

These icons were meant to evoke *milagros*, miracles. After his walk through the valley of stench and pain, Rusty would return to the ranch chores: working sheep and goats, repairing deer blinds, and hauling corn to the game feeders.

Before Lisa left, Rusty was withdrawn. She had begged, “You have to try. Put one foot in front of the other. Get back to work, Rusty.”

Every few days he had tried to start over. But he couldn’t think, couldn’t function. When he was supposed to pick up a seed delivery in town, he’d hitch the trailer and sit by the cross he had stabbed in the ground next to the well.

Finding him there at dusk, Lisa had said, “Rusty, get up. You can’t stay here.”

“I killed him. Lisa, he’s gone. Without Benny I’m dead, too.” She never answered. No response was a second death. A third death. A fourth death. And so on. Why keep counting? Dead was dead.

She had helped him to the house. The chasm deepened between them, almost as deep as that damn well.

Now, Chuy was Rusty’s only link to reality. The fifths of liquor may have dulled the images of Benny, but they did not erase that newsreel. Each episode appeared stuck on pause. Rusty could see Benny hanging, suspended forever.

Before she left, Lisa had said, “I can’t live in your darkness, your pain. You are dead, but you have a pulse. I can’t even look at you.” So, she didn’t.

Side by side, they continued to drag the other one down. Like dead weight. Drowning in pain, in memories, in guilt. Rusty didn’t blame her, but he knew Lisa blamed him. Even if she hadn’t said so.

The first year she had found a teaching job in Flower Mound and the next year in Greenville. Rusty knew she was running; hers just looked different from his slobbering and drinking. Her sister Marlene lived north of Dallas, and she kept Rusty in the loop when there was any news.

Rusty knew about running. He, too, had left Lobo Valley. Since ‘96, he continued to withdraw into the cover of the brush country of Edwards County.

During the third week of Rusty’s sojourn, the distant cry of a varmint, maybe a coyote, pierced the silence. It was a signal. He grabbed clothes, bedroll, thermos, and the keys to the Expedition. Automatically, he drove north on Hwy 55 and took IH-10 West at Sonora. He had tried to return to Lobo Valley before, but each trip ended in a three or four day stall in Ft. Stockton. The Longhorn Saloon and the Holiday Inn Express were easier to face than the memories.

But this time, with the gas gauge on “F” and the clock displaying 3:13, he swore on Chuy’s prayer beads and Holy Ladies that he wouldn’t stop until he was west of Valentine. It would be too close to turn back. Man up, you coward. He owed Benny that much.

At dawn, Rusty spied Sheffield, then Bakersfield. After the oil field bust of the 80s, these two defunct towns had returned to ghost town status. Leaving IH-10 at Ft. Stockton, Rusty ricocheted from one county road to another and angled toward Ft. Davis. The narrow roads, high altitude, and sharp memories assaulted him.

Mid-morning, he sped through Valentine and hit the last stretch. Patches of summer grass spotted the terrain. Rusty remembered the droughts of the late 80s and early 90s when landowners waited seven to ten years for a decent rain. Then, shades of rich chocolate and medium mocha frosted the land. Winds swirled violently, birthing an enemy, a *Diablo*, and moving colonies of tumbleweeds, covering the blacktop. During these dry spells, water became the envy and luxury for all landowners. It required a master of water witching to locate

a spot deep enough for an irrigation well. Hard enough to live here, but it was physical and financial suicide without a drop of water.

Three miles from the turn-off, near the old Quonset hut, Rusty panicked: he was in Lobo Valley. Could he face the haunting of his days and terror of his nights? He had sworn on Chuy’s faith and the Holy Ladies. He owed Benny. How could he fail?

At the arched entrance to R.B. Parker Farm, Rusty caught a glimpse of the tile roof of the distant *hacienda*. Lisa had restored the rotted trim with cedar, replaced the faded linoleum with Saltillo tiles, and added an awning of woven *ocotillo* arbors over the center patio. Combining Southwest and Texas rustic, heavy furniture of pine nestled next to pieces of hard mesquite woods. Plush cushions, in deep reds of chilies, accented in vibrant blues and golds, reflected the palette of the Chihuahua Desert.

Driven by a phantom force, Rusty drove straight to the site. He parked behind the maintenance shed. He saw the wooden cross he had erected in ‘95, a simple tribute with crude lettering: “Benny—Daddy’s Little Man.”

An eight- by twelve-foot concrete slab covered the treacherous well opening. Walking toward the slab, his breathing became labored as tremendous pressure crushed his lungs. Once he had read that during grief the brain released a hormone that restricted breathing. The symptoms could mimic those of a heart attack or a collapsed lung. Rusty had experienced both conditions.

Before ‘92, his family had been happy in the valley. Parker Farm was a small operation until his dad acquired more acreage from bankruptcy sales. During the school term, Rusty served as “Mr. Mom” while Lisa taught Spanish in a nearby Van Horn school. Any time Rusty started the pickup, Benny begged, “Me go with you?”

Today, Rusty sat on the edge of the slab and remembered May 1. They were celebrating the expansion: a new irrigation well, expanded barn, and maintenance shed. A family affair, the women were at the main house, preparing the trimmings to go with the barbecue brisket. Mom promised Benny a batch of sugar cookies and the others a peach cobbler.

Standing around a small campfire behind the shed, Rusty, his dad, his brothers, and his nephew were talking about the two new hydro tomato farms in Van Horn. Benny had insisted they build a campfire and wanted to toast marshmallows. To stave the afternoon chill, they conceded. Both Rusty and his dad shooed Benny away from the blaze two or three times before he ran off and disappeared.

Minutes later, walking through the shed, they saw what appeared to be someone hanging over the new well. Benny? How could he have been up there? He had been pestering everyone a few minutes earlier. Rusty couldn’t relive that frame. Eight years ago it tore more than his marriage apart—it had shattered the family. Nooo! He had to remember it frame by frame.

He recalled every detail. Everyone ran. Cross-ties hovered over the twenty-inch casing of the new irrigation well, over 1,200 feet deep. Benny was holding on. His small hands seemed larger than his entire body. He dangled over the well. In unison, they screamed “BENNY! BENN...”

Rusty forced himself to watch as his little man, with maverick curls peeking from under his Calloway cap, looked and called, “Daddy.” Then, he let go. Benny had trusted him to catch him.

All five men stretched prone over the edge of the well. Benny may have heard their voices echoing inside the casing, but his watery grave silenced them in seconds. His body, slowed only by the friction of the pipe, slipped into eternal darkness. The Chihuahua Desert coveted every drop of water, and Benny’s supple body had displaced