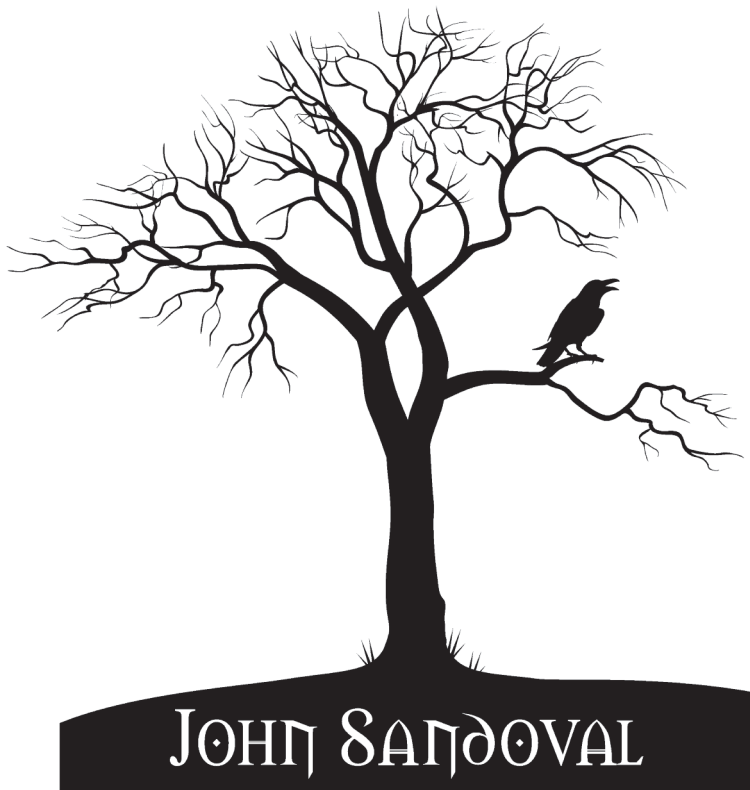


# THE WITCHES OF RUIDOSO



JOHN SANDOVAL

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Hi, Johnny—

Well, here's your book. You wrote it, submitted it and left prematurely. Yana and I did the footwork and finished the project. I think you would have approved of the people from Arte Público Press who put it all together. You have no idea how much you are missed.

Love from your sister,  
Francisca

# ONE

You see, her mother had died back east and her father, due to financial difficulties and illness, had decided to come west—to start anew, to get his health right, to put a run of bad luck behind them. Wasn't much here then—New Mexico, in fact, was not yet a state: The Territories is what they called it. Ruidoso, in those days, was just a village with a few ranches and farms scattered about, a stage stop. And that is how they arrived, on the stage, with all they owned in this world contained in a few trunks and carpetbags.

I was a boy of thirteen at the time and lived with my father just outside the village. In the afternoons, when my chores were done, when school was out, I would walk down and wait for the stage or help Mr. Blackwater out in the store. And so there I was, sitting on the porch of the Ruidoso Store, when Beth Delilah and Mr. Jameson arrived that spring morning of 1895.

I noticed her immediately. No—I *recognized* her. To this day, I can remember thinking: don't I know that girl from somewhere? Have I not seen her somewhere before? For she was fourteen years old, and with all that blond hair and that lovely white skin and those big blue eyes and dressed from boot to bonnet in black (still in mourning for her mother),

black parasol opened above her against the sun, she looked like she had just stepped down out of a calendar. Very Exotic. Very Pretty. Very.

So, as I watched from the porch of the store, she and her father climbed down out of the stage and came walking across the road—obviously having done some hard traveling. Then, suddenly, this lovely blond-haired girl wearing her pretty city dress stopped, squatted down and picked up a horned toad cutting through the dust at her feet. She held that old toad right up to her face, looking him right in the eye, not scared at all and completely fascinated by it, you see; not many horned toads back east—and not many pretty little girls that would pick one up, either, I bet. Then her father called to her and she set that toad back down and hurried up onto the porch and into the store, not even noticing me sitting there on the bench as she passed by. Did you know that boys at that age are quite capable of being thoroughly jealous of horned toads? It is a fact—I was there.

Mr. Blackwater was a man who had spent too much time fishing the dark pools of his soul. He was brother to Mr. Jame-son's deceased wife and owned the Ruidoso Store and some nearby land—homestead acres given to him by the govern-ment for his services as a soldier during the War Between the States. The local Apaches called him "No Leg Dancer" because, you see, every morning, no matter how much whiskey he had drunk in the course of the night, he could be found out on the road at first light, blowing reveille with his bugle, marching to and fro, that right leg of his, from the knee down, just a strap-on wooden peg. He was convinced the sun

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was incapable of rising up without his assistance, you see. He also believed that his missing leg, buried somewhere at Shiloh, had developed a bad case of arthritis and despite the distance separating them, pained him terribly—and that’s why he drank—or so he said. He was also convinced that his cat, a yellow, stub-tailed tom named General Grant that ate lizards, squirrels and anything else it could corner and kill, and cared for no one in particular and disliked everyone in general, accurately predicted the weather. He believed the cat promptly passed that information on to him through a complicated code that could be deciphered through General Grant’s grooming habits and where exactly he sprawled out on the porch at various times of the day. I could go on and on about Mr. Blackwater, for he was a very strange and curious man. But his story is unto itself. I have often wondered, though, through the years, whatever became of Mr. Blackwater. It’s all just a Chinese puzzle . . .