

WEAR & TEAR

fiction by Ned Mudd

Reylene eased one eye open, then the other. A beam of light had found its way through a side window, was illuminating a ragged cotton doll beside a chest of drawers. The doll had belonged to her granddaughter all those years ago.

She took a deep breath, acknowledged that her body was still up to the task of getting on with another day. She slid out of bed, ambled into the kitchen for coffee. Her gut had a natural aversion to coffee, but it was her birthday and she'd picked up a special blend as a present to herself. It wasn't everyday a person turned 82 years old.

The image of the doll carried with her into the kitchen. She had bought the toy from a wrinkled Pueblo woman at the Plaza in Santa Fe. She couldn't recall the occasion, just that the young granddaughter had giggled at seeing the doll's bright red headband, leather moccasins.

That her granddaughter was now a television executive in Los Angeles seemed preposterous. Reylene couldn't understand why anyone would spend their life on something as silly as television. The real conundrum was that the child had grown into a woman who professed being a "fundamentalist lesbian." Reylene wasn't sure what a fundamentalist lesbian was, but had decided to let sleeping dogs lie.

When the coffee was ready she sat at the kitchen table and watched steam rise from her cup. The acrid aroma taunted her nose, brought back memories that seemed a world away.

She noticed a crack running along the plaster beside the back door. The crack was a sign that the earth beneath the adobe casita was in transition. She had read an article about how this part of New Mexico was once a tropical paradise populated with giant ferns, abundant water, and behemoth lizards.

The high desert of today was the latest in a long series of theatrical set changes, having broken off from an ancient super continent via a shift in the tectonic plates. As far as Raylene was concerned, a crack in the plaster was nothing compared to what the tectonic plates were up to. She had discovered that the key to getting old was to quit worrying about wear and tear. Fighting the law of gravity was a fruitless pastime.

A coyote yipped somewhere outside. The sound reminded Reylene that she'd forgotten to feed the critters last night. Her neighbors might despise coyotes, but she felt a nagging empathy for the canines. Life was hard enough out there; a little dog food ameliorated the onslaught of what passed for progress these days.

The Village had been her home for 68 years, long before folks started calling it a "destination." The appearance of spiritual seekers had transformed much of the basin into a tableau of commerce. What was once a community-operated hot springs for soaking tired muscles now served as a walled compound that required reservations and a fat credit card. She had seen her first \$50,000 car outside the spa, remembered feeling deprived of air at being told that the thing's tires cost more than her old Toyota.

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After all her years here, she had never understood why so many of her neighbors spent countless hours ensconced in Ernesto's Bar. Even in the worst of times, when a dollar actually meant something, the tiny cantina was second home to a sizable percentage of the local population. What did people do in there that was worth jumping off the planet? Life was too short to spend it drowning whatever brain cells were left standing.

When something beeped, she looked around the room, saw the hands on the clock had moved half an hour. She got up, walked into the living room, found the cell phone under a cushion on the couch. The contraption was a gift from her son, a reminder that she might need emergency help one day and could dial 911 to start the wheels rolling.

"I've only been up a few minutes, so don't tax my neurons. Life's hard enough already," she said into the phone.

"It's Stephen," a voice said. "My secretary says it's your birthday, so I'm calling to wish you a happy 81st."

Reylene heard the coyote again, followed by another. It was the edge of spring, maybe the desert dogs were singing a mating song.

"It's 82, son," she said. "And tell your secretary thanks for me." She walked to a fish bowl, smiled at the pair of goldfish swimming eternal circles inside. The voice on the other side of the phone began a long sentence, the words little more than digital artifacts.

She wondered if goldfish had feelings about familial matters. The thought passed as she dropped the phone into the bowl. There was a moment when she worried that the thing's battery might electrocute her pets; but the fish seemed more concerned about the spacial intrusion than anything else.

The sun had moved across the sky, sending splatters of light into the casita's front

windows. Reylene liked the way the fibers in her Navajo rug radiated. She wondered if anybody still made rugs as good as hers. From what she'd heard, most folks bought Chinese imitations these days, unaware that real craftsmanship was about celebrating the art of living.

She decided to make another cup of coffee, throw caution to the wind. The morning was still young, even if she wasn't. There was plenty of time to settle down before the Women's Auxiliary Cacti Club convened its weekly taco luncheon. That the Auxiliary was down to three members didn't seem to bother anybody, least of all Reylene.

The afternoon drifted past without making a fuss. She sat in her favorite rocking chair, watching a big cloud gather itself atop the

Ortiz range. She liked the way clouds appeared out of nowhere. The act of suddenly becoming visible was her idea of the ultimate artistic expression. Monsoons were another matter; but in the dry months, the desert conspired to keep every molecule of water under strict control. That a dark cloud could manifest despite the low humidity was an indication that the Universe possessed an inherent rebellious streak.

The main thing was to remember to pay attention to what was happening. It had taken her decades to figure out that one simple axiom.

As dusk narrowed the horizon, she got up and fetched the coyote's metal bowl. A lizard scuttled across the path in front of her, its bulging eye protruding above its knobby skin. She noticed an edge to the light, looked out across the basin, saw a thin line of purple teasing the mountains.

When she'd filled the bowl with dog food and leftovers, she carried it back to the juniper tree that doubled as a coyote feeding station. She set it down, stood silently and waited for the coyote to show itself. The ritual was a lifeline to something beyond herself, like the ubiquitous statues of saints standing guard in homes for hundreds of miles in every direction. She couldn't remember exactly why she'd begun feeding the sneaky canines, but had discovered in the act a sense of connectivity that was becoming harder to find among her own kind.

A few minutes before dark, a shape appeared. Reylene remained as still as her wobbly legs allowed while the coyote sniffed the air, dialing in her scent. It moved in halting steps to the bowl, made a final reconnaissance and began eating. The light was a soft diffusion, little more than a shadow. By the time the animal was fed, there would be nothing left of the sun behind the western range.

She enjoyed this time of day, the way a hush settled in behind the fading light. One of the advantages of old age was being off the clock. It was either night or day, and it often didn't matter which. The main thing was to remember to pay attention to what was happening. It had taken her decades to figure out that one simple axiom.

When it was finished eating, the coyote licked its lips and slunk into the shadows. Reylene smiled, wandered back to her casita. A lone lamp inside the kitchen cast a warm sliver of photons across the hard earth. She had witnessed the same scene thousands of times, had never grown tired of it. Life was a swath of light in an inky void. That there might not be a finality to the blackness of space seemed exciting at this late hour in her trajectory.





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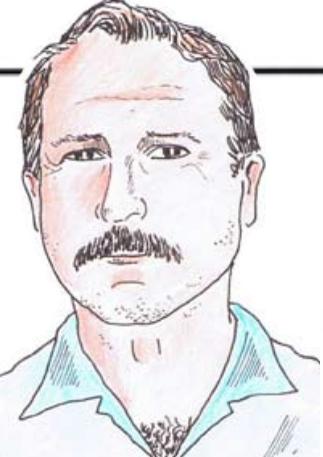


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