'Ok now, let's not make any rash decisions,' said the Sherriff. A bottle exploded behind him.

‘Shut up. The last man spoke too much. Now he is dining with the buzzards. I’m sick of this craziness. Who are you?’ She spied his badge, and her eyes widened in a blend of shock and realisation. He opened his mouth but she cut him off.

‘You’re the law,’ she said.

‘What?’

He touched his badge. ‘I’m the last brick in a broken wall,’ he said, eyes downcast. ‘Hardly the law.’

‘I heard you in my head, or some voice like you. It told me where to go, it told me about you. *Outlaw, outlaw* it said. I thought it was thirsty delusion or some sickness of the mind,’ Alex descended the stairs towards him.

‘It told me to come here to the Garden.’

‘Yes! Mine too,’ he said stunned. ‘Now I’m just trying to stay alive. Trying not to forget the... the old ways.’

‘Is everyone dead?’ asked Alex.

‘Not everyone, but in the space of a week, all of Arizona went cold, every girl and boy. They thought it was some new strain of the bubonic plague.’

‘Same story back in La Jolla. It was like a hard cut. Mother Nature just lashed out.’

‘Well, somehow we are together... uh.’

‘Alex,’ she held out her hand.

‘Eric,’ they shook. Each other’s eyes turned a few shades kinder.

The couple uncorked a dusty bottle of bourbon.

With the sun having reached its zenith the two companions left the Inn. On the front deck, a cool wind eased the heat.

Heads buzzing they failed to notice four ragged men in the middle of the street. Breeze neighed and stamped his hooves and Alex scrambled for her gun.

‘Hey!’ one of them shouted. Eric’s gun was up already.

Fumbling with a broken buckle Alex forced her revolver out and brought it up, a little late to the show.

‘They’re people, they’re alive!’ one of them muttered.

Alex knew they were going to lose if things went sour.

The leader stepped forward. His eyes were shifty reminding Alex of a reptile. Cocking his head, he said, ‘Come now friendss, there ain’t no need for gunss here.’ His lisp slurred his speech.

‘Leave now. If not, you’ll lose,’ said The Sherriff.

‘But you have a horse and a mighty fine young lady,’ his eyes were hungry, ‘we can’t leave now. Let’s talk over a candlelit meal, shall we? Man to man.’ He was clearly a master of brinkmanship.

Void of volition Alex spoke up, ‘He said fuck off! Get out of here! Or I’ll put one right between those slimy eyes.’ Alex was not so bad herself. The man only smiled his greedy grin.

Before he could speak again, a faint whine reached everyone’s ears. It built in resonance like that of a cicada’s choir. Eric noticed the sand seemed to be moving towards them almost a hundred metres away.

‘That’ss no ssandstorm,’ hissed the reptilian leader.

Quickening in pace the sound reached a great scuttling that drowned out all other sounds. In the confusion, the Sherriff shot at one of the men’s back. He yelled and crumpled. The reptilian fired shattering the window behind the Sherriff. The second bullet found his gut. Alex stared wide-eyed.

In a small wave of thorny hides and scales, a colossal movement of lizards swept through the town. Bright blues and greens splashed in the surging stampede of dark browns and desert hues. The men in the street were knocked over and swallowed in the overwhelming tide, and the leader was drowned out as he screamed ‘Moloch! Moloch! Moloch!’

Even more remarkably the lizard pogrom swept entirely around the Garden Inn. Reptiles everywhere and not a claw touched it. They passed on screaming and scurrying, and Alex stood in deep shock. In the next instant, as if the lights were turned out on a sleeping

child, the sun was blotted and darkness reigned. A total eclipse. It caught them a little sideways as the blackness became thicker. They were divers at the bottom of the ocean's deepest gorge.

'Ughh.'

'Eric!' Alex rushed and knelt beside him. She tore open his reddening shirt. Her hand traced the blood and found the abrasion ring. She noticed a silver thin scar under his ribs and wistfully touched her own rib.

'Am I dying?' Eric whispered.

'It's a clean exit wound. You should pull through if I can stop the bleeding.'

Alex attempted patching the wound using fishing line and a rusty nail cutter found in the Inn; there was a roll of bandaging in the storage closet and a packet of aspirin above the bar as well, due to expire the very next day.

The sun and moon fell in synchronicity towards the horizon, carving out the sky like a comet. A total moving eclipse. Alex and Eric hardly noticed. The celestial miracle sat just above the horizon.

'I think I've done it,' she was now only talking to herself. Eric was pale and unconscious from blood loss.

'It's a crude stitching job but it'll do with a bit of luck,' her hands were a bright crimson and her shirt a darker scarlet.

'Such vivid reds,' she said staring at her hands. Eric's heartbeat was stable, and his breathing hadn't stopped.

'Thank god.'

The eclipse now finally dipped below the horizon, like the closing of a tired eye.

Alex looked, and in that instant, she was once again amazed.

Brilliant incandescent light shot up from the horizon and into the sky. Burning, hot, beautiful colours. They swept over the sky and spread out. They danced and weaved like ribbons and currents above the desert land. At that moment the grass in front of the inn belched into life. It spread across the street and in its wake saplings and wildflowers curled into life.

A drop from each coloured tentacle in the sky fell to the sandy floor. So many fell it was as if it were raining, but in a million different shades and tints.

Alex felt as if she had been looking through a dirty window her entire life and it was finally clean. She thought she was dreaming.

The earth was cleansed, as the final plague was one of redemption. A million naked bodies now stood in the desert where the Saguaro cacti once were, and they looked towards the garden. It shone like a lighthouse alone in a sandy sea.