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Lost and Found in Santa Fe

by Judy Fort Brenneman

I am at the shopping mall because it is raining, I tell myself. Rain is why I arrived four hours before my room will be ready, six hours before conference registration will open: it rained for the entire drive, so I stayed in the car instead of stopping to hike in the mountains. What should have been two long days of travel is under a day and a half, and I take shelter in the familiarity of department store chains and fast food.

The rain stops at 2:00, drying up my excuses. I push myself out of the mall and into my car, determined to explore this new place.

I find a parking space close to the downtown plaza near the Scottish Rites Temple, the reddest building without paint I have ever seen, and cross the street to discover that the enormous stone building, not pink or red or even salmon, just solid tan and brown, is a courthouse, then stride with false confidence (to show anyone watching that I know where I am, I am not lost, I am never lost, I am not a ripe tourist ready for picking), past rust red municipal buildings, lawyers' offices, banks and adobe ATMs, parking lots with red and white signs proclaiming Tenants Only, and past large windows with expensive displays, clothes and sculpture and exotic knick-knacks that give way abruptly to a tall, tall tan adobe wall that suddenly ends and opens to a courtyard bounded by streets and people, hundreds, maybe thousands of people, walking around the square of courtyard, wandering into the street, ignoring the creeping cars that edge toward stop signs and left-turn-only arrows, stuck because they forgot or didn't know that parking is impossible this close in, and there is a clink of metal and the low hum of voices, and I turn to look uphill and see a long line of round women and short men sitting against a long wall of adobe shaded by a timber overhang, square blankets before each compressed figure, silver and turquoise and leather and beads and cloth laid out in neat rows, grids of merchandise on display, and rows and rows of white-haired men and women, stout and thin, short, tall, mostly old, pointing, pushing, prodding, nodding, shaking heads, grasping purses and wallets and even a credit card or two, and the dark-haired women and men, some with braids, move the trinkets back and forth, up, down, sliding them with horn-tipped sticks across the blankets, sometimes selling, sometimes not.

I am here, and not here.

I am here, curious about the trade, intrigued and attracted by silver and turquoise, the possibility of a good deal, a perfect souvenir, an elegant gift, and here as I hear the murmurs and chatter of business, and here as I feel my feet grow into the ground under the brick sidewalk.

I am not here as fear and unnameable emotions rip me away from my rooted feet, spin me away from the solid brick-covered ground and the blankets and the white-haired people and the dark-haired people with the braids and the marching circle of the cars and the brick sidewalk that goes around and around and around, and I reach out to catch my son's hand to pull him to safety, but he isn't here and doesn't need me to guide him even if he were—

—and not here as I fall, a rabbit released from the eagle's talons, to the cold cement floor of another place, another time, another display, rows and rows and rows of tables and booths, The Largest American Indian Art Show in the World in hot Oklahoma City, and I have learned how the beautiful belt of crushed stones was made and that it took Best of Show in its class and after I ask about credit cards and the artist goes to check, leaving me with the assistant who told me it was fifty-four, I suddenly realize that fifty-four means five-thousand-four-hundred for a belt that's beautiful that I'll never wear because it's made for a waist half my size or maybe just for display in a wall-mounted shadow box and I feel my face catch fire with shame for even asking and wish that my son would erupt into one of his temper tantrums so I would have an excuse to flee, but he never does them on cue. I glance to my left and see he's chatting easily with a broad-faced man wearing a lanyard braid, standing next to a group of sleek alabaster sculptures two booths down; he's telling the man that he really likes the work, loves abstract art in general, and he's asking intelligent, sophisticated questions, this ten-year-old who at this precise moment sounds like an adult, and I feel like a fool, a chastised child, an ignorant woman who has no right to even ask a price or discuss style, and I feel guilty that I've asked and can never afford, should never buy, and even though I know the shame I feel is out of all proportion to my error, I still feel it, still want to flee or simply disappear, and I fear that I'll be found out, that these hardworking artists, who are Indian or Native American or Navajo or Havasupu or some other name that I'll probably get wrong or at least mispronounce are by definition poor and underprivileged and need my business because I am privileged and white, at least by government definitions.

But I'm not a good white, only a guilty one.

Guilty for the imagined sins of my ancestors, for not helping, for not doing enough, or enough of the right things, for not fixing it all so everyone's happy, that's what I'm supposed to do but I don't and they'll discover I am a fraud, that I owe more money than I can ever hope to repay before Kyle's grown and that I have no right to be here, even if the belt really cost only fifty-four dollars and not five-thousand-four-hundred, and I cannot help them no matter how great their need, how great my desire, how beautiful the jewel, or whether any of it's true or not.

I try to breathe.

I tell the assistant, apologizing, trying to make it so it doesn't sound so bad, so it's just a misunderstanding; I thought you meant five hundred, I lie and I step away from the booth, interrupt my son, and say "We have to go right now," and he looks confused and says "Why?"—for once he's not in a hurry to leave but I don't care I have to get out and I

glance over at the booth and the artist has come back and I see the disappointment on his face when his assistant tells him no sale and I pull my son's hand as we escape to the next row so we can leave without the artist seeing me and I run down the rows searching for the exit and I see turquoise and silver and leather and beads and cloth and large wooden pillars made of timber that line the walk between the brick and the street and I see round women and short men and I see a white-haired woman holding a squash blossom necklace against her massive chest and the white-haired man beside her nodding. . . .

. . . and I breathe, and I turn the corner.

I am here, and still here; I have found my feet again.

I walk on the edge at first, sliding around the street side of the timber posts, the flat of my hand hugging the smooth wood as my body traces its reassuring curve, a shield against the mass of elbows and pocketbooks, broad-brimmed hats and wide hips. Slowly, I ease myself into the crowd, a neophyte swimmer gingerly entering cold water.

The crowd's current draws me in, and I bubble through its shifting mass, my light brown hair and tanned face bobbing up and down with the ebb and flow. We are stones clattering along in the current, sometimes catching on each other or the river bank, tumbling our rough edges through the waves.

Fragments blink at me as the crowd shifts. The russet and brown of a woven blanket. A palm holding earrings shaped like bear paws with turquoise dots in their centers. The tip of a hand-tooled belt swaying above dusty running shoes, the thunderbirds in the belt's repeating pattern seeming to fly as the belt dangles in and out of shadow. A curved cylinder of ivory streaked with gray, clacking against links of bracelets. A small purse made of dun-colored suede with a band of bright-colored beadwork.

The crowd jostles and churns, and suddenly I am at the inner edge, the black leather strap of my sandal a hair's breadth away from a precise grid of silver figurines: pins, I realize, or medallions for necklaces. I regain my balance and slide back a little, almost but not quite in the crowd, and I find myself looking at the vendors as well as the wares, and am relieved that most avoid eye contact, relieved that I can look without touching, admire without feeling compelled to purchase, reminding myself that I am not in Oklahoma City any more; I am not a collector of fine or rare or even ordinary art, no matter the cost; I am not responsible for the success or failure of anyone's business except my own; I am not responsible for saving the world, or even this small part of it.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry I can't fix it.

I drift along the edge of the displays, watching the people more than the products. Unlike most of the people around me, I don't bend or squat down to lift or finger the jewelry or cloth; I think doing so would imply that I am a serious customer and, although I would like to be, I'm not.

I know better than to ask the price of anything: this close, the value of the work is obvious. These are not rummage-sale trinkets any more than the belt of crushed stone was just a belt. The only difference between what rests on these blankets and in the shop displays that radiate out from the plaza is not a difference of cost or quality, but simply of presentation, an aspect of marketing as old as markets themselves.

The men and women tending their spaces—and their work, perhaps—are about my age, late thirties, early forties, except for a small cluster of teenage girls talking and giggling among themselves. One man stands to stretch, hitches up his jeans, and gestures to his neighbor before squatting down to straighten his display. Not short men, I suddenly realize, but sitting. I don't realize I'm staring until the man looks at me as if to say "So? What do you want?" and I flush and look down, embarrassed.

The crowd carries me halfway down the length of the wall, where I discover two doors much too small for the massive adobe with its tall dark windows. The bronze plaques that flank the door proclaim that this building is the Palace of the Governors, El Palacio Real, a fortress and castle built by order of the Spanish crown between 1610 and 1612. They say the building was the seat of government under three flags—Spanish, Mexican, and American—and the residence of over a hundred generals and captains for three hundred years. The plaques don't say anything about Native Americans; I wonder if they sat along the walkway and sold their wares then, too.

I return at night, drawn by the quiet of nearly empty streets. The deep red of the Scottish Rites Temple is washed white in the glow of sodium vapor street lamps. The courthouse is still solid tan and brown, the Palace of the Governors empty and abandoned, not even a scrap of litter left from the day's business. I run my hand along the adobe wall as I stroll in its ancient security. Music floats from a restaurant on the far side of the plaza, a mixture of country and western and mariachi and folk, guitar and deep rich vocals. A few feet beyond the undersized palace doors, I discover a large Plexiglas plate covering what looks like gray stone masonry, the original face of the building—except that it isn't stone after all; it's adobe crafted to look like stone, carefully cut stone precisely mortared. The sign on the Plexiglas doesn't say when the old façade was changed to the new one, the smooth stippled surface of orangetanbrown that my fingers trace along in the sweet night air. Bits of the old façade are crumbling under the Plexiglas; the new façade, newer adobe, is seamless, perhaps timeless, and covers everything except the plastic.

I lean against the corner timber post and look across the plaza, breathing in smells of desert rain and roasted peppers. The adobe pulses behind me, a comforting warmth that feels peaceful and safe. But I resist mistaking the momentary calm I feel for a sense of belonging.

For now, simply being here is enough.