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### Burning in New Mexico

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# Burning in New Mexico

Tasha Vice

They gathered at dusk to burn the old man.

In the center of the park they chanted in unison for his end. Dark cloaked figures circled around the old man with hopes that his demise would bring an end to the local's despair. On-looking mothers, fathers, and children brought with them anguish – addiction, debt, divorce, poverty, hunger, and loss. Beneath the old man's feet his enemy, flowing in red tassels, danced while boasting one pair of torches set ablaze.

Seventeen-year-old David looked up from the ground and tried to peer into the old man's eyes. "I don't understand," said David.

Pete's uncle who was standing next to him smiled and said, "There are many things that you will come to know about our community, in time."

David shrugged, "That's the problem. I don't want to know anything about *this* community."

In the fire's light Pete's skin was worn leather, each line more visible and deeper than the next. The crevices around Pete's eyes tensed when he talked to David, but his eyes remained fixed on the old man. For the most part, his uncle tried to help David adjust to village life. In the span of two weeks Pete taught David to fish, to tend to the local animals, and how to make a trade with the local people. Still there was little Pete could say to help David understand. He couldn't chalk the old man's death off to tradition because it was much more.

"You will want to know, hito. You will want to, soon enough," said Pete.

Screams rang out when the flaming enemy fired several shots through the night air into the old man.

The twenty-foot effigy waved his arms in anger, growling at the presence of onlookers who wished him harm. With each shot the effigy's body burst into more colorful flames. When his dancing enemy lit the base of his feet the old man's death was imminent. Fireworks escaped from beneath the old man as his growling commenced. Onlookers slowly began to uncloak and a celebrations

ensued.

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It had been a week since the burning of Zozobra. The old man groaned, leaning in to David's face. The diameter of his eyes was increasing, glowing with anger. As the old man surfaced up from the earth and erupted into the sky, one single eye gripped David's focus and flames erupted around the two of them.

David gasped then jolted out of bed in a sweat. The torturous sunbeams reflecting down onto his cot through the curtainless steel framed window of the room that he shared with his siblings served as a taunting reminder that the old adobe structure lacked basic air conditioning. To David's relief the hard-pressed dirt floors were cool to the palms of his feet when he stood. He pulled on his plain white T-shirt and Levi's and made his way into the kitchen where his mother was cooking.

Rita's attention was on the flat cast iron griddle where she watched as the tortillas took to a light toasting. David glanced over Rita's shoulder into the deeper of the two cast iron pans. "Oh! Beans!" he said with a sarcastic cheerfulness. David snatched the newly heated tortilla from Rita's hand as she moved it from the griddle to the cooling plate on the table. "Where are you going?" Rita asked as David headed to the door. She wiped the flour from her hands onto her apron and waited, hands to hips, for his response. "Uncle Pete's," David said as he shoveled one half of the tortilla into his mouth.

"Your Tio Pete won't come out," Rita said. She added, "Dad was there this morning and he won't come out of his house."

"What do you mean, he won't come out?" asked David.

Rita was in the middle of telling David about Pete's trade, "He made a bad deal with one of the local Pueblo men, and now he is cursed." Rita said casually.

David didn't hear her over his own thoughts. *So what? Pete gave them a horse for some sheep and the horse fell ill. That doesn't matter. What matters is the only person I connect to in this tiny crap hole won't come out of his house.*

"Are you telling me Uncle Pete won't come out of his house because he's afraid, of a BIRD?" David asked.

"It's an owl, and witches manifest in the form of owls," Rita

explained.

David's voice pitched in frustration. "That's ridiculous! I don't know why we had to come here. I had friends in California! A job! Air conditioning!" his voice pitched. "And now you're saying that the only person I can talk to is locked in his house because he thinks he is cursed?" David yelled.

"That's enough, we had to come here. Your grandma was sick," said Rita.

"No, mom. Grandma had her stroke more than a year ago. She has aunt Lola; she has grandpa! She is not the reason we're here and you know it!"

David was shouting.

He paused just enough to add the sting, "We're here because of Dad!"

Rita scolded him, "Stop, that's enough!"

David turned his back to her and sauntered out, slamming the rickety wooden screen behind him.

"I'll be at uncle Pete's!" he shouted.

Un-rattled by the commotion, Rita continued pressing dough into flat and oval discs. While shaping and mashing tortillas, she watched through the window as David stepped over the glistening litter of glass bottles and shining silver cans that lined the earth. He passed the broken rocker in the front of the house where his father, Jack, snoozed Monday through Sunday. David tossed the last half of his tortilla to the dog lying at his father's feet before intentionally giving the old wooden gate a loud slam. Jack slowly lifted one eye-lid before returning to his stupor.

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David followed the dirt path up the hill, past the thicket of mesquite. He wondered if he'd be able to talk some sense into his uncle Pete. At the top of the hill he crouched, ran his hand through the sand and stood again before stuffing the small pebbles into his pocket.

Just outside of Pete's house ran a coyote fence, where David found one solitary Great Horned Owl perched. The nocturnal bird of prey sat beneath the shadow of a grand oak, but in mid-day. *Stupid bird.*

David called out for his uncle as he knocked on the door of the single room home, but at the shuffle of the front window curtain the owl began calling. No one answered. Frustrated, David pulled the small stones from his pocket and threw them in the owl's direction narrowly missing his head. "Get out of here!" he yelled. Gradually, the owl rotated around and with a slow seemingly deliberate descent of his lids the owl blinked revealing one brown and one golden eye.

Out of pebbles and out of patience, David set off on foot while thinking, *In a couple of days time, I'll be back in California. I'll make my way to the highway... find a ride. There's no one, no reason to stay here.*

David made his way down to the creek before he noticed the snapping sound of twigs growing closer, first from the left, and then from behind him. He glanced around, when suddenly he was pummeled. He found himself face first on the ground. *What the...?* He wondered as he rolled on to his back and looked up at the two narrow shadows that leaned in above him.

The two girls giggled.

"Lorelei! I told you before not to tackle me!" David bellowed while brushing the twigs and sand off of his Levi's.

"What? Did I scare you?" she taunted before offering him a hand, which he declined. David's younger sister was a whopping 105 pounds, but even at a mere 5 foot 2 inches she had a better tackle form than any male ball player David had ever known. She made a habit out of tackling him when he was least prepared. *Of course,* David thought with relief, *that dark blurb that was about to smother me into the ground was just my sister's chestnut brown hair.* For a second, he thought there might be something else, something....

"Have you met Jenny?" Lorelei asked as she pressed her friend out from behind her and into David's space. "Uh, no. Hi." David half waved at her before stepping back two inches. He asked his sister, "Why are you here?"

"Plums" said Lorelei as she pulled a few green fruits from the cross body satchel.

"That and stone-skipping." She said as she pointed to Jenny who had ventured a few feet away to collect flat stones.

As the three of them threw stones across the river, David told

them about Pete. They shared stories they'd heard from town about the owl's first appearance. "It followed him all over town. Maybe the curse is real!" Lorelei explained. But Jenny had another idea.

Jenny had that sweet appeal. Her copper hair was drawn back from her olive skin, highlighting her eyes. As she devised a plan, David was lost for a moment in Jenny's gaze – he had fallen into the abyss of the deepest green river. "What do you think?" Lorelei asked. "What, huh? Sounds good, I guess." David said as he tried to regain his senses. "Perfect! It's settled. We'll go see Jenny's priest for advice tomorrow," Lorelei cheerfully announced. "If anyone would know how to break a curse, it would be him for sure," Jenny added. David didn't have the guts to tell them that he hadn't been listening, that he'd been lost first in the eyes, and then down the neckline of Lorelei's new 16 year-old friend. He was 'almost' ashamed, so he agreed on a meeting time.

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That night, Jenny, Lorelei, and David entered the church's vestibule mid-song and made their way to the back pew of the nave. David fumbled through the unknown motions as the patrons crossed themselves and stilled for the liturgy of the word, passage readings led by the lector. Through scripture readings, prayer, and communion Jenny nudged him and motioned to stand, sit, and kneel. The whirlwind of symbolic practices was ending as quickly as they began. David found himself lost in the final silent prayer. He wondered if he should pray for Pete in a church that was not his own and under the lead of a faith he did not follow. Before he could decide the service was over. Jenny had him by the hand and was leading him into a narrow hallway behind the altar to Father Tony's office.

"When someone speak or wishes evil on another, they have cursed that person," said Father Tony. "An indirect curse can result when a hex is spoken over an instrument of Malefice."

"Malefice?" David asked.

"Photos, or personal belongs can serve and an instrument of evil, transferring the ill wishes onto the belonging person." Tony explained.

"Not possible. There are very few pictures of Uncle Pete," said Lorelei.

“Right, someone close to him would have to give a picture up and that’s unlikely” David added.

“A representative malefice can be used as well to contain the evil and send it toward the afflicted.”

“Like?” asked Jenny.

“Figures, dolls, or animals” Father Tony added.

“Owls.”

“Some believe it’s possible.”

“So how do we end a curse?” David asked.

“We aren’t in the business of offering public blessings to dissuade evil from animals. But, I can provide you with some instruments of grace to minimize the effects” said Father Tony as he opened a cabinet and retrieved a small bottle.

David popped the cap and sniffed. “Water?”

“Holy Water.” Father Tony smiled.

As Jenny, Lorelei, and David were leaving Father Tony offered David some cautionary advice. “Family members have strong bonds. Curses can operate within these bonds. If your uncle really is cursed, it would be best for all involved to right the wrong, resolve the conflict so the hex can be lifted.” That gave Jenny another idea.

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The next morning Jenny tapped on David’s window. He met her on the side of the house and the two walked around back to find Lorelei who had busied herself with morning chores before settling into the company of their border collie, Odysseus. The three made their way to the reservation to meet Jonathan.

Jonathan was only seventeen, but in the tribe he held the status of a respectable adult. He busied himself with local cultural teachings and had been identified as a future tribal leader. For a short while, Jonathan attended public school where he and Jenny became friends. After the services, Jenny called him. They hoped he could help if there was a hex. David still wasn’t convinced that there was such a thing as a curse but he’d been enjoying Jenny’s company too much to object.

Because it was customary to be led into the reservation with a guide, Jonathan met them at the reservations edge where the three decided to walk into town for drinks. Siding with outsiders could be

bad for Jonathan's reputation as a leader and he didn't want to give off the wrong vibe. As they walked, Jenny brought Jonathan up to speed on Uncle Pete's dilemma and Father Tony's advice.

"So, can you help?" Lorelei asked.

Jonathan didn't want to tell her no, "I can't break the hex."

Just as he'd expected, Lorelei seemed disappointed. "But, I know how it can be broken. It's complicated."

"How complicated?" David asked.

"A representative from both parties has to resolve the problem. We need someone from each family."

"We don't even know someone from each family!" David said in frustration.

"Of course we do." Jonathan looked straight at David while Jenny and Lorelei waited anxiously to hear who would help them with this whole mess.

"You."

In Jonathan's tribal studies he had learned that Rita's father, David's grandfather was a member of the Pueblo tribe. When David's great grandmother had died in childbirth, her son, David's grandfather, was adopted by a local French family. Later in life, his grandfather re-established a relationship with his maternal family on the reservation – the descendants of which were the very family Pete wronged in the trade.

"So, not only am I related to Uncle Pete, but also to the local Pueblos?" David asked.

"That's right, and as the male descendant you can break the curse." Jonathan said while glancing toward Lorelei for approval.

The three finished their drinks and followed the creek home. The last two days had been packed with information, but David was nowhere near finding an answer. As the descendant of both trade parties, David could end the curse. But, it was up to him to find the way – and he still wasn't sure he believed in the curse.

As the four walked up the creek, they joked about the occasional misplaced snapping of twigs and faint hooting coming from the mesquites and pines along the springs under the setting sun. When the hooting turned to growls Jenny shrieked and David pulled her close. The growling grew in intensity, grunting until it



was upon them. Two red eyes thrust forward from the darkness of the trees. Lorelei let out a scream. David grabbed Jenny by the hand and pulled. They ran as fast as their feet could carry them. "To the clearing!" David shouted. The single pair of eyes became a pack as the hungry wild boars chased them up the waterway. "This way!" Jonathan yelled. They'd lost some of the pack along the way, but one single boar was determined. Just as they'd finally made the clearing gunshots rang out. "Someone's shooting!" Jenny cried. "Keep running, go to the house!" David yelled. They ran, and didn't look back until they made it through the gate.

After catching her breath, Jenny poignantly claimed, "Another malefice?"

"And, the gunshots?" David asked. "Last time I checked a wild boar will gore and eat you, but they don't have guns."

"Don't look at me, tribal curses don't come with weapons!" Jonathan added as he put his jacket around Lorelei's arms.

"I'm going to find a way to settle this." David said, looking directly at Jenny. "Can you all meet me at Pete's tomorrow morning?"

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David set off to Pete's house. The owl was still perched ominously at the gate when he slipped a note under Pete's door and waited for the ruffle of curtains.

"Let's go," said David.

Still unsure of the plan, Jenny, Jonathan, and Lorelei followed as David rounded the back of the house to an area enclosed by coyote fencing where the four traded sheep grazed. David slipped a knife from his pocket.

"What are you doing?" Jenny cried.

"Don't worry." David said.

He slipped the knife under the wire binding freeing the gate and swung it open. With two fingers David let out a whistle. Odysseus came running, and then herded the four sheep out of their enclosure and toward the reservation.

"With Jonathan as our guide, we can go to the reservation and return the sheep that Pete traded for the sick horse" David explained.

From time to time, the owl could be seen overhead. When

they arrived and locked the four sheep into the enclosure on the reservation, the owl was nowhere to be seen.

After scanning the sky, Lorelei sighed, "Let's just hope this works."

David wanted to go back to his uncle's to see if the owl had gone, but he didn't want Jenny to think he'd started to believe in the curse. He could justify his actions as a means of doing the right thing or disguise them as a way to relieve his uncle Pete's guilt. Instead, the four opted to go back to David's house for some of Rita's beans and tortillas.

Something smelled. Back at David's house, there was smoke in the air. Lorelei rushed the gate with Jenny, Jonathan, and David behind her. As they entered the side door, Rita handed them each a paper plate.

"Mmmm! Smells good." said Jenny.

"Beans?" David asked.

Rita smiled, "Yes, beans, pork, and bacon!"

"Bacon?"

"Your father shot a boar last night."

"Oh, he did? Did he?"

They made soft pork tacos and went to the back porch to join David's father.

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Jack sat, beer in hand, staring at the clearing. Uncle Pete was sitting next to him, poking wooden sticks into the fire pit.

"I got your note," said Pete to David, "Thank you."

After David and Pete embraced, Pete offered them each a chair.

David pulled up a chair for himself and Jenny. Jenny warmed her hands over the evenings pit flames.

"You wrote a note?" she asked.

"Yep," answered David.

David smiled at the glow of her reflection. He watched as the flames licked up into the approaching night's air.

"What'd you say to him?" Jenny asked.

David paused for a moment before answering, "I'm beginning to understand."