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FINDING HOME: A NOVEL IN PROGRESS

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BY
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FINDING HOME: A NOVEL IN PROGRESS

by

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is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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PREFACE: CONTEXT FOR THESIS READERS

My MLA creative project is a continuation of *Finding Home*, a novel set in 2000 within the October landscape of northern New Mexico. Jack and Suzanne, two ex-lovers approaching forty years old and seeking purpose in their lives, are reunited during a political clash between supporters of Oljee Red Hawk, a Native American gubernatorial candidate poised to win the race, and those who would silence his calls for justice and reparations.

This thesis marks the beginning of the second of three sections in the novel, each narrated by a different character. In this section the point of view shifts from Jack, who has narrated the story thus far, to Suzanne, who has returned to northern New Mexico with a group of political activists. This point of view shift is intended to provide the reader with a broader experience of the novel's plot, setting and characters, while deepening the reader's relationship with Suzanne and allowing the reader to see Jack from a distance.

In the novel thus far, the reader has experienced Jack: he grew up in northern New Mexico on the remote Valle Vidal, an ecologically important mountain region under threat from natural gas exploration; he grows marijuana commercially, illegally supplying the legal California and Arizona medical marijuana markets; he narrowly escaped being caught by the US Drug Enforcement Agency, but not before being harassed and beaten by a crooked agent; after fleeing over twenty years ago, he returned home to visit his alcoholic father and enabling mother. Throughout the chapters, Jack has been thinking regrettably about his lost love, Suzanne.

In the following pages Suzanne returns. The narrative begins in Jack's point of view and then shifts to Suzanne's to give thesis readers a sense of how the point of view shift changes the texture of the prose and the feel of the story.

Jack's Point of View

Crisp morning air blew in Jack's face as he drove west on NM 64 out of town towards the Gorge Bridge. The immediate landscape lay in mountain shadow, quietly waiting for the sun to crest the ridgeline. Miles in the distance, Jack could see the edge of the shadow paralleling the mountain range stretching north and south across the wide open land. There sunlight shone down on the scattered sages and grasses that blanketed the red clay mesa in pale autumn green, yellow and grey. But under the looming shadow the land slept beneath a black cloak, its splendor hidden from the world.

The ride was jarring thanks to the truck's worn out shocks and the road's crumbled asphalt. Jack couldn't find a way to sit that didn't aggravate his kidney pain. The ibuprofen wasn't working. He reached over to the stereo, pushed in the Bob Marley *Exodus* tape that hung out of the deck, and turned up the volume. The bass-driven intro to *Natural Mystic* eased in.

Gazing into the distance, Jack spotted a Learjet a few miles to the north on approach to Taos Airport. It flew just high enough to catch the sun's rays, sparkling like a meteorite streaking across the sky. The jet and Jack were on perpendicular paths that, if he timed it right, would intersect where the beginning of the runway met the road. He leaned forward folding his arms across the top of the steering wheel so he could get a good view of the jet through the windshield. It had long graceful wings turned up at the tips and twin engines mounted in front of its sleek tail. The jet's sharp nose angle and almond-shaped windows made it look like a prehistoric bird of prey coming in for the kill. Jack guessed that inside the belly of the beast was some rich Hollywood type, or maybe a Texan oil man, drinking single malt scotch and coming to look at another tract of high desert land suitable to build. Jack sped up. The plane dropped its claw-like landing gear. He dropped the peddle to the floor. They were on a collision course. He

kept one eye on the plane, the other on the road. Ten seconds. The truck raced as fast as it could go. Nine. Eight. Seven.

When Jack was a boy his family would often go to Raton, New Mexico for business. When they did, he'd meet up with his friend Tommy and they'd walk to the public airport on the edge of town. They'd work their way around the fenced-off perimeter to a field at the end of the dirt runway. There they'd lie on their backs for hours, hidden from the world beneath a canopy of scrub brush. They'd prune branches to give them a clear view of the sky, but not give them away from the air. They'd sometimes wait hours for a crop duster returning from far-away fields, or a Forest Service plane from a distant wildfire. On approach a plane would fly fifty feet above Jack and Tommy and land hard on the dirt runway a hundred feet away. The boys would hold their breath as it flew overhead, and then jump up hooting and hollering as it touched down.

Tommy remained Jack's best friend until, at age 19, he was killed by a drunk driver while riding his bike home from a pick-up soccer game. The drunk was the nephew of Raton's mayor and heir to a large local ranching operation. With the help of a high powered Albuquerque law firm, the drunk got off with two-year probation, while Tommy was buried in his family's plot on a small hill at the edge of their farm. Tommy's death stripped Jack of his best friend and his faith in justice.

Four seconds. Three. Two. One. The jet screamed overhead, shaking the racing truck with its shock wave. Jack let out a hoot and a holler and waved his fist high. The jet touched down on the smooth tarmac as Jack drove across the mountain's shadow line and into the sun's light. He pulled over to the side of the road and got out of the truck to watch the jet taxi. The darkened western slope of the mountains rose steeply in the background like a monolithic black wall. Beams of golden sunlight sliced through the cracks and crevices into the valleys below,

lighting wisps of chimney smoke and swaths of yellow-leaved cottonwoods that poked above the fog still clinging to the rivers meandering through town. The shadow line slithered steadily away from Jack over the undulating landscape as the sun peeked over the ridgeline.

Jack hopped back in the truck, put on his Ray-Bans, fast forwarded the tape to “Jamming” and headed toward the gorge. It was ironic that Suzanne had asked to meet him at a landmark frequented by people set on committing suicide. No one knew exactly how many people had jumped to their death off of the Gorge Bridge, dropping into the mighty Rio Grande 650 feet below. Given that New Mexico ranked fourth in the nation for suicides, the number was probably high. The location was even more ironic because Jack, being under federal investigation, having an inflamed kidney and about to be confronted by the bitterness of lost love, was for the first time in his life able to see leaping into the ever-after as a reasonable next step. What would it feel like to free-fall through geologic time into a gorge ripped open by volcanic explosions twenty-nine million years ago? He fantasized his dramatic exit: walk up to Suzanne, pull her into his arms, passionately kiss her, then pull away, wave farewell and jump off the bridge. The idea that he could do it gave him a sense of control. He needed something to hold onto. The choice not to jump to his death was about all he had.

He reached the bridge just as Bob Marley and The Wailers were finishing their version of Curtis Mayfield’s “People Get Ready”. He let the song play out, the fading voices of the I Threes singing, “One love... One heart... Let’s get together and feel alright...”

Jack scrambled down the steep eroded path that led to a large rock ledge beneath the rim of the gorge where the bridge’s arching span touched back down to earth. Suzanne was standing next to a massive concrete pillar that rose out of the red rock to anchor the bridge’s steel girder trusses. She wore a thin wool sweater and blue jeans that both clung tightly to her curves. Jack

skidded, sending a few small rocks tumbling down the path. Suzanne looked up startled. Her ringlets of black hair hung over her shoulders and draped around her opal-blue eyes. She looked stunning. She waved at him. He waved back and continued down the path.

“Hello,” Suzanne said.

“Hey.” Jack stopped a few feet from her and stared down at his boots.

“Thanks for coming,” she said. “I wasn’t sure if you would. It’s good to see you.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for all the tortillas in Mexico,” Jack said, feeling like a jackass as soon as the words left his mouth. He kicked a few pebbles.

“How have you been?”

“Fine,” he said still staring down at his boots.

“Jack, look at me.”

He did as he was told. Suzanne reached out her pale slender hand. Her fingernails were trimmed, but dirty, and the pads of her fingers were calloused.

“Let’s dangle our feet off the edge like old times.”

Jack took her hand. Her grip was warm and firm. Now would have been the perfect time for the dramatic exit. He looked over the edge into the abyss.

Freefalling through geologic time.

They approached three long flat boulders that looked as though they had been chiseled from the cliff above into benches for the gods. Though most of the gorge was still in shadow, sunlight had snuck onto the ledge and had begun warming the rock. Suzanne and Jack sat on a boulder that hung slightly over the edge of a 300 foot cliff wall. Feet dangling, they sat in silence, listening to the river hurling through class five rapids below.

“I missed you,” Suzanne said.

“I missed you too,” Jack said.

A pair of ravens flew overhead. Their cries echoed off the gorge walls.

“Do you want to hear about what I’ve been up to?” Suzanne asked.

“I read your letter,” Jack said.

Once again he felt like a jackass. It surprised Jack a little how comfortable feeling like a jackass was for him. That probably wasn’t a good thing.

“I want to share my story with you, Jack. I have so much to tell you”

“Like the story of the girl who ran home to North Carolina to get away from her New Mexico boyfriend?” They fell into an uncomfortable silence. Jack heard a voice speak inside his head. *Shut your mouth*, is all it said.

“Sorry,” he said.

“There’s no need to be hurtful,” Suzanne said. “This is challenging for both of us. But that’s okay. This is a new beginning. A rebirth.”

Jack didn’t know how to respond. He focused on the grace and symmetry of the bridge overhead until he heard Suzanne start to cry. He turned and looked into her teary eyes. He’d been here before. He reached into his back pocket, pulled out a bandana and handed it to her. She took it and blew her nose.

“Sorry,” she said as she dabbed her eyes with the unused corner.

Jack smiled. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I’ve got more in the truck. You can keep that one.”

“I’ll wash it and get it back to you.”

“No really, it’s okay. Just keep it.”

“Okay.” She blew her nose again. “Thanks.”

“Look, I’ve been having a tough time of it lately,” Jack said. “Life has me on the defensive.”

“You’ve been living on the defensive since the day I met you,” said Suzanne. “The world is always out to get Jack.”

“Well I guess some things never change,” Jack said.

“Everything changes,” said Suzanne. “I used to buy that victim shit too, but no more. I’m done with it. Nothing is *because* of someone else. It’s all about our choices.”

“You lost me,” Jack said

Suzanne leaned forward and peered below. Jack gazed across the rift into the sunlight that had worked its way down the gorge’s west wall. It glistened off the ribbon of the mighty Rio Grande stretching upstream into Colorado and downstream to Mexico. The sun warmed the gorge and pushed the cool stagnant night air up and out. The breeze blew over the ledge. It smelled damp and musty. Jack breathed it in. A few peregrine falcons and a dozen vultures joined the ravens soaring below the edge of the rim, their wings spread wide to catch the rising thermals.

“When I left here in the spring I was confused,” Suzanne said. “I didn’t know who I was or why I was so miserable. I blamed you. I blamed my parents, my friends, the change in seasons. I tried so hard to find excuses for the uncomfortable feelings inside of me. But all along the feelings were, and still are, mine.”

“You were mad at me because I wouldn’t get married and have a kid with you,” Jack said.

“Yes, I was disappointed that the man I had invested six years of my life in was unwilling to go the next step.”

“It was your next step not mine,” said Jack

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Suzanne said. “I have no control over your or anyone else’s choices. I have my emotional responses to them. That’s all I have control over, and really, I don’t even have control over them.”

“That’s well documented,” Jack said. Then the voice in his head repeated, *Shut your mouth.*

“I know my emotionality drove you crazy. I was challenging to live with. Fire burns.”

One of the falcons circling above caught Jack’s attention in time to see it fold its wings and dive after what he guessed was some unaware animal scurrying between sagebrush. Sure enough, seconds later the falcon took flight again with a rodent clutched tightly in its talons. Predator, prey. Eat or be eaten. Suzanne kept talking.

“But my emotions are not a problem, they are my power. I *feel* the world. My emotions respond to the energy all around me. I need to learn how to use that power, to claim that power and bring it to the world as a tool for growth and transformation.”

“You’re sounding like a New Ager whose been licking too many crystals,” Jack said.

“What I’m talking about has nothing to do with new age ‘love and light’ shit. What I’m talking about is summoning the courage to look at what’s hiding in the shadow.”

“I thought you were going to tell me a story,” said Jack.

“I am. It’s just hard to find a place to start,” said Suzanne.

“Try, ‘Once upon a time there was a woman named Suzanne who chased a rainbow across the country and back trying to catch her shadow,’” Jack said. “I’ve got shit to deal with. I don’t have time to chase shadows. Let’s talk about something real. Are you sleeping with your Indian man?”

“That is so crass!” Suzanne said.

“I call it straight forward,” Jack said.

“Straight backward more like it. Fine. You want to fuel your jealousy? I’ll pass you the can. Yes, we fuck.”

“Fucked or still fuck?”

“Fuck, Jack. We fuck and might very well fuck again.”

Jack felt restless. He stood up and hopped off the boulder.

“Who I’m with doesn’t matter to us,” Suzanne said. “We’ve got our own relationship.”

“What relationship?”

“I love you.”

“Bullshit”

“I do. I’ve never stopped loving you. I’m the one who wanted to get married and have children. You’re the one that wouldn’t commit.”

“I thought you were beyond blaming,” Jack said.

“I’m not blaming. Facts are facts. You’re trying to get me to push you away, give you some justification for your self-loathing. Truth is we’re both hurting.”

“You have no idea.”

“Yes I do.”

“Then tell me, Suzanne. Tell me why my stomach is in a fucking knot. Tell me why my head feels like it’s about to explode off of my neck. Tell me why I feel so fucking numb inside. Can you tell me that?”

Jack felt his face flush with anger. Suzanne started to cry.

“Just like old times indeed,” Jack said as he turned to walk away.

“Please don’t go. I need to talk to you,” Suzanne said.

The desperation in her voice stopped Jack cold. He turned back to her. “Whatever you need to say, say it.”

“Will you come sit back down? Please?” asked Suzanne. He did as he was asked. Truth was he didn’t want to leave her. “I need you in my life,” she said. “I’ve learned a lot about myself over the past few months. I’m not who I was when I left.”

Suzanne started crying again. Jack felt himself soften. He didn’t have the strength to fight. He put his arm around her shoulders. She buried her head in his chest. Her body shook as she sobbed. Jack pulled her in tighter. It took a few minutes before she was able to regain her composure. When she did she pulled away from his embrace.

“I did this healing process called shamanic breathwork—I mentioned it in my letter—it’s really profound. You use your breath to journey into your subconscious. During one of my journeys I regressed to when I was nine years old. I was in my house in Raleigh in my room playing when our neighbor who was looking for my father I guess came into my room and sat on my bed and told me to get on his lap and I did and then he told me to take off my clothes and I did and then he made me do horrible things and I did them. I did them. I didn’t know what to do. I was just a little girl. And then my father came home and came into my room and killed that man. That was the last time I saw my daddy. That was the last time I saw my daddy.”

Suzanne was hugging herself and rocking back and forth. Her breath was fast and shallow. Tears were streaming down her face. Jack knew the rest of the story—Suzanne’s daddy bludgeoned the neighbor to death. He was arrested and thrown in jail. No one knew why he’d done the crime. No one knew what had happened to Suzanne, what he’d come home to witness. Three days later, Suzanne’s daddy hung himself in his cell. Her mother never spoke a

word about it. She moved the two of them to the mountains of North Carolina. She told their new neighbors that Suzanne's father had left her for another woman.

She kept rocking back and forth. Jack wanted to go back in time and rescue nine year old Suzanne. He was in shock, but at the same time so much now made sense, like how she could not tolerate being touched certain ways, how she searched a crowd for danger, startled when people snuck up on her, refused to sit with her back to a door. After ten minutes, she stopped rocking and looked at Jack.

"I didn't know any of that had happened or that I've been blaming myself for my father's death for 28 years. I'd erased it from my memory"

"It wasn't your fault," Jack said. "You were just a child."

Jack felt an emptiness rise up and engulf him as if he was in a small box from which all the air had been sucked out. The emptiness was accompanied by a flood of guilt and shame. He felt like the most insensitive man alive. He'd rejected her pleas for help over the years of their relationship. It had been all about him, his needs, his wants. Right up to the day he'd fucked her friend. What an ass he was.

"I haven't been able to love a man, to be intimate with a man," Suzanne said. "I've spent my life not knowing why, thinking there was something wrong with me."

Jack listened to Suzanne. His was speechless.

"When I met you something opened in me," she said. "I don't know what or how or why, but I *know* I need you in my life."

Suzanne threw her arms around Jack. It was his turn to cry.

It was past high noon by the time Jack drove away from the Gorge Bridge parking lot. He looked at himself in the rearview mirror. His eyes were blood shot and puffy. His cheeks

were reddened. He couldn't remember ever having cried like that. It was as if a volcano of molten sadness had erupted and flowed out of his body.

He and Suzanne had continued talking for well over an hour. Her willingness to be vulnerable and share her story had opened Jack's heart. He had left their meeting promising—something else he can't remember the last time doing—to meet up with her on Monday at the activist gathering on the Pueblo.

He rolled down the window and fumbled in the door pocket for another Marley tape. He pulled out *Soul Revolution* and popped it in the tape deck. "Riding High" kicked off side two. He reached across the dash, opened the glove box and pulled out a pouch of American Spirits. Knees on the wheel, he rolled a cigarette. He lit it, put his elbow on the window sill, reclined into the seat and inhaled the sweet smoke.

The bright sun beat down on the ground. The rain that had fallen overnight was gone—sucked up by plants or vaporized by the sun. Jack was parched as well. And he needed to sleep. He got to the blinking light at the edge of town, turned north and headed home.

Suzanne's Point of View

Suzanne was cold. She rolled over and wrapped her long body around Wahyu. His smooth muscular back was warm. He wriggled for a moment and fell back asleep. She hadn't been able to sleep much for a few nights. Insomnia had taken hold. Her mind raced with thoughts and the feelings about those thoughts and the thoughts about those feelings. Round and round.

The sun was working its way over Taos Mountain. Suzanne imagined the dew beginning to sparkle in the fields that over the past week had grown tents and tepees that housed a small army of slumbering revolutionaries. She could hear those that were up and gathered around the fire circle stoking the coals. She quietly slipped out from under the covers. The cold air inside the small tepee tingled her warm skin. She stood for a moment, naked and goose bumped, allowing the cold to hold her. Thoughts of Jack mixed with the smell of Wahya snoring gently beside her. Her skin pulled taut against her frame as the cold gripped her now.

She pulled clothes out of her duffle bag and got dressed in what had become her battle uniform: black lace panties and matching open shelf bra; skin-tight forest green velour pants that laced up the sides; a vintage brown leather belt that hugged her waist and a shimmering green scarf wrapped around the top of her butt and draped down her right thigh; a golden brown canvas bodice with leather lace-ups everywhere and open-elbow sleeves that draped off the shoulders and clung to her long arms; a pair of dark brown leather knee-high boots with buckles running up the sides; and jewelry that included a leather choker necklace with a black lunar eclipse pendant, Maori-made whale bone earrings, and three stone rings carved from Brazilian agate, golden tiger eye and pistachio jasper. She called her anarchist meets pirate meets Fredrick's of Hollywood fashion style "tortured fairy." And she knew she wore it well.

She put on her full-length dark-brown suede, lamb's wool-lined shearling jacket and stepped out into the field. She stretched, reaching her hands first to the sky and then to the earth. She took deep breaths and centered her mind. Her circular thoughts had ceased, as

they did with each new morning. There was important work to be done during the day, work that gave Suzanne purpose and kept her from obsessing on the voices within.

Her friend Angelica had also emerged and was walking towards the fire circle that was now ablaze. Suzanne watched as her fellow tortured fairy moved gracefully across the horse-grazed pasture. Her long blond hair flowed like a freshly groomed mane. Her petit frame was hidden beneath a deep purple wool shawl that looked stunning against the foreground of lush green grass and the background of Taos Mountain aglow with groves of golden aspens. She looked like she belonged in this land.

Suzanne followed after Angelica, eager to be warmed by the fire. She could see a cauldron of water steeping over the edge to the flames. She veered into the kitchen to grab two mugs off the drain board next to the washing station that was part of the outdoor kitchen built to cook for and feed the gathering. It was an impressive makeshift structure. The advance setup team had gathered dozens of dead ponderosa pine logs and constructed an elegant post and beam frame notched and lashed with thick rope that towered twenty feet high and roofed with 2000 square feet of taught canvas tarps. It looked like an old sailing ship ready to ride the winds across the high seas. They'd created gutters out of bamboo halved and laid in a pattern to capture rain off the canvas and deliver it into a cistern marked "cooking water" that was next to another marked "drinking water" that was fed from a pipe stretching a mile to a spring at the base of the mountain's slope.

In the back of the structure was the heart of the kitchen. There was a series of propane fired stoves with large pots ready to slow-cook the elk or venison stew supper staple. Next to the stoves was a large earthen oven built out of clay and straw, dug and cut from the field, already hot from the fire roaring below, baking dozens of loaves of freshly kneaded

bread. Coolers lay in a trench on the outer edge of the kitchen their lids level with the ground and their sides buried to help insulate and keep cold what needed to be.

In the middle of the kitchen were long serving tables built out of lumber salvaged from the reservation. They were arranged to give servers ample room to dispense food to the line that would stretch across an hour. No one but servers touched anything on the server tables; failure to comply got you ejected from the line and sent to the back. There was no greater threat to the movement than an outbreak of foodborne illness, so they were militant about kitchen sanitation.

The washing station was at the front of the kitchen and represented the pinnacle of its bohemian elegance. Four small sinks affixed to the sides of the four large ponderosa posts that framed the kitchen's entrance. Anyone entering the kitchen had to enter between these posts and wash hands. As someone walked in any and every one inside the kitchen would holler "dirty hands, thank you!" as they just had to Suzanne. On a shelf attached to each of the four posts at head height were lidded five gallon buckets filled with warm water. On the side of the buckets wooden arms stood upright clamped to small hoses and nozzles coming out of the bottom of the bucket. Below the sinks metal rods connected the wooden arms to foot pedals. As Suzanne pushed down on the foot pedal the wooden arm lowered until the hose and nozzle were pointing downward below the bottom of the bucket. Gravity drew a gentle stream of water into the hose out the nozzle and into Suzanne's cupped hands. This method ensured that no dirty hands touched anything in the kitchen.

Suzanne wetted her hands and reached for the soap dispenser also screwed to the post. She scrubbed her hands, pressed the foot pedal again, rinsed in the warm water and shook her hands dry. To her right was the dishwashing station which consisted of five rows of counters

each with three deep restaurant-style sinks and a long stretch of slotted drying racks. On a ledge behind the sinks various scrubbing tools rested prepared to handle any dish or pot cleaning need. Each sink had a bucket and wooden arm above it and foot pedal below same as the hand washing station labeled either “Dirty Rinse,” “Wash,” or “Clean Rinse.” The dirty rinse bucket was filled with cold water, the wash bucket with hot soapy water and the clean rinse with warm water. The drain lines disappeared into the ground and took the dirty dish water away from camp.

Suzanne walked past a row of sinks to the drying rack on which sat a hodgepodge of mugs. Everyone brought their own plates, bowls, cups and spoons making finding yours easiest if it was distinctive. Suzanne grabbed Angelica’s mug, a souvenir from Graceland with a ceramic relief of Elvis with outstretched arm leaning forward against the microphone stand and hips shaking like a chorus girl, and her own, a salt-fired blood red outside, bone white inside work of ceramic art from a Swain County potter that lived up the hollow from her parent’s farm.

Suzanne walked out from under the tarps and headed toward Angelica and the fire. The sun had risen above the low ridge above the canyon the way it did this time of year. A shaft of light illuminated the camp. It seemed like everyone around her was on task. People carried split firewood to the bread oven and fire circle, prepared food in the kitchen, set up tents, dug latrines, and hauled water and other materials to the smaller secondary kitchens being constructed as the camp continued to grow in size. The movement was well organized by Wahya and the other leaders, many of whom had served in the army and learned how to run a tight ship. As new people arrived they were oriented, and roles and responsibilities were organized and divvied out. For the most part, people liked the structure: it gave them a

sense of purpose and value. But there were always those that would reject the rigidity and insist upon making their own rules. That tension was unavoidable in a gathering this diverse and with so many young newcomers.

Suzanne stepped up to the caldron as three women in their early twenties walked away, steaming mugs in their gloved hands, talking about one of Howard Zinn's assertions in *A People's History of the United States*. She pulled two tea bags from her jacket pocket, put them in the mugs, ladled hot water into them and walked toward Angelica.

"Tea?" she said.

"Yes, thanks. Good morning," Angelica said. "Sleep well?"

"Don't ask," Suzanne said. "I'm surrendering to insomnia. I'll just have to find other sources to keep me energized."

"Well, honey, this place is full of sources," Angelica said as she watched a young man stacking firewood. "He's ripped."

"You haven't even sipped your tea and already drooling over the eye candy," Suzanne said.

"It's my time of month. Besides, easy for you to say when you get to ride Daniel Day Lewis all night long."

"He's not all he appears," Suzanne said.

"They never are."

"This crowd is getting large. How many people do you think we've got here now?" asked Suzanne.

“I’d guess a thousand by the looks of all the tents,” Angelica said. “That would mean that the laws of probability have delivered to these fine pastures five hundred strapping young men, like that stud over there. Would you look at his butt?”

“Would you find one and get it over with so we can move on,” Suzanne said, smiling over the rim of her mug as she sipped her tea. She was feeling her own pull, but to her surprise it was towards Jack. “You and I are supposed to get things ready for the orientation program this afternoon.”

“I know, I know. We’ll get to that,” said Angelica. “Let’s enjoy our cups of tea and these beautiful surroundings. Look at that one rocking the beard.”

Suzanne had empathy for Angelica. When Angelica was eight her mother died in a house fire that was caused by the kitchen ceiling light fixture shorting out, smoldering and setting the roof framing ablaze in the middle of the night. Her mom and dad drank heavily back then and often fought afterwards. That night had been no exception. Her dad had slept on the couch in the living room next to the kitchen and was the first to awaken to the thick smoke. His instinct had been to grab Angelica out of her bed and get her out of the house, which he did swiftly all the while yelling for her mother to get out too. No one knows whether it was the liquor or the smoke, but either way her mom never did get out of the bed. By the time Angelica’s father rushed back in the house to rescue her mother, the flames had engulfed their bedroom. Her mom’s charred remains were found still lying in the bed. Her father never recovered. His drinking got worse. Ten years later he died from liver cancer.

While Angelica rated and ranked the physical prowess of every male at camp, Suzanne thought about Jack. It had felt so good to talk to him, to see him again. She loved

him, there wasn't any doubt. But was he able to grow with her? She wanted more from a man than wit, charm and a good stiff cock. She wanted a man with purpose. She craved a man capable of being vulnerable. She wanted a man who could stand naked before his truth. Was Jack capable of that? Or was he still the master of escape she'd given six years of her life to?

Suzanne's introspection was interrupted by Morgaine who approached Angelica and her with speed and deliberation.

"Good morning Angelica. Morning Suzanne," said Morgaine.

"Good morning, darling," said Angelica as she kissed Morgaine's high boned cheek.

"Is that today's paper?" asked Suzanne.

"Check out the article on the front page," said Morgaine as she passed the paper to Suzanne.

Suzanne read the article to herself:

Revolution Is in the Air at the Pueblo

A gathering is happening out at the Pueblo. The Tribal Council announced that the reservation is a welcomed refuge for the activists gathering to support Ooljee Red Hawk's gubernatorial candidacy.

According to the Council's War Chief Paul Romero, "Native New Mexicans haven't had a political cause to rally around since the Spanish conquistadors and then the U.S. Calvary stole our lands centuries ago. Since then we've stayed isolated on our reservations dealing with

issues like poverty and drug abuse. But our spirit has endured and has been ignited by Ooljee's candidacy and call for reparations."

Reports from across the State confirm that kivas are active with warriors performing ceremonies in preparation for a pow-wow. Hundreds of Native Americans from across the country, as well as many young people from the activist community, are arriving on the reservation every day. Taos Pueblo has become the epicenter of this movement and is where a pow-wow is scheduled to begin this weekend. It is also where Ooljee Red Hawk, should he win the race, will make his victory speech after the election next Tuesday.

"I never imagined we'd become a full-on movement," Suzanne said, putting down the paper. "It's a little overwhelming."

"It turns me on," said Angelica.

"I'm not surprised," said Morgaine. "We've been waiting for years for the right time to rise up. And now we've got motive and numbers. Speaking of which, are you two on for orientation today?"

"We got it taken care of," said Angelica.

"Yeah," said Suzanne. "And I reckon we'll have a big group between the folks that came in yesterday and the ones coming in now."

“There’s a rumor floating around that Ooljee’s coming by tomorrow to inspire the masses,” said Angelica.

“Wahya has been in contact with him,” Suzanne said. “He made the case that a visit would help bring everyone together, help focus us.”

“We need it,” said Morgaine. “We have so many different tribes represented plus all you gringos. We need to stay unified. There’s a lot of baggage in this movement. There’s a part of me that’s holding her breath just waiting to see if a bag gets ripped open. Five days is a long time.”

“You’re such a fatalist,” said Angelica.

“It comes with being Navajo,” said Morgaine. “When you grow up being told how your ancestors were swindled and murdered you tend to have a pessimistic outlook on humanity.”

Suzanne had seen the life Morgaine spoke of first hand when she and Wahya picked her up at her home on the Navajo reservation near Chaco Canyon. Morgaine and Wahya had been friends since meeting at the World Bank protests in Seattle in 1999, and were now both leaders of the Native Activist Collective. Morgaine’s family lived near the eastern rim of the sacred canyon where her father, an African man who had grown up on the child-labor cacao plantations of Ivory Coast, sold landscape paintings to tourists, and her mother, a medicine woman and a powerful herbalist, helped heal those who sought her out. Morgaine had grown up poor—subsisting on wild game, corn, beans and squash, and living in a one room adobe house with three siblings—but surrounded by unconditional love and the mystical sandstone landscape of Chaco Canyon. And she’d grown up revered for her beauty and her voice. Her lustrous brown skin, shimmering black hair, scarlet lips and piercing hazel eyes were a stunning combination, and the tone of her voice was arresting. She’d swept the Miss Navajo Nation competition in

1993 and been offered a major label record deal. But she turned it down and walked away from fame.

“I just can’t stop thinking about what comes next,” said Suzanne. “All these people have come from all over the country with all sorts of expectations.” By now people in the camp were awaking en-masse as if startled from a collective dream and gathering around the dozen camp fires that dotted the field.

“Don’t worry about that,” said Morgaine. “The last thing we need to concern ourselves with is others’ expectations. When you evoke collective action, the outcome reveals itself.”

“Can’t you ever just say what you mean?” Angelica said.

“We’re not responsible for anyone’s expectations and we don’t know what’s going to happen next,” Morgaine said.

“That’s clear,” Angelica said. “Well while we’re waiting to see what the future holds, I’m going to engage in some morning flirtation.” She walked toward a group of men who were waiting in line for food.

“You’ve got to admire her focus,” said Morgaine.

“She’s like the rest of us I guess, searching for love,” Suzanne said.

“Well, she isn’t going to find any from the men she attracts,” said Morgaine. “But onto more urgent matters. Is Wahya up yet?”

“Not sure.”

“When he is, let him know we’ll meet with Ooljee tomorrow morning at El Monte Sagrado.”

“Ooljee’s in town?”

“Keep it quiet. He is laying low ahead of the pow-wow.”

“I can’t believe we’ll get to finally meet him,” Suzanne said.

“Just Wahya and me. He’s keeping the circle tight right now.”

“You mean only native people?” Suzanne asked.

“Don’t take it personally. These are dangerous times for Ooljee. He’s receiving death threats daily.”

“I’ve been just as involved as you and Wahya pulling this pow-wow together,” Suzanne said. “I’ve proved my dedication to the cause.”

“It’s not our call. And besides, we need you here. There is no more important a role than keeping everyone focused on getting Ooljee elected. That’s what we need from you now. That’s the role you’ve accepted. You’ll get a chance to meet Ooljee when he comes for the pow-wow.”

“Fine. I’ll pass on your message,” Suzanne said as she turned and walked back toward her teepee.

“And one more thing,” Morgaine said. “Whatever you can do to help inspire Wahya, do it. We need his leadership to be strong and you’re in a unique position to help”

“He’s a big boy,” said Suzanne turning back and meeting Morgaine’s gaze. “He can take care of himself.”

“Indeed he can,” said Morgaine.

Being Wahya’s girlfriend had been an empowering experience for Suzanne. She’d been treated with respect, even by the jealous women. Suzanne had influenced Wahya’s vision for this gathering during conversations that had lingered deep into the summer nights on his front porch in Cherokee. It all seemed so far away: the songs of crickets, cicadas and peepers; the glorious smells of magnolia blossoms and honeysuckle vines that wrapped thick around the old

fence row; the peaceful surrender to the humidity that filled the valley covering everything in sweat. She was a creature of the southern Appalachian forest having grown up under the thick canopy of oak, maple, hickory, hemlock, elm, beech, birch, ash, buckeye, basswood, pine, sourwood, sweet gum, sycamore, cherry, walnut, willow. Yet, here she was in a vast, stark and dry land participating in a uprising by native people whose lands and cultures her forefather's had stolen and destroyed in the name of liberty and justice for all.

She reached the tepee, squatted, pulled back the flap and poked her head in. Wahya sat in the middle of the small space in full lotus position, his eyes closed in meditation. Braided hair wrapped behind oval ears and draped over his broad bare shoulders. Muscular arms fell along the sides of his firm torso, hands open, right over left resting in his lap. Long legs wrapped around each other with upturned feet that revealed bottoms so calloused they looked like rawhide. His closed eyelids, fringed with curled lashes, nestled in between his thick brow and round cheeks that cradled his slightly crooked nose—the only visible imperfection. And the thick lips that Suzanne loved to kiss quietly waited for her advance. If it had been last month camping up on Becks Bald high in the Smoky Mountains, she'd have crawled slowly towards him, and brought her face to his. Wahya's eyes would've remained closed but he'd have smiled. Suzanne would've brought her lips to his. They'd have kissed, slow and tender. He'd have unfolded his hands, brought them to the sides of her head, and held it. Suzanne would've fully surrendered to him. That was then.

Wahya opened his eyes. They looked alert.

“Morgaine asked me to wake you,” Suzanne said.

“Of course she did. No rest for the weary when Morgaine is on the prowl.”

“You and she will meet with Ooljee tomorrow morning.”

“Where?”

“El Monte Sagrado.”

“Fancy place for Indians to hang out.”

“Can I come?”

“No.”

“No?”

“There are things we need to discuss that do not involve you.”

“But we’re all in this together, right? That’s what we’ve told all the non-native groups that are joining the fight.”

“We come for our own reasons,” Wahya said. “Our history that is not your history. The wounds that fester inside our bones do not fester in yours. And besides, I am not responsible for why someone chooses to come or for what they expect to experience.”

“You sound just like Morgaine.”

“Ooljee’s candidacy is the flashpoint for this uprising. We are all excited to have a reason to come together, voice our discontent and demand that the promise of justice for all be honored. That is what unites us.”

“Then why can’t I go?”

“Because being the lover of an Indian doesn’t make you an Indian.”

“That’s cold,” Suzanne said.

“If he loses, we Indians are stuck still being Indians. Everyone else can go back to being white people with all the privileges that come with skin color.”

“What about all the Latinos and African Americans joining the fight?”

“They’re not Indians either and right now Ooljee only trusts the intent of fellow Indians.”

“Nice of the man vowing to represent all the people.”

“This is political theater. Very real, but very political. An very dangerous. If Ooljee is going to survive through the election, it will be because he is protected by his people. The threats on his life are real. We’re the ones willing to die for him. Others may be willing to die for the cause, but that’s different.”

“How do you know what other people are willing to die for?”

“At the end of the day, an Indian trusts an Indian. We’ve been stabbed in the back too many times.”

“Then maybe you need to find yourself a good native girl,” Suzanne said as she left the tepee and ran towards the cottonwood thicket that lined the Rio Pueblo de Taos.

She blew through camp like a gust swirling around the throngs of ambling sleepy-eyed activists. She picked up the trail that weaved through the swath of ancient trees flowing out of Pueblo Canyon alongside the river that had been the lifeblood of Tewa culture since story could recall. She ran faster—not because she was trying to get away, but because it felt good. The brisk air numbed her cheeks and hands while her quickened blood stoked her core. She felt her inner warrior rise up. She howled like a wolf. Sunlight flashed into the canyon lighting up the grey gnarled trunks and twisted branches that rose from the hard rocky ground into the boundless sky. Bright glints sparkled off the river’s riffles. Suzanne disappeared into the Canyon’s fold.

She raced across a mile of ascending terrain before she stopped. Her breath was fast. She bent over and tried to catch it. She hadn’t adjusted to life at 9000 feet and the last mile was steep. Her lungs were working hard to pull oxygen out of the thin air. As her breathing slowed, she heard the loud rush of the river ricocheting off the tight canyon walls. She was well outside

the bounds the tribe had set for the visiting activists. Non-tribe members were not permitted up the canyon. It was sacred grounds, but she didn't care anymore. What's the point of getting hung up on the rules if playing by them doesn't get you in the game?

Being the lover of an Indian doesn't make you an Indian.

The sentence repeated in her head, each time pissing her off more. That pompous bastard was missing the point. Suzanne didn't want to be an Indian. She was too old to make-believe. What she wanted was to be treated like the strong woman she saw herself becoming, to be shown respect. She was tired of feeling unworthy—she longed to stand strong as a woman in the company of men.

The rising sun warmed the cool valley air and sent it whirling up the canyon. The wind tingled Suzanne and snapped her out of her thoughts. She looked instinctively for a place to lie down. She spotted a large smooth boulder at the river's edge and laid across it. The rock felt cold, but welcomed against her sweaty back. She stretched out her legs and rested her arms at her side. She began to breathe—deep, fast, in, out. She focused on her breath and listened to the music of river and rustling leaves. Her breath went deeper, faster. It enveloped her senses. She could no longer feel rock or body. Breath and the water's rhythm were all there was. Time lost its relativity and she took off.

She spread her arms wide, and beautiful brown and white feathers filled the space between them and her torso. She leaped into the air and took flight swooping over the canopy of trees and soaring above the jagged ridgelines. She spotted a high peak in the distance and flapped her strong wings in that direction. She flew over fog-engulfed valleys, the jagged mountainsides rising out of the clouds. When she reached the peak she opened her wings wide

and gently descended. Her talons gripped the rocky outcrop. The call of a golden eagle echoed below. She looked down and spotted the great bird being chased by a pair of ravens. The pursuers circled and dove at the eagle from opposite directions. The eagle turned sharply and the ravens barely missed crashing into each other. Unfazed, they circled, dove, and again the eagle outmaneuvered them. The ravens regrouped and raced side-by-side at their target. The eagle flapped its golden-black wings and began to rise quickly. It headed straight for Suzanne. She ducked to avoid being struck as it flew within inches of her head. As it did the updraft beneath its wings created a vacuum into which all sound was sucked. The silence was absolute.

Suzanne wobbled. She looked down to catch her balance. Her talons had turned back to toes and her wings were gone. Pairs of hands held her feet. As she followed the hands attached to arms attached to bodies, she saw that the mountain she was atop was no longer made of rock, but rather hundreds of thousands of people stacked wide and high on top of each other's shoulders. A giant human pyramid. A chorus of deep, long, and steady moans, like the ones made by women giving birth, resonated through the cracks between stacked bodies. The human mountain started to sway. It rocked back and forth and back again before lurching forward like a deep sea wave coming to shore. The top of the mountain crested, picking Suzanne up in the curl like a surfer and carrying her down the slope towards the valley below. The moans turned into woops of joy as the human wave crashed and frothed into the valley. Suzanne tumbled in the effervescent surf and was laid gently onto the ground by the hands that still held her.

The hands let go and receded into the dark primordial forest that Suzanne found herself in. She stood up on the squishy bed of moss that covered the ground wrapping over and under the massive web of roots that supported towering trees. Mist drifted in the shards of light filtered through the high dense canopy. The dank smells of moisture and fungus and rot permeated

everything. In the stillness, Suzanne's senses were heightened. She felt eyes on her. She turned in a circle looking for what was watching her. Nothing. She turned again, beginning to panic. Nothing. And then she heard the low hiss behind her. Slowly, she turned to see a mountain lion standing thirty feet away. Its green eyes stared at her, its head low, haunches ready to pounce. It let out another hiss. Suzanne held her breath, frozen. The lion stepped forward as if stalking its prey. Slow and deliberate, it moved towards her, its eyes remaining fixed on hers. Suzanne did not move, fighting the urge to take flight. She knew it was pointless. The lion advanced until it was a body-length away. The cat's scent cut through the dank air. It roared so loudly that Suzanne's bones vibrated. She stood helplessly.

And then, reflexively, she knelt down in front of the lion and surrendered herself. The beast turned its head to one side. It leaned forward, stretching itself towards Suzanne. She dropped on all fours and leaned forward as well. The lion's cold moist nose met hers in a gentle kiss. It dropped to the ground and rolled over, revealing its underside. Suzanne reached out and rubbed the beast's stomach. It snarled and grunted with delight. She crawled beside the lion. It wrapped its front leg over her body and pulled her in close. Its soft fur was warm. It licked her arm, tickling her. She laughed.

Suzanne regained awareness of body, rock, river. Slowly, she opened her eyes. The sun shone brightly. She squinted and sat up, feeling fatigued. Judging by the height of the sun in the sky, it was mid-morning. Her eyes adjusted to the light. She hopped off the rock, knelt down beside the river, cupped her hands and drank. The cold spring-fed water refreshed her. She pulled her hair back into a pony tail and splashed some on her face.

"Why are you here?" said a voice that seemed to come from the river itself.

Suzanne stood quickly and turned to find an old Native American woman with wrinkled leather skin, sunken cheeks, braided silver hair and large translucent eyes watching her. Her stubby fingers, adorned with silver and turquoise rings, wrapped around a staff carved into a serpent and topped with ornate feathers. She wore a white dress with fringed sleeves embroidered with red, yellow, green and blue patterns of sunrise, vine, heart and moon. Her leather moccasins were well worn. She stood beside the rock Suzanne had journeyed on.

“I’m sorry,” said Suzanne. “I know I am not supposed to be here.”

“That does not matter,” that woman said. “What matters is why you are here.”

“I’m with the activists getting ready for the pow-wow. I went for a run on the trail and wound up going too far.”

“I know who you are,” the woman said. “I’ve been expecting you.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve been told I will meet a woman who can tame the lion. Is that not you?”

Suzanne was confused. The divide between reality and her journey dissolved. She couldn’t tell which world she was in.

“How did you know about the lion?” she asked the woman.

“I watched,” the woman said.

“But my journey was inside myself. How could you see what happened?”

“It is all the same, is it not? Come, sit,” the woman motioned to the rock, onto which she lowered her body, using the staff for support.

Suzanne sat down next to her. The woman looked up at her and smiled.

“My name is Grandma Twilee. I am the last in a long line of medicine women that goes back to the Great Beginning.”

“I am Suzanne and I come from a long line of silent women that goes back to the Pilgrims.”

Grandma Twilee laughed. “Ahh, sense of humor too. Excellent.”

“I do not wish to be anymore disrespectful than I have already coming into the canyon, but what do you want from me?”

“There is no disrespect in asking a question. I want to know why are you here?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you do,” said Grandma Twilee.

“Then why?”

“The answer is not mine to give. But you have already answered it.”

“I don’t like riddles. They hurt my head,” Suzanne said.

“This is not a riddle. You told me you come from a long line of silent women.”

The answer slipped into Suzanne’s brain like an envelope through the mail slot. “I am here to find my voice.”

“Very good,” Grandma Twilee said. “Why do you seek your voice?”

“Because in my voice is my truth.”

“You know more than you think,” Grandma Twilee said with a smile. “Tell me about the journey you took from this rock.”

“But I thought you said you saw it.”

“I did, but seeing it is different than living it.”

Suzanne told Grandma Twilee what she had experienced. The details were fresh and vivid. She did not spare any. When she finished, Grandma Twilee hoisted herself off the rock and stood face to face with Suzanne who remained sitting.

“You have been given a powerful vision. There is much foretold.”

“I will need time to process it all,” said Suzanne.

“We don’t have much time. There is danger looming,” Grandma Twilee said. She leaned on her staff bringing her face inches from Suzanne’s. “I have seen it in my visions too, all the shaman have. But we have been unable to tame the lion, unable to see the way forward. That is why we needed to find the one who can tame the lion. And that is you.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand,” said Suzanne. “I’m not really a lion tamer. It wasn’t a real lion.”

“Nonsense,” said Grandma Twilee sharply. “It is no coincidence that we find ourselves here now. It is no coincidence that my vision shows me a woman who tames the lion and I find you taming a lion. Tell me, what does the lion represent to you?”

“Predator.”

“Yes. As a predator, the lion preys on the weak and in doing so keeps the herds healthy and in turn the whole of the world in balance. Awareness of the lion keeps the herds moving which ensures that the plants and the water and the soil are kept healthy, which creates abundance for all. It has always been this way. But, what happens if there is no lion?”

“The balance is broken,” Suzanne said.

“Yes. And if things became out of balance, how might balance be restored?”

“Bring back the lion,” Suzanne said.

“And that is why we need the lion tamer. To help bring the lion back out of hiding.”

“I am still confused,” Suzanne said.

“Enough for now. Go back to your camp. Tonight I will send for you. We will vision quest together. Wear this.” Grandma Twilee gave Suzanne a leather beaded necklace with a

small leather pouch pendant. “This is medicine that will keep you safe. Keep it around your neck at all times. Now go.”

Suzanne thanked the old woman and headed down the trail. After a few steps she looked back over her shoulder for a last glimpse of the shaman, but Grandma Twilee was already gone.

Suzanne arrived back at camp as lunch was being served. Long lines of activists waiting for tamales, rice and beans weaved between tents and teepees that dotted the field. She saw Angelica standing beside three young men giggling. She interrupted her.

“Have you seen Wahya or Morgaine?” she said.

“They left for town a little while ago,” Angelica said. “Wahya wanted me to tell you that he wouldn’t be back till tomorrow.”

“Can we go somewhere and talk for a minute?” Suzanne said.

“Sure thing,” Angelica said turning her attention back to the men. “You boys hold my place. I’ll be right back.”

They walked to the edge of the field and sat on the grass. Suzanne told her about her experience up the canyon, sharing everything she remembered about her vision and about Grandma Twilee. She showed her the necklace.

“I guess this means you didn’t hallucinate the whole thing,” Angelica said as she held the small leather pouch in her hand.

“She was real,” Suzanne said.

“What do you think it all means?”

“I have no idea.”

“Morgaine will be jealous when she hears about this,” Angelica said.

“Well don’t tell her,” Suzanne said. “I don’t want to bring her into to this right now. Not until I understand better what’s going on.”

“Don’t worry. I’m a recognized member of the Order of Secret Keepers.”

“And can you cover for me at the orientation program this afternoon?” Suzanne asked. “Jack’s supposed to be coming by and I want to spend time with him while Wahya’s not around.”

“You work it girl,” Angelica said. “Will I finally get to meet the Boy Wonder?”

“We’ll see how it goes,” Suzanne said. “He can get a bit uncomfortable around crowds.”

“You do what you need to do,” said Angelica. “I’ll make sure the newbies get properly orientated.”

Suzanne walked down the dusty road to the intersection with Paseo Del Pueblo Norte. She wanted to get Jack before he drove into the mayhem in search of her. Over the years she’d learned strategies for helping Jack stay grounded. She knew he hated crowds. Bringing him to the middle of a thousand person camp was not a good idea. As she walked her mind raced and her voices of self-doubt chattered. She knew she still loved and wanted him, not Wahya. That was a scary thing to admit because the likelihood that Jack would reciprocate her love was questionable. But she was resolved to do whatever it took to give their relationship a second life. She’d decided so while walking back out of the canyon. It meant leaving Wahya. But that was inevitable. She knew she was a curiosity to him and a great fuck; his body language had communicated the latter clearly. But she wasn’t Indian. And he was bound to stay loyal to his culture. Better to try and grow slowly with Jack than flower and wither away with Wahya.

Ranks of puffy cumulus clouds marched across the early afternoon sky pushed along by a steady breeze that blew from the south. The air was crisp, but warmed by the relentless sun. Cloud shadows moved across the mountain slopes highlighting often unnoticed folds and crevices. The effect made the mountains appear larger and more dimensional, and brought awareness to the space between each individual tree and rock and patch of earth.

Suzanne reached the intersection with Paseo Del Pueblo Norte. Traffic whizzed up and down the busy road. She stood a hundred feet up the dirt road to keep her distance from the traffic. Every five minutes a vehicle would turn onto the dirt road, causing Suzanne's heart to leap and her blood to surge with adrenaline thinking it might be Jack. The vehicles would stop to ask her for directions to the rally, which she gave with enthusiasm she could not contain. All she needed was a pair of pompoms and she'd be the perfect revolution cheerleader. Go Rebels! But as the cars drove away in a cloud of dust, she was left with post-adrenaline gut-tugging anticipation-anxiety. After two hours of this emotional tug-o-war, she was ready to head back to the tepee and sleep. She had no guarantee that Jack would show. He'd left her hanging before. Maybe she was a fool to believe their relationship had hope. She began to walk back.

She walked silently with her head up, eyes tracking the beautiful shapes of clouds against the deep blue sky. The sound of Jack's horn startled her. She spun around as he pulled up alongside.

"Excuse me ma'am. Can you tell me where I can find the restless natives?" he said.

"Sorry sir, that information is top secret," she said. "I can take you there, but then I'll have to kill you."

"I'll take the risk," he said. "Hop in."

Suzanne skipped to the passenger-side door and stepped up into the old truck. She pulled the squeaky door closed and turned to Jack who was looking at her with a big smile. She scooted across the seat and kissed him. He met her willingly. His kiss was beautiful. Soft, warm, sweet-smelling. Her eyes were closed but she could sense the clouds passing overhead as the light filtering through her eyelids dimmed and then exploded in bright brilliance. It reminded her of fireworks, which made her laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Jack said pulling his lips away from hers just far enough to form the words.

“Kissing you just makes me happy,” she said.

“That’s cheesy,” he said.

They continued to kiss until a car passed them filled with young men cheering and whistling.

“We’re a roadside attraction,” Suzanne said as she pulled away, suddenly feeling awkward.

“So, where are we going?” he said reaching to adjust the rearview mirror.

“Just a mile up the road. To those horse pastures at the mouth of Taos Canyon.”

“I know those fields well,” he said. “Broke my arm getting thrown from Clyde’s stallion there when we were teenagers. Taught me the danger of drinking tequila and riding a horse you don’t know.”

“Shall we see what lesson the field has in store for you today?” Suzanne said.

“I’m not looking for any more lessons. I’ve had enough as of late.”

“I want to hear what’s been going on with you,” Suzanne said. “Let’s pull off the road up ahead and walk out to the river. There’s a nice place to sit on the bank.”

Jack drove to the spot and they got out of the cab. He reached into the truck bed and pulled out a blanket and picnic basket.

“I brought some homemade goat cheese, crackers and blackberry wine,” he said.

“Sounds delicious,” she said as she followed him down the path.

He looked good from behind in his fitted dark Levi jeans, scuffed cowboy boots, and charcoal grey tee-shirt that clung tightly to his muscles. She noticed he was limping slightly and asked him why. He waited till after they reached the river bank, spread out the blanket, ate some food and sipped the sweet wine before beginning his story. He told her about Jesse and the pot crop, about winding up at his parents’ house, about Dunbar and the investigation and the harassment, and about his father burning the stash. After he was done, Suzanne sat silently staring at the ripples beneath the water striders that skated across the river’s eddy.

“Pretty crazy, huh?” he said.

“Yeah it is,” she said. “I’m glad you’re not going to jail.”

“I don’t think that was ever going to happen. They didn’t have enough to make a go at me.”

“Are you going to go talk to your dad?”

“Not if I can help it.”

“Don’t you feel like trying to get some closure?”

“There is so much between where we are now and any type of closure. I don’t have the stomach for it.”

“What about your mom? Sounds like she really misses you.”

“I feel guilty about that, but I don’t know what to do about it,” he said. “How was it seeing your mom?”

“Intense, but good,” Suzanne said. “She thinks I’m crazy and drawing other crazy people in around me to give me a false sense of normalcy. But I think there’s a part of her that admires my willingness to search for my truth.”

“It’s courageous,” Jack said.

“You really think so?”

“Hell yeah. Takes more courage than I have.”

“It’s not that big of a deal,” Suzanne said.

“Don’t play it short. It’s not becoming of you.”

“You’re right. But I don’t have a choice. I either face the demons or they’ll sneak up and stab me in the back.”

“Well, personally, I’m at the end of my rope and don’t have a fucking clue what move to make next,” said Jack.

Suzanne kept her composure. In the six years they’d been together, that was the closest she’d heard him come to asking for help or admitting he wasn’t in control. She’d never been more turned on by him than right now. She swallowed what felt like a walnut and took a deep breath.

They ate and drank and talked while the clouds continued to march. The sun was getting lower in the western sky stretching out the shadows of the cottonwoods alongside the river. The frequency of light shifted and the rich amber glow that had drawn artists and seekers to these mountains for hundreds of years covered the landscape: magical light that tricked the eyes into believing that it was emanating from within everything rather than reflecting off of everything. Some believed it did—that the light was life force energy shining out from within. All Suzanne knew at the moment was that Jack looked beautiful.

“Do you want to go check out the scene at camp?” she asked.

“I do, but not tonight,” he said with hesitancy.

“It’s over between me and the guy I came with.”

“Your warrior.”

“He’s a good man. You’d probably like him,” she said. “You two are not that dissimilar. But he’s not here tonight.”

“Well neither am I,” he said. “I want to see the wild freaks all the town folks are talking about, but I’m not feeling it tonight. I’ll come back tomorrow morning with Raúl.”

“I wish you’d stay with me tonight,” Suzanne said.

“Look, it’s not that I’m not interested in you. I’m not interested in you with your warrior.”

“I’m not interested in him either.”

“As of what, this afternoon?” said Jack. “And how do you even know you’re interested in me?”

“I’ve wanted to be with you since I met you,” Suzanne said.

“It feels like competition. Like, ‘who will get the girl?’ high school crap.”

“I’m just trying to be open.”

“Too open.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“When did you last fuck him?”

“What the hell question is that?”

“Just curious if you were planning on doing us both today?”

“Fuck you, Jack. You’re just jealous,” Suzanne said as she stood up and turned her back on him. Tears filled her eyes. She didn’t want him to see.

“Maybe,” he said. “Maybe I am. It’s too damn confusing hearing you say you want me while you’re here with him.”

“Good. Now you have some idea of how I felt walking in on your little fuck fest.”

“Is that what this is all about? Revenge?”

Suzanne turned and faced Jack who had stood up as well. “No, Jack. This has nothing to do with revenge. I loved Wahya and now I don’t. It’s over. Whereas with you for some unfucking known reason, even after you sleep with my friend and tell me you won’t commit after six years of being with you, I still love you.” One tear streaked down her cheek. Jack’s eyes tracked it. When he looked back at her, guilt had taken hold. She could see it in the way his shoulders slumped.

“I’m sorry I hurt you. I was an asshole,” Jack said.

“You still are,” Suzanne said wiping the tear with the back of her hand. She could feel his heart opening and wanted to stab it. “I’ve come to expect as much.”

“I’m not that Jack anymore. I’m changing. But I don’t have a clue into what. Maybe a bigger asshole,” Jack said as the sweet smell of sagebrush floated by on a stiff breeze blowing in from the west across the mesa. Cottonwood leaves rustled, some scattering in the air like celebration confetti. Jack looked into the wind, nose turned upward. “Smells like rain’s coming tonight,” he said.

“I don’t care,” said Suzanne. “About the rain. Not about you. I mean I do care about you, but not about your weather forecast.” Suzanne felt her cheeks redden as Jack laughed. She laughed too.

And the tension went as fast as it had come. They'd always been crazy that way. It was the passion that flowed between them. Some days it led to great sex, others to plates smashed against the wall.

“What time will you and Raúl be here tomorrow?”

“Around 9:00.”

“You can join us for breakfast.”

“Sounds good,” Jack said with a tone Suzanne knew too well.

“Is there something else on your mind?” she asked.

“I'm happy to see you and to come hang out but I just can't handle us as lovers right now. I'm too overwhelmed with life. I need it to be platonic.”

“Never thought I'd hear those words from the lips of Jack,” Suzanne said. “I hear you. One day at a time.”

They rolled up the blanket, put the empty bottle in the basket and walked back to the truck. The sun hung lower in the sky. Breezes continued to swoop through the otherwise still air. Lenticular clouds began to form in layers over the peaks. They looked like a fleet of flying saucers stuck in a traffic jam. Suzanne hung her arm out the window and watched the transcendent light shape-shift the mountain as shadows filled the spaces between trees and rocks and earth making the rise appear as a single solid mass of organic form. A new damp and warmer breeze swirled from the east, as if the trees were exhaling in unison, sending the breath of life across the desert.

Suzanne hopped out of Jack's truck at the entrance to the camp. She leaned inside the open window.

“Good night, cowboy. You better be here tomorrow,” she said.

“I will. Raúl won’t let me not. He’s heard there’s a field full of beautiful women ripe for the picking.”

“That’s not the reputation we’re looking for,” Suzanne said.

“Well, it’s the one you’ve got, at least among Raúl’s horny Hispanic crowd,” Jack said.

“Till tomorrow then,” Suzanne said.

“Till tomorrow,” Jack replied.

Suzanne returned to camp. It was dinnertime. The smells of the day’s stews and freshly baked breads filled the air. Lines of people holding plates, spoons and mugs extended through camp. They seemed to all be talking at once. The chatter was loud. Suzanne avoided the “What’s your story?” chit chat whenever possible. It felt like a waste of time. She respected the urgency of the moment.

Suzanne saw Angelica near the front of the line in the main kitchen. She stopped at the wash station and cleaned her hands before walking over to her friend and giving her a hug. She turned to the short man behind Angelica who wore thick black framed glasses that perched firmly on his large nasal spine.

“Mind if I cut to join my friend?” she said with a saucy smile.

“Not at all,” the man said in a deep baritone voice that caught her by surprise.

“Thanks,” she said turning back to Angelica.

“So how is Jack doing today?” asked Angelica. “Notice he is absent from the line.”

“He’ll be here tomorrow morning,” Suzanne said

“Ah, yes. The ole’ tomorrow morning put off.

“It’s not like that,” Suzanne responded. “He’s got issues with me being here with Wahya.”

“Stiff competition,” said Angelica with a wink. The man behind them snickered.

“Let’s change the subject shall we? I need to go get my plate and cup,” said Suzanne.

“No need, darling. We can share,” said Angelica.

They got their food, wandered to the edge of the camping area and sat on a patch of grass basking in the waning sunlight.

“I wonder when the mysterious old grandma is going to fetch you,” said Angelica while chewing a mouthful of elk stew.

“I don’t know,” said Suzanne. “I figured I’d wander back up the canyon after we eat before it gets dark.”

“Want company?” asked Angelica

“Yes, but I got the impression that she wants me alone.”

“I could trail behind. Be there for back-up in case the lion wants to eat the tamer.”

“Thanks, but I’ll be alright,” said Suzanne. “She’s harmless and the lion is a metaphor. Metaphors can’t hurt.”

“Sharp as a knife.”

“That’s a simile.”

“Whatever.”

They finished their dinner. Suzanne went back to her tepee and changed out of her tortured fairy outfit and into jeans and a wool sweater. She grabbed a flashlight, checked to make sure the batteries weren’t dead and put it in her back pocket. She put a wool hat in her

other back pocket and wrapped a thin jacket around her waist. She'd lived on the high mesa long enough to know that once that sun went down it would get cold and dark.

As Suzanne pulled back the tepee's flap, the passing clouds above moved out of the sun's way and a beam of light shot through the door shining on the disheveled blankets atop her and Wahya's bed roll. She imagined herself laying there with him. Nothing stirred in her. Then she imagined Jack. Her body responded. There was no doubt. She'd need to set up her tent and get her things out of the tepee in the morning. It was over with Wahya. Morgaine could have him. She stepped out into the evening.

Suzanne walked out of camp with her head down and intent in her stride, making it clear to anyone who might have wanted to get her attention that she was unavailable. Once she felt safely out of range she looked up and took in the beauty of the canyon's mouth that opened wide ahead of her. The sounds from camp drifted away, replaced by the gurgling noise of the river rolling over riffles into deep eddies and wide pools. A flock of honking Canada geese flew around the upstream bend in the canyon soaring over Suzanne. Three big horn sheep stood like statues anchored to a narrow ledge high above. Coterries of black tailed prairie dogs bobbed silently in and out of burrow mounds scattered across the dry ground.

At the mouth of the canyon grew a gnarled ponderosa pine under which stood Grandma Twilee. Her stone grey hair, beige clay complexion and opal eyes, made her look more like a part of the landscape than a woman standing upon it. As Suzanne approached, Grandma Twilee's smile widened.

"Hello Suzanne," she said.

“Hello,” Suzanne said. “I didn’t know if I should keep waiting for you at camp or come find you.”

“You did as I expected,” said Grandma Twilee. “Let’s walk, shall we?”

Suzanne followed the old woman who moved along the rock strewn path with the grace of a woman half her age. After a half mile or so, Grandma Twilee led Suzanne away from the river up a narrow side canyon that cut into the main canyon’s southern wall. The path was moist from a small flow that Suzanne thought must come from a spring up ahead. The water was thick with cress that smelled like the ripe radishes Suzanne’s mom would pull out of their southern Appalachian garden in the fall when she was a young girl. She and her mom would chop the radishes along with fresh carrots and shallots into the butter crunch and purple cabbage salads they’d dress with Suzanne’s own apple cider vinegar, olive oil, lemon, garlic, oregano, salt, and pepper recipe.

They came to what appeared to be the entrance to a small cave. As Suzanne got closer she realized that it was actually a slot about five feet wide that ran all the way up three hundred vertical feet of sandstone canyon wall. The flow of water they’d been walking along vanished underground and Grandma Twilee disappeared into the crack. Suzanne followed. The slot canyon twisted and turned, narrowed and widened. Swirls of brown and white sandstone undulated across and along the slot’s tall walls. Looking up Suzanne could see a sliver of sky above, as well as the rocks and limbs that had fallen into the slot wedged perilously overhead. Because of the serpentine nature of the slot canyon, Suzanne couldn’t see Grandma Twilee ahead of her, though she could feel that she was there.

After a few minutes of walking, the slot widened and ended in a round chamber a hundred feet across. In the center was a crystal clear spring head that was wide and deep. The

glow of the early evening sky lit up the chamber from high above. Reflections off the water made ripple shadows that gave the sensation the chamber was moving. Picked, carved and incised petroglyphs covered the walls like a museum filled with the works of generations of Tewa artists. The higher Suzanne looked up the walls the more sophisticated the art became changing from stick figures with spears and simple spirals to intricate depictions of buffalo dancing on their hind legs and hunters riding on horses. Grandma Twilee sat cross-legged on the sand floor at the edge of the spring head. Suzanne sat down next to her and peered into the pool. She saw a pair of brook trout dart, their yellow and pink polka dots recognizable in the soft diffused light.

“This is beautiful,” said Suzanne.

“It is,” said Grandma Twilee. “This is the place that my ancestors have come since the beginning to ponder important things.”

“I love all the art.”

“These walls tell our story if you know how to read it.”

Granma Twilee pulled a bundle of sage and a book of matches from her small shoulder bag. She struck a match creating a glow and flicker that made the petroglyphs dance. She brought the flame to the sage. The dried sage crackled and sparked. As it caught fire she blew on the bundle’s tip, extinguishing the flame and activating the smolder. Plumes of sweet pungent smoke rose in spiraling wisps. Grandma Twilee moved the bundle in a slow clockwise circle, eyes closed, lips murmuring what sounded like prayers in her native tongue. Suzanne closed her eyes and opened her arms. The purifying smoke enveloped her.

After a few minutes of sitting quietly in meditation, Suzanne became more aware of her body. She felt her weight sitting on the dirt, the tingling sensation of air caressing her skin, and

the expansion of her ribcage with each inhalation. At the same time she lost the sense of where her body stopped and the air and ground began. She wiggled her toes and fingers to remember.

“Open your eyes,” Grandma Twilee spoke.

Suzanne did as she was told. Grandma Twilee stood and stepped toward her.

“I am going to ask questions to which I want your immediate response, the first thought that comes to your mind,” said Grandma Twilee. “Okay?”

Suzanne shook her head.

“Do I frighten you?” asked Grandma Twilee.

“Yes.”

“Then why have you followed me into this chamber?”

“I’m curious,” said Suzanne.

“What are you curious about?”

“Why you’re interested in me?”

“Why do you think I’m interested in you?”

“I had a vision.”

“Why should I care about your vision?”

“It was about a lion.”

“Why would an old native woman like me care about a young white woman’s lion dream?”

“You said it was a sign.”

“A sign of what?” asked Grandma Twilee.

“What you and the other elders were waiting for.”

Suzanne felt claustrophobic. Her breath quickened. She wanted to run. She looked down the slot and saw a small shadow dart across the distant wall.

“What are you waiting for?” asked Grandma Twilee.

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you not run?”

Suzanne looked at Grandma Twilee who loomed over her. No answer came to mind.

“How do you let go of fear?” Grandma Twilee asked.

“Trust.”

“Then how do you trust?”

“Believe.”

“So, do you believe that I am powerful?”

“Yes.”

“What makes you believe so?” Grandma Twilee asked.

Suzanne looked into the old woman’s eyes. There was no doubt.

“I just know it.”

“And you don’t question that intuition?”

“No.”

“And do you believe that you too are a powerful woman?”

“Yes,” said Suzanne even as doubt crept into her mind.

“But you question that intuition, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

Grandma Twilee stepped back from Suzanne and turned toward the wall. She studied a cluster of drawings that depicted men and women playing music around a fire.

“It’s easy for you to project wonder and power onto me here with my staff and jewelry and wise old eyes.” Grandma Twilee winked at Suzanne. “It’s a whole other thing to feel it in yourself. Very few ever do.” She began to walk around the pool. “This is the problem we face,” she said looking across the water at Suzanne. “Oljee has stepped forward to lead. That is a necessary thing for him to do. But I worry that the people will be seduced by his strength and remain passive. They are used to giving away their power to authority. I’m afraid they’ll give it away to him and be weakened before the fight begins.”

Grandma Twilee paused. She looked up and scanned the walls as if searching for something particular.

“Oljee is not a prophet. He will not lead us out of the darkness,” she continued. “At best he will spark a rekindling of each person’s inner power and make them stronger. But if people project their power onto him instead of owning it themselves, then he’ll stand as a martyr to their collective incompetence.”

Suzanne searched the old woman’s body language for the meaning she wasn’t finding in her words. She found none there either.

“What does that have to do with the lion?” Suzanne asked.

“I am talking too much,” Grandma Twilee said. “It is one of my many faults. It is better for you to discover the answers for yourself. Take off your clothes.”

“Excuse me?” said Suzanne.

“Come here and touch the water,” Grandma Twilee said pounding her staff at the edge of the pool.

Suzanne walked the few steps to the edge, squatted and reached her cupped hand into the water. To her amazement it was warm.

“Now take off your clothes and get in,” Grandma Twilee said turning her back.

Suzanne hesitated. *Believe*. She disrobed.

“You will float in this water tonight. I will stand watch over you. This water flows at body temperature. It has a combination of minerals some believe exist nowhere else on Earth. My scientist friend in Albuquerque says it activates the parasympathetic nervous system and stimulates the Vagus nerve. My people say it clarifies the mind and opens us to the spirit realm.”

Suzanne piled her clothes on the ground. The light in the chamber dimmed as evening settled over the land above. The air chilled down. Suzanne shivered as she sat at the edge of the pool, legs dangling into the water. Slowly, she lowered her body in.

“Lean back and float,” Grandma Twilee said. “The water will support you.”

Suzanne did and to her amazement felt cradled. Her pores opened and absorbed the water. Her body felt warm to the bone. She looked up at Grandma Twilee who was at the edge of the pool looking down on her.

“I’m going to ask you to lay your head back and close your eyes. No matter what you think you hear or see, keep your eyes closed and your ears under the water. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Suzanne.

“Then lay your head back and close your eyes.”

Suzanne did so and all went dark and quiet.

FINDING HOME: A NOVEL IN PROGRESS / Stan Cross

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Finding Home is a work of fiction about a pair of reunited lovers, a diverse group of activists and a Native American man on the rise to political power all amidst the racial and cultural tension unfolding beneath the rugged Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the prickly and gritty high desert of northern New Mexico.

For me, a novel is a series of interactions and introspections woven together to form a tapestry of engaging plots, vivid settings and yearning characters. Fiction is the author's imagination laid bare on the page like a naked baby across a mother's chest; vulnerable, purposeful, and capable. It is an invitation to the reader to quietly slip away from familiarity and embark on a journey of the mind and soul.

For my MLA thesis creative project, I began the second half of *Finding Home* from a new point of view. The first half of the book is written in the point of view of Jack, a man in his late thirties desperate to find his purpose in the high desert landscape where he has lived his whole life. In order to push the plot, setting and character development beyond the limits of a single point of view, I moved the narration to Jack's longtime lover Suzanne, a woman whose yearnings for intimacy, belonging and a child have driven her away from the lush Appalachian mountains of western North Carolina and into the parched cracks and crevices of northern New Mexico. This point of view shift provides a broader experience of the plot, setting and characters. It also deepens the reader's relationship with Suzanne by moving inside her head where her motives, feelings and desires reside hidden from Jack, and allowing the reader to see

Jack from the distance of his ex-lover's experience of him, giving the reader space to consider his or her assumptions and judgments of Jack's character.

As a writer, I am awed by dramatic landscapes, inspired by the symbiotic relationships between human emotion and landscape, and humbled by the relentless forces of nature that alter sky, land, water and life. My writing unfurls from my experiences like fields of spring ephemerals that transfer energy from ancient rootstock, nourished by fertile soil, into flowers that dab the forest floor with color.

As a human being, I am deeply troubled by the rampant social and environmental injustices that plague every corner of the planet. Over the two decades I have spent working and studying in the field of sustainability, including the courses I've taken as part of my MLA journey, I've come to believe that human societies cannot effectively deal with the injustices they perpetrate until individuals within the society take responsibility for their own inner wellbeing: that is to say we cannot heal that which is without until we heal that which is within. For me sustainability is a personal journey to align one's values with one's daily actions. Only by working to 'align' ourselves individually will we be able to collectively deal with the broader environmental and social challenges facing the planet and society.

In the pages of *Finding Home* I explore this belief. The novel is set in a beautiful and fragile natural landscape that is threatened by natural gas mining—mining that will consume vast amounts of locally scarce water and generate toxic waste—and a fragile social landscape that has been ripped apart and left tattered ever since the Spanish conquistadors arrived in 1540. Oljee Red Hawk's rise to power, marked by his eminent New Mexico gubernatorial victory on a platform that calls for retributions to Native Americans for the genocide inflicted upon them and a rewriting of American history to honor the human and environmental atrocities upon which the

democracy was built, serves as the primary tension. That tension is forcing a confrontation between those who value justice for all and those who value justice for Christian white Americans who align with a specific and narrow social agenda.

I use Jack and Suzanne, and their love for and struggle with each other, as a means of humanizing the eternal search for truth and purpose. Their quests parallel those of the broader activist movements and political forces at play. I use these parallels to challenge the reader who might more easily judge or dismiss the motives of the activists and politicians to recognize and wrestle with the themes of power, struggle, integrity, honesty and betrayal through the lives of these two people they come to know well. In the novel's final section, I will shift the point of view to Oljee to challenge the reader to see the world through the eyes of a man who embodies a piece of America that is kept largely in the shadows of history and, as a result, carries with it a great deal of cultural shame and guilt—emotions that, as author, I connect directly to the broader personal, political and social tension written in the pages of *Finding Home*.

In preparation for writing the second half of *Finding Home* and shifting points of view from Jack to Suzanne, I researched two books on writing craft, Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction: a Guide to Narrative Craft* and Josip Novakovich's *Fiction Writer's Workshop*. I also studied three novels by authors that use shifting points of view as a means of strengthening plot, setting and character development: Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden*, Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* and Charlie Baxter's *The Feast of Love*. This research helped prepare me for writing in Suzanne's voice.

Shifting point of view was challenging, and shifting into a woman's even more so. On one hand I felt, and still feel, vulnerable expressing myself in a female's voice. I feel insecure about it because, being a white man who came of age in a progressive community in the 1980's,

I had is beaten into my head that I was privileged and woman, and even more so people of color, were oppressed. I have always been sympathetic and compassionate to this reality. It is truth as I see it. And I have spent a great deal of my adult life letting go of the shame and guilt I carry for being a privileged white man. Writing in a woman's point of view, and next in a Native American's point of view, is part of my process of letting go.

My hope for *Finding Home* is that it will serve as a piece of fiction that challenges the readers assumptions about the divides between male and female, indigenous and civilized, liberal and conservative, and mystical and real. To achieve this, I need to challenge my own. This thesis creative project is part of that personal and artistic challenge.