STORY

State

THING

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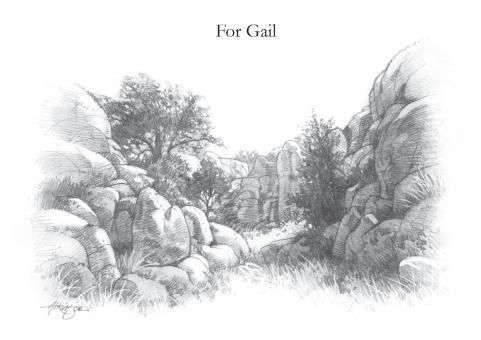
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The scene could have been from an old Western filmed in black and white, from a time before cell phones or man-made satellites or hybrid cars or bombs dropped halfway around the world by engineers in Tucson, Arizona. Or margarine, something the old man on the bay horse despised. He bought salted cream butter like his mother churned when he was a boy, and he left it sitting out on the kitchen table in a ceramic butter dish that he washed when it got too greasy.

A sharp observer of the trio moving across the high Sonoran desert could have picked out hints of modern times like the rubber soles on the old man's boots, the machinemade shoes on the hooves of his livestock, and a jet airplane overhead making its run from L. A. to Phoenix.

A closer, more intimate examination would have revealed a MADE IN CHINA tag inside the collar of the man's shirt.

The old man on the stocky bay horse had been cowboying on this outfit, the Benson Ranch, for over fifty years, had arrived when the Benson and the 3R, the ranch to the south, had been all one holding. He had seen so many changes in his lifetime that he noted them less with surprise than with small ticks in his mind like the shorthand in his tally book. The lines on his face were from sun and wind and work and years. The pack mule in his hand, though old and rich in the wisdom of mules, was young compared to the man. The little dog that came behind them, sniffing and circling and ignoring his own painful joints, was even younger still.

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The man's name was William Morgan, at least on his income tax return. Most people called him Uncle Bill, even though he wasn't anyone's real uncle. His pockets were always full of Juicy Fruit gum, butterscotch candies, and Brach's Toffee Royals. He never seemed to run out, though he patted the front of his shirt in mock horror when the ranch children came running up to him. Uncle Bill never left someone's house without a covered plate of leftovers or a grocery bag heavy with garden truck or half a cake wrapped in foil which he assured the women he ate for breakfast in case he didn't live until dinnertime. He was every little girl's favorite dance partner when the cowboys played music in the barn on a Saturday night, and he treated each one as if she were a grown-up lady, spoiling her for the rowdy boys with no manners who rough-housed out in the gravel yard. He made the real grown-up ladies wish they were little girls again.

The month was July. The trail was dusty. From its place in the midday sky, the sun burned hot on the little group. The day would get cooler from here on out. Bill didn't lift his eyes to the sky nor to the granite rock around him. He studied the ground, keeping the tracks he was following on his left most of the time, becoming more and more sure of his destination as they wound amongst the boulders, through the heavy brush, and past the occasional cactus that he had witnessed, in his lifetime, creeping slowly up into the piñon and juniper forest.

As the trail began to change, to tip off of the flatter mesa toward a lip where the world gave way, the horse's ears moved and pointed. The little dog's tail fanned back and forth, but he stayed behind at the mule's heels. Bill absently fingered

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the leather button on his chap pocket, the one where he kept the pistol.

"I knew it would be you." A girl stepped from behind a boulder and into the trail. She was blonde and sturdily built, not heavy, but solid and strong. Her face was shadowed by a black felt hat, and she was dressed in Wranglers and a denim work shirt of the same brand. They were men's clothes, but no one would mistake her for a man, not even with the beat up boots and the leather belt around her waist that kept her knife in its scabbard close to her hand. Bill didn't start at her sudden appearance in the trail. He reined up and looked off the lip of the canyon to his right before he stepped down.

"Told Julia I figured you'd show up." The girl moved forward on the trail and the old man jerked his head back at the sight of her face.

"That goddamned stinking son of a bitch." The words were simple and to the point, less of a knee-jerk cursing than an honest opinion.

"I'm okay. I'll be okay." Charlie touched the corner of her closed left eye and licked the split in her lip that kept popping back open.

Bill stepped up and touched her arm gently, ducking his head, better to see under the brim of her hat.

"Yeah." He let out a big sigh. "You should come to me, girl. You should come to me a long time ago."

Charlie looked at the ground, "I know."

"Well, you didn't, and I didn't see good enough what was going on." The old man grunted and then turned back to his animals. "I'm sorry for that. But we can't go back. We'd all best pick up our chins and look forward. All of us. Now, I assume you got a camp around here somewhere?"

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He squinted at the girl over his shoulder, a grin on his face even though his eyes were wet, maybe just an old man's reaction to the sun shining brighter as it slid off its apex and down towards the west.