

Scorpion

By Stephen Orloske

Sand crackled under the grind of my knees and it shuffled between Dad's boots and the highway. I was eleven, holding up his Kingpin cruiser under the glaring desert sun. We had been on the road together just over a week when he decided it was time to take me back home. My palms sweated against the metal and every time he pushed on the engine they'd slip and burn on the fresh black paint, until finally I let it drop against the white breakdown line.

My father stood up from his squat on the other side of the motorcycle, his dark leather pants grumbled as they stretched. Wrapped in his husky hand was a chrome wrench that reflected the yellow t-shirt tucked in around his belly. The scorpion tattoo on his arm would twitch when he got angry, but his face would always remain motionless around his quiet gray eyes.

"Can't even be a kickstand, can you?" He threw the wrench against the road and the clang rang out across the flat horizon. I curled up my shoulders and stuck my thin hands in their pockets. My father just picked up the wrench and went back to cranking his pipes, smearing oil all over. On the back of his shirt it read "Army;" it looked like he was wearing it backwards.

"Just get the hell away from my bike," he said, so I walked into the scraggly desert brush. I wandered a ways from him, kicking at the dry weeds, tossing rocks that weren't gripped by the hard earth. A tumbleweed bounced by as I was bending down, puffing out red trails along its windy path. That's when I saw a snake laid out beneath the shade of a cactus, about fifteen yards away. I threw a rock and it fell short, but there was a rattle in the air as the snake coiled up. My foot stung around the snakebite I received the night before. I baked there listening to my father stomp, watching the snake glide through the sand.

I can't remember what it was like the first time Dad left my mother and me, just his face and the smell of oily leather. Mom never liked to mention him; she'd always change the subject to something about my step-dad, Tony. Mom was pregnant so I usually bought her food after school, but she was always so skinny, with thin arms and legs disproportionate from her growing belly. Tony worked three jobs in town, while Mom and I spent nights watching TV together in our modular home just outside Tonopah.

Nine days ago Mom was asleep on the couch when I heard a motorcycle in the driveway. I sprinted out the screen door and into my father. On the bike, the rumble took me in. I forgot about home. The next day I woke up in a cheap motel somewhere in Benton. After lunch we spent the day swimming in Mono Lake. We left as people were taking pictures of the Sierra sunset, doubled by the water's reflection. Most of the week hazed by that way, falling asleep on the bike and waking up in another town.

Yesterday afternoon I had rolled off a lumpy mattress in a trashed motel room. The carpet was melted in spots, the ceiling marked with black splotches. Dad wasn't around, so I walked to the lobby to get something out of the vending machine. A local paper was on a coffee table so I read about the weather in Baker, home of the world's tallest thermometer, while eating my Twinkie. Afterwards there was nothing else to do but watch TV until Dad came back. It was dusk when he burst into the room with a black duffle bag and lifted me onto my bare feet, ready to speed out of town on his Kingpin.

I asked him "What's going on?"

"Nothing. Baker isn't a good place to stay," he said. We turned off 373 and onto an old road heading toward Death Valley. There was a rusted sign at the turn, "Rhyolite 50 Miles."

The nearly full moon made the ground of the ghost town pale in the cold midnight air. When the bike stopped I looked around at the remaining support beams of the old town hall.

"We'll sleep over there." Dad pointed at a wooden stage with thirteen white sheets draped in ghastly positions around a long table. "Don't worry, they're just plaster. It's the best place to keep bugs off you." He took a couple of wool blankets out from under the seat for us to curl up in under the table. Dad lay face down, clutching the black bag, next to the ghost slinking away at the far end of the platform. I had a hard time falling asleep underneath the one with its palms spread out in the middle. In the distance I could see a huge blocky statue standing motionless over the town.

When I woke up it was still dark, the moon loomed behind the blocky figure. I looked down towards my father and saw him sticking a needle in his tattooed arm. He stared at me with new burning eyes. Blood thumped in my ears till I began to sweat, then I dashed towards the moon and the silhouette of the statue became clear. It was a giant pink woman made of blocks, two squares jutting out of her chest, blond string wrapped around her head and groin. I fell down on her foot and hugged the sharp toe, crying, kicking my feet wildly when I heard a hiss. The snake bit right into my naked foot.

"It bit me!" I screamed. There was a flashlight already bobbing towards me and when Dad finally got there I was trembling, cold with sweat. He flashed the light around and grabbed my foot. He sucked on the bloody wound, swallowing it all, even the poison, I imagined. I kept holding onto the toe and stared up through the angular cleavage, shaking while my Dad suckled my foot. Then we saw the snake in the light of the rolling flashlight. My Dad dropped my foot and grabbed the snake by its head.

"It's just a Red Racer!" He waved the snake in my face, even let it lie in his palms, before tossing it away. Then marched back to the ghosts. I got chills and curled up on the pink foot and fell asleep.

The rattlesnake had curled up under a distant shrub when my Dad finally yelled for me to come help him load the motorcycle. A pickup truck had stopped for us, a skinny old man with his granddaughter, who offered a lift to the next rest stop in Goldfield. I did what I could, but Dad did most of the lifting, even pulling me up over the tailgate. We sat on the bike, back to back. I looked through the cab window at the road swallowed by the horizon and the little red headed girl staring at me.

When we got to Goldfield it was already twilight, the dark rainbow of color bleeding across the sky. At the gas station Dad unloaded the motorcycle before paying the old man twenty dollars for the ride. He thanked my Dad and the little girl waved at me. The repair shop was closing, but my Dad took the duffle bag in with him and came back handing me a repair slip, which said "three hours," there was no charge. We walked a block to the closest diner. Four booths down from us were two truckers eyeing my father. One was a man with a dirty collared shirt and thick teeth; the woman wore a ripped t-shirt over a green bra. Both were fat. I noticed the man mouth a word, "Scorpion."

Eventually he came over, stinking up our booth. He sat next to my father, grinning at me over the table.

"Hey there, kid, know where I can get some candy?" I didn't answer because my Dad had reached down to clench his fingers around the trucker's balls. The trucker punched at my Dad till his hand clenched harder, then he just winced, eyes rolled into his head. Dad whispered something in his ear before punching him in the temple.

"Lets' go," he said, tossing bills on the table. We walked over the limp trucker on the floor and back down the road to the repair shop. There was a note on the door saying, "Bike in the back." Dad was putting the duffle bag in the seat when there came a crash from the dumpster. The woman from the diner jumped out with a heavy metal chain in her hands, a flaming skull helmet on her head. She made a throaty yell and struck me in the ear.

I looked up at her from the alley floor. Her armpits were soaked; there was a taste of blood in my mouth. She was yelling at Dad.

"Gimme it, shit face! Come on!" Then he threw the chrome wrench right at her face and blood sprayed from her broken nose. She dropped everything as she fell to the ground. Dad stepped over me to pick up the heavy chain. The woman had taken off her helmet and was crawling for the street.

"Get over here!" he said as he walked over to wrap the chain around her throat. I passed out watching the Scorpion snap violently and seeing her face matted with blood, her tongue pushing between lips covered with sand.

When I came to it was morning. Wrapped around my head was a crude heavy bandage that kept falling over one eye as the bike passed by a sign, "Tonopah 15 Miles," I was almost home. At my house I found Mom asleep on the couch with the TV on, her arms seemed even smaller next to her. I hugged her until she woke up, until she hugged back.

We both looked at my father in the doorway. Mom gasped, but Dad didn't say a word. He just stared at me on my knees, holding onto my mother. Then he put on the flaming skull helmet and I watched it bite down around his quiet gray eyes.