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THE WORLD IN RED

a short story by THERESA WILLIAMS

FLORETA COOK BURIED HER HUSBAND,

Cookie, in the Questa Cemetery in New Mexico. It was a good cemetery. Cookie had always admired it. He liked the sign on the gate saying to watch out for snakes, and the cemetery grounds were bright with wreaths and saints. Cookie had believed in all the saints and gods and had seen patterns everywhere. To Floreta life was chaos, apocalypse probably just around the corner.

Just before he died, Cookie had run his hand up and down his rib cage, feeling each bone tenderly, and said to Floreta, "I hope you're happy. I am."

Immediately after the funeral, Floreta fled for the coast. She zigzagged like a lightning bolt toward the Pacific, subsisting on Beanee Weenees, crackers, and individually wrapped sticks of cheese. When she got tired, she pulled off and slept in the back seat of her Grand Am, her Boston terrier, Willy, curled up next to her. He was Cookie's dog, really. All five Boston terriers they'd had over the years had been his.

She arrived at Morro Bay, walked the beach, and picked up the dried husks of sea creatures, which disintegrated in her hands. She stayed three days in her car, lunching on peanut butter and soft white bread with a shelf life of forever. Then she continued north, not straying from the Pacific Coast Highway. Stay off the interstate — that was Cookie's mantra.

At Sunset Bay State Park, near Coos Bay, Floreta took from the trunk her brand-new red tent, still in the box. She put the box on the ground, opened one end, and tilted it so that the contents slid out. Then she spread the pieces apart, hoping everything would become clear, but it didn't. Since Cookie died, she'd been seeing the world in red: Red as in sunsets. Red as in a childhood memory of her father burning dead limbs from the pines in the spring, a huge red ring of fire behind him. She thought that if there were a God — and she didn't believe there was — he'd look like that fire.

The wind blew cold out of the north, where most cold winds come from, she supposed. She put the poles on top of the red nylon tent material to keep it from blowing away, and she dabbed her nose with an old tissue from the pocket of her wool coat. The last time she'd used this tissue, Cookie had been alive.

A siren wailed in the distance. She thought how when she was seventeen and her father was out at the bars and her mother was working the night shift, Cookie would come pick her up in his Ford Fairlane and take her to his apartment, where she'd lay her head on his arm and listen to sirens pierce the

night. They were all dead now, and she was back where she'd started, alone and afraid.

She called to Willy, that old, toothless dog, who lifted his head, then rested it again on his front paws. He always sulked whenever Cookie went someplace without him. "Come on," she said, trying to sound firm, but her voice had no gravity. She threw her tissue into the black hole of a nearby fire pit. "Let's go for a walk," Floreta said with as much authority as she could muster. Willy blinked and turned away. "Do you want a bone?" she asked. She'd have been a terrible mother, giving her kids cookies and popsicles when they were sad, making them into little blimps. Willy looked at her, cocking his head and pointing his ears straight up. She got the box of Milk-Bones from the car and took one out. When Willy was younger, he'd danced for his bones: stood on his back legs and twirled around and around. Now he was too stiff to stand, but he lifted his front legs for a moment. "All right," she said and held the bone out to him. He ran his quivering black nose over it, then took it in his mouth and chomped it in half. It crumbled, and Willy sniffed along the ground to get every last bit.

Sunset Bay Park had sites for tents and sites for RVs. It was clean and well-ordered, like a big suburban yard: grass, trimmed hedges, paved pathways. Cookie had preferred natural, untouched spots, but Floreta felt safe here.

Where were the other tents? She didn't see one. *Not even Indians pitch tents anymore*, she thought, watching a Native American at the site opposite hers cranking out the sides of an old Alaskan camper.

If Willy didn't want to walk, then she'd head into Coos Bay. She was tired of packaged food. She wanted something good to eat, something warm and spicy. She found a Mexican restaurant on the waterfront and went in. Willy was happy to lie in the warm car and maybe catch a whiff of Cookie's scent or dream of shaking a rabbit to bits, like in the old days.

The meal wasn't what she'd hoped for. The food was thin and stretched out on big plates to make it look like more, the salsa so watery it ran down her chin. If Cookie had been with her, he would have complained, but she said nothing. After she paid, she turned from the cash register and pushed open the door. She didn't like opening doors for herself. It made her tired to think of all the things she'd have to do without him now.

(end of excerpt)