

To Make Way for the Future

by Sharon Hurlbut

It was the shock of black hair twisted into a long thick braid that got our attention and made us want to find meaning here. Albert thought he recognized the hair in the grave. By the time he got to the cemetery most of it had been uncovered. He didn't like coming out first thing in the morning when there was enough chill in the air to show his breath. He said it looked too much like a ghost.

In our haste we'd forgotten how the desert holds bodies, preserving them like dried souvenirs. Albert wouldn't even look at the bones. Some still had tissue clinging to the surface — wedged into joints or flaking in tattered layers from the skin. The smell of putrefaction wasn't obvious at first. That came later, suddenly, with exposure to the air. And of course there was all that hair.

Digging up the flesh and bone of people buried within living memory was hard, and hardest for the native workers. Most leaned on shovels and stared away from the graves, looking toward the red mountains that cast long, sacred shadows in the east. Some couldn't keep their eyes off the cottonfields across the road where the rows of plants were overshadowed by a billboard. It advertised the future, coming soon. Others just kept digging, glancing up occasionally at the cars that snaked past the drive-thru cigarette stand on the corner.

Bulldozers waited nearby, silent and ominous, their metal tongues lolling on the ground. They hungered for earth. They loomed over our conversations by day and rumbled through our dreams at night. We lifted bone quickly from the graves. We collected boots, bits of pottery, and the slivered remnants of simple wooden coffins. Soon

the machines would scrape these pits away. They would smooth out the cemetery's hillocks and erase the landscape of the past.

Albert sat stiffly on an upturned bucket and told us he'd never wanted the new road, the shiny casino, the money. His voice was low but it carried across the maze of empty and half-open graves. He preferred this place silent, with only the dead breathing a dusty wind. Albert spat into the weeds and stood slowly.

Walking through the cemetery with deliberation, Albert kept his head cocked to one side. He muttered ancient words as if repeating a catechism from an elder. We never asked what he heard when he paused by a grave or held a thin strip of cracked and peeling boot leather. We simply followed and listened.

He wouldn't touch the hair, though he held a trembling hand above it. We stood back and waited between the bulldozers and the graves, a wall of human hearts separating the past and the future. Albert was connected to this place by a palpable presence bound in bone and wrapped in his grandmother's long black hair. We put time in our pockets and held it there while he said farewell again.

