

The Desert Has A Beauty All Its Own

By Linda D. Brewer

Red kings and black queens bounced across the road in front of the bus. Roger cried, "Look out!" but it was only a hallucination and the driver didn't seem to have heard him. The only other man on the SunTran, a skinny, toothless geezer whose smell hung like a makeshift bridge across the aisle, gazed at him as if he were a source of entertainment. The old guy wore scuffed cut-rate hiking boots, the same brand that had got Roger fired in San Diego when he told a customer the truth-- that they were only good for wearing to another store to buy better boots.

The key lesson he'd learned from that was that you had to represent a quality product. If you didn't value what you sold, customers wouldn't either.

His stomach growled. He touched the side pocket of his backpack where he kept his mirror, compass, a twenty dollar bill and a granola bar. The old man grinned and watched. Roger decided there was no way he was going to eat his granola bar with this old coot watching every bite. He shifted in his seat and looked out the window.

Two minutes later they passed the car dealership where he'd planned to turn in an application, and he was shocked to see that it had gone out of business. He took in a breath of warm damp air and tried to relax. The last job he'd had was driving a cab in Los Angeles. He'd say he'd driven Kevin Costner one night. His father was a pushover for celebrity names. Kevin Costner might soften the blow until he had a chance to pitch his new idea.

The old guy with the cheap boots cocked his head and said, "Where you coming from, buddy?"

Roger said. "No comment."

The old guy lifted his head like a dog sniffing danger. He said, "That's the exact opposite of the right answer." He pulled himself up and limped down the aisle and spoke to the driver. The driver found Roger in his rearview mirror and raised his eyebrows. Roger lifted his hands and shrugged. The driver kept driving. The old man took the seat behind the driver and glared down the aisle at Roger. "Soon as I get off the bus I'm calling Homeland Security," he yelled.

"Tell them "hi" from me," Roger said.

When the bus reached Main Street he pulled the cord and got off at the corner. A hot wind was blowing and he remembered that in Tucson a breeze could be hotter than still air. He cut across a vacant lot that had had a garage on it three years ago. He remembered cream-colored brick with faded blue trim, sounds of work coming from inside. Romero's, it had been. Now there was nothing but an acre of dust with a few dry weeds around the edges, not even a stray tire left behind. A cracked plywood sign in the corner announced, "Prime Lot for Sale." Some joker had scratched out the "P" and written in a "C."

He walked past the playground where patches of grass covered the ground like moth-eaten rugs. A group of homeless men sat around the picnic table jabbering at each other in their own homeless language. The sun was slipping down. A puffy orange cloud hung above the Tucson Mountains, what his dad called a "cosmorama." Roger crossed the railroad tracks and there was his old

school, Homer Davis Elementary, handy to both the railroad tracks and the freeway, a convenient location to run away from. He turned right onto Fragua Street, all three blocks of it, and there was his parents' house.

It sat behind a high stucco wall with a curlicued wrought iron gate in the middle of it. As a kid he'd been proud when his dad installed the gate, the longest stretch of wrought iron in the neighborhood, a gate worthy of a mansion. Now he saw that the wall and gate disguised a modest sixty-year-old brick ranch house set on a dusty lot with a ramada but no garage for the old station wagon, a sprawling pomegranate bush in front, a tiny guest house in back. It occurred to him that he and his sister would have been better off if his father had sold the house and bought a condo when his mother died, put the profits in the bank, but he knew his father would never give up the compound, as he called it, as if they were some kind of presidential family.

He'd have to share a bathroom one more time. A sort of prayer came into his head. Please, let him go easy on me tonight. Tomorrow I'll get up and look for a job. Tonight I'm too tired to fight back.

A couple stood on the sidewalk in front of the gate, two people casting one shifting shadow. A rooster crowed nearby in spite of the growing darkness. Roger suddenly wondered if his father had moved without letting him know. He walked up to the couple and said, "Do the Blakeney's still live here?"

The woman turned and put her hands up to her face like a parody of "The Scream." He barely recognized her, but he knew it must be his sister. She had changed in the last few years into a slender young woman who looked good in a pair of jeans and a tank top. Her hair, which had been bleached blonde, was now its natural dark brown and hung down her back. Her eyes were the same, narrow and brown, and her voice, when she said, "Oh my God, it's my brother."

She ran to Roger and hugged him, backpack and all. "Oh, God, Rogie, I was afraid you were dead. Where have you been? Is this all you have, just this knapsack? Where's all your stuff? Where's your Jeep?" Her voice took on a wailing tone, as if she were standing over his grave reciting all the things he had lost. The man she had been talking to drifted away down the sidewalk.

Roger stepped out of her embrace. "I see you gave up on being a blonde."

"Viva la raza," Mindi said. "Mom would be proud." She looked him over. "You better come inside. We need to get you cleaned up."

Roger pulled the heavy gate open. "Have you eaten? Is Angel's still open? Tell Dad I'm buying."

Mindi stopped on the front step. "Nice of you to offer. Dad died a year ago. I had no idea how to get hold of you."

It was gratitude, not grief, that made his legs shaky. He stumbled going into the house and Mindi said, "I'm sorry you're just now finding out," and he said, "I am, too."

There was a new red leather couch in the living room and a fancy rug on the floor, an intricate pattern of dark colors with spots of red, like a strange garden you could step into. He leaned over and pressed his finger into the wool.

"What is it?" Mindi asked.

“Nothing. I’m tired.”

She gave him an appraising look. “Did you do anything to have flashbacks about? Did you join the Army or anything?”

He shook his head. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

A flash of disappointment crossed her face and he saw she wished he had joined the Army, so she could brag to her friends about his adventures, even his trauma. Mindi said, “I get a discount from the rug store where I work. It’s beautiful, isn’t it? It’s one of the authentic ones, really good quality. I’m learning how to tell when something’s really worth having.”

The rug might have been new, but the kitchen was the same old gas stove and fridge, the green-painted concrete floor, the grubby tiles on the wall behind the sink. The countertop was littered with mail. He imagined his sister didn’t spend any more time in the kitchen than she had to. He opened the refrigerator and saw eggs in a bowl, olive oil, a package of whole-wheat tortillas, and an assortment of yogurts. Before Mindi could protest he opened the freezer compartment but there wasn’t anything in it but diet frozen dinners. His sister had always been one for secret stashes—he’d expected to find chocolate ice cream. He took a pan down from the rack, washed his hands in the sink and waved Mindi away when she tried to take over.

“This is good. Where did you learn to cook?” Mindi asked him when they were seated at the table. She’d made a fuss about portion size, but she took the plate he gave her.

“I worked in a restaurant for a while.” No need to tell her the details of his stint in the cafe. He finished his food and took a bite of hers. She slapped at his hand, but then pushed her plate toward him just as she had when they were kids in the school cafeteria.

He said, “So how did he die? Heart attack?” He could see his father in a rage about something on TV, suddenly keeling over in the middle of reaching for the remote.

“He got struck by lightning on Mt. Wrightson.”

He dropped his tortilla. “What the hell?”

“He started hiking, after Mom died and you took off. He had a lady friend he went with sometimes, Anita, but she dropped out of the picture.”

“Once she got to know him,” Roger said.

Mindi shook her head. “I didn’t like her anyway. He went up Mt. Wrightson almost every weekend once he stopped drinking. I guess he was up there in a storm and didn’t turn around in time.”

“So he went out in a blaze of glory,” Roger said. “He stopped drinking?”

“There was an article in the paper about him, how he beat alcohol by taking up hiking. He would never go to AA. He couldn’t stand the other people there, he thought they were losers—but I knew they wouldn’t put that in the article.”

“Anybody come to the funeral?”

“Guys from the door factory, even guys who’d worked with him years ago. I put his ashes in the guest house. I moved a bunch of things in there after he died.” Her face took on a defensive expression. “You weren’t here, so I did what I thought was right.”

He nodded. “Not a problem.” Bitterness rose in his throat. “I just wish he would have gone first, and let Mom live a couple of years in peace.”

“I wish they both could have lived more happily together,” Mindi said in a prim voice. “I never hated him the way you did.”

Roger pushed his plate aside and drank the rest of his ice water. “So what about the will? Did he have anything in the bank?”

Mindi said, “I hope you know how disgusting that sounds.”

“Just being honest.”

“You need to get a job. We don’t get anything until we turn thirty. That’s three more years for me, five for you.”

“Jesus Christ. That’s him, isn’t it? What a joker, the son-of-a-bitch. He probably only had a couple of thousand dollars anyway. Making us wait like some aristocratic heirs.”

Mindi said, “I’ve been over all this already a million times with the lawyer. Let’s talk about something else. How about, why are you here all of a sudden?”

“Going to get a job selling cars and make a lot of money,” he said, something he couldn’t have done an hour earlier.

She shook her head. “I hope, Rogie, I really do.”

He went to the bathroom and looked in on his old room. It now contained a gym quality stair climber and an assortment of mats and dumbbells. One wall was covered with mirrored tiles. There was a poster illustrating yoga poses.

Mindi said, “It’s more convenient than a gym.”

He said, “I just need somewhere to sleep.”

“You can use the guest house, but don’t go to bed yet. It’s only seven-thirty. Watch a movie with me like old times, please? I’ll make popcorn.” She popped a bag of low-fat popcorn and put a DVD in the player, Audrey Hepburn in “Roman Holiday.” Roger sat down on the couch and leaned his head against the cool leather. No one in the world had a neck like Audrey Hepburn’s. She was like a swan gliding over deep water that mirrored her beauty.

Mindi patted his arm until he woke up. “Can you make it to the guest house?”

He followed her outside and across the brick courtyard to the guest house. It was a fifteen by twenty foot structure his father had built one Lent when he’d given up drinking “forever.” The little house was painted blue inside and out with a red concrete floor and a small bathroom tacked onto one corner. There was an electric heater and a mini-fridge and microwave and a swamp cooler on the roof. A

double bed sat diagonally in the middle of the room, surrounded by boxes and plastic bags. Roger tried to remember whether any guests had ever stayed there. Mostly he remembered his father stomping off to the guest house in a fury, then sitting there waiting for someone to come and beg him to rejoin the family. Mindi lifted an old pair of skis off the bed and set them on the floor. "I should donate some of this stuff to Goodwill."

"Where are the ashes?" he asked.

"Here. Gilbert made it for me." She lifted a pile of golf sweaters and pointed to a red wooden box embellished with a yellow and green folkloric design. "Do you want to hold it?"

"Nope," he said.

"It's heavier than you would think," Mindi said.

"That makes sense," Roger said, because that was his father's ego in there, dense as a dead star.

Mindi left and he began to move things off the bed. Nothing in the room was anything to run to Antiques Roadshow with. His father's senior class picture was propped against the wall, his younger self with wavy blonde hair and a self-satisfied smirk. There was a box of his father's old college textbooks, forty years out of date. A large carton was marked, "Shoes." Another was marked, "Good suits." There was a fake antique mirror on the wall beside the door. The pillow on the bed smelled like his father's after shave. Roger threw the pillow on the floor, took off his clothes, and lay down.

The dreams that had been crowding inside his head for the past forty-eight hours took over the minute he closed his eyes.

He woke in the dark to the sound of a rooster crowing. He didn't know where he was for a minute. Then a light came on in the backyard next door and he remembered. Tucson again. He'd been in the middle of a dream about mountain climbing. It was a bad dream, but he knew he wouldn't have been aware of it if the rooster hadn't waked him up.

The next morning he said, "Who owns the stupid rooster?"

Mindi said, "Gilbert Guzman still lives there. He has chickens. That's where our omelet came from last night." She went to the counter and got him a cup of coffee. She was already dressed in a blue suit with dark blue high heels, with her hair piled on top of her head. Her shoes made a businesslike clapping sound as she walked back and forth on the concrete floor. She set the cup on the kitchen table in front of him and said, "So, are you looking for that job today?"

Roger took a sip of coffee and set the cup down, trying to convey calm instead of the anger he felt. "Give me time to scope things out."

Mindi nodded. "Time to sit around, you mean. Come to work with me. Mr. Mo is always looking for new people. You can scope things out while you're earning some money. They always say to look for a new job while you've still got the old one."

The rooster crowed in the yard next door. Roger got up and went to the window and looked out at Gilbert Guzman's fence. A row of spiky ocotillos had grown up through the wire. He said, "Gilbert still work in the door factory?"

“He quit a couple of years ago to do his wood-working full time.”

Roger said, “Good luck with that.”

Mindi said, “His furniture is becoming well-known. He’s always busy. There was even a couple from Canada this past June. They had a whole bedroom set shipped up there, Vancouver, British Columbia. He’s been in magazines.” She narrowed her eyes. “He always wants to know what you’re doing. I joke that you ran off to be an actor in Hollywood. You can compare notes next time you see him.”

His sister’s narrow dark gaze had always made him nervous. He sighed. “Where is this rug place?”

Mindi smiled. “It’s in this funky old house on Ursalina Street. I love it. It’s like working in an art gallery, except it’s rugs.” She put her coffee cup in the sink. “You can wear some of Dad’s old clothes.”

“I have my own clothes,” he said.

Back in the guest house he dug in his backpack and found his khaki pants and white shirt, the hopeful yellow tie. The shirt hung on him a little and he had to knot the belt to disguise the fact that the pants were an inch too big around now. He told himself that this was an opportunity to get in some sales practice. He said, “You can do this,” to his reflection in the mirror. A hot breeze blew in the window carrying with it the noise of Guzman’s farmyard. In this neighborhood people kept animals, grew plants, and nobody paid much attention to what kind or how many. His parents had briefly owned a potbellied pig when he was a kid. After the first accident in the house they’d got rid of it in spite of his pleading.

The rooster crowed again. He caught a glimpse of it through the thorny screen of ocotillo. Its feathers were white with dark speckles as if it had been caught in a black rain. Its wattle and comb were blood red. Less than twenty-four hours’ proximity and he already resented its round the clock need for attention.

His sister stuck her head around the doorway. “Open the gate for me and I’ll let you drive.”

The rooster crowed. Roger shut the window. He went across the courtyard and pulled the gate open. Mindi eased the station wagon out onto the street and he shut the gate. She got out and went around, leaving the driver’s side door open for him. The car’s interior was already warm and he sank back into the seat, tired from his sleepless night. He said, “You know I had a long bus ride here. Maybe it would be better if I took the day off, just for today.”

Mindi said, “Right,” in a tone of voice that meant, “Wrong.” She said, “The rooster’s name is Frank. Gilbert named him after Dad. Dad thought it was funny, but he was proud, too. You know how he was, he loved recognition.” She said, “Go east on Speedway. I’ll tell you where to turn. I don’t think he’ll put you on the sales floor right away, but you never know. There’s a price on the rugs, but Mr. Mo doesn’t always abide by it. It’s just the way they do business in his country. Watch him and you’ll see.”

“Your boss not American?” Roger asked.

“He’s from the Mediterranean region. It’s where Western civilization came from, basically.”

“He lives in America now. He should skip the bartering and whatever,” he said. He wondered if his sister was having an affair with the man.

“He’s a very successful gentleman. He’s going to give me a raise when I finish my bookkeeping class. And yes, he’s married. His wife works in a laboratory. Their daughter’s going to college next month. She reminds me of myself at that age, kind of shy.”

Roger laughed at that, but in his mind he was already seeing himself selling expensive rugs to people who lived in the Foothills. He imagined himself driving out into the desert and selling a rug to some guy who lived in a tent who didn’t even need a rug. He wondered if he would get a company car.

The rug store was in a converted washed brick house with a picture window full of rugs, rolled up and unrolled. There was a yellow banner across the window that said, “Prices slashed this week only!”

Mindi said, “I’m trying to get him to take that sign down.” An SUV full of teenage girls was parked in front of the shop. Mindi said, “That’s his daughter. He lets her practice driving him to the store and then her friends pick her up for her summer classes. He won’t let her drive by herself. It’s a Mediterranean thing.”

Mr. Mo, the “Mediterranean,” was a robust fifty-something man with graying black hair and black eyebrows over his big brown eyes. He had a substantial nose, but Roger could see that a woman like Mindi would find him attractive. He shook Roger’s hand and said, “Any brother of Mindi’s must be a good worker. We’ll start you off in the annex.” He escorted Roger out the back door of the store to an old adobe building which turned out to be filled with stacks of rugs four feet high. It smelled of adobe dust and straw and wool, with a hint of pesticide. In the sales room in the main building where Mindi worked, the rugs hung on racks like works of art and the floor was cool gray tiles. Here, the rugs were stock to be shifted in a building which was already heating up in the morning sun.

“No drugs of any kind. Always courtesy to the customer. Always the most polite behavior,” Mr. Mo said. He shook hands again so hard that his ring dug into Roger’s hand. “I was a teacher, fifteen years. I know what it means to start over.” He wagged a finger. “No flip-flops.” He beckoned to a pair of hard-bitten-looking older men working over a stack of rugs and said, “You guys are the teachers. You set him on the straight path.” He clapped Roger a little too hard on the shoulder and walked to a door at the far end of the room. He went through it and shut it behind him.

The men were looking him over. “Roger,” Roger said. “That’s my name, not code for anything.”

The shorter, older man said. “Lance. That’s my name, not my weapon of choice.” He had a white cartoony moustache. He wore denim shorts and a T-shirt and had a red bandana tied around his head. A thin white ponytail trickled out the back.

“A.Z., said the heavier, younger man. “My mom just liked the name.” He had a plump, reddish face and a green bandana. He said, “I hate to tell you this, but your clothes are going to get dirty.”

The job took him ten minutes to learn, but Lance lectured him as if it were rocket science. “Turn and sort the rugs, sweep out the dirt, put like with like, keep the yard clean, check for insects, sort and stack the new shipments, do whatever else Mr. Mo tells you. Keep an eye out for customers. If they don’t see what they want in the show room, sometimes they wander over here and start looking, hoping

to find something different," Lance said.

"Or something extra-valuable that we dumb clucks don't realize is here," A.Z. said. His blue T-shirt was already dark with sweat. He and Lance looked as if they belonged right where they were, doing what they were doing.

Roger held out for half an hour. Then he took off his tie and rolled up his shirt sleeves as high as they would go. His arms were brown from the time he'd spent outdoors, but Lance and A.Z. had thicker muscles. He wished he had something to tie around his head to soak up the sweat. He said, "I've been out of town for a while. I have to get used to Tucson again."

Lance said, "The desert has a beauty all its own. You don't need drugs to enjoy it."

Roger grabbed the corner of a rug and turned it over to see what lay underneath. More rugs, the same complicated multicolored designs but each one different. He shut his eyes and the designs were still there behind his eyelids. He wondered what he would see when he'd been working here as long as Lance and A.Z. When he opened his eyes, Lance was looking at him. "You been to a meeting this week?"

"What meeting?"

"AA. CA. NA. Beer nuts and pretzels A. Whatever you need."

"I'm not addicted to anything," Roger said.

Lance smiled. "We've all said that, partner, and lived to regret it." His eyes shone, the gray backlit by a fanatic red flame.

A.Z. said, "You wouldn't be working with us in this sweat box if you wasn't addicted to some kind of shit."

"If you mean have I hit bottom, then yes. This represents the bottom for me." Roger held out his hands, indicating the stuffy room, the swirling dust motes, the men themselves. "I expect to be in the showroom in about two weeks."

"Well, buddy, I expect I'll get there before you do," Lance said. "I told the boss I'd like to try my hand at it, and I've got about six years more seniority than you do." The flame flared in his eyes. "I think I could bargain about as well as Mr. Mo at this point."

"He bargains because he's rich. It's just a game to him," Roger said. "It's not the American way. When my dad ran the door factory he sold products for what they were worth. He didn't cut corners and he expected to be paid for the work he did."

"Easy does it," A.Z. said. They worked in silence for a while, not looking at each other. Roger couldn't believe a man like Lance could see himself in sales. The man looked as if he'd just come in from holding up a convenience store, and A.Z. looked about the same, except he would have hung around eating the hot dogs until the cops showed up.

Midway through the morning a middle-aged couple wandered in to look through the stacked rugs. Roger pulled the rugs partway back so they could see one pattern after another. The wife kept

asking her husband if he liked this or that pattern, and each time he said, "Whatever you want." Finally she asked to see a rug halfway down the stack. Roger shifted rugs until the one she wanted came into view. She put her fingers to her chin and thought a minute while he stood there sweating. He said, "It's a great rug. Very authentically made." She said, "You know, I think I liked the first one better? The one that was on top?" Roger put the rugs back in order and the woman pointed to the one she wanted. Roger carried the rug to the showroom. Mindi sat at her desk looking cool and professional. She didn't acknowledge him but she turned her brightest smile on the couple.

Lance was raking the yard when he came back.

Roger said, "I still think she should have taken the other one."

Lance shrugged. "She made a good choice, man. That's the rug I would have bought if I had the money. That's what I would have told her." They broke for lunch and he followed Lance and A.Z. down the block to a burrito truck. They bought their lunches and walked back to the shop in the humid heat. Storm clouds were popping up white and pillowy all around the horizon. They dragged some folding chairs to a spot under the laboring swamp cooler and sat, chomping their food like livestock in a strange and colorful pen. While they ate, Lance and A.Z. lectured him on wool and weaves, threads and dyes, and how children in far-flung countries had stunted their growth weaving these rugs. "Some of these rugs are forty, fifty years old, so the kids that wove them are bent-over men and women now, if they're even still alive," Lance said.

"Their grandkids are still doing it," A.Z. said. "I saw a special on TV."

"Goes to show why they're so valuable, so much suffering goes into making them," Lance said. He and A.Z. stared at the stacks of rugs a minute, as if paying their respects to all those bent-over weavers. A truck pulled in off the street and stopped in front of the open door. Lance stuffed his wrappers into his paper bag and said, "Delivery's here. Time to unload."

It was like working in a steam room. Lance and A.Z. had brought plastic gallon jugs of water. A.Z. offered to share, but Roger said, "Is there a drinking fountain around here?"

Lance said, "There's a sink in the spare room. You can drink out of that. Don't hang around in there. Mr. Mo doesn't like it."

Roger went to the door at the far end of the room and opened it. There was a sink and some shelves and a window, a couple of small rugs rolled up on the shelves, and not much else. He bent and soaked his head under the faucet and drank until his stomach felt heavy with the weight of the water. Then he went back and worked on the rugs. Another couple came in and picked through rugs for nearly an hour, then walked away without buying. He wanted to run after them and wring their necks.

At five o'clock Mr. Mo appeared in the doorway. "How did things go today?" he asked.

Lance said, "Went okay. Roger's getting into it."

Roger nodded. He could see someone standing outside behind Mr. Mo. She moved and Roger saw a girl with long slim legs in a short skirt, a small waist, long black hair, big eyes, flawless skin, a gazelle of a girl.

Mo said, "We are going to buy a new computer for school, so wish me good luck. See you all tomorrow. Good work, everybody!" He waved at them and the girl behind him smiled. It seemed to Roger that she was mocking her father's phony geniality. He hoped so.

When they had gone he said, "Who was that?"

"That was none of your business," Lance said.

"Mo's kid," A.Z. said. "Nizam. She's going to be a doctor someday."

Roger said, "I'd like her to examine me."

Lance jabbed him in the shoulder. "Put your eyes back in your head. You don't have what it takes, tell you that right now."

"How do you know what I do and don't have?"

A.Z. said, "You're flipping rugs in a sweat box with a couple of ex-cons, man. You're not exactly the royal family. You have to put a lot on the table to get some of that. A nice car, money in the bank, a good job. Prestige. That special something."

Mindi stuck her head through the back door. "I have to work late. Go home and take a shower and pick me up at 6:30." She tossed him the keys without stepping through the door.

"You must stink, Lance," A.Z. said, and Lance said, "It's not me, bro. It's the new dude. He's not used to heavy lifting." They laughed.

The station wagon was twenty years old, with a hundred and eighty thousand miles on it. The tires were new, but the paint was faded in a wavy pattern across the hood. It smelled of peppermint and he finally figured out that the smell came from a plastic penguin his sister had stuck to the dashboard. His hand hovered over the penguin, ready to rip it off and toss it out the window, but he stopped himself. Just drive it, he told himself. You'll have a better car next year, and an even better one the year after that.

The first week went the same as the first day, except that he wore the lightest clothes he had and brought enough water to last him through the day. He caught glimpses of Nizam every afternoon. A bunch of her girlfriends would drop her off at the shop around five, and she would wait in the showroom or the office for her father to finish. They would go to the white Escalade parked behind the store and Nizam would settle herself in the driver's seat with such a serious expression on her beautiful face that Roger wanted to take her picture. She would ease the car out onto the street, looking both ways a hundred times, while her father talked and gestured, flooding her with too much advice, Roger could tell. On Friday, waiting for Mindi to leave, he saw Nizam sitting on a sheepskin pillow in the middle of a rug, tapping on her phone. Anybody seeing here there would want to buy the rug on the spot, he thought.

He made a point of waving whenever he saw her, and after the first time she waved back. When this happened it was the best part of his day, or any day in his life, he thought. It almost made the job bearable, having somebody like that in the vicinity. The job wasn't bearable because he was so tired, because Gilbert Guzman's rooster kept him awake. It didn't crow every night, which almost made it worse, because he lay awake waiting for it, urging it to go ahead and get it over with, and on nights

when he decided to relax it started in around eleven o'clock. One morning driving to work he turned down the wrong street, a one-way, and Mindi screamed at him. Her voice had the same strident tone as the rooster's. He said, "I'm going to tell Gilbert to get rid of that piece of shit."

Mindi said, "You leave Gilbert alone."

He said, "Why? Are you involved with him?" He remembered the man he'd glimpsed the evening he'd arrived. "Are you an item?"

"I don't want to talk about it right now," she said. "We have been close, yes. That's all I'm going to say."

Ever since he'd arrived the monsoon clouds had puffed up every afternoon, and then evaporated without raining. That night a storm exploded right over the neighborhood. The windows in the guest house rattled, and lightning flashed around the horizon over and over like a neon sign. The rooster, for once, kept quiet. Roger imagined the thing huddled in its little shed, wet and unhappy and the thought made him smile.

The next morning the courtyard at work was a mess of pink-brown mud. Dirty water had crept under the door to the rug room and the nearest stack of rugs was wet along the bottom. He and Lance spent all morning unstacking rugs, looking for the ones that had been damaged. A.Z. jerrybuilt some racks out of two by fours and leaned them against the far wall. "He should fix the door," Roger said, and Lance for once didn't argue.

Mo came in just as Roger was talking about the time a man had died in his cab without paying. Mo said, "I'm hearing too much talking back here. You need to get this place clean." He lifted the edge of a rug and pointed to a damp spot. Lance jumped to peel the rug loose and spread it on a rack. Mo pulled his cell phone from his pocket and began to argue with someone in a what sounded to Roger like Arabic.

When he left, Roger said, "He's in a foul mood."

Lance said, "He's just hungry."

"Low blood sugar," A.Z. said. "My mother, she's gets that. I'm taking her to her appointment this afternoon."

Lance cut him off. "Mo's not diabetic. He's just hungry. It's that fasting thing they do, the Moslems."

"What the hell?" Roger said. He imagined pointed towers and wailing voices, and a crowd of men in long shirts waving rifles.

"They don't eat or drink for a month," Lance said. "I knew a guy in Florence who did it every year, for the two years I was there. At night he would beg for candy. They get to eat at night, to keep up their strength."

"I thought he was from Greece or someplace," Roger said. "I didn't know he was a Moslem. How can you work for him?"

"He gave me a chance," A.Z. said. "He made me what I am today."

Roger laughed.

"I'm not joking," A.Z. said. "It's not much but it's better than who I was."

A.Z. left at three o'clock to take his mother to the doctor. Lance went into the yard to deal with a mesquite tree that had blown down in the storm. Roger was alone, sweating in the humidity, when a man and woman walked in through the back door. They were holding hands, grinning like kids, though they were in their fifties. "We just need a small rug," the man said.

"Mostly red. Some pattern is okay," the woman said. "Four by six. Nothing too expensive."

"Our rugs are all quality products," Roger said. Lance was enmeshed in tree limbs, hacking at them with a small axe. Roger willed him to stay out there. He patted the top of the nearest stack. "These are handmade to last a lifetime. Where were you thinking of putting it?"

"It's for the entryway," the woman said. "Just something to catch the dust when people come in."

"We're not going to be doing it on the Oriental, if that's what you're thinking," the man said, and the woman giggled and slapped his arm. The man was gray-haired and paunchy, in low-slung khaki shorts and a T-shirt with a picture of a javelina on it. The woman was short and plump, in a skort that showed too much of her veiny legs. They looked at a few rugs, Roger sweating as he manhandled the woolen weight of them.

"These are all so big. Don't you carry remnants?" the woman said. Roger hated her for thinking this was a discount warehouse. He hated the man for putting up with her. But then he thought about opportunities he'd messed up, littering his path all the way back to Tucson. He said, "I might have something." He made his way through the stacks to the small room on the east side of the building. It was even hotter in there than it was in the main room. The temptation to soak his head under the faucet was strong, but he ignored it. There was only one rug left on the shelves. He tucked it under his arm and brought it to the couple. He flung it open and they all looked at it together. It wasn't as fancy as some of the bigger ones, but it was fancy enough for people to wipe their shoes on.

"This one is small, it's got a lot of red in it, and it's affordable," he said. "What more could you wish for?"

"How much?" the man asked.

"A hundred," Roger said. The rug didn't have a price on it. He'd clear that up with Mindi later.

"Thirty-five," the man said.

Roger shook his head. "One hundred dollars, tax included. Cash or check."

"I thought you guys liked to bargain," the man said, but he took out his wallet and handed over five twenties. Roger rolled the rug up and tied it with twine from the ball on the work table. The couple left, and he put the money in his pocket. Lance came in a minute later. He was sweaty and muddy and scratched up and Roger thought, that's what you get.

"How's it goin' in here, bro?" Lance asked. "Whatcha up to?"

“Sales,” Roger said. “I sold a rug. Flying carpets are me.”

“You should have let one of the rest of us handle that,” Lance said.

“Nobody else was here. They would have walked away if I hadn’t talked to them.”

Lance frowned. “One day at a time, bro.” The way he kept saying “bro” irritated Roger. He knew Lance envied him and didn’t have the guts to say it.

Mindi was staring at an e-mail on her monitor when Roger came into the showroom. He put the money on her desk and said, “Put me on the board.”

“I wish you wouldn’t come in here when you’re all dirty and sweaty.” Her eyes flicked to the money. “Where’d this come from?”

“I sold a rug.”

No hand clapping from her, either. She stared at the bills a minute, then put them into a drawer and locked it.

“You don’t do that, Rogie,” she said. “You haven’t been trained.”

“You don’t know what-all I can do.”

She shook her head. “Just do your assigned job. I’ll figure out a way to make this right.”

“Whose side are you on?” he asked.

Mindi flushed. “Everybody’s. Yours, Mo’s, Nizam’s, Gilbert’s, mine. That’s my problem. I work so hard to keep everybody happy except me.” She pulled a Kleenex out of the box on her desk and blew her nose and he left her to have hysterics by herself.

That night he figured out why the rooster crowed. It crowed because the motion sensor went on over Gilbert’s back door, when Mindi sneaked over to meet him and complain about her brother. He felt like a fool for not putting it all together before. The next morning she said, “Did you sleep okay?” and he said, “No thanks to you.” He knew he was right when she couldn’t meet his gaze.

Mo came in late the following morning. He looked haggard, as if he, too, hadn’t slept well. He went straight to the little store room and closed the door behind him. A moment later he came out scowling.

“Where’s my sajada? Where is my rug?” he asked. He pointed to the room. Lance went to the doorway and peered inside. “It was there before,” he said.

A.Z. shrugged. “I never saw it.”

Roger said, “I sold it.”

“Why?” To what person?” Mo stepped a little too close. Roger could smell his breath and it didn’t smell good.

“A couple. They paid cash. I gave my sister the money, every cent of it. I got a hundred dollars.”

Mr. Mo left the building. Five minutes later Mindi called Roger on the intercom and told him to come to the showroom. Walking across the courtyard he felt the heat sear his skin and knew he should never have come back to Tucson.

Mr. Mo was standing by Mindi's desk. Mindi looked as upset as he did.

"I'm sorry, my friend, but I need you to go," Mr. Mo said. "Mindi is witness to what I am saying." His voice was low and tense, like a bomb in an insulated package.

"I made money for you," Roger said. "It wasn't new. It probably wouldn't have sold otherwise."

"It was not for sale. It was mine only."

"I'll pay you back," Roger said.

"No, my friend, you don't understand. It was not for sale."

"It was his own personal prayer rug," Mindi said. Mr. Mo lifted his hand to shush her.

"You didn't tell me," Roger said. "You should have put a sign on it, Goddammit. This isn't fair."

"I don't think this is the job for you," Mr. Mo said. He took an envelope from his jacket pocket and Roger had time to note that he was wearing a jacket because he worked in an air-conditioned showroom. Mr. Mo handed him the envelope. "It's two weeks' pay. I hope you find something more suited to you."

He considered tearing the envelope up, but his hands wouldn't do it. He stuffed it in his pants pocket and left. His head was ringing with all the things he wanted to say, but he kept quiet and walked tall out the door.

He pulled the car up to the curb outside the house without any awareness of steering or applying the brakes. All the way he had been arguing with Mr. Mo in his head, and the feeling had been so real he was surprised to find himself alone in the car. He got out to open the gate and the rooster crowed. Roger looked at his watch. It was only four o'clock. He walked over to the wire gate that led to Gilbert Guzman's side yard. The rooster was standing on top of its little house like a king surveying his kingdom. Its four chicken wives scratched in the dust under a mesquite tree. The rooster gave Roger a wild-eyed look and flapped its wings in a menacing manner. It was clear that of the two of them, the rooster thought he was on top. The situation had become intolerable.

He went along the side of Guzman's house to the back yard. The chicken wives scattered to the rear of the yard and pecked at the ground in a nervous, automatic fashion.

The rooster flapped its wings and crowed. Its dangling comb and crazy eyes turned Roger's stomach. He swiped at it just to scare it. Anyone watching would see that he was just playing around, no weapons up his sleeve.

The rooster had weapons galore, it turned out. A beak, to stab the back of his hand. Clawed feet, to rip a furrow down his bare leg. Wings, to flap in his face, crazy eyes to watch him bleed. Roger understood that the universe was playing a prank on him and the rooster was its instrument. He grabbed the animal and stuck it under his left arm like a football. The beak stabbed him again. Pressing it

hard against his side, he grabbed its neck with his right hand, fighting its unexpected muscularity. He let go with his arm and twirled the rooster around hard, once, twice, and again. After the second twirl it stopped trying to stab him, though the legs kept kicking. He twirled it a fourth time to be sure, and then a fifth, and the body suddenly fell from his grasp into the dust.

He opened his hand and there was the rooster's head, separate from the body, the crazy eyes looking at him but not seeing him. Without thinking he threw the head as far as he could. It cleared the back fence and landed in somebody's lemon tree.

His clothes were covered in blood and feathers. The chicken wives, widows now, huddled by the fence in stupid terror. Roger's heart pounded and he had a hard time breathing. Calm down and think, he told himself. He went through the side gate again and closed it after him and walked the ten steps along the sidewalk and went through the gate to his house. He could still feel the rooster's hot head in his hand. He went in the guest house and took off his clothes and took a shower in the narrow shower stall, not flinching when the water hit his torn skin. The towel came away streaked with blood. He bundled his filthy clothes in the towel and put bandages over the wounds on his arms and legs. He changed into an outfit of his father's, linen pants and a green silk shirt. The clothes fit him fine. He shaved and combed his hair. He went into the middle of the room and looked around, thinking about where he would hide alcohol if he'd gone on the wagon but anticipated falling off. Finally he pulled the little refrigerator out of its alcove and there was a dusty bottle of vodka wedged into the corner. He pulled it out and set the refrigerator back in place. He unscrewed the cap and held the bottle up and said, "Gee, thanks, Dad."

He drank as much as he needed but no more, and he brushed his teeth afterward. He carried the bundle of clothes in the towel out through the wrought iron gate, closed it after him and put the bundle on the floor behind the station wagon's front seat. A block away he stopped and dropped the bundle in a garbage can outside the elementary school. Then he drove back to the rug store.

She was sitting in her friend's SUV with the other girls, talking and laughing. He knew she didn't want her father to yammer at her all the way home, but she saw no other option. He parked the station wagon across the street. He got out and crossed the street when the SUV drove away, running to catch her before she went into the store.

He said, "Hi, how's it going?"

She frowned, and he said, "It's Roger. Mindi's brother. I'm wearing decent clothes for once."

She nodded. "You look nice."

He looked at his watch. "How'd you like to take me for a drive?"

She shrugged. "I need more practice."

He smiled. "You can do it. You're gifted and talented."

She smiled and lowered her head a little, but he could see her checking him out from under her eyelashes.

He said, "I've got a few minutes to spare. Take me around the block. I'll keep my mouth shut the whole time."

She looked toward the rug store. Roger imagined Mindi in there apologizing for her brother for the tenth time, and Mr. Mo on the verge of hypoglycemia, trying not to get so angry that he ended up firing her, too.

She gave a shy grin. "Okay, just around the block."

He opened the driver's side door for her and went around to the passenger side. She'd already put on the seatbelt and adjusted the seat by the time he got in. She looked around and he said, "This was a popular American family car at one time." He pointed to the penguin deodorizer on the dashboard. "Give me your honest opinion. Keep it or throw it away?"

"Throw it away," she said without hesitation.

He wrenched the penguin from the dashboard and tossed it out the window.

"Now what?" she said.

He shifted slightly in his seat and turned the rearview mirror toward her. "See that girl?" he said.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, obviously. So what?"

He smiled at her teenage tone of voice. She was beautiful and foreign, but she was a real American kid under it all. He said, "That girl wants to get out of town and see what else is out there. She's sick of going back and forth, school and homework, school and homework. I'm not saying she just wants to have fun. Fun isn't all that interesting to her."

She looked at him, listening. He said, "She wants to have her own point of view. She wants to speak her mind, but she's not sure what's in there. She needs ideas and experiences. The curriculum's lacking in that regard. She's like a runner who's trained for years without running a race. She doesn't really know what she's got in her."

She nodded.

He said, "This car is the perfect vehicle for her to become who she wants to be. If it was for sale I'd sell it to you. But it's not, so I'm letting you drive it."

She started the car and released the emergency brake. She checked all the mirrors and adjusted the rearview. She said, slightly breathless, "You make it sound like magic."

She was beautiful. He could smell her beauty, he could hear it, he could see rose petals blowing down the road in front of them. "Go ahead. Fly," he said.

She was a better driver than he'd expected. She headed west on Speedway and he leaned back in the seat, relaxing for the first time in a long time. He glanced at her after a couple of miles and felt an urge to tell her about his life, the real truth of it. He said, "I went to California to become an actor. I was in a lot of school plays and I was pretty good. My mom thought I was good. But then when I got to Hollywood I found out I couldn't act. Literally. Not in a play or a movie or in real life. I can't get anybody to really hear me. Just you, because you-"

"Please be quiet. I'm trying to drive," Nizam said. So then he shut up.