

FATHER'S LAND

By
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The midday sun beat down mercilessly on the desert landscape as I looked through the cracked windshield of my truck. I took a sip of water as I drove south on Interstate 25 through southern New Mexico. The red brown soil was dotted with creosote bush and mesquite with an occasional bunch of grama grass interspersed between them. I might not be in the middle of nowhere, but I wasn't far from it.

The green interstate sign said 15 miles to my exit.

Marty Robbins crooned out "Devil Woman" on the truck speakers. I smiled as I thought of my dad. God how he loved that song. Not really sure why. Fondly, I remembered family road trips during the 1970's in a baby blue Lincoln Continental with its 8 track player blasting out Marty Robbins, the Moody Blues, and a healthy dose of Opera as we traveled through the southwest desert.

The tires hummed on the asphalt as I drove down the road. Not much to see, but thousands of memories to look at. Up ahead I saw my exit. Just a number marked it. I took my foot off the accelerator. As I turned off, two blue highway signs greeted me. One bore the title of 'Food', the other 'Attractions', both signs were otherwise empty.

I hit the brakes hard as the short off ramp quickly deteriorated. Rapidly progressing from smooth asphalt to numerous potholes as I descended down from the interstate. Soon the road started to crumble apart and by the time I reached the cattle guard at the end, the asphalt had broken into large chunks of road interspersed with dirt. At the stop sign I turned left onto a dirt road heading east.

As I drove I left the last vestige of modern society. The cattle guard told me this was open range land. No fences and a free for all who chose to wander down to these lands. The truck bumped along a washboard, single track dirt road with no known destination. But I knew where I was going. I had been here years before, when I was a young girl, riding in the passenger seat as my dad took us to his secret world.

I looked out at the desolate landscape before me. From a distance it appeared flat, but that was just an illusion as I drove up and down small hills, like swells in an ocean, as the road twisted and turned. Off in the distance on either side of me were mountain ranges rising up as guideposts in this otherwise monotonous landscape.

“Classic basin and range. Classic.” He would say referring to the geology. I remember looking at him with the complete trust of a child who didn’t have a clue what he was talking about but absolutely believed in his omnipotent knowledge.

About an hour later I began to slow down, I was getting close. Occasionally I would see cattle wandering in between the creosote bush looking for grama grass, or honestly anything edible. Their bony hips swaying with a swagger of a drunk sailor on shore leave.

It had been so many years; would I remember? I had no answer, but I had staked my whole trip on the belief that somehow I would. I pressed the accelerator of the truck as I saw the road curve to the left and go up a partially washed out climb. I bounced around on the seat held in place by my grip on the steering wheel. Soon I ascended the hill and topped out on a flat mesa.

Up ahead in the distance I saw what I was looking for, a lone rock outcropping. However, the southwest desert is so deceptive. What looked like just a short distance turned out to be miles away as the road dipped and turned through the arroyos.

Eventually, I drove up to the outcrop defined by its anticline formation. The purpose of my dad’s initial investigation. He was a petroleum geologist, from an era where these mad souls would leave their families for weeks, sometimes months, to drive hundreds of miles in search of the possibilities of oil deposits.

I recalled looking over at his strong arms, burnt from the sun, holding onto the steering wheel of the stripped down oil company GMC Jimmy as we bumped and jostled over the terrain. He stared out at the land from aviator sunglasses, his salt and pepper hair slightly receded from his forehead. The windows rolled down because the air conditioner didn't work. The dust rose up and filtered in, covering everything. I could smell the sagebrush as we drove.

"You see that curve in the rock?" He asked me. "That's why we are here. That my dear girl is an anticline. And that's where oil hides."

"Are we going to find oil today Daddy?" I asked innocently.

He looked over at me and smiled. "Maybe, baby girl, maybe."

It wasn't until I was much older that I understood that my dad was what they called a "wildcatter." Loosely translated, that meant he was a geologist who also was a gambler. Like a card player looking for that winning hand to strike it rich, my father scoured the desolate areas of the western United States looking for that oil field that would be his black gold.

As I approached my destination, I pulled the truck slightly off the road next to some mesquite. I turned off the engine and just sat there in the silence looking at the outcrop. It was now late afternoon and the sun was firmly in the western sky. The rock face shone brightly as its shadow began to lengthen to the east.

Strands of long brown hair fell about my face having come loose from my ponytail during the bumpy drive. I tucked them behind my ears, reached over to the passenger seat and grabbed a wide brimmed straw hat which I then placed on my head. I grabbed an old canvas knapsack and with my left hand I squeezed the door handle. The driver's side door gave a slight creak and my cowboy boots, leather, worn, and cracked, raised a small cloud of dust as I stepped out.

I walked to the back of the truck and let down the tailgate. I set down the knapsack. My fingers, streaked with dust and grime from the drive, undid the snap and flipped back the flap. I

reached in and pulled out a bottle of Jack Daniels and set in on the bed of the truck. Then I reached in and pulled out two whiskey glasses into which each was poured a measure of the amber liquid.

A slight breeze moved through the brush and pushed the loose strands of hair into my eyes. Thoughtlessly, my hands reached up and pushed them back up under my hat. I turned around and hopped up to sit on the tailgate looking at the outcropping and the surrounding open landscape.

Silently I picked up one of the glasses and raised it towards the rocks and then quickly tossed it back in one swallow. The sour acidity enveloped my senses as the fumes burned down my throat and up into my sinuses. My stomach flipped in revolt as the whiskey made its way down.

“Good God, I will never understand why you drank this shit.” I gasped to the void.

The fact was he loved it. Over the years, for Christmas, Father’s day, or his birthday I would buy him the finest bourbons, single malt Scotches, or single pot Irish whiskeys I could find. Each one would just sit on the shelf, untouched.

“Do you remember the last time I was here pops?” I asked as if he was sitting here next to me on the tailgate.

I felt a warm relaxed glow as the effects of the whiskey started to react with my mind and body. I reached over to the bottle and poured some more whiskey into the glass and clinked it to the other glass I had previously filled.

“Well I do.” I said as I took a sip.

I closed my eyes and felt the warmth of the sun on my face. The wind whispered through the brush and trees as it continued on its endless path across the vast open space. A pair of mourning doves cooed to each other. I heard the rustle of sticks and leaves and guessed it to be a thrasher searching for insects. I smiled and let myself wander back in time.

“Alright Carmen, here’s your pack. It’s got water, some trail mix and a light jacket. Remember never set out without the basics for survival.” He said.

“But dad we are just walking over to those rocks, do I have to carry this?” My twelve year old self whined.

“Yes you do. Safety first, right?”

He said it as if it was a question, but I knew better. It was more rhetorical than inquisitive.

“Here look at what I’m taking.”

He sat his backpack on the ground and opened it to show me its contents. I shuffled over, head down. I hated lectures. I looked at him and saw an earnestness in his eyes I’d never seen before. My sullenness disappeared instantly.

“See I got water, a sweater, a jacket, trail mix, and some survival blankets. Over here in the side compartment are matches, a flashlight and a compass. You need to have the basics in case something happens. You need to be able to take care of yourself until either you find a way back or get rescued.”

Dutifully, I looked into his pack. In addition to the items he mentioned, I saw maps, soil sample bags and a small shiny flask. I knew its contents well having seen it many times, either in the inside pocket of his jacket or in his pack.

“I’m sure that’s essential for survival,” I said sarcastically.

His eyes followed my finger pointing to the flask. He snorted out a laugh followed by a self conscious cough.

“Yes, well . . . um . . . a man can’t live by bread alone,” he retorted back with equal sarcasm.

His brow furrowed and he looked up at me with dead seriousness in his eyes.

“Listen, Carmen, it's important that you are prepared. Always. You never know what life is going to throw at you. So take care of the things you can. Life is uncertain. Sometimes you think all is going great and you fail to take care of the basics. Then all of a sudden shit, um, I mean something happens and you are scrambling.”

Silently I stared at him trying to comprehend what he was trying to tell me. Something about him was different. I wanted to reach out and hug him but I didn't know why. So I just stood there.

“Alright, enough of that. Daylight is wasting. We got us some oil to find,” he said jokingly as he reached up and tousled my hair.

Now the whiskey was a comfortable burn as it went down my throat and I exhaled the fumes. The wind was picking up with the late afternoon heat. I watched dust devils dance across the desert floor. Down the road a plume of dust was rising up into the air. Soon an old pickup came up and onto the mesa.

I watched it as it dipped and twisted its way to me. By the time it was a few arroyos away I already knew it was a late 70's or maybe early 80's model. Given its red and white paint job I guessed it to be a Chevy. It was an old game my dad and I played. We would bet on who could first correctly identify any vehicle we would see out on the backroads.

As it rattled over the washboard road I heard the engine roar as the driver clutched and shifted through the uneven terrain. I placed my glass down on the truck bed and waited. Soon the truck came up the last hill before me. Behind the wheel, underneath a large straw cowboy hat, I saw an old man.

The truck slowed down to a stop beside me. I smiled a silent congratulations to myself. Not only did I have the era correct but the side of the truck said Silverado. The man leaned over

to roll down the passenger window, his craggy sunburnt face covered in grey stubble. In the bed of the truck was a large white plastic cistern.

He looked me over but if he was surprised to see a girl, years of living out in this desolate land had honed his poker face.

“Lost?” Was all he said in a gruff voice.

“Nope. Geologist.” I replied deadpan.

He let out a surprised crackled laugh.

“Good lord, I thought y'all had all gone extinct.”

He turned off the engine and shifted in the driver's seat to have a better look at me. I chuckled, I could tell that he was thinking this was going to require further investigation. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a zippo lighter. Deftly he shook a single cigarette up out of the pack, placed it to his lips, flipped the top of the lighter and in a single thumb stroke lit it up. He drew the flame in and snapped the lid closed. Slowly he exhaled and turned his attention back to me.

“Haven’t seen your lot out here in decades. Shit, there was a time you couldn’t turn around without running into one. Hehe, I wouldn’t have minded if they looked like you. What a sorry lot they were. Burnt to shit, filthy, just a bunch of young boys poking at rocks looking for oil.”

He pulled on the cigarette and looked at me closely.

“Of course, ain’t no oil around here, but I suppose you already know that. The oil companies, they did a few dry holes. Then packed up and left. Took all the geologists with them. All these small towns, now just ghost towns. Nobody around to eat in the restaurants, or sleep in the hotels. No drunk roughnecks to fill the bars. So that gets me thinking. What’s a geologist doing out here?”

"I'm surveying. Government wants to know what its land looks like." I lied.

"Oh Jesus Christ! What the hell for? Ain't nothing out here that needs surveying. Jesus! What are they planning to do, put in a shopping mall for Christ's sake."

"Your tax dollars hard at work." I laughed.

I decided to change tactics and go on the offensive. I nodded my head toward the back of his pickup.

"Cattle?"

He coughed and turned his head out the driver's side window to spit.

"Yeah. Got some cows and calves moved down early for the winter. Going to fill a stock tank down at Widow's Wash."

"Lot of work, ranching. My lot might be extinct but your breed is definitely on the endangered list." I said sympathetically.

"God ain't that the truth. And I'm too old to be doing it. But what's a man to do? My son took one look at this life and decided he would rather sell tires in El Paso. My girls are married and live in Las Cruces, neither of their husbands are interested. Lost my wife last year, God rest her soul. So here I am, driving a half broke truck, down some God forsaken road out to nowhere, to take care of some cattle who barely make me enough money to pay the lease fees."

I looked at the lines on his face, the jagged scar across his right cheek and I felt a fondness for this man. His life had not been easy. I could see that. But I could also see he was a decent man.

"I guess we are both fossils out here," I said.

He straightened up and turned on the truck. I knew our conversation was ending. That was the way it is with these old timers.

“Alright you’re not lost, so I’m not going to worry about you. Still think its stupid. Nothing to survey out here that hasn’t already been surveyed. Just a bunch of sand, rocks, and bushes. Nothin’ going to change, not ever.”

Before he drove off he looked one last time at me. I saw a softness in that stoney facade.

“You take care. Don’t stay out too late. It gets awfully dark out here.”

With that he pulled down the front of his hat in farewell. I gave a single hand wave and he drove off.

I stared out. He and my dad, vanishing relics of the west. Now everyone fights about how to “manage” these lands. But almost none of them live out here. Most are part of some group, fundraising to pay their salaries, portraying men like my dad and this man as the villains in their soap opera. But management of these lands is a whole lot more complicated than that. I knew that, as did this gentleman and the few remaining souls who for one reason or the other loved this land and stayed, despite its hardships. Shame they didn’t have a voice at the table.

I grabbed my hat as a gust of wind suddenly whipped up the sand around me. I mused over the old man’s parting words about nothing changing. Not true, the sands are forever shifting and moving. Constantly, changing the landscape. Only fools thought they were on solid ground. My father taught me that.

“Come on Carmen, we are almost up to the top.”

My fingers grasped at the rock as I fought to find a hold to pull myself up. The last part of the trek involved a scramble up a rock face. I struggled to find a foothold, more than once I

slipped out and slid down part way until either my fingers or a foot found a piece of rock jutting out to hold onto.

"I'm scared daddy," I cried.

"You are doing great, little girl. Just keep looking up. You're almost there."

Tears streaked down my face but I believed him and looked for the next possible hand or foot hold on which to pull myself up.

"That's it, Carmen. You're doing great. Don't look down, don't ever look back. Just look up to me and it's all going to be fine. You can do this. Trust me."

I looked up to him and I knew I would be ok. I just needed to keep looking up to him. With my free hand I wiped away the tears and felt a resolve within that I didn't know I had. I placed one hand and pulled, then a foot and pushed, soon I made my way up to his outstretched hand.

"That's my girl," he said as he reached down to me.

We walked up the last few feet to the top. I stood there, full of awe and pride looking out at the valley below. I did it! Now here next to my dad, my heart bursting with love, I leaned into him. I felt his arm across my shoulders as he hugged me into him.

"Come on, let's sit."

He found a spot looking out toward the western sky. We sat and opened our packs. Hungrily I opened the trail mix as he sipped from the water bottle. I sat next to him happy and content. Everything was perfect

He passed his water bottle to me. I tipped it back and greedily gulped down. As I drank, I saw him reach into his pack. His hand fumbled about and eventually pulled out with its prize. He unscrewed the top of the flask and quickly took a sip.

I looked out into the distance. Something was wrong but I didn't know what. It wasn't like he hadn't ever pulled his flask out before and had a couple of nips at it when we would take a rest. But somehow this time was different. Silently, he stared out at the vista. I waited anxiously for him to start telling me about the sea that used to be here millions of years ago. How the dinosaurs roamed along its marshy shores. But he just sat there. My euphoria dissipated and I felt a grip of fear around my heart.

He raised the flask and took a long swallow. With the back of his hand he wiped his mouth and then turned his attention to me.

"Carmen, we need to have a talk. You see . . . um . . . what I mean to say is . . . " He abruptly turned his face away from me and cleared his throat a couple of times before he turned back to face me.

"Listen baby girl there's just no easy way to say this. Your mom and I, well we decided that it's better if we don't live together anymore."

I sat frozen. Nothing was making any sense. He was barely around anyway, always out here working. What was different?

"The fact is your mom needs a husband who is around more than I am. And you, you need a secure and stable home. Not be moving every couple of years. So, see it's really for the best." His voice broke.

Slowly I started to understand.

"Are you and mom getting a divorce?"

"Yes."

I stared out. The only other time I had heard that word was when the mean girls talked about Sally Parker at school. They said she cried all the time and had no friends because her

parents were divorced. Then one day Sally Parker no longer came to school. We were told that her mom had moved back to where she had grown up. And that was all I knew about divorce.

I desperately didn't want to be Sally Parker. I didn't want the mean girls to make fun of me and I didn't want to cry all the time. But mostly I didn't want to lose my dad.

"Can I live with you, daddy?" I pleaded.

He choked back a sob. "No baby, no you can't."

I lowered my head as the tears, silent and furious, flowed. Strange, I thought, how can that ancient sea be dried up because all I felt was its waves crashing down on me. Strong arms wrapped around me and drew me to his chest. I shook with a grief I couldn't comprehend.

"Carmen it's better for you to be with your mom. She loves you so much and she has a good job so you don't need to change schools, or move, or make new friends all the time. And hey, I'm still going to be around. Just not as much, But we will still do things. You're still my baby girl and I love you so much. It's all going to be ok. It is. Trust me."

That was the last time I was here. That was the last time I felt secure. I wiped a tear away and threw back the rest of the whiskey in the glass. Even after all this time the emotions were still just as raw. Of course nothing was ok. Mom went through numerous boyfriends and a couple of husbands. Dad vanished only to reappear on my birthday and Christmas.

I vowed to myself to not be Sally Parker. I stuffed all my emotions deep inside. I became the tough girl, the loner. Contrary to what I was told nothing was secure, nothing was stable. The winds constantly shifted the sands under my feet and to survive I grew up fast.

A year ago he called out of the blue. It wasn't my birthday and it wasn't a holiday. I let it go to voicemail. Whatever was happening I wanted time to absorb it and not be blindsided.

“Hey baby girl, how are you? It's your old man calling. Sorry I haven't been in touch much lately. Just wondering how you are. Well, when you get this message give me a call, please.”

There was a pause and then his voice, feeble and shaking came back on.

“Carmen, please call me. Please. I . . . I miss you.”

It was cancer. By the time I flew to Albuquerque he was in hospice. Everyday we talked, laughed and reminisced. His once strong arms were now just skin over bones, the muscle wasted away. The strong physical man who was my father was gone. Ravaged by time and disease. But his mind and spirit, those still remained.

“Do you remember that place I took you out to around the San Andres Mountains when you were just a girl?”

“Yeah dad I do.”

“I wish we had that day to do over. I wish I had said yes when you asked if you could come live with me. I wish . . .” He broke off crying.

I grabbed his hand and leaned down to hug him in the bed.

“I know dad.” I whispered into his ear.

I poured some more whiskey into the glass and reached into the knapsack again. My hand grasped at a cylindrical urn and pulled it out. I held it in my hands between my legs as I sat on the tailgate. The sun was starting to set and the sky was alive in hues of blue, red, purple and gold.

I grabbed the glass and raised a toast to him.

“Here’s to you pops. I love you. Thank you for everything. The good and the bad. I always knew you loved me. I adored you.”

I slid off the tailgate and staggered a bit. I reached back with my free hand and grabbed the bottle of Jack. I walked up to the base of the outcropping. A small indent in the rock looked perfect for what I intended. I dropped to my knees and placed the urn in the nook. Next to it I placed the whiskey bottle.

Still kneeling, I rocked back on my heels and stared at the urn. Not being particularly religious I struggled with whether I would offer a prayer. But before I could decide, a strong wind whipped up and swirled around. Blinded, I struggled to stay up right as the dust devil swirled and danced about. After it left, I wiped the tears and sand away from my eyes with my shirt. I looked and saw the urn was on its side, the lid nowhere to be seen.

I smiled. My prayers were answered. It was exactly how it should be. He loved this land. Had sacrificed everything to it. So it was only fitting that he should be united with it.

I stood up and pulled the brim of my hat down in salute.

“Vaya con Dios, mi padre.”

I turned and started to walk back to the truck. My father’s words from so long ago echoing in my mind.

“Don’t look down, don’t ever look back.”