

Doña

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THE QUICK RAP OF KNUCKLES on sheet metal woke me from my torpor, followed by the solid clunk of the electronic bolt. The heavy steel door was shouldered open by a man I did not know.

“Good morning,” he smiled, “I’m Dr. Arnold.”

I tried to pronounce his name, but my tongue was thick and gummy.

Dr. Arnold beckoned through the doorway, and an orderly of some sort, a slender dark-skinned, white-haired fellow in a weathered blue jumpsuit, followed him stiffly inside, rolling a computer table over the threshold and helping the doctor position it between the electrical wall outlet and the only chair in the small room. As he assisted the doctor, the trustee scrupulously avoided glancing my way. When he finished, the workman left, pulling the heavy door closed behind him.

I took a sip of tepid water from the bent straw in the Styrofoam cup on my table and inspected this Dr. Arnold as he took his time punching keys and waiting for the computer screen to respond. He looked to be in his late thirties or early forties. Stocky, but fit. His neatly trimmed cinnamon-brown beard contrasted starkly with the clinical whiteness of his starched coat. He looked too perfect to be a real doctor, more like a movie actor playing the part. When he was satisfied, he gazed up to engage me. “You know why I’m here?”

I watched him for a moment, then nodded.

“Good,” he said. “Now . . . I understand that you have waived your right against self-incrimination . . . is that right?”

I said nothing. Just watched.

“Your right to remain silent? Do you understand? Are you willing to talk to me?”

Again I nodded.

“Good. Let’s get started then.” He stood, crossed behind my bed, and did something to the controls monitoring my vital signs. The blood pressure cuff began squeezing my arm. Returning to his chair, he crossed one leg over the other, a picture of calm composure. “Let’s just talk about *you*.”

I coughed. Cleared my throat. “Just . . . me?” I rasped.

“Yes.”

“But . . . what about . . . ?”

He waved a hand. “We’ll get to Miss Costa a little later. Are you okay with that?”

I shrugged. This was his game. I nodded.

“Well then,” he smiled. “What is your name?”

I told him.

“And your date of birth?”

I told him.

“Your address?”

“Mailing or physical?”

“Both.”

I told him.

“Do you know what day of the week it is?”

I told him.

“Today’s date?”

I told him.

He glanced at the readout of my vitals and entered something into his computer. “Do you know who the President of the United States is?”

“Yes.”

He looked up. “Who?”

I told him.

“Do you ever have thoughts of suicide?”

“No. Not really.”

“Never?”

“No.”

“Fine.” He glanced again at my vitals. Entered a couple of keystrokes. “Now . . . do you know where you are?”

“I believe so.”

“Where?”

“In the County Mental Health facility.”

“And why are you here?”

I shrugged. “On a Section 5150 involuntary hold, I presume. And you’re going to evaluate whether I appear to be a danger to myself or others.”

He smiled. Nodded. Glanced again at my vitals. Entered a few notes into his computer. Then he leaned back, stroked his beard professionally, and favored me with his most radiant and sympathetic continence. “Alright . . . now . . . tell me what you remember.”

“What I remember?”

“About that afternoon.”

“In the forest?”

“Yes.”

“Well . . . where would you like me to begin?”

“Let’s start just before the Ranger found you.”

“Okay.” On my elbows I dragged my buttocks up the quilted hospital mattress to raise my head higher onto the pillow. The thin sheet followed me, and so did the IV tube, EKG leads, and blood pressure cuff, like the halter ropes of friendly ponies. “Well . . . I was in the forest,” I began, watching for his reaction. I didn’t like the way he kept tracking my vitals and comparing my words with whatever he had on his computer screen. By the continuous squeezing and deflation of the blood pressure cuff, I knew exactly what he was doing. He was using my vitals as a poor-boy’s lie detector. So I took a deep breath. Leaned back. Squeezed my eyes shut. Let the memories materialize. “A steady . . . unending . . . drizzle. My . . . clothes . . . heavy. Rough. Chafing. Irritating. Fingers numb . . . white with cold. Dampness seeping into my bones. Wisps of fog like . . . like spun sugar clinging to the shadowy conifers . . . far up the slope.”

“This was National Forest?” he interrupted.

I opened my eyes. “Yes.”

“Which one?”

He already knew which one, of course. “Do you want me to tell you my story . . . or not?” I grumbled.

“Yes. Please go on.”

I closed my eyes again, but it took a while before I drifted back to where I had been. “An . . . impenetrable . . . translucent . . . gray sky pressing down . . . like the lid of a pressure cooker. So beautiful. Blue and red marquee lights chasing themselves around the periphery of my vision.” I opened my eyes to see how he would react to the psychedelics. No response. “I remember all this,” I concluded.

“Fine.” He thought for a moment, mulling the course of his interrogation, then asked, “Were you on you feet?”

“On my feet? Standing, you mean? No. I was . . . I was sitting. Or lying down. Slouching. In the wet duff. Leaning against a . . . a fallen log, I guess. Mossy. Spongy. Side by side. The two of us.”

“Let’s just talk about you, for now. I need to establish a baseline. Okay?”

“We were together. I can’t really separate things. In my mind.”

Without hurry the doctor uncrossed his leg and recrossed the other one over his knee. “How did all this make you feel?”

“Like . . . things were not yet . . . finished.”

“Finished?”

“Yeah,” I shrugged. “That’s what I felt. Things were not . . . *finished*. I believed they would be. Before long. Soon, actually. But . . . that’s how I felt.”

“Finished with respect to Miss Costa, you mean?”

“No. Not at all. I thought we weren’t supposed to talk about her.” I inhaled a slow breath. Let it out. “No . . . finished in a more . . . a more metaphysical sense.” I glanced at him. “You had to be there to understand.”

“You were afraid you might die?”

“Oh, no. No. Our survival was never in doubt.”

He typed a few strokes into the computer, then planted both oxfords on the floor and leaned closer. “Okay. Tell me what *else* you were feeling at that moment. Just you.”

“What *else*?”

“Yes.”

“What I was feeling,” I repeated, as if perplexed by the challenge. But I was acting. I knew what he was after. He had read the reports. So I drew a deep breath, sighed, and told him. Like I had told the Ranger and the detective before him. “There was a . . . a *place*. I could *feel* it. Down a long . . . *channel* it lay. Or perhaps you might call it a corridor. Or a tube. In the back of my mind. But it wasn’t hard and defined like a tube or a corridor. It was . . . soft, with moist, breathing walls that were . . . the vibrations of life. It felt like a . . . a *groan* . . . or perhaps a *hum* of some sort. Deep in my head. A vibration in my brain . . . my brain stem, I guess . . . somewhere between a growl and a purr.”

He waited patiently for more, then filled the empty silence. “Where did this corridor lead?”

“I don’t know. *Didn’t* know. But . . . I felt its tug . . . like a . . . like a whirlpool of infinite

depth . . . I felt my mind . . . and my heart . . . *orbiting* . . . spiraling together . . . yearning to be merged . . . with a . . . a *certainty* and a . . . a *fullness*.” I searched for words that probably did not exist. “It felt like . . . like I was standing at a threshold. An antechamber . . . of desire . . . a desire to let go . . . once and for all. *To let go*. To know infinite certainty for the first time . . . to go where I was . . . *summoned*.”

“You felt that you were being summoned by someone?”

“No. I said that wrong. ‘Summoned’ . . . that’s not the right word. There was no one else there.”

“Except Miss Costa.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to talk about her.”

He was typing something, even though this had all been recorded and transcribed before. Was no doubt being recorded again. He was entering his own notes. His own interpretations. *Trying to catch rainwater in a sieve*, I thought. Oh, but I had *been* there. On that threshold of . . . *completeness*. How else would I know this ineffable reality, behind and beneath *all* words.

“And do you still feel that . . . that *corridor* in you head?”

“Not exactly.”

“What do you mean?”

“I remember it. That’s all.”

“What you’ve just told me is a rather *unusual* view of reality, wouldn’t you agree? You *are* aware of that, are you not?”

I considered reminding him of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle if he wanted unusual. Or downright weird. Or the vast empty spaces between each atom in the infinite universe. But I thought better of it. What would be the point? The concept of consensus reality was a slippery thing. So I held my tongue. Nodded.

“Okay.” He finished his notes, then shifted his chair to face me more squarely. “Now. You told the Ranger that a Miss Maria Costa was with you, is that correct?”

“Yes. Doña was with me.”

“Donna?”

“No. *Doña*. You know, like in the Spanish. *Dōn-ya. La Doña Maria*.” I couldn’t help smiling. Smiling *with* her. Smiling *at* him. We were *all* a part of this same cosmic joke.

“That’s what you called . . . Miss Costa? Doña?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you call her that?”

His question disoriented me. Made me tired. I didn’t want to play this ridiculous game any longer. No doubt I showed my annoyance.

He seemed to understand. Waved a hand.

“Private joke,” I said. “An old Kingston Trio song thing. Long time ago.”

“Fine. Fine. Let’s go on. How long had you known her? Doña.”

Annoyed again, I shrugged. “Not very long really. I met her . . . on a hiking path . . . somewhere . . . we found ourselves walking together . . . and talking to each other . . . I can’t remember quite . . . quite when.”

He waited for more.

“Things are still a little . . . muddled,” I said. “You know, in my head.”

“Where does she live?”

I took a deep breath. “I’m not sure I ever . . . knew.”

“Where does she work?”

I shook my head.

“Her telephone number? Email address?”

I continued shaking my head.

“How did you get in touch with her?”

I thought about it. Shrugged. “I guess she got in touch with me.”

“How?”

“Well . . . she’d . . . find me.”

He watched me for a while, then entered something on his keyboard. “Alright.” He shifted his posture. Studied his monitor before looking up. “Now. Had the two of you been drinking?”

“That afternoon?”

“Yes.”

“Alcohol?”

“Yes.”

I thought about it. “No.”

“Neither of you?”

“Neither of us.” I took another slow sip through the straw.

He studied me for a moment, checked my vitals again, then entered a few keystrokes. “You told the Ranger you had taken a psychotropic drug.”

“I never used that word.”

Doctor Arnold scrolled through his computer. “The Ranger described it as mescaline. Did you take mescaline?”

“Yes.”

“Both of you took mescaline?”

“Yes. Both of us.”

“When?”

“Well . . . that’s hard to say . . . time had become so . . . so *elastic*.” I was aware of a ringing in my ears. My fingers were cold. Trembling. I drew a deep breath, trying to steady myself. “Just before . . . maybe an hour or two before . . . before we . . . before she . . .” I could no longer find my voice. I squeezed my eyes shut. *Doña was there*. Standing before me. Tall and slender. Wet, reddish-blond hair draping her shoulders and down her back. Little rivulets of rainwater running from her pale cheeks, over the freckles flecking the bridge of her turned-up nose. She was smiling at me. Smiling that hint of cosmic irony I so cherished. Oh, I could almost hear the softness of her voice. Intimate and articulate and throaty. But I couldn’t make out any words. She was standing before me, but I knew I could not take her in my arms.

“Can you tell me about it?” Doctor Arnold asked in a softer, probing tone.

I just raised a hand. Tears welled in my eyes.

“Would you like to stop now?” he asked. “Take a short break?”

“No.” I managed to draw in a few deep breathes. Another sip of water. Blew my nose into a tissue. Finally I looked up at him. “Peyote buttons,” I said. “Cut them into slices. Buried the chunks in spoonfuls of cottage cheese. Swallowed them whole. Never tasted it. Never got

sick.”

“How much peyote did you consume?”

I shook my head. “Too much, probably.”

The doctor raised his eyebrows. Nodded. Entered it on the keyboard. “What effect did the peyote have on you?”

“Effect?” I thought about it. Shrugged. *How could I put such a thing into words?* “I trust you have never taken peyote yourself, Doctor.”

“No. I have not.”

“Well, how about . . . LSD? Or psilocybin? Ever tried them? Ayahuasca? Mushrooms? Surely you’ve smoked pot. As a student at medical school, maybe?”

“No. I . . . this is not about *me*. I want to talk about *you*. Let’s get back to the experience you were telling me about. Alright?”

I sensed some subtle dynamic had shifted between us. “Alright. What do you want to know?”

“How did this . . . *drug* . . . make you feel?”

“The mescaline?”

“Yes.”

“The peyote?”

“Yes.”

I readjusted my hips. The IV stand rattled. The cables bounced. I imagined the neighing of the friendly ponies attached to the ropes. At last I sighed. “Well . . . I already told you. I guess you weren’t listening.”

Dr. Arnold seemed perplexed. He scrolled back through his computer. “I remember something about . . . ‘marque lights’ . . . was that it? Is that what you are referring to?”

I shook my head. *How do you describe the color of red to the color blind?* “This isn’t going to work,” I told him. “I can’t put it into words. And if I somehow managed to, you wouldn’t understand the words I spoke.” I reached over my head and fluffed my pillow. The pony ropes shook and I felt a sharp pain where the IV inserted into the crook of my arm.

He watched me intently. Calculating.

Finally I drew a deep breath and spoke slowly, as if to a child, “Why don’t you just go ahead . . . and get to the *real* questions . . . you came here to ask me?”

He studied me for a while longer, then abruptly stood, smoothed his trousers, and stepped past my bed to adjust the controls monitoring my vitals. The blood pressure cuff began tightening as he repositioned himself directly in front of me. Still on his feet. His eyes were no longer smiling. *Oh-oh*, I thought. *Bad cop*. For a long moment his gaze bore into mine while the cuff crushed my arm. Finally he asked, “What have you done with Miss Maria Costa?”

I felt my heart leap. I drew a deep breath. Held it. Let it out slowly as the cuff began to deflate. “Doña?”

“Yes, dammit, Doña. Also known as Miss Maria Costa. What have you done with her?”

I took another breath. “Nothing.”

“Do you know where Doña is?”

“Now?”

“Yes, *now!*”

“You haven’t found her?”

“No, they haven’t found her yet.”

“Are they still looking?” I asked.

“As of this morning, yes. A search and rescue crew and a chopper were still looking.”

“Huh.” I made a show of drawing another contemplative breath. “I wonder what happened to her?”

“That’s what I just asked *you*. Do you know where she is?”

“No. No. I do not know where Doña is now.”

“What happened to her?” he snapped.

“I don’t know.”

“She was with you. And then she was gone?”

I nodded slowly. “That about sums it up.”

“Did you fall asleep?”

I shrugged. “I . . . might have . . . I don’t remember.”

“The Ranger said you were alone when he found you.” He glared at me in silence. “Where did she go?”

“I . . . don’t know.”

“The Ranger said there were clear footprints in the spongy soil. Both of yours. Arriving. But none leaving. Where did she go?”

“I don’t know.”

He smiled, softening his approach. “Help me out here. Where do you *think* she *might* have gone?”

“*I don’t know!*”

THEY COULDN’T HOLD ME FOREVER, of course. Not without filing charges, they couldn’t. And they didn’t have any proof a crime had been committed. Not really. The only evidence they had that Doña had even been with me in that National Forest was my own weird testimony, viewed through the twisted lens of peyote buttons. And perhaps some small boot prints that the Ranger said he *might* have seen before they were erased forever by a pouring rain. The district attorney was up for reelection. He was not about to go public and file against me based solely on my own admittedly bizarre *ipse dixit*. Not without more proof that a crime had been committed in the first place.

And they couldn’t continue to hold me under Section 5150 for longer than seventy-two hours without finding that I was a danger to myself or others. And the good Doctor Arnold would never put his lily-white signature on such a judicial application. After all, the statute specifically says he might be found liable in a civil action.

So they let me go. Released me from their involuntary medical hold. I became what they call a “person of interest.” A suspect. The boyfriend always is. And they couldn’t continue to hold me without filing charges. What could they charge me with?

So I am not in custody. But I am no longer a free man either. I can’t stop poring over everything in my mind. Obsessing about it, really. Doubting. In the quiet of my livingroom, with the clock ticking on the wall. On my walks to the post office or along the river. And when others speak to me, I barely hear them. I barely see them. I barely know where I am.

I see her sometimes. Doña. But not as vividly as once I did. She has become . . . vague. Insubstantial. An apparition. A ghost. In truth, I can't help but wonder whether she was ever real. How can anyone really know? And sometimes I think my sweet Doña might have gone down that corridor . . . the one I was telling Doctor Arnold about. Into the strangeness of her own mind. I would like to follow, but I no longer know the way.