

Making the Most of It

Chapter Five – Beware: The Desert Gods Listen

Con hadn't seen the poultry yards and rabbit hutches so he went around to the far side of the growhouse to look them over. Though he knew nothing about raising animals they looked extraordinarily well kept. Hearing the happy squeal of children from the front of the growhouse he rounded its corner. He saw seven or eight children pour out of a side door of the church into a fenced yard of brown grass. They ranged in age from about five years old to eleven or twelve. A thin priest in a black cassock stood watchfully over them. When he saw two of the younger boys wrestling over a toy he gently intervened. Con couldn't hear their conversation but when the priest stepped back he saw him smile and the little boys laugh.

Relief welled in him to see that at least *these* children and those outside the walls had survived. And gladness to find this little moment of happiness amidst the gloom. He walked over to the priest and said, "I see you're good at settling disputes."

The priest smiled. He had a thin ascetic face and a neatly trimmed beard. "I'm afraid my talent extends only to students, formerly at university and now at play." He had a slight accent Con couldn't place. He extended a hand. "Father Bartolomeo, formerly of the University of Messina in Italy."

Con shook it. "Con Colby, barely a graduate of Tres Robles High. You're a long way from home."

"No. Home is wherever God needs me. I happened to be here on sabbatical when the sickness struck." And seeing Con examining the church, "I am a Jesuit but many faiths are gathered together here so I have made the church an ecumenical refuge."

Con said, "We'll need you after we get civilized again. To settle disputes and gather people together."

Father Bartolomeo shrugged and smiled sadly. "I pray for that day. In the meantime I use whatever I find at hand to help people. I care for the children so that their parents can work. We'll just have to accept what comes tomorrow."

"Sounds like you're making the most of all that comes –"

"— and the least of all that goes." Father Bartolomeo laughed gently. "So saith Doc Drennan."

Waiting for sleep that night, Con thought of the priest, stranded so far from friends and family. He must have been lonely, no matter what he said. As always just before he slept, Con then thought of Gloria. *I miss you, Babe*, he told her, *but I'm glad you don't have to go through this shit.*

* * *

Early the following morning Con and Doc took a last, luxurious bath, shaved and started back to Hardy Town with Con driving.

As he had expected, the heavily loaded buggy and cart reduced their speed. He drove as fast as possible downhill to get a run for each upslope, but they slowed considerably before reaching the summit. Doc took over driving after their siesta, claiming they had reached another area too dangerous for Con to drive. *Another of Doc's little secrets*, thought Con irritably, but relinquished driving without comment.

As the morning passed Con thought about Orlando's eventual shut-down. It would mean disaster for the Hardy Towners and others like them if they couldn't produce their own food. The

salvation of civilization depended on food banks like Orlando's, though he didn't trust its revival in the hands of the few Hardy Towners he had seen. People had a better chance of raising their own food in the agricultural Midwest and the fertile parts of California than in the Nevada desert. That's where civilization would return first.

At the end of the day Doc said they had made good time.

"If we do this well every day," asked Con, "will we make it back in four days?"

With mock severity Doc put a finger to his lips. "Ssh. Beware of hubris. The desert gods are listening."

In spite of Con having risked the desert gods' displeasure, the next day started off much like the previous one. In late morning, as Doc drove, he began to doze.

A brash noise behind them shook him awake, a familiar one he never expected to hear again: the sound of motorcycles with old-fashion internal combustion engines. Looking behind and to his right he saw a cloud of sand in the desert coming straight toward them. One bike led. He saw another, no two, close behind. He knew that swirling storm of sand obscured more.

Doc saw them too. Since the buggy had started climbing a slight incline he already held the accelerator to the floor. "Damn. Wonder where they got fuel for those old gasoline hogs? There aren't that many old cars to siphon it out of."

"Speculate later!" Con shouted. "Get us the hell outta here somehow!"

Even though patches of loose sand slowed the motorcycles down they gradually drew nearer. They would move even faster once they reached the smooth paving. Con thought Doc should act a helluva lot more worried than he did. They approached the top of the incline. Con hoped they found the other side much steeper.

The bikes popped out of the sandy cloud and turned screeching onto the pavement, all too close to them. He counted five. If Doc had a plan Con couldn't imagine what it was.

Con watched the bikes. He felt the buggy start down a much too gentle slope. They wouldn't remain ahead of their pursuers for long. He wished they could jettison the cart. The food would surely satisfy the bikers.

"Now we got 'em," Doc cackled. "Roll your window up in case they got guns."

Con did, wondering if Doc had gone nuts.

Doc turned the buggy so that the right wheels ran on the shoulder.

The foremost biker did have a pistol. Con heard its bullet *spang* against the bulletproof back window. Looking up front he saw, *oh, shit!* they had nearly reached the bottom of the hill. And ahead of them rose a steep son-of-a-bitch.

He heard a loud crash behind them and turned, saw the leading motorcycle flip rear over front. The driver flew forward, hit the road hard and slid face-down along the pavement. The bike crashed sideways into one coming up on its left. A third piled into them. A more distant bike turned into the median to miss them.

Something bashed Con's door's window. He whipped around, saw a leering, bearded face, a fist raising a tire iron to smack his window again. "Hey, Doc!"

They had reached the road's low point. Doc jerked the steering wheel to the right to strike bike and rider with the buggy, then straightened. Biker, motorcycle and tire iron shot airborne along different trajectories. The man, splayed legs kicking and arms waving frantically, followed the bike down into the dry creek bed that passed under the freeway.

Doc glanced at the falling man, laughed. "Asshole over appetite. That'll teach im."

That crazy bastard's enjoying this, thought Con.

Behind them, Con saw only one of the men lying on the pavement stir. The one who had

detoured into the median, the only one now standing, had pushed his bike onto the roadway. He stood with hands on hips watching them go. He either didn't have the nerve to pursue them alone or care enough to fire at them if he even had a gun. Doc had the accelerator to the floor. Despite his levity he wanted away from them as badly as Con did.

The highway had flattened. Con rolled the window down, leaned back and willed his nerves to settle down.

At last he said, "Are you gonna tell me what happened to those guys or just let me wonder? And don't tell me the desert gods saved our ass."

"Oh, I'm gonna explain it." Doc sported a big grin. "It was too brilliant an idea not to brag a little. But I do wonder where they got the gasoline for those old engines."

"Probably siphoned it out of old internal combustion engine cars' and bikes' gas tanks but go back and ask em if you want to know for sure. I'll go ahead in the buggy."

Doc laughed. "No, I'm sure you're right."

"But as to how those guys got their asses busted, you know those grates they put over the drainage inlets in these highways?"

"I guess so." Con had barely noticed them before.

"Well, I suspected somebody like these fuckers'd try to hijack those groceries some day. When I first drove along stretches of road that had these grates in the paving I pried them up and threw them in the weeds. If someone started chasing me I figured I'd straddle the inlets with one wheel on the shoulder. Most people don't even notice them and if somebody was after me they'd be more likely to watch the buggy than the road. It'd work just as well if they drove a car. Only one wheel needs to hit a hole like that to stop a car, or even to flip it if it's going fast enough."

"To be honest though, I wasn't sure it would even work. See, I told you we learn something new every day. But just in case those guys and their bikes aren't as beat up as they looked, what say we forego our siesta and drive on through."

Con shuddered. "I second the motion. And I guess that's why you thought some reaches of road were too dangerous for me. You could've just warned me about the missing grates."

Doc grinned. "I don't want to let you in on all my little secrets till I have to."

So they traveled through the afternoon heat and found a good hiding place for the night.

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The next morning as they returned to the freeway Doc said, "Two days behind us and we're half way home."

"Let's not risk pissing the desert gods off," Con says. "I've seen what that leads to. Two more days to Hardy Town sounds good to me."

"I said two days *behind* us. I didn't speculate on how many days it'd take to get to Hardy Town. Hell, we might be ten days from there."

They drove on in silence, Doc looking all around as always. Con thought about the next leg of his journey beyond Hardy Town. He had dreamed of it every moment that he dug the ill-fated ditch. Now he could afford to leave. The time from Hardy Town to Orlando's and back would add up to at least ten days. Ten times the twelve chits per day Doc had promised him equaled one hundred twenty, less however much Doc deducted for meals. And he had saved twenty from the ditch work. That should buy him as much food as he could carry or more.

While they lay up hidden in a pile of rocks for their siesta Doc said, "Y' know, Con, all my trips up and down the freeway aren't as harrowing as this one."

"Good. I'm glad for you."

"What I'm trying to say is, I could use somebody to help me with em."

“I don’t see much future in what you’re doing, Doc. Just running up and down the highway for lousy chits. They’re not money. What’ll they buy you?”

“I don’t do it for the chits. I make the trips to add to my stash from what I find in deserted towns. Now I have camping supplies and water sterilizing equipment and arms and ammunition. All stashed in a safe place. Some day soon I’ll fill the buggy up with enough stuff and we’ll take off. I got a few more items on my wish list to get first. But I’m getting too long in the tooth to carry this on by myself. Until I’m ready to leave I need some help.”

“I wish you well, Doc. I think you’re a great guy. But I gotta go on. I can’t wait.”

“To find a girl?” Doc had lost his usual aplomb. “That’s why young men do stupid things. A girl who probably isn’t even alive!?”

Con almost snarled. “Chloe was alive the last time I saw her. And she’s a helluva lot tougher than you and I combined. She survived Chou’s. Just like you and I did. But I told you, it’s not for love. I had my love and Chou’s took her away from me.”

Doc looked away, through an opening in the boulders, out over the desert. “Sorry, Con. I was outta line.” And a moment later, “I’m tired of this shit. I’m like Old Man River: Sick a livin but scared a dyin.”

Con thought he looked older than ever. He reminded himself that Doc had lost everyone important to him, just like he had. “Shit, Doc –”

“Shut the fuck up and get some sleep.”

As Con waited for sleep it struck him that Doc had said he would pack the buggy with supplies for when we leave. That must mean Lucille. The second bathtub in the big house was for her. Maybe he invited Lucille to ride with him between the food bank and Hardy Town but she refused because of the danger. No, he thought, she would have gone because she loved him. After setting up the bathing arrangements he must have decided not to ask her for the same reasons: because of the danger and because he loved her.

Doc misunderstood his quest to find Chloe. He dreamed only of Gloria, never Chloe. He couldn’t love Chloe with Gloria filling his heart. He had only spent a couple of weeks with Chloe, first as her patient while suffering from the infection, and after recovering, helping with the other patients. So why was he seeking her?

Because he had nowhere else to go. He would not give up his goal.

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On the fourth day they took a long detour through the desert around the blockade they had encountered on their first day. One of the motors stuttered, clogged with sand. As they exchanged it for one in the trunk Doc said he had warned Alessandra Orlando about the blockade in case she knew of anyone heading in that direction. Con felt embarrassed that he hadn’t thought to mention it.

Before the day’s last light they came to the rent in the right-of-way fence that gave access to the dirt road leading to Hardy Town. To Con’s consternation Doc drove past it.

“What the hell, Doc? Is this one of your little secrets? If you’re doing it to piss me off, it’s working.”

With his eyes straight ahead and without humor, Doc said, “It’s a secret that nobody knows but me that I’m about to share with you.”

So Con sat back with his arms crossed, irritated but resigned.

After about a quarter of an hour they came to an exit ramp. Doc took it down to a paved two-lane road leading east across the flat land to one of the West’s ubiquitous vast solar panel farms. Soon they reached and passed an administration building on the road’s south side and the

beginning of the immense fenced field of solar panels on the north. Seemingly endless rows and columns of them extended to the east and north. Supporting structures held them at a southerly angle to face toward the sun. Doc stopped at a gate hanging by one hinge that gave access to a footpath leading between the rows. Con got out when he did. Doc opened the trunk, took out a shovel and started down the path. Con followed, noticing him counting until he had passed over a hundred rows. Then Doc turned right and went down a row with Con following. Posts set in concrete foundations supported the racks holding the solar panels. Doc stopped behind one of the structures. The earth between its posts had been disturbed and roughly smoothed over.

Doc wiped the sweat from his face with his handkerchief. The heat remained even though the sun had begun its slide behind the low western mountains.

"You can see here," he said, "that I've been mucking around in the dirt. I can't compact it to match the rest of the field so I rely on its vastness to hide my handiwork. It's worked so far."

He took the shovel to the dirt, not to dig deeply but to scrape away six inches or so of it. Soon he had exposed a sheet of metal about four by six feet in size, green with a white border. Centered white letters proclaimed, "FREEWAY ENTRANCE."

"Your secret," said Con, "is a buried highway sign."

Doc grinned. "A *repurposed* highway sign."

He lifted one edge and pulled it aside to reveal a hole slightly smaller than the sign. Rectangular translucent plastic containers, apparently empty, neatly filled the hole. Doc pulled one out and then another to expose another layer of the boxes. Through their lids Con could see that they held objects of some kind but not well enough to identify them.

Doc said, "When all the empty ones are full I'll be ready to leave. But tonight I'm going to pay for your trip to Orlando's before we get to Hardy Town."

"I don't understand, Doc. I thought you'd pay me in chits."

"Fuck the chits. You can't eat them. I'm gonna pay you in food out of the cart and stuff you need to survive out of these boxes. First of all, we'll replace that ratty knapsack and leaky canteen and holey blanket. And your baseball cap. It looks like it needs an oil change. You need a wide brimmed hat like mine to protect you from the sun. I'll show you how to hide all this up under these racks for tonight." – he pointed to a space under the solar panels – "In the morning, turn in the Hardy Town chits for whatever food they'll allow you, come here to pick up this stash and be on your way."

Con, stunned, stood there for a moment. "Why, thanks, Doc. I don't know what to say."

"You earned it so there's nothing to say. Help me lift these empty boxes out of the way."

"And by God that girl better be worth it."

* * *

A couple of hours later the buggy rested beside Wiley's tent facing west, away from Hardy Town's somber stockade. They sat on the hood of the buggy, leaning back against its windshield, drinking sour, bad-smelling beer Doc had drained from Wiley's near-empty keg. The desert's manifold species of plants and irregular landforms gave it a special, almost mystical, kind of beauty at night under a waning moon surrounded by innumerable stars.

Doc asked, "So do you know how far this Tin Cup is?"

"I don't even know *where* it is."

Doc shook his head. "I don't know whether you're courageous or nuts. I'm beginning to believe it's probably a little of both."

Con took another drink of beer and felt his stomach lurch. Doc's scrunched-up face showed his beer had had a similar effect.

“But you’re a tough kid, Con. You’ll do okay. It’s a scary world now, in case you hadn’t noticed, and food will become ever harder to find. Every time you find an opportunity, like my buggy and I did hauling food from Orlando’s to Hardy Town, take it. You don’t have a set date to get to this Tin Cup.”

“In other words,” said Con, “make the most of all that comes.”

“Exactly. You’re learning. At the same time, if you miss out on an opportunity, don’t mope about it. In other words...” Doc held a hand out, indicating that Con should finish the sentence.

“Make the least of all that goes.”

“You got it.” Doc held his hand up for a high five and Con slapped it.

They suffered through another drink of beer, not because they liked it but because that’s what friends did on their last night together.

God, I’m gonna miss this guy, thought Con. He couldn’t tell Doc though or he might talk Con into more trips to Orlando’s.

“I’m gonna miss you too, Con.”

Con looked down and blushed. He realized he had been looking at Doc in a way that betrayed his thoughts.

They talked far into the night. Not once did Doc again try to sway Con from his goal.

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