The Sentence

by Matthew Keefer

To S. H.

A man escorted two women down a dusty path. He wore jeans and a tan shirt; they wore thin orange jumpsuits. One woman, in her mid-forties, looked about her: steep, reddish cliffs, the grit of ruddy soil swept about the desert landscape. “I've never been to Arizona,” she said.

“We're in Nevada,” he said.

“Whatever,” she said.

The younger woman, in her late-twenties, shuffled about, head-down, with a smoother face but eyes more sunken-in than her mother-in-law. She hopelessly jangled at the manacles that bound the two together. “I don't see any buildings, gramma.”

“I don't either,” the grandmother replied.

They descended a brief, steep path, rounded about a dry, desert bush, and the women saw two sets of shackles, only a few yards away. They were set firmly into the ground with metal spikes.

“I'm scared, gramma.”

“That's what they want you to think,” she said.

They came to the small, flat area. The grandmother could make out several different shoeprints around the spikes in the fine dust. The man uncuffed the grandmother.

“And if I don't play your game?”

The man pointed up the incline. The dark outline of a figure stood sentinel on the path they had just passed. The shadow of a rifle poked out from his silhouette.

The grandmother lay down. The man shackled her arms and legs. The bright sun blinded her eyes.

The young woman started whimpering. “This isn't, this isn't fair…” she muttered.

“They can't leave us here forever,” the grandmother said. “These little shits will be back before sundown.”

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The young woman fought. She struggled, unable to lay a hand on the man because of the cuffs on her. The man limply wrestled her, and let go. She curled into a ball and started crying.

“They can't leave us here,” the grandmother said, “we're going to what's it called. We'll call our lawyer when we get there.” The young woman turned her face up to her. “We'll tell the judge. She'll put these two fuckers in jail. Torture.”

The young woman gave in. He shackled her beside the grandmother, ignoring her mumbled words. “It's not fair, it's not fair…” she said.

“Hey!” The grandmother's voice caught the man as he ascended the path. “Hey you! What's your fucking name?”

He turned around. “Gary,” he said.

“Last name, badge number?”

“Gary White. No badge number. I'm off-duty right now.”

“Explains why you don't got no faggoty uniform on. Hey!” He turned back to face her again. “When do we eat?”

He ascended the path. The grandmother laughed as he and the shadowy figure disappeared from sight.

“Probably my son's piece-of-shit friend,” the grandmother said. She shook the chains. “Probably wants to put the scare in us.”

“We're gonna die, we're gonna die,” the young woman sniveled.

“Mary-Ann. Mary-Ann!” The young woman turned her attention to the grandmother. “I love you like a daughter, you know?”

The young woman nodded.

“Then stop being a blubbery piece of shit and listen to me: they can't leave us here. You remember that sign? We're on government property. This is probably Area 51. Those fuckers probably have cameras up, want to see us shit our pants.”

“I don't think they need a camera for that,” she whimpered.

“We're going to sue them, this Gary, Gary White? - for everything they've got. We're supposed to be in Nevada State, that's what the transfer said, the judge said it, and we're gonna be rich. We're gonna be filthy fucking rich.”

The grandmother smiled. “And you know what? We're gonna hire some guy to shoot this piece of shit, this Gary White. With his own goddamned money. He's gonna wish he'd never done this.”

The young woman nodded and attempted a feeble smile. She turned away and cried.

“Fucking pussy,” the grandmother said.

The sun stood high in the sky. It was likely noon, perhaps a little later. “Can't see,” the grandmother said.

A wind kicked up, and dust blew on their faces. “Mary-Ann,” the grandmother said. “Mary-Ann.”

“Mmmhmm,” she replied.

“At least we don't have to sit in that van anymore. Christ, my ass hurts.”

The young woman took in a deep, quivering breath. “I'm thirsty,” she said blandly.

The grandmother heard the slight crackle of the sun on the dry earth. Wind whooshed on the peaks of desolate outcroppings of rocks, far in the distance. There was the sound of crinkling, perhaps from the wind pushing about dry bushes, or perhaps from a small stream far off. The grandmother could not tell.

“I bet we can just pull these things out.”

She hefted at the shackle. She put her fingers around the thick spike and shook it a little.

“I betcha they just stuck these in the ground. Like a tent spike.”

The grandmother tried for a grip around the spike. She lifted her arm, testing the shackles' leverage against the spike. She tugged at it.

“Come right out.”

The grandmother tugged a few more times. She yanked on the shackle, straight up. The chain attached to the spike and shackle went straight, then limp, at her attempts. The grandmother grunted and lunged with all her might.

“Fuck,” she panted, “fuck. Mine's in solid. Maybe they fucked up on yours?”

The young woman weakly shook her head.

“Can't even try,” the grandmother said.

The grandmother paced her breaths. She sighed, then yawned. “I'm kinda tired. After all that. Just gonna rest.” The young woman made no indication of having heard her. “Try again in a bit.”

The grandmother turned her head away from the glaring sun. Her mouth dipped on the dry dust and she spat. She reached her head toward her hand, and wiped the dust off her lips. “Why, those...” she grunted harshly like a dog.

The sun cast slight shadows from a few bushes. The grandmother judged an hour had passed.

“I hear it gets cold at night, down here,” the young woman said. She huddled into a semi-fetal position, away from the grandmother.

“Nah, it's nice all night. Nice and cool. It's the best time of day.”

“Yeah,” the young woman said weakly.

The wind died down. The young woman saw a dust swirl somewhere off in the distance.

“What do you think about coyotes?” she said.

“I think I'd like to shoot one.”

“Do you think…?”

“Nah,” the grandmother said. “They've got cameras. They'll come and shoot them. Probably already shot them all by now. Government property.”

The young woman shuddered. “I hear they have scorpions. In the desert.”

“They do.”

“They can't shoot all'a them.”

“No, they can't.”

The bush crackled in the sun.

“They live in your shoes,” the grandmother said.

“I don't want no scorpions in my shoes,” the young woman whimpered.

“Mary-Ann,” she said, “they go in there when you take them off. That's why you don't just put on your shoes, like when you go camping.” The grandmother sighed.

“That's true,” the young woman said.

“They can't get in your shoes if you've got feet in them,” the grandmother said.

The young woman nodded.

The grandmother spat out some dust.

“I'm sorry, little girl, I'm sorry,” the young woman mumbled.

“Shut up.”

Dust caked in their sweat. The sun cast longer shadows off the rocks nearby, off the cliffs in the distance. “Finally,” the grandmother said, “it'll be night. Night's cool like the beach. Can't see a goddamned thing. Goddamned sun.”

“My face is warm, gramma.”

“That's probably a sunburn. From the sun all day.”

“I know, gramma.”

“What, you want some sunscreen then?” The grandmother spat. “You want me to rub some fucking sunscreen on it for you?” The grandmother struggled with her shackles. “What the fuck you say that for?”

The young woman sniffled.

“That's right,” the grandmother said, “you just shut the fuck up.”

A grasshopper jumped about. The grandmother followed its irregular path. Slight colors shifted from the sun. A mini-sunset started glowing off in the distance. “The night will cool off your cheek,” the grandmother said.

“Sunset's pretty,” the young woman said.

The grandmother arched her neck. The shackles rang as she tried to point above her head.

“You see that over there,” she said.

The young woman stayed curled.

“You see that? All the black suits? Lawyers, just waiting for something to happen. Then we'll sue them.” She snorted. “This? Anyone can do this, doesn't matter. Something's gotta happen first, then we'll sue them. That's where the money's at. The fucking judge.” She pointed again. “You see them up there? On that rock?”

“I saw, gramma.”

“Those fucking lawyers,” she laughed. “Can't blame them, they gotta make a dime, too.”

“Yeah,” she said.

The sun disappeared. Night set in, and stars started to appear in the clear sky.

“It's cold,” the grandmother said.

She heard a howl off in the distance. “It's probably on the other side of the fence,” the grandmother said.

“Didn't see no fence,” the young woman whispered.

The grandmother sighed. Crickets chirped. A crackle sounded off in the distance. “Probably a fox,” the grandmother said.

“Probably a fox,” the young woman said.

The crackle died down. “Foxes don't eat people,” the grandmother said. “My daddy trapped one, once. I was little.”

The young woman sighed.

“They're pretty things, foxes. Got into the coop, though. Can't have them get into the coop.”

The young woman shivered. “We did wrong, gramma.”

“We didn't mean to.”

“Yes we did, gramma.”

“We didn't know,” she said.

The wind pushed a soft rustle through a bush.

“We coulda just let her to stop and got a cup of...”

The young woman trailed off. She cried softly. The grandmother looked over and saw her shivering. Her cries became a muted snoring.

The grandmother sighed. She stared into the pitch of the sky. “You out here and you thinking about water. The things you do, you don't take them back if they stink to you later. You gotta take what is.” She yawned. “Lied about them lawyers,” she said. “Just wanted you to feel better. You goddamn baby.” She shook her head. “Just rest. For now.”

Her eyes darted across the night sky. “Haven't looked at the stars. Not since I was a little girl.” A pang of regret bit her. “Ant on my neck.” She bent her neck toward her hand and attempted to flick it

off. “You little bastard…” she reached harder. “Dammit.” The grandmother bent upward and landed down harshly. “Fucking ant.” She banged about a few more times. She lay back and relaxed. “Oh, goddamn. Fuck it.” She stared into the sky and panted. “Too fucking cold.”

She stared at the crescent in the sky. “Moon's out,” she said. “you'll miss it.”

Later the sun pierced into the grandmother's eyes. She shifted onto her other side, away from her daughter-in-law. “Just thirsty,” she said. “Could use some drink or something.”

The desert came back into focus again. There was the bush on the incline, with three sets of shoeprints making their way down to the small clearing where she was held. Her wrists hurt. “Mary-Ann, wake up.”

“Mary-Ann.”

The sunrise came over the young woman's skull. Her hair was long and dark, tangled with reddish dirt. The wind blew it softly.

“Mary-Ann, wake up,” the grandmother said.

She lay huddled toward the sunrise, as if stretching toward its warmth.

“Some people can sleep all day. Whatever. Not like we're going anywhere.”

The grandmother shielded her eyes from the sun. “Your parents must've shit you right out, huh?” She peeked at her daughter-in-law from under her hand. “Sleep a lot.”

She turned on her back. “You lucky bitch.”

The sun slowly crept higher. The slight reds and solar hues diminished quickly, and soon the sun was a ball of yellow-white fury. “God damn,” the grandmother said.

“God damn it.”

She sighed. “Well, I gotta...” She twisted about, restrained by chains. “Fucking assholes.” Warmth crept down her thighs, and the soil darkened. “Fuck. It'll dry out.”

She rubbed her nose; it was moist. “Least I didn't shit myself. Fucking disgrace,” she said. She looked at her finger. There was

thick fluid and blood on it. “God damn, what the...” She gently touched her face; it'd stopped burning, and was numb now. Her fingers cautiously dabbed the blisters forming on her cheek. “Jesus,” she said. “Oh god.”

She shivered. “Fucking cold.” She drew a long breath. “I'm going to lose my face, it's going to melt off. I'm going to live in bandages. Fucking christ.” She closed her eyes. “Too fucking bright out.”

She heard flies buzz about. One landed on her wrist, and she flipped it away. “Get at her,” she said, “she's the dead one.”

“Fucking god.”

Her chest heaved. She calmed herself down and attempted to regain control. She drew long breaths. The desert landscape crackled in the sun. “I hope the maggots get at you,” she said.

She drew a hand near to wipe her forehead, and thought better of it. “Dear god,” she said. “Can't even dry my own sweat. Fucking god.” She sounded a hollow laugh. She turned on her side and vomited. “Ugh,” she muttered.

She heard a loud whoosh and flapping. She opened her eyes to a vulture, almost waltzing, on the desert sand, just beyond her daughter-in-law. “You go, you git!” she yelled. “You fucking git!” Her voice gave out, hollow like a shadow.

The vulture stood, staring.

The grandmother waited. It waddled in place. It crept closer to her daughter-in-law, and extended its neck. The grandmother rattled the chains around her arms, and it jumped back. Another vulture flew down, a couple yards away, and the first vulture turned and squawked at it.

“You two fucking eat each other, now,” she said. She closed her eyes and sighed. The vultures argued.

“It's not that bad,” she said. “You stop feeling the pain. It's not all that bad,” she said. “I hope that fucking scorpion, or what-the-fuck, I hope it goddamned hurt. You lucky cunt. You fucking lucky...”

A cruel smile came over the grandmother. “I bet you fucked it. I bet you paid it to fuck it.” She laughed hoarsely. “You fucking bitch, I shoulda known.”

The sun traced higher. The shadow from the bush on the incline shortened. “God, I gotta shit, too. God damn it.” She gulped dryly. “They're gonna find the two of us out here, shit our pants, gonna think we were fucking pussies.” She shivered. “Think we goddamned cried ourselves to death, huh?” She exhaled deeply. “Fuck, they're going to have to clean it up.” The grandmother grunted. She shifted about. “Fuck,” she said. “Fuck, I'll just do it later.”

The squawking grew louder. There was another voice or two in the argument. “Come on now,” the grandmother said quietly, “there's plenty of her to go around. You fucking vultures.”

“What?”

The squawking continued. She huddled into herself and closed her eyes, as if straining to hear something. The vultures' small feet padded about in the dust, and they flapped their wings slowly. “What was that? Fuck you,” she said.

“Shut up,” she said. “Goddamn shut up.”

The squawkings grew quieter and closer. “Please goddamn shut up already,” she said.

She felt a beak cut at her. The grandmother drew her sight to an oily-feathered vulture. Its eyes were wet. “Try, you little bastard,” she said. The vulture tried for another peck, and her hand darted up and grabbed its throat. She heard the other vultures fly back. It attempted a few feeble caws. “Gary you piece of shit,” she said, “I'll wring your goddamned neck.” Her grip grew tighter around the vulture, and its eyes bulged slightly. “Fucking kill you, cocksucking bastard,” she said. She drew her fingernails into its neck, and her hand starting shaking. “Son of a bitch…” Her hand lost its strength and the vulture withdrew from her grip, dazed and hacking. “Piece of shit,” she said.

The grandmother panted. “So this is it,” she said, closing her eyes again. “Fuck. Shoulda used the goddamn chain,” she said.

The squawks grew distant. A chorus of caws grew more insistent. “Shut up already,” the grandmother said to the corpse. “I just saved you now.”

The vultures shuffled about on the dust. “And then I'll go to hell,” she said. Another flapped down into the group.

A shiver shot through the grandmother. She calmed her nerves and stuck her tongue out. “Dry,” she said. She opened her mouth, and bit down on it. “Owfmph.” She tried again, weaker the second time. She slowly dragged her rough tongue back in. “Christ,” she said, “fucking christ. Can't even-”

She turned her head toward her daughter-in-law, her eyes still closed. “So this is what it's like,” she said.

“You just keep yapping,” she said.

The cacophony of birds quieted down. She heard them shuffle closer again. “You know,” she said. “You know that fox?” The grandmother patted the ground with her hand. “My daddy, he followed that fox. She had pups in her hole.” She shivered. “They was beautiful.” She drew another breath and calmed herself. “He reached in and grabbed them, drowned them one-by-one. Said they just starve without their mom, put them out of their misery.” She shook her head. “I watched him drown each one, in the trough. Fox pups, now they yip a lot.” She sniffled. “I miss him. I do.”

“Things you just do, sometimes.” Her voiced wavered. “Them pups sure do yip.”

She yawned and rested her eyes. The desert sounds seemed to quiet. “What?” The grandmother turned her head to the side, straining to hear. “What now?”

Her body relaxed a bit. “Why,” she said, “why dead girl, you're gone, but? But laughin'... laughin' at me?”

Her heart beat faster. “No, not laugh… a smile… but why, jus' say it why? Say.”

She shook slightly. “Wha...? Wha said...?”

Another shiver ran through her. “I don'... wha you mean...?” She turned her head slightly.

“I don' unnerstan', I-”