

New Fiction by Jesse Rowell: “Second Skin”



Opuntia sp. (prickly pear cactus) (Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Texas)

Alpert Nelsen had lost a toe. He just didn't know it yet. Not a big toe. One of the smaller ones. It got infected when he kicked a roll of fencing after his cameraman deleted the interview footage.

“Can't you disinfect it?” he asked his doctor, a bearded and bespectacled man working out of a family clinic in the Bronx. “You know. Cut it off. Clean it off. Then reattach it?”

His doctor looked at him for a beat. “Sepsis,” he said flatly. “Tell me, Mr. Nelsen, how did you injure your toe?” He wiped Alpert's arm with an alcohol swab, pinched the skin, and plunged a syringe needle into his muscle for tetanus.

He winced at the sting. As the doctor covered the spot with a bandage, Alpert told him about the desert along the northern Texas border and his interviews with the sheriff. Spools of wire sat scattered across the cracked earth, random and misplaced like aeration plugs on a drought-stricken lawn. Glug glug, the sheriff had joked as he watered a long line of planter boxes under the eaves of the waystation, the sharp tips of yucca leaves spearing the soft bodies of jade. Empty water bottles blew across the road into a ditch, a reservoir of plastic.

“So, you're telling me you kicked a roll of fencing on the Texas border?” the doctor asked.

“Yeah.”

"You will need to be more careful next time."

"Yeah, but what about one of those fancy new prosthetics? You know, put that in place of my toe."

"No," the doctor said. "If your foot was missing, sure. Or your hand. Or a limb. You could opt for a nerve-spliced prosthetic with synthetic skin, indistinguishable from the real thing. But a missing toe? No, that is just something you will have to get used to."

"Huh."

"Not to worry, though. You will get used to it. A slight limp for a few months, regain your balance, and then you'll be right as rain."

"Might as well chop off my entire foot. Better to have a prosthetic."

"Might have to do that if you don't get started on antibiotics right away. And we need to schedule intake at our sister clinic to have that toe removed," he said confidently. Then, upon seeing Alpert's face, he assured him, "It's a simple procedure, really. They'll numb the area, no pain, and then snip it off at the joint. You won't feel a thing. You cannot leave that toe unattended, Mr. Nelsen."

Mr. Nelsen attended to his apartment instead, limping as he looked for an old Two-Way camera. A Two-Way won't have a crisis of conscience, he thought as he picked through oil-stained boxes at his workstation. A Two-Way won't look away. The automated flying recorder would feed his servers footage that he edited into digestible narratives for his followers to share and patronize. Still, his subscriber count had begun to dip.

People quit on him. His cameraman. His girlfriend. Sinkholes appeared in his life without warning, leaving him to scramble

around the openings and shovel dirt to bring the ground back to level. Oriana Knowles had left him to help refugees fleeing Texas after other countries airlifted their citizens to safety, or so she had claimed. He remembered her face, a tear-streaked mask of resentment framed by hair the color of sunlight, a Renaissance painting if there ever was one. He held the Two-Way to a pendant light and fiddled with its gyroscope.

A battery pack fell out, tumbled against the workstation, and landed on his bad toe. He shrieked in pain and clutched his foot. Goddamn me, he admonished himself. I shouldn't have started thinking about her. But he couldn't stop thinking about her. Her absence. It wasn't fair that Oriana had cared more about others, cared more about some strangers in some far-off land that could have been ignored just by going about their lives. Eating penne alla vodka at Guiseppe's. Strolling through Central Park. Gelatos under the Statue of Liberty. He missed those quiet moments when a pocket of time opened up just for them.

His toe throbbed on the flight back to the Texas border and hurt even more as he baked under the New Mexico sun. The sovereign territory of Texas disappeared over the horizon, flat and dry. Dead earth not worth fighting for. They thought they were free, but the collapse had brought cartels into their cities, and detention camps spread throughout the Texas deserts like cacti bloom after rain.

A man with a cowboy hat, the sheriff, walked toward the waystation, heat mirages and dust distorting him in the distance. The man showed no urgency to join him under the shade, taking his time to adjust his boots or shift something he carried. As he got closer, Alpert recognized the object as a plastic jug, like the water jugs on pallets inside the entrance. Water. He swallowed and felt thirst scrape at his throat. He had forgotten how quickly dehydration came here in the desert, even when standing in the shade.

He eyed the jugs on the pallets. Some were half-empty, bubbles resting in the water, but each had an individual and somewhat peculiar stamp. A blue trident, its lateral prongs curving comically off to the side, or a cartoon devil, its horns making the same exaggerated curve, or an abstract bird with curved wings. He bent down and rubbed his thumb over one of the trident stamps. The ink didn't smudge as the water jostled inside.

"Traffickers stamp them," the sheriff said, coming up behind him. "Their way of identifying their stash. I find them and confiscate them." He placed the jug he had been carrying next to the others.

"Can I have some?" Alpert asked hopefully.

The sheriff nodded. "Knock yourself out."

Alpert fumbled with the cap on a trident jug and drank, drops splattering against his collared shirt. The water calmed his thirst, for a moment, but he knew it wouldn't be enough to last for long. He handed the empty jug back to the sheriff.

The sheriff watched him with detached interest. His eyes hid behind wrap-around sunglasses, skin peeling at the edges of his sunburned nose and cheeks, ears pushed down under the brim of his white cowboy hat. The faded insignia of border security rested above the hatband. It showed an old map of the southern states before Texas had seceded, blobs of territory shifting throughout history.

Texas independence, if it could be called that, had come through the judiciary a decade ago, granted by the Chief Justice himself in a 5-to-4 ruling. Texas's right-wing militias took over most of the territory in the years that followed, like warlords from some distant land, and interstate commerce collapsed. New maps of America showed a cavernous hole where Texas had once proudly stood, cordoned off by fencing and surveillance, an emptiness that felt like a

phantom limb.

“What happened to your cameraman?” the sheriff asked.

“Fired him.” They both knew he hadn’t fired his cameraman, Pierre Teeter from Nova Scotia. Pierre had stormed off in a huff after the sheriff had mocked him for the umpteenth time, testing his discomfort. Having a good cameraman was preferable to self-shooting. More accurate reaction shots, whereas the Two-Way pivoted in the air between sounds. “We’ll use my floater to finish our interview and get aerial shots. That work for you?”

“Knock yourself out.”

Alpert considered the sheriff’s repeated phrase of self-harm as he set the camera aloft and decided it was easier to believe that he hadn’t meant it as an expression of violence. Either way, it would be captured on his remote servers to be edited, memed, and shared. A self-described independent journalist, he had attracted a fanbase of anti-refugees after multiple interviews with Texas militia leaders, but really they were just ranchers armed with weapons of war. Most had knocked themselves out with assassinations on rival militias and mass shootings, creating the recent influx of Texas refugees seeking asylum.

After confirming his profile in the viewfinder, Alpert adopted the practiced pose of pensive curiosity as he squinted at the camera. “Sheriff Ward Baptiste is a humble man decorated for years of service protecting our southern border. We are here today to learn about the technology deployed at his border station, an unassuming rambler hidden somewhere secret, a location that even I cannot disclose.”

The sheriff chuckled. “Sure, Alpert. Very secret, very hidden. Illegal aliens are scooped up by our surveillance-detention system and brought back to Texas Detention Centers, or TDCs. Simple as that. We keep it clean-clean as a jellybean. On this

side of the border, at least. Can't speak for the other side."

Finally, Alpert exclaimed, some good soundbites. Ward Baptiste, sheriff Glug Glug himself, must have been practicing. Absent were his previous one-word answers tinged with distrust. Perhaps he watched some of my other interviews, he thought. "Tell me about the illegal aliens. Who are they, and why do they come here?"

"Well," the sheriff drawled, seeming to stare off into the distance behind his impenetrable sunglasses.

Alpert feared he had returned to his adversarial persona, like the whiplash of interviewing a politician who delights in switching between faux compliments and verbal abuse. Alpert tightened his jaw as he prepared to prompt him again.

"Well." Ward pointed toward a distant object in the desert that wavered behind a heat mirage. "Why don't you ask one yourself?"

It looked like nothing, and it looked like it could be anything. A specter among the many wavering things sitting at the edge of the horizon. Alpert glanced at the footage captured on the Two-Way on his phone, but he couldn't determine its location near the border station as the camera circled overhead. He pulled at his collar to get air moving over the sweat on his chest, this unexpected and unseen thing ratcheting up his frustration.

"How can you tell?"

"Been around the desert long enough to know when something is out of place. It's a second skin. Same reflection every day. Any change out there is a mole or a freckle that needs to be looked at. C'mon, boyo, let's start walking."

Looking back at the utility vehicle sitting in the shade of the waystation, Alpert hobbled after Ward. Sun blasted him

from above as he came out from under the eaves.

“Can’t we take the four-wheeler out there? Looks like a long walk.”

“Naa, I could use your help destroying supply caches. Easier to find them on foot.”

Alpert felt like Ward was torturing him on purpose as he took his time around the rolls of fencing, looking back at Alpert to make sure he was keeping up. The sheriff exercised excruciating exactness overturning rocks and opening bluffs woven out of dried mud and sticks. He unwrapped food hidden in underground stashes, scattered it across the earth, and told Alpert how coyotes and red-tailed hawks gnawed at it and shat it out. “The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain,” he quoted and laughed. Upon finding a cache of energy bars in yellow packaging, he unwrapped one and dropped the wrapper. Alpert watched it flutter away like a butterfly in the wind.

“See that shape drawn on the ground over there?” Ward smacked his lips as he talked, his tongue navigating nougat. “Go brush off the dirt and rocks and lift up the panel. Water’s hidden underneath.”

Alpert stared at the ground for evidence of a shape. He looked back at the sheriff’s inscrutable face under the shadow of his cowboy hat. He felt frustration rising again with the heat, sweat dripping down his chest. His inflamed toe pulsed with pain. A mingling of misery that made him impatient and made him long to be back in his climate-controlled apartment. He squatted down, tilted his head, and looked for the thing, anything, hoping to see it from a different angle. No shape appeared.

“What are you seeing?” He shook his head in defeat.

“Right there in front of you. El Cartel del Mar. They mark their stashes with a trident. You gotta look for the curve in

the dirt they make with pebbles and rocks. Ya see it now?"

Alpert saw it, finally, couldn't believe he hadn't seen it to begin with. Like learning to see an optical illusion, the shape was obvious to him now. Looking around the ground, he saw other distinctive curvatures marking hidden stashes. "There are so many of them," he said in astonishment. He shook his head. Not having Pierre here to capture footage of the markings on the ground, a graveyard of contraband, lessened the impact. The Two-Way hovered lazily nearby, focusing only on him and the sheriff as they spoke.

"Wait." Alpert knitted his brow above his practiced pensive look. "I can't believe that the cartels are helping Texas refugees, I mean, illegal aliens. What do the cartels get out of hiding food and water near the border?"

Ward looked at him for a beat, which made him feel like he was back in the doctor's office asking stupid questions about reattaching toes and prosthetics. No, these are all perfectly reasonable questions, he thought, but conceded that he should have considered his doctor's advice before rushing back to the border, his toe pulsing with unbearable heat.

"Money," Ward said flatly. "Moving commodities is a lucrative business, whether it be drugs or aliens."

The panel pulled up like the top of a trapdoor spider's hidey-hole, and Alpert lifted out a water jug, thankful no spiders jumped out with it. Only a quarter of water sloshed at the jug's base. He drank greedily at the spout, water running down his neck and chest. Water. Sweet, delicious water in the heat, even if it left a plastic aftertaste. He placed the empty jug back in the hole and hobbled after the dirt clouds stirred up by the sheriff's boots.

They walked toward the object that had piqued the sheriff's interest, still about a hundred yards out or more. Alpert couldn't determine distances here. In a baseball stadium,

sure, he could say they were as close as the 15th row to the pitcher's mound. Goddamn me, he thought, to be at a Yankees game right about now would be fucking fantastic. He imagined resting his aching foot on the cup holder mounted to the front row seats. The quiet before the crack of the bat against the ball, the roar of the crowd as the ball sailed into the stands. The hitter lazily rounding the bases toward home, crossing himself and gesturing to the sky, sanctified. Oriana sitting beside him, a bright smile every time he turned to tell her he was the luckiest man alive and kiss her soft cheek. Laughter as her hair, hair the color of sunlight, blew across his face, the sweet smells of her shampoo and perfume.

But she had to go all social justice on me. Better to just accept the new reality, or what had she called it? The Balkanization of America. The mirror had been shattered, our national identity strewn across the southern states like broken glass where we couldn't recognize each other as Americans anymore, even as former US citizens begged for reunification. The Supreme Court had killed that hope, she had complained bitterly. Precedent, originalism, and the constitution be damned, amorphous terms that had never protected civil rights.

Alpert pushed her out of his mind and focused on the thing ahead. He hadn't noticed that Ward had been talking the entire time about immigration policy and Texas bounty hunters assigned to detention centers. "They nab the aliens before they get close to our borders," he said. "Collect their reward from a TDC, and we clean up the rest."

No matter, he thought, the heat making him listless. The Two-Way would have recorded anything important he had missed, and he could edit out any of the parts that didn't appeal to his fans. The sins of journalistic malpractice—omission, hyperbole, and outrage—didn't apply to the profession of professional vlogger. Only establishing a narrative that helped his patrons feel better about their own lives. They

would certainly feel happy about not having to walk through this godforsaken desert, he thought.

The heat rose off the ground and enveloped him like a blanket. He felt thirst clawing at his throat. He scanned the ground and located the faint outline of a symbol marking a stash. El Cartel del Mar. How good of them to hide life-saving supplies here in the desert, but no, wait. They're the bad guys. They're the invaders who traffic humans and guns and drugs. But how very good of them, how very nice of them to leave me water. His mind reeled as he reached for the trapdoor.

Ward pulled him back, a firm hand on his shoulder. "No, boyo, not that one. Don't touch that." He studied the ground and pointed toward another trident symbol about a stone's throw away. "I'll unearth some water there. You stay put."

Alpert limped toward the thing instead, a second skin the sheriff had called it, or a boll weevil, or... he couldn't remember through the pain of his toe. The Two-Way spun off from filming him as it picked up muffled moans coming from the thing, close enough now that he could see it was a human, or a human-shaped thing, trapped inside a net. The net scrunched closer and closer the more it struggled, mesh pressed against the skin. Bending down, he saw that it was a woman, and he recoiled from the smell of urine.

"Hey there, dearie." Ward joined Alpert to stand over the cocooned body. "You look a little parched. Glug glug." A crystalline column of water poured out of the jug, beads of water splintering against her body. "Strands keep them alive for a few hours under the sun, needles injecting saline and a mild sedative. Makes it painful on the hands where all the nerve endings are, but they can't feel it on the rest of their body, for the most part. By the time I get to them, the saline has run dry. They need a splash before heatstroke sets in."

Alpert looked for a drone or a machine crawling along the

ground that could have deployed the net. "How does the surveillance-detention system work? I don't see where the net came from."

The sheriff nodded as he deactivated the net with a key fob. "You're not supposed to see where it came from. This isn't some penal colony where you get to see all the secrets behind our technology." The net slackened and flopped open on the ground. The woman rolled off and tried lifting herself on her hands and knees before collapsing. Her chest heaved as she shielded her eyes from the sun.

The net looked like a spider web. Its silk lines rustled in the wind, breathing in and out. It glittered with beads of water. He watched, mesmerized, and by looking at the net instead of the woman, he didn't have to acknowledge her existence.

He began to run his hand over the edge of the net before jerking back and cursing. The pressure-sensitive surface jumped up to grab at his hand like some living thing, and it stung like nettles, that ugly plant growing between sidewalk cracks in the Bronx, and god help those who happened to brush a bare calf or ankle against one. Spines barbed to the skin, uneven patches of inflammation, and scratching at the invisible thing ended with no relief.

"Discourages second attempts, doesn't it," Ward said as he grinned in satisfaction. "No repeat offenders. Once they've gotten tangled up in our nets, big fish, little fish, never coming back."

"Goddamn me," he spat at Ward. "That hurt. How is this contraption considered okay, you know, with human rights? It seems unnecessarily cruel." He stopped, realizing he would lose more of his fans and most of his patrons mentioning human rights. I'll have to edit this out, he thought, but his frustration rose like nettle rash.

“Illegal aliens don’t get human rights,” the sheriff said confidently. Then, upon seeing Alpert’s face, he assured him, “It’s simple, really. Title 8 and the sovereign territory of Texas authorizes the capture, detainment, and transfer of aliens as soon as they step on American soil.”

Alpert looked at her, finally. Hair the color of sunlight. She didn’t look like an alien. She looked like she belonged in America. Oriana had referred to refugees as future Americans just to tease him. Maybe she had been right.

“Look here.” Ward pointed at the woman’s blistered neck. “That’s a cartel stamp. She’s been trafficked. And look here.” He wrenched the woman’s wrist around to show Alpert her forearm, ignoring her yelp of pain. “That’s a detention center tattoo. That symbol means that she was detained for the murder of an unborn baby, and she has since been sterilized. She’s the property of Texas.”

The woman looked up at them, blue eyes darting between their faces. Her chapped lips sputtered, white spittle crusted on the corners, but no words came out. A Renaissance painting that reminded him of Oriana. The day she had left him came flooding back, a gut punch as he remembered her face. Disappointment. She had cried that day, tears running down her soft cheeks that he had tried to wipe away, but she had swatted at his hand and insisted that he didn’t understand the damage Texas had inflicted on America, the inhumanity of a theocratic wasteland that imprisoned and killed women.

The woman on the ground uttered a word, her first, and Alpert squatted down to hear her, pain shooting up his leg from his toe.

“Water.”

Alpert saw the outline of dried tears over the dirt on her face. He was a fool to not have admitted it earlier. Her absence hurt. He wanted her back. He wanted her safe from

wherever she had disappeared to inside Texas, wipe away all those tears, and tell her she was right.

“Ya want water?” Ward asked the woman. “Ha! How does the old saying go? ‘You can lead a whore to culture, but you can’t make her drink,’ or something like that.”

What happened next felt like a memory, like he was watching it happen without control over his body and its actions. The sheriff fell backward, his hat flying off into the wind. The net leapt up to meet him, grab him, and crumple him into a ball. He tried stretching out toward Alpert and yelled invective until the net cinched over his mouth, the sound of sunglasses crunching against his face. He looked like a burrito baking in the sun.

“It’s okay.” Alpert turned to offer the woman his hand. “I’m going to help you.”

She swatted at his hand and scooted back in a panic as the Two-Way pivoted behind him.

“Oh, that? Don’t be scared, that’s just my camera. I’m a journalist. I’m filming a story about the Texas border. Really, you can trust me. I’m going to help you.” It felt good to repeat the words, like the act of saying them out loud absolved his actions. He hadn’t been able to wipe away her tears, but he would wipe away the guilt of letting her disappear.

She looked at him suspiciously before pointing. “Water. I need water.” Her finger pointed at a symbol marked on the ground.

The trident, El Cartel del Mar. He felt sandpaper in his throat as he tried to swallow. Yes, water. How very good of them. How very nice of them.

He limped toward the symbol. “Don’t you worry,” he said over his shoulder. “I’m going to help you.” He brushed off the

trident and opened the ground. A net exploded out of the hole like a trapdoor spider capturing its prey. The pain was instantaneous as the net's needles sank into his skin. He struggled to escape, but the net tightened around his body, hugging him like a second skin.

The woman stood over Alpert and watched. She made no effort to free him. After he stopped moving, she found the sheriff's plastic jug and drank deeply of what remained. Her neck muscles worked as she dipped her head back, hair moving across her shoulders. She dropped the empty jug between Alpert and the sheriff, and started walking toward the waystation. Toward America. The Two-Way sparkled in the sun above them for a moment until it spun off to record the sound of wind scraping across the border.