

Jornada Del Muerto
a drunkard's tale

by Edward Tyndall

At first, the black lines cast by the window bars of the drunk tank were a mystery, and the pain in his body a specter. Then the shadows became the field plots of the Llano Estacado he had crossed on his run from Louisiana. He remembered the night before, a patchwork quilt of images that evoked a familiar sense of dread for the suffering to come. He sat up from his dank bedding and puked.

He was somewhere north of Las Cruces and going by the name Billy O'Shea. Now he stood with his hands gripping the pitted iron bars of the cell like a bandit he'd seen in movies. His short stature and slight frame cut a pitiful figure. His red hair curled slightly around his ears. A mustache was barely

evident above his thin upper lip, and his right eye was half closed, a reminder of a beating he probably had coming to him.

He watched the Sheriff approach down the narrow hallway, a ragged Deputy in tow. The Sheriff looked to be in his sixties, a sun-worn Hispano with deep wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, arroyos cutting through the long-suffering earth.

The Sheriff stopped in front of the bars and pulled out a pack of White Horse cigarettes. He shook one out and extended it to O'Shea, who leaned forward and took it with his mouth, not moving his hands from the bars. The Deputy stepped in from the side and lit the cigarette with a brass Zippo. It was then that O'Shea noticed the coiled rope in the Deputy's left hand.

"What's your name, cabron?" the Sheriff asked.

"O'Shea," he said, still eying the rope.

The Deputy threw the rope around a heavy joist running along the ceiling, then tied it off to an iron ring coming out of the mud-brick wall. O'Shea could see the noose tied at the other end. The Deputy slid a chair from against the wall and positioned it under the noose.

"Where you from?" the Sheriff asked.

"Georgia," O'Shea answered, his voice shaking.

"Born in Georgia, hung in New Mexico," the Sheriff said.

The Deputy opened the cell door. The two men grabbed O'Shea by his arms and moved him toward the noose.

"Wait, wait," O'Shea said, dropping the cigarette from his mouth.

It smoldered for a moment before a boot crushed it. The Deputy slipped the noose around O'Shea's neck, and the two men hoisted him onto the chair by his arms. The Deputy pulled the slack on the rope until it was tight, and O'Shea was balancing on his toes, then they fastened his hands behind his back with a belt.

"Why aren't you fighting in Korea?" the Sheriff said.

"They wouldn't take me."

"You been in trouble before. That's why they wouldn't take you," the Sheriff said.

The Deputy pulled harder on the rope. O'Shea began to lose his footing.

"You're a grifter," the Deputy said.

"I ain't done nothing to get hung for," O'Shea said, his voice desperate and rasping.

"Look around," the Sheriff said, gesturing with a calloused hand, "We can do anything we want."

Suddenly, the Deputy kicked the chair from under O'Shea, and he hung by his neck, twisting and kicking beneath the ancient joist.

"The jig of death," the Deputy said, grinning. "Wish I had me a fiddle."

The Sheriff pulled out a cigarette and lit it for dramatic effect. He took a long drag. O'Shea's legs stopped kicking. Smoke drifted out of the window, the bars splitting it like tumultuous water. O'Shea watched the smoke and remembered how he had longed for water on the Llano Estacado. He remembered the intermittent crops giving way to plains of grass as he moved west, the bleached buffalo bones, and the sound of wind through sorghum. He thought of what he'd done in Louisiana, and he was ashamed.

After a few moments, the Deputy pulled a knife and cut the rope near the iron ring. O'Shea fell hard to the ground.

"Leave my county," the Sheriff said.

"I will," O'Shea said, his voice eggshell thin.

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O'Shea had been walking for over an hour through the soul-bending heat toward a small store in the distance. When he finally arrived, he was desperate. He stood for a while looking at the false façade so common in those parts. A sign over the door read *Garza and Vasquez General Merchandise*. Under that, in small red letters, were the words *Indian Jewelry, Old Rocks, Whiskey*.

O'Shea pushed the door open. Rusting bells attached to the door clanked, and a man behind the counter looked up. When he saw O'Shea, his face turned dour.

"You got a lot of nerve coming back in here," the man said.

O'Shea extended his hand toward the man, palm up.

"Let me have one drink," O'Shea said, his thirst obscene now. "I can work for it."

The man slid a short-barreled shotgun from behind the counter and leveled it at O'Shea.

"How old are you?" the man asked.

"Twenty-nine," O'Shea said.

"You'll not see thirty."

#

By noon O'Shea found himself at the edge of a short cliff that gave way to a field of ghostly hoodoos. They flattened out to an endless shimmering plain. To the east, the Doña Ana mountains rose above the desert like wolves' teeth, sharp and cruel. The sun was high now, and the heat felt like it was coming from inside him. He took shade in the shadows of crumbling adobe walls that had once been a fort for Buffalo Soldiers. Now, the walls hunched across the low ridge like some ragged troop melting back into the earth disheartened to oblivion.

O'Shea sat for a while and thought of home. He remembered a time early on he'd killed a songbird out of curiosity. He'd followed behind it with his shotgun as it walked. He had watched

it for several yards before pulling the trigger and scattering it into a thousand pieces, the soft feathers floating down after the catastrophe of buckshot like the melody of his mother's songs.

Rye Whiskey, Rye Whiskey

Rye Whiskey, I cry

If I don't get Rye Whiskey

I surely will die

He had been unable to sleep that night and had returned to the scene of the killing, out in the farm pasture, where the plow had confirmed other deaths from a great battle many years ago: a belt buckle, a twisted rifle barrel, a silver bridge of teeth. He knelt under the quarter moon, gathering what feathers he could find, tears on his cheeks, before carrying the feathers back to the family graveyard and spreading them over the grave of his drunkard father.

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The desert sun reached its zenith and O'Shea looked across the vast plain. In a wavering mirage, he saw two riders approaching. They were wrapped in black rags, their heads tilted down toward the dust. When the horses got closer, the riders disappeared, a product of the mirage perhaps. Now O'Shea could see that the horses were roans, a mare and a yearling.

He watched them for a long time until they reached the edge of the escarpment. They were close enough now for him to see the panic in the mare's eyes. The yearling followed her as she tried to make her way up a draw, but the ground was dry and gave way. Her muzzle foamed and her eyes rolled sideways, exposing great orbs of white like a drowning man.

O'Shea made his way down to the horses with a length of hemp rope from the fort's midden pile. He led them up the draw one at a time, choosing the path with the best footing. At the top of the draw, the mare's hoof unearthed a rusted tin box. O'Shea let his hand slide down her sleek side, feeling the rib bones through the hide, then watched the horses move off to the east in search of water.

He returned to the box and pulled it the rest of the way from the earth. It was bitterly rusted with the design of a flower hand-punched into the tin. He opened it slowly. First, he pulled a delicate bird skull from the box, of what kind he couldn't say. Then he pulled a bundle of creosote tied with a faded purple ribbon. Underneath was a yellowed piece of paper that simply said, 'Dear Mother, I cannot find the words.' Crudely drawn under this was a scene of horror, the bodies of Apaches butchered and splayed beneath a childlike sun.

When he removed the drawing, he found a cache of silver coins stamped 1870. His heart soared at the sight of them, and

he flipped one into the air. It spun the golden light like fish scales struck by the sun. The coin seemed to hang in the air for an unusual amount of time, filled with possibility. When it landed, it was on the bar of the Buckhorn Saloon, and O'Shea was ordering his first whiskey, a light in his eyes that had been gone for fifteen hours.

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The Buckhorn was cool, dark, and smelled of piss. A few roughhewn men sat slumped over their whiskey like starved dogs guarding meat. On the walls were the heads of a cougar, boar, and wolf, the wood of their taxidermy frames showing through the decaying fur. An untouched fiddle hung over the stone hearth. As O'Shea drank his whiskey, the electric buzz overtook him, and the world shifted to the vivid euphoria that marked relief from his shaking and nauseous hell.

When the two Apaches came in with their ink-black hair and Anglo concubine, O'Shea was already drunk, and the sight of them offered an excitement not given by the dull-eyed men that had been his drinking companions. The trio made their way to the bar, and the woman spoke first. Her hair, the color of dry tobacco, and her pock-marked face masked a beauty that was being resurrected by the whiskey in O'Shea's blood.

"Drinks for me and my friends," she said to the bartender.

"You got money?" the bartender asked.

"Yeah."

"Show it to me."

O'Shea spoke up from his spot at the bar. "Their first is on me," he said and laid down a silver dollar.

The Anglo woman turned and smiled at him.

The taller Apache extended his hand toward O'Shea.

"Obliged," he said.

O'Shea shook the hand vigorously.

"Don't be bringing trouble here," the bartender said to the two Apaches.

"We're just passing through," the shorter one said.

"To where?" O'Shea asked.

"Up the Jornada Del Muerto," he said. "If you can get through that, there's work to the North."

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A gray wolf whimpered alone in the sage that dotted the arid hills above the saloon. Something was born and something died in the cold rock crevices that held the darkness like corpse hands cupping the ebony water of cypress swamps. The clock over the bar had long since stopped. O'Shea held the fiddle from the fireplace mantel. He shook it a few times and let the snake rattle hidden inside clear the cobwebs from the spruce and maple body. He tucked the chinrest low at his left shoulder, the old way, as he'd been taught. The whiskey spilled

into the glasses, a beautiful amber that caught the light from the fire now blazing in the stone hearth. O'Shea felt like he was floating in space, and he admired more and more the kind eyes of the Anglo woman. He pulled the bow across the ancient guts. A high squeal drew all eyes to him. He began to play. It was a hypnotic tune that spun the whiskey in all the men and carried their minds to things long given up on. It built, it built, it built, and the Apaches were moved to shuffle-step in circles, a wild-eyed magical reeling. O'Shea cried out, "This is the Bonaparte, the Bonaparte!" then moved into the final notes, and the sound of the fiddle was the voice of the whiskey flowing through the room like life-giving water.

When O'Shea pulled the last note across the strings, the others were exhausted by the ecstasy. The room was quiet except for the popping of pinyon sap in the hearth and the low collective breathing of the men. It was into that room that the Deputy stepped, drunk himself from some lonesome binge at the edge of town. When the Deputy saw O'Shea, his eyes lit with the fire of small men insulted.

"Get out," the Deputy said, his words joined together in the manner of a man not cut out for hard drinking. The Apaches protested.

"He ain't done nothing," the tall one said.

The Deputy's ire turned. "Out," he said. "You Indians and the cracker."

They walked into the cool night, and the Deputy followed. The shorter Apache climbed into the driver's seat of a battered Ford, but the Deputy moved between the others and blocked their way.

"You got no right to bother with us," the taller Apache said.

"What are you doing so far from the reservation?" the Deputy asked.

He pulled out a cigarette and lit it with his brass Zippo. Before he could inhale, O'Shea hit him from behind with a rock. The blow knocked the lit Zippo into the dust. The Deputy went face first behind it, and the blood, matting his black hair, caught the moonlight like a mire of his cruel ideas. O'Shea bent down and picked up the Zippo. He fished the cigarettes out of the Deputy's pocket and grabbed his service revolver from his hip.

"Wait for me," he said to the taller Apache.

They did, and when O'Shea returned from robbing the Buckhorn, he was carrying an armful of whiskey bottles. As the Ford pulled onto the road that cut north through the Jornada Del Muerto, O'Shea leaned out the rear window and fired a shot. He passed one of the bottles up to the Apaches in front. The Anglo

woman looked at O'Shea and smiled, and in the darkness, she seemed the only kindness for a thousand miles.

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O'Shea drank and looked up at the sky through the dingy car window. The night burned with a bright swath of stars that cut through the middle like a mysterious river. The car was quiet, and O'Shea let his head list to the shoulder of the Anglo woman as she slept. She smelled of cigarette smoke and gamey sweat. Soon, her head rested on O'Shea, and he took this for more than simple shifting in sleep. He turned his mouth to her neck. He parted his dry lips and kissed her gently. She shifted and the tires hummed on the rough road, and everything was a strange and drunken dream. He felt he had been traveling this way forever, moving through a shadowland where the shapes of things only suggested what was real. He could still see the river of stars through the opposite window and the dark outlines of the jagged mountains. He was free of pain, and he moved his hand under the Anglo woman's shirt and felt her warm skin. When she came too and realized what was happening, she was incensed.

"Get off me," she said and moved away.

Before he knew it the car was stopped, and O'Shea was being pulled out, the pistol skidding across the hardpack out of reach. The Apaches delivered him a ruthless beating, and the rocks pressed into his face as he lay on the road, trying to

protect himself. He was aware that he was pleading for clemency but wasn't sure what he was saying. Soon, the two men stopped. O'Shea sat up slightly leaning on his elbow, like a woman in a Rococo painting. He could already feel the throbbing pain in his face. He could taste the hot and salty blood running down the back of his throat.

The taller Apache spoke up, "We were going to help you," he said. "Now we're fixing to leave you."

"What is this place?" O'Shea asked.

"You'll find out when the sun comes up," the Anglo woman said.

They began to climb back into the car.

"Wait," O'Shea said. "Leave me something to drink."

The shorter Apache pulled out a canteen and threw it near O'Shea.

"No," O'Shea said. "Whiskey."

The other Apache reached back into the car and rolled a bottle toward O'Shea.

"You're a dead man," the Anglo woman said.

"Don't I know it," O'Shea said, then watched the car's taillights disappear into the distance.

#

O'Shea saw the sunrise as a god bent on vengeance. He climbed a nearby point of rocks that rose above the surrounding

plateau. The rocks were an unusual shade of black that stood out against the endless sand and chaparral of the valley. When he gained the top, his skin was cool with evaporating sweat. He took survey of the whiskey he had, half a bottle, a day at best. He looked north to an array of conical domes, striated with reds, browns, and whites. To the south, cyclones of dust spun mutely into demise. West lay a line of distant barren mountains, and to the east, the Doña Anas rose, close and vicious.

He uncorked the whiskey and hit the bottle for the first time that day. It burned his maw and sent a rush of fire into his veins, filling some hollow spot he knew would return again and again and again. He waited on the rocks for someone to pass until the sun became unbearable. To escape it, he began to excavate a small shelter under one of the larger boulders. As he did, he unearthed a faded blond braid that trailed from a scalp cut ragged from the skull. He lay in his scrape, running his thumb over the braid as if some macabre rosary, and remembered a song from long ago.

Oh death, oh death

How can it be

That I must come

And go with thee?

When night came, a quarter of the bottle remained. He scrambled from his shelter and let the cool desert wind blow

against his face. To the east, he saw a campfire spark to life and tremble against the black and jagged Doña Ana range. He took a drink from the bottle and headed toward the distant fire.

By the time he reached the mountains, the sun was rising, and the visage of the campfire had long since faded to nothing. He stared up at the rocks dotted with horse crippler and creosote. Above him, he saw a line of caves and used the last of his strength to climb to them. When he arrived at a significant height, he moved into one and lay down on the cool rock. He drank the last of the whiskey and waited for hell to come on.

He slept for most of the day and when he woke, a chill had come, and his hands began to shake from lack of drink. He forced himself out of the cave and collected what dry scrub he could. He piled it inside and used the Deputy's Zippo to light a small fire. He pushed close to it for warmth, and his body began to convulse and shake. Then he lost consciousness.

When he came to, he was covered in sweat, and his hands trembled uncontrollably. His calves seized in ruthless spasms. One leg contracted so tightly his heel touched his lower back, and his hands turned inward like the claws of a monster. He fainted and revived, fainted and revived, fainted and revived.

After many hours, a strange and frightening procession began. First, the Stag Horned Man entered the cave and sat next to O'Shea, a serpent in one hand and a brass torc in the other.

Next came long-tailed boar and a ram-headed snake. Winged lions followed, convulsing the air in agitation and making way for a host of shield-bearing men, some hoisting the carnyx and producing an indescribable din that mixed with the howls and screams of the maddened animals. Then, the riders in black rags arrived on the backs of the roans. The horses chomped their bronze bits and pawed the ground in frenzy. The walls of rock seemed to twist and melt, returning to a molten infancy. The procession moved around O'Shea in circles, whirling, whirling, whirling as his body writhed on the stone floor. Finally, a figure so horrible entered that O'Shea prayed for death. It was the Wolf-headed Man, stripped nude to the waist and streaked with blue woad, his breath rich with carrion. The ravenous figure cocked its head and lapped its tongue, moving close to O'Shea's face, then away, then close again, opening its eyes wide in a ritual dance that so terrified O'Shea, he thrust himself further into the cave and was hemmed in on all sides. He pushed and scraped with bleeding heels until he passed through a tight opening and plunged into freezing black water. He was consumed and felt his body tumbling through the inner recesses of the mountain and gave himself over to death. He was there for a day or years, tumbling, tumbling, lost.

Rye Whiskey, Rye Whiskey

Rye Whiskey, I cry

If I don't get Rye Whiskey

I surely will die

When he surfaced, he saw the faintest of light piercing the blackness amidst the veins of quartz and copper. He caught a rock at the edge of the stream and pulled himself toward the light. He used his fingers to scrape away the earth until the hole was big enough to squeeze his nude and tattered body through. Finally, he was out, and he rolled onto a carpet of lush grass that overlooked a valley of unbearable beauty.

It was here that the Ute Woman found O'Shea at dawn, curled like a fawn in the dew. She led him back to her wattle and daub jacal and put him to rest under a tightly woven Chief's blanket of Churro wool. She made him clothes of soft buckskin and fed him rich broths and greens until he was strong enough to rise with the sun and slowly walk the grasslands of the high valley.

Over time, he was well enough to help her with her tasks of harvesting rice grass, dandelion, and pine nuts. They would snare birds together: pheasant, quail, and turkey. They would grind nut flour in deep impressions worn into the stone by pestles, scraping, scraping, scraping since the beginning of time. In the mornings he would climb the high peaks and look out over the endless land that offered no hint of human habitation. At dusk they would sit at a wooden table in the open air and eat, savoring rich stews of beans and the delicate flesh of

birds. Sometimes, she would collect the small buttons of peyote and be gone for a day or more, but always returned, and he would have food and fire waiting for her. He grew to love her in these times, and she to love him. She taught him the simple sign language of the plains, and they traded words for important things like fire, water, and love.

#

She had been gone for two days when he discovered the hammered copper pitcher in the recesses of an earthen dugout used for storage. It was nestled among the dry beans and chilis, and when he picked it up to admire its fine patinaed texture, he knew what was inside.

He carried it into the open air, and as the sunlight hit the amber inside, the valley became alive with voices whispering in an ancient Gaelic or Brythonic he didn't understand, but that carried great weight in his heart. He put the pitcher to his mouth and drank, and the valley turned to a dim shadowland, and he knew this thing inside him came from a dark and ancient place, down across the centuries, and was peculiar to his kind.

He sat by the river when the mezcal was done and watched the slow-grazing rabbits that filled the fields around him. They wandered close to him, unafraid, as the songbird had done in his youth. He could reach out and touch them, but when dusk came, the owls came with their wide eyes and sharp talons. They dove

from the knife-edged rocks and took what they wanted. O'Shea watched the rabbits silhouetted against the darkening sky, victims of a ruthless gluttony that pushed the blackness out of the mountain and consumed the fast-dying light with the dread beat of wings. He tried to stop the owls, to ward them off, or run the rabbits to cover, but the owls were too many and the carnage too quick. Finally, he sat back down on the bank and wept as the rabbits that remained moved off to their warrens in a slow and somber dirge.

When she found him there, he stood abruptly and asked her for more, pointing to the empty pitcher, but she had no more. He grabbed her arm and raised his hand to strike her, but she hit him first, and he tasted blood.

"Let me go back! Let me go back!" He said, desperate and shaking.

#

In the morning, she roused him from his spot along the outer wall of the house and compelled him to follow her. They traveled through the day, and at dusk, arrived at a cavern cut into massive red rocks that tilted like the ruined tables of giants. They entered, and she made a small fire. When the orange flames spun up, they revealed a series of strange images painted on the roof and walls. Directly above him, a nightmarish worm flickered in the firelight, a human head protruding from its

mouth. On the walls were images of deer and antelope and human handprints in hematite and limonite. Here, she ate the peyote and began a song that struck O'Shea dumb with sadness. He watched her as her visions came, and at their height she turned to him, her face drawn tight like a death mask, and he understood that this was the way to use his people's medicine.

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They spent the next day hunting the agave plant, spotting it along the ridges by the quiote rising from the daggered piña. They cut the pencas away, their hands pierced and bleeding until they could uproot its heavy heart. These they carried to a bed of coals in a shallow pit by the river. They spread the piñas there, covered them with deer hide and dirt, and let them smolder for two days.

She did not let him eat or drink, and by the time they uncovered the piñas, he had long since passed through the first sufferings of his fast. Then, he used a wooden mortar he had hewn to crush the piñas into a thick mash. This they stewed with water and saliva in the hides of sheep, and now she allowed him mouthfuls of water at dawn and dusk.

When the mezcal was finished, she poured the golden liquid into the pitcher. At dawn, he carried it up the arduous path to the highest peak. By the time he arrived, the sun was setting. He sat and drank from the pitcher, and as he did, the road

through the Jornada Del Muerto appeared again, and on it, he could see the riders on the roans and the Wolf-headed Man, his woad-streaked body muted by dust. O'Shea knew that he could go back to the road if he wanted, and he was overcome by a dread desire to do so, but he didn't. He only watched as the weary travelers slouched endlessly through the desert below. As the drink wore off, the Jornada Del Muerto disappeared, and O'Shea returned to the Ute Woman in the valley. He confessed to her what he'd done in Louisiana, and she forgave him. The days and nights passed, and O'Shea could not say if he had been in the valley for a month, a day, or had always been there. They lived their lives simply and O'Shea never made the mezcal again. Each night as he slept, he dreamt his body lay on the arid ridges of the mountains like the time-shackled bones of a taibhsear, and that his sun-leathered hide sprouted the daggered agave and thrust up the delicate white flowers high above the valley that held their love.

Rye Whiskey, Rye Whiskey

Rye Whiskey, I cry

The End