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AUDUBON

Magazine of the National Audubon Society

JULY 1989

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The cover: Snowy owlets and tundra wildflowers. Photographed on Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge by Art Wolfe.

A CANYON, AN EGRET ...AND A MYSTERY

by TONY HILLERMAN

On page 185 of the best-selling mystery novel, "A Thief of Time," readers encounter a snowy egret, flushed from its roosting place in the San Juan River canyon by a Navajo Tribal Policeman. The policeman is fictional. But the place is real and so too was the startled egret, flying majestically away into the darkness down the canyon. Therein lies a tale of how a book evolved, and how a silent, empty place can stimulate the human imagination.

IHAPPENED to be floating down the canyon of the San Juan River on a late summer day in 1987 because of one of those odd confluences of needs which sometimes occur. I needed locations—and inspiration—for a book that was trying to take shape in my head. Specifically I needed an Anasazi cliff dwelling in an isolated place. There I intended to have a pot hunter murder an anthropologist. That was to be the pivotal point in a story about those "thieves of time" who loot ancient ruins. Since the anthropologist, the pot hunter, and the crime would be pure fiction, it would seem logical that the cliff dwelling could be fictional as well. But logic doesn't apply when I am trying to write a book. For some reason I almost need to memorize the landscapes I write about.

Meanwhile, two other coinciding needs had developed. Dan Murphy of the National Park Service was feeling a need to show me—a skeptic—that the San Juan River canyon above Lake Powell is as awe-inspiring as he had been claiming. And Charles DeLorme of Wild Rivers Expeditions at Bluff, Utah, needed two people to go on a

raft trip he was organizing. He needed someone to explain to his paying guests the geology, flora, and fauna they would be seeing, and someone to tell them campfire stories about the mythology, culture, and history of the Navajos, whose territory the river invades. Thus Murphy and I signed on to float down the San Juan as natural historian and yarn-spinner, respectively.

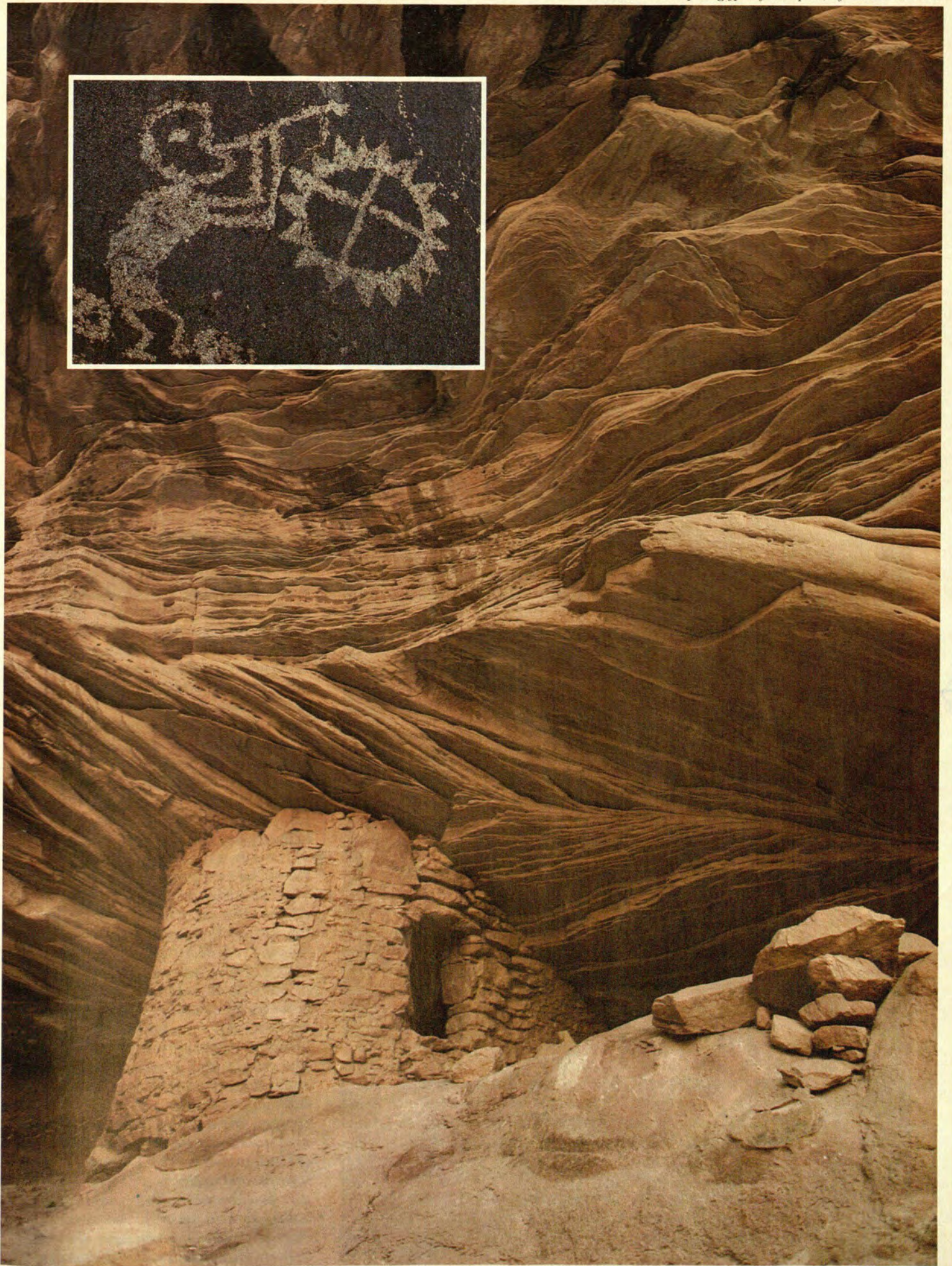
Wild Rivers Expeditions begins most of its San Juan float trips at Sand Island, downstream a bit from Bluff. Just west of the launch site, the river passes under a bridge carrying Highway 191 on its way to Mexican Water and the tiny Navajo town of Tesuque in Arizona. It meanders about for a time between gradually rising cliffs of sandstone, colored pale pink and salmon. Then the bluffs close in and the sandy banks narrow. About seven miles from the launch point, the San Juan slashes through one of America's more spectacular geological features. Geologists call it the Monument Upwarp—a place where the Earth's crust was thrust up in a sort of immense bubble. The dome of this bubble eroded away millions of years ago, but the base remains.

On its long, relatively steep drop toward its junction with the Colorado River—a junction now drowned by Lake Powell—the San Juan zigzags its way through this geological oddity. First it flows through the Lime Ridge and Ruplee anticlines, layered strata which slant sharply upward. The rafter passes older and older formations, which elsewhere lie deeper and deeper under the crust. Since the cliff walls are also rising around you, this slant gives

the eerie sensation that the river is plunging toward the center of the planet. On the other side of the Monument Upwarp (the Mexican Hat Syncline) the strata slant the other way, reversing the effect.

While this exposure of the planet's geologic secrets has its fascination, I was more interested in relatively recent history. The same Anasazi who built great stone apartment towns in places like Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon—and walked away from them—had also appeared in small family groups in this stony wilderness. For my novel about a crime, I intended to use as characters the anthropologists who try to solve the mystery of this vanished civilization. And as you float down the San Juan from Sand Island, Anasazi traces are quick to appear.

About three miles into this journey, we pulled our rafts onto the north shore and inspected an unexcavated mound where nine hundred years of drifted dust buried an Anasazi ruin. Above it, footholds cut into the stone mark the path they used to reach the mesa-top. A mile later, we made another stop and examined what is, in effect, an Anasazi mural. Here petroglyphs were cut through the dark manganese oxide ("desert varnish") stains on the sandstone face of the cliff, forming rows and rows of figures. Some I could identify. One was obviously an egret. Others were abstract representations of the reptiles, birds, and animals which still inhabit the canyon (or, like the bighorn sheep, have vanished with the Anasazi). But many of the forms seem to be from the world of the spirit. Humanoid shapes





with great square shoulders cut into the stone represent (anthropologists believe) the kachina spirits which still play a central role in the metaphysics of the Pueblo tribes. On this cliff, stripes are cut over their heads, indicating whatever one's imagination suggests—perhaps speech, or song, or rank, or magical power.

MY OWN IMAGINATION was trying to deal with this remarkable mural cliff through the eyes of two fictional characters. One is Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn of the Navajo Tribal Police, whom I've used for years and know as one knows a dear old friend. No problem with Joe. I know how his mind works. But the other character was a still nebulous stranger—my murder victim. I had decided to make this victim a contract archeologist working for the National Park Service at the Chaco Cultural Center in New Mexico. On this hot July afternoon on the river this character was a male who existed only as about forty-five words on paper on my desk in Albuquerque. He was to be a specialist in something yet to be decided, and he was supposed to be dead by the end of the first chapter—the victim of the murder on which the plot of this book will turn.

As I stared at figures cut into the cliff, I found myself thinking of the artists who carved it. They would have used tools of sharpened antlers and flint. It would have been a hard, hot job on a summer day like this. I thought of their scarred and calloused

hands, and that led me to remember the hands of an archeologist I know—a beautiful, graceful young woman with the desert sun complexion of the Southwest who rarely is seen without at least one finger bandaged. Suddenly I found myself thinking of my murder victim as a woman. She has the battered hands of digging archeologists and a Phi Beta Kappa mind. She is a working-class woman—an oddity in this field.

Thus under this cliff where Anasazi artists toiled a thousand years ago, what had been a disposable, one-dimensional character changed gender and developed a personality, with a memory of family, a failed marriage, an admiration for an older man she wants to impress, and a love of the abstract art she sees on this cliff. It's a shame she has to die so soon.

The water that the San Juan carries is mostly high-mountain snowmelt. It emerges from Navajo Dam in New Mexico crystal clear and with an almost constant temperature of 42 degrees. By the time it reaches here it has been colored by sand and silt. But even in summer it is still cold enough to give you a shock when your raft splashes through the river's modest rapids. Here the current flowing over the granular bottom creates a pattern of dunes much as prevailing winds form dunes in the desert. These in turn cause "sand waves." Our raft splashed along in a series of miniature roller-coaster rides, countering the blistering afternoon sun with a cooling spray.

We had been floating past cliffs formed mostly of pale-pink Navajo sandstone streaked with desert varnish. Now, a little less than six miles from Sand Island, Murphy showed us where the very top of the darker Kayenta Formation is visible at water level on the left. Just ahead, also on the Navajo side of the river, the stone walls of a small Anasazi cliff dwelling can be seen high under the arched roof of the wall of a small side canyon. On the opposite side of the river a massive sandstone overhang shelters another ruin, some of its walls intact all the way to the natural stone roof. We pulled up on the sandbar to take a look.

The raft crew calls this place River House. Its most prominent feature is a roundish stone tower, which looks a little like a silo and must have been used for storage of grain or other foodstuff. Where the food came from is another matter. Now the vegetation consists of tamarisk, Russian olive, and tumbleweed, all relatively recent European imports, and such ancient American plants as sagebrush, chamisa, broom-snakeweed, prickly pear, yucca, box elder, seep willow, three-wing saltbush, Indian rice grass, Spanish dagger, poison ivy, and a few cottonwoods. The river is the home of catfish, a few beaver and muskrats, and I've seen antelope ground squirrels, a gopher snake, and short-horned, collared, and desert spiny lizards. I have also spotted swallows, ravens, a red-tailed hawk, two turkey vultures, and a single American

kestrel—not enough raptors to suggest that this stony canyon offers much meat to eat. But that wasn't my mystery. Mine was how to make this book take shape.

IT WAS COOL on the earthen floor of River House, and quiet—a place to sit and think bookish thoughts. This ruin, like most along the San Juan drainage, has been surveyed and listed by the anthropological–archeological establishment, but never officially excavated by a research team. It has, however, been tentatively probed by pot hunters. They have left shallow holes in the hummock of earth which must have been this family's trash heap and is, therefore, a likely place for Anasazi burials. It has also been vandalized—one of its walls broken down and other damage done. The raft crew, from which the river has no secrets, told me that the vandal is a member of an unpopular Navajo family that moved across the river from the reservation. They described him as a boy with severe emotional problems.

And so, while I sat in River House looking at the damage this boy had done, a possible first chapter took shape. A Navajo boy, a neurotic loner, would be a witness to my intended murder. I convert him from a vandal per se into a would-be artist who paints his own pictographs on cliffs. My Navajo policeman sees them, knows by their nature that they must be of Navajo origin, finds the boy, solves the crime. But this River House is not an appropriate scene for my crime. Its site overlooking the San Juan is too visible. I need isolation. Besides, Dan Murphy had told me there is a much better ruin downstream and up a canyon on the Navajo side of the river.

From River House, an old trail leads a half-mile downstream to the mouth of Comb Wash and up the wash to traces of an old road which climbs Comb Ridge. The road was cut by Mormons sent down from the Great Salt Lake Valley by Brigham Young to establish an outpost on the San Juan in the vicinity of present-day Bluff. Comb Ridge is a barrier of solid rock, part of the great Monument Upwarp. Scouts for the Mormon wagon train must have ridden down the wash for miles looking for a break in the wall. Finding none, they decided to chip out a road over it. They were dealing with getting ox-drawn wagons over an abrupt vertical rise of at least four hundred feet—the equivalent of a forty-story building—with nothing but

hand tools, their own muscles, and faith in their God. For me it was an ordeal to huff and puff up the traces of that old exploit burdened with nothing heavier than a canteen.

The road leads past a circular mound which must cover the remains of an unusually large ceremonial kiva and to an impressive long view of the Bluff Valley and the sandstone wilderness that surrounds it. The climb also produced thoughts about the sort of iron-willed men and women who were the ancestors of Bluff.

Thus *A Thief of Time* took another of its quirky turns. I decided I

would try to work in just such a Mormon as a character—an elderly man if possible. Not many months before the home of a prominent citizen of this southern Utah canyon country had been raided by the federals. The man's collection of artifacts had been seized, and he had been accused of illegal dealing in Anasazi pots. For my purposes, that was perfect material for the sort of red herring subplot I'm always needing.

Beside the river, below this high edge of Comb Ridge, there still stands the stone foundation of a waterwheel that settlers installed to grind their grain

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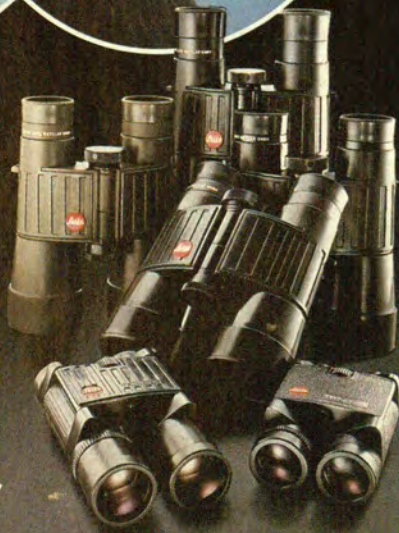
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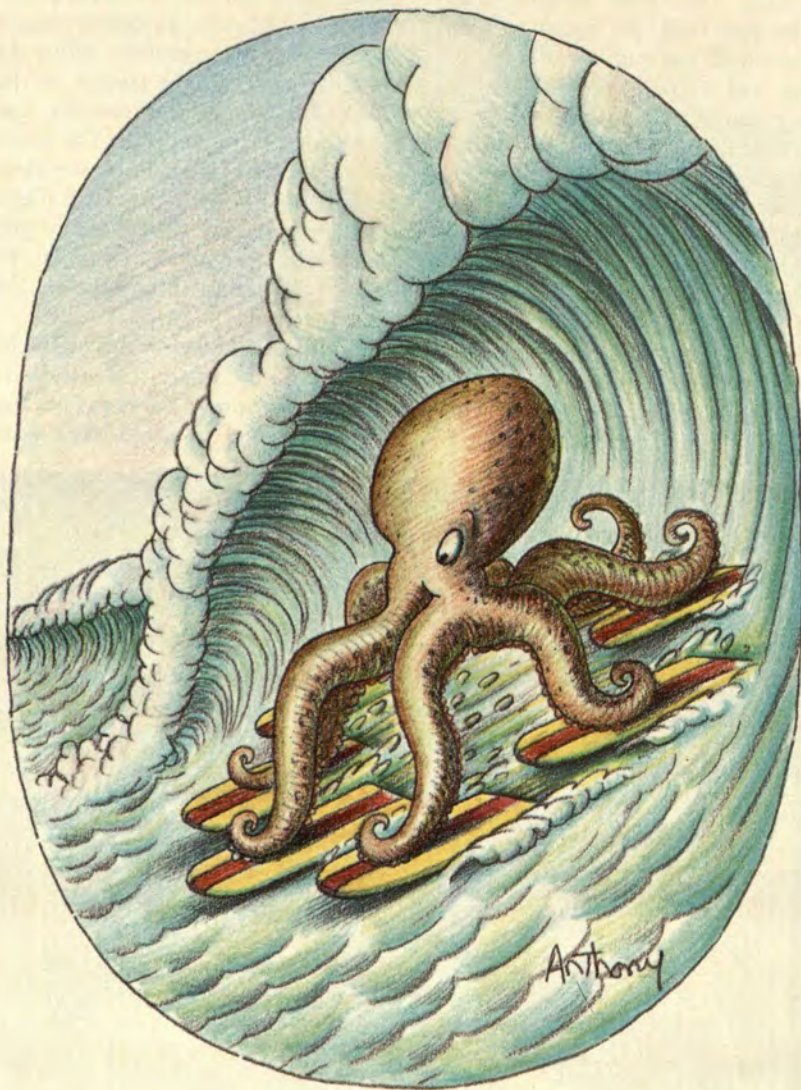
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into flour. On the barren shelf of sandstone above this old mill, there is the roofless ruin of a one-room building. Murphy told me this structure was built as a trading post, that its owner was shot to death in a dispute with two Navajos—who fled across the San Juan and vanished in the wilderness of erosion. When we pushed off again from the sandbar at River House, that story too was stuck in my memory.

I found myself looking for a spot where two men—in all likelihood poor swimmers—could have crossed without drowning. Could my fictional neurotic young Navajo swim? Such bootless mental exercises explain why writers of fiction have a reputation for blank expressions. This train of thought was occupying my imagination when our approaching raft caused the snowy egret to fly.

The egret rose out a clump of tamarisk and seep willows on a sandbar just ahead of our raft. It flew slowly, no more than six feet above the water, a graceful shape gleaming white against

the shadowed cliffs ahead. And then it disappeared around a river bend. I remembered the petroglyph egret. A thousand years ago, the Anasazi artist saw an identical bird and was impressed enough to preserve it in stone.

Since childhood I have been a person impressed by birds—an idle, amateur student of crow migrations, of how mockingbirds tease cats and blue jays dive-bomb them, of the kaleidoscopic patterns that snow geese use to form their first dawn flights, of the concentrated patience of the heron waiting for the minnow to move nearer. Here was just one egret, no mate, no companions. Are egrets, like swans and wolves, among those species that mate only once, and for life? What holds this great bird in such a lonely, empty place?

BY THE TIME we were rolling out our sleeping bags and building our evening fire at the mouth of Chinle Wash, several things were coming clear about the book. The egret

would have its place in it somehow, and the thoughts that its solitary presence had provoked seemed to be turning the tale of action I'd intended into a novel of character. I found myself trying to attach the same perpetual monogamy I had imagined for the egret to one of the characters. I tried it first on the victim. (By now she has become Dr. Eleanor Friedman-Bernal to me, with the hyphenated Bernal to drop as soon as her divorce becomes final.) It didn't work. She is the wrong type.

I turn to collecting the sort of impressions she would collect as she arrived at this place. She would make the trip secretly and at night since her dig would be illegal. She would be burdened with the sort of nervousness that law-abiding people feel when they are breaking the law. Still, she would be stirred by this evening as I am stirred. Violet-green swallows and nighthawks are out, patrolling the twilight for insects. (I remember an argument I used to have with the Potawatomi boys I played with as a child about whether nighthawks should be called "bullbats.") A beaver, looking old and tired, swims slowly up the river, keeping out of the current and paying no more attention to me than he would to a cow.

I hear the song of frogs coming from somewhere up the wash, and as the rising moon lights the top of the cliff, a coyote and his partner begin exchanging coyote talk somewhere high above us on Nokaito Bench. The swallows and nighthawks call it an evening and are replaced by battalions of bats. They flash through the firelight, making their high-pitched little calls. I make notes of all of this, using reality to spare my imagination. It still had a lot of work to do on this plot.

One of those noisy and torrential thunderstorms which make summer interesting on the Colorado Plateau (Navajos call them "male rains") had swept across the Chinle Wash drainage fairly recently. While not a drop seemed to have fallen at its junction with the San Juan, a substantial flash flood had roared down the wash. The bottom was muddy, and the potholes still held water. In these the eggs of leopard frogs had hatched, and the new generation (about thumbnail size) was everywhere ahop. These are exactly the sort of specific details I look for, hoping they make fictional landscapes seem real. I would remember these frogs.

For a collector of such odds and ends, Dan Murphy is a perfect guide.

He had come to show me a specific cliff dwelling. But en route he showed me the trapdoor lid under which a wolf spider was lurking; the way a species of black, crumbly, and dead-seeming desert lichen will turn a gaudy green when touched by water; a Navajo pictograph in which a man on foot is shooting an arrow at a big-hatted horseman who is shooting a pistol at him; fossils of crinoids, horn coral, and various brachiopods; and so forth. He also showed me "Baseball Man," an unusual Anasazi pictograph which depicts—larger than life—a figure that seems to be holding a big reddish chest protector, like a home-plate umpire. But the cliff dwelling at the end of this long walk was the prize.

Reaching it involved climbing out of the wash onto a broad stone shelf. This led to a second level of cliffs and past another of those petroglyph murals. This one was decorated with beautifully preserved depictions of the little humpbacked flute player called Kokopela (including one of him on his back, flute aimed between his knees). Anthropologists believe Kokopela was the Anasazi fertility figure, and one sees him carved into cliffs and painted on lava rocks throughout Anasazi country. At the moment I was thinking of his flute. Specifically, I was considering how eerie it would seem if my foredoomed anthropologist, aware of the presence of these figures, hears the piping of his music in the canyon darkness. But how? Can I make my neurotic Navajo a musician? That seems strained. I dismissed the idea. It refused to go away.

THE FLUTE-PLAYER was still with me when we reached the ruins Dan Murphy had thought were exactly right for my purposes. They were far better than anything I could have imagined. Behind a curve in the towering sandstone wall of the mesa, nature had formed a cavernous amphitheater some fifty feet deep, sixty feet wide, and perhaps seventy feet from floor to ceiling. A seep high up the face of the cliff produced enough water to cause a green curtain of moss and ivy to thrive and to feed a shallow basin perhaps ten or twelve feet across on the stone floor of the alcove.

Behind this pool, on a ledge some twelve feet above the alcove floor, an Anasazi family had built its stone home. The centuries had done their damage, but the walls of the small structure were mostly intact. Up the cliff at the edge of the alcove, a stairway-ladder of footholds had been cut into the stone. They led to a shelf high above. There another stone structure still stands. It must have been built as the family's last defense if danger trapped them.

This high hideaway is unusual, but the overhang itself is typical enough of the alcoves the Anasazi preferred as living sites. It faced so that it was open to the low winter sun but protected from the summer sun almost overhead. Beyond the deep shade around the pool, the sunlight reflecting off the sandy humps and the bare stone of the mesa was almost blinding. But it was cool here and silent—out of the reach of the breeze which was kicking up whirls of dust along Chinle Wash.

The pool had produced its own swarm of leopard frogs, and watching them provoked thoughts. Were those drought-resistant frogs here when the Anasazi family occupied the house behind me? How would it have felt to have lived in this lonely place at the tag-end of a dying culture? What was this danger so fierce that it caused these people to build their tiny fort?

I imagine the family huddled behind the walls above. I make it night. A very dark night. Something has frightened them into scurrying up the footholds. They hold their breath, listening. Hearing what? The Anasazi become Eleanor Friedman-Bernal, already uneasy by the illegality of her dig and now hiding, terrified. What does she hear? I think of Kokopela's flute—music from a spirit vanished a thousand years. Crazy, I think. And while I am into the craziness, I try again to do something with my neurotic Navajo. I change him to a local Mormon boy. A boy whose only relief from some mental illness is music. But what is he doing here? Hiding out from some crime I will dream up later.

What else would Eleanor hear? The frogs, perhaps. The frogs are hopping about on the fringes of the pool. I try to look at them through the eyes of a mentally ill boy I have hiding here. The snowy egret reinserts itself into this daydreaming, and with it my speculation about its loneliness and its faithfulness. An idea comes, and another.

Gradually, as I sat in that cool shade among the frogs, my Navajo Tribal Policeman became a widower, and the framework for my tale became the makings of a novel.

It took another trip down the San Juan Canyon, and up Chinle Wash, before I could complete it all. This time I went during what the Navajos call "the Season when the Thunder Sleeps." In this rainless time, the potholes in the wash were dry, and so was the pool under the ruins. The frogs had vanished, leaving their eggs waiting in the dried mud for a wetter time. The snowy egret had vanished, too. But the ruins of the trading post on the shelf above the river were there, and I visited them again because now they were sticking in my mind. How could a crime that had destroyed a family in the 19th Century leave a memory that would destroy a man today? I began to see how it could happen.

And thus the San Juan Canyon is germinating another story.



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