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Sierra Blanca Peak on the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation (Wikimedia Commons/Jonathan Cutrer)



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July 27, 2024

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First, Miss Mescalero caught my eye. Then she invaded my heart. Finally, she became my friend. This is the story.

I was in a casino hotel on an Apache reservation, gulping down hundreds of pages of [Charles Camosy](#)'s compelling book [Resisting Throwaway Culture](#). Of course, some folks enter such environments to gamble. I gamble with my comfort zone — reading Camosy. Despite the title, his book is not about recycling. It's about consumer values that dictate how we throw each other away in decisions small and paramount. Camosy bets on a culture of hospitality and encounter instead.

Yet here I was in a hotel room encountering no one in particular. Occasionally, I'd head downstairs to grab a bite in a coffee shop. This is the writerly thing: carving out your solitude in every crowd. It's how I go through life, floating above or hiding beneath it all. Frankly, it's how I like it.

One evening, heading back to my room, I saw Miss Mescalero. Her title was inscribed on a tall elaborate headdress so you couldn't miss it. A young Apache woman of perhaps 18, she was costumed in electric blue from head to foot. She stood in the hotel lobby greeting everyone who passed by. She welcomed me also.

I brushed past with a distracted nod, absorbed in thought. Only incidentally did I wonder how a person might come to be Miss Whatever. She passed from my mind directly. You could say I threw her away.

Sitting in the coffee shop the next morning, I caught another glimpse of Miss Mescalero. This time she wore a sunflower yellow gown with yellow boots and gold headdress. I watched her pace back and forth across the lobby, greeting people. She was comprehensively ignored.

I felt a pang, recalling how I'd shrugged her off the night before. I hadn't seen her as a person, just a hurdle to cross.

Throwaway culture was getting to me. As Miss Mescalero glided back and forth across the vast space of her territory, I imagined spending the day as a greeter in a decidedly commercial setting, among strangers, on your feet — and in those boots.

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As the crowd thinned out, Miss M leaned over a bannister and stared emptily into the atrium below, a princess without an audience. She seemed lonely and vacated. I got up and crossed the distance between us, determined to encounter her.

"I hope your boots are comfortable," I remarked. "You have to stand in them for hours!"

Miss M offered a smile of surprise and pleasure. "Yes, they're comfortable," she assured me. "And, it's an honor, you know."

As I walked away, I wondered what the honor was: To be elected Miss Mescalero? To work in a swanky hotel? To have a job at all? I decided next time I saw her, I'd stop wondering about her and really talk with her.

That afternoon, I left my room gratuitously and spotted Miss Mescalero in the lobby throng. A high headdress is not inconspicuous. "Miss Mescalero!" I called, and she brightened at my approach.

"I've been looking for you all day," she confessed, with a sincerity that made me blush.

"You're easier to spot," I admitted. "I was wondering: Do you get a roomful of these outfits when you get your title?"

"My grandmother sews them," she revealed, a note of joy in her voice. "I could do it myself, but I don't have the patience."

Suddenly my image of this woman evolved. I had to make room for a devoted grandmother. And a young person who could sew — whereas I can barely keep buttons on my coats.

"Do you get a scholarship with your appointment?"

"I wish," she replied ruefully.

"Will you try to go on to school anyway?"

At this, she became animated. "Oh, but I am in school already! I'm studying to be an occupational therapist. And a nurse. I want to be more than one thing. I have many dreams!"

When I left her this time, my mind was reeling. The cutout princess I'd first disregarded in the lobby had swelled into an engaging three-dimensional personality before my eyes. My experience of the hotel, and even my reason for being there, had become buoyant. It wasn't just Miss Mescalero who was morphing into a new creature. So was I.

Her simple words broke against my heart and shattered it. 'You're the only one I remember.'

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On Friday evening, I had a dinner engagement and had to dress more formally. The casino was unusually crowded, and progressing through the sea of people in a long dress and unfamiliar shoes felt perilous. Jostled, I stumbled and put out an arm to break the fall — and someone caught me and drew me up.

It was Miss Mescalero, pulling me into a warm embrace. Shaken from the near accident, it felt good to be wrapped in strong young arms.

"I was looking for you," she said again. "You're the only one I remember."

Hundreds of people were streaming through the lobby. Her simple words broke against my heart and shattered it. "You're the only one I remember." She greeted a thousand people on a weekend like this, so many faces and purposes. She welcomed as many as possible, as fast as she could scamper from one spot to the next.

"Miss Mescalero," I asked hesitantly, "You greet everyone who comes here. How many people greet you back?"

"Some," she said quickly. Then more slowly: "Not many." She took a deep breath and looked away. "No, not very many."

The next morning was my last. I stayed in the coffee shop for an hour after checking out of the room. I couldn't leave without seeing my friend. I scanned the crowds pouring through the lobby. Finally I saw her, leaning over the bannister staring disinterestedly into the atrium below.

"Miss Mescalero!" I shouted. She turned, smiling. She was wearing a confetti-colored gown with a confetti-spattered headdress and her yellow boots.

"This is the best dress of all," I declared, and she nodded.

"It is," she said.

"Could we take a picture together?" I asked, feeling shy about the request. She accepted the proposal. Then I gave her my card and told her I was leaving. "Please write to me and I'll send the photo. Please write to me — so I can hear what comes next in your story. It's such a great story."

"It is," she nodded solemnly. "Mine is a great story."

And as I wheeled my luggage out to the car, I realized something that brought me a surge of joy. She is the only one I remembered.