

RED DUST SUSPENDED

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The Native Americans of northern New Mexico believe that feelings, thoughts, and breaths remain in a place, that the spirits of the dead still inhabit the land.

I LIVED IN A HOUSE IN MICHIGAN overlooking a river and woods. I ended a long-term, long-distance relationship, worked on stained glass at a local studio, bicycled past parks of picnicking families, drank wine alone by the fire. I was sure I had everything I needed.

Then I met Ted. The first time I saw him he stood next to a window in the glass studio and balanced a sheet of art glass overhead on his fingertips, tilting it to make the light dance through the colors. He had children and grandchildren, went to church, painted in oils, and in his fifties had bicycled around Norway. We dated—bike rides with sack lunches, lighthouse explorations, Mackinac Island with horses and buggies—and moved in together.

We chose a condo, a brick-and-vinyl-sided one-story two-bedroom pod in shades of tan like all the other condos in the development, containers for the aging in an oasis we called our bird sanctuary, right off a bike path, edged by a row of oaks that reached at least sixty feet into the sky. He turned the guest bedroom into an art studio; I mostly lived in the sunroom where I looked through our geraniums and stained-glass panels of abstracted flowers

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into the outside world of weeping cherry, orange daylilies, and huge red hibiscus. It was like living in one big lush riotous greenhouse.

One day I was searching for some papers in the storage room when I came across a box of photos. I grabbed a handful and compressed my past—horses, airplanes, camping—into a ten-second flip book, stopped by a rocky hillside dotted with cholla cactus, yellow-tipped chamisa, and me in my thirties, messy and un-put-together in a full denim skirt, cowboy boots and a multi-colored woven jacket.

Ted had asked to see these pictures when I told him I had property in New Mexico, but I'd pretended to be too busy to look. I considered shoving the photos back—why bother with the past?—but was actively trying to open up, to curb my lifelong habit of what I considered restraint but others, many others, called withholding. I hurried to the studio and leaned against the doorway, “I found New Mexico.” Ted put down his brush. I stepped into the room. He considered each photo as I handed it to him. “This is Christ in the Desert Monastery up the road, this is my property, that’s the view across the highway.”

Though the colors had faded, Ted took his time with each one. “Look at those shapes! That sky! This is beautiful country,” he said. “When can we go?”

Never.

For twenty years, I tried to share my love for that magical place with everyone who mattered to me. No one wanted to return. Each rebuff felt personal, like it was me being rejected instead of this place I'd chosen. I watched Ted's blue eyes sparkle as he studied each photo and risked a new thought—maybe—surprised at how wistful it made me. Was it the land I missed or the woman in a

woven jacket who once dreamed of an adobe home with windows all around?

THE FIRST TIME I SAW NEW MEXICO, IN MY mid-thirties, I was startled by the wide open red-earth landscape domed by a huge blue sky that seemed to fall off the edges. Artist Georgia O'Keeffe said that after her first visit, she was always on her way back, and so it was for me.

One October, five years after that first visit, I drove to Chama with my Santa Fe friend Julie and her toddler-son Galen through mountains that began to close in as thundering rain clouds spun toward us. Shafts of sunlight lit white cliffs, red hills, rocky layers color-coded to geologic time—lavender yellow beige orange red—folded vertically like drapes. Mesas shifted between navy and purple as light alternated with shadow. A scatter of adobe homes butted up against the wild. I imagined hidden canyons and arroyos. In the singular extravagant landscape that was New Mexico, this narrow valley felt like an explosion of color.

“This is the most beautiful place I've ever seen,” I said. “I want to live here.”

A hand-lettered sign—“Land for Sale” with a phone number—appeared on the left. Julie smiled, “Well, there you go!”

“Unbelievable.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“No, no. Keep going.” I didn't mean live live.

For the rest of that day, I saw myself walking those red hills. When we returned to Julie's that evening, I phoned to inquire about the land for sale. The owner hung up on me. I turned to Julie, “That's the end of that. He won't sell to anyone from California.”

But that place reverberated inside me. When I returned to California, I called Julie



to ask her to try. Tell him I'm a real person, not a developer. He said he'd worked hard to put the land in alfalfa and wanted to sell to someone who would farm it.

I didn't want to grow alfalfa. Growing up on a cattle ranch in California had taught me firsthand how a living tied to the land could break a person. I valued my job—ferrying damaged and abandoned airplanes—hard-won after years of floundering, work in California that was not transferable. New Mexico could only be for retirement.

At night, I sat on my couch holding open a coffee table book of New Mexico photographs, staring into a vision of the sun setting over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, imagining an awe-filled life in a new landscape. Family and tradition and commitment seemed to pulse

through New Mexico. I would learn reverence and how to celebrate. Mine was a child's view of the Indo-Hispanic cultures where people lived close to the earth, helped one another, and lived uncomplicated lives.

I hand wrote a letter to John, the landowner. It took three binder pages to tell him that this was where I wanted to settle when I retired. I had to buy the land now because it might not be available later. This, the most beautiful place on earth, I would cherish forever and never abuse. I didn't have John's address so wrote Abiquiu, New Mexico under his name and placed my photo of the property next to the telephone.

Six months later, John phoned: “You might as well get out here and take a look at this place.” I flew on Southwest to Albuquerque



and drove northwest to meet John, his wife Pauline, and their three young sons. “It’s a mile and a half past Bodes; look for the sign that says Cincos.” I turned down a long dirt driveway that descended to a house on the Rio Chama. John opened the door with Pauline beside him. He had a strong presence, sturdy with dark intense eyes and rosy cheeks; she was slender with a no-nonsense air, and they both had that slightly leathery look that comes from spending time outdoors close to the sun. I handed John a bag of pistachios. They invited me in and offered coffee.

John grew up in New Mexico. This land was part of the Juan Jose Lobato Land Grant of 1744, which gave settlers a place to live and farm. His tone conveyed that this was important. The ground held stories

and memories. They gave me a tour of the house, and from a side window, John pointed to the historic Abeyta-Trujillo Acquecia running through their property. Abiquiu was an outpost in the early days of Spanish colonialism, the edge of settled territory, and later, the start of the Old Spanish Trail to the west. This area had been called Los Silvestres—The Wild Ones. Did I know there was a Jicarilla Apache reservation to the north? No. All I knew were signs to pueblos I passed on the highway. John told me about an airstrip up the road used by one of the priests. He was sure I could get permission to land there.

I admired two wooden birds with inset eyes and small beaks perched on a piece of driftwood, angled toward each other, their

rough-carved bodies sanded smooth on the top half, knife marks showing on the bottom. John had carved them from a cottonwood. We left the house and walked down a dirt road to a shop that housed their electrical business, alfalfa sales, and Pauline’s videotape rental store.

“Let’s go for a ride,” John said. “We have two other pieces you should see.” The boys stayed behind while John drove down a dirt path to a corner abutting the highway. Six acres of rocks and cactus overlooked the alfalfa field and the Rio Chama cottonwoods. We walked on uneven ground as John laid out the boundaries. I mostly looked down to dodge cholla and prickly pear cactus.

“The other piece is right on the river,” John said. Riverfront property—what could be better? We headed down the highway to turn onto a rough two-track to the Rio Chama. Then I remembered. Floods. And I didn’t want to be in the view, I wanted to look at the view.

“Is Abiquiu an actual town?” I asked on our way back to the highway. “All I saw were a few buildings.”

“It’s a village,” John said in the gentle rising-and-falling New Mexico lilt I was beginning to recognize, “that began as a pueblo.” He turned toward the post office and continued up a steep hill onto the mesa where the plaza seemed to be a wide spot next to a church. Abiquiu had no pavement, library, or shops. One cantina. One church. The small adobes looked ancient and forlorn. No people. No animals. John asked if I’d like to see Georgia O’Keeffe’s home. I’d heard the name but knew nothing about her; I was surprised she lived there. Her house was larger and more contemporary than the others with a large black sculpture in the front yard. I wondered if she might notice us staring and invite us in

for a cup of tea. But John said she had recently died.

I picked the property near the highway, the rocks and cactus with a view of the Rio Chama and mountains that turned different colors depending on the light. Back at the house, John disappeared down a hallway and came back holding the driftwood with the two small birds. “But this is yours!” I said.

“I can make another one. I want you to have this.”

He also gave me a small *kachina* (a small carved figure representing an ancestral spirit) and a *National Geographic* with a photo that included a small patch of alfalfa—John and Pauline’s ranch. I put the gifts in my carryon along with two rocks from my property. On the flight home to California, I watched the ground change from rosy to brown to straw as all that was vital was left behind.

I couldn’t wait to show off my land. Even though I insisted I’d bought it for retirement, I envisioned vacations in a home designed by me. I pored over books on adobe construction, rammed earth and straw bales, and homes made of recycled tires. With no concrete plan, I imagined the vacation house turning into a permanent home. But my husband refused to return after his initial visit. “I never left anything in New Mexico,” he said. After my divorce, I brought my new partner, but he found Santa Fe too artsy. The mountain villages reminded him of Mexico—poverty-stricken. In Taos, he didn’t even get out of the car. After he toured my property, he turned to me, “What is it about this place you like?”

In the first year I owned the land, John bladed off a driveway for me, put in a gate, and mailed a key to the padlock. He found someone to drill a well and cap it off; access to

water could not be taken for granted. While John was improving my land, I continued working in California. I'd be circling an airport—breaking in a new engine, two-and-a-half hours of boredom if all went well—and dream about New Mexico where I was meant to be. A person would never be alone in such a vibrant place. I drew plans for a round adobe house with windows in all directions. A bench circled a central firepit with a flue I had not quite figured out yet. I had time. I was still decades away from retirement.

Friends who came with me to New Mexico cringed at the battered trucks and just-hanging-on ranches. My mother stood on my land and squinted, "It's very... uneven." So I came to New Mexico alone for an aerobics course at the Santa Fe airport, for Julie's wedding to a man she'd met at a sweat lodge and to see their new home in the Pecos Wilderness, and their next home when they moved back to Santa Fe. But I was lonesome, especially on one nighttime stroll through Santa Fe's plaza when it seemed like everyone was coupled up, holding hands. New Mexico was incompatible with everyone I cared about.

One fall, on a solitary trip, I decided to visit the Penitente Morada in Abiquiu. Hoping to finally meet someone in the village, I left my car by the post office and walked up the hill. I saw no one, though the road to the morada skirted the plaza. There was no mistaking the crumbling adobe rectangle outlined by a brilliant blue sky marked by crosses angled into the earth. I stood without moving until the air grew dense and tried to push me to my knees. Panic turned my muscles to mush. I didn't belong there.

The atmosphere filled with sadness, then grief. I felt disconnected from my body, like a

dying person who floats to the ceiling in the operating room, except I felt no peace. Then, an act of mercy. A breeze swept me up like a silk scarf and carried me to my car where I sat shaking so hard I could not put the key in the ignition.

Afterward, I wanted to understand what had happened. I read about the Penitente Hermanos, their dedication to community service and rituals of physical mortification, and wished I had stayed to work through my feelings of wrongness. But I was afraid to go back. I'd touched the world of spirit, and it frightened me. This land was teaching me respect. I vowed to be more careful.

IN MY MID-FORTIES, I MOVED TO MICHIGAN for a business development job in aerospace. I now had two long-distance relationships: one with the man in California who found Santa Fe too artsy and one with six acres of rocks and cactus. My trips to New Mexico became less frequent, travels to California more so. I placed my house plans inside a book and shelved it.

Seventeen years after I bought the property, I went to Abiquiu without first phoning John and Pauline. No one answered when I stopped at their house. As I turned away, Pauline surprised me by opening the door. She shut it behind her. "John is dying," she said in a low voice. "Pancreatic cancer."

I mumbled that I'd check back after I walked the property, drove to the driveway John had made for me, stumbled up the hill to look for the well. A salmon-pink rock sparkled halfway down the slope. I sidestepped down to kick at it. It didn't budge. I bent to claw away the hot red dirt, but the ground didn't want to give this one up. I couldn't rest until that rock was in my



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hand. I ran my thumb along its jagged edges and turned it over and over to marvel at the pink and green layers marbled with pink and beige, like a miniature version of the one-hundred-million-year-old cliffs. When I raised my eyes to the river, I imagined John on his tractor in the alfalfa field, his three-legged dog loping beside him.

Pauline opened the door as soon as I returned. "John said he'd like to see you." John lay in bed with the covers pulled up to his armpits. He patted the bed, and I sat beside him. Pauline stood, arms crossed, holding her breaking heart in place. "Are you still flying?" he asked. I told him I was.

I asked about the boys. John began to cry. He said, "I'm scared." I lay down, put my arms around him, and said it would be alright.

I DIDN'T MOVE TO NEW MEXICO WHEN I retired. From my house in Michigan, I watched the leaves spiral off the trees in autumn and bud out again in spring. In my late sixties, a friend pointed out that my house needed a sprucing up. How had I not noticed the peeling paint, rotting wood, piles of dust?

Then on to a condo, where Ted stood before me, a new love holding old photos to the light, his simple question—when can we go to New Mexico?—unanswered. I couldn't explain why I didn't want to go. I had to fight to keep from withdrawing into silence, but the truth felt petty and inadequate. I didn't want Ted to be disappointed in New Mexico. I didn't want him to be disappointed in me.

At dinner that night, he asked again, "When could we visit?" He looked fourteen



years old, so hopeful and enthusiastic. I took a small step toward that ephemeral place of shared vulnerability. “Let me think about it,” I said. What I meant was give me time.

Slowly a daydream emerged: Ted and me walking hand-in-hand through the plaza, sipping wine by the light of a kiva fireplace, exploring my six acres. The next time he asked, I suggested December. “The pinon smell from all the fireplaces... mmmm... and the roofs are lined with *farolitos* (luminarias).” I created an itinerary that included the Santuario de Chimayo and the High Road to Taos, Abiquiu and Ghost Ranch, and all my favorite spots in Santa Fe. Ted had reawakened my passion for New Mexico, but the night before we left, I lay awake thinking of alternates in case he wanted to leave early.

We stayed at a motel walking distance from the plaza and spent the first two days in Santa Fe visiting with gallery owners. The third day we drove to Chimayo. A sign directed us to the Santuario parking lot. Parking lot? There was even a bus turn-around. And welcome center, gallery, museum, gardens, gift shops, ramp, maps. “This used to be pasture,” I said as we dodged ice and snow on gravel paths. “Back here was a fence, and a Jesus with a crown of barbed wire.” I pointed to this building and that, “All new.” We walked into the walled courtyard in front of the chapel. “This was the first thing you saw—the bell towers, the gate, the ladder.” The humble aesthetic inside the chapel was the only thing that seemed the same. I showed Ted the tiny room with healing dirt and crutches lining

the walls. When we left, we walked alongside a stream that separated the new Stations of the Cross from the neighbor’s pasture. Ted took photos of cows munching grass while I slumped in the car with my face turned toward the mountains, away from progress.

We delayed the Abiquiu trip to the end of the week. Every morning I checked the Christ in the Desert Monastery website for road conditions in case we had time for a side trip, but those thirteen miles remained wet and impassable. On our last full day in New Mexico, we headed for Abiquiu. My usual anticipation bubbled up, mixed with a new fear. Would I recognize my land? Ten years had passed since I’d last seen my property.

“We’re almost there,” I said. “Los Trujillos is the first... what?”

Los Trujillos convenience store was permanently closed, but the parking lot of the Family Dollar next door was full. I was still processing the advent of Family Dollar when we passed a sign for a lavender farm. Other new signs: An O’Keeffe Welcome Center, an arrow to the village, a historic marker, a local artist tour. We drove up to the village to see Georgia O’Keeffe’s home that I remembered so clearly, right off the plaza. But it wasn’t there. The same adobes seemed to be collapsing into the earth from which they were made, the coyote fences made of side-by-side saplings still stood, protecting tangled weeds, tidy gardens. People lived here, but where were they? Where were the children, animals, old folks? Aside from a small library and cultural center, closed for the day, the pueblo-village was the still and silent place I remembered. I parked in front of St. Thomas the Apostle church and checked Google maps for the O’Keeffe house while Ted wandered off to get pictures.

A shadow settled over me: what was I doing here? Worse yet, Ted had disappeared, off reducing the world to two dimensions. When he returned, I snapped. “Do you have to put a frame around everything? Do you even know where you are?” He looked stricken but kept quiet. What was happening? Why was I ruining our trip? I held up my cell. “Google maps has the O’Keeffe house. It’s over there.”

A thick adobe wall surrounded the grounds, with a locked gate and sign: “Tours available seasonally for a fee. No photos allowed. Meet at the Welcome Center on the highway.” A plaque designated the home as a National Historic Landmark. “There’s a large black sculpture in the yard,” I said. Ted climbed a stile to peer over the wall. No black sculpture. Later, I searched online and could find no mention of any outdoor sculpture.

We ate lunch at Bode’s General Store, now offering Boar’s Head meats and fewer shovels than I remembered. They still stocked tools and nails and livestock feed, but had added T-shirts with logos and locally made soaps. A flyer tacked to the community board announced a yoga retreat. Workers ordered from the counter and spoke in Spanish as they sat to eat at a long communal table. Two made the sign of the cross. Ted and I split a turkey and green chile sandwich at a small table overlooking the Phillips 66 pumps. “Let’s skip my property for now and go on to Ghost Ranch. It’s just up the road and we can stop on the way back,” I said.

The Rio Chama crossed to the south side of the highway; I began to look for my land. A faded Cincos sign offered hay for sale. After three decades and a few years, I finally got Cincos: John, Pauline, their three sons. “There it is,” I said. “But let’s keep going.” We drove up onto the sweeping Piedra Lumbre plains and



turned into Ghost Ranch. Ted kept snapping photos. “Stop here! Look at that light! Look at those colors!”

“I know. I know.”

“Let’s come back and stay all summer.”

“We have to go. We’ll be late for dinner with Julie and her husband.”

This clamped-down feeling had started the minute we got to Abiquiu. Here, at last, I was with someone as invigorated as I had once been, and all I wanted was to get out of there. Had I really expected everything to stay the same? When I looked at Ted practically leaping with joy at the sky, the clouds, the cliffs, the mystery, my eyes filled with tears. I’d blamed him for abandoning me in the village, but I was the deserter. Neglected, un-nurtured, my dream had disintegrated to dust.

We left Ghost Ranch and turned onto the highway back toward Abiquiu. As we neared my property, I felt overheated, nauseous, heart-fluttery. “I don’t want to stop,” I said. “It’s nothing but rocks and cactus.” An old Suburban, a flat bed, and two pickups sat in front of Pauline’s house. I passed their driveway without turning. Pauline was in Colorado—we’d texted. If her youngest son was here, he’d have no idea who I was. To me, he was still the eight-year-old who told me he was going to make clothes for the rattlesnakes.

“We don’t need to stop,” I said.

“We came all this way,” Ted said. “At least let me get pictures.” I turned onto the driveway John had made and parked in front of the locked gate for which I’d lost the key

long before. “Don’t climb through the fence,” I said. “Nobody knows us. I don’t want to get shot.” Ted gave me that look just short of an eye-roll that reminded me he was oblivious to the code of the West.

Ted wanted to understand the boundaries.

“It goes to the fence,” I said, pointing east. But how far south? Just short of the acacia. But where was that? Was this driveway on my property or Pauline’s? The hills seemed steeper, the trees higher, the arroyo deeper. Ted walked east, “Are you coming?”

“I can’t.” I stood at the gate staring ahead. What was wrong with me? Maybe if I found the well, I would get my bearings. The well had to be visible from the fence. Didn’t it? Where had it gone? How had New Mexico left me without my knowing?

When I caught up to Ted, he was picking cactus needles out of his ankle. “I love this place,” he said, his blue eyes all sparkly, his smile big and wide. We got back in the car; I broke into sobs. “I’m sorry, I didn’t expect this. All those years, those hopes, my life. Nothing went the way I thought it would.” My past had just caught up; I saw my life as a whole, most of it behind me, a circle rather than the arrow forward I thought I’d been living.

We headed for Santa Fe. “Could you really live here?” I said. “Your kids, your grandkids, they’re in Michigan. Do you want to be away from everyone?”

Away from everyone. Until Ted, I’d been half-in, half-out of every relationship I’d ever had, including the one I had with this land. I had reasons: too remote, too crowded, too Anglo-fied, not Anglo-fied enough, too rich, too poor, too violent, too spiritual. The last scared me the most. The older I got, the more I felt this transcendent beauty demanded, not offered, union with the divine. There

was a Benedictine monastery up the road, an Islamic settlement across the highway, and Native American spirits everywhere. Committing to an aesthetic life (who asked this of me . . . only my own imagination) was one challenge I could not meet, one threshold I couldn’t cross. Not yet.

We agreed to take our time deciding about the property. Move there? Keep it for vacations? Let it go? Before we made any decisions, we would spend big chunks of time there, get to know the area together. Back in Michigan, we sat side by side—Ted with a biography of Georgia O’Keeffe, me with *Valley of Shining Stone*—and shared our favorite passages.

Abiquiu was built on Tewa ruins in the early 1700s by Genizaros, Native Americans captured and sold as child slaves to Spanish colonists. The story of Abiquiu was the story of the whole world: colonization, haves and have-nots, bloodshed, evil, grace. The stories exposed a complex mixture of alliances and oppositions between nomads, pueblo dwellers, Spaniards, Mexicans, Anglos, trespassers and speculators, settlers and the unsettled. I read that the Native Americans of northern New Mexico believe that feelings, thoughts, and breaths remain in a place, that the spirits of the dead still inhabit the land.

The first time I saw New Mexico, before I owned a cell phone or computer, I wrote a story about a woman who walked through the desert as the wind peeled the flesh from her bones. Her bones turned to dust and blew away. I meant it as a story of transmutation, dust returning to dust. That story foretold my own, how once in my lifetime a place grabbed hold of my soul. But it was never my land to own. I could only borrow it for an infinitesimal speck of time. ❖