

Santa Fe Days

The crisp, spring breeze chilled the exposed skin on my neck. I shoved my gloved hands further into my jacket pockets, doing anything to keep myself warm. My nose and cheeks were pink with irritation from the cold but with every step I took, I couldn't help but appreciate the change of scenery. Here in Santa Fe, the warm, rustic hues of the red dirt under my feet and the insistent smell of cinnamon wafting from the adobe buildings is what I'd call home. In the corner is a little beige restaurant with a small courtyard, and near the entrance, a little Italian fountain waits for a wish.

What caught my eye were the funny groups of vendors splayed across the street. One man was selling dried chili peppers. He set up a booth, and was holding a string of peppers all bunched up together that it looked more like a chili pepper palm frond instead of a string, and in another hand, a wreath of chili peppers all wrapped up in a perfect little circle; However funny the sight was, the odor that came from that vendor was even stranger. A couple feet away from that man, was a woman selling small, hand-crafted wooden creatures. Rabbits, bears and wolves lined the edge of the stand, but further back there were little people who were doing funny poses. One wood person had its foot in the air behind it, almost like it was planning to kick a soccer ball across the field, the other was crouching with its arms in front of it, and its palms turned upwards toward the sky. The vendor that caught my eye, however, was not strange at all; It was the hot chocolate stand.

This little town is more my home than Hawaii is with its chaotic sunsets and the sticky, soggy, tropical air dripping with dew from the morning before. That wasn't paradise to me, but an isle of Asphodel. The crowd suddenly crescendoed and I swiveled on my heels to see what was happening. Across the plaza, one woman came out with a fat bag swung over her shoulders. Her skin was copper and her hair, a braid of black wire that reached all the way down to her knees. Her clothes looked like they were made from cheaply woven cotton, but decorated with colorful Native American patterns across her shoulders. She slung a long, what looked like deer skin, shawl over her back like a rug.

The woman knelt down and gently rolled out a small rabbit skin place mat over the ground and pulled out pieces of jewelry from her bag. Once I saw what she had

brought, I shuffled over to the crowd, slipping between people and making my way to the front, clasping my own bag in my hands for easy access of my wallet. The woman made no show that she saw the crowd in front of her, but now that I was closer, I saw the fine line of eyeliner around her endless brown eyes and her earrings—long dangling lines of colorful beads—pirouetted through the air whenever she moved her head.

I immediately fell in love when I saw the kind of jewelry that she had laid out in front of her. Rings with silver rims with little studs of turquoise going down the middle, others were more elaborate with huge amber stones placed in the middle of a thick silver band. There were rings that didn't have any stones on them at all, but were patterned with little indents in the silver making the metal look like it was forged from a wild sea, and there were rings that were formed from copper with both amber and turquoise stones lining the edges. The necklaces were adorned with amber and opal gems dangling off the chains. There were quartz crystals the shapes of teardrops rimmed with silver, hooked on delicate chains. The woman kept repeating to us in a husky voice that reeked of tobacco.

“Bigger stone, bigger price!” However, I couldn't help but notice a pair of beat up ‘Nike’ tennis shoes on her feet amidst a culture of clothing.

She hobbled into the cold plaza. Her teeth were chattering against her skull and the cold stung her eyes with a bitter remorse. She winced as she walked, and with every step she took, her bag of jewelry got heavier and heavier. Yet how could she afford to show the plaza, her customers, her family that she was weak and sick? They buy her trinkets all the time, how would they feel knowing that they had bought earrings from a woman who couldn't afford to keep her culture alive? They couldn't know, so she carried on through the wind chill. The square was busy with action, Mr. Gonzalez had set up his annual chili pepper stand in front of the old Mexican restaurant, and she smiled slightly when she noticed that Ms. Marge was across the street. She loved Ms. Marge and had noticed on her work days at the plaza, Mr. Gonzalez adored Marge.

She bunched her poncho all the way up to her chin to protect herself from the harsh cold, and settled down into a small, smooth area. *Perfect*, she thought. After the long trek from the reservation, she was finally able to sit down and start displaying her

treasures. First came the traditional rabbit skin to make everything soft and orderly. She pulled it out and started to unravel it, slowly unveiling the silver and copper rings that were nested tightly among the fur.

The rings were not by far her favorite pieces. They were a pain in the ass to make and very rarely did any of them come out the way she wanted them to, but because they were so easy to fix (just place a hunk of amber over the mistake) she had many of them that she wanted to sell. Once the all the rings were displayed on the rabbit skin, she pulled out a bigger rabbit skin from her bag and started unraveling that one. In it were a plethora of different colored and designed necklaces. The necklaces were too costly for her to make many of them, and for most of them, the charm on the necklace itself was the only part that she had actually made with her own hands. The rest, including the chain, she had to buy.

By the time she had finished setting up the necklaces, a crowd was gathering in front of her. Women were calling to their husbands to save them a spot at the restaurant and children were shuffling to and fro calling to their parents and commenting on certain pieces of jewelry: "I want that one! I want that one!" One girl squealed to her friend. "¡Quiero eso anillo!" another girl shouted to her father. But the she didn't look up at the accumulating crowd, she still had plenty more to display.

Then, she pulled out a small mink skin and laid it down in the spot next to the necklaces. Instead of the jewelry being rolled up inside, they were in a small plastic bag in her sack. She took the bracelets from that bag and gently set each one down in a carefully trained manner. These bracelets were some of her favorites and every single time she set them out, they were bought immediately, but everyday she came out to sell them. There was a little sliver of hope that no one would buy a bracelet so that she might keep one for herself; but it never seemed to go the way she hoped. The last thing she had to set up were the pendants, and it was an unusual day, because usually her aunt would sell the pendants but she decided to sell some pendants of her own. They were laid on her aunts annual bear skin place mat, and to her, these pendants were her most precious treasure.

Pyramid shaped quartz and gems glittered at the end of the necklace whenever the sun glanced at them. One pendant was a blue Lapis Lazuli with white marbling

etched across the stone to make it seem like it had captured a little bit of lightning. Another was clear quartz with a little fleck of white in the middle of the stone, and rumor has it that once the quartz becomes completely white, its powers of healing will have depleted. She pulled out pendant after pendant and splayed them out in little rows. Once she had done so, she called out to the crowd the way that she usually does:

“Bigger stone, bigger price!”

Among the jumble of flying hands and sweeping hair, a young woman came up to the pendants at the corner of her display and held up the healing quartz with an undeniable sparkle in her eyes.