

SEVEN

Melanie set her fork down and collected the salad bowls. She gave Rick a nudge and took the fork out of his hand. “You all right?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. He looked at her strangely. I was beginning to worry I’d given him too much to drink. I hadn’t wanted to put him to sleep, after all.

Melanie and I reset the table for the main course. I found the little tomato that had popped out of Rick’s mouth, and set it beside his plate. “Maybe you’d like to keep it as a souvenir,” I suggested. Melanie laughed.

A glint of anger flashed in Rick’s eyes. “You’re really trying to stick it to me, aren’t you? Is this some kind of initiation?”

“He’s probably a little confused,” I told Melanie. “Let’s give him some time to digest it all. I could use a hand in the kitchen, if you don’t mind.”

“No problem, Unc. It sure smells good. What is it?”

“One of your favorites. Do you mind checking on the rice?”

As my niece and I puttered around in the kitchen, transferring the meal to serving bowls, Rick sat folding and refolding his napkin.

“I realize you want to find out what he’s like, but is this the right way, Unc?”

“Trust me,” I said.

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We went out to the dining room with the steaming bowls and the glass baking dish. I refilled the wine glasses and Melanie served equal portions of rice and Chicken Vesuvio. Then we sat down. Seeing Melanie and me dig in, Rick lifted the first fork-full to his lips.

“I remember you and Mom taking a couple of vacations together—when I was about seven—and I got to stay with my Dad. They were the most boring summers of my life. I thought you and Mom went to Nevada, though; some place out West.”

“New Mexico,” I said. “You’re right, but that was the following year. We went to Thailand in secret. We knew your Dad would try to stop us if he found out what we were up to.”

“As you can see, we had the procedure reversed,” I explained to Rick. “The operation didn’t accomplish what we hoped it would. What was the use of being whole in a world of fragments?”

Rick was drinking too much wine. Maybe he found the Vesuvio a bit spicy. I moved the wine bottle to the other end of the table. I wanted him to lower his guard, not fall unconscious.

“I think you’re full of shit,” he snarled.

“Do you? Would you like to see the scars?” I got up and pulled my shirt out of my pants.

“Not now, Unc. Let’s finish dinner. This is really good, by the way. Why not tell Rick about Mom’s and your trip to New Mexico?”

“Yeah, all right. We *Belacani*—whites, that is—are regarded by some of the Navajo as...”

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. . .Two-Spirit People

My sister and I spent the winter arguing about where to go for our vacation in early May. Neither of us wanted to repeat our separate disasters of the previous year, when Connie had dragged her husband through Europe and he managed to be abusive in four languages, and I took my girlfriend to Hawaii only to have her go off with some guy she met at our first luau. The guy was so fat and sloppy you couldn't tell him from the roast pig, except the pig wasn't offensive. It had an apple stuck in its mouth.

Connie and Charles separated after their vacation. The separation wasn't voluntary. Charles gave Connie a black eye and a split lip on the flight home. What wouldn't even have been a misdemeanor on the ground became a federal offense in the air. Charles met a few lawyers in prison and sued Connie for a divorce on the grounds of mental cruelty. Nothing is too improbable for aviators or lawyers.

I never saw Charlene again, though she did send me a nice thank-you note that arrived on April Fool's Day. Life is full of coincidences.

Connie and I looked forward to our coming vacation. Even if the plane crashed, we'd have a better time than the year before.

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The arguments I had with my sister were never vicious. They involved wheedling and cajoling and pouting: skills we'd learned as children. We knew enough nasty people as it was and had no desire to add a spiteful sibling to our lists.

Connie wanted to vacation in Italy, to see whether the Florentines were friendlier without Chuck along. I opted for Hawaii again, to see if the Pacific were less salty without Charlene there to wound my self-esteem and invite the ocean to bathe the open sore.

After our third or fourth session, my sister and I realized what we were really up to. We hoped to relive the past, but with a more favorable outcome. By the time I decided to go along with her plan and said we'd go to Italy, she had already set her heart on Hawaii, a place as far from Florence as she could ever hope to get, and a place I never wanted to see again in my life. We had merely switched destinations, remaining as antipodal as ever.

It became clear that only a compromise could salvage our plans to vacation together. This required several more late night sessions over the board, around which stood our empty beer bottles, like discarded pieces from an earlier game. Once, when we were both a little drunk, we consulted her Ouija board. The Ouija gnomon selected a place for us called Mxqulpletz, a place which, even under equally improbable spelling variants, we couldn't find in any travel atlas or gazetteer, at least none treating of the geography of the third planet from the sun.

With only a week remaining in which to make our travel arrangements, Connie and I grew desperate to reach the elusive compromise. We didn't want to stay home and we didn't want to travel alone.

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Aided in our intent by a bottle of wine, we drew lines across the fold-out center pages of her world atlas. We bisected, drew arcs and tangents, triangulated, and performed all manner of functions on *terra cognita*, executing whatever arcane principles we could recall from our high school geometry class. Every compromise thus attained put us in the middle of a large body of salt water. Her map looked like it had been annotated with the symbols of a secret sect of flat-world geographers.

In desperation, Connie tore out the map and taped it to her living room wall. She blindfolded me with her paisley scarf, put the corkscrew in my hand, and aimed me towards the wall. I was thankful she didn't spin me around. I was dizzy enough from the wine.

The corkscrew became stuck somewhere in the American Southwest. It was impossible to say exactly where.

"Shit," Connie groused. "I hate the desert."

"Have you ever been there?" I asked, knowing she hadn't. "How do you know you won't like it?"

"I have a feeling."

"You always have a feeling about things. I wouldn't trust them if I were you. You're last gut instinct told you Chuck was the man of your dreams."

"He was, in a way."

"Yeah," I said, "in the way that nightmares are dreams."

Connie frowned. "If I can't trust my feelings, what can I believe in?"

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“Dumb luck,” I said. “That’s all we’ve got going for us.” I smoothed the hair back from her forehead. “Come on. We’ve still got to pick out a town or someplace. It’s your turn.”

I tore out the page depicting the southwestern quadrant of the U.S. and hung it up. I repeated the procedure with the scarf and the corkscrew and aimed my sister at the map. For a minute it looked as though she’d miss it altogether and jab the corkscrew into a blank stretch of wall. But she hit the map.

“Where the hell is Gypsum Falls, New Mexico?” she said, lifting the blindfold the rest of the way off. Her long hair fell back into her face.

“I guess we’ll find out, won’t we?” I replied, hoping I sounded more adventurous than I felt.

The following week, Connie and I flew to Phoenix. The metaphor wasn’t lost on us. We realized we were expecting a lot from the trip, but couldn’t stop our precipitous slide into hope. The next morning we’d take the Greyhound bus to Albuquerque, the only bus to pass through Gypsum Falls. Since the bus made that run only twice a week, we’d be stuck in our hotel room for four days if we didn’t get up in time. I set my travel alarm, compulsively checking it every ten minutes to make sure I’d flipped the little switch so it would beep at the appointed hour.

“Will you settle down,” Connie scolded. “You’re making me nervous.”

“I’m not nervous,” I said.

I set the tiny clock on the night table between our beds, after checking it one last time. I opened my suitcase and took out the clothes I was going to put on in the morning, draping them neatly over one of the hotel chairs you couldn’t sit straight in anyway. My jeans and jacket were

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bought for the trip, and were as stiff as cardboard. The cowboy boots were about the same. I'd tried breaking them in by walking around my apartment after work each night, but they needed a little more time to shape themselves to my feet. I took out the red and white checked shirt which, after half a dozen washings, at least felt like cloth.

"You can't wear *that* shirt," Connie said, jumping off her bed.

"Why not?"

"Here's why not," she replied, taking the identical checked shirt from her suitcase and flinging it onto the bed.

I laughed. Connie grew furious.

"Wasn't it bad enough Mom and Dad dressed us like the Bobbsey Twins? Now you've got to do it yourself?"

"Come on, Connie. It's not my fault we're twins. I didn't set out to buy the same clothes as you. Anyway, how many variations of western clothes are there?"

"Plenty," she said. "But you've got the same kind of Levi's and jean jacket I do, the same color boots—Christ, they've got the identical stitching—and a gray Stetson, too, with the same narrow hatband. Now, to top it off, you've got the same shirt. It's too much. I mean, we look like identical twins, for Christ's sake."

"Well, who told you to go cut your hair short?"

"I figured it might be hot, even for spring. You know how miserable I get if I can't wash my hair every day. For all I know, they don't have running water in Gypsum Falls."

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“Don’t be ridiculous,” I chided her. “I told you we should have gone shopping together. At least we could’ve been sure of not picking out matching outfits so that we look like a couple of trick monkeys. This is as much your fault as it is mine. I’m not taking the blame.”

“Where’s your other shirt?” she asked. “Didn’t you say you bought two shirts?”

“Yeah, I did. But that’s not going to help.” I took out my other shirt and held it up.

“Why’d you buy two of the same color?” Connie asked.

“I wanted blue checked—I don’t even like red—but they didn’t have it in my size, so I got two red ones. Where’s your other shirt?”

Connie took a second red checked shirt from her suitcase. She laughed so hard she fell down on the bed and held her stomach. “I can’t believe it,” she said, catching her breath in between fits of laughter. “We’ve got four shirts and they’re all the same. What color are your other blue jeans?” she asked.

“Blue,” I said, falling onto the other bed. I laughed until the tears rolled into my ears.

We had no trouble getting to sleep. Our excitement and our laughter had worn us out. I turned the lamp low and we talked quietly, the ends of our sentences left for the other to complete. We couldn’t remember ever laughing that hard, even as children—especially as children.

Connie and I managed to sleep through the alarm. We had no time to shower or have breakfast. We grabbed a couple of day-old donuts and two cups of bottom-of-the-pot coffee at the bus depot restaurant. We had only a couple of minutes to gulp it down before the bus to Gypsum Falls arrived.

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The lurching Greyhound was as gritty and dusty as a desert caravan that had already limped across the Gobi and the Sahara, about to embark upon the final leg of its rainless, globe-traversing journey. The engine rattled as if choked with sand. The old bus seemed ready to expire at any moment. I suspected, however, it might endure a while longer, until, like an ornery desert beast, it would strand its passengers mid-way between their point of departure and their destination, at the furthest distance from help.

There were only four other people on board: an old couple, a nun in a Sister of Mercy habit gray with dust, and a young cowboy in wear-faded denim. The driver's uniform was gray by design. In our new clothes, Connie and I were the most colorful objects in view. We stuck out like butterflies on a dried mud puddle. Though we each could've had a whole seat to ourselves, we chose to sit together. I let Connie have the window. It wasn't much of a sacrifice. The dusty film coating the tinted glass painted the stop signs a washed-out shade of grayish-red. Only a hint of the world's customary colors tinged the pervasive haze of our window.

With so little to notice but our grimy outlook on a flat, dusty landscape, Connie and I soon fell asleep, she against the window and I against her bony shoulder. The driver had to wake us when, nearly four hours later, the bus lumbered into Gypsum Falls.

The sunlight was blinding; the air shimmering. The sky was too blue. I felt as though I hadn't fully emerged from my last dream. Each object appeared too real to be anything other than an image conjured in a dream.

Connie and I had expended all our efforts in choosing and arriving at our destination. We hadn't given the slightest thought to what we'd do when we got there. There simply wasn't any

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mental energy left over for such considerations. We stood on the gravel shoulder of the highway in front of the bus depot greasy spoon, eating the dust of the departing Greyhound. We looked like we'd been set down in the middle of nowhere by an alien spacecraft beaming down free samples. Our clothing and unscuffed suitcases advertised what sort of product we were: city folk on vacation.

We decided to come in out of the sun, although it wasn't fiercely hot as we'd expected. Walking across the gravel parking lot, we stepped onto the weathered plank porch of the restaurant. We took our places on the bench beside the rusty Coke machine as though this were part of our daily routine upon coming into town.

"What do we do now?" Connie asked.

"I don't know. Let's just see what happens," I said, slouching in the bench. I wasn't used to the dimensions of my Stetson. The brim hit the wall behind me and knocked the hat into my lap. It rolled down the incline of my crossed legs and tumbled off the end of porch. I retrieved it and walked back across the lot, staring up and down the highway for signs of life. There was only sky and dirt as far as I could see. I returned to my sister, kicking at the dusty gravel so my boots wouldn't look so God-awful brand new.

The town of Gypsum Falls extended for about three streets behind us. I told Connie we ought to go exploring, but she wanted to sit a while longer and wait for something to happen. I put my cowboy hat back on and squinted at the shimmering black band of highway.

A short way into a brief nap, I heard the crunch of gravel. An old Native American stood staring at us, blinking his eyes as though trying to clear them of a mirage. He wore his coarse gray hair tied in braids that hung down to the brass clasps of his baggy overalls. His pants had been

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patched in so many places, over and over again, there didn't seem to be any of the original material left.

The old Indian walked a few paces across the lot to the other end of the porch, where he stared at us from a different angle. He retraced his steps, keeping us in view out of the corner of his eye. He backed away and squinted at us from a distance.

A much younger Native came around the corner from the side lot and stepped onto the porch. He took off his battered cowboy hat and asked us whether the old man was bothering us. Connie lied, saying, "No, not in the least."

The young man was fiercely handsome. His presence projected several feet all around him. Though I remained sitting, I knew he stood at least a head taller than me. He didn't wear his long black hair in braids, but rather let it spill around his shoulders and halfway down his back.

"Are you sure he's not a bother?" he asked Connie.

"Of course I'm sure," she said.

A sort of electric spark passed between them in that exchange of a few words. I felt it charge the air with a crackle. The spark was as blue as the sky. I saw my sister's glance run over every inch of him, down the front of his softly-faded flannel shirt, down each leg of his weatherbeaten Levi's, to his dusty boots. She glanced up into his face and began her perusal of him all over again. If it wouldn't have been so obvious, I'd have nudged her to cut it out. I felt like the third wheel on a bicycle.

"Well, you let me know if he bothers you," the young man said. "He's harmless, but sometimes he gets a pretty wild notion or two." He turned to call the old man, motioning to him to

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come over. “You might as well come and meet them, Grandfather. At least be polite, after all your staring.”

The old man seemed painfully shy. He shifted from one foot to the other. He bowed at the waist and introduced himself. Connie and I stood up.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said, shaking our hands. His grip was firm and leathery. “My name’s Sam Chevrolet, yeah, like the car. Want to know how I got that name?”

“How?” Connie asked.

“My Mama had me in the back seat of an old Chevrolet, left by the side of the road. Didn’t run no more. That’s what they’ve always called me. I don’t run no more either,” he laughed.

“What color was it?” my sister asked him, as if that made the slightest difference.

“Black,” the old man said. “All the cars back then were black.” He pulled the young man closer to us, patting his arm. “This is my grandson, Lucas Proudfoot. We call him that ’cause he refuses to get into an automobile. He walks or gets up on his horse, but you’ll never see him driving a car.”

Connie smiled at Lucas again. The beam traveling between their pairs of eyes was strong enough to hang your winter coat on.

“You haven’t apologized to them for your rudeness, Grandfather,” Luke told the old man.

Sam Chevrolet waved his hands and, eyes downcast, shuffled from one moccasined foot to the other in the loose dirt. “I am not the only one here today to have forgotten his manners,” he said.

“Yes, Grandfather,” Luke replied, averting his glance from the old man, studying the same plot of loose dirt. I was amazed at how this tall, powerful Indian could be cowed by the old man

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stooped at his side. Sam glanced at my sister and me and spoke in a torrent of what I suspected was Navajo. Luke waited until Sam had finished and then translated his remarks.

“My Grandfather apologizes for his behavior,” Luke said. “He can’t help himself sometimes. He’s got this thing about two-spirit people and forgets his manners.”

“This thing about what?” Connie asked.

“Two-spirit people,” Luke replied. “White people. Anglos. Grandfather believes white folk are divided in spirit and sees it as his personal mission to help them get over their separation and become one spirit. He also hasn’t seen many twins, and never man and woman twins before.”

“Intriguing,” I said. “How does Sam Chevrolet the Shaman unite white people’s spirits?”

“If they’ll stand still long enough, I perform the marriage ceremony for them,” the old man explained. “Otherwise I just say a prayer for them as they go by.”

“How can you marry us?” my sister asked. “It’s not legal, is it, even in New Mexico?”

“There are higher laws than the white man’s laws,” Sam Chevrolet said. “I must explain. Our language uses the word ‘marriage’ for many things. A warrior is married to his horse. You marry boards together to make a hogan.”

“I get it,” I said. “You mean ‘join.’”

“Yes. Thank you,” the old man said. “I will join your spirits.”

Connie and I drew aside and discussed what we should do.

“It sounds kind of kinky to me,” I said.

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“Let loose a little, will you?” Connie remarked. “Your Indian name ought to be Stick-in-the-Mud. Don’t be so uptight. When in Rome, as they say. Our vacation hasn’t exactly been an adventure up to now, has it?”

“No,” I said, “but...”

“It’s probably just the local tourist thing. Besides, I wouldn’t mind getting to know Luke a little better,” she said.

I looked at the old man. His face was a contour map of crow’s-feet, wrinkles, lines, and furrows among which shone two clear beacons as crystalline as prisms filled with sunlight. I couldn’t tell what color his eyes were. They were all colors. I decided I didn’t want to disappoint the old shaman. “What harm could it do?” I told Connie. “How expensive could it be?”

I nodded to the old man. “Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

“It is good,” Sam replied.

Luke Proudfoot smiled. “Are you staying with someone?” he asked.

“Uh, probably just at the motel, I guess,” Connie said.

“You don’t want to stay at the Gypsum Falls Motel,” Luke remarked.

“Why not?” I asked. “Does Norman Bates run it?”

Luke caught the joke. A glint of his grandfather’s humor twinkled in his own dark eyes. “No,” he said, “but it’s filthy. I wouldn’t let my neighbor’s dog sleep there. Would you like to come meet my wife and children and share our meal?”

“Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

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Connie remained mute. I nudged her, but she didn't stir. I looked at her. Her gaze was fixed on Luke's left hand. The silvery gleam of the ring on his finger was reflected in her eyes. I felt it sear a hole in her heart. Poor Connie, I thought. She had probably geared herself up for a vacation romance and figured Lucas Proudfoot was available for just such an adventure.

I had to admit Luke Proudfoot sure didn't act married, especially when looking at my sister. But I figured he'd just been flirting with her. Connie always read an entire book into a single word from any man who paid attention to her.

"Of course we'll come," I said, nudging Connie again. She nodded slowly. She was in a daze. I took her arm and led her to the old man's pick-up, steering her past obstacles as one would guide a sleepwalker out of harm's way. Luke slipped the hitch on the weathered post and mounted his horse in a seamlessly sure and graceful movement. He rode off along the side of the highway in a trail of dust before the old man even turned the ignition key.

"We'll give my grandson a head start," Sam said. "I don't want to wound his pride."

We drove out of the gravel parking lot many minutes later. Sam Chevrolet shifted inexpertly. The pick-up stopped and lurched and bolted, amid much grinding of gears, before careening out of the lot onto the dust-gray blacktop.

Unless she was asked a direct question, Connie remained silent for the entire trip. She seemed sullen rather than stunned.

Luke Proudfoot's hogan was a yellow and brown mobile home with stacks of firewood serving as the skirt around its perimeter. A dilapidated metal shed leaned against the single tree in

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the yard. A kitchen garden sprouted promisingly in the other half of the front yard. A pale blue Honda, crinkled with dents and scrapes, was parked in the rutted roadway.

“I thought you said Luke doesn’t drive,” I remarked.

“That’s his wife’s car,” Sam said. “Theresa isn’t so eager to go native as her husband.”

Connie came back to life in a sudden spurt. I tried to enter her frame of mind, puzzling over what had re-animated her dashed hopes. I decided it must have been Sam’s remark that Luke and his wife didn’t see eye-to-eye on how many up-to-date conveniences they wanted to live without. I knew I’d have to keep an eye on Connie to make sure she didn’t try to insinuate herself into these impossibly tiny openings. She’d make a fool of herself—and me. I whispered to her, reminding her we were guests.

Luke came out onto the unpainted stairway and waved us inside. “Come in, Grandfather. Come meet my family,” he told me and Connie.

Luke’s mobile home hogan was very steamy inside. Laundry hung across a section of the living room and Theresa was washing a stack of dishes with extremely hot water. She was listening to a scratchy Edith Piaf record, swaying and bobbing along to the music. Through the rear window above the sink I saw Luke’s horse, tethered to a post and munching on an opened bale of hay, or maybe they were oats.

Theresa wiped her hands on the apron covering her beaded Native dress. She was a beautiful woman. Her skin glowed, reminding me of the patina on the lovingly maintained dining tables in an antique shop. You could not help rubbing your hand over each one as you passed. They had, after all, been polished with such caresses.

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Theresa untied her apron and put on a short-waisted white denim jacket. “I’m sorry to run out on you like this,” she said. “Tonight is my women’s quilting meeting. We’re working on a group quilt depicting Coyote stories. Maybe you’d like to come along next time,” she told Connie. “We’ve got two Anglo women in our group. They’re very good workers. I’ve got to run now. I just wanted to meet you before I left. Good-bye, Luke, Grandfather.”

She and Luke put their arms around one another and kissed—for a long time, I thought, for someone who said she was in a hurry. I felt a twinge of the jealousy Connie had felt.

Theresa rushed out the door. I heard the engine of the old Honda sputter and die twice before it caught.

Sam asked us to sit down at the wooden dining room table. The space was nothing more than an alcove off the kitchen. The other rooms were only sparsely occupied by furniture, most of it homemade like the table and chairs at which we sat. Every square foot of the walls, however, was covered with quilts, rugs, or woven wall hangings. Luke’s home seemed like the Native American Arts equivalent of a bookmobile, a travelling museum of Native and folk crafts.

Luke rolled up his sleeves and continued washing and rinsing the dishes his wife had left. He put on a pot of coffee and went into one of the tiny bedrooms to awake the kids from their nap.

Both children were astonishingly beautiful, even in their ruffled, bleary state of just awakening. The girl, about nine years old, nodded to us and kissed her great-grandfather. She went to the corner of the living room beneath the hanging wash and began matching socks together from a tangle at the bottom of a decorated basket. The boy, however, awoke on the wrong side of the bed. He was a few years younger than his sister and eyed Connie and me suspiciously, alternating

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between quiet shyness and whining crankiness. The boy clung to his father's thigh and sat in his lap, arms around his neck, when Luke joined us at the table.

Connie smiled. "It's nice when a woman can pursue her own interests," she said. "Her husband, of course, can't mind being saddled with some of the housework and taking care of the kids."

She spoke as though from personal experience. I reached for Connie's foot under the table and gently stepped on it.

Luke looked up from the boy. He slowly rolled his shirt sleeves down. "I don't feel saddled," he said. "This is my house and these are my children. They are mine even when they're dirty. It's my duty as much as Theresa's to keep things in order, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, sure," Connie said.

"Theresa is involved with her circle of artists. Her work is very good. She's done everything you see here. And I have my own friends in the men's lodge. A man and woman can't be everything to one another."

"No, of course not. I didn't mean anything by what I said, Luke. It's just that you looked a little out of place with soap suds up to your elbows. My ex-husband was only good at making things dirty. You're an exceptional husband. Theresa is very fortunate."

Luke nodded modestly, as though there were no point in gainsaying the obvious. He set his son on the floor and got up to prepare supper. The boy ran to his sister and dipped into the sock basket, retrieving the mate of whichever sock she held up to him.

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Connie seemed uncomfortable under the glare of the old man's unflinching gaze and went to help Luke. She peeled potatoes, shelled peas, and diced onions for a stew, speaking with Luke in a low conversational drone from which I could extract no whole words. They laughed frequently.

The old man fell asleep, his coarse gray braids dipping forward to the edge of the table, his chin resting on his chest. I watched the kids folding the laundry. When Luke's daughter, Anita, had all the dry wash loaded in the woven baskets, she set the table, smiling at me bashfully.

The stew had very little meat in it, and what there was seemed to have been left from several previous stews, boiled to insipidness and with only slightly more texture than the thick gravy.

Sam awoke when a round loaf of Theresa's pan bread was set beside him. He ladled more juice than substance out of the pot, either out of courtesy to the younger ones with more of an appetite or, as I suspected, so that he'd be required to cut several slices from the fresh loaf in order to sop it all up.

Anita and her little brother, Justin, ate quickly and left the table. They amused themselves with more of their peculiar combination of work and play. Anita was making something of beads and Justin handed her the color, size, and number she asked him to count out for her from the shallow cardboard trays.

I grew very sleepy after supper. I could see Connie wasn't far behind. We hadn't got much rest in the past three days. After the children went to bed, Luke hauled out a bundle of blankets and spare pillows and rolled them out on the living room floor.

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“I’ve got to get up early for work,” he said, “so I’m heading off to bed. You two can stay up as long as you like. Theresa gets home about ten. She knows you’ll be staying over. Good night, Grandfather,” he told Sam.

In a somnambulistic shuffle, Sam weaved his way to the front door. He wished Connie and me not pleasant dreams, but useful ones.

Connie and I straightened the blankets and quilts and stretched out on the floor, staring up at the ceiling as though trying to make out the constellations. It felt so much like a camp-out to me I was reminded of our sleeping in the back yard as children, cocooned in our dew-damp blankets.

I heard one of Luke’s boots hit the floor, muffled only slightly by the thin walls of the mobile hogan. His other boot thudded against the wall. A short while later I heard the bedsprings creak over and over again until Luke settled down. Connie sighed each time the springs squeaked and grated. I knew where she’d rather be sleeping. Her sighing became a lusty nightnoise of its own, as rhythmic and lulling as the rasping of the crickets. I fell asleep in spite of the children’s errant beads, as hard as dried peas, jabbing me through the blanket and the rear pockets of my jeans.

I awoke with the room ablaze in desert sunlight. The walls seemed translucent. Justin sat beside me on the floor. I felt it was his staring that had awakened me. I sat up stiffly, as though my vertebrae had fused into a single inflexible bone. Connie and Theresa sat at the dining table, chatting and giggling like old school chums.

“Did you sleep well?” Justin asked me. I found his seriousness amusing. He behaved liked the old shaman’s apprentice. He’d learned the morning incantation without understanding how difficult it could be to form a sensible reply.

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“I’ll let you know in a minute,” I said.

The boy handed me a large blue bead: a polished turquoise with an off-center hole drilled in it.

“For me?” I asked.

Justin nodded solemnly.

“Won’t your sister miss that one when she gets home from school? It looks like a very special bead to me.”

“It’s mine,” he said. “I can give you what’s mine.”

“Thank you.” I stuffed the bead into the riveted pocket of my jeans.

Theresa and Connie saw I had stirred and invited me to join them. Connie looked a trifle ruffled, but Theresa was radiant in the morning light. She set a mug of coffee before me. The rising curls of vapor were sufficient to bring me to the edge of wakefulness before I’d taken my first sip.

“Did you want some breakfast before you leave?” Theresa asked me. “Connie and I have already eaten.”

“Leave?” I asked. “Where are we going?”

“Luke’s grandfather is coming for you. He should be here in a little while. He’s going to prepare you and Connie for the joining ceremony.”

“Oh,” I said, realizing I had nothing to contribute to the discussion of the arrangements. I took a sip of the strong, gritty coffee. “Why are you all being so nice to us?” I asked. “I mean, we’re just strangers to you.”

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“Grandfather doesn’t believe in strangers,” Theresa explained. “He says people always meet one another for a reason. He thinks his part is to help you become whole people, like us. Sam Chevrolet’s married every white man and woman who’ve passed through Gypsum Falls in the last fifty years, whether they were aware of it or not.” She laughed as though recalling a specific episode. “It’s his way of bringing balance to the world.”

“We could be psychos or something,” I said. “He found us at the bus stop.”

Theresa shook her head. “Grandfather is never wrong about people. Do you want to eat? I hear his pick-up.”

“No,” I said. “Coffee’s all I ever have in the morning.”

Sam’s hogan looked like a weatherbeaten moonshiner’s shack. Scrubby bushes, in the first stages of sprouting and blooming, littered the front yard. A dense stand of what looked like cottonwood trees crouched near the back, obscuring the view of the distant hills. A large thatched hut squatted beside his shack, looking like an igloo woven of sticks.

“Welcome to my hogan,” Sam said. His place was even more sparsely furnished than Luke’s and Theresa’s mobile home. There was only a single room. One of Theresa’s rugs covered the warped floorboards and other artwork hung on each of the four walls, between the windows on the two side walls.

The old man began preparing something on the table in the kitchen quarter of his hogan. I thought he intended to feed us. “You must first have a vision before I can join you,” he said, as

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though stating the obvious. “You must meet the other part of you that is hiding inside, so you can be whole people. You must not be afraid.”

Sam chopped and poured and grated, sprinkling yet other herbs into the concoction. He handed me and Connie the heavy ceramic bowl and bade us drink. I put the bowl to my lips and hesitated, the earthy, musty aroma of its contents stinging my nostrils. “Drink,” he said, gesturing as though to help me tip the bowl.

It wasn’t bad: a little like cold mushroom soup, a little heavy on the spice. I took three swallows and Sam motioned me to hand the bowl to Connie. Seeing that I had tried it and found it palatable, she didn’t waver. She wiped her mouth with a long swipe of her checkered sleeve.

“Now you must be alone,” Sam said. “You will stay here,” he told Connie. “Be comfortable in my home. But you must not leave until I come for you. Don’t worry. I will watch over you. Come,” he told me.

Sam led me to the thatched hut he called the men’s lodge. He pulled the stiff leather curtain aside, tied it to remain open, and waved me inside. “You must stay,” he said. “You must meet the one who will make you complete. I will be just outside, praying for you and your sister.”

The dirt floor of the lodge had been swept meticulously. A circle of blackened stones stood at the center, beneath a smoke hole. I sat down inside the circle and pulled my boots off. A loose string dangled annoyingly above my head. I pulled at it, thinking too late that it might be what was holding the lodge together. It wasn’t a string; it was a narrow strip of leather. It broke off at the knot. I toyed with it a while. Then I took Justin’s bead and threaded the leather thong through it and tied it around my neck like an amulet. I was starting to get into this.

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The lodge grew uncomfortably warm before long. I stripped off my jacket and shirt. Time dragged while I waited for something to happen. I hoped this wouldn't take all day. I'd roast. I wondered whether Sam hadn't merely given us a placebo, counting on the suggestion he'd planted in us for the effect of his magic.

On and off, as clouds passed overhead, the sunlight filtered down through the smoke hole. A shaft of dancing motes illuminated my hands. My hands! I was seeing them for the first time. Ancient runic messages seemed written in the creases and whorls. The inscriptions changed as I curled or stretched my fingers. More remarkable still was the impression that my hands weren't merely the shackled slaves that did my bidding. I no longer had parts like my bossy brain and minimum-wage appendages. I was my hands!

I hadn't forgotten about the potion I'd drunk, in spite of these astounding revelations that swirled through me. The effect seemed to wear off very quickly. The beam of sunlight was gone. It was growing dark outside. Someone was coming.

Connie crouched down and stepped through the doorway of the lodge. She wore Theresa's beaded dress of white doeskin.

"What're you doing here?" I asked. "Sam told us to wait until he came for us. You're going to screw the whole thing up."

"I'm sorry," Connie said. "I couldn't stand being alone any longer. I missed you."

I couldn't decide whether her admission was irritating or touching. She came and sat with me inside the circle, folding her legs beneath her. "I missed you, too," I said. "Did you meet someone yet?" I asked.

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Connie nodded. Thinking of the counterpoint to my own expectations, I asked her whether it had been Luke.

“No,” she said. “It’s you.”

“Me?”

Connie cradled my face in her cool hands. “Yes,” she replied. “You. I realized I could never have Luke, any more than you’d be able to lure Theresa away from him. It’s a nice fantasy, but it’d never happen in a million years.”

“What makes you think I’ve been lusting after Theresa?”

“Oh, come on. Who do you think you’re kidding? Your face lights up when she looks at you like somebody plugged in a Christmas tree. Do you think I’m blind? You’ve started to strut, too.”

“Strut?”

“Yeah, strut. You should see yourself. And don’t tell me it’s hard to walk straight in cowboy boots and tight jeans.”

I couldn’t admit that’s just what I was going to tell her.

“Once I put the fantasy to rest,” Connie continued, “I asked myself what I found so attractive about Luke, besides the terrific body and the hundred-watt smile. It’s his strength: quiet, gentle strength: the confidence he has in himself.”

Connie took my hands in hers and looked at me intently. “I know I’ve given you a pretty hard time. Maybe that’s what brothers and sisters are good at. But I look up to you. I admire your quiet strength. What I’d hope is to find a man like you. I mean that. I need to find a man who’s a person first.”

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I smiled. “What a coincidence,” I said. “I wouldn’t mind meeting a woman with some backbone, either: a woman who doesn’t expect me to take over her life and make everything bad disappear forever: you know, as you said, someone who’s her own person: a woman something like you, Connie.”

“That’s so sweet of you, even if you’re just trying to make me feel good.” She kissed me and quickly turned her head away, startled by a rustling noise outside.

“You’d better go,” I told her. “We don’t want to ruin it for the old man.” I realized the rustling sound, like dried leaves in a whirl of wind, was the rain from a sudden cloudburst pelting against the thatched hut. Connie ducked out the doorway. She’d be soaked before she took two steps. I left the circle beneath the smoke hole, now filling with water, and got dressed again. Just as quickly, the torrent subsided to a trickle and a sunbeam of water shimmered on the muddy puddle in the hearth. As I tugged on my second boot, Sam bowed in the doorway and called me outside.

Connie stood in the clearing between Sam’s house and the lodge. Theresa and Luke stood alongside her. The borrowed dress Connie wore wasn’t even damp. Her hair was perfectly dry.

The air seemed to bloom from the sudden shower. The buds and leaves on the scrubby bushes had burst into full flower. Their fragrance hung in the air like a mist too fine to see, yet I could feel it tickling my skin.

I joined the others, putting one arm around Luke and the other around Connie, facing Theresa across the circle. The old man, chanting almost subvocally, as though answering the humming insects, wove a garland of waxy leaves and pale flowers around us. The smoke from his pile of smoldering sticks smelled as sweet as incense.

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“You have joined our family,” Sam said, carefully unwinding the braided stalks. “Luke is your brother and Theresa is your sister. Welcome to our family.”

He kissed Connie and me. There was no scratchy stubble on his chin. He looked me in the eye. I understood in his gaze he’d known all along whom Connie and I would meet in our visions. He had prayed for it.

After the ceremony, we drove back to Luke’s and Theresa’s house. The entire desert had come to life in a single explosive burst. Sam told us the earth wanted to give us each a gift: a sign for us from the man and woman with whom Connie and I would one day share our lives. He told us we must go out and look for this present from our future lifemates for ourselves.

Connie and I went out after supper, following the horse trail behind the Proudfoots’ mobile hogan. We decided it wouldn’t be a good idea to search for our lovers’ gifts together. We took divergent paths after reaching Milagro Creek.

There were flowers I could have collected by the basketful, but I didn’t want the woman I’d be meeting symbolized by a bloom that would wither too quickly, exchanging its fabulous colors for a permanent dull ocher. I wanted something more substantial for her, something that would last.

The many gullies leading into Milagro Creek had been scoured by the recent rain. The trickle of muddy water gurgled over the stones loosened by the brief flood. I wanted to look past the colorful ones. After my recent vision, and a history of meeting the wrong women, I hoped I’d learned to look past appearances.

I found a potato-sized stone banded and speckled with black and tan. Its shape was like a large peanut, suggesting two smaller stones in the process of merging into one. I speculated on a

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prehistoric volcano in the area. The stone had once been soft and semi-liquid, and seemed to have been extruded.

I wiped the stone on my shirt and walked back to the hogan, in a hurry to get there before the sun set. It was nothing new to Connie and me, but Sam and Luke were surprised my sister and I had found exactly the same kind of stones. The old shaman and his grandson looked strangely at one another and said they didn't know what kind of rocks they were, though they'd seen them at the bottom of the washes.

Connie and I packed our bags, figuring we'd be leaving in the morning. Theresa asked us about our destination. Connie and I shrugged.

"Why don't you stay with us?" Luke suggested. "You can spend the rest of your vacation here if you like."

My sister and I didn't have to consult one another to know what we both wanted. The Proudfoots were not the kind of people who offered invitations they hoped you'd decline. We agreed at once and unpacked our bags again.

The remaining week-and-a-half was the most pleasant Connie and I had ever spent with anyone. She went with Theresa to her quilting meetings and even made a pathetic attempt at a woven placemat. I told her it was beautiful. She helped Theresa around the hogan and made some of the Italian dishes Chuck had insisted she cook for him.

I helped Luke repair the leaning shed and twice accompanied him to the men's lodge at Sam's place, where I'd had my vision. We and the other men walked down to the creek and stripped,

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scrubbing one another with the coarse wet sand before plunging in. Our clothes hung on the bushes outside the thatched lodge as we sat around naked and traded stories and jokes. Absent was all the pretension and unsubtle bragging men usually evoke from one another. The stories were true and heartfelt, even during their purely fanciful episodes. I had to admit it was the most enjoyment I'd had in the company of other men since grade school when, of course, none of us were yet men. I saw the group assembled in Sam's woven hut as a Cub Scout troop for those who came rather late to childhood. I told Sam that made him the den mother. He took it in good humor.

Theresa and I gathered different plants for the dyeing of her wool yarns. She told me their names in both English and Navajo, both of which I quickly forgot. Luke taught me to ride his horse, Cheveyo, though I usually stopped the stallion short of any urge to gallop. Cheveyo was a name Luke admitted he borrowed from the Hopi language. He said it meant *Spirit Warrior*.

Anita and Justin took turns playing with Connie and me. At times a little jealousy was fomented, but I didn't want to tell my sister I thought she was monopolizing the children.

On the day before we were to leave, the whole family went to the creek for a picnic, Sam included. The old man swam like a dolphin.

I knew parting would be difficult, but I hadn't expected such a wash of tears at the bus stop. Even Luke's face was wet. I could hardly talk, and what I did get out didn't always make much sense. I had tried to tell them I'd never known a family could make you want to stay with them. My legs didn't want to climb the steps of the bus.

We watched our family grow smaller and smaller until it was pointless to continue squinting through the dirty glass. Connie leaned her seat back and I took out the little rock-hound's guide I'd

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bought from the paperback rack at the bus depot. I was still curious about the stones Connie and I had found in the desert. Fortunately, the guide had color pictures and I quickly identified the mementos from our future lovers.

“What’s it say?” Connie asked, popping her seat forward.

“It’s called ‘coprolite,’” I said. Scanning the page, I did a quick editing job. “Uh... ‘sedimentary... sand, phosphate, calcium carbonate... concretionary... light brown to black... hardness 2.0 to 4.0... found in riverbeds...’ Sounds kind of ordinary,” I remarked.

“That’s all right,” Connie said, moving her seat back again and tipping her cowboy hat over her eyes. “Ordinary’s all right. I wouldn’t mind feeling settled for once. I’m getting too old for passionate flashes in the pan. So are you.”

“Yeah,” I said. I tucked the book in a pocket of my knapsack and stared out the window, seeing nothing. I’d spared Connie a glimpse into our futures. I’d left out the important details concerning our stone talismans. Coprolite was nothing more than fossilized excrement, from dinosaurs and other animals. The book said the stones ranged from pea-sized to weights over a ton.

The future looked as bleak to me as it had when we set out on our adventure. Even in the midst of them, vacations felt as unreal to me as the photographic images by which I hoped to capture and hold them. I couldn’t bring myself to tell Connie the truth. I just didn’t have the heart to tell her that all we had to look forward to was a load of the same old shit.