

The Last Watermelon in Mora

The horse stood tied to the gas pump at the convenience store, the newest building in Mora, New Mexico. His head drooped, and one hind foot tipped up in a resting position. A lariat looped at the ready over the saddle horn. Was some cowboy lost in the time warp of this little town where the state highway between Las Vegas and Taos doubled as its main street? My niece, Evelyn, unbuckled her seat belt and slid from the cab of the F-250 pickup. She took a picture.

That July Saturday in 1982, I was taking my daughter, Barbara, and her cousin to the Girl Scout camp near Angel Fire. Both fifth graders, the girls were only months apart in age. While I bought gas, Barbara entertained Will, her little brother, seventeen-months-old. Evelyn was from Denver. For the rest of us, a horse tied to a gas pump in Mora did not warrant much notice.

I turned north towards the camp. The truck bumped over potholes on the secondary road.

“We’re going to have *so* much fun,” I said twenty-five miles later as the pavement ended, and we stopped at Coyote Creek State Park.

It was early, about 9:30, and ours was the only vehicle in the parking lot.

“It’s pretty here, like Colorado,” said Evelyn, as she and her cousin flitted off towards Coyote Creek. The pristine stream had just enough rush to be exciting.

In the absence of a playground, I put some cereal on a paper plate and let Will pull himself up on the bench of the roughhewn picnic table; it seemed better than the ash pit for toddler entertainment.

Whoosh! Wrak! The paper plate went flying amid a flash of black wings. I caught Will’s shoulder as he startled backwards, wide eyed. His puckered mouth trembled as a sob began.

Then the stocky grey bird swooped down again and pecked at its ill-gotten gains. The little boy's face relaxed. He straightened his body and pointed. "Buwd."

"Bad bird." I said. "Clark's Nutcracker." Just another playground hazard on the road less traveled.

Fifteen minutes later, I looked up to see Barbara and Evelyn striding back towards us. Fast. I hadn't even unpacked the breakfast sandwiches. I knew their strange hand signals were a semaphore spelling out *SOS*.

I took Will's hand, and we walked towards them. The park ranger, a step behind the two girls, had on his Smoky Bear hat. His gun was holstered, but he had a ticket book and a stubby pencil in his hands.

Evelyn blurted out the details through her tears. "We found a watermelon in the creek, so...we busted it." She cocked her head and spread her hands.

The park officer began, "Fifty-dollar fine for destroying private property, and ..." He stopped his litany and stared at me. My mouth was open, my tee shirt stained with strawberry jam. Will clutched my hand, stilled by his sister's encounter with the law. "Say, aren't you my daughter's doctor?"

I babbled, "I'm sorry, I'm what? Oh, Mr. Gonzales, how is Jennifer?"

"She's doing o.k. ... she hasn't had a seizure for months ... but we're having a big picnic this weekend, lots of family from Albuquerque. That was *our* watermelon in the creek."

I heard myself say, "We'll replace it."

Worse, Mr. Gonzales accepted the offer. With a smile, he put the ticket book into his pocket.

I glared at the girls. "Can we still go to camp?" asked Barbara.

“Shh. I have to think.”

We could make it to Mora, and still get to camp on time. Surely, on a beautiful July Saturday, the convenience store would have a watermelon.

We careened back down the road, Barbara and Evelyn, silent and slumped. “Evelyn is a city girl, but you Barbara...” I lit into my daughter, “...and even if you *didn't* get that the melon was *chilling* in the creek, why destroy it?” Still lecturing, I pulled into the store. I tapped my fingers. The girls would buy the replacement with their camp spending money.

“They’re sold out,” Barbara said, eyes downcast, cash still clutched in her fist. Will whined, and he stank. When I came back from diaper duty, the girls were staring up the road toward Taos.

Barbara pointed. “There’s another store.” The girls brightened. The “store” was the front room of a home. We adjusted our eyes to a space lit by a commercial refrigerator: the meat, produce, and dairy department. “Do you have a watermelon?” Evelyn said, without realizing that we were the only people in the room. Voices of children and the smell of good chile emanated from the back.

“Yes,” said a woman walking through the curtain divider like a diva on cue.

“Thank, God!” said Evelyn.

“But, ... where is it? Luis, where’s that watermelon?” the diva shouted.

Luis appeared holding a puppy. “I sold it this morning to those fisherman from Vegas.” He turned to me. “There are a couple more stores towards Cleveland, but they won’t be open long. The convenience store takes food stamps.”

“Cleveland!” said Evelyn. Her grandparents were from Toledo. “How does that help?”

“Cleveland, New Mexico, just up the road.”

As we drove toward Taos, one store was already closed. Evelyn bit her nails. The sign, Cleveland, appeared where the road began to rise. Just at the big curve that led into the mountains, there was one more store with two tiny watermelons, firm and fresh, in a box with shriveled apples. The girls shelled out their money, and then paid even more for two bags of ice at the new store in Mora.

Back at Coyote Creek State Park, the girls helped Jennifer and her dad put the melons and ice in the bathtub. Even I giggled.

After the girls kissed me good-bye at camp, I took the interstate home, Will asleep in his car seat and John Denver warbling on the eight-track. I sang along.