

Cactus

by Foster Trecost

I counted telephone poles and the seconds between them. The old highway cut straight through the sand and it seemed the road would never end. No curves. No hills. Just poles.

I'm not sure when she changed. After kids, I suppose. She didn't smile very often, joked even less. I looked over to watch her drive. Not even a blink. Just a stare, dry like the desert, untouchable like a cactus. I wanted to say something, but I knew she only wanted to drive, to hide behind the wheel, an excuse to concentrate, a reason to focus on something other than me. Maybe I had changed, too. I went back to the poles.

She once asked me to keep her young. "There's not much I can do about aging," I said. So she asked me to keep her youthful. "That, I can try."

I remember days in the park or the grocery, it didn't matter, everyone we saw was someone else. We spent hours making up stories about people, who they really were, what their lives were like. She got the idea from a Simon and Garfunkel song. "See that woman over there," she said in the checkout line. "She's having an affair with her tango instructor. Her husband knows it, too. But he's sleeping with his secretary." She looked at me, and waited to see what I would say.

"Do you think they know?" I asked.

"Know what?"

"Do you think they know that her tango instructor is married to his secretary?"

She kissed me, right there in the checkout line, for a long time. And that's how it started. That's how everyone we saw became someone else.

I tired of the poles and wanted to turn on the radio, but I figured no stations were in reach. I also figured she would turn it off if I found one. I wanted to talk, or break something.

I must have dozed off because I don't remember stopping. I woke to an empty car, still running, her door open. I jumped out, looked around, and found her standing in the sand some ways away. I walked to where she was, but let her speak first. She stood in front of a cactus, prickly in bloom.

"They're spies," she said.

I waited.

"They're spies from another planet, sent here to watch us. See those flowers," she said. "Those flowers aren't really flowers."

It was my turn. "No, they're not. They're communication devices used to send information back to their home planet. Information they gather throughout the year."

"Yes," she said. "That's what they are. Communication devices."

I wanted to ask where she had gone, but instead I kissed her for a long time.

