

## Alternative Reality

Short story by Allison Fine

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Alexandra had no intentions of following any kind of spiritual path, that wasn't her gig. She was a film director for a small independent company, *Road Kill Films*; Subsidiary of one of the larger studios. She got the job because she had dutifully performed her duties as A.D. for four years at Sony. Her former film-school teacher recommended her to the studio.

She had no plan to get into this whole Native American thing everyone was onto these days. To her it was just another case of boring white people co-opting indigenous mythology—it had nothing to do with her. Most of the Indians she knew were drunk or stoned most of the time anyway. She realized it was politically incorrect to think this, but she thought it anyway. Truth was, she got exceedingly annoyed at the liberalism of the film business. She considered herself a conservative. *Directing films is like running a small corporation for a short period of time. I'm a businesswoman.* She saw herself as an entertainment entrepreneur and had little patience for the art aspect of it all. To her mind, the artists she met were just self-indulgent lazy idiots who never read. Her last hiatus she had read *Moby Dick*. In the back of her mind, she saw herself as a modern-day Ishmael hunting for the whale of creativity. Oftentimes she found the whale but not the creativity.

She got this directing job because a friend told the producers: “She’s organized, disciplined; she knows her stuff.” That was all these guys wanted to hear. They decided to try her out on one of their action-adventure A & E movies to see how she did. Tight budget, B-list actors, very little wiggle room. Alex loved that kind of pressure.

She got curious about the rumors she'd heard about some old medicine woman in the desert. They were filming outside of Los Cruces, New Mexico—the labor was cheap and the desert suited the film, which dealt with a Native American detective and a bunch of drunken villagers. Everybody had a buzz about this woman.

“I'll go see her,” she volunteered, as if she were doing them a favor.

“Just be forewarned. She deals in alternative reality,” Missy, her A.D. told her.

“Right, Missy. What's that?”

Alex was fucking her leading man Bill Crossman. Had been for years. They were on and off, like so many in the gypsy film business. He was an aging actor demoted from B to C status. He still looked good if you didn't get too close in on a tight shot, if he could cut down on the drinking, although in person he looked ragged and sometimes his hands shook. All the God Damn actors were drug addicts or alcoholics. It came with the territory. Whatever bloom of creative wishes they had had when young were wilted and dead by the time they got to be Bill's age, which he lied about anyway. She figured he was around sixty-five but he claimed he was fifty-five. Still, he got plenty of play from the little girls. He always fucked the ingénues—they wanted him to help them with their careers. Alex resented this but not enough to do anything about it, probably because she didn't really like Bill enough to do anything about it. He was a pleasant fuck and it beat having to cruise bars, restaurants and studio lots looking for it. She didn't look good enough in a bathing suit anymore to cruise the beaches. One thing she really railed against was the inequality of it all. *Oh fuck, it's a man's world.* How come women didn't have cute little men hanging around wanting to fuck them for a job? Come to think of it, there were plenty of them—they just didn't turn her on. That's the big difference between

men and women. *Women are attracted to power; men like to have the power. When a woman has the power she loses her sexual bank account—no one finds her erotic. She doesn't find herself erotic.* These thoughts turned over in her head leading her to consider Bill's latest ingénue fuck.

This one was different. She was Native American, from the Cree nation, very dark, beautiful, aloof. Casting had found her in some theatre in Seattle. Alex didn't feel like messing with her; Bill could have her, what the hell. Eat your candy, have your stomachache.

Bill's problem was that he had never gotten over his third wife's suicide. He had recurring dreams about it, seeing it from every angle. His dreams were the dreams of a frustrated cinematographer. He was forever shooting the same scene over and over—this time with a fisheye lens, the next time using a high-hat shot, panning from one side to the other, using a cutaway to focus on some other aspect of the scene. One time the dream even had a touch of "Mickey Mousing;" combining whimsical, completely inappropriate music to the actions of the scene. The scene was always the same: his wife's suicide playing eternal re-runs in his dreams. One night in an extreme long shot, he saw himself hoisted high up a mountain sitting with a bunyip, an Australian man killer. When the bunyip turned around it had the face of Alexandra. That was his worst nightmare. Thank god he woke up from that. Some nights after the suicide replay he'd wake thinking his wife was still alive and he could do something about it. She'd slashed her throat with a paring knife, got into the bathtub and bled to death while he was on location in Indiana filming some shitty industrial-school movie. He preferred reel violence to real violence, which he found repulsive.

His only daughter, Michelle, was pregnant with her third fatherless child. She kept having babies with men she couldn't stand. Bill sustained her financially, buying her a house in Long Beach, giving her a monthly stipend so she could afford the nanny, a maid and pool service. It kept him sane to know he was a good father.

Alex dared to drive out and see this medicine woman everyone was talking about. Danger excited her. Too much risk gave her nausea, but she controlled this with Xanax.

The word was the medicine woman was an artist or something. She made art objects out of found junk and displayed them in front of her house on Compassion Creek, the name of the road leading up to her place.

Driving down Highway 70 Alex saw a sign: *Welcome to Truth or Consequences*. Alex stopped at a gas and convenience store just off the highway. Heat waves rose from the pavement. In front of the store a half-starved dog sat in the shade, panting to stay alive. As she entered the store the screen door groaned. A fat young man, probably weighing about three hundred pounds, with shaved head and a tattoo on his scalp, stood behind the counter stuffing a ding-dong into his mouth. Two teenaged girls, skinny and hipless, scarred with tattoos and piercings on their eyebrows, wearing pants that barely covered their crotches stood in the corner of the store looking at magazines and giggling.

ALEX

Hi.

FAT BOY

You blow in from the sky?

*Alex's eyebrows rise.*

ALEXANDRA

I came the usual way.

FAT BOY

Traveling alone?

ALEXANDRA

I hope so.

*Fat Boy puts on a CD. It is exactly the same CD with the same song that Alex has been playing in the car: Karryn Allyson singing "Too Young to Go Steady." Alex stares in disbelief.*

ALEXANDRA (CONT'D)

*Fat Boy begins to dance behind the counter. Alex gapes at him a moment, then walks around the store.*

You have Neccos?

FAT BOY

Yep. Over there.

*Fat Boy continues dancing and points to a counter. Alex grabs an armful of candy, chips, pop and junk food and tumbles it on to the counter. Fat Boy punches the cash register.*

FAT BOY

Go with it.

ALEXANDRA

I am.

FAT BOY

Everything has significance.

*Fat Boy puts her things into a grocery bag.*

ALEXANDRA

Thanks.

FAT BOY

Don't you think?

ALEXANDRA

What's your deal? This is just a convenience store, right?

*Fat Boy pops another ding-dong into his mouth.*

FAT BOY

"This is just a convenience store, right?"

*Pausing to eat, Fat Boy smacks his lips with a smirk.*

FAT BOY (CONT'D)

One man's convenience is another man's Neccos.

ALEXANDRA

I happen to like Neccos.

FAT BOY

I know.

*Alex looks at him, grabbing the grocery bag, holding it close to her chest, as if for protection.*

ALEXANDRA

No, you don't.

FAT BOY

I can explain.

ALEXANDRA

Spare me.

*(pause)*

Is it always this hot?

FAT BOY

Life in the desert--it fries our brains.

ALEXANDRA

I'm looking for someone who lives near here. She's--

FAT BOY

Not home right now. Went to Elephant Butte to see her brother. She'll be heading back pretty soon, though.

ALEXANDRA

How do you know whom I'm talking about?

FAT BOY

Rebecca.

ALEXANDRA

Yes.

FAT BOY

Rebecca.

ALEXANDRA

So you repeat yourself. Where is she?

FAT BOY

Well, hard telling where she is right now. Like I say, she's seeing her brother. You can go out there, people do. She's always got something brewing on her stove.

*Fat Boy walks over to the CD player and switches the music to loud ROCK, cranking up the volume, then dances with the mop.*

FAT BOY (CONT'D)

Say now. This is hot.

ALEXANDRA

You know, where I come from... oh, never mind.

*Fat Boy stops, staring at her.*

ALEXANDRA (CONT'D)

I won't be intruding, will I?

FAT BOY

Anyone who makes it here ain't an intruder.

*Fat Boy continues dancing with the mop.*

FAT BOY (CONT'D)

She lives out by Compassion Creek. Abandoned Elders. Here, I'll draw you a map.

*Fat Boy pulls out a brown bag drawing a map on the flap.*

FAT BOY

Here you go.

*Fat Boy smiles, stops dancing and mops the floor. Alex looks at him once more, (he is crazy) and walks out.*

## EXT. DESERT ROAD – DAY

The Jeep came to the crossroads. Alex got out of the car and walked up to a wooden sign, which leaned to one side. The words were covered in dust and sand. She brushed the sign off and made out the crude lettering:

*COMPASSION CREEK*

Alex hopped back into the car and drove a little further until she came to a dirt road, just past what was supposed to be this so-called Compassion Creek. There wasn't much of a creek left to speak of—it was actually a methane bog left by the linen factory that now sat empty off the road, a square, ugly building covered with sheathing paper. As Alex drove down Compassion Creek Road she passed a circle of hedgehog cactus spilling out its blooms of red fruit. Mesquite trees and creosote bush lined the dirt road; paloverde popped out from stands of cactus and sagebrush. A giant saguaro guarded the entrance to the woman's house. Leaning against the base of the saguaro was a small wooden sign:

*Welcome To Abandoned Elders.*

Walking up to the doorway Alex's legs brushed up against ocotillo, pricking her calves and making them itch. *Shit. I'll have to stop at that stupid store again and pick up some Calamine Lotion.*

A fair women with salt and pepper hair tied in a knot with a bright red scarf came out of the door, her arms full of various colored jagged pieces of glass.

“Hi.” Alex extended her hand as she walked up to the woman. “I’m Alex—we’re making the film down yonder.” *Down yonder? When did she ever catch herself talking like that?*

The woman set the glass pieces down on a flat rock in front of a baby Saguaro; then stood up straight. Her eyes were transparent blue, strong, penetrating with a hint of something violent in the tiny flecks of gold in the iris.

“Well, this is a pretty unusual place.”

“I teach glass blowing at the Community College up the road. I’m always looking for pieces of glass people throw away.”

“I’m the director of the film—“

“You mentioned. Some locals are going to be extras I hear.”

“Yes. Well, they showed up yesterday but we have to be careful. Some of them don’t have a green card and the producers are sticklers about that.”

“Oh, really?”

The woman turned and headed toward the house.

“You coming?”

Alex followed her, ducking her head to enter the hut.

“I built this house myself, out of material I found all around here. My son came and helped me finish the interior—painted the walls and all that.”

Inside the light dimmed. One window off the dining area let in the relentless sun, otherwise the radiance disappeared. Atmosphere, diffused and dark, hung about the place. It gave the impression of a womb. A blue armchair set off by a calico red couch and a large wooden table littered with plants, dishes, magazines and several glass art objects.

“This is nice.”

“Sit down. I’ll make you some tea.”

Rebecca pulled a large iron kettle from the stove and poured water into a green and yellow flowered teapot sitting on the counter.

“I make this from herbs I grow myself. I’m Rebecca, by the way. You probably know.”

“Yeah, Fat Boy informed me.”

Rebecca laughed.

“He’s our local color.”

“Seems you are too.”

“Oh not me. I’m just an old artist and a teacher. Just barely get by, you know.”

“Well, I like your place.”

Rebecca set the pottery teacups on the table.

Alex took a sip of the tea. A few minutes later a strange feeling came over her.

“What kind of herbs are these?”

“Oh, just this and that—stuff I grow in the garden.

“I think I might need to lie down.”

“Oh? Well, I got a spare bedroom for friends and family.”

Rebecca led her to the bedroom. The walls were clean, white with nothing on them but a series of wood block prints over the bed. The prints were animals: buffalo, bear, wolf and eagle. The single bed sat wedged up against the corner wall next to the window. There was a small rocking chair and a blue hand-painted nightstand and that was all. The room had a barren feeling about it, but comforting nevertheless.

“Did you do these?” Alex pointed to the wood block prints.

“Oh, no. They were given. Totems.”

Alex collapsed onto the bed, spiraling into blackness with no memory that lasted an hour or more. No telling how much time passed, she slept, while Rebecca worked on painting glass beads at the kitchen table.

On set Bill wandered agitated.

“Where’s Alex?” he asked of Missy.

“I don’t know. She should be here soon.” She had no desire to let Bill know about the medicine woman.

“Where’s Lynette?”

“I don’t know that either.”

“Thanks, Missy, you’re a real help.”

“Fuck you too, Bill,” Missy spoke after his retreating form.

Bill found Lynette outside Kraft Services reading a book.

“What’s that?”

Lynette held out the book spine.

“Moby Dick?”

“Re-reading the classics.”

“Re-reading?”

“I had a Catholic school education.”

Bill looked at her sweet, dark, lithe body and felt a rise coming on.

“Want to sit in my trailer?”

“How come you get your own trailer and I don’t?”

“Because I’m the star and I’m famous.”

“You’re not that famous. Nobody in my family has ever heard of you.”

They walked into the door of Bill’s trailer.

“It’s a mess. Your underwear is everywhere.”

“I need a woman’s touch.”

She turned impetuously, making him stop short, grabbed his neck and kissed him hard, moving her tongue all over his mouth. It left him breathless.

“Jesus,” he said after she released him.

“Screw me and shut up,” she ordered lifting her dress over her head. She had nothing on underneath.

“Do you always whisk around without underwear?”

“Are you always such a saddidy white prude?”

She flashed a tiny smile, whipping her shoes off and throwing them against the wall.

“Come on.”

She laid her beautiful brown body on his bed and beckoned him with her arms. He hated to admit he had performance anxiety—it was such a guy thing. She wouldn’t understand. All this incredible, voluptuous availability, it gave him a hard on and an intense headache at the same time.

“Just a sec,” he said, pulling his pants off, getting his left leg caught in the cuff.

“Sorry,” he laughed.

“Hurry up!”

He hopped over to the kitchenette, pouring himself a stiff whiskey and downed it in one gulp.

“I’m here!”

After leaping over to the bed, she yanked his pants off as he crawled over her exquisite form.

“Does Alexandra get jealous?” she asked, as he was about to enter her.

“What?”

“Does she—“

“Just a sec—“ he was trying to negotiate the condom and get inside of her in one swift motion. It wasn’t happening.

“Here, let me do that.” She took hold of his penis, yanking the organ, rolling it to push the condom on; then guided his penis inside of the folded moist mystery of her vagina.

“Oh yeah, that’s the stuff!” she yelled.

He pumped it in her, hardly daring to think about technique or anything else performance related.

“Faster, faster!” she screamed into his neck.

He sped up the pumping.

“Harder! Harder! Hurt me, hurt me!” she screeched into the unmoving air of the trailer. Bill cranked his neck to look around—the windows of the trailer were open. He had serious anxiety about people on set hearing this.

“Could you be a little quieter?” he asked.

“Oh, come on, Billy boy, give me the cock! The cock! Rock’em baby! Rock my world!”

He continued pumping—what else was there to do? She came, clutching the back of his neck hard, pushing and pulling it and his head back and forth. He wondered if he had whiplash.

He collapsed on top of her.

“Do you want to work on lines?” she exhaled into his ear.

“No.” He could hardly breathe. His heart was pumping wildly. He was afraid he might have a heart attack right there. Fifty-five, OK sixty-three, wasn’t too young, was it? Panic rose in his throat. Was that a symptom?

“How old are you?” He lifted himself off her gorgeous, sweaty body.

“Oh, how old do you want me to be?”

“Don’t play games.” Bill said, pulling his shirt on inside out.

“Well, my grandmother says I am as old as the hills and as cunning as a coyote. She guesses around 2400 years.”

“Oh, right, and I’m Gulliver.”

“Who?”

“Don’t you read?”

“I hate White Culture.”

“You don’t mind white cock, though, do you?” He had trouble saying the word. It was not in his everyday vocabulary. “I thought you were re-reading the classics. Wasn’t Herman Melville White?”

“I don’t give a damn. I’m into the whale.”

“Well, if I recall, the whale was white too.”

“So fucking what? Anyway I like cock. I don’t give a damn what color it is.”

“So you—do this a lot?”

“Whenever I can.” She got up to retrieve her dress and noticed his shirt was inside out. She decided not to tell him about it. “I’m trying to earn money for law school.”

“Law school? You’re going to law school?”

Bill zipped his pants up. He couldn’t see how this could happen. “Don’t you like the film business?”

“I fucking hate the film business and most of all I hate the people in the film business and especially most of all I hate the men in the film business.”

Just then a shout came from outside the trailer.

“Bill! Bill!”

Bill tried smoothing his hair just as Lynette exited the trailer. Now everyone would know what his extracurricular activities were, not that it was any kind of mystery, but he prided himself on pretending it was. Alexandra pulled up into the space next to the trailer just as Lynette sauntered off.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Bill said as he slammed the trailer door shut.

“What’s in there?”

“Nothing.”

“Your shirt’s on inside out.”

“So what?”

“Are you screwing our leading lady?”

“She has a minor part.”

“Are you screwing her?” Alexandra pushed the trailer door open and got a whiff of the pungent odor of sex.

“It smells debauched in there.”

“I am wicked, depraved, corrupt, dissolute, dissipated, disheartening, decadent and immoral. Why do you love me?”

“I worship you, isn’t that enough?”

Alexander slammed the door shut.

“Get on set. We’re shooting the suicide scene. And I hope you accidentally make it real.”

“I’ll never kill myself. It isn’t worth it.”

After the scene Bill decided that he didn’t really have the time or energy to have an affair while Alexander was both directing him and directing, in you get the drift. One woman was plenty for a man if his diminished caliber. He went back to the trailer. Somehow the suicide scene had gotten to him. His character drives out into the desert, sees a hallucination (they called it a *vision*) of some kind of medicine man dressed all in black with a black hat and a feather, drives himself crazy, pulls a gun from his glove compartment and shoots himself, leaving his dead carcass in the middle of the road. The vision vanishes, as all visions do.

For Bill this was just wish fulfillment on Alexandra’s part. *There’s nothing romantic about gunning yourself down*, he thought as he downed his second whiskey. The empty bottle of Dewar’s lined the backsplash of the kitchenette sink. *But I’ve never*

*been one for romance anyway*, he thought, pouring a third glass of whiskey and flopping onto the double bed. *In fact, I fucking hate it. I pride myself on being jaded; it's who I am.* He smiled as he thought this: the jaded, cynical man in his 60's, (pretending to be forty-something—well, who didn't these days?) He wouldn't admit to the facelift, (*would you?*) he thought, speaking to the imaginary cohort that existed just past his left eye and behind the shoulder. The guy with the black hat and the feather, perhaps, with snakeskin boots! He liked the added touch. Mirrored sunglasses and snakeskin boots.

The Walther P99 sat in the little drawer in the bed table underneath his bandanna and his dog-eared copy of *Lolita*, a pack of Marlboro Lights and that damn stupid crocodile lighter some girl had given him at the gun show in Missoula. He liked the girl, the gun show was ok. He reminisced about the reading he had done in his life. When all was said and done it really came to him just how stupid a life can be, especially his, and that the only thing that really mattered was the shit he read. His reading, if it could walk and talk and write a eulogy, would be the best damn testament for his life that he had. So now he could thumb through the pages of his mind and look where he lands! Salinger's masterpiece, *A Perfect Day for Bannanafish*. And there's luminous post-traumatic stressed Seymour, the best pick of the Glass bunch, about to blow his brains out after acting weird on the beach like some pedophile with a strange little girl. Of course they didn't call it PTSD in those days—it was shell shock or something. But Seymour was just plain fucking weird and his wife in the hotel was a monster in the making.

*Something like the bitch I married*, Bill thought and drifted into sleep. Nothing was happening while he slept and outside, the quiet still of the desert night stole onto the make shift set like a panther stalking prey. With a sudden movement outside his window

Bill startled awake and remembered. The Walther P99 and Bannanafish. It was all such a perfect moment that not even a man with a couple of face-lifts and a film about to wrap could resist so he took the advice of the man in black. Blowing his brains out never felt better and once the pain subsided so did the memory.

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