

Sedona Ghosts

Three days after the president mounts a stage and a camera pans over white upturned faces, three days after the northern half of their state institutes what is called Shelter in Place, three days after their university sends an email that says, Apologies, but—

Three days after this, they decide to leave for Sedona.

There are also three of them. X drives out of Los Angeles through low-lying Indio and Palm Springs, past mountains that ridge up first snow-topped and then clay red. The landscape flattens from cityscape to desert, the trees shift from palms into cacti and flowers. Traffic drops off once they make it through Coachella Valley, and the highway, the only road visible, reduces from cars to the occasional trundling semi-truck.

The sky is thankfully clear. Drizzle had been shadowing Los Angeles the past weeks, unusual after a dry and yellowed winter, and X thinks, What a relief to see above.

There was also supposed to be a fourth. J. But she was from the other coast, and she flew home quickly, afraid that the airports, too, would shutter, that she would be stranded in California whose doors are quickly folding.

Understandable, R and Z had said. Couldn't agree more.

But to X they'd whispered, Though wouldn't you rather be trapped in the West?

The clouds hang low and flat, as if on glass.

The road falls straight behind.

In the backseat, R and Z crackle with laughter.

The town, when they reach it, is red and quiet. The buildings are colored the same as the earth, and even the logos (McDonald's! Whole Foods! Chase Bank!) are displayed either in

turquoise or stone. They pass through the emptied main road, where red mountains tower round them, and turn into a tucked-away street and rumble up a private drive. At the top is a chain link gate, a metallic horse stamped on it.

Outside a woman and her baby toddle. X rolls down her window.

The woman, tall and slim, balances the baby on her hip and approaches.

You must be our guests! she says, with a kindness that reads unnatural. The brim of her hat droops, shadowing her from the sun, and also from X's view. Here are your keys, she says, dropping them into her hand. Here is the gate clicker. Here is a pass, for hiking wherever your heart desires.

X can hear R and Z shift behind her: Will she ask where they are coming from?

No. She will not. They thank her and park.

The house where they are staying is cave-like, tucked under another unit. The kitchen is small, almost nonexistent, but they each get their own large bedroom, a small miracle for college students. X chooses the largest, the one with windows stretching across every wall. She looks through each individually, past the garden outside to the green-tipped slopes, and then beyond even those, to the red rocks rising.

Next to X's bed she sees a glass door. She peers there too, and sees stairs leading upward. No curtains to close over it.

She exits quickly.

In the kitchen R and Z lounge: Z sprawled on the loveseat, R hunkered over the dining table. There is creaking above.

Can you hear that? says R, in a low voice.

They listen, and above them is the woman's voice, talking to someone. The baby shrieks, his small footsteps punctuating directly above their heads.

They all lift their eyes to watch. The ceiling is blank and unmoving.

I thought we were supposed to have the house to ourselves, Z whispers.

Going into town is like stepping into Los Angeles a few days prior. The restaurants and bars are still open; heads still cluster and darken windows. They go to a grocery store, and it's fully stocked with baubles promising good health. They go to a restaurant, where their food is prepared by magicians. They go to a crystal shop, where they trace their fingertips over smooth and cold gems.

Enhanced immunity, advertises one. Increased longevity, says another.

R and Z scoop up a few of each. The cashier's smile is so plastered that X feels she could scrape it off. This place is eerie, she thinks, the red rocks looming uncanny.

But she says nothing, and R and Z are too entranced by the crystals.

How beautiful, they say on the drive back to the house. How relaxing. Don't you feel so much better? Don't you feel like you've escaped?

When the sun falls behind the mountains and the sky grows dim, X ignores the clustering and soft underbellies of the moths on the window. But she dreams of them, the way their pale bodies cling and pulse against the darkened glass.

She wakes to footsteps above her head and light leaching the room. X brings her laptop outside; she brings coffee. She watches the clouds pass over the sun, so that the mountains go from red to blue to black again.

R and Z rustle in their beds. R makes her way outside.

God, it's so beautiful, she says, leaning against X's chair. And then she adds, squinting,
But don't those mountains seem closer than yesterday?

The rocks stand tall and stark against the brightening sky.

I swear I couldn't see those cracks before, says R, bending nearer.

The drive to the trail base takes them through an adobe backroad specked with cacti. The roofs of houses, flat, are indistinguishable from the landscape. The three are quiet.

I think our place is haunted, says Z, suddenly.

Oh, my God, says R. She lets out a breath. I thought the same thing. I thought I could feel something.

X shivers, her hands white on the wheel. I couldn't sleep, she says. I felt like I was being watched.

The curtain shifting in the dim of the night. The glass door, so close she could touch.

I hate it there, says Z, and laughs. I'm so glad to be away.

They park where the road begins to curl into the mountain, in a cluster of empty SUVs.

They choose the longest trail to Devil's Bridge. It's quiet at first and they scabble through the dust quickly. A stream trickles greenly under stones. The trees are twisted and low, the cacti bubbling from the ground. Everywhere: brilliant red, and redder against a cobalt sky.

This is an alien landscape. This is the isolation of Mars.

They reach the bottom of a mountain that rises straight up and then plateaus, and it's here that the tourists begin to mob, that the path shifts from flat to stone steps, natural or unnatural,

either/or, impossible to tell. The tourists clamber upward, pushing and shoving, breathing heavy spittle, coughing from exertion or maybe something else.

Jesus, says Z, under her breath. Don't they know we're supposed to stay apart? She glares toward a small family scrambling past a boulder.

Six feet, says R, shaking her head sadly. Guess they don't care.

They turn and into view comes a stone bridge, a natural one, that bends into a narrow arc over a hundred foot drop. The bottom is scaped with cacti and shorn tree trunks. There is a line to walk over it. A man saunters his way to the center, no more than three feet from either edge, then plops down and scoots toward the drop.

Nononono, says R.

The man swings his legs over. They dangle over the canyon. He smiles for the camera.

Oh, shit, says Z. Oh, fuck.

The man totters when he stands up. His hands throw to either side. They hold their breaths, and he rights himself: safe.

He makes it back to the line, still jaunty.

They sigh relief until the next tourists step on, this time a mother with her daughter who can't be more than five. Her legs, round and unsteady, waddle forward. X screws her eyes shut, then opens them again.

I can't watch this, says R, and turns away.

Don't they care about their lives? snaps Z. Or at least their children's?

Are they careless? she says. Do they want to die?

Her eyes are red. I hate people like that, says Z, finally turning her back.

X says nothing. X only watches the small mother and child as they veer closer and closer to the edge.

X wakes to laughter over her head, the floorboards creaking. Somewhere near, the baby babbles.

That day it rains and they are trapped inside.

X uses the time to scroll through reviews of the house. She doesn't believe in these things (she insists) but still: she searches words like "haunted" and "spirits," "energy" and "loud." Nothing turns up, except for comments like, The host kept us in good spirits despite the weather! and This place has great energy, I mean, really.

They can't see the rocks through the gray drizzle but they can feel them there, close: closer. The air is still. They eat quietly at the kitchen table, each frightened by the heaviness of the house. There is another presence they do not want to name.

When X glances up from her breakfast, she sees the bag where they've hoarded their groceries move. No, that isn't right—except yes, it's definitely, definitely moving, and by itself. She stares, watches for several seconds as the bag inches closer and closer to the edge of the countertop.

X drops her spoon. The yogurt splashes.

R and Z glance up.

X is not superstitious, and says so. There must be a vent, she says, and stands to check. The walls are blank.

A window, then.

They're all closed.

She looks inside the bag, as if expecting an answer there. She brushes her hand over the counter it's sitting on. Nothing.

They leave to eat at a juicery.

They flip through meditation books at the shop.

That night she presses her hand against each of the curtains to make sure no one is standing behind them. She checks under the bed. She doesn't dare look through the windows. She squeezes her eyes tight, even when she wakes up in the night.

There is the distinct feeling that there is another body in the room, and although she distrusts the intuition, she's frightened of what her imagination will show her.

When she finally opens her eyes, R stands in the doorway, sallow.

X, she says. I feel sick.

X sits up in bed, cautiously. Her eyes are adjusting and she ignores the shadows moving in her periphery. What are your symptoms?

Body aches, R says. Dry cough. Fever.

Slowly, she lists every one of the symptoms on the list the government has given them.

Okay, says X. Okay.

We need to leave, says X. Now.

They zip underneath a storm so bad X pulls over. The windshield is blurred and thick with water. The wipers squeal on the swollen glass.

Do we tell them?

No, not until we get a positive. We don't want to stir panic.

The valley they passed through before is weighed down by clouds so close X feels she could touch them. The mountains cup the highway, moving inward. They are at the bottom of a glass bowl filling with water.

I'm so glad to go home, says Z.

The sky is impossibly low.

That place was *creepy*, says R.

Aren't you glad to be gone? asks Z. Don't you feel like you've escaped?

X does not. Instead, X has the sense that maybe they are the ghosts—that maybe they are the ones who have brought something unforgivable—that maybe they are the ones bringing it back.

A quarter mile away, lightning cracks the sky into a jagged and electric blue.

Ahead, the landscape stretches dull and endless.

THE END