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El Secreto del Rio Hondo

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El Secreto del Río Hondo

by Corilia Ortega

I run.

As gently and diligently as the *Río Hondo*, her origins being from the highest peaks of this high desert, and mine being tucked away humbly at their base.

Every evening a halo of sorbet orange crowns my braided *piñon* brown hair as I meander through the red willow along the *acequia*; my *vecinos* know that it is borrowed from the alpine glow of the Sangre de Cristos. For their temporary sundown crowns are also ruby, amethyst, and on most occasions turquoise.

I have found the fuzzy *poleo*. I've been sent to gather for tomorrow's sun tea. The glass gallon jars of pickles from last week's *junta* will now be on a south-facing windowsill and when it's time to come in from the field, we'll fill our glasses with ice and tea and the aromatic *poleo*. I've found more than enough and leave plenty behind—we never take all of any one single *remedio*.

So now I can walk home, adding the last item of my treasure hunt from my Mom's list to my basket that also has matured *quelites*, *verdolaga*, a small collection of wild asparagus seed, and always, some sunflowers and sweet clover. I avoid stepping on my cousins, the perfectly stretching *yerba negra* and sticky yellow *grindalia*, and as I reach the bottom of the hill—

where the view of our mountain is most magnificent-

I pause to honor the enticing prickly pear fruit that has fresh deer droppings scattered about. For the *venados* also know, if not better than me, where all the goodies have been growing.

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Enough about me, my friends, for you are here to learn more about *her*. You are wondering “Where is this place?” And “Why is it worth saying that it is not the same as Santa Fe, Abiquiu, Española, or Dixon?”

We can all agree that there are traces of tender similarities between our time in place on this generous land but I've been noting the differences. Like how a mother can distinguish between *gemelas*, I too can tell you the differences.

Our *Río Hondo* flows unapologetically under the bridge on HWY 522 and although that is home for me, she stays traveling towards the sunset, eager to meet up with her older brother, *Río el Grande*.

I am glad we are forever friends in this hidden valley. I do not believe you will see her look like this anywhere else in our *condado*. For she told me a secret once, and if you are of the same character of our loyal *chipilotes* arriving in spring, I will share it with you. But if you have magpie tendencies, although clever, this word is not for you. For you will share it widely and soon all will know and then come to stake their claim.

El secreto del Río Hondo.

She whispered to my barefoot toes:

“Eres especial. This is the *most* beautiful area I have ever yearned after. I never tire of my journey to this place. Even when I’m flowing at my lowest—and you think I’m disappearing forever—I assure you, I will remain. For you belong to me,” she continued giggling, **“It has something to do with the basalt walls and *cholla* greeting me and the lush *vegas* and *montaña* bidding me farewell—you see? My dearest friends are all right here. We are together.”**

It’s her truth and I carry it deeply in my *corazón*.

For every time I drive the seven miles between the last blinking light to our haven, I feel the same sense of delight as I descend from the *mesa* to our *valle*.

Basalt and *cholla* to my left. *Vegas* and cottonwoods to my right—with the reigning mountain queen in the backdrop.

Unlike her I cross above the bridge, moving north. She is the finish line, a lush green ribbon stretching east to west saying “welcome home *m’ija*.”

Every morning she says “*nos vemos al rato*” as I rush to work, and every evening she greets me, declaring “*¡al fin llegastes!*”

And every day of my life I am reminded that I am hers. Because of her, and only her, was I dreamt about and raised here. All of us. Eternally dependent on her life-giving waters.

We are her secret.

And she is mine.

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My full basket rests on my hip, and my aspen skin gets goosebumps as I gaze down the hillside, seeing the last aura of flickering sun on the distant homes. The field of blue corn, *calabaza*, and *bolita* beans sway in harmony as they listen to the *chistes* of the crickets. The *golondrinas* are feasting on evening bugs while the *chipilotes* begin their effortless soar to rest in their favorite poplar trees.

In two weeks, this will not be my view and I cherish this evening gift.

All my friends are here, and I treasure them oh so deeply. For soon they will be on the next chapter of their growing and migration journey.

I will remain, with her, always growing towards their return.

For I, too, run gently and diligently.

Corilia Ortega is a third-year *acequia* farmer just north of Taos who grows food for her family and neighbors. She views herself as fortunate to have learned from her parents and extensive support system of land-based friends. She understands her ability to grow food as a cultivating practice that allows her to preserve parts of her community's history and sense of belonging. The field brings Ortega closer to the stories of her family and solidifies a connection to, “this special place.”