

From *Haute Desert* by Cori Clark Nelson

We drive towards a tiny but well-maintained salmon-colored cabin. Christmas lights hang from the eaves and a steer skull adorns the gate. I'm reluctant to admit, even if only to myself, that it's quite charming. But instead of pulling into that gate, we turn off the paved road and bounce onto a dirt path hardly big enough for one car, let alone two to pass. For the first time in my life I grab onto the "oh shit" handle. My mom flips the recycled air switch and rolls up the windows. We plunge forward, the compact Ford bucking in and out of grooves like a rodeo star. Dust clouds surround the car, but unfortunately it's not enough to block out the shit show in front of us. I sneak a look at my mom, expecting her to say something, anything, about her former home, but she pilots the car through the opening in the rusty chain-link fence without a word.

Various piles of junk strewn about the dirt yard seem to be organized by theme. A 70s style bedroom set rots in particleboard limbo. Further away rests a couple of the boxiest TVs I've ever seen, each with the glass shot out. In the middle, propped up on cinder blocks sits the original hybrid vehicle— car in front, pickup truck in back— literally the mullet of cars. But none of this rubble prepares me for the house.

The cabin is the color of dust, so wind-blown it feels like the desert is striving to reclaim it. Puffy sofas with the stuffing erupting out of them sit on either side of the front door under what once was a porch awning, but now the wooden slats have collapsed onto the stacks of cardboard boxes left there to rot. Both of the windows are lined with cardboard from inside the house, but that probably wasn't much of a deterrent to the bullets that pierced the glass.

"Mom?" I keep hoping she'll turn and say, "Gotcha!" That this is all a joke.

"Help me with the bag," she says, opening the trunk. I'm still pissed at her for lying, but I'm so freaked out by the sight of this place, I wish we were talking.