

TRUE OR UNTRUE, GRIT

MY HUSBAND AND I WERE spending our first night in our new winter home, even though we were still having electrical and plumbing difficulties—no exterior lighting for instance—but as dusk arrived, we looked up at the perfectly shaped, symmetrical mountain above our house and realized that we had never noticed it during daylight hours.

My husband, exhausted, went to bed early, but I could not sleep and decided to go out beneath the amphitheater of stars—it was just like having your own planetarium, that spectacular! Brilliant. But then a strange thing happened. As I was groping my way across the courtyard, I felt a *woooooosh* of energy surge past me.

I thought it must be a coatimundi, one of those raccoon-like creatures with long, ringed tails that inhabit the hills in our area. Their little dusty paw prints had been noted on the concrete floors during the course of construction, and our Hispanic crew had observed these animals going through the trash, walking on all-fours like monkeys. The men were wary of the coatimundi for they had formidable claws.

One of our stone masons, from Hermosillo, lived in a tent on our place for weeks, constructing stone walls and the pump house. He even brought along his own mini-fridge which he plugged in with a long extension cord. Arnulfo, the mason, told our bi-lingual contractor, who in turn told us, that a coatimundi had come brazenly into his tent, opened the fridge and helped himself. Not unlike some of the locals.

Because of these stories, I believed it must have been a coatimundi that had just *wooshed* past me—a hair's-breadth away. It was as real as a dream when you wake with the sensation still vibrating in your body.

Our elderly neighbor, who had not wanted us to buy this land in the first place, because of the sacredness of our building site, told us it was a well-known fact that our land was a Native American holy spot.

That, of course, made the site even more appealing. The lot had big oaks and an impressive view. There was a riparian stream of pure water running underground, thirty gallons a minute—liquid gold in this drought-ridden country. We could afford to water our roses.

Now I was forced to consider our neighbor's words. They hung about me like an Indian robe around the shoulders of an old Apache person.

A couple of days later, my husband left for New York, taking our bichons frises with him. Dogs have to fly out before May 15th, and I wanted a few extra days on my own. I wanted to see the process of our house finally completed. We were *so close*.

My general contractor used the Next Monday Method of Appeasement, and I still believed that such-and-such would actually occur on the first day of any given week, when in reality, that never happened. *Mañana* was clearly an understatement. *Twice*

as much, twice as long, no exaggeration of fact. Monday, indeed, had come and gone, not that I could get mad at my contractor, for he was so handsome, he was so good, a truly decent person.

But now, all alone in the house at twilight, time seemed to be suspended. I looked out the kitchen window and saw a human form. It gave me a jolt to see a Real Live Indian on the inside of our well-locked patio. There was no way anyone could have gotten in without vaulting over our eight foot walls. He didn't knock on the window pane. He simply stood there rocking, as if he had all the time in the world. I stared at him as he continued to come in-and-out of focus, until I finally opened the door.

"May I help you?" I asked. Perhaps it had been HIM *wooshing* past me the other night.

His only response was a rather urgent—"Number Two."

He looked a million years old. "You seem tired," I said.

"No get sleep," was his response. "Bull-damn-doing."

Oh great! So my neighbor had been right, not only about the endangered pygmy owls, but about the Native Americans too.

"Your name?" I continued.

"No got."

"Well, my name is Nora. I'm from New York City. Manhattan," I explained. "You know, we bought it from the Indians?"

"Ugh," he responded.

"And now we have just completed this house."

"My place," the Indian claimed.

Oh really? I thought, without giving him the satisfaction of an argument. Not asking if he had a title or deed... Oh, I know, about Indians and their sacred land. No one really owns it... Mother Earth belongs to all, the Great White Spirit *etceteraetcetera*... But maybe we could share this place somehow. We could live here, quietly, gazing at the hummingbirds and he could rest in peace, no?

He was so dirty and caked with grime that I decided to call him Grit. He certainly had gotten my dander up, a bit like seeing a rattler—that blood curdling chill. I suppose that's how the pioneers felt years ago when real Apaches rode through this valley yelping.

I was getting sort of used to this fellow with his ratty shoulder rug, when suddenly he disappeared—*Poof*. Had I been talking to an apparition? Or was I just nervous, alone in the house without my bichons frises. Was I going insane from the interminable process of building this house? It was enough to drive a normal person over the edge. I wondered how my contractor could stand it. Day in & day out, all the complications, never losing his temper.

I had heard from our elderly neighbor that the valley we inhabited was once called *Manzano*, Spanish for apple. The Apaches often raided the orchards. We had liked the sound of that so much, we had named our property MANZANO, putting it on our gate as well as our stationery.

All these thoughts streamed through my mind as I stood there stunned before the kitchen window. I felt disoriented, weird, unreal. I even went so far as to call my husband but only got the answering machine. Where was he when I so rarely NEEDED him!

Well, maybe he was taking our dogs for a walk. They say two males from the same litter often fight and cause trouble, but that was not true of our boys.

When my husband refused to return my calls, (I think he was miffed I wanted time to myself) I called my general contractor. He said he would come right over.

If you have ever built a house, then you may understand that the ideal contractor is like a perfect husband—always on hand when you need him, consistently agreeable, making endless adjustments, for as everybody knows—“It's a woman's privilege



to change her mind.” My contractor fit the bill. He was truly the nicest, most wonderful person. Everyone thought he looked like a movie star. He offered to bring over his dog.

“That would be great! You are such a godsend! I just don’t feel safe here without my bichons.” They might have been small, but they gave me an unwarranted feeling of security, a pint-size breed, but fearless. Together they had taken down a coatimundi.

“Don’t do that,” I scolded. But then I broke down and rewarded their bravery with bacon-infused bones.

I thought Rex, a Shepard mix, would surely protect me, but no, this half-breed simply growled throughout the night until I felt I was sleeping in some Twilight Zone.

“Chill,” I commanded from the master bedroom, but the dog only barked as if there were something only he could see right there before him.

Finally, I got up, turned on the light and walked down the hall. There was the apparition of Grit, wrapped in his dirty blanket. He was sitting cross-legged on the hallway floor making a terrible grunting sound.

Rex looked up, as if to say—See!

“Good Grief,” I exclaimed. “Couldn’t you wait until morning? What time is it anyway?”

“No can sleep. You wanna-take-a-walk?”

“I don’t *think* so,” I replied, making the time-out signal.

This he understood, and POOF he disappeared. Rex quieted down then, and we both slept as if drugged until almost high noon.

My general contractor had left Rex a zip-lock baggie of Big Boy Kibble, which I was offering him before I’d even had coffee, when you-know-who reappeared. Rex didn’t have to growl this time—I could see the hair standing up on his back and that was

enough.

“Morning Grit,” I said.

“Grit not my name,” he said with some dignity. “You can call me—Cool Hand John Fucking Wayne.”

It was as if he were getting his Netflix shuffled. He didn’t seem dangerous, only deranged. Maybe we could come to a compromise. I would try to be diplomatic, “Let’s sit down and discuss this over a good cup of coffee.”

“Cool Wayne no sit. This my house.”

“Now wait a minute here. This house took us over three years to build. Lots and lots of wampum!” He was unimpressed. “If you were so offended, why didn’t you speak up earlier?”

“No toilet before.”

Whatever.

Our property wasn’t huge, only forty-six acres, but it was entirely surrounded by Federal land, so that (other than our elderly neighbor down the road) it looked like we owned a whole section. Our complex of buildings seemed “over-the-top” to most of the locals, who had traipsed through the site during the course of construction, helping themselves to whatever wasn’t bolted down.

“Listen,” I said to Grit, “are you dead or alive?”

“WANTED,” he responded.

“Do you want any breakfast?” I could make flapjacks, wagon train style. I was almost afraid he would make a shoveling motion toward his mouth and ask for grits, but instead he said something even more disturbing, “Wayne need a drink.”

“Uh-oh!” I knew about Indians and (*al-co-hol*).

“You drink?” I repeated.

“Gas, no oil.”

“Well, we don’t have that in the kitchen. Maybe out in the garage.”

I went to look with Rex and Cool Hand Grit both trailing along behind me. We must have looked like a Western remake of *The Three Stooges*. I wondered who would be the first to say, *pick a finger*, and pop someone over the head.

When I found the gas can, I handed it over.

“Bonanza!” he cried, as he unscrewed the top and put the nozzle down his throat so that the feathers in his headband hung down his back. (I remember details like that, so I know this really happened.) I could hear the gas glugging down his gullet splashing into his stomach. Isn’t that odd for an apparition? And what if he farted? Would the whole house explode?

Then he pulled out his peace pipe.

Wait a minute now! I am no idiot. I know that gasoline and matches do not mix. “I think maybe you should digest for a while.”

“Me wanna smoke!”

Goodness, some people. I tell you the Southwest is full of cigarette smokers, unlike New York where you can’t light up in a bar anymore.

I thought, maybe this was all a dream, or fantasy, untrue, not real. Maybe the laws of physics were different for the dead than they were for the living, but then I stubbed my toe on a riser, squealing, “OW!”

“Pow-OW!” he responded, smiling.

I knew it! He was a real Apache Indian—taking pleasure in other people’s pain. Rex sat down and watched Grit intently, as if he had never seen anything so interesting since the last javelina trotted down the road.

These hills were crawling with land sharks, I tell you. Our crew

had seen a Mexican jaguar nab a fawn on the perfect mountain above our house. The men jumped in their pick-up and started honking the horn until the jaguar dropped its prey and ran off.

Our opinionated neighbor thought the workers should have left the big cat alone. "Nature can take care of itself," she huffed. Then she further unnerved me by saying she'd just heard what sounded like a mountain lion's roar before this huge corpus crashed through the limbs of her cottonwood crushing a mule deer who only moaned in response.

Thank God our bijies didn't get picked up by some eagle and carried away—can you imagine looking out your window and seeing your little puff-buddy wriggling in some big bird's claws? Well, I didn't want that happening to me out here in the Weird Wild West where I was supposed to be having a few peaceful days to myself. Macy's was beginning to seem like a sanctuary, Trump Tower, a sacred shrine.

I could just hear my husband, laughing to himself. Maybe he had hired Ole Grit from some Tucson stage set, just to scare me back to New York. He wasn't used to feeding the dogs, not to mention himself. He was probably surviving on take-out. My husband *still* wasn't returning my calls. "Passive aggressive," my therapist would say. Or maybe he had collapsed on the living room rug. Should I call the super? The dogs could be starving. But I was too distracted to worry very much.

I put out my hand to touch the Indian's shoulder and he melted away. I could never quite reach him. I had never taken his hand and had a proper how-do-you-do. Then again I had rejected his peace-pipe ritual, and maybe he'd been offended.

"You wanna take a walk?" he inquired once more.

"Where to?" I answered.

"Top of Perfect Mountain."

My husband was always taking our house guests up there to scare them a bit and wear them out before we sent them packing. The soil was so crumbly and the incline so steep, one had to crawl along on one's knees. I had never gone up, not much of a climber, and I wasn't particularly keen on going up now, but maybe if I did, Grit would leave me alone. "Can the dog come along?" I asked, figuring Rex could pull me up the treacherous incline.

"Ugh," he responded, which I took to mean—Yes, so off we went, me in my brand new clean white *tennies*. (My husband hates that word.) He has a fetish about certain words I'm not allowed to utter, like *gristle*, and *nelly*, *humping*, and *weenie*. It's an odd assortment, but he keeps a list of words he doesn't like, and I have to refrain from speaking these in his presence. He especially hates: "*Grow* the economy." I don't like that one either, so it isn't an issue, but sometimes I slip up and say, *tinkle* or *grunt*.

"Grit," I said, "you're a nice enough person." He didn't have a hatchet or a string of scalps.

Come On, he waved, impatient.

I was to follow, which was fine with me. "So," I said, trying to make conversation, "I like your costume. Is it original?"

"Well it sure not Sack-Sick-Savenue."

Where did he pick up this lingo? Out of thin air? Did mismatched phrases like "Faulty Twin Towers" float around in space in the land of dead people? Did language move like smoke from the mouth of phantom Indians? Even though I had never offered him a light, he was smoking his peace pipe and I was getting the drift of his secondhand smoke, and it almost smelled good. That was alarming. I had not smoked anything in over two decades. I had been perfectly peace-loving and tobacco free before this Indian showed up.

I guess I wasn't going to get too far by asking about his raggedy



clothing, so I tried another tack. “Do you have any children?”

“Seventeen, last count. All dead now.”

“That’s a pity,” I responded. “I have three sons. They all live in Florida.”

At the mention of this he started to SHRIEK until I thought my eardrums would pop. Then I remembered Geronimo, that Florida was where the Apaches were taken after they were captured.

“Oh, sorry!” I exclaimed. “I won’t say that again, I promise, double promise, cross my heart and hope to die.” (I would put *Florida* on my long list of DON’T words.)

We were steadily gaining altitude. I could now see the cluster of our buildings from on high. It really looked like something from sssshhhh—(Florida’s) Epcot Center. I could see how the main house, all snug within walls, was wedged between the giant oaks, as if it had been there forever. After all, it had taken us five architectural firms to get it right. But we had never wavered when it came to our contractor. We had the best, and I loved our crew. They had saved the sacred oaks by carefully pruning and watering them on a slow drip system for three solid months before the bulldamn-dozers came in. The trees showed no signs of distress. “Isn’t that remarkable?” I pointed this out to True Hand Grit.

“Many Indian disturbed by planting of house.”

DARN! Just like my neighbor had said.

“Is it true our land is some sort of holy spot?”

“Ugh,” he responded. “Full of holes.”

Did he mean—as in graves? Was this mountain a burial mound?

I was really glad to have Rex along now. There’s something about a dog. He was literally hauling me up the hill until the collar on his neck seemed to almost choke.

Finally, we made it to the top. Looking down, I saw my general contractor's white truck pull up. I saw him enter the house, which I had forgotten to lock, not that locks were doing much good nowadays. He was probably looking for Rex or wanting a cup of strong coffee. I thought it odd that the dog didn't bark at the sight of his master. I began to question the reality of this mutt, of the house itself, even the contractor and his crew, not to mention this supposed Indian. Was it true or untrue? For a moment I was lost and didn't know the difference.

"Look," Grit said, pointing off to the side. I looked in that direction, and there was a gigantic hole. Quite unnerving! It was like a mineshaft that went down and down, all the way down through the Perfect Mountain.

"Listen," Grit said, cupping his hand to his ear and motioning to the hole.

I got down on my hands and knees and listened intently. It sounded like—like what?

"You know," Grit said.

"A toilet flushing."

"YES," Grit nodded, "Exactly. Sacred Mountain disturbed. You can not flush toilet at base of Sacred Mountain."

"But modern people have to have bathrooms."

"Use that," he pointed to the bright green Porta-Potty that we were still renting for the crew.

Oh the crew, the crew, the adorable crew, when would they ever leave? Would they never say—*It's Monday*—your house is now complete!

Since Grit didn't like to touch or be touched, (as in—Why don't we shake on it?) I suggested that we sign a treaty, of sorts. I assumed he was unaware of American history. Personally, I thought I could hold up my end of the bargain, though I wasn't

sure how we would explain it to our houseguests—a million dollar home with a working outhouse. I wondered if my husband would agree, or would he break the sacred arrow of trust and toss the pieces aside?

Together, Grit and I, and Rex the dog, descended the mountain together. I was proud of having gotten all the way up, a kind of initiation that would allow me to go back to New York a more complete person. I was ready to take in a Broadway show, not to mention a restaurant which didn't serve chips and salsa.

Down we slid into our sacred grove.

My handsome contractor came out of the house and gave me a hug, announcing briskly, "Your house is now complete. I even fixed the exterior lighting, and the toilets are all working."

Instead of feeling elated, I could hardly believe my ears. It wasn't even Monday we were talking about. Truly, I felt profound sadness. Was our process really over? Would he leave my life for good? It was like the end of analysis, or an affair of the heart. He had said it so abruptly. Three full years was an awfully long time, day in, day out. I should have been let down more gently. Indeed, I had to fight back tears, and my contractor, came and put his arm around me, while Rex sat motionless beside the Indian, like a scout. My contractor didn't seem to notice either one of them, which made me wonder.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he said. "I intercepted Fed-Ex in town." He presented me with an official looking envelope.

Was it divorce papers? Or perhaps I'd won the lottery. If so, we could start all over, build a guest house down the road for my (Floridian) sons. But inside the envelope was a personal letter:

Dear Mr. and Ms. Makepeace,

My wife Catherine and I would like to buy your land and beautiful home in Santa Cruz County. Please call me at your earliest convenience.

*Thank you,
Culvert Tillman*

My general (always anticipating everything) handed me his cell phone, and I gave Culvert Tillman a call, asking if he would like to make an offer. I explained that we had invested a great deal of money, as well as three long years of blood, sweat and tears. But for some reason, now that the creative process was over, I could imagine getting rid of it.

Culvert Tillman's first offer was low. He would have to do better. I talked him up and Up, until our investment was nearly tripled.

"But I'll have to run this by my husband," I added. "He's so attached to MANZANO."

As I spoke, I wondered if my husband and the contractor hadn't set this all up with the Apache Indian and Culvert. Were they exchanging sly winks behind my back? Was somebody getting a percentage? I knew my husband was already bored with the desert, and wanted to try the sea, maybe Baja or Nevis.

When I turned, Untrue Grit was nowhere to be seen, and Rex was scratching at the dirt as if looking for a bone.

I explained to Mr. Tillman that there was one small lien, a simple condition required by the original owners. I was sure he could live with it, but he had to agree, before I even said what. It

seemed that he would do almost anything in order to be the owner of our architecturally digested (recent issue) special house...But just when I was sure he was about to say, "Yes," I felt a *woosh* of energy surge past me—

I turned, and the whole house had melted away and my contractor was nowhere to be seen. I was getting a dial tone. Rex had shrunken to the size of a small black bug and was flying around and around my head. The sound seemed to enter my ear with a roar—I felt drugged, almost dizzy, jet-lagged perhaps—but I was sure I heard someone making a *grunt* sound, when I realized I was down in the bowels of the city, waiting for the E train as usual.



