

## Wear & Tear...continued

Reylene put her book down, listened to the silence inside the casita. She noticed that her attention was acting fidgety. She got up and poured herself a glass of water. Her last visit to the doctor had turned into a tedious lecture on the virtues of hydration. The doctor was young enough to be her grandson, didn't know the first thing about being an octogenarian. She had to admit that her skin looked at least one iota better since she'd added a few glasses of water to her repertoire.

She walked outside, looked towards the south. She hadn't been here to see the atomic test at Trinity, but expected its ghost to reappear at any moment. Something about unleashing the nuclear genie from its bottle never sat right with her. She didn't care for scientific tomfoolery, the way it obfuscated the simple things in life. She looked up at the night sky, saw a blanket of stars, rhinestones of eternity. She liked the way the Universe glittered, a silent voice that spoke volumes.

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The coyotes were yipping somewhere in the direction of the bosque. It was hard to tell how many were involved, but it was enough to make a racket. She smiled, wondered if her coyote was one of the voices. Something about the high pitched howls seemed to accentuate the stars. As if the desert was the harmonizing element between heaven and earth.

She went inside, checked the time. In another three hours her birthday would be just another statistic. The Women's Auxiliary luncheon now seemed like a distant memory, having lived up to its usual mediocrity. The event was evidence that there were only so many tacos one could eat without becoming immune to their allure. Even smothered in hot chipotle sauce, the crunchy things were lacking in character. If you wanted a good taco, you had to make it yourself.

Her two companions had fallen into a black hole of conversation about a recent sexual scandal at the spa. One of the ladies had gone into graphic detail about the lewd indiscretions, revealing things about human bonding that Reylene found disturbing. It was as if a spotlight had been switched on and she suddenly understood what fundamentalist lesbians were all about.

As with most projects spanning four decades, the Women's Auxiliary showed signs of inertia. Originally a dozen women with a zest for being in each other's company, the group was now a trio of old crones with little more to talk about than salacious gossip. That one of the trio gravitated towards high octane tequila didn't improve things.

At one point during lunch, Reylene felt an odd compulsion to turn the channel. She had learned more about the local spa's denizens than she could process and was ready for a sea change.

"Have you girls ever seen coyotes fornicate?" she said as a waiter carted off their empty plates.

Her companions appeared to freeze, two popsicles in cowgirl attire. It wasn't like their friend to blurt out prurient dialog.

"Why no, Reylene," said Carletta, the Auxiliary's treasurer. "Have you?"

Reylene bobbed her head, a soft glow creeping across her face. "You bet I have!" she said. "What do you think I do all day, twiddle my thumbs?"

Carletta sat back in her chair and looked at the third leg of the stool, a blue haired matron affectionately known as Lady Bell.

"Are we missing out on something?" Carletta asked. The idea that there might be a new wrinkle on sexual congress had a way of sharply focusing her imagination.

Reylene smiled, cracked her knuckles. "The big boy's tally-whacker swells up like a corn pone and just like that - he's stuck in the elevator like a fly on honey. It's the damndest thing you ever saw," she told them.

Lady Bell took a sip of her Margarita, said, "Honey, that happens to yard dogs all the time; maybe you've been living out in the wilderness too long."

Reylene let the comment land on the table, felt her lungs sucking in air. It crossed her mind that she'd experienced about all the auxiliary nonsense she needed in this life.

"Don't be such a city twit," she said. "The Don Juan of Dogs likes being stuck; the second he knows he's locked in the love canal his lips peel back and he starts laughing like a drunk clown! I'm describing a demonic lust for pussy here!"

Carletta gasped as Lady Bell knocked her Margarita off the table and into her lap. Neither woman had heard the word pussy in twenty years, and didn't know what to do with it now.

"Jesus, Reylene," Lady Bell hissed. "What crawled up your butt? Have you started drinking?"

Reylene watched the marbles roll around inside her lunch partner's heads. She wondered if moving to Santa Fe hadn't impaired their DNA in some way, made them both dimwitted by default.

She got up and fixed her straw hat on her head. "It's been fun, ladies," she said, "but I've got to get back to my vibrator."

She walked into a wedge of dazzling light, not an ounce of humidity. As she reached her car, a brand new GMC half-ton pulled in the parking lot. The truck stopped, the driver's side window sliding down like it was on greased bearings.

"Buenas tardes, Señora" the driver said.

"Howdy, Elwood," she replied. "Nice new toy you got there. You win the lottery?"

Elwood called himself the Village Mayor, despite the fact that there had been no election and the Village wasn't a real town. He was living proof that the guy with the biggest

mouth ended up at the front of the stage.

"Price of oil is sky high," he said. "My wells are fat cash cows this year."

"You always were a scalawag," Reylene said. From the moment she'd met the man, she'd known he was descended from a long line of vipers. His family had welcomed the oil and gas industry into the basin before anyone could mount opposition to what was an obvious land rape. The day she'd come across an oil rig a few feet from a slab of ancient petroglyphs had left an indelible scar somewhere inside her mind.

The Mayor snorted, locked his truck, and strutted to the restaurant's front door. Reylene noticed him flipping a finger at her as the door shut behind him.

She drove her car out into the country, letting the wind blow through the car's windows. She passed an old windmill, a handful of cows standing around a water tank beneath it. As far as she was concerned, the windmill was the last invention worth the trouble. The advent of technology had only added to the world's complications. Sooner or later, most folks were going to end up being little more than robots.

At a bend in the highway, a small herd of antelope dashed across the asphalt. She stopped the car, watched the antelope prance through the sage brush. The animals seemed to glide across the ground, their feet barely touching the hardpan.

One of the antelope stopped, looked back at the car. For a moment Reylene felt the bottom fall out; time had decided to suspend its forward momentum, creating a gap in the quantum matrix.

Then the antelope spun, leapt into space and set the world straight again.

She got a pair of tongs, pulled the phone out of the fish bowl. When all the water had drained from the thing's casing, she tossed it in the garage can and dried her hands. The kitchen clock said it was a few minutes before 11 p.m., a good hour past her bedtime.

She went to a hall closet, rummaged around until she found an old Polaroid camera she'd left there ten years ago. She carried the camera to her bedroom, removed her smock and took a picture of her naked body. When the photo finally developed, she laughed at the ghastly image that appeared. No doubt about it, she was officially a bag of bones. At least she'd managed to sever her head from the snapshot.

She slid into a pair of slacks and a pull-over sweatshirt. The night carried a trace of chill, so she put on a quilted jacket, her straw hat. When she was ready, she stuck the Polaroid in a jacket pocket and walked out the front door.

During her afternoon drive a sudden intrusion of thought had occurred, taking her by surprise. It was a memory from so long ago that its origins were impossibly obscure. But the details were loud and clear, and contained specific instructions on how to surreptitiously let the air out of a tire.

She didn't know why her mind had wanted to go there, but the image was so taut that it caused a series of ideas to coalesce into a ludicrous plan.

A little after 11, she drove past the Village, parked in a driveway that belonged to an abandoned barn and walked back to a line of trucks outside Ernesto's Bar. At the far end of the line was the Mayor's new trophy ride.

She eased to a window and peered in at the bar's patrons. Most of them were nursing longnecks, their eyes glued to a television mounted behind the bar. A baseball game was in extra innings, soon to become a commercial about the benefits of ultra-white teeth.

Reylene winced; the vision inside the bar only edified her resolve. The figures hunched over their beers appeared to lack some essential spark, resembling little more than stoned

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zombies. She doubted any of them could remember one tenth of what had happened during the last decade.

She backed away from the window, moved into the shadows, and pulled a box of small nails from her pocket. The trick was to wedge the nails into the tire stems in such a way that the air could escape uninterrupted. The rest was up to the laws of physics.

She decided to begin with an old Dodge pickup, deflating the front driver's side tire. There was just enough light bouncing out of the bar's neon sign to make the job easy.

When she heard a steady hiss, she went to the next truck, repeated the procedure. It occurred to her that there were going to be some seriously pissed off cowboys before the night was over.

At the end of the line, she ran a hand along the Mayor's rig, felt the slick metallic paint tickle her skin. The truck was exceptional, wore a bulky winch just above the front bumper. Even in the dim neon glow, it was apparent that Elwood had never used the truck for anything but show.

On a whim, she jammed nails in the stems of all four tires, stood back and surveyed her work. The symbolism might be oblique, but she sensed a definite statement was taking place. Oxygen was the common denominator between living beings. To be alive entailed more than moving a pair of lungs; it was about appreciating every breath, as if each inhalation was a gift that might be revoked at any minute. The hissing of tires was a simple proclamation: Cowboy wake up time.

She started back to her car, stopped and walked over to the Mayor's truck. She reached in her jacket, removed the Polaroid, and stuck it under one of the windshield wipers.

It was ten minutes before midnight, still time to enjoy the rest of her birthday. As she walked into the night, an old melody appeared in her head. The song caught a groove and rambled along with a mind of its own. These things happened; the smart thing to do was to go with the flow and whistle along to the tune.

*Ned Mudd is a regular contributor to The Zephyr. he lives in Birmingham, Alabama, Ned can be reached at nedmudd@mac.com*

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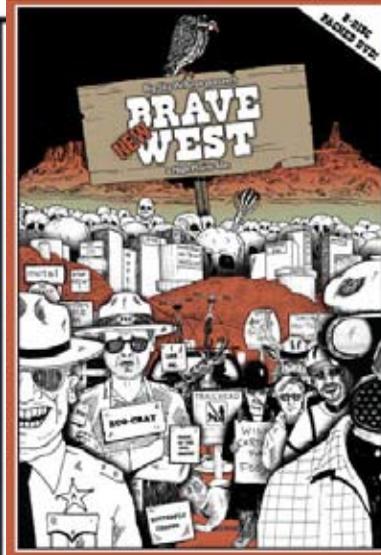
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