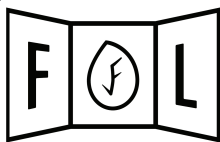


ISSUE 16



FLY LEAF

MARCH 2015

WATCHERS

Scott Cheshire



I've seen the Racetrack Playa for eleven years in Januarys when the desert air and ground are still forgiving. My first year here was spent with the faces one finds in clouds, with the old men, running men, the dancing men one sees in the gnarled and raised roots of arrow weed, in the arms-in-the-air surrender of the Joshua tree, in the ever-changing weathered walls of towering rock and mud. In time, they all move and fall.

My second year here on the playa, I met two others—Raymond and Sport, a gay couple, Australian. They were wandering the Americas on foot and riding the occasional Greyhound. I happened by them in my Honda as they hitched their thumbs from the roadside. We drove some, and then sat facing the sun for two days. We didn't speak much, our eyes scanning the flat ground beneath us. Some, like Ray and Sport, leave the playa and never come back. Others return for two years, three years. And some just keep on coming.

For instance, I met Thom Storme some ten years ago while staying in a near-dead Pocono resort in Pennsylvania. The kind of place crawling with menthol-breathing Keno addicts by 10 a.m. Thom was the outdoor events coordinator, and we became friendly while snowshoeing across a frozen mountain lake. That long ago morning, Thom taught me how to walk on water.

And I told him about the flat world of Death Valley's Racetrack Playa.

That next January, my third year on the playa, Thom sat beside me as we watched the desert sky beyond us touch the far away ground. Soon enough, we were five on the playa, then ten. Some years, fifteen, never more than fifteen people, I think. In teepees and tents, herding by the fire, some of us with little more than sunglasses and a sleeping bag.

I remember a photo of the Valley's Mesquite Flats in an issue of National Geographic that I found among my father's things: a boiling ocean of violet sand, like God's blanket snapped and shaken from some sky-sized window.

My father was here in 1968 with Sharp and Carey, the first geologists to pay strict attention to the traveling rocks of Racetrack Playa. They chose thirty stones, and named them: Hortense, Crystal, Brenda, and so on. I believe there are more than a hundred now scattered across the playa. Sharp and Carey marked their thirty with grease (some with a first letter initial, others with a full name), and kept a trained eye on the movers. One season, Hortense advanced 820 feet. There are some theories—ice sheets, wind, wet clay, more wind—but no consensus. Some of these stones have accrued a somewhat quasi-celebrity/mystical status over the years for us watchers. I've seen a Hortense myself, and my heart stopped.

According to my mother, my father spotted Sharp first, then Carey, and decided that two chance encounters in Death Valley were two too many to ignore so he walked up and said hello. When they told him about the playa stones I think it must have moved some wall inside him. Apparently, my father drove back west through the valley again toward California (his birth state) three days after I first showed my face. I had barely burped in this world, and the man was gone. Not gone for good, mind you, not yet. No, he came back nine days later and told my mother about the two men he'd met in the desert.

He said he'd made some friends.

One year we looked and looked, but we just couldn't find the rock trails. Which, in part, made all that waiting

all the better. There it is, the cleanest slate. But you can bet those sun-broiled and half-ton stones, heavier and without wheels than any grand piano, will stray across the desert floor, amble, as if pushed by muscled, invisible hands. And they will leave lines trailing behind like sperm tails, like tadpole tails, like comet tails, furrowed in the hard mud, stretching six hundred, seven hundred, eight hundred feet. No footprints, man or animal, about. No surface disturbance at all, save for the rock's very own path.

A sight like this—and one stone is more than enough to make you take a seat, to fill your stomach with a guttural rush of awe. But ten stones, twenty, one for each of us standing on the bedrock grandstand summit that overlooks the Racetrack Playa—it's enough to swipe your breath. And I mean this—the lot of us just staring, breathless, and waiting to catch one move.

Some of us wish we might see one stir like those that jones for a ghost moment, some encounter with the uncanny. Others claim a divine will, God's handiwork. Maybe the stones are push-buttons, levers, I don't know, on/off switches in some kind of "this world" camouflage that we are simply not meant to understand, I guess.

My take—despite what they'd like to think, there's no real room for miracle in the believer's world. If anything can happen, and I mean anything, by God, then tell me where does one find wonder?

My father's later trips were sporadic, unplanned. When I was twelve he was gone for six weeks. My mother said, "Your father went for a drive." Sometimes years would pass by before he drove out west again.

When I turned fifteen, my father left for the desert and was gone for three months. And I held no resentment

for the man. Instead, I developed a second image, a brain-secret version of my father that involved monk's robes, sandals—just him, the sun, and for some reason a battery powered eight-track player. I imagined Gregorian chant as he cooled his feet in oasis water.

My mother said, "Your father is the kind of man who needs space."

Last January, among others, there was Thom and myself on the playa. Also, of all things, a recently disassociated Unarian woman. She confessed to giving up her faith in the second coming of an inter-dimensional Martian father—the cosmic victor who would one day return for her, and how many thousands of others, in one of Yahweh's UFOs for a starry journey to who knows where fueled by love and tie-dye. And there were two Jehovah's Witnesses, young men, brothers maybe. It was their second year and their last, they told us. They remained largely silent, but could not help revealing a terribly tiring fight in their faces. It's remarkable what we tell each other even when we say so little.

And there was Lorraine. An atheist housewife from Austin who for four years has spent one week away from her husband and teenage children driving the deserts of California, Nevada, and Utah, her last day usually spent with us in Death Valley.

An egg-yolk blonde, the prism's perfect opposite to deep and desert sky blue, she's not at all what you might imagine a pretty housewife from Austin to be. Often severe, head bowed, Lorraine seems to be mourning someone or some thing. But at the first sound of her name she turns with a portrait smile, ecstatic, stiff and arctic—I almost always buy it.

The first time I met Lorraine I found her sitting on

a magazine, her legs crossed, cheeks bright with sweat. She rubbed her eyes like she'd been crying. She must have heard me coming, because she cleared a smooth circle in the gravel beside her. We slept that night beside each other in the piercing wind, wrapped in overlapping sleeping bags and blankets by the fire, and we never said one word. I heard her leave the next morning, pebbles crunching as she packed her bag.

There is very little talk on the playa. We drive the melting yellow lines of Highways 395 and 95, some from as close as Carson City, others like myself and Thom from as far as this country will take us, 2,500 miles back to the eastern sea and coast.

I'm sure there are others, at other times, attracted to the more deadly days of a desert June or July, to the screaming dunes of Mesquite Flats, the wide and whopping crooked skyline of the Panamint Ranges, or the milky bruise of the salted Badwater Basin. Or maybe yet others who favor particular holidays, Christmas in the dunes, maybe some Thanksgiving lizard. There must be others. But the first week of January—the first weekend in January, this has been my time and some have found this time equally amenable. Sometimes they point my way and exaggerate to the others—15 years, 20 years, he's been doing this for 30 years, and his father before him... I once heard a kid, his forehead draped with unfortunate dreadlocks, say, "I heard it's his land, he owns all of this."

I told him, "Don't be stupid," and I took my place on the grandstand.

My friend Thom is the uncanny kind. For him, the experience is an agnostic one, and he will be satisfied

with nothing less than a live encounter out here. He is the kind of person that hopes for the vacant chair to move, for the untouched door to slam. He loves Halloween, I know because he told me. He's also a man born for the outdoors. He is far better equipped for this life with his backpack, bicycle, and salmon jerky than I could ever be with my Honda hatchback, usually parked in Saline not an hour's walk behind the playa, a change of clothes and a small black and white portable television in the back seat. Thom, no longer employed by the Bella Vista resort back east, lives in a yurt just outside of Burlington, Vermont. He makes a living something to do with rental cabins. If you asked Thom how I make mine, he would cock his head like the pug of a man that he is and say, "Now that is a good question." Like all of us, Thom wants to see a stone tear across the playa surface like a shot pinball. One of the smaller stones would do, but of course we all want to watch one of the big ones fly, one of the impossibles.

Point of fact: it's never happened. Not one witness, not ever, so we wait.

Lorraine waits, she says, because she "needs" to see this happen. Maybe this has something to do with an unchecked longing for immanence, a passing over into this world, something magical. Then again, I would think this might make things even more difficult for her. Lorraine wears the right kind of jeans, and she drives me crazy. We have shared a sleeping bag for these last three years (three nights, really), and I have felt a closeness with this woman I never expected. Not but one hundred hours of history between us, and she floats beside my heart like buoy. Her tired face, her blue eyes burning like two small moons, her perfect bottom. She never says my name.

Last year, we spent the night in my back seat, and Lorraine pulled me inside her as if I might pass through.

My mother died last February at seventy-one, pancreatic cancer. I watched her disappear, fall through the sieve of her bed, until she was gone like so much sand. My mother was a woman of very few words. She asked me if I was still waiting for my father to come home.

She said, "You are, aren't you? You expect that man to pull up some day in that horrible Ford, and park the car like nothing happened. Love, the world moves with or without you. There is no standing still."

I told her she was wrong, and told her to rest.

"I never cared about your father," she said. "I'm glad he left."

I shushed her—forgive me, I wanted to press the pillow on her face till her small feet stopped shaking.

"I've only ever had sympathy for two kinds of people, junior—the people I love and strangers. Unfortunately, I knew your father very well."

My mother was a beautiful woman, even as her body turned mutinous, even as her skin turned to paper, her bones stabbing at her belly. I said, "You don't mean that."

She said, "I think this is the longest conversation we've ever had."

When I was twenty, my father, sixty-four years old, went for a final drive out west. We never spoke much about his drives. What I do know I learned from my mother, bit by bit, gathered crumbs. I guess I always assumed he would take me with him when I got older. And as the years passed, my allegiance (a far less romantic version) dramatically shifted from him to my mother; and yet I have allowed an aura of wishful immortality to mingle with the man's memory, creating something less like myth, and more like unfinished story.

So I lay my chips with hers, the good woman who took

it. She never said a false word about him. Nevertheless, I have to ask, please: where does one pay allegiance next?

When I last saw him, my father had a green plastic cooler in the front seat of his Ford wagon. It was filled with Schaefer beer. He turned the engine and asked me if I knew his middle name.

I said, "No. I don't."

He said, "Figured as much," beeped the car horn and took off down our street.

Some years later, my mother said, "I think your father's gone, dear."

I also remember Jasmine Yow who returned to the playa with her husband, Louis, in the years 1989, '90, '91. In 1992 Louis told us, those of us there that year, that his Jasmine (only thirty-five) had been shot dead by one of her junior high students for who knows what. But before leaving us, she made him swear he would return to the desert. So he did.

Louis Yow, widower, Japanese born, wore a camera hanging from his neck on a strap as wide as a weightlifter's belt. A telescoping lens hid within its circles, an eye like a Harley's headlight. The man was a photographer, or so we guessed. We all know very little about each other, really (Thom being the exception). The late Jasmine Yow was the kind of woman that seems to blindly share her portion of beneficence. She improved my mood every time just by being here. We don't know much else. Only this: what life there is beyond, if any, has now been made lovelier by her being there.

Louis never showed his face again, probably drove home, wherever that is, with a wallpapered grin. And I bet it came unstuck, sure and slow, the closer he got to his

garbage can lined curb, until it fell as he made a left into his driveway, parked, quietly clicked his car door shut and fell upon his lawn. I imagine a white-stucco home jutting from the grass, where Louis lay, like some grave marker. And I see a darkroom in his basement, filled beyond capacity, developed glossies bleeding beyond the intended square-footage into bathrooms, kitchen and hall—all the echo-empty photos of the Death Valley Racetrack hanging by clothespins from clotheslines, filling the house and his heart.

Yesterday, Lorraine and I took a walk along the playa. The flat world of the desert floor, dry and cracked, surrounded us forming octagons and hexagons, the scaly pattern of an infinite armadillo's shell. We spotted what turned out to be a research team unloading trucks, wires and cabling just waiting to be un-spooled. An eager young man wearing a baseball hat, whose glasses would not keep still—they kept sliding down the bridge of his nose—jogged up toward us. He tried keeping his head tilted back as he spoke, and he could not take his eyes from Lorraine. She has a beaten kind of beauty that engages you unwillingly.

He asked her, "Why are you here?"

I started to answer, but he began talking over me—"Before long, we'll know every move. One hundred stones. We'll have footage." He said the word "footage" as if he were referring to something pornographic. His eyes were wide, owl's eyes, beneath the brim of his cap. His lips were pre-kiss.

"Now why would you want to do something like that?" I asked him.

I guess he didn't have the answer because he ran off to fetch one of the others, someone better informed. She was

a youngish woman, toasty hair in wispy bands reached from beneath a safari hat tied under her chin. I thought of Katherine Hepburn in *The African Queen*. She waved while blocking her eyes from the sun, and shouted, "Hello there," still fifty or sixty feet from where we stood.

"The Global Positioning System," she explained. "This is why we're here."

The "system" has been fully operational for over a year now, and the damn thing sees every last move we make; as close to God's eyes as we'll ever get. Like the Big Dipper, or the Little Dipper, these twinkling and mechanical stars hang above us, forming a constellation of satellites that will actually, for once, tell our stories.

She was a cartographer, she said, and the young man a geologist. She said they'd heard of watchers, but hadn't spoken with any yet, much less seen so many at once. More often, the valley is stippled with solitary creatures, shadowed toy-men crouching small and high on a precipice. I felt a delirious need to tell her about my father, and Sharp and Carey, but this would involve telling Lorraine.

"So how many are you?" she asked.

"Maybe twelve," I said. Lorraine was silent as usual, but she squeezed my hand as if she would collapse without it. Her left palm was over her mouth. Then she lurched forward, and regained her composure.

"Tomorrow morning," the woman said. "First thing, we're up and running. We have laptops—your prayers are answered. Is she okay?" she asked, nodding toward Lorraine.

I never quite saw the woman's face completely—the sun, the droop of her hat, our hands blocking shards of sunlight and glare. All for the better, I'm sure. I have a shamefully easy access to memory, like reaching into my

Honda's glovebox where I keep Lorraine's, forgive me, gorgeous melancholy, the rear view of Lorraine in her unflawed jeans, and every other thing that breaks my heart. If I had clearly seen the cartographer's face, I would hate her forever.

Lorraine spoke directly to her: "Thank you."

Her words hit me like an icy hose-thrust. I asked if she understood what was actually happening here.

Lorraine said, "Yes. What I came for."

I told her she didn't mean it. I motioned with my arms, as if taking the valley into my lap, and said: "This is ours."

Lorraine said, not so much to me but to the cartographer, that her husband had left her two months prior.

Then she vomited on the sand.

Lorraine wiped her mouth, then cleaned her hands on the back of her jeans and walked toward one of the trucks. She turned and, facing me, began walking backward while waving. I wasn't sure if she was gesturing me to come join her, or simply waving goodbye.

The trucks, I could see, were parked in a semi-circle. They were unsheathing antennas, and rigging transmission dishes in the sand. Behind me and above the playa, the others stood stationary, watching from the grandstand. I couldn't make out their faces, they were too far off, but I could see one small arm in the air. It was good old Thom, I'm sure of it. The rocks stretched behind him skyward, stony fists. Points of rock like saw-teeth, a bear-trap's teeth, circled the horizon in the hot quivering air. I thought, is my father here? Does he waste somewhere close, sitting in his rusting Ford and watching the horizon? Is his belly sour with regret? Or maybe he's walking now, finally, in the Valley sun, his car long abandoned, making his slow way toward my mother.

* * *

On her last day, my mother said, “Junior, this is the kind of end we have to settle for, here, stinking and ugly. So you better get going.”

I watched Lorraine kneel, tie her boot, and disappear behind a truck. And I was then overcome with love, a wash of love that almost knocked me over. It ran right through me. I chose to move with it.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SCOTT CHESHIRE earned his MFA from Hunter College. His work has been published in *Harper's*, *Electric Literature*, *Slice*, *AGNI*, *Guernica* and the Picador anthology *The Book of Men*. He lives in New York City. *High as the Horses' Bridles* is his first novel.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

MARK PARA lives in the Chicago suburbs with his wife, Helena, and his dog, Dino. He draws inspiration from intricate craftsmanship and vintage charm. His taste is further influenced by his love of cars and modern architecture, as well as a great appreciation for the simplicity of nature. Among his many hobbies, Mark collects fine automatic timepieces and spends time restoring his antique Mercedes 250S. His other designs can be seen at www.paradesigns.com.