

Mano Matate



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Mano, Matate

There is magic in these expanses—and it wants me dead. Or maybe just undone. I suppose if this devilry wanted me dead, it would have done it by now.

I knew of it before lightning struck the stately mulberry in my front yard, but the bolt helped nudge my

knowing closer to tearing. The lightning was the exclamation point on the *Oh, fuck* feeling I've had for a while.

The mulberry is not dead, but it looks a sight. The same, I guess, is true for me.

It would take a whole pot of coffee slipping into cocktails for me to recount my recent misfortunes. Misfortune abounds here. If my bounty of misfortune was instead blessing, I'd be a rich woman with a young husband. And a yacht. I have no idea what a yacht looks like, but I know they're expensive, and I know I'd have one. Because that's how much misfortune I've had.

I don't think the magic has me beat yet. I don't think I'm undone—yet. But will I know when I am? And if I just got the undone over with, would the calamity wagon finally pull off this rutted road? Enduring is in my bones, but sometimes I wish they would just break and be done with it.

Every time I get in the car, I see the sprouting spot of my misfortune story. It nestles in the crook between walkway and driveway, looking like nothing more than two cozy grey stones. The smaller one has ground out the center of the big one, making a bowl-shaped curve in the middle. This ordinary object is where my damning began.

Whenever I see a mano and metate—this or another—I think of it as a metaphor for motherhood. The little ones always grind down us big ones so we curve around them, accommodate them, cradle them. Our children do more to shape us, I think, than the other way around. Go ahead and believe you're the one doing the shaping, but when it's all said and done, take a look at how hollowed out you are. Take a look at how nothing else fits that hollow space like your child.

Though my children are now largely lost to me, I still hold their hollows. And those hollows make the losing of them a whole heap harder. Nothing fills those spaces, though I try to fill them with the very thing that took my kids from me: my oft-repeated, ever-wanted sin.

That mano and metate pair—the one I see on my way to my car—is my snake. My apple. Or whatever it is that Eve messed up with, whatever she kissed or ate. I never was good with those stories, could never hold the weight of them in my hand. But whatever it was that Eve did that cursed mankind, Adam was surely in on it, too. He just didn't want to take the fall for it. That's how it goes.

He's the one that pointed out the mano and metate—my husband. He's the one that taught me about such things. I would have simply passed them by as rocks sitting on more rocks, but he pointed out how they have a pound-out past, an impossibly deep past that somehow still sits on the surface. Like

they were just used yesterday. He taught me the power of pondering that past, how you can get lost in the pondering. He pointed them out, but I was the one that loaded them into the pickup bed. He would have done it—I know he wanted to—but I was there to take the fall.

I've been falling ever since.

He's dead now, my husband. And another one after him. You'd think that'd be a sure sign that he was the one to take the fall—that they both did—but, no. I know better. In death, they get heaven or oblivion, or something different than this. They're beyond this, while I remain. I remain in order to be worked toward undone daily. I remain to stagger under the weight of grief—and fear—while the trash still has to go out and the dishes be done.

They died, and I am left to die a million tiny deaths daily.

Give me a death sentence. A life sentence is so much longer and harsher, a heavier burden to carry. Death is breath-light, while life's burdens mire. To hear it from me, you'd think I'd be a good candidate for a .38 Special to the temple or a bottle of tablets chased by a bottle of Southern Comfort. But as I said, enduring is in my bones. So I do.

After we took the mano and metate, my husband and I, well, the bug bit us. We drove back into the desert the next day. And the next. And the next. It became our workaday routine. I'd pack the picnic basket with leftovers and beer, and off we'd go, looking to get lost in the finding of something.

My husband called it Moqui Fever. It's hard to describe the pull, unless you've felt it. I think it's a part of the unholy magic here: It wants to draw you in because it wants to destroy you. It feeds off destruction. It feeds on it, too. How could there not be a lingering wickedness from a people who fed on each other? That's the story I've heard about the Moquis, anyway, that when food and water got scarce, these people got scared—but in a crazy way. They turned on their brothers, and they ate their brothers, then they shat out their brothers' remains into skull bowls and did it all over again. Until they were gone. That's the story. But they're not really gone. When you go out that way, I think you only depart bodily. The spirit sticks around for means of reparation or retribution. The latter is what we've got going on here, in these canyons. What I've got going on.

It's strange, though, how a woman can know this—feel it and fear it in her bones—yet still go on invoking the spirits' wrath. I guess it's like any addiction. An addict knows the destruction her actions wreak on body and mind, self and others, but she carries on despite it. To spite it. It's a disease of

the soul. I am afflicted. My soul is diseased.

Moqui Fever may be a disease, but the fever isn't the sickness kind; it's the lusty kind. Your eyes hollow to the shape of the desired item—arrowhead, potsherd, bead, what have you—until nothing fits your gaze except what you're looking for. And then, there it is, dropped atop the earth for you alone to find—your stone-made salvation. Your stare is sucked down to sand as if it were the quick kind, and your brain sparks in recognition of manmade work amidst desert-made clutter. The spark burns in your brain like rye burns in your belly, a warm and satisfying release. Then you are picking it up and holding it, this new object of yours. Because in the finding of it, there is no question that it is yours. Its makers departed long ago, and rains will ravage it away if you don't rescue it. That's how I experience it. That's part of the addiction. I get to feeling like a hero, saving the past from an unknown future.

And then that past flickers, movie-projector style, behind your eyes. Suddenly, with that stone in your hand, you're picturing the man who crafted it, the shape of his hands. You're picturing him by himself, contemplating a future hunt, and then you're herd-dogging him back to his family in some nearby cave so you can see how he greets his girls. You're looking at a desert that's 2000 years younger, seeing towers that long ago tumbled under the same sun that forever shines. You're transported. Moqui Fever is an affliction, and it's a time machine.

Maybe a bigger person would leave it at that, returning the remnant to the sand, walking on. But I don't want to be that bigger person. I think that bigger person's morality is a heavy burden, snapping the cords connecting him to others. When I take my find home and mount it amongst others on the wall, I am then reminded of my bit part in a big tale in the telling. I am reminded that my sad story isn't solitary.

Morality is rigid, but waywardness keeps us on a curving path that connects us to more people, a cross-section of humanity. Across time. That's my feeling, anyway. Some of the most interesting people I've ever met have been the biggest sinners. Myself included. Consider this a confession.

I can't put a count on the things I've taken. Go ahead and come in my home and try a tally. The boredom of the number stream will knock you on your ass before you're halfway done. Just trust me to tell you that it's a lot. And that numbers don't matter. I don't think I'll ever feel my hunger full. Nor my hollows.

I am so empty these days. My children...their goneness. I can still feel the silkiness of their dark curls

under my chin, sense the scent of their innocence. I still feel my arms wrapping around their tiny forms in the before-bed cradling they once needed. Now, there is nothing but a hollow space there, and that is my doing. My kids made the hollows, but I made the hollows empty.

My first husband taught me about the Moquis, but I've carried on the hunt for their memory more years than he had to give. I got my second husband hooked, but the accident at the mine took his legs before he had much chance to roam. Then the oxycodone took the rest of him.

But I always kept it separate from my kids. I wanted them to feel the fever's thrill, but the mama bear in me knew better than to share. They never got bit by the bug, which is good, but damn if they haven't been bitten by my curse. My eldest is in jail. My girl is in rehab. My littlest is in the grave. I've got my daughter's kids now, my grandkids, while she gets straightened out. They've had a hard go of it, and I hope to hell it isn't because of me. Could the undoing magic be that cruel?

That smell of innocence atop my little ones' heads—like a halo—did my actions strip them of it? I already feel it fading from the grandkids.

The grandkids ask about the arrowheads and potsherds framed on the wall. They ask about the metates and basket bits on the floor. They're particularly enamored with the square of rock art that sits on the porch, a big-bellied bighorn sheep. That's something my second husband and I did, chisel and sawing a slab of rock off a canyon wall one evening. And that's something I'll never do again. That was stealing, not finding. The sheep looks so lonely now, separated from his herd, aching to leap over the desert rim but too block-heavy to do it. I can't return him; I picture myself slathering a full bottle of Elmer's on his back and have to laugh. I've never been good at solutions—just problems.

I tell the little ones about the Moquis, but I don't tell them where the stuff comes from. For all they know, we're somehow related to those stone folk, and the artifacts have been passed down the line. One of the kids has some Navajo in him so, hell, it's plausible that he's related, that he's got some kind of birthright to all of this. Maybe his connection will protect him. Maybe none of us are worth protecting. Certainly not me. The mulberry confirms as much.

The lightning struck the tree two Tuesdays ago. One dark cloud in a big, blue sky, and it chose my yard as its unleashing spot. The whole thing put me in an inside state of mind—inside my house, inside my head—trying to figure how I venture outward and forward into my fearful future. Maybe it's my spirit's turn, struck sensible by lightning, to look at reparations or retributions.

Something's got to change. This is no way to walk the world, all hollowed out empty and heavy with dread.

You'd think the many dearly departed and devastated in my life would have woken me up long ago, underscoring the undoing magic and my part in its unleashing. But the tree...that was some other kind of message entirely. The awakening kind. That lightning illuminated a darkness in the nearness. And that darkness demands a response.

When the lightning struck, hurtling in on a mid-afternoon wind, I was at the kitchen counter, adding a new ochre spear point to a shadow box frame full of them. The flash-bang twosome jumped my heart up to my tonsils and startled stutters into my fingers. I dropped the spear points. All of them. Several tips chipped. One point lodged firmly in the soft linoleum. I've left it there. I step gingerly around it to get my coffee. It seems a new presence in the house, though I guess it's always been here. It just finally stood up to stare me down.

My first day of lightning-sparked soul-searching found me steeping in a brew of reparation views. I stared at that spear point and imagined gathering up the whole lot of goods and dumping it on the county museum's doorstep in the night. Let them catalog and curate my sins away. Let them relieve me of my burden with white gloves and small, prodding implements. Let them be like surgeons excising a cancer.

Yet that didn't sit right. These remnants of life lived would suffocate within climate-controlled drawers in a fluorescent-lit basement, no one to ponder them but people too smart to feel. The picture of it plucked a heartstring.

Then I imagined wandering the desert for months and years, returning each item to its original sitting spot. Or as close as I can remember. I fancied it as another kind of Moqui time machine, this one clicking rewind on my life, me walking backward through the years, setting the desert floor to rights, emptying my home of years of gather. I imagined the monsoons raining upward, the sun arcing east, the wind carefully putting each sand grain back to bed—and all the while, me replacing plunder.

The thought brought a smile—until I realized that spooling the thread of my sad story backward into a ball would find me lonely in the holding of it. I could set all to rights but still have three in the grave and two in the poke. Nothing I can do will bring life back to my beloveds. Nothing will erase my pain. I can set all to rights—and I know I should—but my life will still be wrong, wrong, wrong.

I have paid enough. I will give no more.

As this knowing took root, it sprouted as a need for retribution. I saw myself grabbing the 12-gauge from the closet, driving down a lonely wash, and adding my own petroglyph patter to a wall full of figures, blasting my story large and lasting atop the old one. Because my story is no less valid or true. I imagined hurling fragile handled pots off cliff edges, highlighting their fragility—and my unbrokenness. I pictured myself dumping kerosene down a kiva hole and tossing in a match, flames leaping out of the abandoned heart of a world. I reveled in the notion of a big, messy fuck-you writ large across the landscape, an unmistakable Moqui-marring message.

They have taken enough. They will take no more.

Malice became a balm for my weary soul. I rested in my rage. I glared at that spear point standing tall—yet small—in my kitchen. And I realized my bigness and my power.

Here is what I now understand: The canyon magic has taken enough from me. From now on, my losses are my losses; they don't chalk up as wins for unhinged souls. In believing in unholy magic, I bring it into being. In believing in the power to be undone, I'm doing the undoing. I'm chipping away at my heart with my own damned hand.

I know this addled addiction is no way to live a life. Yet, instead of changing, I'll be taking my rucksack into the canyons tomorrow to see what I can find.

Maybe I'm like the desert winds, not knowing when to lay my gritty burden down. But when I look out the window, I see room enough to park a desert-bound yacht. I see a swing set where my remaining kids can play with theirs. I see ample space for luck to pivot through a U-turn.

I see a mano and a metate, unbroken and inseparable, despite all the harm a thousand years can muster. And I see a mulberry corkscrewed with wounding, yet still reaching for the bolt-dropping sky.

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