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The Dry Season

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On her descent into Phoenix, Helen lifted her window shade to see a spectacular, fluorescent pink sunset, a 3-D postcard that made her snort out loud. A cliché already and

she hadn't even landed. In baggage claim, she was the only Asian person. She hoisted her heavy wheelie off the carousel and walked toward the car rental counters. The agent had a head of white hair and matching teeth, which he flashed as he gave her the keys. "Here you go, Miss," he said, though her driver's license showed she was forty-two. Buckling herself into the compact blue Nissan, she thought wistfully of her wheels back home, the sleek grey Prius she could no longer afford to lease. Even this rental was only for one day. Once she got to her destination, she'd been told there was a car she could use.

It took her twenty minutes just to get outside the airport loop. Her GPS kept steering her back onto Sky Harbor Boulevard instead of the 10 Freeway. "Fuck you!" she yelled after the third attempt, gunning through a yellow light and swinging wildly into the furthest left lane, regardless where it took her. If Soojin were with her, she'd say in her most calming voice: "Relax, Hae Jung. You'll get there." Then she'd call Helen's mother to pick apart every nuance of her behavior and what it suggested about her mental condition. Soojin was the only one besides her parents who called her Hae Jung. Helen was indebted to her, but it didn't change the fact that her cousin was a judgmental, meddling snitch. And for all her

ethnic pride, her disapproval of Helen living with Derek all those years, she'd ended up herself with a white guy named Barry (though that was different; they were *married*). Barry's parents owned a vacation home in a gated retirement community in Scottsdale, where

Helen would be living for a few months under their charity.

“Stay as long as you need to,” Soojin told her. “Until you get back on your feet.” She'd been sincere about it. That was the thing about her: sometimes she could surprise you and be a real person. Also, she was good to Helen's parents, stopping by every few weeks to visit, always leaving some pears or mochi she'd picked up in Koreatown. Soojin lived only twenty minutes away from their home in West Covina, and Helen did not—but even if she did, she knew she'd be less diligent about checking in.

By the time she turned onto the wide long stretch of North Scottsdale Road, the sky had darkened. She

could only see the shapes of palm trees and jutting saguaro on either side, with low rocky boulders in the distance. The night air was balmy through her open window, and the drive uneventful, until she reached the intersection at Pinnacle Peak. Striped orange

cones cut off one lane, where workmen bent over sparks flying from their welding gear.

Slowing down, she heard an onslaught of tiny pellets battering against her car. A second later, a large gust of dirt sprayed through her window and into her face. “What the hell?” she cried, pressing hard on the brake as she coughed and shielded her eyes. Her car swerved briefly into the opposite lane before she could steer it back on track and come to a full stop. She rolled her window up, grateful there’d been no oncoming traffic. The workmen covered their faces with their shirts. The dust storm thickened and swirled around for a full minute before it cleared. Lowering her window a few inches, she stuck her hand out. The air was calm and still, as if nothing had happened. She’d never seen such a fierce dust storm, or one that came and went so quickly. The driver behind her honked. Squirting her windshield clear, she drove on.

Just past Lone Mountain Road she turned east into the gated entrance of Dunecrest. There was nobody at the security station. She waited a moment, then killed the engine and got out of the car. Another car pulled up behind her, and the low mechanized gate started to swing open. The driver’s window rolled down and a man poked his head out. “Are you visiting someone, Miss?”

She approached the car, a silver BMW coupe, blinking against the glare of its headlights. The driver looked to be in his mid-sixties and was handsome in a roguish, John Huston way. “Hi,” she said, “I’m staying at the Connelly’s on Sidewinder Lane? There was supposed to be a guard here to give me the keys.”

“Oh, we know Brian and June!” He turned to a woman in the passenger seat. “We have the main security number, don’t we honey? Tell you what,” he told Helen, “why don’t you pull in and let us call? He’s probably on a break.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate it.” She ran to her car and drove through the gate, and they pulled in after.

When they got out of their cars she could see the woman was striking too, with chiseled features and silvery-brown hair in a shoulder-length bob. They were tall and fit, moving with the languid ease of the wealthy. They looked like they could be in a Cialis commercial.

“Mark Seabrook,” the man said, extending his hand. “And my wife Laura.”

“Helen Park. Thanks again for helping out.”

“It’s absolutely no bother,” Laura said. She pulled out her phone and pressed some

numbers. When no one picked up, she left a polite and detailed message. “Someone will call soon, I’m sure. Why don’t you follow us home and wait there?”

“Oh, I couldn’t—”

“Nonsense!” Mark insisted. “Come, we’ll have drinks and be neighborly.” Helen felt the start of ridiculous tears. It had been so long since she’d been welcome anywhere.

The Seabrooks had a spacious adobe house at the end of a cul-de-sac, with white curved walls and a kiva fireplace. It was decorated in a tasteful ethnic mix of Kilim rugs, Indonesian wall hangings, and Native American pottery placed inside niche shelves. They sat on leather sectionals around a low teak table, sipping Chardonnay.

“So,” Laura asked with a smile, “Do you know the Connellys or are you...?” She let the word *renting* float in the air.

“Yes, they’re...friends of the family. I’ll be staying a few months as their guest. Do you know them well?” Helen was suddenly paranoid that the Connellys might have gossiped about her.

“Oh, in a neighborly way,” Mark said. “We say hello at the pool or see them at Marley’s—we

just came from there, matter of fact.

Wonderful restaurant! Anyway, we're always out here in March and April. The dry season's the best time. In May we head back to Minneapolis."

"You say you're staying on a while?" Laura said. "My dear, you might reconsider. The summer is scorching—and the dust storms can be terrible!"

"I was just in one of those driving here! It seemed to come out of nowhere. I almost got into an accident."

Mark nodded. "You should keep your AMBER alert on in case. You don't want to breathe in that stuff. People get bad allergies, asthma, not to mention Valley Fever."

"What's that?"

"You haven't heard?" Laura said. "It's fairly common out here. Dust spores get into your lungs and make you cough up blood. For some it's no worse than the flu, but for others it can be serious, even fatal."

Mark rolled his eyes. "Don't get her started. Next she'll be talking about rattlesnakes and javelinas—"

"Don't remind me!" Laura shuddered. "That was the most frightful thing."

“What are javelinas?” Helen asked with alarm.

“They’re a wild boar that live in the desert,” Mark said, with obvious relish. “One night last year, we came home and found three of them munching on our prickly pear right outside the front door.”

“We couldn’t get into the house!” Laura said. “We had to call the wildlife department and wait in the car. I had that plant cut down the next day.”

Helen shook her head. “Well, this is all pretty new to me.”

Laura gave her a bright, curious smile. “Where are you from, Helen?”

When people asked her this, Helen assumed they meant her ethnicity but always gave a geographic answer. “L.A. originally, then Portland the last eight years.”

“Oh, we were in Portland three summers ago and had so much fun, didn’t we, Laura? Talk about some amazing restaurants!”

“Yes,” said Helen, feeling her throat constrict. “I know.” Next would be the inevitable question, *And what do you do in Portland?* She hadn’t thought about how she would answer that, or even the possibility of being in a social situation. In her mind, Arizona had seemed

both a salvation and purgatory, one she'd be facing alone. She wondered how these nice people would react if she were to tell them: "My ex and I used to own a restaurant, Plate—you might have heard of it? It was written up in *The New York Times*. Turns out he was doing some creative accounting and got us busted. We lost the restaurant, our condo, our friends—and one day I lost my mind."

It really had only been one day, this past January, shortly after they got their foreclosure notice. She ended up on a park bench by the Willamette River, for how long she couldn't say. After a while the cold became so numbing she couldn't feel anything, and that was alright. She slumped over to the side and nodded off. When two young women woke her to see if she was okay, she shook so hard they thought she was having a seizure. The EMT and police came and she grew hysterical, convinced they were taking her off to jail. In the ER, they gave her a sedative that calmed her enough so she could call her parents—a memory so surreal and shameful she could hardly believe it happened. She'd never forget their tense, disappointed faces when they picked her up at LAX.

The Seabrooks looked at her now with similar expressions of concern. Helen had forgotten what they were talking about. She noticed in

the bright indoor lighting that they'd each had some work done. Laura's skin had a flushed, plumped glow, while the area around Mark's eyelids seemed unnaturally taut. Their smooth faces were a jarring contrast to the loose, mottled texture of their necks and veined, leathery hands. Looking back and forth between them, she realized they were actually older than she'd initially thought. Mark's eyes met hers sharply and she quickly glanced away.

Laura asked with a smile, "What do you do, Helen?" Oh, right. "Well...I used to have a business, but now I'm out of it and just uh...figuring out my next move."

"I see." The flicker of interest behind Laura's eyes fizzled. "Well, this is certainly a nice place to do that," she said politely. An awkward pause followed that Helen felt helpless to divert. Then Laura's phone rang. It was the guard, back from his break. As they stood to say their goodnights, Mark became jovial again. "Well, hope to see you around! Come by anytime!"

"Yes, do come by," Laura echoed, the corners of her mouth lifting. But Helen couldn't help feeling that something had gone off in their short acquaintance.

#

The pool was full of screaming children. Their parents ignored them as they splashed water, waved Styrofoam noodles, and chanted ‘Marco Polo’ with endless fervor. For five straight days, since the third week of March, there had been a steady influx of these nearly identical families with their doughy, exuberant offspring. Helen figured it would continue for at least another week, until everyone’s Spring Break was finally over. One of the kids did a cannonball off the diving board, causing a large splash to land on Helen’s magazine. “Fuck,” she hissed softly, glaring at the culprit. She toweled the pages dry and leaned back in her lounge chair.

Six years ago, she and Derek briefly considered having a child. Then they got distracted with plans to open the restaurant. When that took off so unexpectedly, there was no more talk of babies. Her parents pressured her on the subject—she was their only offspring, the end of the family line—though neither of them approved of Derek. Once, a year into their relationship, she took him to her parents’ house for dinner. Her mother had dressed up but her dad greeted them in his undershirt and shorts, a can of Coors in his hand. He glared at Derek and blurted out, “Why you not marry my daughter?”

Derek shrugged. “Ask her.”

Helen said, “For chrissake, Dad,” and stalked out of the house, furious.

Her parents had never visited them in Portland, and when Helen made her brief annual trips to L.A., she went alone. The irony was that since she and Derek split, her mother asked about him constantly in a tentative, hopeful manner that made Helen’s jaw clench. Apparently, having a lying, bankrupt, tax-evading boyfriend was still better than having none.

Well, she thought, looking around the pool, don’t think I’ll find anyone here. There was old Mr. Geffen leaning over his walker with his shorts falling down, exposing his pale, humble buttocks. Or portly Mr. Priven, fully reclined and bronzed as a rotisserie chicken. Every man was at least twenty years older or married. It didn’t matter, she was over all that. What she needed to do was figure out how to make a living—and where. She’d earned a liberal arts degree to appease her parents’ insistence on higher education, but for the last twenty years, all she’d done was work in the service industry: as a waitress, bartender, manager, and finally, co-owner. She could try to be a GM somewhere, or worst case, go back to bartending, though she wouldn’t get the tips she used to. All her youth and spunk were gone, and she’d never been a beauty. Her eyes

were small and narrow, her nose a flat smudge, her mouth full but shapeless without lipstick. Her best feature was her long straight hair, a concession to the Asian stereotype, she knew—but a woman had to work with what she had.

Someone hovered over her, blocking her sun. “Hello, Helen.” It was Laura Seabrook in a floppy hat and linen cover-up, with Mark standing next to her. Helen sat up and raised her knees, feeling self-conscious in her two-piece. She’d worn it hoping a tan might camouflage the flab on her belly, thickened from inactivity over the last few months.

“Hi! How are you? I haven’t seen you since I arrived.” That had been two weeks ago.

“We’ve been golfing at the Boulders this week,” said Laura. “And you, are you all settled in?”

“Yes, everything’s great. And you can’t beat the weather,” Helen said lamely.

“Told you,” Mark said with grin. “March and April are the best.”

“By the way,” Laura said, “was that you the other day in the Connelys’ Lexus? Over on Cave Creek Road?”

“Yes,” said Helen, blushing despite herself. She had the sudden suspicion Laura’s main

purpose in talking to her was to ask that question. “They want me use the car, so the battery won’t die.” It was the truth. Why should she feel defensive?

Mark said, “Well, that’s just swell! Works out best for all parties.”

Laura nodded, then looked around and sighed. “My goodness, it’s so crowded. So many new people every year. Look, Mark, there’s an umbrella with some chairs over there.” She gave Helen one of her bright smiles. “Enjoy the rest of your afternoon.”

“You too.” No more pretending they would socialize. Helen wondered what she’d done to freeze their initial friendliness. Then she had a horrible thought: what if the Connellys *had* talked to them and worse, asked them to keep an eye on her? She watched them through her sunglasses cross to the other side of the pool. They stopped to chat with another couple, apparently no longer in a rush to nab their shady spot. To hell with them, she decided, putting on her headphones and closing her eyes.

She woke abruptly when the edge of her towel slapped her face. Only two other women were still at the pool besides her, struggling to collect their things before they blew away. She’d gotten used to these sudden gusts,

which happened on occasion, though never as severely as the first time. The wind subsided quickly into a pleasant breeze, but when she stood, she shivered. It was just past five. She'd slept for over an hour. Long mid-day naps had become a daily routine. To compensate for being so sedentary, she took the circuitous route walking back to the house. Aside from swimming, it was her only form of exercise.

This time of day there was always a somnolent golden stillness, enhancing the fabricated prettiness of the compound with its stucco adobe houses, all in earthy tones of clay, slate, and sage. Day or night, she rarely saw people coming out of those houses. She'd once traversed the entire gated community and not encountered a single soul. Along the gently curving pavement palo verde trees stood tall, their frail branches swaying, with saguaro and other cacti arranged in neatly graveled yards. Rounding the bend leading to her street, she stopped short before the expanse of large black bins lined up at the edge of each driveway. They were just a reminder of trash pick-up the next day—yet the sight of them always struck her as ominous. Perhaps it was their eerie regularity, emblematic of the place itself. There was a sameness to the days, the people, the landscape, a lack of distinction so disorienting that, for the first week, she'd actually needed her GPS to find her way

home.

The Connellys' house was slightly smaller than the Seabrooks', filled with a hodgepodge of floral chintz furniture, Lladro figurines, and a wall display of collectors' plates commemorating selected U.S. Presidents: Theodore Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Ronald Reagan. Shelves and end tables were crammed with gilt-framed pictures of the Connelly clan, including Barry, Soojin, and their two boys.

It felt odd for Helen to be surrounded by personal mementos of people who were practically strangers to her. She'd only met the Connellys once, at Soojin's wedding eight years ago—and until she saw the pictures, had completely forgotten what they looked like. Even now, living in their home, she never spoke with them. She had their phone number but all their communication was through email or Soojin. This arrangement, while a relief in some ways, made her feel even more like an interloper. Most unsettling were the evenings, when the darkness from outside seemed to seep through the walls of the house and into her thoughts, provoking questions she had no answers to. Questions others had asked as well. How could she not have known what Derek was up to? How could she have been so blind—and stayed with him

for so long?

In the end, she was heartbroken not so much over him as the restaurant. Its success had been sweet, proving everyone she'd railed against in her youth wrong, until Derek proved them right again. He actually expected her gratitude when he took the full blame for what happened, as if telling the truth made him heroic. It made little difference to the people that mattered. They owed money they could never pay back to their investors, staff, and suppliers, many who had been friends. None of them would look her in the eye now.

During the day she let the sun bleach her thoughts away, but at night she anguished over these humiliations, nursing bottom-shelf vodka tonics. She found herself leaving the TV on for company, eating her dinner in the den while watching marathon episodes of *Dateline* and *Forensic Files*, sometimes falling asleep on the Laz-E-Boy recliner. Waking up some hours later, she would rise and stumble into the small guest bedroom, pulling the unmade covers over her head with the blurry thought that soon, maybe even the next day, she would decide upon a course of action.

#

One morning, on her way back from the community mailbox, she saw a snake at the

bottom of her driveway, lying on a large flat rock. “Oh Jesus Christ!” she yelled, leaping back. The snake glistened under the bright sun, coiled in a reverse S-shape. It lay still, yellowish in color, with brown dappled spots and a white head. She stared for several minutes, fascinated despite her fear. So far, the only creatures she’d seen besides birds were jackrabbits, gambel quails, and the occasional iguana. But she’d been warned about scorpions and rattlesnakes. This one at least had no rattle. When it refused to budge she finally walked away, figuring it would eventually slither its way back into the Sedona Desert.

As soon as she entered the house, her phone rang. It was Soojin, sounding stressed. “Listen, is this a good time to talk?”

“Uh, sure, what’s up?”

“Well, I don’t even know how to ask you this,” Soojin started, and sighed.

Helen felt her stomach drop. The Connellys had changed their mind, and she’d have to leave. Until that moment, she hadn’t realized how much she’d relied on staying at Dunecrest. It was boring but in a weightless way that felt healing. Where would she go now? Her parents were the only option, but thinking of it made her want to crawl into a

cave.

Soojin was saying, “...so June’s brother Charlie’s in a nursing home in Phoenix. He’s a widower and eighty-something, not in great health. Anyway, when she’s there she visits him every week or else his son in Tucson does—but Tom broke his wrist the other day and can’t drive on the freeway and, well, don’t get mad but I told June you could check in on him. It would mean a lot to her.”

“Oh!” said Helen, hugely relieved. “Of course.”

“Really? So would next week sometime work? I know this is so not your thing, but it would definitely cheer him up.”

“It’s really okay,” said Helen. “I mean, it’s the least I can do.”

“Great! I’ll email June and copy you, then she can give you directions.”

After she hung up, Helen’s relief at not being ousted spurred her into action. She decided to drive to Carefree, a Western-themed town nearby with a shopping center full of restaurants, hoping someone could use a manager or bartender. It wouldn’t hurt to make a little money. She ate a cheap lunch at a taqueria, then stopped at Marley’s, the upscale

restaurant Mark Seabrook had mentioned. The owner was in that day and available to talk, which she considered a good sign until he scanned her resume and shook his head. “You’re manager-level or higher, but mine’s been with me since we opened.”

“Well, I don’t mind bartending. Part-time works too.”

“Our mixologists are among the best,” he said, with a brief, cold smile. “Those positions are competitive, and in any case, I’m set there too. But have your references call me. If something opens up I’ll get in touch, though it might not be until September.”

Walking back to her car, she felt dejected, and then angry. *Asshole. Pretentious little shit.* What was the point in having her references call when there was no position? By September she’d be gone. Her body shook with mounting fury. She began to hyperventilate. As she backed out of the parking space, she felt a wave of dizziness so intense she had to brake. Sweat broke out on her forehead while the A/C made her shiver. She shut the ignition off and leaned over the steering wheel with her eyes closed for several minutes. After a while, the dizziness passed, but she decided to check out the other restaurants another day. She barely had the energy to get groceries, which

she was desperately low on.

By the time she got back to the house, she felt drained. She clicked the electric garage door open, pulled inside, and unleashed the car trunk. She was heading toward the back door, bags in hand, when she remembered the snake and peered down the driveway. It was still on the rock. She set the bags down and walked slowly toward it. The snake was in the exact same position as she'd last seen it, hours before, but now it was bloated. Worse, she noticed a thin dark leakage from the middle of its body, dribbling down the side of the rock—and the distinct whiff of rot.

“Fuck,” she muttered. In the garage she found a shovel and dustbin. Placing the dustbin below the rock, she steeled herself and tried to nudge the snake off with the shovel. It moved flaccidly and then deflated like a pierced soufflé, releasing a gaseous, stomach-churning odor that filled the entire driveway. “Oh my god!” She screamed, letting the shovel clatter to the ground. Clamping a hand over her mouth and nose, she reeled away, retching, almost tripping over a barrel cactus.

At that moment a kid biked past. His head swiveled around in horror at the stench. He circled back, covering his own nose. “What’s *that?*”

She felt mortified, as if the smell came from her. Behind her hand she mumbled, “A snake. It just died,

here in my driveway.”

“Gro-o-o-oss.” But he seemed mesmerized. He was freckle-faced with dark blond hair, and looked about

eight years old. She couldn’t remember if she’d seen him at the pool.

“Listen, I’ll pay you to get rid of it.”

His hazel eyes widened. “How much?”

“Ten?”

The kid looked at the snake and then, his face scrunching, shook his head. “Nah, sorry.”

“Twenty then!” The desperation in her voice seemed to scare him. He walked his bike back a little and rested his foot on one pedal. Then he looked up and, with renewed interest, asked, “Hey, aren’t you Chinese?”

“What? No, why?”

“Oh,” he said, looking disappointed. “My dad told me Chinese people like to eat snakes.”

For a moment she was so appalled she could only stare. His face was simply curious,

without guile. But she was enraged. “Did he? Well, I’m not Chinese, I’m Korean. We don’t eat snakes and we’re not all the same!”

His face turned a bright red. “You don’t have to yell at me. I didn’t kill your stupid snake.” He pedaled off.

She looked back at the flattened carcass, oozing goo down the side of the rock. There was no way in hell she’d go near the thing now. She dragged the stinking tools to the front yard hose and rinsed them off. By the time she got everything cleaned and the groceries up to the house she was bone-tired and feverish. Leaning against the back door, she looked down the length of the driveway to see if anyone had been watching. No one was around. But whoever walked by would notice the snake befouling the otherwise sanitized street. Even from a distance of thirty yards, she could smell a faint rotten odor.

#

Three days passed before Helen finally stepped outside again. Every day she’d woken up feeling lethargic, though all she did was rest. The first night, she took cold medication and knocked out, hoping to kill whatever bug she’d caught. But the next morning, her chest felt tight and phlegmy—and when she coughed into a tissue, she saw small droplets

of blood. She stared in shock, then crumpled the tissue, tossing it into the wastebasket near her bed. She told herself, I'm just coughing too hard. The chills and fever grew worse, and twice she hacked up more blood. On top of that, she got her period. Finally, on the third morning, she felt strong enough to take a shower.

Afterward, she picked up the used tissues around her, emptying everything into the large kitchen trashcan.

Then she washed all the dirty mugs and plates she'd left in the sink. She pulled on some sweats, opened the garage door, and walked to the bottom of the driveway. The sky was cloudless and the sun beat down. It was strange to feel its heat and still be shivering. She was supposed to visit Charlie at the nursing home in a few days. By then she had to be over this.

The dried remains of the snake were now encrusted onto the rock. At least it no longer reeked. She felt winded even after her minimal activity but made herself walk the few blocks to the mailbox. Inside she found the usual junk mail: AARP renewal notices, Geico solicitations, supermarket coupons. On her way back, she saw a woman in a pink jogging suit walking toward her with a white

Lhasa Apso on a leash. She was carrying a sheaf of papers and to Helen's surprise, started waving them at her from across the street.

"Hello!" she trilled. "You live around here, right?"

Helen nodded as she approached. "Yes, I'm staying just up the block on Sidewinder."

"Then we're neighbors." The woman stopped in front of her and smiled, her blue eyes bright in her tanned, crinkled face. "I'm Rebecca. Sorry, my hands are full. But take one of these flyers. I'm having an estate sale next Tuesday, sort of a preview for Dunecrest —Snickers, stop that!" she yelled as her dog leapt up to sniff Helen's crotch.

"Thanks. I'm Helen." She glanced at the flyer with feigned interest.

Rebecca cocked her head to one side. "You're the one staying in the Connelly's place."

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Word gets around. We haven't seen you by the pool lately. Everyone's been asking, 'Where's that Oriental girl?' Oh, by the way," she added with a grimace, "you know there's a dead snake in your driveway?"

Helen felt her face redden. “Yeah...I’ve been meaning to clean that up, but I’ve been sick.”

“You don’t look well, dear,” Rebecca agreed. “I hope you get better soon. Anyway, nice to officially meet you.” With that she waved and headed toward the entrance of another house.

Back in her driveway, Helen found some rubber gloves and filled a bucket with soap and water from the

garage sink. She carried everything down to the rock. The shape of the snake with its reverse ‘S’ was like a brand seared into it. Bending over, she picked at the snake’s skin with two fingers. It peeled off in one long shriveled strip, releasing a faint fishy odor. She gagged and pushed it under the loose gravel around the rock. Averting her head, she took a deep breath. Then she wet the sponge and scraped away at the crusty stain. It was disgusting work but when the stain disappeared she felt some satisfaction. The bloody trickle down the side of the rock was harder to erase and also emitted an odor, different from the other, metallic and strangely familiar. It struck her that snake blood smelled just like a human’s.

#

The Pueblo Bonito nursing home was a

sprawling one-story compound near downtown Phoenix, an hour's drive from Dunecrest. Helen set her alarm for ten, allowing ample time to get ready, pick up flowers and pastries at Safeway, and get to the home by one. She was exhausted when she arrived but determined to put on a good face. The circular reception area evoked the bland ambiance of a three-star hotel, with tufted leather sofas arranged around an oval glass coffee table. She walked up to a pleasant-looking woman sitting at a large desk, a discreet golden nametag etched with *Sheryl* pinned over her bosom.

“Hi, I’m here to see one of your residents, Charles Jeffers? I’m Helen Park.”

“Oh, Charlie. Well, that’s wonderful, he doesn’t get a lot of visitors. Just go through that door on your right and down the corridor to room 311.”

“Thanks, I appreci—” Helen’s throat seized up in a long hacking cough. She covered her mouth until it was over, balancing her box of pastries. “Sorry,” she gasped. “Just getting over a cold.”

“Oh dear,” Sheryl said, leaning back. “I hope you’re not contagious. The residents here are highly susceptible.” Her tone had changed from one of cheerful welcome to

admonishment.

“No, it’s the end of it, I’m sure.” As soon as Helen entered the residents’ ward, she saw that the reception area masked the facility’s likeness to a hospital. All hospitals had the same sad odors of sour bodies, bedpans, reheated processed food. This place was no different. What did strike her as different, after five weeks at Dunecrest, were all the Hispanic, Asian, and African-American staff walking around. Beyond their pastel scrubs, their relative youth and vigor set them apart from the few residents inching along the corridor in wheelchairs and walkers, who looked at her with dull curiosity.

When she arrived at room 311 it was empty. She stood in puzzlement by the door until a young Hispanic nurse saw her and asked, “Are you looking for Charlie? He’s over with the others in the rec area. Someone’s having a birthday party.” She pointed to Helen’s flowers and pastry box. “If you want to put those in his room I’ll walk you over.”

Helen thanked her and set everything down. Then she followed the nurse through a set of double doors opening onto a spacious, shabbier version of the reception area, with a TV in one corner and several upholstered chairs. A long narrow table in the middle of

the room was decorated with plastic garlands along the edges. There was a large sheet cake and punchbowl along with plastic plates, cups, and utensils. From opposite ends of the table, two Mylar balloons danced under the A/C vents, printed with 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY!' on one side and '87' on the reverse.

Around thirty residents, most in wheelchairs, were gathered nearby. They looked anywhere from seventy-five to over ninety years old. Most were so hollow-eyed and skeletal they barely looked alive. Two of them were asleep in their chairs. It struck Helen that the residents at Dunecrest were merely seniors. Here they were *old*. The nurse led her over to a large-framed bald man in a wheelchair. He wore a plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up above his forearms, which were completely wrapped in white gauze. "Charlie," she said, "you have a visitor."

Under his thick glasses, the man's eyes lit up. "Marisol! I haven't seen you all day."

"You saw me this morning, silly. And you'll see me later." She waved at them both and left.

Charlie looked up at Helen with a puzzled expression.

"I'm Helen," she said, extending her hand. "We met at Barry's wedding eight years ago. I told

your sister June I'd come visit."

His face cleared and he said, "Oh, that's right! You're the one staying in her house."

"Yes," she said, chagrined by the reminder but relieved he wasn't senile. At that moment a matronly blond nurse wheeled in a tiny old woman with a fluff of white hair. Following her were other nurses and a group of what Helen assumed were family and friends.

"Happy birthday, Eleanor!" the blond nurse said, conducting all the residents to chime in. "Happy birthday," they echoed faintly, with scattered clapping.

After the birthday song, the nurses cut the cake and passed around slices. Helen asked Charlie, "Would you like me to get you a piece?"

"Oh yes, please," he said, smiling broadly. "And get yourself one too."

For the next half-hour he introduced her to his friends, telling jokes and, amped up from the sugar, patting people indiscriminately. In the midst of the party, Helen noticed two men in black uniforms wheeling a gurney through the rec room. They headed toward the residents' ward, skirting around the crowd. Several minutes later, they came back through the double doors, this time with someone on

the gurney, a sheet pulled over the face. Helen watched, aghast, as they led the gurney out through a side exit. A faint murmur transmitted through the room, as if someone had dialed the volume down. Then everything resumed as before.

She had never been anywhere more depressing. She sat hunched in her chair, barely focusing on the conversation around her, waiting for the right moment to leave. Finally she stood up. “Charlie, it was so nice to see you but I have to get going. I left some things in your room—flowers and some cherry strudel.”

He blinked in surprise, his eyes brimming moistly. “Can we go to my room and see them? We can say ‘bye’ from there.”

“Of course,” she said, thinking of the long drive home.

When she wheeled him back to his room, he exclaimed over the flowers, a cheap ‘Spring Assortment’ spray on sale for \$8.99. “Wow, look at that! You would’ve thought it was my birthday.” He lifted the box of strudel, insisting they each have some before she left.

“But Charlie, we just had cake! Save it for later—it’s all for you.” He looked crestfallen, and she realized he’d only been trying to stall her

departure. Sympathy mingled with pique at being manipulated.

Just then a young Asian nurse came in, holding a large roll of white gauze. Her nametag read 'Mai.' "Charlie," she said in a soft, coaxing voice, "it's time to change your bandages." Smiling at Helen, she said, "You can stay." As she unwound the old dressing, Helen had to stifle a gasp. The skin on Charlie's forearms was severely atrophied, with large maroon-colored sores. Mai murmured, "It's looking better." She put on sterilized gloves and applied ointment over all his wounds, wrapping the new gauze around them. Her movements were light, careful, efficient. She finished and put everything away. Helen adjusted her bag onto her shoulder, determined to leave with her, when another coughing fit came on, wracking her whole body. She grabbed a wad of tissues from her bag and, bending over, expelled a large, bloody globule of phlegm. This one was almost the size of her palm. She stared in shock for a moment, then crumpled the wad into her bag.

Mai looked alarmed. "You're coughing up blood? For how long?"

"I'm fine," Helen said through short breaths. "But I really have to leave. Charlie, it was so

nice to see you.”

He clutched at her arm. “You’ll come back, though?”

“Yes, when I can.” Leaning in, she brushed her face against his dry, papery cheek. He smelled medicinal and a little oily. She felt a collision of emotions: revulsion, guilt, pity. He was so lonely. How the hell had that happened? But of course, she knew. She thought of her parents, living all these years by themselves far away. There would come a time, and soon, when she would have to make amends. Then one day she too would be old and abandoned, though she’d have no children, and likely no spouse, to blame for it.

On their way out, Mai told her, “Listen, you do not look good. Please get yourself checked out.”

Helen nodded, knowing she wouldn’t. The days of seeing a doctor for a cold, no matter how bad, were over. She had no idea how she’d even be able to keep her crappy health insurance. All of it seemed a ludicrous investment toward a bleak future no one should want, much less have to pay into. Her mind screamed one word: NO.

By the time she returned home, the sky had just begun to turn a soft shade of coral. Within

the hour there would be another one of those glorious Kool-Aid sunsets, predictable as the sprinklers turning on each morning, the pool maintenance on Sundays, and trash pick-up on Tuesdays. Seeing some of the neighbors' black bins outside, she remembered that in fact it was Monday. With her last reserve of energy, she went through the house to consolidate all her garbage, emptying everything into her own black bin. Then she pushed it slowly down the driveway, lining it up with all the others.

#

When Helen awoke the next day it was past two in the afternoon, late even by her standards. She'd had a horrible night's sleep interrupted by coughing fits, fever, and fragmented dreams where gnarled disembodied hands plucked at her arms and face. She kept fluctuating between hot and cold, getting up several times to adjust the thermostat. At four in the morning, she grabbed her comforter and went into the den to watch TV from the Laz-E-Boy, finally drifting off at sunrise.

In the bathroom mirror, she observed her fallen cheeks, how thin she'd gotten in just a week, feeling a perverse mix of shock and pleasure. She'd had no appetite for days but

knew she should eat something. She pulled out a half-eaten loaf of bread from the fridge. Mold dotted several slices. Disgusted, she tossed the bread into the garbage. Then she remembered she had to bring in the trash bin. She threw a sweater over her t-shirt and shorts and went to open the garage door.

As it lifted, she felt a strong breeze and clutched the edges of her sweater across her chest. Down the length of the driveway, she could see several cars parked along both curbsides. In all the time she'd been at Dunecrest, she'd never seen so many gathered on one street. The car parked on her curb looked like the Seabrooks' BMW. She stared in confusion and then remembered it was the day of Rebecca's estate sale. Wow, she thought, she must have some good stuff. She walked out a few yards and then frowned. Her trash bin was toppled onto its side several feet from the driveway, with its lid open. Some of the contents had spilled out onto the street, and bits of paper flew around in the breeze. Looking up and down the street, she noticed all the bins from the other houses had already been taken inside, which meant their trash had been collected. She wondered why hers hadn't, and who or what had knocked it over.

At the bottom of the driveway she stopped dead in her tracks. One of the trash bags from

her bin had not only spilled out but was gaping, as if it had been torn open. She burned with shame and a growing sense of violation. Up ahead, for half a block, all her tissues lay on the tar pavement, scattered like breadcrumbs from her house. She walked over to a bloodied pile of them and stared. They looked like the crumpled brown cactus flowers she'd seen withering in the desert. At the sight of them she felt stunned and queasy. It wasn't possible there could be so many. I'm sick, she thought. I'm really sick. Down the street, people started to come out of Rebecca's house, just a few at first, and then more, becoming a large group. Watching the sea of grey heads made Helen's vision blur...she swayed dizzily and shut her eyes. When she opened them, she saw the Seabrooks.

Panic galvanized her, pushing aside her exhaustion. She bent down, hurrying to collect everything before they noticed. But the wind had picked up and kept blowing the tissues out of her reach. One by one, she chased after them.

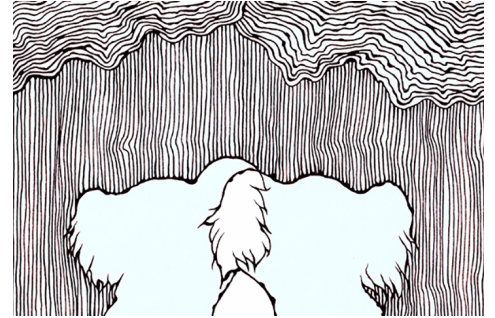
More from The West:

Thieves With Tiny

Eyes (excerpt)

Anna Joy Springer

The Blackbird This is supposed to be a love letter. The relationship will start in tears. One of the girls, ...



Divestment

Helene Wecker

Gerda Kohl, eighty years old, sat in the den of her house, surrounded by cardboard boxes. Her two daughters were ...

Lucky Frank

Jenny Xie

My parents, who had all day nursed an injured silence between them, united to teach me a lesson. I had ...

