

I visited Santa Fe, New Mexico back in the late eighties along with wife Anne, Cousin Angela and her then husband Bob. The town has a palpable aura of mystery about it that you cannot help but feel and this story seemed to write itself shortly after I returned to Oklahoma.

Moth Madness

A short story by

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A clear blue day, the sky mimicked polished turquoise pierced with veins of crystalline quartz. In front of the Palace of the Governors, Navaho artists arranged malachite rings and squash blossom necklaces. Across the street, in shops and galleries, non-native artisans expressed their own vision in a more contemporary, if somewhat less fervent fashion.

The old town was alive with color. Morning glories and hollyhocks lined the street, pastels clashing with orange berries of mountain ash, and chocolate adobe. Sunflowers, pumpkins and sacred corn crowned the flat roofs. A message on an old car garishly painted in a splash of bright, freehand colors, said, 'never pet a burning dog'.

Two couples meandered down the crowded sidewalk, occasionally stopping to examine a silver bauble, or finger an eye-catching ring. Finally, Pamela said, "What now, gang?"

Pamela's husband Don winked at Raymond, his male counterpart, and said, "A drink at the nearest bar?"

"Honestly, Don," Pamela chided. "Hasn't the town's ambience caught up with you yet?"

"Just the gas from last night's frijoles," he said.

Raymond added, "So spicy, there's a fart in every bite."

Pamela frowned and walked ahead in silent protest. Don winked at Raymond and Julie, puffing his cheeks in Dizzie Gillespie fashion to show his distaste for the local fare. "Slow down, Dear," he said, words dripping with mischievous inflection. She didn't and they hurried after her.

After lunch at a courtyard restaurant Julie pushed her plate aside and asked, "What now?"

Don stretched in his chair and yawned. "A nice nap?"

Pamela sipped her mineral water and smiled introspectively. "This is the last day of our vacation, Don."

"So what?"

"This is the center of New Age. We can't leave without at least visiting a channeler and summoning a lost spirit."

Don grinned, fidgeting with his curly gray moustache.

"Dear, you're crazy."

Pamela ignored him, turning to Julie and Raymond. "What do you two think?"

Julie glanced nervously at Raymond, "I don't know, Pam. Sounds sort of silly to me."

"It's not silly," Pamela shot back. "If you think it is, Don and I will go alone."

Don glanced helplessly at Julie and Raymond. Then, winking at Raymond, he asked, "How will we decide which channeler to consult, dear?"

"We'll ask the waiter."

Don grinned wryly. "Sounds logical."

Pamela ignored him, but Raymond glanced at Julie and smiled. When the waiter with the Brooklyn accent returned, Pamela asked, "Can you direct us to the best channeler in Santa Fe?"

"Depends," he said.

"On what?" Julie asked, her curiosity piqued.

"On how much you're paying."

His terse reply raised Pamela's eyebrows. "Are some that much better than others?"

"No, but for the right price, I'll do it myself."

This time neither Don, Julie nor Raymond stifled their laughter. Pamela folded her arms, sat up straight and frowned.

"I wasn't making a joke," she said, reprimanding the young man.

"Well," he paused, "If I'm not good enough for you, you might try the Wolf."

"The wolf?"

"Steinhart, Wolf Steinhart."

Bob chortled, "Wolf Steinhart?"

"Who's Wolf Steinhart?" Julie and Raymond asked in unison.

"If you want to know about New Age, Wolf is your man."

Don leaned back in his chair and folded his big hands behind his head. "Where might we find Mr. Steinhart?"

The waiter glanced at his watch. "Right now, he's probably at the Pagan Bar."

Don's pale blue eyes widened. "He keeps a schedule?"

The waiter grinned. "Nah, he's there most of the time."

They found the Pagan Bar empty and eclectic, even by Santa Fe standards. Small dragons hung from the ceilings. A tree grew behind the bar and Louis Armstrong's picture decorated the opposite wall, along with wooden swords, crosses, lizards and stained glass dragons. A sign said "this is the year of the dragon". A lone man occupied a pink stone table, his head resting on his arm. As they stood in a semi-circle around him, he began snoring at a level that would have made a tic on the chart of the nearest seismic station.

Don grinned and tried to rouse him. "Ahem!"

A louder snort erupted from the man's nostrils and Pamela suggested, "Maybe we should come back later."

"Not on your life," Don said.

Raymond grabbed her elbow to prevent her exit. "He's right. Let's wake him."

Raymond shook the man's shoulder. Steinhart, if that's who he was, brushed away Raymond's hand like someone swatting an errant fly buzzing about their head. A voice startled them. "You wanna talk with the Wolf."

A dark-skinned lady wearing a bright red dress draped low over her shoulders stood looking at them, hand on hips,

"Why yes, as a matter-of-fact." Don said.

"Then waita minute."

She disappeared behind the bar, returning with a shot of tequila which she placed beside the man's head. The Wolf snorted and slowly opened his red-rimmed eyes, glancing up myopically at the five people standing over him. He drained the shot in one gulp and tossed the glass into the adobe kiva behind him, wincing and massaging his left temple as it shattered.

"Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"I'm Don Brabham and this is my wife Pamela. These lovely people are Julie Hamilton and Raymond West."

The man stretched himself to his full, impressive height. Don was tall but this man taller, fully six-six.

"Wolf Steinhart," he said, extending his hand. "At your service."

Steinhart's spoke with a clipped British accent, khaki shirt and pants imparting the appearance of a mercenary soldier or big game hunter. A red stain on his shirt dispelled this initial impression. Pamela edged to the back of the group and eyed the door, but Don grabbed her arm.

"We understand you are an expert on New Age philosophy," Don said. "May we sit?"

"How rude of me," Steinhart said, pulling out two of the red lacquered chairs and raising a finger to the woman in the red dress. "Ramona! Tequila and five glasses."

The dark-skinned woman ignored his request, continuing to polish a glass. "Who's gonna pay?"

Steinhart glanced at the group until Don raised his hand, answering brusquely, "I'll pay."

"Then make it Cuervo Gold, pretty senorita," Steinhart said, popping all five fingers on both hands. Happily, he bent over and placed his palms on the table's pink surface. "Ladies and gentlemen, you have found your man."

Still beaming, Steinhart plopped down between Pamela and Julie on the pink-cushioned bonco. They wrinkled their noses and edged away as Ramona brought the tequila and five shot glasses.

"I'd rather have a glass of Chablis," Pamela said.

Julie said, "Make mine a Coke."

"Well, gentlemen," Steinhart said, refraining from breaking the glass in the fireplace when he finished his fiery shot. "More for us." He smacked his lips like a contented bovine and added, "My friends. You have arrived at the pith of the maelstrom, the mouth of the volcano, the eye of the needle."

"The tail of the ass," Don said, wryly.

Unperturbed, Steinhart continued. "Exactly what is it you wish to discover?"

"The address of a good channeler," Don said dryly.

Wolf's chin dropped. "Is that all?"

"Actually no," Pamela said, suddenly enthusiastic. "We need a guide through the mysteries of New Age."

Wolf perked up at Pamela's words. "A broad and demanding subject. I require a fee."

"That's all right --," Pamela began.

Don interrupted. "How much?"

"Twenty dollars an hour and residuals," Steinhart said.

Don squelched Pamela's reply. "Residuals?"

Steinhart held up the bottle of tequila. Don glanced at Raymond and Julie. They simply smiled and blinked.

"You got it, old man," Don said, taking the initiative.

Steinhart filled Don and Raymond's glasses and poured another for himself. "As you mentioned," he said, looking at Pamela. "This is the hub of New Age. The place where everyone's karma hits the fan." He chuckled. "In Santa Fe, experts perform functions as diverse as synovial fluid equalization, aura balancing, crystal healing, vibrational healing, connective tissue polarity therapy, colon cleansing, clear light therapy, and "he paused," bio-energetic synchronization."

"More like bio-energetic money detachment," Don quipped.

Pamela ignored her husband's levity. "And channelers?" "My dear lady," Steinhart said, eloquently, "There are hundreds of mystics, gurus and spirit channelers in Santa Fe."

Julie sipped her soda and Raymond fidgeted in his red lacquered chair. "Every waiter in town is a mystic," Raymond said. "Surely most of these people are fakes preying on unsuspecting visitors." He glanced away from Pamela's glare.

Steinhart nodded, suddenly solemn. "What you suggest is true, but they are here for a reason."

Raymond asked, "What reason?"

Steinhart poured another shot and answered, "The native Americans."

Pamela leaned forward. "Native Americans?"

"Yes. There are fifteen thousand Pueblo in New Mexico, along with the Navajo and Hopi. The Pueblo believe they are here, now and always. This is an important view of them selves because it reveals their feelings for bahana."

"Bahana?" Don said, looking perturbed.

"Whites. You and I. The original people have occupied this region for almost eight thousand years. Their culture is quite defined. More so than any in North America. There are things we bahana will never know."

Julie asked, "Such as?"

"Koshare --," Steinhart's word died on his lips.

Don glanced at Raymond, then at Julie. "Koshare?"

"Powerful secret societies. Magic, both white and black. The so-called New Age practitioners gravitated here naturally. To the Pueblo this is, quite simply, the center of the universe."

Pamela's face glowed with anticipation. "You mean these people could summon a demon, or heal a cancer?"

Wolf Steinhart nodded. "These people, as you call them, are quite capable of almost anything."

"Then this is for real?"

"As real as you or I," he said, dogmatically.

Pamela asked, "Can we experience this mysticism or witness the summoning of a spirit?"

Don turned nervously in his chair. "Dear, this is getting ridiculous. Let's go back to the hotel and take a nice nap."

Pamela glared at her husband. "You go, I'll stay."

Don frowned but remained seated, pouring another shot from the half-empty bottle. Raymond and Julie glanced nervously at each other. Steinhart simply folded his arms, silent as he contemplated Pamela's question.

"It's possible," he finally said.

Pamela glowed. "We'll pay. Whatever it costs."

"Dear lady, it's not a question of money."

Julie asked, skeptically, "What is it a question of?"

"Belief," Steinhart said, finishing his shot and standing. "Where are you staying?"

"La Fonda," Don said.

Wolf Steinhart glanced at his watch. "If you're serious, I'll pick you up in front of the hotel at five."

The two couples waited, Pamela beaming, Don fidgeting, Julie looking bored and Raymond nervously pacing the sidewalk. "This is really stupid, Pamela," Don said. "Steinhart's not coming."

"Of course he's coming. He's just a little late."

An old Land Rover pulled up to the curb, allaying Don's doubts, Wolf Steinhart at the wheel in the same outfit as before. A broad-brimmed hat completed his big game hunter look. Raymond noted with relief he had at least changed shirts. Steinhart leaned across the front seat and opened the door with a smile.

"Pile in, good people."

Because of his height, Don sat in the front seat. The others crowded into the back on the narrow, cushionless bench. Steinhart pulled away from the curb and headed out of town.

Don asked, "Where are we going, old man?"

"First to Taos to secure a guide, and then to visit the witch," he said.

Julie sat stiffly in the back seat, arms folded and toe tapping. "I thought you were our guide."

"Unfortunately this excursion requires more than I."

Pamela was ecstatic. "We're visiting a witch, a real witch? Please tell us about it."

"A practice passed through successive generations. Spanish monks introduced Catholicism to the region. Since then the native's belief in the spirit world has become rigidly intertwined with the Catholic view of god."

Raymond asked, "Such as?"

"The evil eye. The Pueblo and Navajo believe wizards and witches possess the power to harm simply by gazing at you. The power of the evil eye. They wear amulets and talismans, often Catholic crosses or votives, to protect them from this power. They intermingle eucharistic epiclesis with their own ancient beliefs when they invoke spirits of the earth and moon."

"And our visit to the witch --?"

"Simply a demonstration," Steinhart said, finishing Raymond's question. "It would take our combined remaining lifetimes to understand this region's mystical culture."

Purple shadows engulfed the highway, blending with the hazy orange sunset as they continued north to the Taos Pueblo. Steinhart entered through the back gate. In the encroaching darkness they approached two pueblos separated by a clear creek, both structures looking like ancient apartment complexes. A church bounded the west end of the coyote-fenced enclosure. Steinhart crossed the narrow bridge, careful of the horse roaming the compound and the mongrel dogs in their path, stopping by the largest adobe structure. He opened the door and stepped out.

"Wait here. I won't be long." Steinhart started away, but returned quickly, as if forgetting something. He removed four crucifixes from his safari shirt and handed one to each of them.

"Put these on," he said.

They watched him climb a ladder to an upper entrance, disappearing inside. Don glanced at the crucifix, saying. "You think this will work for a Jew?"

"Honestly Don," Pamela said. "Just put it on."

Raymond nudged Julie and she bit her lip to keep from laughing. When Steinhart returned only the stars and moon illuminated the surroundings. He wasn't alone.

"This is Sam," he said, introducing the young man. "He'll lead us the remainder of the way."

Sam rode on the Land Rover's fender to his own vehicle, an old pickup truck. Steinhart shadowed him out of the enclosure and into the darkness. They followed the highway several miles before exiting to a barely visible dirt path jutting into the desert. The path followed a dry arroyo for five more miles.

Julie, Raymond and Pamela held on to their uncomfortable seats as Steinhart followed Sam's truck up the slight incline to the other side of the arroyo. There they found a single adobe cubicle, light radiating from its windows. Steinhart helped Pamela and Julie unwind from the uncomfortable back seat. The two couples waited in the chilly bleakness, Sam and Steinhart soon returning from the house with a smiling boy. Steinhart took a bag of fruit from the vehicle, handing it to the boy.

"We're just here to observe," Steinhart said. "Please keep your questions to a minimum."

They followed Steinhart into the stucco house, finding a young woman standing beside kiva fireplace. Two little girls giggled, playing ball and jacks on the earthen floor. When they spotted the sack of fruit they rushed with awkward pigeon-toed gaits to their brother, demanding their share.

Various peculiar objects decorated the walls: an old chrome hubcap, several jawbones of indistinct origin, and some shells. Lateral vigas supported the ceiling. Bits of hay in the walls suggested real adobe formed them, not the cement variety widely used by local builders.

"This is Rachel Kucate, her daughter's Verla and Natalie, and son Chester."

Don, Pamela, Julie and Raymond followed Steinhart and Sam to a room in back where an old woman sat alone in a rocking chair, a black cat at her feet. Sam closed the door behind them, a dim coal oil lamp illuminating the room. The old woman rocked, seemingly unaware of their presence.

The cat arched its back as it moved beneath her legs and the rockers of the chair. The old woman seemed the picture of antiquity, but the brightness and color of her garments clashed with this notion. Withered as a corn stalk ruined by too much sun and lack of rain, a blue flowered bandanna capped her silver hair. Turquoise and silver draped from her earlobes. A red and green flowered shawl cloaked her pink wool sweater and a twisted turquoise butterfly bracelet graced her gnarled wrist.

"I have brought visitors Grandmother," Sam said.

The old woman slowly opened her eyes, one dark and old, the other green and alive. She studied the visitors as Sam brought a small table from the corner, placing it in front of her. He sat on the floor and began chanting and beating a drum he had brought from the truck. When the old woman spoke her voice quivered, barely audible. She looked straight at Don.

"You brought somethin' for Grandmother?"

Startled by her question, Don reached for his wallet, but Steinhart touched his wrist. "She's not asking for money."

Confused, Don fished an old gold watch, attached to a length of frayed chain, from his pocket. Without understanding why, he placed it on the table.

"Bring me the cloud blower, my son," she said.

Steinhart handed her the ceremonial pipe which she lighted with a thin piece of wood in the flame of the coal oil lamp. Acrid smoke of wild tobacco billowed from its bowl. After several puffs she handed the pipe to Don. Don puffed it, coughing as the harsh smoke filled his lungs. The old woman took it from him, placing it on the table beside the watch.

Soon, almost imperceptibly at first, her shoulders began to quake, the tremble continuing up her neck until her eyes closed and head tilted sharply backwards. Her wrinkled lips parted and emitted a moan sounding like wind whistling through branches.

Trembling enveloped her and she shook in a wild paroxysm of movement. Suddenly, her head slammed against the table so hard, Raymond thought she must have killed herself.

Don moved to help, but Steinhart's upraised palm signaled him back. The old woman's hands and head thrashed wildly against the table for a full minute before surrendering to a few feeble palpitations. Finally she was quiet, her motion ceasing completely. A voice spoke, her lips unmoving. The voice, coming from the bowels of her soul, sounded masculine and tinny, as if awakened from a long sleep.

"I plunged from the sky, embraced by blue icy water. I am free and I bid you farewell."

The voice died away like an echo in an empty cavern as they watched, mollified and frozen in place. Sam stopped drumming and filled a ladle with cool water. He and Steinhart helped the old woman back against the chair and held the water to her lips until she opened her eyes and began rocking again, much as before.

Steinhart hugged the old woman and gave her a pouch of tobacco, then exchanged a silent farewell as he motioned them to leave. Raymond was the last out, stealing one last glance at the old woman before shutting the door behind him. Strangely, he noticed the cat beneath her feet had only one eye, green and alive. In the cheery outer room, Steinhart gave Sam and Rachel twenty dollars each. Sam nodded and faded into the darkness. "That's the strangest experience I've ever had," Pamela said, returning along the dirt path to the Land Rover.

Julie agreed. "Amen to that."

Raymond asked, "What's the story on those people?"

"The old woman is a witch, as is her granddaughter Rachel and the two little girls. They suffer from genetic epilepsy and the foot abnormality you noticed. Navajos call the epilepsy moth madness. Witch frenzy. This is because in the throes of a seizure they move their limbs like the wings of a moth near a flame. The Navajo believe women possessed by moth madness are magical and able to converse with spirits. What you witnessed, however, is its own explanation."

"Fascinating," Pamela said. "Whose voice did we hear and what did the message mean?"

"Maybe you should ask your husband," Steinhart said.

Confused by the Wolf's reply, Pamela put her hand on Don's shoulder. "Don, are you all right?"

Don's usual joviality had flown out the window. "The watch I gave the old woman was my older brother's. A tail gunner during the war. His plane was lost over Germany, his body never recovered. We were very close and I was upset when he went overseas. I never said goodbye."

Pamela started to comment, but suddenly, caught between reality and a dusty desert road, she reclined instead against the bouncing seat of the Land Rover. Raymond put his arm around Julie and gazed at the sky, watching as a shooting star lighted the darkness and disappeared forever behind a distant flat-topped promontory.

END