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The Old Folks

THEY ARE SERE and withered from the desert sun, all of them saddle-brown, creased and cracked like ancient leather. Through slits like lizard eyes they peer at their feet, unwilling to look directly into the silent fury of the blazing star above.

This is Mojave Springs, a spa, cratered for millennia with steaming, bubbling mud holes. And these are the old, the aged, young enough still to make the pilgrimage, but well beyond the age of family gyms and fitness centers, where the iron-pumping, treadmilling young or middle-aged wage unending war on calories and carbs and accumulating fat—that they might rejoice in the glow and juice of youth. The old folks trekking across the badlands no longer seek thin thighs nor taut breasts; such gaudy baubles are from the long-ago, the once-upon-a-time. They come only to be preserved, desiccated like jerky, not yet willing to surrender themselves to the convalescent home, the hospice.

Thus they creep along, led by some improbable Moses with a whistle on a chain; they murmur in the wilderness of Baal and Mephistopheles. Blinking like iguanas, some cover their bald or thin-haired heads with gym towels as they approach the main complex that houses them on these expeditions. Having spent the morning parboiling in cracks in the earth, potholes through which the planet interior's hot juices escape to the surface along with

billowing sulfuric clouds of barely breathable air, they now return for showers, for grapefruit and prune juice lunches and a bowl of pretty capsules: vitamin C, Echinacea and a varying assortment of Eupatorium, Goldenseal, Inula, Ligusticum. Dinner will feature vitamin A, beta-carotene and zinc, but the nice-looking young man in the short-sleeved shirt and tie, healthy, hairy arms akimbo, warns them, "Don't try anything with Astragalus as that is long-term, not short-term. I like Wise Woman's Phytoguard, but Herb Pharm, MediHerb, and Gaia Herbs are also excellent and will do the job. I've never seen the bargain herbs work effectively."

Stretching exercises and massage, courtesy of a bobbed brunette bursting with vitality. Yoga with yogurt and afterward, with evening's onset, a shuffling conga line of toothpick men and corn-husk women. Still later, the nice young man slips away to the room of the pretty girl – her slender hips! her firm breasts! – who leads the stretching and does the massaging and raises the gentleman geezers' blood pressure, and who can say whether he will inject a life-force fluid into her body and whether she will writhe and buck and bounce and strip years from him as well?

Listen, was that her primal wail? Or just another coyote?

But these days too are gone for the old folks, memories as faded and falling apart as the black and white photographs they extract from wallet or purse or pocket and sort before them like tarot cards: here are Death and the Devil, the Chariot and Star, here are Lovers, a Hermit, the High Priestess, and this, this last, most recent, I suppose you could call it current, is the Fool.

And they trade these totems to days long past at night, in the Great Hall, and the wind whistles and hisses across the desert sand and the fireplace crackles with the pop of boiling sap, requires another log, and then another, until finally all the memories have been traded and put away and they totter off to bed, their own life-force guttering like a candle at wick's end, and their only lullaby is the wind outdoors and the within, the pretty girl's final, dying cry.