

Dust

By Marissa Collins

Hot wind whistled through the rolled down window, dry and gritty, with the aftertaste of crop fertilizer baked into it. The dust stung the driver's eyes, but he ignored it, elbow hanging out the side as he passed another car, gripping the wheel with only his knees. The air conditioner roared, the agony of the west Texas summer too much for its Detroit manufacturing to keep up with. He shifted, sweat slicking his shirt to the leather seat. Pulling off the paved highway, his wheels crunched gravel as he swung into an old parking lot at the edge of town, the engine dying to a grateful moan as he twisted the keys.

The first thing he noticed was the heat, always the heat. As soon as he stepped out of the somewhat adjusted temperature of his vehicle, the glare and the dust and the bright white hotness of it all swept over him. He took off the sunglasses anyway, tossing them into the glove box and rolling the window up to a crack before slamming the door. Already, the places where his shirt rubbed skin were damp, the wetness spreading from his back.

The sun was high and whole and bleached everything, the monotone brown bricks of the one story 60's ranch houses, the deep red dust of the cotton fields, the blue in the sky painted over with a flaky pink blush from the dust storms. Everything rusted. He blinked to clear his vision, and started up the gravel road into town, loose pavement and patches of cracked handmade brick uneven under old sneakers, ignoring the heat waves. He remembered the street names easily; there wasn't much to them. Pine, Maple, Willow, Oak. Everything on a grid. The tracks ran across the northern edge, and the town ran south, buildings clustered close to the wider

main street that began at the station, terminated at the old Baptist church. Like three dozen other little towns he'd passed through to get here, except this one had been his.

He stopped by the railroad station. The whitewashed walls were chipped, sagging, boards haphazardly nailed over the door. Behind it a triple row of tracks ran off to either horizon, tumbleweeds catching briefly against the rails. A kid in a dirty t-shirt sat on the steps, a one eared dog lounging beside him. He looked at the kid, and the kid looked back. Behind, the windows were cracked, dark.

He moved on.

Some of the houses had new cars, many didn't. There were only a few in front of the school, a large square building with a dirt parking lot. They must be in session now he mused, walking up to the front windows, eyeing the rose bushes kept carefully trimmed by the ladies' garden club. The school was one of the nicer buildings in town, but then, it always had been. The ticket to freedom, it had been to him. His watch beeped, on the hour, reminding him he should get going, so he turned away and strolled another block. He saw no one. Any houses left inhabited would have the blinds drawn and the air conditioners going, until more favorable evening weather would send the occupants to their porches or garages. Still, the emptiness was too empty, cracks in the road too wide. He was glad to reach his sister's place, step into the shade of the front door, and knock, a heavy thunk. The plastic around the ringer had been melted out of shape for ten years.

When Paige answered the door, she was wearing a tanktop and some cutoff jeans, her late forties figure sagging a bit outwards at the seams. Her face was red and her bleached curling hair swept up in a tired bun, but she smiled when she saw him, and her eyes hadn't changed much.

“Jake.”

She pulled him inside, and he was too grateful for the rush of cool air to resist the sweaty hug. She pulled back, holding him by the shoulders, scanning him from sneakers to dusty brown hair, not quite yet beginning to gray.

“You’ve grown. Filled out, too.”

“I’ve gained a few pounds here and there, sis.”

She patted his shoulder affectionately, then pulled him through the living room to the kitchen, sitting him down at the four chair table covered with a plastic daisy table cloth. Turning to the cabinet, she pulled down a couple of glasses, and got some ice from the fridge.

“Wife been treating you well? And how’re the girls? It’s been so long…”

“Six years?”

“Seven.”

He accepted the glass she held out to him and took a long sip as she settled across from him, her pink gloss nails matching the tablecloth. He set his cup on the table but kept his hands on it, letting the condensation cool them.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here, for the funeral.”

Paige shifted, and her metal chair creaked. She took her time, taking a sip of her own.

“I understand. Job, wife, kids. It happens. Life gets away from you, doesn’t it?”

He turned the glass, watching muted pink sway with the ice cubes. A moment later, Paige laid a hand on his wrist. He looked up, surprised to see sympathy.

“Dad was very proud of you, Jake. The college boy. You’ve made it good in the world. Heck, you’ve been out there and seen the world. We’re all proud of you.”

He nodded, and tried to smile.

“So how are you? How’s Michelle?”

Paige leaned back again, smiled. She motioned to the wall behind her, filled with pictures of a much younger version of herself.

“Doing good. She likes school, likes New York. She wants to be a neurologist. Can you believe it?”

“Did they have those, when we were kids?”

Paige laughed, leaning back further, nails tapping the table top in a slow, rhythmic pattern. The ceiling fan whirred above them, keeping time.

“She doesn’t call much these days, though. Says class work keeps her busy. I suppose it does, she talks about what she studies a bit, though I don’t get most of it. We talk some about her friends and her teachers and then…”

His sister trailed off, thinking. After a moment, she gave a little shrug.

“I suppose about then she hangs up.”

A fly buzzed, caught in the window screen. He found himself nodding, even though he didn't know what he was nodding to. They talked some more, about little things, then Paige got the paperwork for him to sign. An hour later he was saying goodbye. He shut the door hard behind.

The walk back to the car was quicker. He did pause briefly by the station, staring down Main Street one last time. The kid sitting on the depot steps had vanished; only the dog remained. It looked at him with milky brown eyes, silent. The darkness in the windows had deepened, the cracks a thin film between the outside and the shadowed sockets beyond. He saw their aftershadow, even when he stood in front of the gleaming eggshell white finish of his vehicle.

He climbed into the truck, boots tracking red prints on the interior carpeting, and punched the keys into the ignition. The car came to life with a subtle rumble, and he pulled quickly out of the lot and onto the highway, a dark straight marker line to the horizon, flat and smooth and unblemished. As he reached full speed, he flicked on the radio, keeping his eyes on the road as the dust fields whipped by. Old country. He flicked the dial again, leaving it on some modern jazz group, smooth and rhythmic and classy. He eyed the dirt under his fingernails. He'd take a long shower, once he got back to the city. Get the dust off of him.