



Chapter 5 (excerpt)
Albuquerque and Ft. Collins; more fire at Tomasita's

Renting a car at the Albuquerque Airport, one of few tolerable places to fly into because of its Pueblo Revival architecture and unhurried quiet, I drove north on *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro*. The King's Road of the Interior, by now with 400 years of history or so, stretching from Mexico City to Santa Fe.

Fresh, cold air overcame the acrid jet exhaust, while under the intensely blue sky, passing Santo Domingo Pueblo, I recalled feast dances a couple of years back. Lines of brilliantly costumed dancers stepped to the drums, bells and shaking olive shell tinklers. It had been what I needed, a thousand years of culture in an afternoon, watched from the rooftop of an adobe. Dust from a stray gust on that cloudless day blanketed the Pueblo, dancers--applying another increment of the sands of time. There is comfort when one does not have to worry about how deep the sands will become.

Climbing the escarpment, *La Bajada*, I passed the wagon wheel on the stone pillar at the top. Santa Fe was near. I was staying at La Fonda, the inn at the end of the Santa Fe Trail. Like much of the city, which was being intensely hyped in the magazines as another "last best place," La Fonda was neither as old nor original as the promoters would have you believe. But then built in the early 1900's, within the inventory of our increasingly disposable architectural masterpieces, it was already officially designated as "historically relevant." It didn't really matter to me. After Hollywood and Santa Monica, the ambiance, sights and smells were invigorating, exotic.

There is a cafe off the lobby where I could get a cappuccino and pastry, a convenient and very strategically placed niche on the leading edge of the java and fine wine wave of yuppiedom breaking over the City Different. Across the street was Packards and the Wheelwright, up near St. John's College, had an exhibition of exquisite Anasazi pottery. Fine arts of the savages, or savagely fine art--your stereotypical choice. The fire in the lobby crackled as I sat in an old leather chair, pleasantly lost in the road trip, Cathy, music, memory of the pueblo dancers. The upcoming tour, album, my place in the galaxy were more problematic.

Crash! A porcelain cup, member of the team of objects moving locally under the influence of planetary gravitational fields, fell to the floor, jarred me awake. La Fonda, City Different, New Mexico, USA. Remember? It better be.

I walked under the porticos of W. San Francisco Street, sat on a cast iron bench in the Plaza, looking at the Official Obelisk, designated end of the Santa Fe Trail. This city is about driving in long, waking up to surprisingly brisk, brilliant mornings. About sugilite, coral and turquoise, bracelets and beads, sunscreen. Enigmatic notes written on cream stock from Marcy Street Card Shop. Snakeskin boots and chrome belts, dusty sandals of impossibly complicated construction, Andean, Hindu Kush, worn even in winter with thick ragg socks. Sitting in a deep chair, considering the perspective from closer to the floor, carrying on a conversation with a dog. World class and world crass. Agua Fria dirt drive dreadlocked casitas. Chocolate-dipped biscotti, morning people sipping warmth. Healing, dealing, and careening. Lilacs on Don Gaspar when the season's right. Woolen shawls, shearling, and red cheeks against the wind. Dancing too many dances, dragging too many smokes in life-ending contemplation of losses vague and specific at Club West. All at a Pueblo crease.

Suppose Natalie had walked in. Alone. Would I have been in the cafe waiting all these years later? How about if it was at Club West and she was with some guy, bending her knee that way for him? Could I picture it? Could I?

About as much as "Don't Mess With Bill" covered by a Zydeco band not used to the high altitude sun, recovering from a winter burn.

An old truck went by, handpainted reversion, travelling an open seam frayed ten years back in the Heart of the Sixties. "It Runs, Therefore It Is." With a broken windshield, of course--it *is* New Mexico.

With evening approaching, I overheard flamenco at the Ore House when the door opened, reminiscent of La Boheme in Berkeley, fingers tapping the beat, counterpoint on the Spanish guitar. It could have been La Salamandra, I thought, slipping on the curb outside Ortega's, dirty ice, clouds of red dust as cars passed. There was the smell of corn tortillas, posole, chile, sage, piñon smoke; the architecture of vigas, corbels, latigas, portales; wooden gates on Camino del Monte Sol. Hilltops from which Doug West hand pulled art views seen nowhere else, Limited Edition. Hearing castanets, staccato heels, seeing her long, jet black hair again. Run down by a memory.

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And then tomorrow was today. Where did it go? To Taos, the cafe on Camino del Pueblo Norte, a few doors north of Kit Carson Road.

"*Comment dites-on 'blueberry muffin' en française,*" I asked, hearing French music, eyeing a muffin.

"Ze muffin ees not French, ees Eenglish, I theenk ...," she said as I lost the rest of the statement in the smoothness of her arm. T-shirt and jeans in December, brown skinned, must ski, I thought, eat well and burn a lot of calories. A little North African mixed in there?

"*Comment vous appelez-vous?*"

"Françoise." No *et vous?*

I got the muffin and a double cappuccino to go. Sitting in the car, it came to me: *un petit gâteau aux bleuets*. Blueberry muffin, although it applied to Françoise equally. Seeing her in ways I won't go into, I shook my head to break the spell, wondering how long it would take me to spill the coffee and after that, whether I should end the day by plunging off the road into a canyon. There's a deep one nearby. Real deep. Convenient.

But actually thinking, are *you* holding out for all-consuming love, Françoise, trusting that you'll know when it happens? Is that the shadow of waiting in your eyes? Are you footnoted, "after O'Keefe," or in economic exile? Can I be of help in any way?

"*Merci bien, monsieur,*" Françoise had said as I left. *C'est tout.*

The questions remained unanswered, finally pushed out of my consciousness by growing anticipation of tonight's rendezvous with Ze Cathy.

In Santa Fe again on the way back to Albuquerque to catch the plane for Denver, I bought a squash blossom necklace for her, fine old turquoise, exquisite silver work. Traditional and elegant. The shop also had several excellent bracelets, Hopi, Navajo, and Zuni. In an exuberant, "I've got to have everything" crescendo, I bought them all. Buying is the easy part; sorting out emotions and motivations much more difficult.

The flight was only about an hour, mostly dark north of Santa Fe and Taos, until Colorado Springs. The woman in the seat next to me immediately started a conversation, describing a morning fire suppression exercise. Not something you hear about every day, casually, on a flight. I imagined the floods of water now frozen into terraces and pools, like Mammoth Hot Springs. Ice sculpture in some fireman's dream tonight.

She was energetic, early thirties, I guessed, with orthodontic bands occasionally making a word difficult to enunciate, and glasses. Dressed in navy blue, sweater, skirt, and nylons, she looked like one of the stewardesses on the

plane. I tried to picture her ten years later, but didn't come up with much different. Her nails were a good sign. In my view, shorter is better, usually evidence of work; a pearl clearcoat just fine. I wondered if she was *firmly* energetic, strictly academically at first, but then concentrating on her lips as she struggled to carefully enunciate the story, I got caught up in other things.

A minute later Ms. Unidentified and I were talking about something else, maybe the darkness outside the window. That subject wouldn't sustain much of a conversation beyond Newton's Laws. Now I remember, she got to light the fire.

I had moved on to different fires. Any woman could tell you by now what was on my mind. The only thing on my mind. Green Sweater Girl. For one. Proper name, capitals and all, GSG monogram.

"You're looking crisp tonight," I complimented her in my best Southern drawl, a brief line in a little air travel fantasy, seated at tray tables in the nonupright position, chomping on ice cubes in plastic cups next to empty, miniature bottles of hooch, at the Five Miles High Dinner Theater.

Goodbye, Ms. Unidentified Navy Blue. You too, Green Sweater Girl. Enjoy Santa Fe before you go back to Austin. You see, I got her name and telephone number after all. It wasn't a guess. It was fascination. An unfilled prescription. GSG wasn't Jennifer, and I'm no fool.

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