

# Jillian in the Borderlands

*a cycle of rather dark tales*

Beth Alvarado



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For Maurilio Miguel Alvarado,  
who was orphaned long before he ever reached the border,  
and  
for all of the children who have been separated  
from their parents since.

“Do you believe,” said Candide, “that men have always massacred each other as they do to-day, that they have always been liars, cheats, traitors, ingrates, brigands, idiots, thieves, scoundrels, gluttons, drunkards, misers, envious, ambitious, bloody-minded, calumniators, debauchees, fanatics, hypocrites, and fools?”

—Voltaire

# Jillian in the Borderlands

## a cycle of rather dark tales

Tale (tāl) *n.* [ME < OE *talū*] **1.** A recital of events; a report or revelation. **2.** A story or narrative, true or fictitious, drawn up so as to interest or amuse, or to preserve the history of a fact or incident. **3.** Things told so as to violate confidence or secrecy; reports of private matters not proper to be divulged; idle or mischievous gossip. **4.** *Archaic:* a tally or reckoning.

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*In which Jillian encounters the dead child bride  
and is thus saved from the clutches of her neighbor, Mr. Wiley.*

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*In which Jillian travels to the precarious city  
and encounters the ghost of her great-grandfather, among others.*

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*In which Jillian encounters the astonished dead and comes to understand both the shooter and the dead, although not completely.*

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# The Dead Child Bride

*In which Jillian encounters the dead child bride and is thus saved from the clutches of her neighbor, Mr. Wiley.*

## 1

Angie O'Malley stood on her porch with her daughter and watched as Wiley drove up. This was in the desert, a thorny landscape of hallucinatory heat where the prickly pear drill their spines into the caliche and hope for rain, where immigrants from regions south seek refuge and snowbirds sunshine, where bureaucrats ban books and brown skin and birth control, where companies design sleek missiles and pour solvents into the soil, where on streets lined with small stucco houses cowboys shoot their guns in noisy celebration on the Fourth of July, and where the bodies of dead girls are sometimes abandoned in alleys. Once only the arms were found; once a seven-year-old was knocked off her bicycle and abducted; once a two-year-old was stolen through the window of her bedroom. Such was the climate and the atmosphere.

Angie had heard that Wiley was just a workingman. He had pulled himself up by his bootstraps from a dusty dot in Texas to this small plot of lawn circled by chain link. Here he could hunt to his heart's delight and had once followed a deer all the way into Mexico, going against human traffic, avoiding the Minutemen, stepping over the

invisible borderline, until the deer, next to a small lake, had stopped and tilted its head to taste the wind. It was an oasis, really, tall trees and dappled sunlight. Birdsong. No wonder the deer was so calm, protected as it thought it was by international law. But Wiley took aim and then, afterwards, he shouldered that carcass and slunk back across the line. If anyone stopped him, he would just say *you can't cross what you can't see*. At least that was his story. And he was going to stick by it.

When Wiley pulled his truck into his driveway, he tipped his cowboy hat in Angie's general direction, and said, "How's your daddy," which she thought odd, since her father had been dead for years, but then she remembered Wiley was a Texan and they had unique ways of speaking there. When he said "daddy," maybe he meant her ex-husband, Bobby. Or maybe he was talking to her daughter, Jillian, but everyone on the block knew Jillian couldn't talk. It suddenly occurred to Angie that it would be just like him to set his sights on Jilli, even though she was still just a girl. Hadn't he romanced his own seventeen-year-old son's fourteen-year-old girlfriend? Hadn't he married her?

Angie had heard these stories from Mac, her across-the-street neighbor, who appeared on the front porch daily with tales of woe. Yes, Mac was the neighborhood collector of sorrows. In another country, in another century, she would have been a professional wailer, but here and now she was just a snoop and a dispenser of advice no one wanted to hear.

Angie watched, her arms folded, as Wiley stepped into his house and then, only moments later, back out. He was wearing his cowboy boots and a pair of Speedos. He threw the head of a dead deer into the yard for his dogs to gnaw on and began to mow his grass. Clouds, like large dark turnips, rose in the sky.

## 2

Angie and her sister and me, we're sitting at her kitchen table. It is hot, as in h-o-t, hot. Sunlight melting like butter down the sliding

glass door. What with only a swamp cooler and it being July, it's probably muggier inside than out there under the mulberry trees where the kids are. I'm keeping my eye on Jillian—she's been known to pinch. Not that I haven't taught my own kids to fight back. Whatever. It's that kind of world. Anyways, Angie and Glenda and me, we're talking about May-December romances because Glenda's husband Steve has just run off with a student in his first period geometry class. Glenda's thinking about calling the girl's parents and the principal, the school board, and the newspaper.

"Add the police to the list," Angie says, and turns to me. "Don't you think so, Mac? And the TV news and *America's Most Wanted!*"

Not one to take sides, I shrug.

"He wrote me a letter," Glenda says. "On ordinary notebook paper. Just torn out of a notebook. In pencil."

How sad is that?

I remind them how Wiley, next door, he'd done the same thing. "But," I say, "I'm not sure you can call it a May-December romance if the guy's over forty and the girl a teenager. Plus the girl had first been his son's girlfriend and he had stolen her away."

"Steve thinks they're soul mates," Glenda sighs. "That's what he wrote."

"Soul mates? Now he's going to have cell mates," Angie says, and we all laugh although I can tell Glenda's hurting. She finishes off that Chablis like it's soda pop.

"He left it right there on the kitchen counter. Where Stevie Jr. could have found it." Glenda lights a cigarette. "But, you know," she makes her eyes all squinty, "I can't remember what I did with it."

"Burn it," Angie says, then changes her mind. "Give it to the cops."

"No, save it for later," I say. "A little bit of guilt can go a long way."

I tell them how Wiley first allowed the girl to move in with his son, but the parents showed up and dragged her out of there by the hair, all kinds of drama, including broken windows. And then a few days later, Wiley married her! "Of course, that night we could hear

the fighting and yelling. Wiley was beating his son up, saying, *this hurts me more than it hurts you*. And, *why do you make me do this?* And, *you ungrateful little bastard*. In the morning, when the kid moved out, he had a black eye.”

Angie looks at her sister. “What do you do with a dad like that?”

Glenda shrugs. “I haven’t told Stevie Jr. anything yet.”

We look at her. We look at one another. She’s taking this pretty hard.

“When do you think he started sleeping with the girl?” Angie asks—about Wiley, I guess. Not Steve.

“¿Quien sabe?” I say.

Angie gets up to open another bottle. It’s past five, the shadows growing longer. Soon it’ll be time to feed the kids.

“And only a few days later, she set fire to the inside of his house,” I say. “Almost gutted it.”

“In the letter, he included a list of my sins.” Glenda sighs out a lungful of smoke. “But what were they?”

“Sins!” I refill her glass and mine. “*Eff him.*”

“I heard Wiley had the girl committed,” Angie says. She takes a long look out the sliding glass door to make sure the kids aren’t being mean to one another, as they will be when left to their own devices, especially if one of them is different. “What was his son’s name?”

“Johnny? Ronnie? Tommy?” I say. “Whatever. He has blond hair to his shoulders.” I look with meaning at Glenda. “A nice looking kid, really, if you go for the young ones.”

“Hmm,” Glenda smiles.

“Tit for tat, I always say.”

“Make sure he’s legal,” Angie says.

We raise our glasses and the blood orange that is the sun gets caught there.

## 3

When Angie allowed herself to think about her ex-husband at all, she felt that Bobby Guzmán had deserted her for no good reason other than, as he would say, she was pinche. Most of the time she didn't miss him and she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself, thank you, but deserted in this god-forsaken desert, that's how she often felt. Marooned among morons. Mac and Wiley were the least of it. The guy on the other side had a mean Doberman and whenever the dog got out of the yard, everyone would drop what they were doing and scurry into their houses, hiding, until the damn dog was re-captured. The guys down the street from the trailer park, why, they did their own paltry versions of home invasions, waving guns around until you handed over twenty bucks or whatever. After a few years of this, no one had much left to steal. An air raid alarm, that's actually what was needed, some sort of warning *the meth-heads are coming, the meth-heads are coming* so you could stash your TV or stereo in the closet, hide the family jewels if you had any. Really, they didn't want trouble; they just wanted enough for the next fix. It was almost like a donation to keep the peace. Who worried about missiles—although they did indeed live in a town ringed by missiles—with neighbors like these?

When Angie and Bobby had found the place, it hadn't seemed as if they were surrounded by outlaws. In fact, the neighbors, like Mac and her husband, who trimmed their square green lawns every Saturday morning and washed their old cars until they gleamed, had greeted them, glad that the house, the blight of the block, had been sold. Sure the house had holes punched in the drywall and black mold in between the tiles of the showers—such was their price range—but it had been neglected by its owners and perhaps trashed by them on their way out. Nothing that soap and water and paint and hard work couldn't fix. Angie had stripped all the bright orange paint off of the cupboards in the kitchen and Bobby had stained them a warm walnut. They'd ripped up the old carpeting and lay-

ers of linoleum and he'd painted the concrete floors brick red, like those in the houses of his youth. They'd replaced the drywall and the tiles in the bathrooms. They'd built an arbor in the back yard and planted grape vines and a vegetable garden beneath it. Angie had made curtains and quilts and towels on the ancient black Singer her mother had given her.

During all of this, she had been pregnant with Jillian and she sometimes wondered if it hadn't been the chemicals that made Jilli mute, although the doctors repeatedly told her there was no rhyme or reason. Little did she know that Jillian, swimming in the warm amniotic fluid, had known everything she needed to know even then: had foreseen that in five years her father would witness the deaths of his fellow workers, one literally felled by a falling saguaro—they weighed tons, evidently—another while trimming a palm tree. Foresaw that his friend would climb up the trunk with spikes on his shoes and a belt around his waist fastening him to the tree; foresaw, also, that the dead fronds from above would come crashing down, forcing his head forward against his chest until he could no longer breathe; and foresaw, finally, that her father would not be able to get to him, no ladder would be long enough, not the extension ladder from the job, not even the ladder of the first fire truck, which would take a half an hour to arrive. Her father would have to listen to his friend cry that he did not want to die until, in fact, he did die. Her father would then sink into a deep depression, feeling that even nature was becoming malevolent, feeling there was nothing a man could do to keep his family safe. He had, after all, been helpless in the face of death. In response, he would grow his hair out and his beard and he would begin to partake, a little too much, of the beer.

Of course, none of this happened until Jillian was five. Up until then, the three of them had lived in their little house and cultivated their garden and cooked out on summer evenings, only having to hide from the bullets of their neighbors when they rained down from the heavens on the Fourth of July or New Year's Eve. It was only

after these deaths he could not prevent that Jillian's father would begin to look like a sad, dark Jesus, that the neighborhood would be taken over by people who were ruled by their baser appetites, that nature would start reasserting itself—even the vines would begin growing into the house between the windows and the bricks, even the rain would drip through the roof into pots, even the waters from the rains would rise and flood in under the front door in the winter, even the winds would uproot the trees in the backyard, the trees knocking over the wall so that the lizards and rabbits and snakes and quail could come into the yard and eat from the garden, even the weeds would push their way up through the asphalt in the streets and the cracks in the sidewalks.

But since Jillian had foreseen all of this from the womb, nothing surprised her. She decided that if there was nothing her father could do, there was nothing she could say. Only her mother could see none of the signs, not of her husband's sadness, nor of the crumbling world around her. She was determined, Angie was. She was determined that, despite all evidence to the contrary, she could make of this the best of all possible worlds. Everything could be made anew and safe for Jillian. All it took was a strong will.

#### 4

“Jilli. Jilli Bean. Wouldn't you like an itty bit more lunch, sweetie? I made you those frogs on a log you love so much.” Jillian turned off the volume on *One Thousand and Three Horrible Ways to Die*, a show she was never supposed to watch. She hated it when her mother called her Jilli and she hated it when she talked to her like she was a baby. Mom, I'm not *stupid*, I'm *speechless*. That's what she would have said except for she was speechless.

*Why was I born now?* she'd intuited to her Maker on that fateful day of her birth, why not in the Good Old Days when she could've churned her own butter and milked the cows, although not in that

order, and then gone out into the wilds with her handsome hunk of a husband who looked like Clint Eastwood when he was Rowdy Yates on that old Netflix show, when she could have been abducted by an even handsomer—if you went in for the ambiguous ethnic type, which she did, since she was one herself—Indian played by an Italian, a renegade who would ravish her as much as she wanted to be ravished and then when her husband rescued her, he wouldn't even care because, *hello*, she'd been ravished and he would love that little half-breed baby just as much as his own tow-heads.

Why now, why in this day and age, she'd wanted to ask, while the mists of heaven were still in her eyes and so for an infinitesimal split-second she could see ahead to the next day when, on her way home from school, she would encounter Wiley next door, well-named because he was so wily, as in Wile E. Coyote, and not a hunk, not by any stretch of the imagination, ethnic or otherwise. She'd seen ahead to the deer's head in the yard—this is why she would stop and look. The deer's head. It was a portent. And she knew she would look into its eyes and see alarm there and then the deer would say to her, so clearly, “Do not go into that house, Chick-a-dee. Wile E. is one sick puppy.”

But at that moment, her split seconds of omniscience would end and, like the rest of us, she'd be left in suspense. What did the vision mean? Was it a warning, telling her not to go into the house, telling her she could alter her fate? Or was it simply a sign that she was fated to go into the house?

“Curiosity,” the Deer's Head would tell her, “curiosity is what killed the cat.”

Not one to ignore a talking Deer's Head but sure of her own agency, Jillian crept up to the sliding glass door and peered in. There she saw the Child Bride zipping around the kitchen, running her hands through the plates and glasses, trying to knock them off the shelves. When the Child Bride heard Jillian at the window—or perhaps she just sensed Jillian's presence, such are the powers of the dead—she turned and her hair rose away from her head as if a big Costco fan was

blowing and just then Jillian could see through her and realized that the Deer's Head had done her a solid: old Wiley *was* one sick puppy but, too late, he was standing on the other side of the glass. He slid open the door: "Why hello, sweet thing. Wanna come in?"

"Don't eat any of those pills," the Dead Child Bride warned her, via some sort of strange telepathy, "or drink anything he gives you."

Jillian closed her eyes and remembered all the episodes she'd seen of *One Thousand and Three Horrible Ways to Die* in case there were any hints there for her to save herself. But which episode? Death by Impalement? A javelin through the eye? Where would she get a javelin? Death by Decapitation? Not likely. Death by Electrocution, a possibility, since every house had electricity, and then she remembered the one where the guy who was out on parole got an apple shoved in his mouth, he was tied up, trussed up like the pig that he'd proven himself to be. Death by Dominatrix, she thought it was, but she'd closed her eyes so she didn't know exactly how he died, only that it was an excruciating death which seemed, in her opinion, a fitting way for Wiley to die, too, being as it was like Biblical, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and all that.

And then, as if both the Deer's Head and the Dead Child Bride had seen her thoughts, when she opened her eyes, that was indeed the scene in the kitchen. The Deer's Head had gone inside and was floating up near the ceiling shooting lasers from its eyes which somehow pinned Wiley to the wall and the hands of the Dead Child Bride now moved so rapidly as to be only a blur and Wiley's open mouth had a waxy tangerine stuffed in it. His eyes were bulging out and, behold, unbeknownst to anyone, one of his eyes was glass and it popped out and rolled across the floor to the open door where Jillian was standing.

"Run!" the Deer's Head said to her.

"Run," the Dead Child Bride said, "*Run!*"

Jillian picked up the eye, which was still warm and slightly moist, and ran.

## 5

The Dead Child Bride has not always been dead. She remembers, when she was little, how she loved to sit on the lip of the tub before her bath and tip her head back and feel her hair fall down her naked back. She used to move her head from side to side so she could feel her hair like a waterfall or like a big feather; she moved her head so she could tickle her own back, so she could give herself goosebumps. She remembers other intensely pleasurable things: cherries bursting in her mouth, cold sweet ice cream, the smell of earth when she made mud pies with her brother, the buzzing bees in the lazy garden, running with her strong strong legs, riding bikes, riding in the car with the windows down, wind wind wind wind whipping her long dark hair all around. And thus it was when she died, a wind came and lifted her and she could see, as if she were flying over the whole world, all the other dead child brides—although not all of them were dead, and not all of them were children, and not all of them were brides: a little girl who had been taken through her bedroom window; a woman's head sticking out of the sand, men gathered around her, arms raised, stones in their hands; women in courtyards, their voices rising in grief; women in apartment buildings, five locks on every door; girls in cars, girls in bars, girls in shopping malls, girls in army uniforms. It made her dizzy.

And now Jillian. And now, again, Wiley. The Dead Child Bride, her heart is cold, she freezes him. She manifests her face as it is now, a skull, the smooth bones, the eye sockets, one caved in where he hit her. "The orbital bone," she says to him, her voice frosty. "Can you say that, Wiley? Or-bit-al?" She comes so close to him that he can feel the ice in her voice, he can feel that she is not afraid, and then her hair, her long black hair which, in death, has been growing longer and longer, her long black hair, strong as silk, it reaches out like tentacles and strangles him. It is that easy.