

The Desert Within¹

By Gianluca Cinelli

As he got off the bus, Jackson sniffed the scorching air of July saturated with the smell of withered earth and dried hay. He knew he was alone again. He had reached Albuquerque on a Greyhound and had afterwards headed west beyond Gallup, until the last local bus had dropped him in the middle of nowhere on a crossroad. No one could track him down now.

He looked around like a castaway on a desert island. It would not be easy, but he kept repeating the words which Karen, the elderly neighbour of his parents', had told him before he left from home: «There's no good in crawling back. Ahead must you go.» And so he meant to, although he had no idea of where to start from.

He looked at the setting sun and began to walk westward. The land was dry and rocky, low hills wrinkled the horizon like waves, and the vultures flew high in the pale-blue sky. Had it not been for the scent of hay, that empty sky could have been just the same as in Afghanistan. The same hostility and strangeness lurked in its unfathomable depths. And yet, this was supposed to be home, his own country, and people, for whom he had sacrificed his youth. But Jackson did no longer know where home was. His entire life seemed severed in two halves. One part lay far behind like a dead thing, while the other one lay ahead as dark and formless as the desert's night.

He walked on in the peaceful desolation of the land, interspersed with low bushes and lonely trees. The heat made him dizzy, but as the evening was coming down, he knew that some fresh breeze would blow after dark. After a few miles, the land changed abruptly. All vegetation grew thinner until it disappeared completely, leaving only a barren desert of reddish and sharp rocks. No sooner had the sun disappeared, than he heard the distant roar of an engine and turned around with a start.

An old orange van was crawling up to him through the desert, and its glimmering lights looked almost unreal in the violet twilight. The van slowed down and eventually stopped a few yards away. The driver wore a hat and looked rather massive, but his face was invisible inside the dark cockpit. Jackson reached the van and looked inside from the open window.

«Hi, wouldn't you give me a lift?»

«Sure. Where are you bound to?»

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Jackson could not answer, for he did not know. All he managed to conjure was a vague jest of his hand.

«Jump in», the man said. As the driver offered him a cigarette, the little flame revealed that the man was an Indian.

«How far can you drive me?», he asked, looking out at the desert that was getting dark.

«I'll stop in Naschitti.»

Jackson had never heard of such a place before, but it did not really matter.

The driver was silent and breathed heavily. The van was old and dusty, it smelled of oil and tobacco. Jackson closed his eyes and let his mind wander off. The monotonous roar of the old engine, the bumps along the road, and the dry scent of the cooling desert brought him back overseas, where his youth lay slumbering forever. It had taken some time before the Army found out what he had done, but now they were at his heels. The desert, though, would protect him this time, for things can hide and live in the desert.

He woke up and saw the stars glittering in the clear sky. The van was crossing the night as if flying over an abyss. Jackson reached over to his hip, checking that his weapon was there, for the province of Herat was insidious after dusk. However, he could not find it and startled.

«How long have we being patrolling?», he asked in a perplexed tone. He could not believe he had fallen asleep during a patrol.

The driver looked at him twice before he replied: «This is no patrol, buddy. We're in New Mexico. You slept. And talked, too.»

Jackson came back to reality at once and knew he was not on his Hummer. The man sitting next to him was not Franklin, who was dead. Jackson knew that it was his fault, for he had seen the kid kneel and aim his RPG towards their vehicle. It could see him right now with his very waking eyes, and his mouth dried once again. God only knows why he had said nothing. Franklin got killed in the blast.

«Listen, man», the driver said quietly. «There are no hotels in the place we're going to. I would keep you at my place for tonight, but my ma wouldn't allow you in. I will drop you at the gas station. You can stay for the night in the rear, in my office. You'll find something to eat and drink on the shelves.»

«I'm much obliged», Jackson replied, feeling uncomfortable. He was now a vagabond and needed others' help for everything. Him!, who had never asked for anything, he who had always watched over the sleep of others. How funny it was now to be sitting

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at the bottom, eyeing that strange rope, hanging from above. He was uncertain whether he should hang himself with that, or grasp it and wait for being rescued from the pit he had fallen into.

Jackson and his rescuer reached the village quite late.

«Get in now», the man told Jackson, as they stepped out from the van before the gas station. «Close the door behind you when you leave. North from here, you'll meet the road to the west. God bless you.»

They parted without saying anything more and the night swallowed up the Indian.

* * *

During the night, Jackson woke up in fear once again, for he dreamt about being aboard his Hummer with Franklin. As usual, the kid appeared and fired his rocket-launcher. However, the dream unfolded in an unprecedented way, and Jackson slipped into another dream. The desert turned green and grey and was eventually replaced by a forest under a stormy sky. The firs swayed in the fierce wind and Jackson was standing alone before a barn. A small man, no bigger than a fat child, danced in rags before him and waved his hands madly, in a somewhat mocking way. A huge black dog was chained to a pole and howled wildly. Jackson looked upon the scene in horror. Then Franklin appeared behind the wild man and began to beat him senseless or maybe dead. A tornado eventually appeared in the sky, and the rain started to stream down onto earth like a waterfall, wiping away the house, the corpse, and the dog with its pole.

When he opened his eyes, the eastern sky was growing rosy. Jackson left the village unseen and headed north until he met the old Indian route, the same that the Blue Jackets once rode to reach the farthest outposts in Alamo and Fort Defiance, on the border. Long before, he thought, foreigners from the East had come here with their guns to impose their laws and ways with violence. His black skin was the other face of the same story. His forefathers were herded on the wild coast of Africa and shipped off to the west in chains, to feed the men who ventured in this desert chasing the red people. Was any justice and meaning to be found in all that? As he walked on, Jackson felt as though he was streaming back through time, and what he saw was a long chain of wars and bloodsheds. He did not want to be part of that history anymore. This was a place where ghosts still lingered on, protected by the desert, and he felt finally at home. He walked on and on in the sunlight that grew fiercer by the minute. He saw life fight back among the rocks to survive, no matter how hard or pointless it might be. He felt

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like he was turning into a black rock among those red rocks that fiercely stood there, where the red warriors had fallen under the sabres and bullets of the conquerors.

The blaze of the sun became unbearable, Jackson had to stop before collapsing. He came across a dirty bar by the road and got in despite his pockets not jingling as he sounded them. Nonetheless, he slipped inside and paced straight for a table in the farthest corner of the room. The air was stuffy and warm, and a sour-sweet smell of decaying food floated around, making him feel somewhat nauseous. He sat and saw a handful of customers sitting in a row at the bar, leaning forward and heavily sunken in their thoughts. Nobody spoke. It seemed that some sort of spell kept those people stunned. Some kind of pain forced those men to perch on their stools and bend over.

No one really seemed to acknowledge Jackson, until the Indian bartender left his spot and came forth.

«What will I bring you?», he asked after peering at Jackson.

«I'd just like to stay here for a while, please», he answered in a humble tone.

«Wandering alone in the desert in July is dangerous.»

Jackson looked up at the man and smiled faintly.

«Ten to one, you're in the Army», the barman said.

«How so?»

«I see many like you. They come from the north, mostly from Colorado Springs. They pop by and move off southbound.»

«And what does make you think I'm one of those?»

«The look on your face. See those wrecks there?», he pointed to the men at the bar and sat down next to Jackson. «Nobody ever stops here but folk of their like. They're not really alive, nor are they dead yet. Do not think bad of me, but I've grown quite good at understanding at first glance what sort of people walk across my door. This bar is a strange place, where old broken things come to be mended or to waste away once and for all.»

«You've much to say, I reckon. But I'm not sure I feel like listening much longer.»

«Yeah, whatever. Can I offer you a coffee? It's on the house.»

«That's kind of you, man.»

«No problem. I'll get back in a minute.»

Jackson sat back and closed his weary eyes and started brooding over broken things. The penetrating smell of rotting food disgusted him. He had to find out how to mend his own cracks. The barman came back with the coffee, but he did not pour it, nor did Jackson drink any. The man sat down again by him and put his elbows on the table.

«I'm here to get cured», Jackson said suddenly.

«You are what?»

«You said that broken things come here looking for mending.»

«I did, yes. But I don't have the cure myself. I'm no voodoo-medicine man.»

«Is this what you say to those who come here?»

«They don't usually ask. You're the first one, and that's why I wish to help you. There's a place in the Reserve. A wise woman lives there. She's ancient and knows the mysteries of earth and sky. She's been living in the desert since ever. She can speak with the dead.»

«Are you kidding?»

«You asked, man. I'm only telling you what I have heard of.»

«And where would this woman be?»

«Beyond the lakes, right north from here, where our people once dwelled. She will help you. I'll show you the map.»

The man disappeared into a backdoor and reappeared a few seconds later holding a yellowish parchment that looked as old as the desert itself. As he laid the thing on the table, Jackson realized it was a worn-out piece of leather with a map drawn upon. He could see the roads, the hills, and a green patch scattered with blue stains, just like an oasis. One red line showed the way into the heart of the green area.

«Just follow the map, and you won't fail. But be ready, for she'll ask for something back.»

«Do you know that woman? Personally, I mean.»

«Of course not» the man hastened to reply. «You'll need your strengths for the journey. You can stay here for tonight, then you'll leave before dawn. You see? You now know what you came here for.»

* * *

And morning came, finding Jackson lying on a bench in an empty room apparently used as a storage cabinet. The house was quiet, and Jackson woke up surprisingly fresh. For the first night, he had had no nightmares whatsoever. The first thought that darted through his mind was the map, which was nowhere to be found, though. He looked around baffled, for the place looked shabby and derelict. Two piles of cardboard boxes stood in one corner, under a thick layer of the same dust covering the floor, where his boots had left footsteps. The air was stuffy, and the shutter of the only small window was broken. A calendar of 2008 hung from the wall, discoloured and soiled.

Then, a sudden rustle followed by a stomp startled him. Perhaps the barman was back. He waited, but nothing happened. No one opened the door and came in, however, he sensed that the mysterious visitor was lingering outside just beyond the door. Jackson shivered and held his breath. He could imagine the man standing outside, with one ear pressed against the door to catch the least sound from within. That must be Franklin, for sure. He had caught up with him at last.

Jackson could not tell how long he remained still, listening. Eventually, a blade of reddish sunlight appeared on the wall opposite the window, and he knew that the day was young and he had to leave. The ghost was gone, and he cautiously opened the backdoor. There was nothing out there, except for the almost inaudible rustle of the cool, nightly breeze rushing away. Distant red rocks glowed in the sunlight. Jackson ventured around the house that now looked very old. The shutters were closed, the paint was peeled and scraped, and a thick layer of sand covered the porch, where he could clearly see the marks of military boots. So it was true! Franklin was here. Although he thought that the men he had seen in the bar the day before should have left their footprints behind too, none were visible. He could only see the traces of desert-boots, which were not unlike his own after all.

Jackson headed northeast leaving the barn behind. There was no track to follow but the tiny red line he had seen on the map. He just began to wonder who had ever drawn it, for he had asked nothing about it. It might be a hoax, and he had not even worried about it. What if the man had just made of him the greatest fool, sending him to get lost in the desert?

On he went, and the sun rose higher and higher over the desert, blazing and scorching the already excruciated rocky bulges. After hours of rambling, Jackson finally reached a valley like an oasis. Here the barren desert turned into an Eden where little trees grew on the side of the hills, around a quiet, shiny speck of blue water. The man sped up through the bush pacing straight to the lake.

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The trees offered some shelter from the violent touch of the sun, but he was sweating and swaying. As he reached the shore, he did not even stop and walked straightaway into the cool water with his clothes still on. The touch of the water was icy and gave him cramps in the stomach. He headed back to the beach and crawled under a shadowy bush, where he got off his clothes and lied down naked, letting the breeze caress his body. He felt dizzy and lightheaded. The trees and the bush began to sway, and the light white clouds floating above him in the sky seemed to whirl as if caught in some unnatural storm. The sun had maddened him and now chained his naked body to the ground, forcing his soul neither to sleep nor to stay awake. Jackson's wearied mind just wandered astray.

He heard steps coming near. Jackson rolled his eyes to look at the stranger, fearing that the phantom had caught up with him once again, but it was not Franklin who was approaching. It was a woman who stopped and startled as she saw the naked body lying. She thought him dead, but Jackson moved his arm feebly and opened his eyes. He knew he had found her, for he had reached the place where she lived forever, apart from human eyes.

«Are you hurt?», he heard her ask. It was a low, ancient voice. The face that leaned on him was old and wrinkled, tanned and ugly, her eyes were as blue as the sky, and silvery, long hair came streaming down her shoulders like a frozen waterfall. He could feel the touch of her bony hands on his chest and neck, on his hot forehead, and around his pulsing wrists.

«You'll be fine», she said. «You're lucky that I found you.»

Her words eased Jackson's weary mind, and he suddenly felt better, as though life was streaming backwards through his veins. He turned his head and winked to peer at her. Although naked, he felt no shame, for she was no mere woman and had no appetite for his body. She was a witch if not a goddess, and what she craved for was his soul. He struggled to talk, but his mouth was dry and his throat sore:

«I was looking for you», he said faintly. «The map took me here.»

She looked at him and smiled, then touched his forehead gently.

«You must have been walking for hours, young man. The desert is dangerous, at this time of the year.»

«You saved my life», Jackson said eyeing a circle of vultures high above the lake.

«I'm glad I found you. You gave me a startle, for you did look dead already.»

«I cannot die, as long as I remain in the desert.»

She smiled again as he went on:

«My friend keeps living in the desert too.»

«Your friend? You're not alone?»

«I am. He just keeps following me, he's got the grudge.»

«Is your friend anywhere around?», she asked in alarm.

«You could talk to him and tell him to leave me alone. I didn't mean to hurt him, I really didn't.»

The woman looked around, pondering what to do. She thought that something had been going on around there, for the man was far sicker than sunstroke could have caused him to be. What if he recovered his strength? He could not be older than twenty-five and was strong and healthy, despite his being rather thin and unclean, just like a tramp.

«I was told you can heal me», he said faintly.

«Who told you that?»

«Someone I met on the road. He showed me the map to you. He said I'm a broken thing and I need mending.»

«Did he say that?»

«He did, and I found you.»

«Was your friend who told you that?»

«He was no friend, no. I had never seen him before, he was an Indian.»

«So, he was not the one you... killed.»

Jackson chuckled: «That was Franklin, he drove the Hummer. He's no Indian. He's a very good buddy.»

The woman was now utterly puzzled.

«Does anyone know that you are here?»

«No one knows», he said stirring. «No one must know.»

«Ok, now calm down. It's all right. You're doing great.»

The picture was slowly getting clear. The man had killed some friend of his called Franklin, and he was now on the run. He was also shocked and confused, and he believed that his friend was still lurking out there as a ghost, looking for revenge. She

thought the police must be looking for him, but her phone was dead and her car was at least two miles away, over the hills. She shivered and thought that the best thing was keeping the man quiet.

«Your man was right, you know», she said reassuringly. «I can heal you.»

Jackson looked at her with gratefulness, while she poured water from her canteen into his dry mouth and over his naked chest and head.

«I can't do much here, though. I'll go get my jeep and come back to pick you up.»

«You've got a jeep?», he said surprised. «Don't you live in the desert?»

«It does not matter, does it?», she said, but Jackson was getting nervous.

«You're not the holy woman I was looking for», he protested trying to get up.

«Calm down, I said I can help you and I will, but I need to take you away from here.»

«No! You're a fraud! You're a spy! You were tracking me down, to get them on my trail.»

As Jackson struggled to get on his feet again, the woman panicked and fled, followed by the desperate curses of the man, who felt too dizzy and stunned to run after her. He strived to put his clothes on and he cried out his desperation. Then, a man in a desert-suit came out of the bush. Jackson saw him and drew himself up half-frozen in astonishment and fear. Franklin was standing there before his very waking eyes, pale and stiff.

«Franklin?», Jackson muttered.

«Yes, Jackie, it's me. I've been looking for you all over the place. It's beautiful here, ain't it?»

«It's wondrous. Was it you this morning, tapping at my door?»

«What do you think?»

«I think it was you, buddy. How did you find me?»

«You never let me go.»

«Yeah, I didn't, could I?»

«Will we sit down? There, by the lake.»

The two friends went to sit where Jackson saw the water gently caress the land. He wiped his tears and sighed deeply. He was glad that Franklin had found him.

«Are you still mad at me?», he asked shyly.

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«I never was, Jackie.»

«Really? Despite it all?»

«Despite it all.»

«I thought you got the grudge. I am so ashamed of myself», Jackson said crying. «I didn't mean to let you down, buddy. I wish I had died in your place.»

«I know. It was not your fault. Now it's time to stop running away, don't you think?»

«But they're hunting me down like a beast.»

«I know that too.»

«How can I prove that I am innocent?»

«Innocent?»

«You just said so, but how will I tell them?»

«I didn't say that, Jackie.»

Jackson stared at the ghost in bewilderment.

«I said that what happened in Afghanistan was not your fault. But then?», the ghost said.

Jackson was puzzled, he went back to the days he had spent with his parents, the gloomy days in which solitude was like the lid of a grave over his head. His recollections were now so blurred as though he was trying to recall someone else's life. He could see the big house upon the hill, the garden, and those appalling mists exhaling from the forest. He could now see the house of their neighbours, the face of Karen and her beautiful daughter Cynthia, with her long dragonfly-like limbs and big eyes. Were they real?

Then his memories grew darker. He could now see the steep slope downhill with a white track leading to the shabby shack of that ugly, wicked man, who lived alone with his horrible black dog. He shivered, as the curses of the midget, who was calling him names, still resounded in his ears. There were darkness and rage then. He could now see him lying down with clots of brain coming out of his cracked skull to form an ugly pond of dark blood. Then the rain started pouring down, washing the horror away. A fierce wind ripped the shack into the air, and the howling dog and the corpse of the murdered man flew swirling up in the sky.

Jackson put his hand to his eyes and said:

«I dreamt of that man the other day. You were in my dream too, rescuing me. You killed him.»

«Jackie, my friend, it's time to face the truth.»

«What truth?»

«Karen told you, he was a wicked man. He beat up his wife and let his dog rip cats to pieces just for fun. He was a horrible man, but it was not up to you to bring justice upon him.»

«I didn't kill the man. You did it!»

«I'm just a ghost, I exist only in your mind. I can kill if you do. I can go if you let me. I'm nothing but a hollow.»

Jackson grew dumb. He thought he saw himself in another life, as somebody else. He knew he was both the men, and he was Franklin and the Indian bartender too. All these people existed inside his mind and he could no longer tell the dream from reality.

«Should I stop running?», he asked.

«It's up to you.»

«They'll punish me for what I've done.»

«You can start again. You just need to believe that you can.»

«I wish I could.»

«Stop looking backwards. You got to get outta here, buddy. Stop running and leave the desert behind.»

«I'm afraid, Franklin.»

«We all are, buddy. Look at me. Am I not afraid of leaving all this behind? But I'm here only because of you. Let me go, I beg you.»

Jackson turned to stare at the lake, so placidly flat and blue as though it had swallowed the sky. He finally felt ready to face his fate, whatever it was. He had killed the man upon the hill, he didn't know why, for he could not remember. His rage had had the upper hand upon him, and it could happen again. He needed to be healed.

«I don't want to live on like a dead among the living», Jackson said. «I want to be born again, and I'm ready to go through it.»

«I'm proud of you Jackie. Be ready though, for each birth claims a death.»

Franklin grew paler and paler as if he was to fade.

«I'll miss you, Franklin. I love you.»

«I love you, Jackie.»

* * *

The woman came back with two cops. The sun blazed, the air had become hot. She had not said much to the cops, she did not mean to get the poor man into more troubles than he already was in. She had just said that he was in dire need, and she expected to find him where she had left him naked. They found the body lying with the face into the sand. He had tried to put his clothes on, but he must have collapsed before he could finish. She pronounced him dead without even taking his pulse.

«I'm sorry ma'm», one of the cops said. «I'm afraid we'll need to rob you of a little more time for a statement. Sorry about your spoiled holiday, by the way.»

The desert was silent under the slow, circular flight of vultures.

¹ This short story appeared in Italian language in the magazine «Fermenti», 250 (special collectible issue) (2020): 289-298.