

THE BACKBONE #17



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MAN IN THE MAZE

FICTION BY MUDD

Felix opened the door to the meditation hall, bowed to the Buddha perched above the ornate altar. He removed his shoes, walked silently to the lone cushion that supported his practice. From the corner of his eye, he spotted the head monk leafing through a book of sutras.

A cloud of sandalwood hung in the air as he took his seat. He rocked in place, slowed his mind and body in preparation for what came next. For the following 40 minutes he would sink into slow, measured breathing, allowing the mental pond to find a glassy equilibrium - calm abiding. He wasn't convinced meditation was everything it was cracked up to be; but smoothing out his mind's rough edges seemed like a good idea. So far, he'd hung with the group for almost two years, a personal record on the commitment front.

When the bell chimed, Felix did three long cleansing breaths and began counting inhalations. When he reached the end of the 10th breath, the process repeated. It was a deceptively simple routine, yet onerous in application.

The first few minutes was almost pleasant, despite the uncomfortable angle of his legs. Every time a thought appeared, he acknowledged it, then reset his count to 1 and started over.

By the end of half a dozen breath cycles, a train of thought rambled across a vista he recognized as the New Mexico desert. A girl moved beside him, outfitted in a National Park uniform. She seemed oblivious to his presence, focused instead on setting fire to a tangle of brush beneath a towering pine.

"Controlled burn," she said. "Looks like shit to the tourists; best thing to come out of Headquarters since anybody can remember."

Felix watched the flames run along the forest floor, smoke curling into the needles above. He seemed to recall hearing that Ponderosas were fire tolerant; the conflagration would regenerate native wildflowers and forbs.

The Ranger moved in front of him, feeding the fire. Felix noticed the way her uniform clung to her body, emphasizing the natural contours. But he couldn't find the place in his mental landscape where she belonged. It was as if he'd stumbled into somebody else's dream, wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or not.

A couple of men in green fatigues materialized, waved their shovels. Felix noted the Park Service badges, metal hard hats. One of the guys wore the most outrageous handlebar mustache Felix had ever seen.

"Come on," the girl said. "Those flame wranglers love wimpy surface action."

They moved up trail, following a small creek that ran along the bottom of a steep canyon. Felix was aware of a grackling above his head, a shadow glancing off the rock to his right. He looked up, saw a big Raven circle once, glide sideways over a grassy meadow, and land on a Cottonwood snag. The bird vocalized again, seemed to be talking to the sky.

The Ranger turned around, her face lit by fierce afternoon sun. Felix's eye caught a glint of light, squinted, made out the name Paseo on the girl's badge.

"It's a Koshare - a clown," she said, pointing at the bird.

Felix looked back at Raven, recalled an old Zen riddle about not mistaking the finger for the moon. Where was the moon now?

Raven hopped onto another branch, stood on one foot, lifted its beak and cawed. The sound trailed off, oscillating. Felix wasn't sure, but the bird appeared to be laughing.

He looked back at the Ranger, hunched his shoulders. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"The Hopi have these characters: Koshares," she said. "Striped body paint, loin cloths, garish faces - mythical clowns. They remind the People that we're all fools in our own right."

Felix felt a bead of sweat roll down his cheek, evaporate before it hit the collar of his shirt. Raven went airborne, cawed once more, drifted towards the mouth of the narrow canyon. Felix felt something inside himself join the bird's trajectory.

The girl smiled, said, "You know why you're here, right?" Her eyes were the color of the lichens growing on the canyon walls.

"No," Felix said. The sound of his own voice startled him.

"Let's walk a littler farther," she told him. "You have to stay loose at this altitude; don't get ahead of yourself."

Felix started to answer, but she was already moving towards a long switch-back.

They sat underneath a wide ledge; the clouds were oddly organized into animals with popcorn faces. Felix noted petroglyphs of some sort: eccentric swirls, a beautiful labyrinth. Somebody had built a fire near the edge of the shelter, ashes heaped in a perfect pyramid, pieces of charred wood.

Dead center of the open cave was a ring of stones and the protruding poles of a hand-made ladder. A shaft of light illuminated the air above the structure; dust motes swirled through the atmosphere.

"The Old Ones thought the People emerged into this world through a hole in the earth," the girl said, pointing at the stones. "They built ceremonial kivas like this one, holy spaces that maintain the frequency of the Way."

Felix walked over to the stone foundation. The thing had a plaster roof. A square hole led down into a chamber by way of the ladder. The hole was surprisingly dark against the

afternoon. A hint of cool air ticked his face, wafting up from below.

"When you go down there, you must be completely quiet," the girl said. "Even your thoughts."

Felix heard the faint echo of Raven from somewhere in the canyon below. He found the bird's voice almost comical. He looked at the girl, tried to place her again, failed. The green uniform accentuated her silky black hair, the blue dots in her ear lobes.

"Be back in a minute," he said, turning to the kiva.

"I'll be here," she told him. "You have all the time in the world."

Felix flashed on an old news story about Hanta virus infecting lung tissue via aerosolized mouse feces. The floor of the kiva was littered with droppings, tiny pieces of pine cones, even a piece of shoe string. He moved to the far side of the sunken room, careful not to stir the dust anymore than absolutely necessary. He remembered a bandana in the back pocket of his pants, tied it around his nose and mouth.

In the center of the Kiva was a small aperture, the emergence hole of the People. As Felix watched, a slice of light hit the wall next to him, illuminating a scrawled carving. He leaned closer, letting his eyes absorb the image. It was a labyrinth, similar to the one above, more intricate and finely crafted. The thing's looping pathways drew to the center, pulled his sense of gravity into the maze.

A noise from above rattled him; Raven was standing atop one pole of the ladder. The bird's eyes resembled two bullet holes in a field of ink. Raven squawked, jerked its beak in a circle, casting an odd shadow on the labyrinth. Then the bird was gone.

Felix turned back to the etching, let his gaze settle on the entrance to the puzzle. As

he moved into the maze, he felt his breath slow to a crawl. The design was superb, each change in direction carefully angled against a background of rough plaster. Whoever constructed the labyrinth had been a stickler for detail, allowing for natural contours in the wall, using depth as well as precision.

It dawned on Felix that the etching was more than a simple pattern; its swirls lured the energy behind his eyes, pulled his focus into the shifting lines. He felt something drawing his attention deep into a pool of darkness, a void without threat of extinction.

He was losing himself in the maze, letting go of baggage, the emblems of self. So much accumulation falling away like useless layers of skin. He wondered if there would be a point where he was down to nothing. It was an oddly pleasant sensation, a lightness of being.

When he reached the center of the labyrinth, Felix noticed that it all came down to a tiny dot, an analog of the emergence hole, ground zero. To enter the hole was to return to a place he couldn't remember, a uterine terraform. He was wandering without direction, no feeling of being lost, deep inside a womb with no walls.

Nowhere.

He focused his eyes on the tiny dot, drifted. Then he entered the hole and felt the bottom fall away. For the first time in his life, Felix wasn't talking to himself.

7... 8...9...

Felix opened his eyes, saw the head monk pass in front of the oversized Buddha. He let go of his counting, allowed his breath to do its own thing. The autonomic nervous system was on its own for the time being.

He noticed his left leg was asleep. It was a common phenomena, one he'd never gotten used to. He straightened it out, almost laughed at the way it jutted from the cushion. When the blood resumed its normal course, he brought the leg in, used it to stand up, arched his back. It was only a few feet to the exit, a place he'd been through countless times.

When he was outside the hall, he slid back into his shoes, turned to leave. The head monk appeared, his shaved head radiating in the glare of a fluorescent light. The guy was called Sensei by the disciples; Felix seemed to remember that his real name was Bernie.

"The bell hasn't tolled," the monk said, slight scowl.

Felix nodded, said, "Yeah, it has."

The monk frowned. It didn't pay to have weird vibes go down during a meditation session. He saw Felix as a model student, two years of consistent practice, no complaints so far, always paid on time.

"You OK?" the monk asked.

Felix smiled, smelled a trace of incense wafting from the monk's tawny robes. The idea of counting his breath suddenly seemed absurd, a robotic attempt at remembering the present.

"No hard feelings, Bernie; but I'm out of here," Felix said.

The monk appeared to draw up, a bead of spittle in the corner of his mouth. "You're going to mess up your karma, man! This is the highest Dharma, the path to liberation for all beings. You don't walk out on that!"

Felix thought the monk looked haggard, in need of sleep; one hour too many sitting on a cushion.

"It's about dirt, Bernie. Clouds, lizards, spiral galaxies." Felix felt a few decades fall off his shoulders, like a whirlpool had deposited him on a familiar shore. "Wasn't it you who said, 'When the wind blows, the grass bends'?"

He turned, walked towards his truck. He figured it would take a week or so to tie up loose ends, taxes, the apartment. Another few days to drive to New Mexico. It shouldn't be too hard to find Ranger Paseo - computers could find anybody.

