

Cadence

It was one of those flawlessly beautiful fall days when you would think nothing could possibly go wrong. That morning Raymond and I were talking about taking a hike. El Valle was proposed, though neither of us wanted to drive over an hour to reach the trail head. There were trails above Pecos on the other side of the mountains but they would take even longer to reach.

“Why don’t we just pack some sandwiches and walk the river trail behind the house?” I suggested. It had been a long time since we had gone farther than the first river crossing, which is about three quarters of a mile from our front door. So that’s what we did, taking Annie on a leash. Annie is getting up in years, but she pranced up the driveway stopping to sniff juniper branches like someone pouring over the morning newspaper to learn about last night’s events.

Half a mile down the road we came to our neighbor’s house where Rob was outside pattering near his tool shed. He straightened up, rubbed his calloused hand over his white beard and walked over to chat. He told us that Peggy had left for Santa Fe earlier to do something with horses. Two of their horses stood in the yard, a giant black gelding who regarded us with dignified interest, and his companion, a small, shaggy pony named Diego. They were both wearing blanket coats to protect them from chill or bugs -- I wasn’t sure which since I don’t know much about horses. Two ferocious looking black rottweilers, Bell and Bart who, as Rob says, will love you to death given half a chance, greeted us with stubby tails wagging, while a piece of black fluff I call Shrimp because I can’t remember the chihuahua’s real name, danced around our feet.

Rob and Peggy have the last house in the foothills before the wilderness begins. The few of us who own homes along this road all live next to a vast region of forested mountains that is partly old Spanish Land Grant, partly federal lands, partly National Forest, with a handful of small, privately owned sections in the foothills. From Rob and Peggy’s one can drive a vehicle only about half a mile further before the road ends and foot trails meander into the Pecos Wilderness where 7000 ft. *cerros* (hills) become 12,000 ft. mountains whose granite peaks are well above timberline.

If trouble happens in the mountains it often finds its way to Rob and Peggy’s doorstep. Rob told me that one especially hot day last summer a man knocked on his door saying he and his wife had been hiking in the hills and his dog had collapsed. Could Rob help them carry the dog out? A retired Los Alamos engineer, Rob is extremely hale and hearty, but he knew better than to hike into those scorching hills to haul out a big, unconscious dog. He drove the man up country as far as possible and gave him some water and medical supplies, but later learned help had come too late, the dog was already dead, probably from heat stroke or dehydration. There is little water to be found in the foothills except what flows down the Rio Chiquito, and the hikers were nowhere near the river.

Living on the edge of the wilderness for fifteen years I have acquired some experience about how things work here. Mostly we go through long stretches of peaceful times. But when things go wrong it happens incredibly fast. One minute all is serenely predictable, the next second there is blood spurting, shrieks, and chaos. Staunching wounds, trips to the doctor or vet, or even burials may follow before the profound silence that surrounds our home once again settles over the arroyos and hills.

One morning the air was so fresh and light that the dogs and I didn't turn around after our usual hour hike but kept climbing the trackless conical hill behind the house, higher and higher, aiming for the top, which proved to be too far to reach. I was higher than I had ever been on this hill and could see the entire Jemez range to the west and Sandia mountain to the south, eighty miles away. Northward were the soft blue contours of the Canjilon mountains this side of Tierra Amarilla. Even the hump of San Antonio peak was visible near the Colorado border.

The way back was easy, all down hill, though I was careful to keep my footing on the loose granite and quartz under foot. We were almost to the river and descending a steep slope when I saw an old horse shoe. "Good luck!" I thought, reaching down to pick it up, as a rock rolled under my foot and down I went, bare knee slamming onto a sharp rock that sliced deep. Even before I looked closely I knew it was bad. I still had to cross the river and climb the steep hill to reach the house. Pushing the flap of torn skin down hard over the wound I literally willed the cut not to bleed as I cautiously made my way home. And incredibly my knee obliged, even though the cut was so deep that it took years for the scar to disappear.

There have been mishaps with barbed wire I'd rather not recall, dog fights, scorpion bites, dogs hit by cars, and cats that went the way of the coyote. Each crisis rattled me to the core. Thankfully these traumas were spread out over many years with many more good and happy times in between. But when things turn grim one just copes the best one can.

Like that spring night Raymond woke me up in the middle of the night saying a squirrel had knocked over the window screen in my study, but not to worry because he had left the window open and the door to the room closed. It was 1 a.m., I had been sleeping soundly and none of this made much sense, but as Raymond seemed to have things under control I fell back asleep.

I was awakened by a violent banging and Raymond yelling, "Liz, there's a bear in the house!" I flew out of bed and found him slamming his fists on the study door yelling, "GET OUT! GET OUT!" My mind was working slowly. Had the bear come in to eat the squirrel? Had Raymond gone mad? I ran to the living room, snapped on the outside lights and looked out. The window to my study was open and I half expected to see a bear emerge from it. Instead, a very large bear came around the side of the house toward the window. It meant to get in. Now it was my turn to bang on the glass and yell, "GET OUT! GET OUT!" The bear turned on its heels and vanished around the side of the house.

Raymond came into the living room and looked at me. I looked back at him. We were both trying to accept that a big bear wanted to get in our house and that a window was open.

“We’ve got to shut that window!” I said.

“I can’t,” said Raymond. “The bear jammed it and I can’t close it from the inside. I’m going outside and push it shut. You latch it.” So he did and I did, and then he raced back in. With the house secure we stood there looking dumbly at each other. We had never seen a bear near our property though we’d often found scat on the dirt road and in the river canyon.

“Where’s the squirrel?” I asked.

“What squirrel?”

As Raymond pieced together the events it became clear that the only squirrel had been inside his head. Around midnight he was awakened by our two dogs, Rainbow and Annie, barking inside the house. He got out of bed and went into the study to find the window screen on the floor. This was very strange. The dogs clearly smelled something as they sniffed the floor, the hair bristling on their backs. Raymond knew something was wrong but he couldn’t see anything else was amiss. He put the dogs on leashes and walked outside but everything was quiet.

Back inside he reasoned that a squirrel had climbed on the screen, knocked it to the floor and might possibly be hiding in the closet. So it made sense to leave the window open with the screen off so the squirrel could find its way out. The dogs had settled down and after shutting the study door Raymond went back to bed.

He was awakened some time later by the dogs barking and a strange sound coming from the study. He got up, opened the door, switched on the light and found himself looking at a bear trying to squeeze in through the window. He slammed the door and began hammering on it while yelling for me to wake up.

The bear did not come back to our house that night, though it did visit the neighbors. Later I learned that it had rummaged through their garbage earlier that day and they had chased it off, but that night as their two little boys were sleeping in a room with a picture window one of them woke up and saw the bear outside. “Daddy, Daddy, the bear’s back!” they shouted, and the parents came running. By now the bear was standing at the window with its paws on the glass and when the father banged his fists on the window the bear banged back! This was one determined, hungry bear. They had already called the folks at Fish and Game, but more calls were placed the next day. A live trap was hauled in, packets of food were dispersed, and about a week later a bear was caught some distance from our property and relocated (so we were told) to a remote place in the Jemez Mountains.

Later we concluded that the bear had probably been drawn to our open window by the irresistible smell of a citrus air freshener I had just put in the closet. Needless to say, I’ve never made that mistake again and we have had no more bear visitations since. But there are still long scratches in the wooden window sill from the bear’s claws.

Raymond and I said goodbye to Rob and continued down the dirt road, Raymond leading the way. In his worn stetson hat, blue work shirt and jeans he probably looked something like his Spanish-speaking grandfather must have looked fifty years ago when he used to run cattle in these mountains. Raymond's once thick, curly black hair is mostly grey now, but those large brown eyes I fell for when he was in his late twenties haven't changed, nor his aquiline nose that someone once called pure El Greco.

It was a warm day for mid-September, but there were plenty of signs that fall was underway. The Ponderosa pines were entwined with blood red Virginia Creeper. A wild clematis vine covered the old fences, thick with tufted seed pods that look like little white beards. Purple asters and yellow chamisa bushes lined the road. Clinging to the rocky hillsides stubby mountain oaks were beginning to shift from green to copper.

At the first river crossing we avoided getting our feet wet by climbing a steep slope and then dropping back down on the other side of the river. At the second crossing we did the same thing, keeping our feet dry by scrambling up and down another hillside. We were now in the wilderness, following a narrow cattle and horse path that would take us as far as we chose to go into the mountains.

We stopped to eat lunch at the last large meadow before the path enters dense forest. Annie had been off her leash for most of the walk and she wandered over to sniff the giant mullein plants growing in clusters by the shallow river. Their prehistoric looking stalks were over five feet tall thanks to the heavy rains this summer. Not only did lush green grass line the river bank, but all the normally sparse vegetation was thriving from the extra moisture.

It was a blissfully perfect afternoon. Raymond and I sat back to back on a rock, enjoying our smoked gouda cheese sandwiches, raw carrots, and sipping hot tea from a thermos. Small clouds caught the sunlight at certain angles and rippled with rainbow colors. The sky was oceanic blue and the sun sensuously warm.

I had just finished my sandwich and thrown the crust to a magpie when I noticed Annie sniffing the air. "She's got a whiff of something," I said, not thinking much about it.

"Give me the leash," said Raymond. I pulled it from the backpack and he hooked it to her collar just as a horse came walking down the path we had just come on. It was laden with two very large packs and a duffle bag hung to one side. There was nothing surprising about this and we waited for the owner to appear. But as the horse came closer two things became immediately apparent. There horse was alone and something smelled terrible.

"It's lost," said Raymond. "I think it's been lost a long time." As I held Annie who was barking madly, Raymond walked over to the horse that was cropping grass by the river and began to unhook the filthy, stained knapsacks from the saddle. They were bulging with something so heavy he had trouble lifting them. The sickening smell of decaying meat filled the air.

“They’re full of a dead deer,” said Raymond. A blood stained ax protruded from one of the sacks. Mentally I was trying to piece events together but this was out of my realm of experience. How long did it take meat to smell that bad? A day? Two days? My mind flashed to a scene in an old Western I had seen as a child in which a group of soldiers arriving at a fort on a hot summer day following a massacre quickly pull their bandanas over their noses to muffle the stench of decaying flesh. I wished I had a bandana.

Raymond was dragging the packs onto the grass and starting to empty them. “Why don’t you just leave the stuff here!” I yelled over Annie’s barking. “Let the owners figure out what to do with it. Let’s just get the horse back to Rob and Peggy’s.” I was angry at whoever would slaughter a deer, force a horse to carry the carcass and then lose the horse. Raymond ignored me. He was as disgusted by the situation as I was but in his own way he was trying to clean up a disaster and set things right.

“I have to find out if there’s anything to salvage in here,” he yelled back as he poured liquified deer gore onto the grass. I knew what he was thinking; if the meat was removed from the bags scavengers might eat it and the poor dismembered deer would not go to waste. It was a noble effort and typical of Raymond.

As I watched him I remembered that several years ago for my birthday Raymond had hired a local man with three horses to take us on a day ride through the same area we were now in. Even before Victor had tightened the cinches on the saddles he was popping open the first beer of the morning and we soon realized he had brought enough beer in his saddle bags to last him all day. By the time we had reached the top of Cerro Gordo his horse was carrying a lighter load and Victor was feeling pretty mellow. He pointed out a distant campsite, like a little bald patch in the forest far below, and said that was where he and other hunters liked to camp when they were looking for deer or elk to shoot. As to how this horse had become lost, it didn’t take too much imagination to picture fumbling fingers and blurred vision throwing a rope over a tree branch and a weary horse pulling free during the night and starting for home while hunters slept off their drunk. It was as good a theory as any.

The horse, a small palomino with a thin neck, seemed to have endured her ordeal fairly well. Clearly she was grateful to get the packs off her back, and she had become so accustomed to the stench that she continued to quietly eat grass next to the now empty, loathsome sacks. Raymond tied a rope to her halter, hooked the empty bags over the saddle and we began heading back the way we had come. The horse plodded along docilely behind us until we came to the first river crossing where she dug in her hooves and refused to budge. Neither of us wanted to add to the poor animal’s misery by whacking her or tying her up and leaving her, so after a few minutes of deliberation we decided I would wait with her while Raymond walked the half mile to Rob and Peggy’s to get help. Before he left he removed everything from her back and dragged the saddle, packs and duffle bag far enough away so that the stench was not so bad. Then he and Annie crossed the river and disappeared in the trees.

The woods were silent except for a few bird calls. There was no wind to stir the tree branches. I stood there looking at the horse feeling very tired all of a sudden. The horse seemed content to

stand in the shade resting her hindquarters on a rock wall, her hooves half buried in the sandy bottom where a trickle of water flowed. She was clearly exhausted and her eyes wanted to close, but every few minutes she snapped her head back to lick her side where the saddle had scraped the skin raw. I squatted down near her, staring at the rippling reflections of yellow leaves in the water. I did not know what to do for the horse other than to keep her company, but I talked to her a bit, saying I knew what she had been through and that I was sorry for her. Perhaps the worst of this ordeal was over, but there was little doubt that she would be returned to the stupid people who had done this and who would undoubtedly put her through more hardships over the years. What a truly awful burden to carry a dead, decaying creature on your back for days that you cannot rid yourself of, I thought. And don't we all, sooner or later, experience this to some degree when someone we love dies? Don't we carry for a long, long time the unshakable weight of loss, memories, perhaps guilt, certainly grief?

The horse grew quieter, her eyes were nearly closed. Leaning against the rock wall I closed my eyes, too, feeling the comforting sun on my face and listening to the still woods, the droning insects and the river murmuring nearby.

In music there is a form called a cadence -- a series of chords that bring to a close a piece or passage of music, like the familiar four part sounds, "ah-ah-ah-men." But a cadence can also be a series of chords in the middle of a work that create a temporary feeling of rest, occurring at the end of one section, before the next section begins. These quiet chords offer a brief space before the music resumes on a new note, perhaps in a more energetic rhythm and melody that moves the work forward toward a conclusion. For an hour or so in the still woods the horse and I enjoyed a cadence out of common time, a precious repose between the inevitable business of life's hardships and blessings.

The rumbling of an ATV, unseen but growing louder, broke the stillness. Then the engine was cut and a few minutes later Raymond and Rob were clambering down the steep river bank. Annie had sensibly been left at Rob's house. Rob had brought horse snacks and a delicate buggy whip, both which the horse responded to. It took only the tiniest touch of the whip on her flanks to get her across the river. As the men bounced ahead on the ATV I ran up the path, the horse trotting behind me. Once again everything was in motion, and this time I went straight through the river crossings not caring that my feet got wet.

Peggy was waiting for us at the top of the hill with a bucket of something so delicious that the horse lipped up every morsel, totally unconcerned as Peggy washed the stains off her coat and applied bright green ointment to the sores, all the while giving an insightful analysis of what she was observing.

"She's a filly . . . not even two years old. Too young to be used for this sort of work. But she's already been worked hard." Peggy was feeling a knobby place under the horse's jaw. "Her jaw's been broken, maybe by a halter that was too tight, but she doesn't seem bothered by it."

"Why is her ear notched?" I asked.

“That’s how some people brand their horses. Or maybe she had a tag in her ear once that was torn off.”

“Humph,” said Rob under his breath. “Some people shouldn’t be allowed to have animals.” But he walked back to the house to call the owners.

Peggy lifted a bail of hay for the horse to eat and took away the bucket. “No more of that, kid-do. Too rich for you. Poor girl. She’s been in those hills a week. About a week ago a kid from the village came by here saying they’d lost their horse. They live on the edge of the valley by the river, not too far from you. They just turn their horses out on the river to graze -- not that there’s much to eat out there. This is the third time one of their horses has showed up here.” She patted the horse. “Worst of all was being out there by yourself, wasn’t it? Horses don’t like being alone.”

“It’s incredible she wasn’t attacked by a bear or wild cat,” said Raymond.

“It’s pretty rare for them to go after a grown horse,” said Peggy. “On the other hand, she’s not that big and that deer was getting pretty ripe. She was lucky.”

Rob came back from the house and offered to drive us home for which we were grateful. Raymond, who smelled pretty ripe himself, jumped in the back of the pickup while I climbed in the front seat. We were halfway down the hill when a pickup pulled alongside and stopped for a second. The small dark man at the wheel was grinning too widely as he exchanged a few words with Rob. It was the owner wasting no time to claim his horse, probably with the intention of making it walk all the way back home. Behind my sunglasses I glared at him.

Our part of the adventure ended with hot baths and laundry sloshing in the machine. As for the horse, whatever Peggy said to the owner I’m sure she was civil. This is a small community and everyone keeps their opinions to themselves, mostly. But we noticed that the horse stayed over night at Peggy and Rob’s and the next morning was loaded into a horse trailer and driven home in style. And there she must be left to her fate.

Via con Dios.

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