

## The Last Desert Legend

I imagine the desert calmed your storm. Offered you freedom with its expansive, bare-boned, nothing-ness. When the sun finally slipped into a swath of vermillion and indigo, I imagine you howled at the moon with the coyotes on the mesa. You said you would never go to sea again. Dark waters haunt sailors long after they amputate their sea legs. The horseshoe on your arm is a promise of luck and good fortune, on which all those at sea rely for safe homecoming. The name under the portrait on your shoulder reminds you that home forever waits on her sailor, even after the war is over. Faded ink now marks a weathered canvas, but the etchings remain steadfast. Permanence is nothing to the desert. Eventually, everything turns to dust and stars.

You point to the horizon where jagged bluffs glow under a naked moon. The desert was once flat, you tell me. Nothing but golden sand for miles and miles and miles, until the edges of earth dropped off into Heaven. Back then, anyone could walk through the desert and cross into Heaven if they traveled long enough. You trace the ink on your forearm like a cartographer studying an ancient tributary. You ask me if I believe in legends and I think I see the woman on your shoulder smile. This land once belonged to great warriors on horses, you whisper. Men and women who walked so lightly, their feet never marked the ground. They spoke to Mother Earth who told them the secrets of nature, which they passed down to their children and their children's 'children. There were no kings or queens. The warriors were free, honoring the spirits of each other and their ancestors.

I imagine a warrior's spirit riding a dappled stallion with a mane the color of Saguaro flowers. You take my hand and raise it to the sky. Next to yours, my fingers look pale and straight like needles that have not yet pierced skin and tasted the blood of life. Beyond our reach, burning white stars beckon from light-years away. You guide our hands toward the brightest of the dancing orbs, whose glow reduces us to silhouettes, featureless and unremarkable. The stars in the sky are what's left of the warriors, you say.

Battles erupted when men in wagon trains tried to steal the desert and give it a new name. With guns and sickness and bibles, the men in wagons tried to strip the warriors of their spirits and rewrite the story of Mother Earth. They walked so heavily, they scared the ground beneath their boots. Wagon ruts cursed the desert like the un-healed wounds of a lashing. Mother Earth cried out after battles erupted as the warriors fought to save their home. Lightning struck the desert, but nothing stopped the flood of wagons and the firepower they brought. After a final massacre, the last warriors rode their horses to the edge of the desert and into the sky.

Again, you point to the jagged bluffs on the horizon. The moon is no longer naked. It has climbed nearly to the top of the sky, triumphantly igniting the desert in silver incandescence. Your eyes, too, have waned into full lunar specters as you speak of the legend's ending. Where blood of the last warriors stained the sand, the jagged bluffs grew as a barrier between earth and Heaven. From then on, no one travels freely from the desert into Heaven. The warriors' spirits light up the sky as they watch over Mother Earth where the coyotes stare up at them and cry with broken hearts.

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“Excuse me?”

A distant voice interrupts my haunted sleep. Harsh, artificial lights form a halo around the figure of a nurse standing over me. The waiting room chair feels infinitely smaller than it did when I sat to rest my eyes. Veins in my legs are screaming for blood which feels to have coagulated in my heart, forcing it to heave inside my chest. There are no clocks here. Just bare walls and rows of chairs strategically placed to provide enough room to keep elbows from bumping while in communal isolation. One could wait in this desolate room for minutes or days or lifetimes. Time is accountable for nothing when there is no means to record its passing. The heaving in my chest subsides to a dull, rhythmic reminder: *I am here. I am here. I am here.*

Still hovering over me, the nurse waits while I break the surface into reality. She could be in her 20s or be an active fifty-something. Nurses are tricky that way, they never seem to reflect the burdens they carry. This one, in particular, seems exceptionally practiced in her delivery of devastating news. Her hazel eyes are neither weary nor bright, her lips are lightly glossed in a hue that matches her plum colored scrubs, and she speaks slowly with precise enunciation, “We’ve moved him to a private room. You’re welcome to go back there now, if you’d like.”

The way she never breaks eye-contact is unnerving, but she smiles politely in that way pragmatic people do when catering to social cues, “Technically visiting hours are over, but we stay pretty quiet around here. Since the new hospital was built – oh, maybe two, three years ago - our ICU is rarely full.”

Above us, an industrial vent stutters before expelling icy air into the room. I notice goosebumps forming on the nurse's arms and realize how peculiar the need for air conditioning is in December. I wonder if the nurse has ever seen snow. The kind of snow that buried us in endless winter back home. The emptiness between that world and here makes me feel like a ghost, a spiritless apparition, drifting between some celestial Neverland and a vacant hole in the desert ground. I touch my face to confirm I am still made of matter. The nurse finally retires her obligatory smile, maybe she feels the cold hands of emptiness wrapping around her, too.

"The night staff here is great, of course," she says, "We do our best, anyway. This is definitely where I'd want my grandfather to be if —"

Her eyes shift away from me for the first time as she abandons her statement. I can't help but feel like I have some unfortunate defect on my face that she is trying to avoid staring at in a diplomatic attempt to spare my feelings. The nurse retreats and allows social graces to redeem her misstep, "Between me and you, though, don't eat the food from the cafeteria. There's a vending machine by the elevator, that thing is a life saver."

She is smiling again. This time more authentically, revealing crooked front teeth. Teeth almost as crooked as mine. I am relieved that she, too, seems to be made of matter. Maybe she understands what it's like to be a ghost, waiting powerlessly in Limbo. What can either of us do now but wait? The nurse rehearses her lines, "Follow me. I'll take you to his room."

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It's much warmer in here. The dim light casts a comforting glow which seems heavenly compared to the bright artificial lights in the waiting room. The walls are still bare, but the muted lavender color serves its purpose, offering a sterile sense of calm. It is silent and I know we couldn't be further from the swinging bench on your front porch where we sat all night last time I saw you. There is no Cicada orchestra, no orange trees rustling in desert breeze. There is no Budweiser on your night stand. Nothing that I know of your home is here with us now. I wonder if the stars are on display since we are not there to witness them. Out of the only window in your room, I search for signs of life in the night sky. A network of city lights sprawl across the desert, the pulsing capillaries of colonization.

Asleep in the hospital bed, you look the same as you do in the black and white pictures Grandma keeps in frames near the bed you share. Your hair hasn't greyed and in your cheekbones I recognize my own. I wonder if you are dreaming or if you are waiting in darkness.

Can you hear me?

Do you know I'm near?

I hold your hand in mine, willing my life to pass through my palm into yours. Maybe I see a flutter beneath your eye lids. Maybe it's me wishing prayers weren't lost on non-believers. The tattooed ink on your arm reminds me that you are home, but the horseshoe brings me little comfort or thoughts of good fortune. I press my cheek against your chest and hear the bray of a war drum: *I am here. I am here. I am here.*

I close my eyes and imagine the warrior on the dappled stallion with a mane the color of Saguaro flowers. You said no one travels from the edge of the desert into Heaven any more, but I think even the desert makes exceptions for the greatest warriors. Even the most valiant battles must end in time. We sit silently with the still night, and I think the ink in your arms has darkened in the shadow of the legend. With a small breath of desert wind, you are gone with the warriors. In the distance, coyotes cry from the mesa, and I feel your spirit with them. The last desert legend can finally rest, at home with the brightest stars, forever watching over lonely Mother Earth.