

Orpheus Today

by Lisa Marie Basile

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(Originally on The Molotov Cocktail)

It is only seven-thirty but the night is full, gloom seizing Highway 66. There is a carcass on the road, maybe a human, slumped next to an empty ice cream truck. Several stars hang up in the East, drunken constellations scrambling to find meaning.

A sign says, ARIZONA 66 FRIJOLES, SODA. It is a shabby diner, a lone rest stop for truckers. It's shaped like an old-fashioned sheet metal diner, but most of it is made from adobe. Through the window, a lanky man sits on a cerulean stool; he is wearing a trench coat that hangs to the floor. Before him, a plate of tomatilla pie and a tall glass of milk. One hand is covered in something red. A lyre sits on the floor at his feet.

Then there is the man outside of the diner, at the entrance. He leans right there, on the edge of a circular safe-smoker public ashtray made from pebbles. He has long hair, settled in a braid across his shoulder. His forehead is creased, little deserts built into his skin. He's so dry, and tired and quiet as night. In the distance behind him, the desert glitters for miles. Between the sky and the earth and everything below — there aren't any separations, just stars and sand.

"Lotta migrants deaths out this way," says the man. He's not talking to anyone. Just smoking a Seneca cigarette, the scrim of silver whirls spilling into either direction, parting slowly to reveal two amber eyes.

"Damn snakes," he says, always getting the ladies. He takes two fingers and shoots toward the highway as a police car rolls by, surveying him probably, the strange Native man leaning as though he had business being there.

A serpent is dead at his feet, strung out like an hackneyed lasso.

Inside the diner, there are several dead women. Their aprons pulled up over their heads, revealing little black skirts and thick,

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scarred legs and ripped stockings. One of the girls was pretty; she had a nice face and music notes in her pocket. Her name-tag said "Ruby." There are a few pieces of art hanging on the wall, but nothing impressive. Just some impressionist cactus paintings and a sepia Annie Oakley holding a pistol by some trees.

The man on the stool doesn't say anything. He's not eating the pie or drinking the milk. The native man walks in, Seneca lit and limp between his lips. His boots are the cool color of sunny alligator skin, and there's a little lopsided heart stitched over his breast pocket where he had placed the box of cigarettes. He wants to believe in love but it is very hard on 66.

He throws the serpent at the floor like a tossed coin. Wipes his hands and walks over to the red-handed man.

"Mind?" the Native says, and drinks the man's milk.

The red-handed man says nothing. He looks at the serpent and then looks at the lyre. Then, he looks at the girls on the floor.

"You did that?" the Native says, pointing at the dead girls.

"Yeah."

"Why?" the Native asks.

"Hades pissed me off, took things I cared about."

"Well, alright," he says, the Native, accepting.

The red-handed man fingers his pie, gets up to leave. But the Native knows he'll never leave this diner, this desert. It's a prison, he knows, for those can't follow the rules. Maybe Gods and Devils are arbitrary, he thinks. But he knows the face of a man who has lost something, so he offers him a smoke.

The lanky man says "no I don't smoke," picks up the lyre and starts to walk out the door, his blue eyes painting across the room. There is a sadness too big for the desert, and no music will cure it and no heaven will save it.

"Know where you are boy?" asks the Native.

"66."

"More or less. What's your name?"

The red-handed man takes his keys out of his pocket. He stands about 6'5. The key chain is a little ice-cream cone. A chocolate

circle, a red circle and a white circle. He nods his head and says
“well they call me Billy, but my name is Orpheus.”

