

Mescalito

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Colin Fulkerth lost his way. Heading for reliable sweetwater tanques in the bedrock of a side canyon, he had somehow missed the turnoff and climbed all the way through the arroyo to the baked alkali waste of the high Chihuahuan desert. Only a few scrawny mesquite shrubs dotted the landscape of low creosote bush, brittlebush, yucca, and ocotillo. Thorny cholla and prickly pear and hedgehog cactus hindered the walking. There was no shade.

His boots slipped, sucked beneath the shifting sand, as he struggled up a dry wash beneath the noonday sun. His backpack bore down heavily on the raw, pink skin of his bare, sweat-slick shoulders, sliding up and down like a whetstone. Cholla needles had caught in the legs of his trousers and pricked his shins and needled his ankles with each step. But he dared not stop to pick out the harpoon-like barbs. He had to find water. Find water or die.

Dazed and faint, his thoughts became a roulette wheel. The ball clacked crazily across a dozen revolving visions before settling into a final slot, where a weathered board gate in an adobe wall stood facing him, just a step above the cobblestone street. Tugging on the frayed rope that dangled through a hole in the gate would lift the crossbar. He had built that gate and the crossbar and the release rope. He could hear the heavy clunk of the two-by-four lifting and the welcoming squeal of the hinges. Inside lay the moist green lawn of the inner courtyard and the mossy brick pathway still wet with puddles as bright as the sky, surrounded by banana trees with deep green leaves like elephant ears that led up the pathway to the deep umbrella-like shade of a huge mango. But needles pierced his shin and the rope slipped through his fingers. The gate swung shut. Stunned, for a moment he stared blankly at the aching cobblestones, crooked as impacted teeth and trodden now only by ghosts, before they dissolved into desert sand.

Colin fell to his knees in the burning sand and buried his face in his hands. It was no use. His eyes ached from the dizzying brightness. His mouth was so dry his tongue had begun to swell. His lips were cracked and bleeding. The relentless sun blistered his skin. There was no escape.

He crawled into the speckled shade beneath a twisted mesquite bush, leaving in the sand the slithering trail of a great lizard. Sand clung to his arms and his chest as he struggled free from his pack and rolled onto his back, the hot sand stinging his burned shoulders like a nest of fire ants. He wrestled a shirt from his pack and spread it over himself, then rested his head on the pack. Sucking in the stifling desert heat, he gazed up through the tiny leaves and lacy branches of the mesquite. The single black dot of a vulture circled far overhead. He tugged the hat down over his eyes and squinted toward the horizon. There Colin Fulkerth rested, suspended in time. Breathing. Hallucinating. Waiting for death and the vulture to sniff him out.

Through half-closed eyes he saw the twin spires of the old bell towers of Ajijic against a rich blue sky. The bells hung silently within each tower. He waited for the bells to begin their slow swinging and for the loud, round tones to crash over him and wake him from this suffering. He could smell the wet grass of the zocalo all around him. And the scent of the bougainvillea, rich and sweet. Hear the clatter of hooves on the cobblestones. As his eyes focused, the bell towers resolved into the fruiting stalks of twin yucca plants. The bells were their fruit capsules.

Despair overwhelmed him, and Colin Fulkerth was wrenched with dry sobs.

He shut his eyes and was riding the *Lunada*. As the sun set and the full moon rose, he rode his horse Lucero up a steep trail towards the narrow canyon. Through the twilight Lucero carried him higher and higher while he and his compadres swigged burning tequila from pint bottles. In the canyon it was too dark to see, so he let Lucero have the reins. Lucero knew the trail. The riders were already drunk by the time they reached the plateau, a broad, flat grassland far above the pool of deep turquoise lake and the toy-like lights of the village below. There they let the horses run, galloping until he fell from his mount when Lucero veered suddenly to the right. Why, only the horse knew. Unhurt, he scrambled to his feet and chased after the stallion laughing. It was all so vivid. So sweet. The moonlit silver mountains above. The dark coolness of the dewy grass. Companionship. Time that would last forever.

A cool shadow passed over his face. Colin Fulkerth opened his eyes. Before him stood a figure, blocking the afternoon sun. Shirt and trousers were as gray as the sand. A belt of rope was tied around its waist. A folded blanket was draped over his left shoulder. A cloth bag and a yellow gourd dangled from the right. Huarachis covered naked feet. Colin could not see the eyes in the deep shade of a black sombrero.

“Water,” Colin whispered.

The figure made no reply.

“*Agua*,” Colin repeated in Spanish. A wisp of sand blew into his eyes. When he opened them again, the vision was still there. Colin gazed at him. “Who are you?”

The figure never moved. Never wavered. Just watched.

“Are you real?” Colin rasped.

There was a slight nod of the terrible black sombrero and a broad smile of irregular white teeth. Nothing more.

“Then you must be Death,” Colin whispered, squeezing his eyes on fresh tears. He trembled as the shadow flickered over him. A few moments later a rough hand burrowed into the sand beneath his head and lifted. A trickle of tepid water touched his lips. Colin took a small sip and let the precious fluid run over his chapped lips and swollen tongue to the back of his throat. There was hardly enough to swallow.

Colin opened his eyes. The face of an old Indian filled his vision, smiling down. The tawny skin was deeply creased leather and the deep-set eyes were brown. Ancient eyes. Eyes that seemed to regard him and look through him at the same time. The Indian tipped a dried yellow gourd and a little more water spilled onto Colin’s tongue. He moved it around his mouth. This time the swallowing was easier.

“Who are you?” Colin asked again.

Again the gourd rose slowly. Again a trickle of water soothed his throat. Finally the Indian spoke, “When you are ready, Mescalito, I will walk with you to the water tanques.” His voice was tenor and nasal and had the peculiar sing-song lilt of Spanish. But Spanish was not his native tongue. He began picking the cholla needles out of Colin’s pant legs.

“I am not Mescalito.”

“Who are you then,” the Indian smiled, playing along with this delightful game.

“My name is Colin Fulkerth.”

“Ah, yes.” The smile deepened into a grin. “And what is Colin Fulkerth? Another name

for Mescalito?”

“But I am not Mescalito.”

“You say that you are not Mescalito,” the Indian said, enjoying himself immensely. “How do you know that you are not Mescalito?”

“Because . . . because . . .,” Colin licked his lips, “. . . because I remember things.”

“What things do you remember, Mescalito?”

“Things from my own life. And stop calling me Mescalito, will you?”

“As you wish, Mescalito.”

“My name is Colin Fulkerth. I remember things. Things that happened to me.”

“Can you sit up now?”

The Indian’s hands were strong as they helped him into a sitting position. Colin took the water gourd and drank from it. “It is almost empty,” he said.

“Finish it. There is more water nearby. We will walk there together.”

Colin let the last drops fall on his tongue. “Thank you,” he said.

That made the Indian beam. Laughter shown from the crinkled corners of his eyes. “Are you ready to walk to the tanques? Or would you wait for the dark to fall?”

“I guess I’m ready.” Slowly, with the help of the Indian, Colin stood. Lightheaded, he swayed for a moment while the old man steadied him.

The Indian raised Colin’s backpack, slung it over his shoulder beside the empty gourd and the sack, and set off into the bright sun that still hovered just above the horizon. They walked slowly, the Indian turning often to wait for Colin to catch up. Always he smiled. But the sand was soft and Colin had never been more exhausted. They walked on until the red ball of the sun touched the edge of the world and sank quietly into twilight. Colin started to feel a little better.

They entered the top of a rocky defile that soon grew steep. The footing was easier here without the soft sand. They descended a short way into a copse of short willows and then to the edge of a large pool that filled a smooth bowl in the bedrock floor. Further down Colin could see another, smaller pool. He could hear the water trickling down to the lower pond. As he approached the edge of the pool on moist, packed sand, a frog jumped into the water.

“Sit over here,” the Indian said, setting down Colin’s backpack near an old fire ring. “I will bring you fresh water.”

Colin eased himself down onto the firm sand, leaned back against the smooth, exposed rock wall, and watched the old man bend and fill the gourd. It felt cooler in the canyon beside the water. Colin studied the myriad animal footprints in the flat sand beside the pool. “Are there coyotes?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“What else?”

“Pack rats. Javalina. Others. But you have nothing to fear.”

“Why not?”

“Because they will know who you are.”

“Will you stay with me here tonight?”

“If you wish me to.” The Indian handed him the dripping gourd. “Drink it slowly. Not too much at a time. I will gather some firewood.”

The old man came back before dark with an armload of mesquite branches and lit a fire with a silver zippo lighter. He sat down on the far side of the fire ring and ate some fruit from a barrel cactus and a handful of nuts. He offered none to Colin, but that was alright. Colin did not feel the least bit hungry.

“Tell me why you think I am Mescalito,” Colin said.

“Because I was looking for you. I was crossing this desert in a straight line toward a distant peak, thinking only of Mescalito. Looking for you in my path. And look, I already found you several times this way.” He held out the small cloth sack. Inside were a half dozen segmented, spineless cacti. Like tiny green succulent pumpkins.

“Fresh peyote buttons.”

“You see? And then I saw you lying right in my path in the form of a man. Beneath that scrawny mesquite bush. You must have crawled under it as a lizard. I saw the tracks. And I have seen you before. Do you not remember? How could you not be Mescalito? There is no one else out here.”

“But I am a man, not a cactus.”

“You can take any form you want, Mescalito. You know that. I have seen you change from a coyote into a man.”

“You saw that?”

“Yes. And back into a coyote again.”

“Did this happen right in front of you?”

“It was far away. In the evening. But my eyes are good.”

“How do you know that *you* are not Mescalito?”

This made the old man laugh so hard that he gripped his belly and almost fell over. When the laughter subsided, he said, “Because *you* are Mescalito.”

“But I was dying of thirst when you found me. Would Mescalito die of thirst?”

He grew somber. Thoughtful. “You were showing me your vulnerability, Mescalito. To remind me of the compassion I must have for every living thing.”

“Then how do you explain my memories?”

“They are dreams. The dreams of someone else. Perhaps someone who has died here. Probably long ago. You have taken up the dreams of one who died here long ago.”

“But I passed no grave.”

“They were the dreams of a someone who was never buried.”

“I saw no bones.”

“The bones were scattered by the coyotes and the pack rats and the buzzards.” He smiled compassionately. “Do not worry, Mescalito. When the morning comes, you will remember who you are.”

With that he added two branches to the fire, then came over and spread his blanket out for Colin to wrap himself in.

“No, I couldn’t take your blanket—”

“Please,” the Indian said. “I want you to have it. I will be warm enough by the fire.”

The blanket felt good. The stars had come out and a chill was setting in. Colin pulled the blanket tight about his neck. “How do you know English so well?” he asked.

“I do not speak English,” the Indian said. “I am Yaqui. I speak only Yaqui.”

“But . . . we have been speaking together!”

“We have been speaking only Yaqui. Now go to sleep, Mescalito.”

A chill shot down his spine. Colin could not remember ever learning Yaqui. Could any of the old man’s nonsense be true? Confused, he watched the old Yaqui as he sat before the flickering fire. Sparks rose with lurid red tails. All the long night the Indian fed the fire with mesquite branches, or else he sat stone still, eyes open, but not seeing things of this world. The old man no longer returned his gaze. He seemed supremely content, alone with his own visions.

He must have slept deeply, dreamlessly, for when he awoke to the first ghostly light of morning, the Indian was gone. The blanket was gone. The fire had gone out. He rose and sniffed the ground to confirm that the Indian had really been here. Here the sand smelled of the Indian’s scent. Over there he could smell where the blanket had lain. The tattered remnant of bleached blue canvas that had once been a backpack lay below a crevice in the rock wall. He did not go near it.

Just as the old Yaqui had promised, Mescalito remembered who he was. Satisfied, he drank deeply from the still, cold pool, shook himself all over, then trotted out into the boundless desert, stopping only once to howl at the band of golden light spreading across the eastern horizon.