

Waiting for the Motor to Warm

At first light Driller stood by the wellrig, his gaze cast on the harvested cottonfields run to the land's edge. "What some men sow," he voiced without marvel to the Estacado silence. "Sow and reap. Sow and reap." The cotton stubble freshly snowdusted, white without cotton. The bloodspoor black. His cut hand dripped on his boots, these narrowfooted with polished silver buckles and embossed toe rands.

He knew not the farmer whose fields he surveyed. His name, this place, nothing to him. Driller knew only that someone, if not the farmer, was sure to visit the wellsite. Foreman, a hiredhand, someone come to drain the tanks before a hard freeze. This mess found.

Earlier he had drunk from the well, tasting the young driller Peterson whose body he had crammed into the newly sunk casing. Water flavored of denim dyed in Gujarat. Not his first taste of a deadman down a wellhole. The year before he had sipped the water of a villager fallen into a twenty-inch bore drilled for a date grower in the eastern Liwa of the Emirates. An old villager who smacked of gypsum, marl, and a woolen thwab.

Of what fell into waterwells, never a surprise passed Driller's lips. He had tasted errant riverhorses and unstrung rosary beads. Dropped candles. Fallen eyeglasses. A silk lungi stripped from a curious Bengali bent too close to whirling drillsteel. He had sipped the aspergillum sprinkles of priests and the salted taperings of a widow's tears. He had drunk the love men pour into the land, and their hate, the hate tasting better.

Driller waited for the rig motor to warm. To the east, grackles lifted from the harvested fields, hundreds of birds winged black on a pale sky. They swooped the machine, strafing with raucous sputters, their white eyes turned on him. He followed their motion with interest, having eaten grackle, spitted wing to wing and roasted over a sagewood fire.

He recalled Peterson's windburned face, the surprise come to it when he looked up from his drilling to find a newcomer arrived without apparent crossing of the Estacado, as though risen from the wellhole itself. Alarm in his blue eyes as he beheld Driller's unhinged grin, the large teeth. After a solid handshake and some genial palaver, he seemed to relax. Soon he was talking. Later he invited Driller to coffee.

Three hundred feet, Peterson reported when asked for the depth of his well. Red caprock, then sandstone. He claimed to have drilled the Ogallala before. For a young driller he knew his trade but not the deeper meaning of his labor. When asked what besides water he had come to drill in his life, what secrets he could share, Peterson looked perplexed. "Hell if I know!" he said. This exclamation his last.

Driller wiped his cut hand on his pantsleg. His blooded boots he swept on the snow. He was a big man built in the mold of a large quadruped privileged to walk upright. Eyes borrowed from nomadic tribes, their gaze sometimes sliding sideways, not quite right. His hair was permanently parted crossways from ear to ear where the scalp had scarred after a derrick tiedown whiplashed his crown to the bone, leaving his head imperfectly seamed. Strangeness enough for men to stare at, though most preferred to look away.

He watched the grackles wheel to the north, their squawking but a whisper to the land. At the wellsite his bloodtracks turned red on the daylighted snow. "Could hose

'em," he observed, speaking to where the remains of Peterson reposed. "But more will come. You know that. More and more."

Then he climbed into the cab and eased the wellrig across the stubbled rows.

La Noria y La Mujer

“There,” Retch said, pointing to the rooftin glint. Dig turned the Willys sharply off the rimland and accelerated onto the flat, lifting a gray dust no wind carried. They stopped before a mudbrick building cleared of thornscrub. The woman who watched from the doorway wore a sunfaded dress. At her feet cried a naked, red-haired boy.

“That can’t be anything good,” Dig said.

The boy’s wail loud in the desert silence.

“Damn. He’s got your hair.”

Retch nodded. “Never met her,” he replied.

Dig called to the woman. “Queremos agua y tortillas.”

She lifted her chin toward a noria encircled with a laidstone apron. Then she took the boy and retreated into the doorway.

They got down and carried the jerrycans to the well.

No stench rose from the noria—a handdug hole rounded in an imperfect circle wide enough to swing a pickax. Retch tested the ixtle tied to the lardcan bailer before he returned to the Willys to fetch braitrope from the trailer. Brindled goats followed his movements, the females with deflated udders. Retch stared beyond them at ground grazed to dust. He saw trashmounds with liquor bottles, a washline strung with strips of dried meat, a stocktrough tipped on its side. At the noria he knotted the braitrope to the bail and lowered the lardcan into the well.

From a shed kitchen the woman watched the strangers fill their cans. “Ya, ya,” she cooed to the wailing boy. “Ya se van.” She cooked the tortillas on a barrel brazier, stacking them on the linoleum-topped table. Above the table hung a machete. She pointed to the tortillas when the redheaded gringo came to pay.

Retch wrapped them in his kerchief, leaving a five-peso coin on the table.

“Gracias,” he said. The woman silent. Her face pockmarked like cholla wood. Her cheek with a ribboned scar. When they drove away, the boy still cried.

An hour up the road, Dig stopped to refill his bule from the jerrycans. He drank, then gagged. “Damn her!”

Retch touched the gourdcanteen to his lips, the water salty. What you get for not tasting it, he thought.

Dig spat. “We’re going back.”

Retch shook his head, not wanting new trouble. Two weeks earlier, in Chihuahua’s Lobero Range, west of Babanore, they had left for dead a mine watchman knocked senseless with a tapermouth spade swung by Dig. “Forget it,” he said.

“Forget she tried to thirst us?”

“Yeah. Fill in La Fortuna.” Retch knew that whatever reason the woman had for saying nothing about the water was not a reason Dig would understand.

“Fortuna?” Dig corked the bule. His jeweled watch a sunglint spectacle on the austere land. “Screw that.” He turned them around and headed to the woman’s ranch. Retch held to his hat as Dig floored the Willys.

At a trailer lot outside Modesto, they had purchased the silver Daxara. After hitching it to the Willys, they had driven to Jackson’s Prospecting Supplies in Mariposa where they had loaded shovels, prybars, fuel cans, screens, a navy barrow, a Primus

stove, a power sluicibox, and a suction dredge—all paid for out of Digger’s cash. When old man Jackson had asked if they were taking cordage, Dig said they were headed to where rope was made.

“And where’s that?” old man Jackson inquired.

“Mexico, you fool.”

They rode all night to San Ysidro where they crossed the border into Tijuana in the early morning hours. Dig gave the aduana officer fifty dollars to keep his hands out of the Daxara. They left the peninsular road at Vicente Guerrero, following a dry riverbed west into the mountains of San Pedro Mártir. In the arroyo of Santa Domingo downstream from San Antonio, they tested the equipment. Curious boys from the town came to watch. That night they drank solera brandy at the comisario’s house. The constable asked how long they were staying in Mexico. Dig pointed to Retch and answered, “Until one of us dies or marries a local, God help him.”

The constable laughed, not understanding.

A week later they took the ferry from Santa Rosalía to Heroica Guaymas, driving Highway 15 south to Ciudad Obregón. In the parkinglot of the Yuri Hotel, Dig laid a yellowed gridmap across the Willys hood. He traced a path past El Oviáchic, east of Palmarito and north of Potrero, into the cordillera cornerland of Chihuahua and the Hiak Vatwe basin. “Gonna spiral our asses,” he declared.

From the coast they drove east under a cloudless sky, the land rising before them. The first night they slept in a Madrean woodland, their stomachs full with tequila and boiled beans, the babycries of onzas haunting their dreams. The next day Dig wound the Willys through gray granite hills, climbing the backbone roads into the jagged sierra. They traversed the rocky, ravine-cut slopes of eastern Sonora, halting on the third day to sluice in the streambed of a narrow arroyo. Dig ran the suction dredge, Retch the highbanker, each taking turns to screen the black-sand concentrate while the other panned for metallic flecks. They lifted camp after a week, following the water to a new site. Days later they moved again. So they prospected, the months passing, the panning all but luckless. “Pissant whorefetti,” Dig called their sparse gleanings of gold, the pocket grams. He gave them to Retch, his gift, he said. “Payola, bud, for whatever hell comes next.”

They resupplied in the ramshackle stores of the sierran ranchos, Digger a celebrity among the locals. El Topo Loco their name for the green-eyed, baldheaded gringo. Crazy—prospecting aside. He drank with the men, slept with the women, swore at the children, and bought and bartered for chickens, jerky, tortillas, liquor, fuel, good will, and safe passage. Retch, the silent, rusty-haired partner, watched his back.

Summer arrived, the dry mountain burn. Then rain, the arroyos running. They drifted from village to village like itinerant pilgrims devoted to a godless land devoid of hallowed places. Dig drank colanche and smoky-flavored lechuguilla sold in knotted plastic bags. In Urique he fistfought two Rarámuris drunk on tesgüino, disputing their claim that God drank cornbeer. They tussled and rolled in the street, two on one, Dig kicking them into submission. He emptied their liquor jugs in the dirt. Three weeks later in Tomochic, he was detained overnight by the Policía Rural after assaulting a tianguis trader for the sale of overpriced cigarettes.

Then came the incident in the Lobero Range.

They had driven to an abandoned silver mine west of Babanore, Dig taking the Willys over a sleeper road blasted for ore cars. At the mine they found timber buildings collapsed in dusty heaps of planks and splintered shingles. Railtrack, wheels, and the remains of defunct machines lay strewn like the artifacts of some ancient and precociously mechanical tribe. A brooding, dayheated silence hung about the place. Near the tunnel entrance stood a shanty built of incongruous gleanings—wood, tin, and plastic fitted together—a dwelling sprung of perverse promises known but to the builder. Dusty chickens pecked in the doorway.

The old man who emerged wore oversize coveralls and walked with a withered leg. His hair white, his chiseled face sunstarved. He carried a tapermouth spade over his shoulder. “Prohibido el paso, señores,” he advised, blinking in the brightness.

Dig sipped from a wickerworked demijohn filled with silver sotol. “Ya pasamos,” he replied.

The old man stood beside the Willys. He pointed to a faded logo on his coveralls. “Esta es propiedad de la Compañía Minas Alvarado de Parral.”

Dig sipped. “Go to hell, you old fart.”

“Soy el velador,” said the watchman. He held up the shovel, his warrant.

Retch gazed at the rusted remains of machinery once comprising a prosperous mining concern. That its stewardship be left to an old man with a spade seemed absurdly appropriate.

Dig restarted the Willys. “Let’s see how far we can drive in.”

The watchman stepped in front of the Willys. Dig revved the engine. “He’ll move,” he said before he popped the clutch, the vehicle lurching forward, the old man not moving. He held to his spade as the Willys knocked him from sight.

A woman screamed. Dig braked. “The bastard didn’t move!”

Retch looked to the shanty. The woman gray-haired, stooped. Her hands covered her face. She cried out again, “¡Lo mataste!”

“Damn!” said Dig, reversing the Willys. They saw the old man get to his feet. He held to the tapermouth shovel. “¡Malditos!” he wheezed. He careened toward them on his withered leg. He swung the spade, aiming for Dig, hitting the windshield instead. A starburst of cracks effloresced the glass.

“Sonofabitch!” Dig yelled. “You goddamn sonofabitch!” He jumped down and wrestled the shovel from the watchman’s grasp, the old man not letting go until Dig kicked him in the groin.

The watchman grabbed himself, breath lost in a gurgled wheeze. Dig raised the spade and struck his head with the flat of the blade, knocking him to the ground.

The old woman shrieked from the shanty. The watchman quivered on his side, hands scratching the dirt. Then he lay motionless. Blood filled his ear and ran down his face, dripping off his chin.

Retch stared, mouth open. A dog barked somewhere, warning too late of strangers. When he closed his mouth, he smelled something cooking.

“We’re out of here,” Dig said, climbing into the Willys.

As they drove away, Retch looked back. The old woman shuffled toward the watchman, followed by the dog. Chickens pecked at the blood-darkened dirt.

“Didn’t kill him. Only knocked him into next week.”

“Looked bad enough,” Retch said.

“Look at this goddamn glass.” Dig pointed to the broken windshield, ringed and rayed like his shattered mind. He lifted the demijohn and drank.

Retch stared ahead, thinking he would have to leave Digger. The time fast approaching.

They rode to Babanore where they hitched the Daxara. That night they left the Lobero Range, crossing the Chihuahuan border into Sonora and the Madrean rimland therein.