

# DOWA YALANNE

by

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On the two-hundredth anniversary of our nation's birth, slivers of sunrise unveil a hushed pueblo landscape. A crimson Volkswagen Beetle exits the driveway of an adobe block building with an oversized "Zuni Legal Services" sign above the front door. The car's headlights illuminate an arts center across the road that sells turquoise and silver jewelry, kachina dolls, fetishes, and pottery, with each item bearing a distinct symbolic meaning.

Fred, wearing an NYU Law T-shirt under a hoodie, tan khaki pants, and Puma Clydes, turns right, heading into the fires of a tangerine sky. Next to him sits the lithe, twenty-year-old Lovely Linda. Fred drives cautiously on red earth past mud-brick houses, each with a ladder reclined against the roof and a beehive-shaped oven in its yard.

At the edge of town, the car reaches Route 53, a two-lane highway traversing a broad desert valley adorned with mesas, creeks, and juniper and pine trees. Fred cranks open his window to let in air that smells dry baked. On the radio, Lou Rawls softly croons, "*You'll never find, as long as you live, someone who loves you tender like I do.*"

Noticing two greyish-brown rabbits with rounded tails and white undersides foraging for food on the side of the road, Fred slows and points. "Look! They're on their bunnymoon."

"Such cute rabbits." Linda remarks.

"Technically, they're 'desert cottontails.'"

Linda sighs. "So different here. The air, the sun, the animals, the karma. Feels like I've arrived on another planet."

"You have, babe. And I'm your pilot."

A mile later, Fred turns right onto gravelly Indian Service Road 42. Straight ahead is a flat-topped, mile-long sandstone mesa marked with russet and cream white bandings and bordered on each side by a rocky, tower-like formation.

"That's Dowa Yalanne," Fred says. "It's the Zuni's sacred mesa. Back in 1540, the natives fled to it to escape Coronado's conquistadors, who thought they had found a city of gold."

"Is this the usual story? 'White men arrive. Natives get slaughtered.'"

"Might have been the case had the Zunis not skedaddled over here."

Passing a field flush with gilded wild sunflower heads, the Beetle rolls to a stop in a makeshift parking lot. Fred hops out onto withered vegetation mixed with pink sand. Linda, wearing a white V-neck T-shirt covered by a lavender cotton sweater, jeans, and hiking boots, steps out cautiously. She stares at the mesa's jagged, wind-worn rock that the rising sun glints off of.

“It’s got character,” she observes. “Like an old man’s face.”

Fred pops open the front trunk and pulls out a backpack. “Brought snacks, water, snake spray, stuff like that,” he says casually.

Linda’s rounded, cornflower blue eyes widen. “Snake spray?”

“Not to worry.” He smirks. “Only a few are poisonous.”

“Suddenly,” she counters, “I’ve become fond of boring-old-Queens.”

Fred opens a zipper and removes two worn orange and cobalt blue baseball caps, one of which he tosses to Linda. She examines the interlocking “N” and “Y.” “Is this Yankees or Mets?”

Fred shakes his head. “You’re such a girl.” He quickly adds, “But that’s a good thing.”

Linda jams the cap on, topping waves of golden brown hair. “Tell me the truth. Is this a tough hike? My legs are still sore from the puddle jumper ride into Gallup yesterday.”

“Not too bad. About a thousand feet up along a clear trail. I’ve done it with a few beers in me.”

“If it’s not so difficult to climb, then why didn’t Coronado’s men go after the Zunis? Could have been a Masada-like scenario.”

“Dunno. Maybe they were afraid to mess-a with the mesa.”

Fred slings the backpack over his shoulders. "The Zunis," he says, "believe this is a house of the gods. That rain, lightning, and thunder are created here. That's why it's also called 'Thunder Mountain.' And there's something to that. One day, I watched while a storm just sat above the mesa, completely covering it. But it was sunny at the pueblo."

Fred closes the trunk and locks the car. "Vamanos, muchacha." They head toward a wood sign marking the trailhead. On it are carved the words, "Dangerous – Stay on the Blazed Trail. Do You Have Enough Water?"

"Dangerous," she enunciates with vigor, "is not 'not too bad.'"

"One tricky spot. But there's a rope to grab onto."

"Snakes. Ropes. Lightning." She flutters her eyebrows lasciviously. "If this damsel gets into distress, I will grab onto you, my dear prince."

Fred bows his head. "Mi casa es su casa."

Announced by the sound of twittering birds, they march onto the trail, which quickly turns steep. After twenty minutes, Linda is breathing heavily.

"Damn," she mutters, "I'm in lousy shape."

"Don't feel too bad. We're six thousand feet up. Takes time to acclimate."

"Now you tell me."

They round a turn to find a view of the awakening pueblo below, highlighted by the two-story, flat-roofed, adobe Our Lady of Guadalupe mission church.

"Take a break?" Linda asks.

She quickly plunks down on a spot bathed in shadow. Fred follows. Beads of sweat glisten like dew on their faces. Linda peels off her sweater and passes it to Fred, who stuffs it in the backpack along with his hoodie. He takes out a green canteen shaped like a flask and laden with an array of nicks and grooves,.

“Drink,” he commands. They alternately swig while gazing at puffy silver clouds dotting a vast horizon.

“Dowa Yalanne also is called “Corn Mountain,” Fred notes. “They say that during some great flood, the Zunis carried baskets of corn to the mesa top and lived there until the water receded.”

“How many names does this rock pile have?”

“Names are important. Names have power.”

“What does that even mean?” she challenges.

“They say that when you name something, it gives you control over it.”

“No one has control over this place.”

Fred considers this. “Okay, but naming it gives you a good feeling. A feeling that you can manage it. That it’s not so scary.”

Linda tilts her head coyly. “You know my name. Am I less scary?”

He slowly leans toward her until their lips touch, igniting a tender, lingering kiss. “When I first saw you that day in camp,” Fred says, “teaching those kids pottery, I was smitten. Before I knew your name, I knew it would mean ‘beautiful.’ And it did.”

She pouts and squeezes his hand as he continues.

“You know, during that flood, the water rose so high that they had to build an ark. They took with them a male and female of every animal.”

“Hmmm. Sounds familiar.”

“Yes, but unlike Noah, they left the rattlesnakes here.”

She wags a finger at him. “You are baaaaad.”

Fred’s smile is akin to a hug. “I’m so glad you came,” he blurts out.

Sunshine pours from Linda’s face. “What’s it been like these past few weeks?”

“Well, the commute to work is great. I shower, dress, make a cup of coffee, and walk twenty feet to the front of the building.”

“Can you really help people with their legal issues? You’ve only finished your first year of law school.”

Fred shrugs. “Truth is, I do a lot of really basic stuff you don’t need a law degree for. Like helping get a credit card, dispute a wrong charge from a company, or fill out a car registration. Lots of times, I just listen to someone tell me what’s going on in his life. No legal problem is even mentioned.”

“So, you’re part shrink?”

“A good lawyer has to be one.”

She quickly retorts, “And a good boyfriend.”

Linda motions for the canteen, savoring its contents. "You're the only gringo living on the pueblo, right?" she says.

He nods. "That's also pretty...brave," she adds before giggling.

"I feel welcomed," he insists. "They let me watch the tribal dances in the main plaza. So cool. Lines of people dancing together. They jump, stomp, step hop, toe touch to rhythms played on drums. Men weave in and out of a line of women, and then it's reversed. They chant, and sometimes they shriek, asking for rain, good crops, good health, stuff like that."

"Your postcard said the costumes are amazing."

"They wear all sorts of stuff – feathers, animal skins, bull horns, antlers, headdresses. Some put on huge giant masks in the shape of a bird. And then there are these men they call 'mudheads,' with ears like cones and pegs for noses stuck in hardened clay. They're meant to be ugly and scary. The Zuni dancers are so good they've been invited to appear in the Macy's parade."

"Really?" she exclaims.

Fred grins broadly. She smacks him playfully.

"Can't wait to take you to see it," Fred says emphatically.

"When's the next one?"

"Dunno. News spreads by word of mouth. Pamela, the woman who manages the office part time, comes by and tells me."

Fred stands and stretches. "We're about half way up. Ready to rock and roll?"

A skeptical Linda remains seated. “How,” she asks with trepidation, “does the top half compare to the bottom?”

“It’s more scenic.”

She glares at him. “You know what I mean.”

“Okay, it’s even steeper. But we’ll go slow.”

After ten minutes of cautious progress, the trail narrows precariously. Around a bend, they come to a halt before a near-vertical twenty-foot rock face with sporadic metal hand holds framed on one side by a taut, frayed rope.

“You go first,” Fred instructs. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“Famous last words.” She exhales deeply and grabs the rope. They scramble up the rock, with Fred taking the liberty of pushing on Linda’s tush with his free hand.

“This rope rail is a man’s dream,” she says, although not terribly perturbed .

On the sharply inclined trail, gusts of wind push them about rudely. They weave a path to the top, where a vast horizon greets. Linda, after catching her breath, spreads her arms joyfully and screams, “One giant step for womankind!” She plops down onto a smooth-topped boulder facing west and pats the narrow spot next to her, which Fred proceeds to squeeze into. “Tell me what’s out there,” Linda requests.

“Straight ahead is the pueblo. A dozen miles beyond is Arizona.”

Fred points to his right. “That’s north, toward Gallup, where I picked you up.”

He yanks his thumb to the left. “Mejico. Now look back.”

They turn and squint into the distance. “Hard to see now,” he continues, “but about thirty miles away is this large sandstone bluff with water at its base called ‘El Morro.’ In the old days, it was a watering hole where travelers would stop. They’d carve their names, the date, and all sorts of messages and pictures. It’s like a huge autograph book with thousands of inscriptions.”

“Hmmm. So if we were travelers a hundred years ago, what would we have carved?”

“Fred and Linda were here?”

“Boring!”

“Good point. How about a poem?” Fred recites theatrically, “They came here thirsty, did Linda and Fred. Good thing they found agua, or else they’d be dead.”

Linda chuckles, then her expression grows pensive. “Clever, but I think our message should be something deep. Didn’t you tell me that the Zunis are intensely religious?”

“Yes. I’ve been reading up on it. They believe everything in the natural world is sacred. Mountains, earth, rocks, animals, plants. Which reminds me...”

Fred reaches into his backpack, scrounges around, and pulls out a small pouch, which he hands to her.

“Know what a fetish is?” he asks.

“Sure. Like I have a fetish for good coffee.” She winks at Fred. “And handsome men.”

“No, I mean—”

“Yes,” Linda interrupts, “I know what a fetish is.” She hurriedly unwraps the item, a two-inch turquoise carving of a hummingbird attached to a black cotton cord.

“The woman who sold me this,” Fred explains, “said it was blessed by a medicine man.” He waits in nervous anticipation as she examines the figure. Her lips curl into a smile. “I love it!”

Linda slips the fetish around her neck. “What does a hummingbird signify?”

“A little background first,” Fred responds. “At one of the dances, there was a petite woman dressed in white moccasins and deer-hide leggings wound from ankle to knee. And a black wool tunic over a white blouse. She wore lots of turquoise rings and bracelets. So many that her arms and hands looked like they'd been dipped in blue-green water.”

“Was she pretty?”

“Not nearly as pretty as you.”

Linda grins approvingly.

“When I went up to talk to her,” Fred continues, “I saw she was wearing a brooch in the shape of a hummingbird. She explained that hummingbirds are defenders of their territory. And many times stronger than their small size indicates.”

“Do you think I'm strong?” Linda asks demurely.

“Yes, in a quiet way. But that's not why I got this for you. It's because the hummingbird represents beauty and joy.”

He chokes up. “I'm so happy you're here. I was so lonely before yesterday.”

She places her hand on the nape of his neck and pulls him to her, her eyes closing as their lips join. They kiss passionately. When they finally break away, Fred serenades her. *“You’ll never find, as long as you live, someone who loves you tender like I do.”*

As they embrace the solitude of the mesa, Linda stares at a sky now an immense sapphire glass marred by flecks of swirling ash. “I once read,” she says, “that hummingbirds are the only birds that can fly backwards and upside down.”

“Yes,” Fred acknowledges, “but they can never remember song lyrics.”

She snorts out a laugh. Fred takes a deep breath and pulls the safety pin. “There was a reason I approached that woman at the dance. It was to congratulate her. Because she was a bride.”

Fred removes from a zippered side pocket a smaller pouch and opens it, revealing a coral and silver ring. As he drops to one knee, Linda’s eyes widen and her hands cover her mouth.

“You are my hummingbird, Linda. Will you marry me?”

She hesitates. “Are you sure?”

His eyes narrow. “What kind of answer is that?” he chides.

“It’s not that I don’t want to. I do. It’s just that...”

“Are you afraid?”

“Yes. That you’re too smart for me. Too worldly. Too ambitious.”

“Where’s this coming from?”

“Fred, you drove two thousand miles by yourself in that beat-up little Beetle to the middle of nowhere to take a job that probably needs an experienced attorney, working with people you never knew before, in a place that’s the polar opposite of Queens.”

“What’s really worrying you?”

She sighs. “That you’ll get bored with me.”

He shakes his head. “I could never. I know that because I couldn’t fully enjoy being here until you arrived. Because I want to see every new world I enter with both our eyes, not just mine.”

Fred stands. With his fingertips, he traces Linda’s jaw from earlobe to chin. “So,” he asks, “what’s your answer?”

She grasps his hand and intertwines her fingers into his. “Yes. Of course I will. Because I want to see those new worlds too. But only with you.”

He carefully twists the ring – a touch too small – onto her finger. They cuddle, their attention returning to the rugged panorama. Crows caw. A bald eagle sweeps the horizon in search of food, its snow-white head feathers ablaze in the sunlight. Swirls of dust meander across dry earth as if animate.

“I’m guessing the pueblo won’t be setting off fireworks tonight,” Linda says.

“We’ll make our own fireworks,” Fred responds mischievously. “Now that you’re here with me,” he adds, “I have a new name for this place. Mi diosa.”

“Meaning?”

“My goddess.”

“Aww.” She squeezes him closer. “And now I know what our inscription on El Morro should be. Linda and Fred were here.”

She pauses for effect. “After all, why should you get first billing?”