

SCENIC BYWAYS

EPISODE 7

"BIG RIG"

by Ben Sembler

LOOKING BACK

The recorder switches on, truck drives on.

NARRATOR

Dust everywhere, kicked up by Old Stars' eighteen wheels, swirlin' up from the scrub and sage brush, twistin' devilish across the desert. Windin' its way through the silent sentries guardin' against who-knows-what, those stoic Saguaro cacti, a thousand needles to defend themselves when it's a bit of reach they really need. Defense seems barely enough these days. Course that didn't stop the people from boardin' up the windows in that town. Only it weren't the dust they were guardin' against. Not that it made any difference, in the end. Boards or no, the real threat snuck right in, burrowed its way so deep it almost struck water. Course that coyote knew better than anyone, if they brought water to these parts, it'd parch right into the earth. It'd take nothing short of a torrent to quiet the desert dust. A river so enraged it could wash the sin clean away. But if you can't bring the river to land, maybe you can bring the people to the river.

SFX RECORDER OFF

CREDITS UP

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

SFX WIND, TUMBLEWEED, SALOON DOOR SWINGING, CRUNCHY FOOT-
STEPS

SFX DOOR OPENS

NARRATOR

Hello there! You wouldn't happen—

SFX DOOR SLAMS SHUT

NARRATOR

Awful rude, if I say so.

SFX CRUNCHY FOOTSTEPS

NARRATOR

Though I haven't exactly followed propriety to its fullest myself.

SFX KNOCK ON WOODEN DOOR

NARRATOR

Excuse me, you wouldn't happen to know where a traveler might find some water, would you?

SFX HOOVES, WHINNY

NARRATOR

Huh?

SFX DISMOUNT

SFX FOOTSTEPS WITH SPURS

SHERIFF

Welcome to Coldwater, stranger. Am I right in thinking that's your big rig parked outside town?

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

Drove straight through that great basin east of California, 'till the far off lights of New Gomorrah stretched across the horizon and I headed west, back into the salt flats and dunes of the Mojave. I'd heard rumors of water in the Sin-

ful City from folks along the way, but it weren't enough to bring me close. I had some to spare, still. Water, that is. Course you shake long enough, some sin is bound to fall out, too. Hmm. Soon as the lights were far enough behind me I set a course for the east again, this time across the dry Colorado riverbed and into Arizona. It'd been a long while since I passed through, and quite a lot had changed. But the desert is still the desert, and even Old Stars seems small against that mighty, drab backdrop. But life gathers around water, and there was little of it to be found anymore in the ghost towns and ruins I passed along the roads. Couldn't much afford to pass the first town I'd come across in the old state. Despite the rather cold welcome.

SFX RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

SFX DOOR SWINGS OPEN, CLOSES

SHERIFF

Please, sit.

SFX NARRATOR SITS

SHERIFF

Sheriff's office isn't much to speak of these days, but I assure you this six-pointed star on my chest is for more than decoration. There's plenty of peace to be keeping these days. So stranger, you here to do some business with that Big Rig?

NARRATOR

Sure am, if there's any to be done. Could really use with a bit of water, truth be told.

SHERIFF LAUGHS

SHERIFF

Couldn't we all? Well you're in luck. This time tomorrow I'll be out scoutin' the plains, and if you'd arrived then you mighta squared off with more than a door slammed in your face, without this badge to keep the peace. No, it's

quite the timing that's brought you here now. So business, then. I got some word the Others are moving water tonight. We were planning a raid with some of the horses, but they can only carry so much. Your big rig, on the other hand... Well best case the noise scares 'em well off. And I'm sure we can fit quite a lot in the back.

NARRATOR

That you can.

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

And as long as I got to keep some, I figured it would be worth the drive. Only... Well it didn't sit quite right with me, raidin' other peoples water. A few horses worth might keep the people of Coldwater goin' for a bit, and who's to say these so called others need it more? But if there's enough to fill Old Stars... Goes to reason the others must be gettin' it from somewhere. And the source may be a bit less sinful a place to gather water than from others surely in sore need of it as well.

PRESENT DRIVING TRUCK

SFX RECORDER OFF

SFX DOOR OPENS, WOMAN CLIMBS INTO CAB, OWL HOOTS IN BACKGROUND, WOMAN SITS AND SHUTS DOOR

WOMAN

Well alright then, let's go get us some water.

SFX OLD STARS STARTS UP, DRIVES INTO DESERT

NARRATOR

Must be plenty a water, if Old Stars will make the difference in carryin' it.

WOMAN

Enough to last a bit, at least.

NARRATOR

Where are these others gettin' it?

WOMAN

From others still. Maybe the ones in the north? We can't go there, though, it's far too dangerous. Speaking of danger, let's just hope Kai isn't about.

NARRATOR

Kai?

WOMAN

The leader of the Others. He's a real nasty fella, to hear the Sheriff tell it. Of course I've never run into him. Don't think I'd be here if I had.

WOMAN LAUGHS

WOMAN

But we don't need to worry about any of that. Things are pretty stable, ever since the Sheriff rode into town. We were at each others throats, then, without enough water to go around. But he brought some then, and he's helped us take from the Others when we need to. He's a godsend, that Sheriff.

NARRATOR

I bet.

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

We reached the rendezvous point soon enough, quicker than the others on horseback and on foot. The woman stepped out to stand watch, while I crawled in the sleeper to get some shut-eye. Not sure how long I was out, but it felt no more than a moment before she was shakin' me awake. I climbed back into the cab and lowered the windows to let the cool night air in. That's when I saw them all around, crouched, waitin'. The people of Coldwater. They didn't have to wait very long.

SFX RECORDER OFF

PRESENT, IN TRUCK

SFX NIGHT SOUNDS IN DESERT

WOMAN

(hushed)

There, that's the signal. GO! GO!

SFX TRUCK STARTS, TRUCK REVS, TRUCK DRIVES

SFX WHOOPING, RUNNING

WOMAN

(shouting)

And keep running!

WOMAN LAUGHS

SFX TRUCK STOPS

SFX DOOR OPENS, WOMAN GETS OUT

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

It was a rout. I barely caught a glimpse of the others in the light of the full moon, escortin' that wagon of water,

before they scattered at the sight of the townspeople. Weapons were fired, but the shots went wild, and the others were wily. They disappeared into the desert quick. The townspeople threw caution to the gentle wind that had risen up and rushed to the cart, offloadin' and gulpin' down the water. I was still a fair bit wary, and took my time approachin'. When I reached the cart a good deal of water had already been offloaded, some of it sittin' in Old Stars. I brought a bottle to my nose. It smelled fine. To my lips. No funny taste. I started gulpin' myself, unaware of just how thirsty I was. And yet. Something still didn't feel quite right. When I finished drinkin' I turned to see the townspeople loaded up, ready to go. I walked back to Old Stars, that funny feeling unabated. Then it hit me, just what seemed so off. Where was Sheriff Otie? He had set this whole raid up, he was leadin' the people of Coldwater. What was so important it kept him from takin' the water himself? I didn't have to wonder long. I would find out soon enough.

SFX RECORDER OFF

PRESENT DRIVING TRUCK

SFX NIGHT SOUNDS, OLD STARS DRIVING

NARRATOR

Huh... You hear that?

WOMAN

What?

OLD STARS SLOWS, ENGINE IS KILLED. WINDOW LOWERS. NIGHT SOUNDS.

WOMAN

What are you stopping for? There's nothing there!

NARRATOR

Funny. I could have sworn I heard something. Well--

SFX SHIK, SHIK, SHIK

SFX GUNSHOT

OTHER CAPTAIN

We have you surrounded! Exit the truck slowly!

WOMAN

What are you doing?! Start the truck! Drive!

NARRATOR

They're everywhere, where should I drive?

WOMAN

Over them! If you won't do it, I will!

SFX STRUGGLE

NARRATOR

Now you can't just--

SFX GUNSHOT

OTHER CAPTAIN

Exit! Now!

WOMAN

To hell with this I'm getting out of here.

SFX DOOR OPENS, WOMAN HOPS DOWN

WOMAN

It's him you want, he's got the water!

SFX WOMAN RUNS

OTHER CAPTAIN

Stop!

SFX WOMAN RUNS AWAY

SFX ARROW SHIKS

SFX BODY THUDS

OTHER CAPTAIN

Exit now!

SFX DOOR OPENS, NARRATOR HOPS DOWN

SFX SLOW FOOTSTEPS

LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

I saw them all, surrounding Old Stars, moonlight glintin' off the tips of arrowheads and the muzzles of rifles. Then I saw the metallic sheen of her blood, reflectin' back that same full moon. The one in charge had me kneel. Told me to face forward and wait. I didn't have to wait long.

RECORDER OFF

SFX NIGHT SOUNDS

SFX FOOTSTEPS WITH SPURS

OTHER CAPTAIN

He was right where you said, Kai.

SHERIFF/RED

Nicely done.

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

I heard the footsteps before I saw his face. It wasn't quite clickin', that sound, here. When he came around in front it all fell into place. Gone was the six-pointed star, but it was the same man. Sheriff Otie. Kai. My stomach started to turn, fall out from within me and spill onto the dry dirt of that unquenchable desert. The sick feeling

I'd gotten at that cart earlier had curdled in me. No wonder he wasn't with us on the raid.

SFX RECORDER OFF

SFX NIGHT SOUNDS

RED/SHERIFF

Get the water. Then dispose of the truck. Him, too.

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

The sickness in my stomach was slowly spreadin', turnin' my body icy in the desert night. Sheriff Otie, or Kai, looked down at me and grinned, a wicked, wide smile. The moon glinted off his teeth, and under that wan light his mouth almost seemed to twist, elongate, into a long, toothy maw. It was an awful, delighted sort of grin. Then he turned and walked off, back into the desert, the Others around me unloadin' Old Stars of the water. My stomach kept movin' in me, rollin' along. Twistin' and turnin' like one long, steep rollercoaster. Remember that time you dragged me to the theme park? I wasn't keen on goin', never quite liked the feelin' of the air gone from beneath my feet, the smells and overstimulation. But this one had animals, you said. And you knew I liked that. So we went, and we saw the animals, lions and giraffes and zebras, and we ate the sticky, sweet and salty food, and we navigated through the throngs of children and parents and lovers. And I loved every minute of it. And after all that, all that happiness I was so quick to dismiss, how could I say no to one ride on a rollercoaster? My stomach turned fast, the heat drained straight from me, but I looked over and saw you there, smilin', your hand in mine, and it was all worth it. Every wave of nausea, every bump and rattle. I closed my eyes and imagined that coaster, and you beside me in the desert air, ridin' along with me. I kept smilin', awash in my reverie, until the leader of the Others shook me more violently than that coaster ever did, and I opened my eyes to see him standin' there, the bison hide in his left hand.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

SFX NIGHT SOUNDS

OTHER CAPTAIN

You! Where did you get this? Where?

NARRATOR

That? From the New Lakota Nation. The told me it was a token of friendship. And that others would recognize it as such.

OTHER CAPTAIN

You're a friend, then?

NARRATOR

More a friend than Kai, that's for sure.

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

I told 'em what I knew, about Coldwater, about Kai, and Sheriff Otie. They didn't believe me. Said that Kai was the only reason they had water to begin with, that he brought it to them sometimes, and other times led raids on the people of Coldwater to take their water. Of course he did. I asked him where the townspeople got the water. They didn't know. From different towns, or maybe up north, where the others couldn't go. I tried talkin' sense to 'em, but that didn't work. I couldn't blame 'em for not believin'. But fortunately I had proof. And that bison hide bought me the chance to show it to 'em.

SFX RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

SFX OLD STARS DRIVES, BRAKES, TURNS OFF

SFX DOOR OPENS, NARRATOR HOPS DOWN

SFX COLDWATER AMBIENT SOUNDS

NARRATOR

(shouting)

Sheriff Otie! You here?!

BEAT

SFX FOOTSTEPS

SFX OLD STARS BACK OPENS

NARRATOR

Stay out of sight.

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

It was just before high noon that I drove back into the town. It seemed as cold and unfriendly as when I first drove in, though I sensed something else in that cold, now. When I called out for the Sheriff, a few faces peeked out, saw the truck. Nobody moved. Not until I opened the back and started unloading the water, that is. Just like before, the townspeople threw caution to the wind, and rushed out, grabbin' and gulpin'. It wasn't long before the whole town was out in the square, surroundin' the water. That's when they found *themselves* surrounded.

SFX RECORDER OFF

SFX AMBIENT TOWN SOUNDS, PEOPLE HAPPY, CHATTERING

SFX FOOTSTEPS ON METAL, THUDS

OTHER CAPTAIN

Nobody move!

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

The Others pointed their weapons at the townspeople, the smiles flash-frozen on their faces, then melting just as suddenly under the noon sun. They looked at me with disdain, but I knew far more now than I had before. I asked 'em where Sheriff Otie was, and they told me he was out scoutin'. He'd be back before the sun set, if he was back at all. Well that was fine by me. I could wait. The Others were impatient though. They wanted to know where the townspeople kept their water. I told 'em there wasn't a drop of water in the whole town the people hadn't taken from the others last night. The one in charge gave me a funny look, then led a few on a search of the houses. We heard 'em tearin' up inside, lookin' for water, but they'd exit each time empty-handed. The shadows grew long as the sun sunk lower on the horizon, all the while we waited in that square. This time we *did* have long to wait.

SFX RECORDER OFF

SFX HOOVES

SFX DISMOUNT

SFX SHERIFF/RED FOOTSTEPS APPROACH

RED/SHERIFF

Well, what do we have here?

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

When the others saw their leader up close, dressed as the sheriff, they knew. They knew there was no water in that town, and there probably never was. They lowered their weapons, shocked speechless. The townspeople didn't wait for an explanation. They scattered back into their houses, peeked out from boarded up windows.

SFX RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

SFX TOWN SOUNDS, QUIET

OTHER CAPTAIN

(stunned)

What is the meaning of this?

RED/SHERIFF

The meaning of what? Of life? To go on living of course. And you can't do that without water.

OTHER CAPTAIN

There is no water here.

RED/SHERIFF

Sure there is. Look right there, there's a whole truck load of it. That water is the only thing keeping people alive in this country. And I brought it. You were dying in the desert before I came to save you. The people of this town had already turned on each other. Violence and chaos. Your mouths were full of dirt, and now they're quenched. This way is better.

NARRATOR

Tell that to the woman I rode with. She won't respond, though. *Her* mouth's still full of dirt.

SFX SNARL

RED/SHERIFF

You know nothing! I've been here since before they crawled over the bridge of ice, before the ancestors of the cowering fools sailed over in their ships. This is my desert. I know what's best.

NARRATOR

Where are you getting the water?

RED/SHERIFF

You'll see. Just as I saw. What they do with it when they have it. They'll think themselves the master of it, just as they did before. Divert it this way and that, bottle it and sell it and poison the source with the bottles themselves. They destroyed it all once, before we intervened. They'll destroy it again. Already they're finding new things to divert. To bottle. To *box*. But go. The water is to the north. Take them there. And see for yourself, how quickly the torrent can dry.

SFX SNARL

SFX RED/SHERIFF FOOTSTEPS

SFX RUNNING (DISTANT)

SFX COYOTE LOPING (DISTANT)

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

He came so close I could feel the air shift, Kai, Otie, whatever he was called. Then he turned on his heels and set off, the click of spurs disappearing into the desert just as he did. He walked straight into the horizon, the settin' sun lightin' the whole sky ablaze. I tried to follow his figure, but it was strain to make it out amongst that brilliant red, shimmerin' there. I could have sworn I saw him

twist and shrink, though, almost as if he got down on all fours. The dazzle must've been playing tricks. And then he was gone, the sun not too far behind. And all of us not too far behind, either.

SFX RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

SFX RUSHING WATER

SFX HAPPY PEOPLE

OTHER CAPTAIN

It's... incredible.

NARRATOR

It surely is.

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

We set out the next morning. To the north. Some rode in the back of Old Stars, others rode in carts and on horseback. It was slow going, but we made our way. I had us stop where they overtook us the night before. Made sure to bury the woman. It took time, but it needed doin'. Ground was hard, but we used some of the water to soften it. I thought they'd object, but they didn't. Maybe they were still stunned by the events in town. Or maybe they saw the truth in what we were doing. The necessity of it. All the same, we buried her deep. Didn't strike water, though. Kept headin' north, until the brown and red of the desert gave way to greens, and greener still. Like a miracle the forest sprung up, and some of them wanted to stop, but we pushed on. Further north. And that's when we found it. We heard it before we saw it, a torrent rushing past. We followed the sound all the way to the edge of that Grand Canyon. I'd

seen it before, yet I was still in awe of the reds and oranges and yellows, and now there was green and blue to match 'em. The dirty river that once flowed so far down in the bottom had risen up, a clear, glacial blue, and flowed at a level so high I would've sworn it was halfway between the old river and the top of canyon. When they saw it, the people of Coldwater and the others cried and embraced. So much water. So much life. Or the promise of it, at the very least. I watched the one in charge of the others bound down a trail into the canyon, rushin' to that river that itself rushed past, no care for the men and women takin' however much water as they saw fit. I watched a good long while, until they reached it. Brought it to their lips. Bathed in it. So much water. I wonder if it washed the sin clean away, once and for all.

(sighs)

I stayed for a bit, probably more than I should have. Long enough to see 'em settle along the rim. The thought of 'em coming together to build a community made me smile. But it was time for me to go. I headed east, of course. Drivin' east now. There'll be more water, there, I know, but still, I took a good deal from the Grand Canyon. Not nearly as much as New Gomorrah took. Coyote was right, the people of the Sinful City had already begun divertin' the river. It was no wonder I didn't see any when I crossed the Colorado into old Arizona. Soon they'd be bottlin' it, I was sure. Maybe I'd get a load to carry in Old Stars.

(laughs)

But maybe not. Would it be so bad? Who's to say. Not me, that's for sure. No, I'm far past all that. I don't have the perspective. It feels like I'm treadin' water, for so long I've just been tryin' to stay afloat. But I'll find some solid ground. Somewhere tall, with a good vantage. And when I do, I'll see the path that'll take me home. Back to you.