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MYSTERY AT MESA VERDE

Peacefully, endlessly, snow kept falling over the frozen alcoves, plazas and kivas of Mesa Verde. Silence always falls along with the snow, thought Qlp, sheltered in a dwelling under a low alcove. He was in a sad mood because he felt isolated in the vastness of the landscape. Before his eyes the world seemed to be becoming simplified, blending, and expanding; piling up in white waves, undisturbed by any confusing trace of life. Eventually the dance of snowflakes, the only motion in that deep silence, thinned and seemed to stop altogether.

It was very cold outside. There were reasons, Qlp thought, to stay where he was: quiet, habits, his bed and fire. What more do I need, Qlp thought; I should stay and fulfill the truth of my life here. My space is small; but I can expand it with my imagination.

But there was work to do. The plaza in front of his alcove needed repair and the kiva a new roof. Qlp walked outside and sank his feet in the snow. He was puzzled that with his long line of footprints, he was the first to leave his stamp on

the plaza. But coming toward him, around the kiva of his alcove, was someone covered with snow. Now two lines of footprints, Qlp thought, will run next to one another; and then cross, creating the first disorder in the blank sameness of the plaza.

The Other paused. He had snow in his hair and was staring hard at something not far from the side of the kiva. "You see that footprint over there?" the snow-decked Other said. He was pointing at an imprint perhaps six feet from the kiva.

"I see it," Qlp said. "It looks like a footprint."

"Yes, but how did it get here?"

Someone was walking there, Qlp started to say. But he stopped, puzzled. The footprint was alone in the midst of the plaza; there was there not a trace of another footprint before or after the lone footprint. The print was clear and distinct against the white snow. But it was solitary, nothing led either to it or away from it. How could it have got there? Qlp began to move toward it. Perhaps it is was made by an ally, or god, of the Hostile Ones?

"Wait!" said the Other. "If we make more footprints around it, it will spoil everything. We must first try to explain it before we disturb the snow. Why is there just one footprint. There must be an explanation. Whoever made it must have jumped from somewhere."

Qlp became slightly irritated. “Where would he have jumped from? If he had jumped from where we are, there would be other footprints. But obviously no-one was here before us this morning. The only tracks in the snow are ours.”

“But look at the way the print is facing, away from us. Whoever made it must have come from somewhere near where we are standing.” The Other turned and pointed behind them, toward the canyon wall where ladders were put out each morning in order to communicate with the alcoves below; and further down with the People’s communal gardens along the river.

Qlp was silent, listening to the low roar of the river. The river, fed by melting snow from a heavy winter, was rising. If the river overflowed its banks and flooded the People’s cropping land, then the planting season would be delayed. They needed a good harvest of beans, squash and corn this year. With last year’s storage already running low, the People would again be hungry and some would starve.

The Other’s spoke slowly: “Perhaps the Night Watchers forgot to take in the ladders. Perhaps the person, or thing, that made the print came up from the river and passed through where we are standing.” The Other’s voice trailed off, seemingly without thought of direction—much like a piece of driftwood bobbing in a pool.

“Thing?” Qlp paused. Perhaps what the Other was suggesting was right. Perhaps it wasn’t the footprint of one of the People. Or even one of the Hostiles from around and below the bend in the river? Perhaps it was *something else*. Something either benign or evil *breathed* from the spirit world?

To Qlp, any mystery was a spiritual matter. The world was full of enigmas, unexplainable happenings. Things were often touched, and sometimes transformed, by the breath of the Spirit. If so, perhaps the Footprint wasn't something to fear. For only when you are confronted with something mysterious, do you become conscious of your own Spirit...tremble...and feel awe.

"There has to be an explanation," the Other said. "Perhaps the print was made by something dropped by a bird. It was carried here when the snow stopped falling. If it was there before the snow started falling, we would be able to see the red earth beneath it. But all we can see is snow."

'Let's examine it closer,' said Qlp. Then both of them walked over to it. The situation couldn't have been more clear. Rising gently from the edge of the cliff was a stretch of snow-covered plaza. In the middle of it was the print and just beyond it stood a storage bin covered with snow. The area between the cliff and the print was untouched, without the slightest sign of having been disturbed; nowhere was the surface of the snow broken. It was soft and powdery, not crusty like snow that had melted and then frozen again.

The existence of the Footprint took on a harsh, naked clarity.

They climbed the path above the pristine, snowy plazas and courtyards before the alcoves and walked along an upper level of alcoves. Other white alcoves and plazas dipped down, far down and beyond them they could see the vast canyons and mesas, extending in brilliant whiteness, of the Anasazi Nation. They

turned around and came back down, following their own tracks, to where the print lay, cynical in its isolation.

Something, thought Qlp, something powerful, is holding the mischievous child in me back from trampling out the print. What could it be?

They sat in the snow and looked at the print. "Perhaps," said Qlp "one of the gods of the hostiles... Koalilcal comes to mind...had something to do with this? He made the storm, then dropped the thing that made the print from a great height, right after the storm. Perhaps it is a sign of imminent attack by the Hostiles. Let us go and inform the Elders." Qlp paused: "Or perhaps it the footprint of the god Himself."

"Perhaps," the Other said cautiously. "Or perhaps it's just the opposite, a sign that we will be saved from the Hostiles. Or a sign that we will have a better crop of corn and squash next season? What we see here isn't a trick, or an illusion of the mind. What we have is an occurrence created under the simplest of conditions."

I too, thought Qlp, want a sign that the alcoves will be spared attacks by the Hostiles; or that the crops will be adequate next season. I want the gods to protect us from the uncertainty that seems to grow deeper every year. But the ways of the gods are as mysterious as the print. The print neither tells us that we will be spared an attack by the Hostiles or what the harvest will be.

Qlp and the Other sat there for a long time not speaking, lost in their own thoughts. An east wind from the canyon started up and it began to snow again, this

time thick and heavy. They sat there as if in a fog. They struggled to focus their thoughts on the mystery but at the same time to be free of trying to explain it.

If only the Footprint didn't exist!

Finally, Qlp stood up: "I can't spend any more time here. I have work to do on our plaza and kiva."

"Wait," the Other replied. "I have to tell you something."

"What is it?"

"It came to me suddenly, completely out of the blue. I hadn't thought of it in years. It came to me of its own accord."

"A memory?"

"More like a solution. It's how one way the unusual relates to the familiar."

"Are you saying this to me only to keep me here?"

"I'm saying it to myself as I remember it." A sudden wave of light washed across the plaza. "It is grandfather's story of the Solitary Footprint. The footprint appeared long ago to his People in the sand along the river. This one in the snow may not be the first such Footprint. Grandfather said that his grandfather had told him that there were other appearances of the Solitary Footprint in previous generations of the People."

"Did you believe your grandfather?"

“Perhaps, I’m not sure, but I do remember listening hard to him. My grandfather was an Elder and a trusted chronicler of the People. “

The Other stood up and looked out toward the vast country beyond the People’s canyon wall. Then he turned back to Qlp: “My grandfather said that the footprints of the People are all alike, but that the print of the Solitary One is larger and deeper. He told us that when we think about our life we must acknowledge that there are footprints that seem to come from nowhere and lead nowhere. It is a mistake, he said...especially of the young...to think that what you live through is no more than a chain that begins at one link and ends at another. We must try to see, and feel, that there is something comparable to nothing in our experience, nothing that is familiar but something true that comes unexpectedly.”

The Other paused: “I can see that you are younger than me. Can you believe that there are things that have nothing in common with anything else, that seem to be merely evidence of their own solitariness, whatever they are. But are really signs of the truth and what will come to be.”

Qlp thought: How can I know of things from which mysteries flow, which may or may not bring salvation? The Hostiles are real; their hostility flows from something tangible, just as the hunger of the People flow from a real condition of time and weather.

“Is that the end of your grandfather’s story?” Qlp knew that it was time for him to be at work. If he delayed much longer, the Elders would be displeased. But

something that felt like the pressure from a giant invisible hand was pushing him down, holding him back

“No,” the Other said “the Footprint my grandfather’s People found in the sand was only one of many. They found the others and followed them, through strange canyons and over windy, dry mesas, to the last footprint. They found it here.”

It wouldn’t have been my choice, Qlp thought. The alcoves had been constructed at the dead end of a steep headwall. Paths had to be cut into the canyon wall and ladders made. Materials, wood, mud and water for mortar, had to be carried up from the river and down from the grand mesa above. “This place, here? Your grandfather People’s settled here?”

“Yes, the Footprints led them here.”

“Where did the People come from?”

“He never told us. Only that they came here because the old Way had been lost to them. To be without the Way is somehow to experience a terrifying infinity; waylessness, grandfather said, leads you nowhere, it tells you nothing. You must have the Way, walls on either side to guide you. So the People came here, following the Footprints to find the new Way.”

They stood in the silent whiteness and looked up at the cliffs above. Small luminous spots could be seen in the alcoves above. The morning cries of children mixed with the cry of an owl from an unknown distance drilling into the stock-still light.

“Perhaps that is what the Footprint is telling us. It is time for the People to leave again, to find the new Way.” The Other pointed to the Footprint. His voice was slow and cautious: “Perhaps the print is a link in a continuous chain of prints. If we could communicate with all the other alcoves, with all the People, then we would be able to locate the rest of the prints.”

“Are you talking about drawing a map of the prints?”

The Other continued, ignoring Qlp’s words. “It was the belief of my grandfather that the Solitary Footprint that appeared to his People was that of our god proceeding along His own route; taking one step at a time without a break, guiding the People to a new home. “

“How did they know that the Footprint wasn’t the work of a god of the Hostiles? A ruse to lead them into an ambush; kill them, and occupy their alcoves and territory along the river?”

“Trust. Trust in the truth of their grandfathers’ story.” The Other turned to look out beyond the river again. The alternating periods of sunlight and snow squalls seemed to be fighting for control of the plazas. Then Qlp heard the Other say, almost to himself alone “If it is the route of our god that we should follow, then by finding the other Footprints that go with this one we can find the road to salvation for our People.”

“But where do we go to find the other Footprints, the ones that match this one,” Qlp asked. “How can we possibly know where the route begins?”

The Other stood up and looked in the direction which he had come. The squalling snow changed to a heavy, persistent snowfall. The Solitary Footprint, Qlp could see, was beginning to disappear under a new blanket of snow.

“We can’t let go of it,” the Other said. “We must go and find the prints that precede and follow it. We must trace the route of our god and find our new home.”

“But the prints will disappear when the snow melts.”

“Then we will look for them in the sand along the rivers, prints in the forest floors and in the dust of the mesas.”

So they set off in the falling snow in different directions to find the first and the last Solitary Footprint—the beginning and a new end.

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