

Silence of the elders

By Bob Martel



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“The subsumption of the general intellect into the corporate kingdom of abstraction is depriving the living community of intelligence, understanding, and emotion. ... And the brainless body reacts—on one side, a huge wave of mental suffering, and on the other side, the much-advertised cure for depression: fanaticism, fascism, and war. And at the end, suicide.”

Franco Berardi Bifo from *The Coming Global Civil War: Is There Any Way Out?*

When everything, everything, everything you touch turns to gold, gold, gold.

Statues and empires are all at your hands.

Water to wine and the finest of sands.

When all that you have's turning stale and it's cold.

Oh, you'll no longer fear when your heart's turned to gold.

I'm dying to feel again

Oh, anything at all,

But oh, I feel nothin', nothin', nothin', nothin'

When everything, everything, everything you touch turns to gold, gold, gold.

Imagine Dragons edited from *Gold*

El Vizcaíno

The desert air blew through the speeding, bright-red, rental car's open windows wrestling with his long hair and cooling his upper body as it evaporated the heat-generated sweat streaming down from his balding scalp across his long face through his short white beard onto his bare, hairless chest to be absorbed by his once white Disneyland tank top with a sun-bleached image of Goofy, soaked and sagging in a dampened loop onto his lap. The sound of the wind rushing by him nearly drowned out the considerable volume his car's speakers produced. His roadmate, as he thought of her, managed to sleep through it all, or pretended to. He couldn't decide, but then he was a loner who left everyone else's life to them to live. This bit of curiosity did not cause him to call out to her against the noise of the wind, not to mention the guitar riffs and drum strains of Cream's Sunshine of Your Love. She was in the backseat leaning up against her pack and computer case. He saw her in the rearview mirror, if he adjusted it to the max, looking young and relaxed. He thought, 'youth is wasted on the young.' He chuckled at his predictability. He looked back again, and this time saw her as the perfect being she was. So, he thought again, contrarily, can't call that a waste. Even his aged cynicism couldn't mar her beauty in his seventy-year-old eyes.

A drive across the Baja Norte's El Desierto del Vizcaíno from Guerrero Negro to Santa Rosalia can cause hallucinations without any help. To ensure an entertaining drive he had swallowed a hundred mics of LSD with his breakfast and now, in less than an hour, the highway was taking on a different shape and hue. He felt like going slower, which he did, until he stopped on a dirt road headed into the cactus. His natural nose for adventure led him to a small grove of stunted trees a few hundred

yards from the highway. Half of humanity had stopped to take a shit here passed through his mind, so many some good soul had built an outhouse. He thought it was an odd scene in the country, a sanitary remnant left by some conqueror no doubt. Mexico had many magical events in its history and the erection of this small building in the middle of ... he tried bumfuck nowhere, chastised his tripping mind and settled on ... the desert was one of them.

He was travelling high on psychedelics with an underage, he suspected, girl whose name he had yet to learn. That was disturbing, sending a wave of anxiety that upset his focus. He didn't need a toilet or an outhouse. Why had he stopped here? He was sure that the greatest danger he would face would be misidentification. If ID'ed as a terrorist, he would face great wrath he thought. He quickly jumped to the notion that a terrorist might come upon him with suggestions of martyrdom with the virgins and all. Then he remembered he needed to be somewhere else and climbed back in the car with its sleeping, and still nameless, passenger and drove off continuing south-east.

He loved the psychedelic experience. He loved the struggle between his historic sense of reality and the wild mind. He was going slowly to La Paz. Mulege was on the way. That is what he thought when she approached him at dawn at a panaderia in Guerrero Negro. He had fallen for Mexican sweet rolls decades ago. He bought a bag full for breakfast and was chewing his first bite when she came up to him.

“Mulege. I am going to Mulege. Can you take me?”

Normally he would have claimed to be going north instead of south, but he couldn't talk since the roll was dry and his water bottle still in his car. He had a mouthful of exploding sugar. He nodded. She smiled and

thanked him. He found his water bottle once they reached his car, washed the roll down, took the acid after he decided he could handle it, if you know what I mean, then laughed. She rolled into the back seat. In seconds, they were speeding down the narrow desert highway toward Santa Rosalia and the Sea of Cortez.

As he pulled back out onto the highway from his outhouse discovery it was still early enough in the morning for the sun to be in his face. He thought forward to Santa Rosalia and the now sad, yellowish hotel he found years ago, on a previous trip, maybe his first road trip to Baja Sur. The new, at the time, hotel, beige he remembered, was on a small bluff over the gulf and alongside a little creek, a desert arroyo. It overlooked a rocky shore, overgrown with unfriendly weeds. Over the decades, it was painted and repaired by whoever owned it at the time. After so many stays it was like a second home. He was not fond of it but used to it. The drive across was at times harrowing and the streaking trucks that raced along the highway in the oncoming lane made for a tense and exhausting journey. He often took acid and he always stayed at the ugly yellow hotel less than two hours ahead of him. He knew where he would sleep. He had a destination. That fact mattered to him.

The last time he came this way he spent almost a week in Santa Rosalia. He talked to no one but himself. A nearby mercado had the beer he liked. The room he stayed in had a great view of the water and the sunrise. Most days he watched Mexican stations on the room's small analogue TV trying to learn Spanish, he told himself. He lied. The highlight of any day was the professional wrestling shows where the contestants competed to see who could overact the other. They spoke so fast in the most colloquial of terms he understood nothing with the exception of the occasional profanity which he knew from childhood in

English and Spanish. One of those days, just before sunrise, he packed and left, headed south towards La Paz.

It was late November, warm, but not hot. The sun was an hour before setting when he reached the outskirts of the old city. It gave the jumble of the suburbs a surreal colorful glow over the gulf and the bays within the city. La Paz was not the only place where the sun was such an important celestial player. It was just his favorite. He began planning this trip months ago. He spent the better part of five days getting here. He might tire of it quickly and leave even within hours to drive into the mountains and a hot springs with a similar sunrise. Not this time. His closest friend who lives in La Paz Centro was waiting for him. He had called her from the road to warn her. That was last fall the time before this time with the roadmate and the outhouse and the 100 mics.

They were entering Santa Rosalia as he came back from his memory vault. He wanted a beer and a pee. He made a left-hand turn. She woke.

“Where are we?” She asked from the backseat.

“I am on Earth. The sun’s at 10:30. I need a baño. Next is a beer. You? Where are you?”

“I must have missed something. Let’s see. Is this Mulege?”

“Last time I was here it was Santa Rosalia.”

“How much longer to Mulege?”

“I was thinking about a week or so. I might get antsy and leave tomorrow but ...”

“Where do I go?”

“Hmm. I’d offer you half a bed and as fun as that sounds I know how it ends. Badly.”

“OK. I get it. I don’t want a daddy or a male protector even though Mexico scares me. It’s so big and empty. You know what I mean?”

“Wild. To me this desert is wild, full of the spirits we chased south from the US. I got a little help from my friends so I can see them.”

“Peyote?”

“Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.” The car settled safely in the slot in front of his favorite room at the yellow hotel. He exited slowly his age demanded testing each muscle as he needed it to be certain it worked. She watched him uncoil and then he opened her door. With a slight mat kip, she leapt out. They slammed the doors simultaneously and ended facing one another.

“Wow.” She said. “I could try some?”

“No.” He said. “I am too far down my path to recreate with someone so young. My mother, by her bad example, taught me I should act my age and be silent.”

“You won’t tell me your name?”

“Viejo.”

“Be-ahole?” She said with a scornful face that became a grin and a swallowed laugh.

“Nice. Maybe you are a hallucination. I would ask you to leave but you seem important to me, maybe a deity? Maybe an undercover cop? I don’t always know the difference.”

“Look. Simplicity is I am running from not to. Mulege is a name, a destination. What is behind me is harder to face than what is in front of me. There is no plan except survival and anonymity. I am young, but lucky.”

“Swell. I am old, paranoid by birth and scared of human company by experience. My biggest fear is to be Guantanamo’ed by mistake. All I want is a place to pee and a fresh beer. Philosophy would be nice. I’d like that. Do you have one?”

“If I did you’d ask me to stay?”

“I see your point. Look. Be fair. Mulege is a few villes down the way towards La Paz, my destination. There is a bus. Leave now and you’ll have lunch overlooking the same sea I’ll see in ten minutes.”

“I was on the bus from the border. When we stopped so the drivers could switch, I saw you and hoped I would get lucky.” He watched her as she told her story. “Please no more bus. Can I stay? Can we share? Can we part happy?” She begged. He admired her skills.

“Depends on what the words mean. Stay. I will rent a room with two beds. We can be family. Me dada. You baba. Promise?”

“No. I promise respect.”

“Same thing.” He thought a million thoughts some positive, most chilling and negative. He weighed his feelings. “Stay if you want.”

“Can I have some?”

“A little.” Small amounts of a good thing are the best he thought. A little company without compromises can be comfortable and conscionable. He laughed.

“What?” She asked.

“Alliteration.” He answered. He loved most the surprises of companionship. The laughs for barely humor. Tears for joyful moments. Sex crossed his mind. Sex uncrossed his mind. He thought of his friend in La Paz. He’d call her once he left Mulege. “That’s what friends are for.”

“What?”

“Sorry. Thinking out loud. What’s your name? Wait.” He asked as he reached for a small vial from his pack. “Stick out your tongue.” With a dropper, he gave her a bit of his concoction. She tasted it as she swallowed, reached for her water bottle and chased the LSD down her throat.

“Thank you.” She looked him in the eyes, smiled and cleared her throat. “My parents were environmental activists. They had forest names as they called them. Mine is Persuasion.”

“No doubt. Mine would be Soldier.” He looked back at her. She made eye contact for the first time as he recalled, which meant he made eye contact for the first time as she recalled. They were taken by the experience.

Viejo moved his bags into the room. One he placed in the refrigerator and next to it a six pack of Coronas. She followed him and chose her bed by flopping on it.

“It’s not love.” He said. She laughed.

“What would you know? Are there rules? But no, you are right, there cannot be more than respect between us. Love seems less.”

“Philosophy.”

They did what they did with a respectfully reserved relationship. No one noticed them which was his goal. Time passed, he wasn't sure how many days when he said. “Time to go. Today's the day for Mulege.”

“Already?” She said.

“I'll take you to the hospidaje I told you about. It is near the beach, the bus, a great bar and grill and a pay phone. All of life's necessities.”

Packing took ten minutes and they were out on the highway headed towards the equator.

“This is going to be a short ride.” He said as soon as he had reached highway speed. “Do you have enough money?”

“Yes, Dada.” She said in the voice only a teenager can master.

“Checking, Baba.” He responded with a patience only the elderly can fake.

“Be-ahole, I am glad you care about me. I never imagined you would feel responsible for feeding me. Which brings up the question of who's responsible for feeding the hungry and, you know, all the other things? Are you?”

“Why me?”

“Why not you? Wouldn't you like to do that? Save the world or whatever? I am seventeen. I have never been hungry or whatever. I cannot empathize. I ran from the impossibility of the task.”

“Your parents were failing to save the environment and ...”

“Having a lot of fun at cocktail fundraisers. You know.”

“Saw it. Never went there.”

“How old are you?”

“Your grandfather’s age.”

“Both are gone.”

“Older than them.”

“Someone says ‘ten years from now’ and I grow dim. That’s more than half my life. I guess we are fifty or sixty years apart. I know that about you.” She spoke against the wind.

“Baba, can I say I love you?” He asked and not waiting for her to respond he went on. “Age changes the meaning. There is ferocity at first. It is noble to love. At my age, it is poverty not to care about someone or worse if no one cares about me.”

Persuasion laughed. Viejo Soldier drove. The day was hot. The windows were down the music was up. In less than an hour they were in front of his vision of her hotel. They disembarked, unloaded her stuff, registered her for a room. Back on the street next to the car they shared a short abrazo.

“I’ll miss you.” She said. “It was wonderful to spend time as we did. I wish we had talked more but maybe we’ll cross paths again.”

“Remember the story about me and Viola, the cathedral and the garden. Tell the story often. It’ll keep me alive.” As swiftly as he could he was back in the driver’s seat accelerating away from her.

Persuasion watched Viejo Soldier's car shrink into the distance. Every moment of contact was important to her. Two blocks he turned left and was gone. She turned to see the hotel she was booked into. She spun in a slow 360 taking in as much as she could of her scene. She turned east and decided to find the water.

Viejo Soldier drove south. The sun was high overhead not in his eyes. He noticed because in his search for an excuse for the tears, he hoped it was sun glare. There was none.

"Damn. Foolishness of age. Old enough to be her grandfather... Nice person. Gonna miss the nice person." At his age and condition emotions could run rampant and make his day miserable. He was a loner. No changing that, he thought, better off alone. "Better off alone." He said.

Persuasion walked alone along the foot path on the Río de Santa Rosalía's north bank. She could see the Gulf's water ahead of her. The barrios and the desert surrounded her. Some of the confidence she lost during her recent bus ride from the border through La Frontera to Guerro Negro had returned. Her few days with Be-ahole had been her best in months.

Images from before she met him rushed her comfort zone but her strength of will defeated their ill-effects. The bus from the Tijuana border to a hotel in San Quintin had been an educational journey for a below the border newbie, her first escape from the US. Her first experience was absolute proof the advantages of her life were based on luck of birth – who provided the sperm and who the egg – rather than some deserved reward for good behavior.

She was angry when she crossed the border. Anger made her brave beyond her ability to defend herself. She drew more strength from its exercise and newly drawn back within herself she did the thing the young can do most easily: continue. She stood five feet away from the Gulf's warm waters. She stood and stared and thought. Her stomach growled from hunger. "Grrr." She said in return with certainty. She left her sandals on the sand then continued her walk to the sea. A small wave washed her naked feet as she stared off across the water feeling new. She turned west and walked back to eat, sleep and dream about who she would become.

Viejo Soldier drove. It was a long leg of his journey. The miles of road, twisting through the low mountains, along the seasonally dry river beds, kept him company, as did the speeding trucks and the snail-like vehicles that crept between the small towns he passed year after year without ever stopping. He made a pledge to stop at the next one just to break the habit but, as he knew, it was the beginning of a hundred mile stretch of failed local entrepreneurship. He might have been bummed out at the lack of opportunity, but he knew he was kidding himself. He chuckled at his tricky mind.

Every curve brought him closer, until finally he turned from the highway and headed for La Paz' central city, a hotel, a shower. The first gas station off the highway had a decent bathroom and a payphone in the first stall. He hated his cellphone and used it only when his old ways including a payphone would fail. The stall was empty. He sat down after dialing the phone.

"Hola."

"Hola to you. Robert here. Your old friend."

“Viejo? Is it you? Is it party night?”

“When you off?”

“Six.”

“See you then.”

“Honey, things have changed a little. Hard times. I have a roomy. She is nice but she takes up too much space, if you know what I mean.”

“I’ll get a big suite with a balcony. We can drink champagne and toast the revelers. Will that work?”

“The balcony will be wonderful. The champagne might be too much. I have some chicken soup I can bring if you’re hungry. Maybe a beer is all I need.”

“Party night or good night’s sleep?”

“Sleep tonight party tomorrow. I am so happy to imagine your face in my hands. I might stare.”

“Into my eyes.” He said.

“Maise-y.” She liked to tease him. He always fell for it.

“You mean corny.”

“Oh yeah. Corny.” She said. He could picture her in great detail. For decades, he had been following this path from the Humboldt Bay to the shoreline of La Paz. When he first met Viola, she was a singer in a small bar. Her father owned the bar. Still in high school she was a virgin. Her single parent father protected her from the world. She had a wonderful blues voice with fearless desire to sing her heart out. That was fifty years

ago. He hadn't heard her singing then and she had yet to sing in front of him. It was the first story she told him. Twice a year Robert visited her, once in the late fall and again in the early spring. They were happily in each other's heart. His attachment to Viola was a possession he kept in a safe place, away from the opportunity to lose it. He was a loner with an asterisk for her for their two weeks a year together.

Business had brought him to La Paz the first time and from then on, he came for Viola's company. It was a half hour before sunset when he checked into his favorite hotel. He dropped his bags and made his way to the cathedral to make his visitation to the place they always met. The hotel was 10 blocks from the cathedral. He wasn't sure if the hotel was there when he first came. He remembered walking around La Paz at the time looking for any sight to break his monotony when he 'found' the large stone church and its organic vegetable garden. He passed through the gate to the garden plots. The first time he felt the rush of acceptance that had left him elated and did now and every time no matter how many times he visited it. He felt the amazement again.

He slowly walked through the ironwood, lemon and avocado trees surrounding the large plots of tomatoes and cilantro. That was then, the first time, but now he saw lettuce, onions, carrots and all the rest that made his vegetarian desires peak. Back then she was just standing there, as he walked through the gate. Her back was to him. She belonged there, he thought. He was new. She turned, saw him and smiled. He smiled back. She spoke to him in Spanish. He answered in gringo. She laughed. He laughed.

This time as he walked through the gate he looked at his watch. "Six fifteen." He said. He looked up and she was standing there with her back

to him. He smiled. She felt it and waited for him. He came shoulder to shoulder with her and stood silently with a smile waiting for nothing, feeling the feelings of coming home if not to hearth to heart.

“Tardes.” He said.

“Noches. Did you see the sunset?”

“Pointed the wrong way.”

“I always forget that.”

“You’re cute. How was it?”

“What?”

“The sunset.”

“It brought you.” Viola was not a young woman any longer. Robert was not a young man. They had old ways that ruled their life together. It was a habit they had fashioned into their practice. “For safety’s sake.” He said. She followed. They had many secrets especially from each other.

She turned to stand facing him. Her hands were folded near the place her lap would form. Her head was slightly bowed. She giggled a childish giggle.

His recent periods of LSD enhanced consciousness left him in a colorful dreamland. He thought about how long they had shared a secret space that Adam and Eve would have envied: a place where one can hide from god.

“Sister Viola, as beatific as always.”

“Father Robert, may god’s love warm your soul.”

Persuasion

As soon as one starts hiding from one's past in an already remote and quiet town in a country, the common language unknown to you, where speaking is pointless, one discovers there is almost nothing but time. Mulege was such a town. Persuasion was such a one now safely hidden with a new life most of which lay before her. Alone, as she wanted to be, waiting for the unknown to happen as she shifted her thinking from the densely-populated San Fernando Valley with the too many people to be nice to any one of them to Mulege where the worst thing was she was not exactly alone but one of many hidiers with the same need for anonymity. It began to feel like everyone had taken a vow of silence. Nodding and "Buenas," the reduction of community to acceptance and a one word wish for good luck, was the common fare.

Her pattern of life in Mulege was born in her on the first day and lasted until she left. She called her new habits 'rule by the sun.' Up and down with the sun. She had escaped a life with no meaning, as she saw it, to a way she could not yet describe. She thought about Viejo Soldier, often about the small conversations they had about how he stayed hidden behind his self-diagnosis, and ultimately by always changing his mental state to suit his various internal quests for anonymity. From her perspective, he was on a path she wanted to be on, needed to be on.

Then she really, really missed him. Then she decided to find him.

On her eighteenth birthday, July 5th, she bought a bus ticket to La Paz. It was a long ride with stops in any town with electricity and/or plumbing. Her emersion in a world no one she had known suspected existed was growing deeper and increasingly inescapable. As a stranger no one expected anything from her. She was seen as simply a tourist, a source

of American money if she liked your tortillas or your zapatos. People offered what they had. She smiled and nodded. Said nothing but offered the kindness she imagined she was growing in her soul. She had picked up small gifts, religious icons which she thought of as trading cards of the saints that she distributed as a form of mordida for social acceptance.

“I’ll give you two Saint Francis and a Madonna for a Get Out of Hell Free card.” She said at one stop to a woman selling homemade tamales, who thanked her for the gifts of good travel and comfort. “I know. My reward is in heaven. See you there.” Persuasion said in English. The woman offered her a tamale for lunch. Persuasion gave her 40 pesos and a ‘Gracias’ in return. As she walked away the aroma of the tamale forced her into taking the first bite. She praised herself as she became ever more Mexican if not by culture by ingestion.

The bus eventually arrived at its destination at a station her map said was more than five blocks from the cathedral. Judging that she would not make the walk comfortably with all her gear she found a hotel three blocks further away from the cathedral. When she first crossed into Mexico she had a day pack and her computer. In three months that changed as she gathered momentos and mordida for the road. Now she felt like her version of a travelling saleswoman with ointments for ailments of all kinds in a rolling suitcase, a full backpack plus a belt that held her water and emergency aid including a fancy knife for cutting vegetables. “Survive. Thrive. Be alive.” She said as she walked through the old city.

When Persuasion entered the Hotel Hacienda Bugambilias with all her baggage in tow a woman holding a beer bottle ran through the lobby

screaming nonsense in English followed by a same aged male begging her to come back to their room. No one seemed to mind. The lobby was populated with Michiganders on holiday. The couple blended in. She giggled at the thought. Viejo Soldier jumped into her mind. “He has been here. I can feel the energy he’s gotten from this.” She said as she reached the desk. “Persuasion.” She said to the old clerk. “I have no reservations.”

“Good. Neither does anyone else here.” The clerk said with a slide into a snide grin. “We happen to have two vacancies. One up. One down.”

“Which is best?”

“Down, near the pool can be OK depending on who is upstairs and what they do. If you know ...”

“What I mean. Heard it before. Up, please. Tell the downs I am quiet. I need my sleep.” She smiled a keep your hands off me smile. “Can I pay you in pesos?”

As her arrival portended, her return to the street from her room taking the pool tour, as she called it, was exciting, potentially dangerous and enlightening. “Why would Be-ahole stay here?” Then she got it. “Ah, that’s it. This is not the closest hotel to the cathedral.”

A brainwave is a mental marvel that ends in “Ah.” The realization about the nearness was the first sighting and the crash upon the shore of the mind was a delight. “They are living secret lives. Ah, now I get it.”

It took her a long time to reach her objective, as measured by her impatience, the cathedral, Catedral de Nuestra Señora de La Paz. She came to what must have been the gate Be-ahole went through that first

evening. She was early. Not much early. She walked through the ironwoods, the lemon and avocado trees. "The gate." She said. She stopped and turned back to see the path canopied by the trees. The breeze rustled the leaves in light waves, hypnotic and soothing. "A new world."

She turned back again and saw a woman wearing a robe such as a nun might wear. The woman was standing in the garden having watched the sunset. Persuasion had no limit to her imagination.

"Viola?"

Robert Fall 1966

He left La Paz the next morning after they met. He repeatedly revisited his memory and meta-memory recollections searching for meaning in the meeting. Her name was Viola. She looked young and brown. He knew little Spanish. But he deduced that her father owned a cantina, and she sang blues songs. She wanted to take vows, he assumed to be a nun. That was from ten minutes sitting in the garden, apart as was the custom, she said. He knew where he was going in life, practically an alien being no matter where he went, he was going to be a poet. He was destined. He had found an elixir for his imagination. He would follow her if she was his muse. He was certain that was how choosing a life's path was done.

He left the garden behind him. His mind buzzed in this direction and that all surrounding the ten-minute introduction with no way to reconnect. It buzzed until he landed at LAX. One look around inside the terminal and he lost touch with his thin recollections of the day before. Time passed.

By the time, months later, in the spring of 1967, he sat in Santa Rosalia at the then beige hotel, on the Mar Barmejo's veranda overlooking the Vermillion Sea with a cold beer and a funny grin, he was committed to staying right where he was until he could come up with a reason to go further.

Viola Winter 1966

She was not so deep in a mystery as he. She was alone. Her life had shifted from a little family of her father and herself. One night in late winter as he was closing the bar he keeled over dead. A sheltered girl, the monastery took her in. The monastery was inhabited by two elder nuns who loved to eat but not to farm. They needed help to keep their trees healthy and to plant, tend and harvest the crops needed to keep them fit. In late-fall Viola had taken to visiting the garden every day. When the sisters learned she was living alone they invited her to take a room in the monastery and to tend the garden. She was in the garden every day from early morning to late afternoon and then at sunset.

It was then as she stood admiring the sunset that she saw Father Robert's face in her memory. She wished him there, but he was not. She wondered at her desire to see him again. She thought about how they would regard each other. He was a priest he had said though he didn't dress like one. He said he was on vacation. She saw no need to question him. That day they sat apart for ten minutes trying to find a language to speak, a vocabulary to explain how wonderful it was to find such a beautiful being in such a beautiful place. He left. She waited. That was her conclusion about their meeting.

Robert Spring 1967 On the road headed south

Robert drove through the desert. He liked the wind rushing through the car. On the long unpopulated stretches of road south of the border between San Isidro, CA US and the border between Norte and Sur he could hit a top speed of 60 mph in his red VW Beetle. He had been letting his hair grow longer to match the beatnik style his life in San Francisco exposed him to.

Once he had reached San Marcos he found that the desert was not quite empty as he had imagined. There were uninhabited spots but for a mile or more, here and there, the signs of entrepreneurship, even stretches that resembled a giant strip mall, were evident especially where there were also large employers such as agricultural operations processing avocados or tomatoes. There were growing populations creating colorful hodge-podge towns built of whatever anyone could commandeer for building materials.

South of San Marcos he could see the ocean again on the long straight road that was punctuated with wash outs and flash floods zones called Vados.

Then the scene changed dramatically into fields of boulders, giant rock piles next to the remains of volcanos that were no doubt responsible for the boulders strewn for miles about. In between was a form of life he had never seen. Cacti of varying shades of green and gray colors, some were spires of flowers, red, yellow and green

The wind blew through his lengthening locks for most of the six hours the first leg into Mexico would last. By the time his day ended his hair

would be in tangles. He spent an hour unraveling it once he reached a motel in Guerrero Negro.

He took the morning to explore the town. In La Paz, he had found the Mexican confection he remembered as dulce. He found a bakery open early and began a fifty-year habit.

“Una bolsita de dulce, por favor.” He pointed towards the puffy cookies with pink frosting. Remembering an old joke, he added. “S, O, C, K, S.”

“Si, Señor. Cinco pesos.”

This was his first overland trip to La Paz. He had flown last spring – his first time to Baja. His patrons, a pair of over-moneyed locals, a father and son, living in a small hacienda on the southern edge of the old town, had recommended the drive if he ever returned. At the time, he had no idea he would. Now, four months later he was headed for another visit. He might surprise his patrons, but he doubted it. He was searching for his real reason to make the trip even as he sped away from town to the south and east following the main road. This is where the road crosses the Vizcaíno. He checked his map. “Santa Rosalia.”

This road was not a 60-mph road. Animals, potholes, wash outs, rising creeks and flash floods made the journey harrowing but by luck he made the crossing early enough to find lodging in a newly painted beige hotel called Mar Bermejo. He rented a room with a view of the water. The owner must have loved the view because the grounds and his room showed a caring that was surprising considering what he knew of the poverty of the populace of Baja Sur. The owner found someone to keep his electrical and cooling systems running. Anyone from the region knew the value of refrigeration. Robert loved the nearby access to cold beer

and a room cooled to 80 degrees from the 100 plus outside. He didn't use the air conditioner in his rented car. He thought it stunk like stale cigarettes.

Once in the hotel he had nothing to do except enjoy his new surroundings. He thought all day. Sometimes he took notes. Sometimes he woke from a dream with wild ideas. Sometimes he took his sacrament, as he described it, that gave him access to other worlds free of judgements or rules.

With whatever tools he had he contemplated the direction of his life. He made lists. None of them had her name on them. He methodically eliminated every option from his lists.

"Nothing." He stood to stare at the sea. After a few moments and a sigh he returned to his table which held his writing materials.

"Viola." He wrote. "It must be her." He said.

Persuasion Spring 1967

Her father's parents met at the opening of a new restaurant on the Berkeley Coast as they later referred to what they could see from across the Bay from San Francisco out of their 1 Market Place condo's windows on a clear night. They shared a glass of white wine and talked about candidates for governor, the stock market, sexual preferences, places of reference, time frames for the evening and exchanged cards. He left in his Porche, she in her Mercedes.

An only child, her father, educated as a lawyer at Stanford University, became famous as an attorney to the Stars. He had moved to the San Fernando Valley, leaving his parents to rule their home turf without him.

In 1998, he married one of his blond and beautiful clients with whom he sired an only child who he called Angel, but his wife called Trouble. Either way the father was too busy to raise her, and her mother fell in love again but this time with opioids that left the soon to be Persuasion to travel up and down the State from the empty parents' home to her Grandparents' 1 Market Place condo, filled with artwork of the San Francisco art and poetry scene.

Robert Spring 1967

He sat in his car his hands squeezing the steering wheel. He looked at himself in the rearview. He thought he looked serious. He pulled the map out and in a few seconds his finger found the road south, going west and south then east he found La Paz and the cathedral.

“It’s her.” He said while he put the car in gear. “Here we go.” There would never be another trip like his first. When that thought passed through his mind he pulled over on the roadside and found a small vial in his pack. “This’ll help.” A few drops, a little water. “Here we go.”

The long rides up and down mountain passes left him hours to contemplate the universe, the meaning of serenity, the pleasure of art. He thought about the sweetest words he could say and then he thought about who he wanted to be, and his thoughts stopped. The road had hypnotized him. He drove on for miles behind a slow produce truck that finally turned off into Ciudad Loreto. He followed it off the highway before he realized he went the wrong way.

He wasn’t hungry or thirsty. He didn’t think a nap would do him any good. He turned back around and drove, and he drove, until he saw the Gulf again, a city on the horizon. He traced what he could see of the tall buildings and the shoreline.

When he was in La Paz last spring he roamed the marinas looking at boats. Boats are travelers. Travelers are interesting. He went into a marina bar for a beer. Others had had the same idea, and some had been there a long time.

“Who are you?” One asked.

“Just flew in. Tell me your story.”

“Buy me a brew.”

“OK. One, so it better be a short story.”

“Not around here.” He went on about the number of people who had sailed into La Paz and never left. He talked about the Spanish fleet being stuck in the bay unable to escape. The wind was called the Coromuel.

“Every day is the same. Check the maps. The wind blows you in. You have a few beers. Why leave? The wind’s against you all the way around and north. Maybe tomorrow will be better.”

Robert went back to that bar every day. Every day he listened to the stories about the ones who could not escape. One day, the day after he met her, he boarded a flight to LAX and left them to their own devices. Four months later as he drove into La Paz for the first time from the only road south to La Paz he realized how like a sailor he was. How could he leave he thought? He hadn’t driven through the desert to leave. Now that he was here it might be a long time before he headed north. He drove past the marina to the cathedral and then he circled looking for a room to rent. The one that caught his eye first, was ten blocks east of the cathedral. It was an alabaster fortress partially covered with bougainvillea’s. He parked in front of a door marked ‘Oficina.’

When he opened the door to the office there was a little voice coming from the front desk.

“Si, Señor.” The clerk was a diminutive young man who cursorily examined Robert, decided he couldn’t speak Spanish and quickly made a few other easy assessments as well. “We have vacancies. I should warn you that we have a group of Midwesterners from Traverse City,

Michigan coming in for the weekend. They are like horses out of a corral, if you know what I mean. Anyway, you might like them. Shall I show you around or do you like exploring on your own?"

"Sounds fun. Sign me up and I'll find my own way."

"Thought you might. Fill-in this and here and sign at the X. I should also warn you John Doe is not a name here so don't try that. You can pay in Pesos or Dollars. I have today's exchange rate." The clerk said sweeping up the dollars and giving him a receipt and a brass key on a neck chain. He then gathered the registration form and the pen. "Everything is in order. Thank you, Señor."

His baggage safe in his room, Robert walked across the plaza central to the rectangular two-story structure. The main feature was the pool surrounded by several lighted arches that enhanced the romantic nature of La Paz. He found the office and exited without paying any attention to the dozen or so fairly-drunk 30-year-olds who were harassing the clerk with laughter and promises to do lewd things to him. The sun was setting, and the crazy was coming out.

Once in the street he consulted his map and set-off to the northwest. He wondered if he had chosen the correct direction. As he was walking he could see the sunset. Then he saw the cathedral spires, then the gate. He entered. He saw the arching trees' canopy and the gardens beyond. He walked through the garden as the last light faded from the day. What was he after? He was alone. Better off alone. He turned and walked back through the trees. As he reached the gate and a second before his intended departure she spoke.

“Father Robert. Is that you?” She said in English from memory. She had practiced these words often.

He turned towards the sound of her voice. As he did she stood before him. Dressed in the light brown robes the monastery required. They looked at each other for clues about the meaning of the moment.

“Yes. I missed you.” He said in his practiced Spanish. “I came back to find you. Have you taken vows?” And then in English, “You are dressed...”

“Si, pero ...” She said.

“Then Sister Viola, contento.”

“Contento de verte, Padre Roberto.” Her head bowed, her hands pressed flat against her thighs. “Dios tenga misericordia.”

Persuasion

“Viola? Sister Viola, is that you?” Persuasion watched as the nun in the garden rose from her knees, so she could turn to look at who was calling her by a name only one person knew, and now two.

The young woman walked towards the elder woman. “I found you.”

“Only, now I am lost.” Viola was a gardener. She dressed against the elements to preserve her skin from disease. She looked like a nun, her clothes were hand me downs from the two sisters who had given her a home. Nearly a half century had passed as they had. There were no nuns left. Only Viola and one other woman the priest brought in to keep her company and to tend to her aging needs lived in the stone building.

“I met Viejo Soldier, Robert, in the spring on his trip to visit you. I missed him. I tried to find you in the hopes he would be here with you.”

“Too early but who can tell? Such a man can be anywhere at any time. What is your name?” Viola spoke to her feet in a soft voice. Persuasion moved towards her to hear her. Viola looked up. “He told me about you. You are Persuasion.”

“Yes.”

“You look well. I assume you are at the Hotel. Father Robert and I stay there.”

“It is a world outside this one.” Persuasion said. “Can we sit? Do you want to walk?” Viola reached out, her hand laced through the crook of Persuasion’s elbow and tugged her out the gate into the street, now quiet in the gathering darkness. Viola pulled her robe over her head

revealing old levies, a t-shirt and sandals. The robe she placed near the gate, in a little box dedicated to the purpose, and off they went.

“Father Robert told me what to do if you were to come by. He said to tell you about our life together to hide nothing of any kind. I am famished. Let’s go out for flan and a glass of brandy. I know the place. Keep up.”

Viola and Persuasion could have been sisters if one overlooked the fifty years’ difference in ages. They were similar in stature. Their clothing of the same elements. They knew next to nothing about each other’s life but more than anyone else they knew about Robert’s.

“In fifty years, you are the first person he has sent to me or who has known how to find me. I bet you tricked him on one of his journey days and he was unaware of who you were to become. But of course, now he knows.”

“How?”

“He said you caught him with his mouth full. It’s idiomatic? No?” She said. “When he and I met, we had little common language. I have learned English from a local teacher. Viejo isn’t very good at Spanish.”

“Me either.”

“I noticed.” Viola also noticed Persuasion had an infectious smile. “He told me you joined him on his journey even if he didn’t want you to. He wouldn’t let me join him. You are special, but who isn’t?”

Persuasion felt in over her head.

The walk towards the marina was the most urban the old city had to offer. It was after seven and dark. The temperature was mild. No one was chasing them. They walked calmly neither feeling a need to talk. It was three blocks. Nothing happened. No one expected anything to happen.

They walked into the oldest center of the city into the narrow streets with two and three-story buildings the kind with flowery balconies. Viola leaned towards Persuasion and whispered "I might have lived here as a prostitute, but I could sing. The nuns and the priest at the cathedral wanted me to sing for them. My father arranged it. The priest wanted me to continue so I continued to sing even after my father died." She stopped in front of one of the buildings. "Here we are. Wait for me I will be back." She pulled open a wooden door in a tall metal fence and disappeared down the alley between the building and its neighbor.

Persuasion did as she was told and waited. As she stood in the tree lined street, she noticed the details in her surroundings. The buildings on this street were built next to each other, often sharing walls to preserve their back yards from the street. Viola's building was a brick and wooden three story about as big as a four-bedroom house in the San Fernando Valley. The balcony over the street was painted blue. The railing on the balcony was the work of a master carpenter. The posts that held the balcony up above the sidewalk were hand carved as were the ones that held the roof above it. She imagined standing there with a glass of white wine watching the traffic and talking about the day's events with her closest friend.

The front door opened, and Viola stuck her head out to invite her in. The curtains on the windows were so thick no light escaped. Persuasion was shocked at the light and sounds that escaped the door into the street.

“Ven aqui. Ven chica.” She said. “Everything is good.” She stood back to let her in and closed the door behind her.

Robert 1976

After a November sunset, Robert found Viola where she waited for him in the garden looking after the last light coming over the mountain tops to the west.

He watched her contemplations from behind her suspecting she could sense his presence. When he had studied her standing meditation enough, he took the three steps to be by her side. They had only once touched one another outside their solitude in Robert's room at the Bugambilias. They had taken to sleeping in the monastery occasionally since no one else did. There they had different rules.

She stood with her hands folded against her thighs. He stood quivering with the desire for her company that moved him to drive for five days to be with her in their secret life.

"Hola, Father Robert. God is good."

"Hola, Sister Viola, my friend."

She turned to see his face. Feeling brave, Robert turned to look into her eyes.

"If I were not who you thought I was, would you hate me?" He said.

"Which one? Do I hate the real you I don't know or the dream you who doesn't exist?" Viola was sincere and laughing.

He laughed. "Are you afraid?" He asked.

"I am afraid." Viola with her arms tight around her torso shivered, feigning a chill.

"Are you afraid of the unknown or the imagined?"

“I am afraid I love you or the idea of you. I can’t tell yet?”

“Exactly my thoughts.” Robert said.

The sun beyond sight, they walked to their room at the Hacienda, the same room 43. As they walked through the door, as had been their custom they closed the door, and without taking an unnecessary step, kissed.

Viola held him by his hands. “Robert, we both have secrets, yet we have known each other for ten years.”

“Twenty times I have made the trip south to be with you and you have been here. Knowing each other’s secrets might change how we feel for each other. I love you as you are in my memory without knowing the secrets. Keep them if you can.”

“You are funny, Robert. One day the Coromuel will keep you and I can keep you, too.” Viola went into the bathroom while he pulled his clothes from his body. She came out crawled in beside him, touched him. They fell asleep.

Viola and Persuasion

They stood beyond the closed and bolted door. Viola turned to lead Persuasion through the brightly colored bar in full light. The music came from a professional music system and once inside it was loud. Viola adjusted the volume and set up a play list of blues artists. As she passed the first partition leading to a stair leading upward, she snapped the lights off in the bar and a quieter light on above the stair.

The landing had a wet bar over a small refrigerator. Inside the fridge was a pan of flan and a knife. Viola cut two pieces one large and one small placing them on two small plates with forks. She took a bottle from the shelf above the sink and poured a half inch in each of two short stemmed glasses. Handing the large piece of flan and a glass to Persuasion she turned with her plate and glass and headed out onto the balcony.

In one corner was a table for two. They set their sweets and alcohol on the table. Viola sipped and chewed. Persuasion stood at the railing and searched the street to its narrow horizon for sites to see. The music below could be heard above, and she swayed slowly to the voice that moved Viola's heart. She guessed Sarah Vaughn. The sounds and the tastes of the evening flowed over and through them.

"Did you ever have sex?" Persuasion asked out of the blue.

"Did we ever break our vows? We have been together for 50 years. My memory fades. I remember wanting to touch him. Lust is a sin." Viola looked at Persuasion with her young eyes holding an image of the moment. "To answer a question one never anticipated being asked is to

first beg for the time to toss it around this way and that to see how it fits in one's personal philosophy." Viola lapsed into quiet.

Persuasion sat across from her and poked at her flan until she had the right amount on her fork. She looked up to see Viola watching her. She was.

As Persuasion put the flan in her mouth, Viola spoke again. "We met in the garden. We sat in silence in the garden with dozens of flowers blooming, bees and birds fertilizing what would become our dinners a few days, weeks or months from then. Neither of us spoke. Awareness was within for peace and out for life.

"Father Robert is my family. The death of my father left me an orphan at 17. My chance encounter with Father Robert saved me from dying on the street below."

"Is this building the cantina? Did you live here?"

"Yes. After my father died I moved to the monastery. The cathedral had not been part of my life other than the singing. But Father Robert met me there and when he left I frequented it hoping he would return. He did. My going there every day drew the nuns' attention." She spent a few breaths for the memories of so long ago she wasn't sure if they were real. "You may not remember everything that happened perfectly but as you get older there are fewer people to dispute your version of the past." They laughed together at the trickery of their minds.

Persuasion stood quietly waiting for the gears in the aging Viola's head to grind up her memories and produce her history. In the other corner Viola moved to a swinging chair that was hanging from the balcony roof overlooking Calle de Ignacio Zaragoza. Persuasion leaned forward

against the railing gazing down into the calle. The two had been there a while. The brandy and sweets moved their spirits.

Persuasion could feel the tension between Viola and Robert, the obvious hiding of truth, the fantasy instead of reality.

“You people are books. There is no way your lives have been simple. Nothing I know about either of you says ordinary. I think I need to know how you regarded what transpired between you. Did you touch one another?”

“Listen to you? You make me laugh.” Viola said in reply. “Today at sunset you appear in my world with no warning, yet I know about you and you about me. I think Father Robert and I touched many times in many ways. Always with respect. Often for pleasure, the yearning for which has faded replaced by a longing to share life a while longer. We have always been Father Robert and Sister Viola. We have always been living this secret life together.”

“Were you looking for someone ...?” Persuasion silenced herself as she realized a new vision from her own recent experiences. “Why were you in the garden that day – the day you met?”

“My father was very confining. There were few places I could go alone. The cathedral was one. I went there that day to take a free breath and watch the sunset.” Viola spoke from her memory where she could feel the energy of a young woman who sought to answer the questions of life, who am I and what will I do? The sunset was her adoration of the creation that provided this beauty.

“I went to watch the sunset as often as I could and after I met Robert I went every day at first in case he returned. I did not want to miss him.

The garden and the sunset was all that connected us. I still adore the sunset, even if he is here.”

Viejo Soldier Last Spring

Persuasion sipped her mango juice as Viejo drank his beer. The Santa Rosalia bar they sat in was under a palapa, a thatched roof structure with open sides. Santa Rosalia had grown into a tourist destination after the state improved the road for year-round traveling. Places like the palapa bar, started more than twenty years ago as the road was improved were recent and still novel as far as Robert was concerned.

She had no idea about what made him talk. He didn't respond to questions in a clear way. He seemed to like her company, and this was enough to get him going. She sipped her juice and watched his face, waiting.

"The first time I went to the garden I did not know where I was going. It was sunset. I came upon an open gate. I entered. It was my first visit to La Paz. I knew only one person in Mexico - the benefactors who supported my work." He spoke into the sky. "I was on a mission of sorts. It might have been La Paz itself. Romantic. Unfathomable. Mysterious. I wanted to be part of that. The garden accentuated all of that and there she was."

The pelicans were fishing in the waves a dozen meters offshore. The sounds of the gulls attending the pelicans for scraps left behind mixed with the sounds of the waves themselves made conversation slow.

They sipped and nibbled on the fajitas served to the bar patrons.

Persuasion knew he could tell a truth larger than was believable.

“Viejo, we are here for different reasons. I am on the run.” She paused as a truck drove by. “You are a secret. Or maybe I am a secret and you are on the run.”

They burst into laughter at the tortured connection they had discovered.

Viola

Persuasion sat quietly letting Viola's wheels turn. They were on the balcony. No one had passed by on the street below for several minutes. Persuasion had asked her what she remembered of the moment she first saw him.

"I heard him behind me. I turned to see him. I recognized him as the one in my dream."

"What dream?" Persuasion loved these kinds of conversations where things were revealed. This was amazing to her to hear from someone fifty years older talking about her first encounter with love at age seventeen.

"At the time, I had a recurring dream about taking vows of poverty and chastity and all the rest. As I was repeating the words that made the vows, a man would appear and interrupt my speech. He looked into me. He said nothing. He smiled, and the dream ended. It lasted until the day we met. I smiled first in the recognition of an old friend. Then he smiled at me as if I were not a stranger."

They sipped and nibbled. The brandy and the flan took time to taste and silence between them abided until the world beyond them interfered with the perfection of the moment. As the offending sound diminished Persuasion was not.

"Viola, how is it you were sheltered by the monastery, while you appear to own this building the beauty of which astounds me?"

Viola had a fork full of flan enroute to her mouth on the word 'monastery' and stopped on the word 'building.' Her fork found the plate. Viola's eyes found Persuasion's.

Persuasion

None of the summer heat passed. Nothing changed day to day. It might rain. The Coromuel might blow. The wind might not blow at all. The heat might rise. Persuasion wandered busily around the garden, given orders from Viola to weed or to water.

The days began with waking in the monastery in a cell made of brick blocks with a high window that opened to the garden. Viola left in the last hour of darkness to the cantina to check the locks and balance the ledgers before anyone else would notice she was awake. She knew the names of the street cleaners who she greeted and asked after their families.

The summer weeks flowed by. Persuasion had what she needed. She could not have found a better place to find anonymity or solitude.

Still weeks from the time Robert usually arrived in La Paz for his fall visit the phone rang in Viola's room – an unusual event in any case. It was past her bedtime. It was midnight.

"Viola, it's Viejo."

"Your voice. Are you coming this way?" Viola said as she wiped the sleep from her face.

"I'm here. Outside. Near the gate. I need you." His effort to stay conscious ended.

The next morning Robert woke in a bed in the middle of a small room with a cane backed chair in one corner. His first thought was a feeling of familiarity with the room. His eyes roamed slowly across the walls. A crucifix caught his attention, then a small window with an avocado tree

blocking the sunshine, then a narrow door. "The monastery." He said. His aching body told him not to move, pain was moments away. He moved his fingers. He flexed his toes. Then a memory flashed through his explorations. He let thoughts of decay and death flow past him.

The door opened, and Persuasion walked in appropriately dressed for a catholic women's hostel in brown robes and a hood that covered her short hair.

"Be-ahole." She said when she saw his eyes move. "You're just the man I came to see."

He said nothing. He didn't try. She walked to the edge of his bed and lifted the blanket to reveal a web of leather belts that Viola had told her were part of the history of the monastery. She said something about bouts of insanity that afflicted some of the prior inhabitants.

"Notice that you are restrained from movement. You asked for that last night. I found the belts that were used for others before you. If you ask I will remove them."

His eyes continued to play about the room falling again on the things that interested him from his prior search but now included her and the belts that held him.

"Oh." He said. "Belts. Now I remember. I was afraid, more than usual, I think."

She had carried a bottle of water when she came into the room which she now offered to his eyes to see. "Wanna drink?"

"Hmm." He said. "Please, Baba." He remained still. His body was as at ease as he could get.

“Well, old friend, you must sit up if you can. Shall I release you?”

“First tell me what happened last night, only then can I tell if I am safe to be freed.”

“You were hiding in your car outside the garden gate. You called Sister Viola on your cell and asked for help. We came out and found you. We led you into this room and here you are.”

“What did I say?”

“You were afraid, I think of hurting yourself. It was about your sacrament. You might have taken more than was comfortable.”

“How did I seem?”

“Tired. Maybe frightened. Maybe what was going on in your head scared you. We would have sat up with you, but you didn’t want that. Maybe you were afraid for us, too.” Persuasion reached down to his wrist and hand. She held his fingers. “You are here, warm, therefore still alive. Case you wondered. I am glad to hear your mind at work in a normal way.”

“How long have I been here?”

“It is almost vespers.” She said while she automatically folded her hands within the sleeves of her robe. “4-ish. You arrived after midnight. You have been here in this room for over fifteen hours.”

“Persuasion, I am surprised at the ‘vespers’ coming from you.”

“Quick learner. Everyone here is as phony as a two-dollar bill. The robe holds off suspicion and a few well used terms ensure no one will pay attention to us.”

“Us? Phony as a two-dollar bill? Where did you pick that up?”

“I took the same vows Viola took, so I am one of hers.” Persuasion smiled a version of Viola’s beatific grin. He saw it for what it was. In his mind, whatever moved Persuasion may have been his doing.

“Leave me here to die.”

“No silly. We love you too much. If you want I will leave you for a few more hours.”

“OK. But the water sounded good.”

“Should I unleash you?”

“Not yet. I need to do this at the right time when it is safe again. Help me drink slowly. A little spill won’t hurt.”

She put water into a small glass and held it on his lips. He sipped. She poured. He choked a bit but smiled. “Thanks.”

Persuasion left. He closed his eyes attempting to return to unconsciousness.

When he woke again it was dark. Viola was near the head of his bed. She was bathing him, cleaning his night messes, readying him for burial he thought when he woke into his consciousness of her. He did not show her he was awake. Her attentions were enough. He would wait to hear her voice until she finished.

Robert 1987

The Malecon is La Pazian for the quay, the boardwalk, the marina. To Robert it was the end of a walk or the beginning of an afternoon watching the goings on from a stool in a bar with a view of the water. There were many fine establishments to choose from. After two decades, he noticed how different each one was. Each had its own special aroma and taste. Everyone had clientele but each one had a different set, each one in its own imaginary world.

What is real and what imaginary? This was the question he pondered in moments on his journey, in his affections, in every part of his odd life. His mind had been 'expanded.' It was his do-it-yourself project for a lifetime.

The experiment was part of his search for meaning in life. Being odd he did odd things, he had odd friends in odd circumstances and had a very odd family.

Viola was at the garden every day of his week stay. He was in La Paz. They would meet at sunset as Father and Sister and emerge as two lovers heading for company, food and pleasure as they needed it.

But the hours between dawn and sunset were Robert's to spend alone. He carried a black and white composition book with him as he walked from one end to the other of the Malecon. He would stop at an establishment and order a Pacifico or a Corona, order a bite of food, and sit for an hour writing. For the most part, he wrote about himself, in a language devoid of self-blame and of self-incrimination. He was driven to discover his inner world as if his internal environment were another planet and he was the first sentient being on it.

Persuasion and Viejo last Spring

“Who are you?” Persuasion had many questions and the time she and Viejo spent together at the yellow motel generated more and more.

“Who am I?” He laughed as he answered her. “You are probably a better witness than I am. It’s not that I haven’t worked on figuring it out. I have. It’s just not simple.”

Persuasion sat on her bed looking across the hotel room at Robert laying on his. It was hot. The air conditioner was running. It was much hotter outside, so they put up with the noise. “How did you take to ingesting mind altering substances?”

“Just acid. Nothing else. It is my medicine, now I say my sacrament. It was prescribed at first but now I have my own supply, so I do as seems best to me.”

“I have had a few hits the last two years, but I take it for the laughs.” She flopped backwards onto her bed. “Boredom is my problem what’s yours?”

“My past, as short as it was, before I met the woman in my life, was about a war of sorts that left me with bad dreams and depression. It’s difficult to talk about without bringing the worst parts of it back to life.” He rolled off his bed and walked to the window that faced the sea. He pulled back the curtain far enough to see the sun was no longer beating on the glass. It was past noon.

“Sorry. Don’t mean to pry.”

“No need. There has not been anyone like you in my life. Talking is good today.”

“How does Acid help you?” Persuasion was quick to ask while he was answering.

“In a world of internal confusion, nature is better than man made orderliness. Hospitals, freeways and TV freak me out. Blizzards are from heaven in comparison. The desert, this one especially is chaotic and welcoming. Cities are too cold, distant. I need to be empathic with my surroundings. Chaos inside needs chaos outside.” In his mind, he thought he must keep moving generating electricity in his veins as he passed through the waves of magnetic energy emitted from the earth so he would not dissolve into fear.

“That is what you learned from those experiences? That you could be happiest living in chaos?” Persuasion grimaced at his illogic but then who could expect logic to come from chaos?

He finished pulling back the drapes, one by one across a twenty-foot span of windows revealing the Sea before them. She loved this moment in the day when she could lounge on her bed and watch the waves while the pelicans danced on the surface. There are a few minutes when the waves sparkled reflecting the sun’s rays in a dazzling display. Persuasion was becoming new, admiring creation, ... not creation, she thought, another idea was needed.

“What do you call it?”

“What?”

“That.” She said waving her arms apart indicating everything she could see before her through the open curtains. “The Sea for starters.”

“Ah, That.” He laughed. He looked at her. He saw what she saw. “The really big That.”

“Yeah, That. Why do my eyes feast on That? What is the pleasure I feel when I see it, at this moment, when the blinds are open, when nothing is hidden?”

“When there are no secrets?”

“Exactly. Except, what do you call it?”

“Home.”

“Clever. I like it. Home.” She watched the swells for a few minutes. He pulled a spiral notebook from his pack, sat at the table near the refrigerator with the beer and began to write notes. A daily habit he described as “a memory, so I can forget.” He took a beer from the fridge, sipped some, wrote some, sipped more and so on. He was thinking some thought, a memory, as he was writing, and he began to see who Persuasion was.

“Why don’t you use a computer?” She asked. She did not offer a sorry for breaking his train of thought.

“Wrong tool.”

“What is the right tool?”

“I was right a few days ago, that you are important to me. You are my new muse. Right now, I need to listen to you, to learn from you.” He looked up at her. “You are the right tool.”

“Oh. Sounds possessive, unhealthy. I am a kid still. Calling me a tool sounds negative.” She wasn’t mad or sad. She was having a feeling. He

had told her about his, how ideas cross his mind in several shapes and sizes, moving at different speeds. She saw this one floating there almost in front of her. She grabbed it. “Wait. Give me a minute. That feeling wasn’t right. It lacks courage.”

They didn’t talk for most of the rest of the day. They walked to the beach at sunset. It was warm, a cooling breeze coming off the Sea.

“I am glad you have a woman in your life.” She said to him when he caught up to her at the point where a rock outcropping forced them to return. “Maybe she is your age. Maybe you love her for how she was your muse and now you are looking for another one. Not looking for a love, just a muse. If so, let her rip. I am having a good time.”

“There is no urgency. There is inevitability, as in, if not now then sooner or later. You feel me?”

“OK. What do I have to do?”

“Hmm. Nothing intentional, just be you, as you have been.”

They walked the beach back to a small restaurant for fish tacos and Coronas. Their focus changed to nourishment and drink.

“None of this was here years a few years ago.” He swirled the last half inch of beer in the bottom of the bottle and quaffed it. “Good. This is good to enjoy. I love being here for a short time for as long as I have ideas to carry me through my day. Your job, the muse thing, is done best with no effort at all. You are not becoming: you are. If we never talk again, I still have my memories malleable and ever changing. Can’t get enough of those kinds of memories.”

“Who are you to me do you think?”

“Hmm. I am on a journey. You have followed for a ways, while on your own trail. I am in your memory. I might be a burden. If so, put me down. If not, then we travel in and with each other as companions no matter where you or I might be.”

“We are alike. Are there others like us?”

“I think we are alike. There are others. Viola.”

“Viola?”

“The woman in my life.”

Viola

She never knew when the phone might ring, and he would say Hola. It's Viejo. He hadn't always called himself that. It was only a few years back that he started. He used to say Robert, never Father Robert. He said secrets must be kept. He only called her Sister in the garden. He always met her at sunset or soon thereafter.

As these memories filled her mind, she sat with him in the monastery's infirmary. She admired his serious face, serious like a sunflower, shining his love for her. He looked tired. His journey has been long. Their secret life had been their home. This was where her thoughts grew thorny, where she often lost her way trying this path and that to avoid the obvious and uncomfortable problems they faced now that their secret life was over.

Persuasion and Viola July their first night continued

Sitting at the small table on the balcony overlooking Calle de Ignacio Zaragoza, Viola sipped her brandy. Her flan was half eaten. She sat thinking about the unsettled feeling she had from Persuasion sharing her secret life. She was standing at the railing ignoring her post-sunset treats at Viola's cantina.

"Persuasion, sit, nibble a little, tipple a little."

"Tipple? That sounds risqué." She sat as asked and put a forkful in her mouth followed by hmm. "Good, my god, this is amazing." She tippled followed by a more hesitant hmm.

"I hear you. There are a few slippery slopes in this way of life. While you eat, I will tell you something even Viejo Soldier doesn't know."

Persuasion settled into her chair slowly moving the flan onto her fork and into her mouth as she listened. Viola stood and walked to the railing looking down into the empty street. She remembered other evenings decades ago when the comings and goings would last all night.

When her father died, he owned the building and the land beneath it, plus all the buildings on his side of the block. He was a master of the redlight businesses that were plentiful in La Paz. When he died, he left her a large amount of money and property. She was conventionally rich, independent and secure. Today, she owned the hotels Robert loved in Guerro Negro, Santa Rosalia, and La Paz. The rooms he loved were always vacant and ready for him even though he was not aware of her wealth. She paid for the upkeep of the cathedral. The sisters who kept the rooms were gone replaced by the gardeners. The priest was happy. She sang at his Masses.

She was raised to be alone and silent. Raised for the monastery she would say. "It's true. My childhood was spent with the nuns while my father ran the immoral district. I was sheltered from knowledge of his sins which I in turn would commit but in my way." Persuasion listened attempting to match what she knew with what she was just learning. Viola sipped and chewed and alternately talked.

"Viola your secrets are numerous. Robert, Father Robert, believes you are Sister Viola abandoned to the life of a monastery."

"It is true. I needed support. I was too young to run my father's businesses out in the open and I may have tried if ..."

"If you hadn't stumbled onto Robert or he into you."

"There was Father Robert. He was real. After our first meeting, I looked for him every sunset hoping he returned. In between his first visit and his next my father died. Robert returned. I moved into the monastery to be safe and to be Sister Viola for Father Robert. When I turned eighteen, I took over the property. Over time the night pleasure businesses closed, and new things grew. No one knew what happened. There were other buildings he owned, not on this block. I sold those one by one and bought the hotels as Robert told me about them. When the government fixed the roads, and built more airports, the hotels became good investments. Robert is lucky that way."

Persuasion was exhausted. This was still the first day she spent in La Paz. It was also the first time Viola had spoken to anyone about who she was and what she had become. Viola quit talking, leaving Persuasion to her own thoughts. The night air surrounded them.

Persuasion knew then that she was as happy as she was ever going to be. She breathed the night air with the cool breeze and watched the bats weaving under the lights catching moths. The silence was comfortable for her. It reminded her of Mulege. Now it was the monastery and Viola who despite her choice for secrecy spoke to her until she was exhausted. The plates and glasses were returned to the small kitchen. They returned to the street. She stood waiting for Viola to come through the alley. The street had changed, Viola said so and Persuasion could feel it. The buildings were historical but put to better uses as clothing stores, a massage studio and coffee shops. Viola emerged. They walked the two blocks to the monastery and Persuasion ten more blocks to the Hotel Hacienda Bugambilias.

Robert September

When Viola was finished with his body, moved all her apparatus to its proper place, she sat next to him on the cane backed chair. Robert, who had fallen back to slumber woke, opened his eyes, quickly found her sitting nearby, reading by a small table lamp in the otherwise dark room.

“Sister Viola.” He said.

Her eyes snapped from her book to his eyes. She smiled. He smiled.

“Father Robert.”

“Sister, please read the last rites to me.”

“No. You are not finished yet. But I will free you from your bondage. This is not your death bed.” She rose and unhooked the clasps that held him securely on the bed. He did not object.

“Viola, I love you. I drove all night and all day to get here. For what? A wake?”

She shrieked in laughter. “Robert, great idea. Let’s have a wake for the three of us.”

“Sounds merry. Who are the dead?”

“The lives we do not wish to live any longer.” Viola pulled her robe over her head. “This is me. I want to be me. To sing in a club again. To flirt with you in public and hold your hand. I want to take vows with you. Can you do it?”

“But ... wait.”

“For what? We are here tonight, together. Get up and stretch. I want to show you something really cool.”

“Cool? Sounds wonderful.” He pulled himself into a sitting position.

“Where is the toilet? I need clothes.”

“This way. I’ll get your bag from my room.”

Three on the balcony

As the three moved about the monastery each blended the preparation for a night walk and an attempt to grasp the meaning of a wake they would hold for themselves. Robert was ready, he said as he walked through the courtyard from the monastery door to the garden gate. The bats were busy with the moths and others at the few lights that marked the path through the gardens. People came at night, in the darkness, to gather what they could eat of what there was to eat. Their shadows moved about, visible from the few lights the moths and bats used in their ritual.

Viola knew the night harvesters by what they ate and what they brought with them to trade. Some left Persuasion's form of mordida, a card, a metal figure, a crucifix. The priest gathered these gifts and placed them on an altar near the exit of the monastery to the cathedral. Viola noted the pride the man felt as he presented each piece to his god for favors in heaven or an early escape from purgatory. The bats left other more useful things to a gardener.

Other night harvesters left clothing or household goods which Viola gave to the poor.

The three met at the gate. Viola grabbed her companions' arms and led them down the street. They walked as fast as they could which was as fast as Viejo Soldier could walk. With Viola steering she and Persuasion pulled him to a stop when they reached the old bar. Persuasion told him where they were and that it had been called El Nuevo Tiempo. Robert said he had never been there before.

Viola left. The door opened. The ritual of the lights and music, the servings made of flan and brandy was completed. They carried their treats to the balcony and the table.

Robert said the flan was to die for. They all laughed. The women both had brandy as was the custom of the house. Viola found a Corona for Robert.

“I don’t know.” She said. “The beer and the sweets together would be tough on my tongue.”

“The flan is good. The beer is good. The company is wonderful. Works for me.” Robert had recovered his sense of humor. She’s right, he thought. He preferred salt to sugar and beer to brandy. Viola had the other view.

Persuasion

She stood against the carved post, near the table. The two old friends talked about things she thought silly. A wake? Celebrating the end of their old selves and the beginning of a new life. The music from below was classical. She couldn't place the name or composer, but it seemed well-known. Her curiosity was not enough to force words through her lips. She kept her silence not wanting to break the trance that held them together.

"Hell." Robert said.

"Viejo!" Viola said. "Inferno."

"Right, Inferno." He said. "It feels like hell. Who picked this music for tonight?"

"Sister Viola did. She so tried to escape the wrath by only pretending to sin to entertain god." Viola smiled as she talked. "I thought it was funny."

"Too deep for beer." Viejo grinned.

"I recommended brandy, but you wouldn't see the sense of it." The night turned cool. Robert moved his chair next to Violet's and in a series of subtle moves they pressed and wiggled until they were as close as close could be, his arm around her, her head upon his shoulder. They could have been any age.

Persuasion saw this. She sighed in recognition of the beauty. The simple things are the most amazing. She had listened to her old new friends. She felt their closeness shared with her. She looked off the balcony, into

the distance as she liked to do. She stared off waiting for a wave of Ah coming towards the shore.

Moments fled. No one cared. Persuasion turned back to the elders.

“Ah. I understand the choice of music.” She said. They were captive. Her silence had earned their respect. Viola sat up. Robert turned to hear her. “We are near our end. The plagues are upon us. The prophets of science are warning us. To survive we must think. Thinking is what got us here. We are being asked to change our thinking. And this in the midst of lies and deceit. Dante thought if we imagined the nature of the pain we will suffer if we don’t change, we might try. He appears wrong at the moment. So, the music is to honor what is dead in the sense of being in hell or soon to be. Ah, it makes sense.”

Robert sat silent. Viola rose from her chair and stood beside her, wrapped her arms around her and they were still. “That’s too sad, Persuasion. The world will go on. There is no hell except the one each of us might make for ourselves in this life.” Viola whispered the words into Persuasion’s ear. She could smell the flan and brandy on their breath and knew Viola was correct.

Robert sat quietly watching his muses hugging. They stood still embracing one another. The music’s funereal moods roamed about the house and escaped through the open door to the balcony. He had written many poems or rants as he famously renamed them about the fears of futures not to be. The Inferno blazed in his mind. He finished his beer.

Persuasion could feel Be-ahole’s agitation increasing to get on with the wake. “I need a new name. Persuasion is no longer me. I am not the

child I was. Do I need a pyre? What do I burn? The stuff I left behind when I became an acolyte of Sister Viola?” Viola jolted at her words and squeezed her harder.

“You are shaking.” She said as she stood back from the younger woman still holding her shoulders in her farmer’s grip. “I say we go downstairs. There is a sitting room that is very pleasant and cozy sometimes. Today it might be. Come follow me.” Robert stood. They carried their plates and glasses inside. Viola led them through the maze of darkened rooms to the floor below. The lighting changed. The music stopped. She turned her head back. “Music or silence?”

Hearing no calls for sound she let the silence be by leading them into a room that smelled of old wood. The light went on. A maple table, a poker table, with six chairs sat in the middle under an ornate hanging light. There were no signs of a game in progress. There were no signs of anything having happened there recently. Everything was in its place, dusted and polished.

“Sit.” Viola said as she waved her arms toward the leather couches on two sides of the room, pushed up against hardwood paneling framed by end tables. “Pick your spot.” She walked around the room touching the oak and cedar. “This is ironwood and here cherry. My father loved wood.”

Robert was obedient plopping down in the first chair he saw. Persuasion not, she roamed the room following Viola unintentionally. Viola turned to face her. “Are you thirsty? Hungry?”

“No Sister.” She said and paused as Viola moved past her towards the door. “Sister, can we have candle light?”

Viola was headed for her own errand when Persuasion asked. Robert rose. "I see some. I can do this." He gathered the candles from the cases and tables around the room placing them on the poker table. "You have a match? No. Hmm." The search went on until he found a cigar box with all the fixings including ten La Gloria Cubana Paraiso 2014 cigars. "Nice." He said.

"What?" Persuasion said.

"Cigars. And matches."

"What kind? I used to steal my dad's cigars."

"The \$100 kind. Here." He handed her the box and took the matches.

"Ooh." She said as she ran a cigar under her nose. "Yummy. But no." She replaced the cigar as Robert lit the candles and turned off the light. As he did so Viola came in with a tray of small bottles and wooden boxes. Robert and Persuasion moved to seats at the table.

"You found the candles." Viola walked to the table. "And my cigars. Thank you, Robert. I have some things I thought might be helpful, some maybe not. We can decide." The tray went on the table next to the candles. The boxes were teak inlaid with silver and gold. Each one had an engraved label. Robert reached forward and picked up a bottle.

"Laudanum. Laudanum? Sounds familiar." He picked up a small box.

"Maravilla. Something special?"

"Very. I have never had any of this. Maybe research is needed but I learned from my father that his customers had desires that led him to acquire these for recreation. Persuasion wants recreation. So, do I. So, do you, Robert. No?"

“Si, Amiga. It is time for something new.”

Persuasion came to life at the thought. It felt like hers. “I need a new everything.”

Robert laughed. Viola told him to be nice. Robert was beyond arguments. “Persuasion is on a journey through the universe. So are we. The universe is the comedian.”

The discussion matched the intensity of the discussers. They organized the bottles and boxes alphabetically. Persuasion used her laptop with its 4G connection to investigate the nature, effects and after effects of each one. Once a dose was determined the bottle or box was examined by Viola to ascertain if enough existed to take together. They argued the merits of each, eliminating a few, sorting the rest into three piles: ahora, mañana and mas tarde.

It was after midnight when they were done. The bottles and boxes were arrayed on the table in an order of priority they determined in moments of levity would lead to the desired conclusion.

“When should we begin?” Viola asked. Checking the list, she reached for a small box that held three small capsules. “The first is Mescaline. It is a stimulant as well as psychotropic, so we’d be up all night. It opens one’s imagination to other ways of seeing the world and one’s self. Taken in a group it is bonding, tribal even. We’ll have to be prepared for the long friendships ahead of us.”

Persuasion was holding Viola’s hand, intent on watching her as she talked. Robert, who was well rested from his incarceration in the Monastery’s web, was excitedly walking around the room pretending to be looking for a seat to sit in. “Ok.” He said. “Now is all we have. None of

us want to be the same tomorrow. We are in the safest place in La Paz with the people we care about. It could never be a better time. I want to begin.”

“Me, too.” Said Persuasion.

Viola turned and left the room. Two minutes she returned with a set of three glasses and a carafe of water. “Now it is. We begin our journey together with a cactus plant that grows nearby, even in the Monastery garden.”

The cactus derivative was encapsulated. The trio presumed that one would do it. With a pill in their left hands and a glass of water in the other they toasted their future together, placed the pill on tongue, and drank an entire glass of water. Persuasion gave a little hoot of victory as she returned the glass to the serving tray.

“It is 45 minutes after midnight.” Viola said. “Research said 40 minutes until we feel it in our minds. It should last until dawn.” The three sat at the table. Robert’s eyes travelled back and forth between the two women. Persuasion looked as if she was praying, Viola as if she had just eaten a piece of flan after a long fast. Robert chuckled.

“What do we do? Sit and be quiet?”

“Until someone talks.”

“What do people say? Is there a common experience?”

“Elation and curiosity to begin then a personal experience said to be spiritual, maybe, a new relationship with creation.”

“Home?”

“Home.”

“We are always home.”

The conversation went on as the candles keep light in the room. Viola fetched another carafe of water. Persuasion stretched out on one of the couches, closed her eyes, her lips in a smile. Robert took a notebook from his pack and began to write the opening paragraphs of what would be his last book.

The grandfather clock in the hallway outside the poker room struck two. Robert put down his pen. He found Viola and Persuasion lying side by side on a couch, holding one another, stroking each other’s hair. Viola was cooing words of welcome to a newborn. Persuasion had her head on Viola’s breast snuggled into the abundance of caring that represented love in Viola’s world.

Robert decided to see the outside. He found and climbed the stairs and searched until he found the balcony. The moon, ah the Moon, was over the city. The glow was enough to outline the structures and hillsides he could see. “What’s new? What’s going to be new?” As quickly as he said it he forgot it and another something, an idea, a notion, flowed by. It was an ordinary sensation, like clouds cruising through the sky he thought. He remembered he was under an influence. He checked his watch: 3 it said. He changed the air in his lungs with two complete sighs.

For a moment, he thought he was asleep. He had laid down on the deck of the porch to watch for planets and was now looking at two pairs of legs belonging to the two giggling women. Robert rose into a sitting position an unsurpassed grin on his face.

Viola was still cooing to Persuasion saying, “Lovey, Starlight, Amore...”

“Sister V, I am me, a blur of atoms run away.”

Robert, aroused and mused, ran into the hallway down the stairs to his notebook to write and lost his thoughts as he walked to sit in front of his book pen in hand with nothing in his head.

The night went on. The trio experienced what they would of a new way that had not quite begun. The moon was still in the sky. The mescaline was still in their minds. The dark was becoming lighter. One of them noticed. They all noticed and rose to walk to the cathedral garden an outing they had planned for a renaming ceremony they were about to make up.

As well as Viola knew the way from the bar to the garden, she took a longer, twisting route. Each turn she picked at random, or so it would seem to someone who might have known where they were heading. Robert noticed the indirectness, but he was not tired or in a hurry. He kept his silence.

Persuasion noticed a few blocks and a turn further. “Wait. We just went this way. Are we going in circles?”

“How can we begin new lives if we take the usual paths?” Viola was walking, slowly spinning down the center of the road. “People are still asleep. If not, we are just revelers returning home.”

Robert was Viejo Soldier trudging in a style he imagined fitting his name. To him Persuasion was Baba. Viola?

“Viola? What is your name?” He said loudly enough for her to hear through her giggling howls.

She stopped mid-turn and mid-giggle. "Serious business that. A name can scar you for life or free you from any prison."

"Are you Sister Viola?" Baba said.

"No more than you are Sister Persuasion. Never was except with Father Robert." Viola walked to each of the other two, gripped their elbows and brought them together at the edge of the cathedral walls. "Let me show you a secret." With that she released them, walked to the brush along the wall, pulling it back revealing a small wooden door.

Viejo Soldier and Baba saw it. Viola pulled it open. "Come on." She said as she disappeared behind the doorsill. They followed.

Viola pulled the door shut.

It was dark inside the wall. Viola stood close by the other two. "This is a passageway that leads from the cathedral to the monastery. We are hidden in the wall. To the right is the cathedral. Turn to the left and we go to our rooms or an exit into the garden." They walked slowly down the pitch-dark passage following Viola until she asked them to stop. "Here is the exit." She opened the door and the morning light met their faces as they searched for clues of their location.

Freed from the darkness into the light, they were individually moved by a memory of a previous passage. Baba fell to her knees onto the soft soil in a lettuce bed she had planted two days ago. Robert closed his eyes standing facing the rising sun feeling the warmth on his eye lids. Viola reached down for Robert's hand and found Viejo Soldier in her grasp. He turned to see the sun in her eyes. "Viejo." She said. "The Coromuel has caught you."

Viejo and Viola helped Baba to her room, gave her water and tucked her in. Viejo walked with Viola to her room where they entwined and passed out. It was morning.

Viejo Soldier

He thought about giving up. Then again, his muses said it was too early. He rolled over in the small bed something he could do only because Viola was in the garden or at the club. She was busy but how could she do it today while he still languished recovering from their late-night ceremonies? Staring at the ceiling with its old mural of the Madonna looking down from heaven at him, his thoughts began to entertain him. He rose from bed to search for his bag and his journal.

He opened his book to make an entry with his ideas and he discovered what he had forgotten: two paragraphs, the first two of a new book. He read them as if they were addressed to him from beyond the grave. He wondered if he had died. He thought he might have and so decided to test his theory by walking around until someone noticed him. He laughed as he left through the hidden gates they had entered at sunrise. Standing in the sun light he noticed it was late afternoon. "Almost sunset." He said as he skipped down the road towards the club. "Feeling frisky."

The first person he saw was shielding his eyes from the late sun. The second was breast feeding a newborn. Her eyes were filled with her new child while sitting on a park bench singing a lullaby in the cooing voice mothers make. He turned down Revolution looking away from the sun, passing more walkers who were shielding their eyes. No one noticed him.

He walked two blocks, in a direction that felt familiar to him. "I'm dead." He concluded.

"Robert."

He didn't hear the call. His thoughts were so amusing he was locked into his own silence.

"Viejo Soldier!"

Viejo Soldier ran through his mind. I am Viejo Soldier he thought as he looked around to find the bodies the voices matched. There was no one on the street.

"Look up, silly." Said Baba.

He looked up and saw the blue porch and the smiling faces of his muses.

"I thought I was dead."

"Just slow to rise." Said Baba. "Let's hug. It is a new day and we are still here. I'll get the front door."

Viejo Soldier stood at the front door while Baba moved down the stairs, past the poker room and through the lounge and bar. She pulled back the drape to see him standing there before she unbolted the front door.

As the door swung outward, he pulled it fully open latching it to the outer wall.

Baba hugged him. He cooed his pleasure at being proven to still be corporeal. As she released him he grabbed her hand and tugged her back to the edge of the sidewalk.

"We should spiffy this place up. A little paint. How about a sign?" Viejo's arms were stirring the air in front of him as he described the changes he would help create.

As he talked they moved into the bar where they both waved and talked. Viola heard their boisterousness from her office and joined them at the end of the bar.

“Staff meeting?”

“Baba and I think the cantina needs a facelift.”

“I am for it. When do we start?”

El Nuevo Tiempo

The three stood outside on the sidewalk across the street examining the updated bar. They had worked together for weeks to spruce up the front. Viola and Viejo found the old sign that was stored in a wine cellar corner. It now hung below the balcony from two chains: El Nuevo Tiempo. The breezes often made it rock and wave in the swirling air. Baba had spent a week touching up the paint and the sign looked like a blinking neon in the morning sun. At night, it was invisible.

Viola explained it didn't matter. "It's a blues club not a sports bar. If you can't find the door in the dark, you can't be a blues fan." She pointed to the blue light above the door that was turned on during open hours all within the dark of night.

Back inside Viola pulled back the heavy curtains and pushed open the sliding windows that had kept the sights and sounds of the outdoors from the revelers on the inside. She liked a sea breeze and a little warmth to change the air from the staleness of yesterday's celebrations in preparation for a new one. Baba was polishing the tables reciting the wood species of each one: Oak, Cedar, Black Walnut. And so on, each one different in shape and size. Viejo sat at the bar sipping an Americano and nibbling on his favorite dulce.

"These are good." He said. "Almost as good as the ones in Guerrero Negro." As he spoke small crumbs sprinkled onto the notebook in front of him. He swallowed a little coffee to clear his throat. "No. These are the best ever."

Baba was finished with her wooden litany and overheard Viejo's paean to his sweet cakes. "They are the best because they are the ones you've got, I'm guessing."

Viola circled around the bar standing across from them. They sat or stood in silence. It felt like an important moment. They looked around their newly reopened club. It was shiny. It sparkled in their minds. She wanted a blues club, one that opened after dinner time and stayed open until the last song was sung.

She had yet to stand up and show her stuff. Fifty years had passed, and her dream was coming to be.

"We've been open for three nights. People come and go. We need the live music to bring more in and give them a reason to stay. I like a crowd to sing my best." Viola let rip a jazzy hurray. She spun a turn behind the bar then bolted towards the sound equipment. "Let's see if the mics still work. Hmm." She studied the dials and switches clicking and turning as she tried to get the sound system to amplify her clicking sound.

"Click!" broke the quiet. Viola made an adjustment. "Too loud." She stood over the equipment motioning for the two to join her. "Look. It's easy. At least the volume is." She pointed and explained. The others nodded and said, "Got it."

That night Viola made her way to the bandstand big enough for a three piece with a singer or two. She wore a cocktail dress, black with a white orchid pinned between her breasts. She wore dark gray gloves with strands of silver yarn woven into them. It was her vision of what she would do to sing in the club again.

She stood at the microphone, her small band behind and beside her. The first song she sang she sang for Viejo and Baba.

Don't you know you're life itself	Like a
leaf clings to a tree	Oh my
darling, cling to me	For
we're creatures of the wind	And wild
is the wind	So wild is the
wind	

Decades ago the band was composed of old friends of Francisco, Viola's father. He loved to hear what was then called jazz. At night, past her bedtime, she listened from her bedroom above the bar to the beat of the bass guitar and the lure of the singer's voice calling her to the blues. The songs the band and singers knew were not many. Viola learned the lyrics and sang along at the top of her lungs with no fear her sounds would attract the attention of anyone below.

Predictably, Francisco went up to her room and heard her singing. He kept his daughter safe from the night crowd, as he called them. The night crowd was composed of the clientele and workers from the surrounding blocks which were dedicated to the night-life pleasures to which a good girl should not be exposed. That night he saw she loved to sing.

The next night he introduced the singer to his daughter. The following night Viola stood on the stage with her new mentor and voice coach and they sang a special duet. Viola could not sleep that night.

The next day, Saturday, Francisco and Viola walked to the cathedral to talk to the nuns and the priest about Viola singing in church. The sisters

took Viola on a tour of the trees and the gardens. The Father and the father stood back to talk.

Father Domingo was a hard man. The cathedral was experiencing difficult times. At the moment, there was no choir and only two-tone deaf sisters of the cloth inhabited the monastery. He would think about an offer if Francisco was willing to make one. Francisco offered a tithe, a monthly tithe, to support the cathedral in forming a choir. Domingo said an organist would be needed. Francisco offered his cousin Renaldo who played keyboard in the band at El Nuevo Tiempo. Domingo smiled and accepted an envelope from Francisco. Francisco was thanked for his support by the man of god. He kept the payments up every month for every remaining months of his life. Domingo was still alive when Francisco died. He buried Viola's father and, in the homily, waggered Francisco was in heaven, because he earned it.

Viola had scant memory about the payments to the priest. Her father never attended mass that she knew and from what she could see around her he was unlikely to ever have done so. In her mind, Father Domingo was more authoritarian than her father. She didn't like him. Staying close to Renaldo and running home when choir was done kept her out of the priest gaze. Once she began to sing in the cathedral her night time performances packed her father's bar. When she sang, she stayed close to Renaldo and ran upstairs to her room when she finished.

At 67, Viola was beyond running. For half century, she hid beneath the nuns' robes which proved enough to keep most everyone away. Viejo was the exception.

She told this story to Viejo and Baba later that night as they took in the night air on the balcony once the night's festivities had ended and the flan and brandy warmed and sweetened them.

The music from below sailed across their perch above the quiet street.

I sing just to know that I'm alive
I play just to feel that I'll survive
And if there's a second place
Where just in case
I sing just to know that I'm alive

Well the mountains they won't move no they don't
And the people they won't dance and they won't
I sing, I sing, I sing
just to know that I'm alive

I sing,
I sing

Viola's declaration on the balcony

The balcony became the story telling place where twice a night they sat waiting for the bell to begin preparing for the nights music or to recover their humors at the end.

One late night Baba sat alone, Viejo and Viola had found their bed before she was ready. Staring up and across the city she was reminded of a story Viola told a few months ago while they first were together and waiting for Robert to return.

"By the time my habits had been deeply etched into me, I was Sister Viola for two weeks a year and pretended to be Sister Viola for the other fifty.

"Backwards? I took my dream to be my reality. My vows were interrupted by Robert. He is four years older. He was beautiful to me. In his bad Spanish and my bad English, we made a world that only Father Robert and Sister Viola could inhabit. He told me once how impossible it may be to tell what we did and have it sound sensible. I argue that we weren't trying to be sensible therefore he was right."

"Not much of an argument." Persuasion said.

"It never mattered. We talked to no one about our life in hiding together. We were hidden from the prying eyes of god." Viola stood up from the balcony table. She stretched her back. "Too much sitting."

"It doesn't make sense. But if you had not been Sister Viola I would never have met you. There are consequences for your frivolity."

Persuasion watched Viola walk away. "Going to bed?"

“No. Flan and brandy,” She turned to look back at what changes Persuasion had brought to her life. “I’ve got a thousand stories all for you. Wait or follow.”

Persuasion was immobile. She watched the clouds of ideas pass before her eyes. Nothing grabbed her attention. She was waiting for the “Ah.” As she did, Viola returned with the usual arrangement of glasses, plates and forks on a serving tray. Viola sat and began to enjoy her favorite post sunset snack.

“Viola, I am so amazed. How or why did you live without him? If it were me I would have followed him everywhere. But you waited for him and kept him so far away. Ah.” Viola had seen this before. She waited watching Persuasion’s eyes search the meaning of her discovery. “You were hiding from god... from the prying eyes of god.” Viola waited some more. “You are a business woman. Now I get it. Ah.”

“Eat some flan and tipple a little.” Viola led the way watching Persuasion’s eyes follow the threads of her thinking. “That’s mostly over. A few hotels, this block with the bar, a house on the sea, little else. The Night Life was over a long time ago.”

Robert's Declaration on the balcony

Baba knew there was much about the secretive Robert she wished to know. One late afternoon as they waited for the sunset, Viola below finishing some project in her office she had Viejo to herself.

"Who are you, Viejo?"

"Too long an answer for the moment." He guessed she wanted him to talk. "Try again."

"What is your best name?" She watched his face for signs of acceptance. He smiled. She smiled. He began.

"Viejo Soldier is my best name. I have tried on many in my life. Nothing nefarious. Just literary pseudonyms. Poets have them. You called it my forest name, a notion I can abide with, like a totem animal. The idea of Viejo for old man is easy but the Soldier part came to me all at once when you told me your name was Persuasion. I told you that before.

"Why Soldier? Look where I am now, stuck in La Paz by a wind that blows maybe two weeks a year? Not much of a soldier. But that has nothing to do with how I got to La Paz and to that hotel, surrounded by drug addled Midwesterners. I've been staying there for about half a century for my two weeks a year as Father Robert.

"Every time I stayed there have been crazed Michiganders by the pool drinking Coronas. They were so committed to Coronas they bought out the local stores and turned to tequila. One of them told me they came for a binge of booze and drugs either as winter ended or just began. The Michigan bland days, I was told, required desperate measures.

“I doubt I ever learned their names short of a few minutes of discussion here and there. From one visit to the next I saw no one I recognized. There was only one name I knew for sure that was not Sister Viola’s. That’s a longer story than I am up for tonight. “

“What about the Soldier part? Why do you think of yourself as Soldier?” Baba asked.

“As I said, it may be too complicated. I want to tell my story straight out, but it is not my way or hasn’t been. Nothing about my past tells me it’s OK to reveal myself.” He was looking at his nails as if to see what his poorly kept hands would say about him.

“Where did you live?” Baba looked where he was looking. When they first met, she was too self-absorbed to notice anything about his personal habits except for his beer thing and of course the acid. Now after she spent months in the garden his nails looked good by comparison.

“I had a business in San Francisco and a home north in Humboldt County in a little beach community called Manila. The business was a bookstore, a hole in the wall but in a good neighborhood for it. North Beach. Been there?”

“San Francisco, yes. North Beach is familiar to me.”

“Near China Town.”

“Been there. My grandparents owned a condo near China Town.”

“The store was next to a coffee bar off Washington Square. It was called The Little Red Bookstore. I carried esoteric volumes of history. Things few people wanted except the rich and the odd. The rich liked the

bindings. The odd read them. Most of what I sold was related to war or at least conflict and often mass killing. The store was open on weekends and by appointment.”

“What was your poetry like?”

“Dark. Confessional. I gave the poetry away to those who bought the books. They needed it.” Viejo stopped. His eyes watered up.

“You need tissue for your leaking nose. I am on my way. Go nowhere.” Baba leapt to her feet and off down the hall.

He used his shirt sleeves while he waited. She stood in the kitchen shaking for a minute, peed, pulled a few strips from the TP roll and headed back out. He felt her coming, stood up and walked to the railing. He wondered at his motivation and settled upon some shame for the tears and more for the confession. He was hiding. That didn’t stop Baba.

“So, I accept your last answer as responding to the question why Soldier. But now I want to know what you did or imagined you did.” Baba stood next to him at the railing. She had painted it last month in a light blue she thought matched the original color. She had sanded the old rail smooth and with the fresh paint it felt as luxurious as it was when Viola’s father first saw it.

Her hands were still caressing the rail searching for rough spots she had missed with sand paper or made with the painting. “Ah.” She said. Then she waited, and Viejo Soldier waited.

As he waited, the sunset finished. Viola arrived with plates with sweets and glasses of Brandy. They saw her coming and as if given an order they sat at the small table again.

“What’s been going on with you? Looks like a funeral.” She said as she slid the yummys between them.

“Or like fathers-to-be in the waiting room.” When Baba said that Viejo Soldier brightened. “That is what we are doing. Waiting for a rebirth. Ah.”

“Of wonder.” He said.

“What?” Viola was not getting it. Her face showed there was a distance between perception and enlightenment.

“Waiting for a rebirth of wonder. From a poem. Not mine. A guy named Larry, has a bookstore near mine.”

“Bookstore?”

Quiet followed as imbibing and ingestion ensued. There were hmms and oohs. Eyes were aimed at forks or the sky. A slight breeze blew through the porch company ruffling their clothing and hair.

Viejo Soldier giggled. “The Coromuel.” They all laughed. “It’s hell being stuck in La Paz.”

“A great torture.” Said Viola. Strains of Nina Simone flowed upstairs after the wind.

It’s a new dawn.
new day.
new life for me.

It’s a
It’s a

They enjoyed the failing light that lingers past setting. Deep in the lower floor, on the bar, an alarm went off.

Viola bolted to her feet. “It’s time to play.”

Blues is not a life style. It's a passion.

Baba

Baba and Viejo poured wine and beer. Neither could make a cocktail. None of that mattered. Blues is simple. Viola sang. The clientele sat sipping and maybe swaying to the tones that captured them.

East of the sun,
And west of the moon,
We'll build a dream house
Of love, dear;

Near to the sun in the day,
to the moon at night;
in a lovely way dear,
and pale moonlight.

sing the blues
sea

choose
blues

Near
We'll live
Living on love
I gotta right to
Soon that deep blue
Will be callin' me
It must be love say what you
I gotta right to sing the

The band were all locals who struggled to find the beat. Baba heard the incongruities and found the shared sense of chaos as entertainment. The voice and the band moved her. Baba knew she had a case of the blues Persuasion brought with her. This was not that. It wasn't sad. It was healing.

Viola was stunning to Baba eyes. The young woman thought she had found someone to admire. Her mother was distracted to say the least. Persuasion left an emptiness Baba was filling with Viejo's chaos and Viola's blues. As she listened she dreamed of who she was becoming.

She saw herself Viola's age. She imagined the days she was spending as the past.

Viejo was moving past her, behind her as she leaned at the bar. She felt him and turned to put her hand on his shoulder. He turned to see her smile.

"Be-ahole, your muse has a thought. Would you like it?"

"Always."

"You two must marry."

"Viola might agree." Viejo Soldier turned away for a second to turn back and look her in the eyes, then hug her. "The Coromuel may make that a necessity. But why, dear muse, did you imagine such a thing?"

"Look at her. Such a thing of beauty. How could you not want to be with her always?"

Robert

Driving north from La Paz back in 1967, Robert knew he had to go back to San Francisco even if he did not want to leave. He listened to his thoughts. "Want? I do not want to leave. I desire to stay. I am leaving. Now I long for her company. Do I love her? No, maybe not, but I want to love her." He said out loud, his voice drowned by the wind.

Baba had asked a question he could not answer.

"I don't remember why I did not stay the first moment I met her. We had language problems. I was on another path. Changes I couldn't make. Anything is imaginable. Nothing seems strong enough now, then, well, we wanted something, but not everything.

"Baba, I love you as only a poet and muse can love. I imagine a sharing of what is given easily, requiring no judgement by either poet or muse. You were right. Respect matters more. If love is beyond me, respect is within me. Did you say that?"

Baba smiled. She had caught him changing the topic again. He saw it.

"OK. Here is more. I did not think about Viola every day or even often. I never questioned my actions based upon a relationship. I sat and read and thought and wrote and rewrote. She is my muse as you are. My imagination longed for a partnership and now here we are."

Baba watched his eyes as he spoke. She was quiet after he stopped. The balcony allowed for human silence. But curiosities motivate.

"Viejo." It was late, very late, after the music stopped, after the cantina doors were shut and barred. "Back then, when you were leaving after first coming south to find her, you must have been in an altered state.

You met, spent ten minutes together, were apart for four months: You drove for days, spent a week together then you left. What I want to know is what happened in that week. You came back again and again so something happened. What?"

"At the time, she was your age now. I was a few years older. I found a room in the hotel. Number 43 with a view of the bay. I walked to the cathedral. She found me in the garden. The first night we stayed together. And every night after that. She was Sister Viola and I, Father Robert." Viejo had never spoken this out before not even in his imaginings. He hesitated. She waited. "We had so little vocabulary but not much was needed the first night."

Baba waited to form a new question. Robert saw a chance to elucidate.

"I did not want children or even a woman who wanted children. My father hated being a slave to his family, my mother especially. He disappeared before I was born. I did not want to do that to anyone else. At least that is how I remember it." Viejo brought his empty Brandy glass to his nose. He searched for a lingering odor to remind him of its goodness. "Therefore, I was a virgin when we met at the Hotel that first night. Pleasure imagined had never overcome the fear of procreation. We were both virgins."

Baba tried to look accepting. She had listened to her now abandoned school mates discuss losing their virginity. She felt herself an expert. She listened to the cadence of Viejo's voice. He sounded excited to speak it out. His voice sounded as youthful as the memories were.

"Art is a pleasure in the eyes or ears or on the skin or tongue of the beholder. Everyone knows that. If there was no pleasure in viewing a

painting or hearing music or eating something, then it would not be viewed or heard or eaten. It is simple, really.

“Baba, pleasure is not given by the cosmos. The physical world doesn’t care about you and your desires. It is still the beholder’s choice whether it is Art or not. The individual’s assessment of any moment is affected by tragedy and by beauty.

“The internal physical world, the body, is a sensory system. The body collects data from the external and internal worlds, which is analyzed in the mind. The data may be beheld as a pleasure of sight, sound, feeling, taste or smell. Then again, not all pleasure comes from senses, not all art is for the physical senses.

“Some pleasures are generated by the mind. Longing can be one such pleasure. It is a dance of desires imagined and yet to be acquired. There is nothing physical about it, yet it is sensual.

“Longing for art seems unlikely but there are those who travel to museums and galleries just to experience the pleasure from viewing a painting that captures their imagination or inspires awe at the skill of the artist. Longing for physical pleasures is a hunger. A longing could be simply for company or contrarily, for aloneness whichever satisfies. I longed for a fantasy world with Viola, and then the surrender, to be captured by the Coromuel.”

Baba had never heard a grown man speak of sex so cautiously. “You didn’t ... you know?”

“Yes, we did. It was important to us to be lovers. Now that I think about it one of us must be infertile. Doesn’t matter now but then we had

hungers that needed attention. Viola probably thinks of it a different way.” “Why did you never stay more than the week?”

“Ask her.” Viejo fell into silence. His posture sagged. His age returned from the memories. “Baba, I will ask her to marry. Maybe tomorrow. I need sleep. Viola is asleep and I will join her. You should sleep. Tomorrow will arrive without permission.”

Baba laughed.

Viola

Baba woke in her room at the monastery. As she dressed she monitored her feelings. There was no one else awake. The priest had a lover in El Zacatal and never slept at the cathedral. The old women who had been hired to care for Viola and the garden were gone since Viola was gone. The late nights at the club kept her in bed until mid-morning. Last night it was Saturday night and the music went on and on. It was noon before Baba rose. The garden kept her at the cathedral until just before sunset when she walked the two blocks to El Nuevo Tiempo to sit with her friends, enjoy the conversations at sunset and of course the brandy and flan. On Sunday, there was no music, no blues and they would sit for hours on the balcony sharing their observations of life, speculating about their future.

When Baba arrived at the club on Sunday, Viejo was alone with no yummys on the table. Viola was not there.

“Where is she?” Baba asked.

“She didn’t say. Maybe she is at the marina in a bar complaining about the Coromuel.” Viejo was not joking. He was not smiling. His voice was quiet even for him.

“What happened?”

“I don’t think we have all been born again. Viola is still Viola.”

“Did you ask her?”

“To marry? No.” Viejo stood from the table to hold the railing in his hands. Baba saw them turn white from the tension. “I am frightened. I should not have stayed. My feelings say go but where?”

“Go look for her. I will join you. We’ll leave a note.”

“Where do we look first? The monastery? Where else does she go?”

“Let’s start downstairs. Maybe she is in the poker room.” They walked down the narrow hall past the fridge with the flan, down the stairs to the cantina below, past the sound equipment and into the darkened room with the smell of a dozen sad forests. Before they turned on the light they stood and listened. There was only the sound of breathing. They stopped breathing. Only Viola’s breath was audible. They searched the darkness with their ears until they found her on a leather couch seemingly dreaming. As if by agreement they sat one at her feet another at her head and fell asleep.

There is no way the morning light would ever reach this room. Exhausted, the three gave up dreaming out loud for a night and some of the morning. As if by design Baba and Viejo woke and stood to leave the room for bathrooms and a little orientation. Alone again Viola shook herself awake but didn’t rise. She could smell their night’s exhalations in the room. When they tip toed back into the room she was not surprised.

Baba leaned over her, saw she was awake, grabbed her hand and said, “Sister.”

“Hermana?” Viola said and sighed a deep sigh only the feeling of relief can allow. “My new name. No, it’s an old name Viejo called me a few times.”

“But only in bed.” The women’s eyes shifted to Viejo. “Just saying.”

“Father Robert, you don’t speak much Spanish. Sister is too complicated, Hermana is not. It is my name.” Viola sat and the two sat on either side.

Baba wished out loud that there was a photographer to take a family portrait. It would have been a special picture with the look of bed in their eyes and hair. We slept in our clothes would have been written all over it. None of them cared. None of them thought that way. They each pledged their best to remember the scene. Then they lurched off the couch and began their day as they had many times before.

Baba

At sunset on another otherwise normal day Baba walked in a rambling course from the garden to the street. She found the entrance to the wall. It was behind the lettuce beds. She entered the darkness of the narrow passage retracing the steps the three had taken before. She kept her right hand along the exterior wall until she felt it change where the door went out. She stood there and on impulse passed the door to the street to continue towards the cathedral.

She walked slowly not knowing what to expect. She kept a hand on each wall and kept her nose behind her feet fearing the end of the tunnel would be abrupt. Her right hand found a door. She pushed it open and the morning light jumped in after her. "Whoa," She whispered. "Bright light."

When her eyes settled, she saw the room she had exposed to her view. Having never been in the cathedral or any catholic church she couldn't tell a vestry from a vestibule. Her eyes roamed the room. There were wooden closets along one wall. Their doors were open showing the priest's colorful vestments hanging neatly waiting to be needed. A table in the middle with four chairs held two half empty wineglasses. Baba thought about the poker room: "It's the wood."

She had been in La Paz for about four months. Most of that time was spent in the garden or the monastery or the cantina. She didn't think about the cathedral itself. It stood there looming over the garden to the north so not a factor in shading the greens and trees. Now she was in a room the purpose of which was mysterious to her. The wine glasses made her wonder. Across from the wall of closets was a small toilet and

a single bed, its covers in disarray, a pair of women's panties decorated with cartoon characters lay unremarkably on the floor.

In a flash, she pulled her head back through the door. She closed it as quietly as she could and returned to the exit to the street door. Outside she wondered at what she had seen. She walked around the garden walls, down the three blocks to the Calle de Ignacio Zaragoza and to the cantina.

As she sat at the table on the balcony she said her hellos to Viejo and Hermana kissing each on a cheek and receiving the same in return. They were all smiles. She was all consternation.

"Baba," Viejo said. "You look unsettled. Did you see a phantasm?"

"I saw a room in the cathedral that looked like a dressing room for the priest."

"How?"

"The wall. I went to the end and looked in. There was a table with wine glasses and a rumpled bed with a girl's panties on the floor."

"You probably scared him." Hermana was giggling like a pre-teen at the thought. "He has never seemed to care that people know but getting caught... How do you say it? What a something?"

"What a hoot." Baba offered.

"Hoot. I love it." Hermana said.

"But somehow it seems wrong." Baba realized immediately that she was describing Sister Viola and Father Robert.

Viejo slumped in his chair then sat up sipped his brandy and with a piece of flan on his fork headed for his mouth he stopped. “Wrong? No, wrong is a hard word to figure out.” Then he shoveled the forkful onto his tongue.

Hermana reached out for Baba’s hand pulled it towards her and kissed her fingers. “Mia, we are teasing you. At least you did not catch them in the act. Such an event could scar you for life.”

Rounds of laughter followed. Still holding Baba’s hand, she began to speak again then hesitated.

“Hermana,” Baba interrupted. “Tell me what you think.”

“Later, Mia. Now we play music and sing to heal our wounded souls.” With that they rose to open the doors to the club.

The Drill they called it, setting up the club so it was ready an hour after sunset; the opening time by convention. There was no sign telling passersby the time the club would be open. There wasn’t much of a sign of anything, no music playing on street-side speakers, no playbills announcing who was performing. The Drill ended when everything was ready then a small blue light was switched on as the only invitation visible from the street.

The customers were recognizable, most were known by name to the three. The customers knew the three by name as well. Viejo was Roberto. Hermana was Viola and Baba was Baba. The three looked like a family and the customers were treated that way. None of the customers had known Hermana’s father. The club had been closed all their lives. When it reopened without much remodeling or fanfare the first few who came in were surprised by its very existence. “Where did this come

from?” was heard often during the first months. Now it was obvious to the locals and nearly invisible to the tourists.

The band members were exceptional in that some were the children or grandchildren or even great grandchildren of the original band members. They had played together for years at backyard weddings and garage concerts but never with a singer like Viola whose ears had heard the originators of the blues, especially the women whose songs she felt made the hymnal for her religion. In time, they learned from each other and became an attraction for the worldly culture of the blue’s lovers.

This night was no different than the last. The cantina was packed for hours. Roberto and Baba poured the wine and beer while they adored Hermana. Viola sang her heart out and graciously accepted applause she shared with all. The night grew old. Last call was long passed. The band put their instruments away. The lights dimmed. The last customer was gone. The blue light turned out, the curtains pulled closed, door locked and barred. The three climbed the stairs to the balcony overlooking the darkened and unpeopled calle below.

The brandy and flan a norm for sunset was a special pleasure at two in the morning. Hermana portioned them much smaller. It was only a reminder of the goodness. It was only to be nibbled and maybe abandoned rather than consumed entirely and wanting more.

“Hermana dear, do you like your new name? Do you miss Viola?” Baba spoke in the loving manner she had learned from Father Robert and Sister Viola. She smiled as she talked her eyes loudly proclaimed her admiration and respect.

Viejo recognized the newness of their situation as he waited for Hermana to reassure them that she had become new, too.

“Amigos, most of my life I have had a secret life. It was not Viola’s secret life it was Sister Viola’s secret life. I waited longing for what I was outside to become what I am inside. My longing ended when we opened the cantina again and became a family like none of us has experienced before.” Tears welled up in her eyes. Baba handed her a napkin and she intercepted them as they coursed down her cheek. “Thank you, Mia. You see, Viola sings as she has always done and me, I am Hermana, lover of Viejo Soldier, guide to Baba. But I still have a secret life with a longing I have felt for fifty years.”

“Tell us.” Baba said.

“I will show you.” She turned toward Viejo, reached for his hands with hers and kissed his fingers as she had done to Baba’s. “I love you, Viejo. I long to take vows with you.”

Baba screamed in delight. Viejo slid down in his chair as if the air had come out of him. Then coming back to consciousness, bolt upright, a smile across his face, he gripped her hands, pulled her towards him and practically swallowed her face in a kiss. Baba sat with her hands against her mouth trying, it seemed, to hold in another shout.

The laughter continued as one or another excitedly asked where and when and who is invited. Then there was silence. Age must have had its privilege and the two women looked to Viejo Soldier.

“How about in the cathedral’s garden? We could do it on a Tuesday at sunset. The priest is always in El Zacatal on Tuesdays. We don’t need a

priest. We don't even need the cathedral." Viejo said in between shudders of joy and tears.

No one spoke for a time. Baba offered a toast by raising her glass. No one tipped they only whiffed the sweet odors of the liquor. They rose together as if they had decided it was time. They descended to the floor below. Viejo organized a group hug.

While they were all enjoying their new lives together Hermana said, "I want to move us away from town to the shore. I have an empty house on the sea. It is a big house. Actually, it's two houses. My father was thinking about two families living there or two generations. It would fit us well and a few friends."

"Whoa." Viejo was swimming in newness and despite of all his mind-bending experience his imagination lagged behind his reality.

Mahi Tacos and Coronas at Bahia de los Sueños

None of the three owned a car. Viejo had always flown then bused to the border, entered Mexico then rented a car at the border. He loved Red VW Bugs. The last rental had long ago been towed away from the garden gate where he had abandoned it. The day after they were moving to the Sea they bought an old truck like the kind Viejo would curse on his snail like climbs up the Highway 1 mountain passes. It was blue and greenish and a blend of ford and chevy that the wealth-free were accustomed to in the desert.

The next Sunday they made the hour-long drive east on Highway 286 to Ensenada de Muertos on Bahia de los Sueños.

Life in La Paz, with its bay nearby, part of everyday experience, made the view of the Sea less amazing than it really was. Now, way out in the deserts and rocks the urban concept of commerce was an hour away giving the sea a country look. The veranda they sat on was part of a small palapa restaurant that featured fish tacos and beer just like almost every palapa restaurant in Baja Sur. Viejo Soldier smiled his best smile when he saw the Mahi Tacos on the menu.

“I’ll have that, Hermana Viola.” He said. “What looks good to you?”

Hermana as she often did was staring at her lover, now her novio. Since she had asked to marry she stared more, if that was possible. “You.” She said.

Baba Mia laughed and though she thought of many plays on words that would have been hilarious to her ex-classmates, she held the words in even without having to hold her hands over her mouth.

Viola noticed even though she did not look directly at Baba. “I sense Baba is being respectful of us in our amorous state. Aren’t you Mia?”

“Sí, Señora. I am enjoying all the sights. But I am having misgivings about moving out to the boonies. You realize that we cannot possibly keep the El Nuevo Tiempo open as we have. And what about the cathedral gardens? That’s a daily chore.”

Hermana tore her eyes away from the flame and saw Baba’s sincerity.

“Mia, a chance has offered itself to us. Remember Renaldo, my father’s late-cousin and onetime band member? His grandson, Juan Cabral de la Torre, is back from the US with a business degree and a love for the blues. He plays electric jazz guitar and is quite handsome for a twenty-one-year-old I am told. He sent a letter asking if the club was for sale.”

“You would sell it!” There was something she didn’t understand. “I love the cantina. I love listening to your voice. Will that all end? It’s too soon.”

The waitress arrived with new questions they could easily answer. Mahi Tacos and Coronas for all. Silence followed until Baba had an Ah. Viejo and Viola waited. Eventually, she began speaking.

“I am young. Change is all I know. The cantina is new to me and a change I enjoyed. This place we are going today, your house, also new and I assume also cool. You want something special that I thought you might never get. Now it is close to being. I see it. You and your husband-for-real will spend your last years here. I guess I am uncertain about my own future. Not the Ah moment I hoped for, but still I get it.”

Hermana reached for her hand and held it softly. “Mia, wait until you see where we are going. You’ll have your own house if you want it.

There are two and you get first choice. Viejo and I aren't seeing much but each other's eyes."

The food and drinks arrived. The conversation was sparse. the topic simple things about how selling the cantina might affect Viola's singing and maybe Baba's social life.

"I wouldn't mind finding a boyfriend." She said. Viejo studied her. He knew about her body shape from their time in Santa Rosalia. He knew about her, como se dises, her mind. He decided it would take a brave man because of both her beauty and brains.

Hermana listened to her desire for company. "I never had that feeling. Robert became that person for me before I knew I had a feeling. But do not fear, imagine handsome Juan Cabral, smart, good humored, playing blues guitar and on Friday nights we all go and I sing." She stopped talking to giggle like a girl at the thought.

Baba scowled at the thought. "He might be gay. He might like someone else."

"Nope." Viejo said. "I've met him by accident at a restaurant in La Paz, Nim. He is an artist. I wonder how he knew about the club."

"His older brother, the sweet-faced bass player, Miguel, probably told him it had opened." Hermana said. "We'll ask tomorrow night and see. I am done eating. Are you? Let's walk the beach to the hacienda."

Baba's face scrunched up as she tried to recall an event from the recent past. "I met a guy from the States a couple months back. He had a dark complexion. He said his name was Johnny. He had friends with him. They were shopping for clothes at Sears. Upstairs where the guy stuff is. He

dropped a shirt on the floor. He was trying to carry too many at once into the dressing rooms. I picked it up for him.

“He was cute. We talked, and his friends joined us. They called him Jay. They rushed him off but not before I told him about the club and all.”

Viola looked at her as she spoke. “Looks like you liked that one. Maybe Juan Cabral is too late.”

“Hmm. Or maybe it was Juan Cabral.” Viejo seemed fascinated by the possibility.

Baba had an Ah moment. “They called him ‘goat boy.’ Does that mean anything?”

They laughed it off and started talking about the color of the sea.

Baba thought of their walking adventure along the beach as an amble. There was purpose but no hurry. The beach was open, broad without outcroppings. The sea wall was a bleached white sand, hardened lime and ancient shells visible even at a distance. She had no idea how far the walk would be from the palapa restaurant.

Hermana and Soldier were holding hands walking as close together as they could. Baba walked two steps behind, her view ahead blocked. Following without thinking she walked behind Hermana through a squeaking gate that sounded like as if it hadn’t been opened in years.

“Noisy.” Baba said.

Hermana held her hand. “The maids come in from the street. No one has played here in quite a while. Come let me show you the big house

first, but I warn you the small house is even wilder and might be your style.”

The gate entered a walled compound with the two houses. The big house safe from the sea’s worst day and below it, closer to the water the smaller house.

The big house was almost immodest. Everything was ‘too.’ Too large. Too bright. Too angular. It was three interlocking cubes, the tallest three stories high. Another two stories and the eastern facing walls were glass. The building was painted white and red with year-round green lawns on the southside. Nearest the beach the last cube, a one story with a roof top deck wasn’t like the others, instead of the metal and glass showcase look, it was homey-er. The windows were more modest, and the walls were stucco. The northern wall of this part of the house was built into the compound’s wall. The lower floor was stucco as was the compound wall. It housed a rustic kitchen and dining area; above was a partially covered deck. The dining area had views over the wall looking east southeast across Bahia de los Sueños towards the Pacific Ocean.

The little house down the slope to the sea was a typical hacienda style architecture with heavy stucco walls, a red tile roof, and French windows smaller than the Big House, Baba thought she saw two bedrooms. Maybe someone will visit her, she thought.

She wandered around the big house while Viejo and Viola sat on the view deck serving each other’s needs for company and cold beer. She walked to the third floor where she was awed at the view. As she scanned the scene she looked down on the small house. Ok, she thought, there is my new home for a time. She traced the water’s edge

then she saw a gate through the wall just near the little house. "There." She said as she turned from the window to descend to the beach level.

She walked through the back door of the little house. "Baba's house." She said. The back door opened in a large room with couches and a central table creating a conversation area. She searched in cabinets and behind wall hangings. "Good. No TV."

When her attention was free again she saw the front door and the gate to the beach. Without hesitation, she walked through them and down to the water. At the edge, she looked at her toes in the dry sand, the moist sand an inch away. There must be a ceremony for remaking one's self in a way that is pleasing. She thought about what she had seen since her baptism in Mulege, her vows and rebirth in La Paz and now this place and her openness to whatever Juan Cabral might bring. Imagining a new life, she stepped forward letting the waves tickle her ankles, a step forward and she could feel the little fish chewing on her toes and all the interesting things they brought with them into the sea.

She stood surrounded by the shallow water mumbling a song by John Lee Hooker, "Can heal you, can heal you, heal you, if you let it." She pulled her thin dress over her head which she threw back, behind her, to the sand. Turning to the sea again she took two steps and dove in a smooth slide into the warm waters.

Above her on the view deck her old friends watched as she waded and now swam.

Hermana chuckled under her breathe. "Well, my dear almost husband for fifty some years, what do you think?"

"Baba loves it."

“And you?”

“Hmm. How do you say the most beautiful moment of my life in Spanish?”

“Este es el momento más hermoso de mi vida.”

“Yah that.” Robert laughed. “I missed the punch line. S. O. C. K. S.”

Viola grinned and then smirked. “You need new jokes. Something to think about.”

“What? I should become a comedian in my later years? That would be a change.”

“Well, dear, you have time to consider a new future. Shall we marry this week.”

“Let’s wait for Baba. Something tells me we could have a double wedding.”

“That’s a ceremony. I want to be a wife. Legal sex while its good is what I had in mind.”

“What Is legal? A piece of paper? I will make a piece of paper. We will sign. We will be who the paper says we are.” Viejo knew he was entering crazy land. “What name do you want to be known by?”

“Viejo’s hot mamma.”

“No. Señora Viola Hermana Soldier wife of Señor Roberto Viejo Soldier, parents by choice of Baba Soldier Cabral de la Torre. A respectable family.”

“How fast can you write? I have ideas for tonight.”

Sunrise three decades ago

You're never really been anywhere unless you've seen the sunrise from your bed. That thought coursed through his dream as he awakened to see the dawn sky.

Robert was alone lying in a meadow on the El Paso side of the US-Mexican border. A river, the Rio Grande, and Juarez were a few football fields away. The sun was in his right eye. His face was in the dry grass. "Ahhh." He said and repeated it a few times. *Where is this place?* He thought.

He was too sore to move. He had learned from his reading that when you awake half dead it is best to not stir a muscle while gathering passive information about your surroundings. He stopped moaning. The pain did not go away. His memory began to come alive. *A bullet* ran through his mind.

His thoughts were tortured by the ache in his thigh. Two men with long guns ambushed him and his partner Xavier. Robert called him X. These guys were his contacts for kilos. Robert was the money. X was the brains. "X. Where is X? Money. Where is money?"

Suddenly motivated to move, he pushed his upper torso up out of the tall grass, so he could look from side to side. To his left was the rental car he and X came to the meeting in. The windshield was shattered. He thought the tires looked flat.

"Money's gone." He surmised. He rolled over onto his back and sat up. He craned his neck in an abbreviated 360 and couldn't find X. "X is in the car." He knew he didn't know, but what's to guess. "Dead or alive." Then he just stood up.

“Damn. That hurts.” He soon discovered his right thigh had been wounded but not a through wound. His pants were a little wet. At least the bleeding didn’t kill him. He hobbled to the car. There was no money in the back seat where the conversation had begun about how much was owed to whom and why. That’s when the guns showed up. Robert remembered slowly opening the backseat door, standing, then running away into the darkness like a man fearing for his life. Then gun shots, both rifle and shotgun. He fell. He heard voices, then quiet. He felt extreme pain. He passed out.

There was no money and no X in the front either.

“The trunk.”

He flipped the inboard trunk switch, hobbled slowly to the back and there in the trunk was nothing. No X.

“Maybe he escaped.” He thought. “Maybe he is in the river. Maybe he set me up. Nah. Not X. He owes me. Hmm. Maybe he did.”

A quick look around the car and he saw it was dead. He found his pack, torn apart, his clothes scattered about near the car. He dressed his wound, changed his clothes and set off for what he estimated would be a short walk to a bus stop.

Two days later he was asleep on the ground floor of his Washington Square bookstore.

It was Saturday morning. The Little Red Bookstore was normally open to the public from nine in the morning. When he heard a loud knock on his door he had been thinking about what time it might be. Normally, he wouldn’t have been on a bus for over twenty-four hours with a bleeding

wound. Normally, he wouldn't sleep down here on the floor but upstairs in his bed in his studio apartment. Normally, his bedside clock answered his question. The knocking persisted.

Robert rose from the floor his bad leg stiff and painful. He saw it was light outside. He felt the shadows cross his windows and determined it was nine and a customer was intent upon opening the store. He hopped to the door and saw through the door window that a slight built senior citizen was using the knob of her walking stick to beat on the door frame. He flipped the alarms and locks. Finally, he pulled the door open and she rushed past him into the store. As he turned to say hello, he saw her handgun. A .22 *cal* passed through his thoughts.

"Lock the door," she said. Pushing the gun into his ribs.

He did as she wanted by closing and relocking the door.

"Thank you. I appreciate your predicament. Gramma with a gun comes to bust your ass. Any questions?"

"Ah. One comes to mind. Do you want a book? I only buy books by appointment, since so much money may be involved. I like quiet and calm so everyone is happy."

"Quiet and calm? Hmm. Not my way." She looked like she was elderly and a bit crippled by age, but she sounded like a youthful ninja. Robert giggled at the thought.

"I'm guessing you didn't attend kindergarten." Robert had used this line before. In his estimate reminding dangerous people that they were young and had fun once could bring a change of heart. Not this time.

“Do you feel the pain of a 22 cal solid point in your thigh? Don’t worry I know who shot you. It wasn’t me. You can cut the psychology.”

“How can I help you?” Robert took the time the conversation had taken to move slowly to his chair, the one he always used for conversations. As he asked this question he slid down onto the seat. “Ah. That feels better.”

“You are in a world of hurt. People are after you. You are lucky I wasn’t one of them.”

“Excuse me. Do you want a book?”

“I hear you asking why I am here. I found out some information by accident and I figured if I impressed you with it you would help me.” She remained standing, her right hand holding the gun pointed in his general direction. She seemed more at ease.

Robert shook his head. He decided to give it one more try. “I have a one of a kind volume of .22 cal handgun murders. Did you know it is the favorite weapon for suicides? The book I am speaking of is on the table behind you. Just there.” He said pointing to her left and behind her. She turned to look to where he pointed. “It’s called ‘The Gun Was Loaded.’”

She walked to the table. Switched hands with her gun and began picking up the books on the table, one by one. “This is crazy. How does one guy collect so many bazaar books?” She put the gun on top of the nearest pile. “This one is interesting.”

Robert was comfortable enough in his chair. He sat and watched her. She had turned her back to him as she continued to comb through the

stacks in front of her. He knew her from somewhere. Where? The answer would not be long in coming.

“Robert, I cannot believe you. You walk into a trap. Some guys who know pretty much nothing steal your money. They almost kill you.” She slapped the book she was interested in onto the top of the stack next to her gun and turned to face him. “Then, wounded you open the door to a stranger armed and dangerous. Not good. You have lost your touch. You have forgotten everything I taught you.”

“Aunt Beth?”

“You didn’t even try to overwhelm me when I turned my back and put the gun down.”

“Shoot me. I am too tired to care. Might be a relief.”

“Where did I go wrong?”

“I think it was pulling the gun on me. What were you trying to do? Bring me to my senses?” Robert tried and failed to regain his footing. “You are lucky I carry no weapons. Just my sharp wit and explosive opinions.”

“I always thought you were the smart one.”

“You were always my favorite aunt.” Robert grimaced as he rose at last to give Beth a hug. She held him close for an aunt, but he thought she may have not been touched for some time. She was never a warm person – not a rarity in their family. Hugs were also rare and usually reserved for special occasions like weddings and funerals. She giggled when she released him.

“I was worried I would be too late to save you.” Which Robert took to mean the hug was related to a funeral. “Old aunties always miss their nephews. I have missed you.”

“And you want a favor?”

“Not a favor but help. I will pay you well.” She flopped down in his empty chair. “Good to get the load off.”

“Beth, anyone listening to this would be confused. I am. You know who shot me even though they are just marijuanos. They took what they wanted. People are after me, but not those people.” As he spoke, his urge for coffee overcame him.

He moved slowly to the bathroom behind her and splashed water in his face letting the dampness dry to wake him completely. It wasn’t coffee, but it helped.

She sat in his chair grinning because she had a secret and he wanted to know it without paying any price.

“Dear Robert,” she said when he emerged into the main room.

“Remember the last time we talked? Five years have passed. There were rumors of a murder. One of my partners went missing.”

“That was Xavier’s father. Did you find him?”

“Sort of. Angelico found me. Now I use a cane.” She rubbed her legs as if warming her hands. “He was very unkind.”

“Oh.” Robert was not surprised. Something was always happening to her. Not hearing from her for five years had not fazed him. He thought of Aunt Beth as inevitable and now here she was to prove his point.

“Beth, are you saying X hijacked me?”

“Like Father.”

“Oh.” Robert wished he could snuggle in Sister Viola’s breasts and be comforted as his heart began to race and his head burst with thoughts unbecoming the spiritual being he hoped he was. “Shit. I mean, fuck. I mean what an asshole he is.”

“You knew he was no saint or he wouldn’t be working with you. Like I said I feared I might be too late to save you. But not, for which I am glad.” Beth smiled into Robert’s eyes. “I will save you from both of them.”

“Well, it wasn’t me who made them angry. Now they are into me for another 10 which makes 15,000. And that’s not Pesos.”

“I can help.”

“What do I have to do for you?” Robert hated being owed almost as much as he hated needing help. Sometimes it works out nice and clean. Most times it is complicated, even bloody. Like this time had been.

“I want you to retire from the life before I die trying to keep you alive.”

“You are funny, Beth. If you had retired everything would now be cool. Mais no?”

“Mais oui. However, your wishes are belated and here we are.”

“What does Angelico want with you?”

“You.”

“What?” Robert was now pissed off. “This is your doing. Why did I get involved?”

“It is about a book.”

“Does he own it or do I?”

“Xavier told me last night that you will get your 15 plus vig for a copy of a book about his father he claims was sold to you by mistake. He is mad at the seller, who is now beyond caring, I assume. All that remains of a problem is getting the book back to him.”

“He tries to kill me then he wants a favor from me?”

“He said you are not dead because he was just trying to motivate you to sell it to him.”

“I need a name, a title.”

“Silence of the Elders. That’s, ah, El Silencio de los Ancianos, in Spanish. You have this?”

“It is in my bank security box across the street.” Robert was shaking.

“He just wants the book and either me dead or you retired from the smoke trade. He says the margins are too thin to share now that every longhaired a-hole from the US is competing with him.”

“He hopes I love you?”

“He could care less. He wants the trade. You, too, are dead or alive depending.”

“And the book?”

“Simple. You make your old auntie happy or ...”

“Tell Angelico to meet me here on Monday for lunch.”

“No tricks. X is still out there if Angel is dust.”

“No tricks. Where will you be?”

“I have tickets to a foreign country, the name of which is unimportant. They say the weather is great and the people friendly.”

“Beth, I hope the best for you.”

“I won’t be in touch.”

“Thanks for that. It is painful either way.”

Everybody loves everybody

The sunset often produced discussions about the meaning of life and the nature of the existential. Baba was usually the one who had a feeling that needed addressing.

“Hey, love birds, how does it feel to be married by desire? What is new about it?” She asked. They were standing on the beach where the houses would not block their western view.

“Baba dear, you know we do not know everything about one another. There are many secrets. We took a vow together. Mine was something like: Robert, you know I, Viola, loved you. I, Sister Viola, loved you Father Robert. Hermana Viola loves Viejo Soldier no matter who you turn out to be. The secrets we keep are only just so dark and no more.”

Baba looked at Viejo. “And you?”

“Mine were mine. I said: Sister Viola, I want to be yours in every way I can and in every way you wish for. The darkness is powerful. Together we will bring light into our lives”

Baba said, “Ah.” Everyone waited. “The big question is why you were not married before even my father was born? The answer is in the secrets you kept because you were rarely together. When you were together you wanted to be free. Free to be who you were, who you really were beyond the business you were doing. But the world is a difficult place to be peaceful in when you live in the seat of world violence, the empire of pain.”

They walked back to the house without talking. They made food together without revisiting their conversation.

Robert's secrets come out

"Who am I? It's not simple. I have worked on telling the story all at once, in a sentence, not there yet. Robert has an answer but so does Viejo Soldier and, it is not the same answer."

"Try harder, amigo mio." Viola Hermana reached for his hand, slowly petting it hoping his mind would free his secrets as she had hers. "We are alone here. Baba is napping. There is not a soul within a half mile of us. I know a secret telling spell. Ready"

"OK."

"East of the sun, and west of the moon, we'll build a dream house of love, dear."

"Billy? Sounds like a spell for happiness."

"Ours. Tell me the worst. I know about death. Tell me the rest. What came before? Start there."

"East of the sun. I was tortured when I was young. Seven. The scars are gone but the frightening memories are inside. Invisible. I was imprisoned until age eighteen for crimes that did not exist. I was freed by accident. What freed me? My sacrament freed my mind from the cage. Whose cage?" He stopped. A drink of water. His tears fell into the cup. His drink was salty.

She saw his emotions like sharp stones on his path. He stumbled across them in his bare feet. She thought of the Cathedral and the crucifix.

"I see your thoughts." He said. "It is more than funny that we met where we did and became who we did. But it is so."

“How?” She paused. He did not answer. She went on. “I know how. My father in moments of passion spoke against the priests and the generals.”

“Yes. The priests and the generals are the gods we hide from. I am free but not without the blues.”

“Well put.” She said. “My father would have loved you as he did me.”

More water and more salt.

“West of the moon. I could not love. Not a woman. Not a child. Not myself. I became driven to do something to end the torture but as you know west of the moon is a wild place. I misunderstood what I was to do. Things I tried were torture disguised. In many ways, each reminded me of my cell. I mistook a new way as a different way, leading elsewhere but no. I gave up. I became them to beat them. Becoming your enemy is the ultimate defeat. I left the world knowing that I would never return. That is when we met.”

She sat listening to his story trying hard to understand the nuance of his words, trying to see around the corner, trying to guess from what her fifty years with him had taught her, what he could be referring to when he said, “Becoming your enemy.”

“Today, in the center of the universe, having seen the edges of it all, I like to think that it is possible I am better off for it. Not the torture but the journey here. I am Viejo Soldier, who fought as hard as he could until there was no more to do. The war was never meant to end.”

“But it has.”

“For me? The peace was won, as the saying goes. I became a priest and a general to no avail, only to find meaning living two weeks a year in the imaginary world of Father Robert with his very real lover Sister Viola. Fifty years elapsed, still west of the moon, until time had moved us from the old universe to another one where love was possible. My longing for a way out of our imaginary, fable life has come to be, and we are here, a little late some might say. But I am free inside and out. Billy must have something to say about that.”

“The rest of the verse: Near to the sun in the day, near to the moon at night, we’ll live in a lovely way dear, living on love and pale moonlight.”

Escaping into their silence. Viejo’s final secret was safe from detection.

“Viejo, mio, are you happy now? Have you found peace?”

“You ask if my secrets are safe? I can answer that the part that matters, the part of life that matters, is to guard your love for me from harm, from distortion into regret. Peace is love of all. Everything else is death.”

Juan Cabral

Juan Cabral knew what he wanted and when he saw Baba at the club on the first night after the Viola, Soldier, Baba soiree to the beach house the mysteries were solved. When he walked through the door of the club, Baba saw him and leaned towards Robert to tell him, "That's him. Johnny Jay Goat-boy. I like him."

Robert watched as Juan recognized her and walked towards her with his hand out saying, "I know you. I am Johnny. What's your name?"

"Hard to say. It's a story and a half."

"If I wanted to call you to ask for a date how should I call you?"

"Call me Baba or Mia or whatever you want to call me."

"Just call you. I get it, Baba. Baba. I like Baba. Maybe you can tell me some of the story later if you are available."

Robert watched them grin at each other as they tried to get over the discomfort of introductions. He was moved to offer advice. "Maybe you could go for a stroll. Or maybe Johnny could introduce himself to Hermana Viola." As he spoke he watched Viola come up from behind Juan.

"Juan Cabral? I am Viola Hermana. I own this club."

"Yes, Hermana it is me. Juan Cabral." Everyone had a laugh over the difficulty of having too many names to keep things simple.

As the evening proceeded, the conversations amongst the four led to a novel approach to how they could deal with everything at once. Cabral liked white wine and Baba joined him in a glass which for her was the

most she had had since the club opened. Viola and Viejo told Juan about a wedding. He looked to Baba and saw what there was to see. They decided to have a serious talk about the future. They chose the beach house the next Monday for breakfast. Somehow it all made sense to them even though the notion of a double wedding sounded crazy but maybe wonderful as well.

On Monday, el desayuno was imported from La Paz. Juan brought it with him to the beach house. It was a luscious fruit salad with the dulce Viejo liked.

They ate and drank the coffee Viejo brewed making sounds of appreciation for the fresh ripe fruit Juan Cabral had found and so deliciously added to Viola's pancakes.

Viejo didn't care for food before Coronas, so he sat sipping his café, listening to the polite talk. He planned a lunch of the rolls.

Robert did not have to struggle to understand the conversation between two native speakers, but Baba's even poorer Spanish meant the four had to speak in English to make it easy for her. Otherwise it was a classic old-world conversation between a mother and a man about the fate of her daughter.

"She is very young." Hermana Viola said. "She is not used to housework."

"Señora, I will not employ my wife. I will leave her to her pursuits, but I will need her help to run the cantina. She understands the business and I want her to continue running it." Juan Cabral was a dark-skinned and handsome man as were all the men in his family. He sat at the breakfast

table across from Viola. On his right sat Viejo sipping his coffee and to Juan's left was Baba quiet with a look of seriousness.

"Si, Señor, pero... She must have a maid and staff for El Nuevo Tiempo. You will be rich. She should enjoy that wealth, not be part of it."

"OK. I hear you. Half of everything I own and everything we make will be hers. She is my partner, not in the old way but, once we are wed, she will stand with me not behind me. Señora Viola, you and I are close enough to be family. I admire your business sense. Your father left you an empire and you have done well with it. I want to rejuvenate it and add to it. You and Robert will share with me and Baba." Juan Cabral spoke slowly not wanting to confuse Viola or cause Baba any more stress than he imagined the negotiation for her womb must have seemed to her already.

He turned to Robert. "Señor Viejo Soldier, as you know, it is the way marriages work in the US. Community property rules will apply. In this way, I am an American hoping that the love we will come to share will not be destroyed by greed."

Viola, Baba and Robert all started to talk at once. The level of enthusiasm grew as they planned first a business partnership and then a double wedding. By the end of the meeting Baba and Johnny were holding hands. Viejo said he needed a nap, Viola seconded the motion and they headed upstairs. The others withdrew to the little house to make more of their new affections. Viola hugged Viejo as they fell asleep in the first bed they knew they would share forever.

Juan Cabral de la Torres' secret

Juan had a feeling for Baba. If she wanted to be his partner they could not have secrets. "Mi Amore, you know your family's secrets?"

"There is confusion in the words. My new family has a few but I do not think of them as secrets. Everyone alive at the time knew what Francisco was up to. Nothing was hidden. It is just that almost everyone alive at the time is now passed on to other worlds."

"Francisco was a tough, smart man." Juan explained. He talked with his hands. Baba made note of this as an annoyance.

"Also, immoral, I would say." She said.

"Maybe part of the world that seems impolite to most, but still he was a good businessman. Do you agree?"

"He made money if that is what you mean, and he made a lot of it. You know the downside was the nature of his businesses." Baba sat up straight her argument was as plain as the words she used.

"Prostitution and drugs? He was a landlord. He owned property which he rented to other business concerns that did involve both."

"Nicer way to put it." Baba nodded in agreement.

"Yes. And Viejo? What was his method?"

"That may be a secret I do not know. He owned a bookstore."

"His customers were involved in drugs and assassinations. True."

“They had to shop for food and go to the movies too. Does that make the grocer and the movie theater owner immoral?” Baba said without emotion.

“Good point.” Juan Cabral nodded in agreement.

“There may be more than that to him, but he is retired, and I want to let what ailed him be at rest, so he can be at rest in this life as well. He is the best man I have ever known.”

“Fair enough.” Juan Cabral said, sensing that to form an agreement, agreeing was the most important thing he could do. So far, he counted three agreements. “What I know of him is that he was a smuggler who worked with Francisco’s partners who lived here in La Paz. I am not entirely certain, but I have a feeling for his past that my father has helped me to understand. No matter. It is of little consequence. I have a plan to rebuild Francisco’s empire from the cantina up and I want you to be my business partner. What I have learned of you gives me confidence that we can grow wealthy together.”

“Juan, you are a surprise.” Baba smiled as she talked. Juan was a handsome man and would make a wonderful gangster.

Robert's Next to last secret

One of the features of life on a near barren landscape is the phenomenon of sameness in the macro. The sounds and sights are unchanging within limits. The limits distinguish micro from macro, or a life time from a millennium. In the details, in the long run things are changing. But no one lives long enough to notice. That's how it was supposed to be. We are born into a context which for the overwhelming majority is nearly the same as it was for many preceding generations.

Life had changed. Lives were longer, and the limits had been stretched by the force of increasing human populations. Baja Sur was now different within the lifetimes of many.

Viejo and Viola sat on the beach, staring into the shades of blue, often silent, sometimes not. Viejo was noticing the extreme changes La Paz had undergone during his time. He decided not to worry about it since he had no children but then there is Baba and her children if they have any.

Viola petted the top of his head with its sparse hair. He was so deep in thought she thought him asleep. She decided to try to rouse him with her attention.

"Amor tell me a secret."

"Oh. I have told you many secrets."

"But not the one's I want to hear." She spoke slowly. "You know I have heard of Aunt Beth. I assumed she was your aunt."

A flash of doubt flared in his mind. This is dangerously close to the last secret he kept. Viola saw the thoughts that crossed his mind. She petted him some more.

“Don’t worry. The darkness is only so dark and no more.” She smiled into his face. “Tell me about Beth. Start anywhere.”

Viejo sat up and faced her. “OK.” He cleared his throat. “Aunt Beth loved her work. That’s how she put it. She was not alone in this. There is something satisfying that ridding the world of a deserving soul brought to her. It kept her at it.

“I knew her since my birth. My father was, you know, who knows. My mother and my aunt raised me. Beth’s hope was I would join her in her game, but I was transformed by LSD. The act became undoable for me, so I told her. She didn’t take it well and even after two decades passed she still held it against me.”

Viejo told her the story of his partnership with X and the awakening he received as his reward.

“The time she found me on the bookstore floor, I had been going in a wrong direction playing the game with people who were not looking out for my welfare. Smuggling is an honored profession. Smugglers are not always honorable people. Somewhere in the gray area, I was shot in the leg. Could have been worse.”

“Found you on the bookstore floor?”

“Ah. Yeah. Maybe I haven’t told you that story.” Viejo reminded himself to never rely on his memory. It was too uncertain. “Well Beth shows up

at the door first thing on a Saturday. I had been shot in the leg two days before. She came by to tell me what my being shot in the leg signified.”

“Oh. I remember a new scar a few dozen years ago.”

“That one.” He sighed.

“I got a book shortly after that scar showed up. El Silencio it’s called...”
She said.

Robert did not want to hear about this from her.

“... de los Ancianos.” He said under his breathe. “I know of it. Books were my business.”

“Robert, you still have a secret. Save it for another day.” They rose to seek food.

Robert and Viola 2017

The bedroom at the top of the main house was made for sunrises. Robert and Viola married themselves in a private ceremony and made love in a way reflecting all their half century of experience together. First, they slept. They went to bed early and woke by an alarm at 5 AM. They showered and ate then returned to bed to wait for the sun. As the light touched their skin their hands and lips followed.

As the sun rose their lust satisfied they returned to the task to unburden themselves to protect their love. Viejo and Hermana knew there still were secrets. Persuasion had helped them start. If they had more to say it was up to them.

“Are you afraid?” Viejo was fond of this question.

“Of what?”

“Of truth?”

“Only in the ears of my enemies.” Viola loved to be the underworld figure whose empire stretched all the way to the Capital.

“I have had some of those.”

“Enemies? Me too.”

They were sitting up in their wedding bed adoring the dawn and the pastel colors the Gulf’s waters turned as the sun rose to take over the day.

“Sister Viola let’s stay in bed until noon.”

“Nah. Let’s go for a swim.”

“Tomorrow. I want to talk.”

“Talking is for after dinner. If you don’t get up, you’ll rust solid and we won’t be able to move you. Let’s walk to the water.” It was 75 outside. Taking almost no time to dress in bathing suits and flips, off they went.

The path from the top floor included a long, circular stair with a landing on each half level, that went the two floors to ground level followed by a garden path through the cactus collection of a lifetime. Then the squeaking gate and onto the beach. By the time the loudly giggling couple reached the sand, Baba was at the gate waiting for them. Everyone hugged with shouts of delight.

“I want to swim.” Baba said. Throwing her thin covering onto the fence she skipped naked to the water’s edge and into the Gulf. Hermana shouted encouragement and joined her but with more caution than her younger companion.

Robert Viejo Soldier stood still, watching Viola’s experience before he moved down the sand to the water and in until he reached ankle deep where he stopped. Staring at the water his thoughts entertained his final confession.

As he approached the first telling, the one that is wholly for oneself, he must have been in a deep trance with a mixture of the Viola’s beauty and the terror of her realizing who he was, because he missed the women sneaking up beside him.

“Ahhh!” They yelled as they splashed him to consciousness, his thoughts moving back into the present. He joined in until they were treading water together holding each other’s shoulders smiling and giggling in love with everything in every way.

It was 7:30 and the three were sitting in the little house, in the conversation area having fresh brewed coffee. Baba had the skill. They all loved coffee and leftover dulce. Then it happened.

Baba Mia said, “Ah.”

Everyone waited. Viejo sipped his coffee. Viola watched her ‘child’s’ face stare off into the void.

“Ah. That’s it.” She said. “I see. You really did have secrets. There are things we hide from ourselves, most definitely, ill-defining moments, aka, can’t I just get over it. But that is hiding, not open and trusting, love is uncertain with secrets. But you have always had secrets, even from the start, before you became Father and Sister.”

“Baba,” Viejo wanted to hug her. “There wasn’t always love as much as mystery. We knew we didn’t know, didn’t want to tell, preferred the untruth rather than the lie. We made up a small world we could maintain seven days at a time twice a year.”

“And lived in it.”

“For fifty years. Happily.”

“Until me.”

What was it, Robert thought, that brought the end of the secret life? Robert had started the unwinding in the hotel in Santa Rosalia where he knew it was Viola, the reason he went back to La Paz. Memories are tricky things. Was that how it went?

Viejo teared up. He pushed the tears out of his eyes. “You know you freed us from our prison cells. We knew the depths of each other and

loved those depths. You inspired the telling, the freeing of the truth or more of it than happened before. It was enough to make the walls that kept us in a bondage burst without pain to let us be together and open.”

“Now we are vulnerable.” Viola nodded her head. Viejo got her intention.

“What?” Baba said looking at Viola.

“Secrets told have lives of their own.” Hermana stood and said, “I’m going for the good stuff.”

“I’ll help.” Baba was at the door before Viola rose to go.

Viejo sat listening to the shore break lifted by the onshore breeze. He fell asleep. Before they returned he had been awakened by his bladder and returned from the bathroom to see brandy, flan and a box, mahogany inlaid in gold and silver. Baba and Hermana were filling glasses with water and others with brandy. Plates of flan with forks were in front of them.

“My good friends and other things,” Viola seemed about ready for a song. “I love ya, I love you, I love you. I love you anyhow, And I don't care.”

“Oh!” Said Viejo as he opened it in front of him. “There is some serious stuff in this box.”

He took the three groups of ahora, mañana and mas tarde and placed the vials on the table. They looked at all three groups and settled on one from mañana.

“What is the second choice of things to do? Ah. Hashish.” Viejo had never smoked in his life. Nor had Viola. Baba was from a different culture.

“Oh, goodie.” She said.

Aunt Beth 1987

Robert didn't know what to do with Beth now that she had settled down and moved her pistol to its holster. She had retired, promised to stay away but here she was once more, a year older, demanding something.

"That damn book." She referred to Angelico's Silence of the Elders. "Cost me a bunch. But it's over. We're outa the game. Who'd a thought."

"How old are you?"

"Maybe 62 or 75." Beth sneered. "Older than about 107 people I planted. They stopped. I kept going."

"That's not nice. Some of them may have been good family men or women. Maybe their children miss them."

"Robert, damn, you have this all wrong. I only pointed the gun at the ones no one would miss even for a moment. They usually had a lot of stuff and their early demises left the pile for other dogs to fight over."

"How do you know?"

"By their job descriptions. Killer, rapist, thieves, more. You get the idea."

Beth was pacing across the bookstore floor. It was Monday morning. The store was closed and there were no appointments until Wednesday. Robert was planning to leave on Thursday for La Paz. Aunt Beth needed to be gone by then.

"Beth, I have to go away for a couple weeks. Business to attend to."

"Where?"

"Mexico."

“Pot.”

“Nope. You know that’s over. LSD.”

“Buy or sell?”

“Sell.”

“Who to?”

“Same people as always. Nothing new.”

“Didn’t I get you started. La Paz. Right?”

“You did, you are.”

“That was a sad one. Guy had a daughter.”

“What?” Robert was thinking about Viola and missed her reference.

“Just some shit flew past my lips. Sorry.” Beth turned to the front door.

“Want a coffee?”

“Nice offer. I need out of here. Let’s walk.” Beth was through the door out into Washington Square where she waited for him to pull on his sweater. They walked side by side across the square and up Columbus to the hippest place in the City.

They sat on the sidewalk at Vesuvio’s Restaurant. They ordered coffee and a pastry each. They talked a little about his parents. Beth had met his father when her sister began to hang out with him. He disappeared from his mother’s life once she became pregnant.

“She might have tired of him and just ... you know.” She made a popping sound while she aimed her index finger like a gun. “Naturally she loved you. Mothers are that way. Once her hormones changed he became the

asshole and fled. Once he was gone she relaxed and enjoyed your womb-life and birth.”

“What was his name?” Robert asked. The mocha was gone as was his blueberry muffin. Hers too.

The conversation lingered. Neither could remember his father’s name. His mother had been dead for almost five years, so she was not available to remind them.

“Oh, well.” Beth said as she pushed herself away from the table. “Might come to me, but then I am off once more to my favorite hideout.”

He stood. They hugged. She turned and left looking for a cab. He turned away from her and headed back to the store to pack for his trip south.

That was the last time he saw her.

Back to the Mahogany box and the tin of Hashish

The main house in Los Sueños, a stack of boxes with the windows open to the east, had three levels. The first level was the entry ways and the base of the stairs that snaked up to the upper levels. It was built by Viola's father. It had a poker room made of wood. It was a replica of the one at the cantina.

Viejo and Viola were crushed up against each other in a loveseat. It was the middle of the morning. Baba had brought the mahogany box and placed it on his lap, turned to sit on a stuffed chair, relaxed into it, folded her hands in her lap and smiled.

"Viejo, please read about Hashish." She said.

"Hashish is for the strong of will. If you aren't, you are hammered into silence. It is good for quiet things like listening. Not good for talking. Good for laughing. Great for writing, painting, maybe sex. It's a matter of tastes and/or conditions." Robert read from a description left in the box. He remembered being recently raised from the dead. There was this emergency that drove him off his schedule into a two-day drive with no sleep until he was hidden safely in the monastery crazy ward. Then they decided to all die and be reborn into a new history and it began with Mescaline and a midnight trip that ended in a lettuce bed and new names.

That seemed like years in the past to Viejo and only yesterday to Baba Mia whose handwriting was evident in the description. "I wrote that." Baba giggled. Everyone laughed. Viola had loaded a water pipe. A lighter started a coal burning in the lump of hash then the ritual puffing,

passing and coughing ensued until nothing remained of the hash or the people who became increasingly docile and horizontal.

Robert Viejo Soldier sat still on a pillow on the floor staring into a candle's flickering flame. Viola Hermana wife of Robert Viejo Soldier held his right arm against her chest. She imagined she had died and gone to heaven. Persuasion Baba Mia rose from the floor and walked into the late morning sun for a dip in the water.

Viejo and Hermana watched Baba retreat to the sea. They decided to try sex and wandered back up the stairs and into their wedding bed where they 'passed out' into their own world of vivid dreams.

The morning became Noon. Thoughts of lunch rushed into their minds nearly simultaneously. Shorts, tank top and flips on, the trio variously skipped, staggered and spun down the beach in search of the palapa restaurant they liked so much.

The tacos and Coronas brought them back from where the cannabinoids sent them. Waiting for the second round of tacos talk circled around the issues they decided needed their attention. The garden, the club, Juan Cabral were imbedded in the discussion of the beauties of Los Sueños, the beach and the sunrises. This was just days before they gave up on La Paz and the nightlife in favor of early mornings complete with bathing in the pastel sunrises.

"Viejo. Hermana. I have to declare Juan to be hopelessly a Mexican male and all that portends for the non-Mexican female i.e. me. If we are to work together it is a business contract, we need." Baba was leaning back into one of those brightly painted wicker bottom chairs that squeaked

every time she moved. The sound bothered her. She stopped talking and played the chair for her adoring audience. “Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.”

The new tacos arrived in time for a round of laughter. More face stuffing more beer and more declarations of a faith in a future together that didn’t need Cabral’s business ideas to make the future bright.

Viola loved the club, “Maybe it is for sale, maybe it is looking for a partner. I dreamed my dream for decades and we made it happen for me.”

“And me.” Baba was nodding in agreement, talking over a mouthful of cabezon taco with salsa and a half teaspoon of refried beans on top. “Hmm.” She finished her thought.

Viejo Soldier knew better than to interrupt happiness with a sense of reality, but his inner fool wouldn’t let him remain silent. “There are times when all the money is on the table and the best cards win. Everyone else loses. I say do not play for money. Make it love or make it somewhere else.”

There was a round of ‘well said.’ Nodding happened. More tacos were eaten as their thoughts worked on Viejo’s small speech.

“I was in the game.” Viejo said.

“Me, too.” Viola said.

“Not me.” Baba said. “It seems like a movie plot not a real-life plan.”

They plotted their next steps. Their plan was simply to move to the beach houses. The garden would be given up to the night harvesters.

The club would become an occasional place. They were determined to survive on sun, sand and the once a week blues night in town.

When the last of the tacos were gone that was the plan. It was hot as hell on the sand. They walked back home by wading in the shallows of the Gulf.

The brightest star, the darkest moon

Viejo's memory was playing tricks on him. He was remembering things he wanted to forget while forgetting things he wanted to remember. Some people only remember the errors and not the triumphs, he thought. But there was the nagging of the forgotten.

There were plenty of times he recalled some moment when he didn't shine like the brightest star. His mother had a saying about the beauty of his best parts which she contrasted to his spiritual deficits.

The last time he saw his mother, he was twelve already embarked on a career in smuggling with a small gang of friends who lived along the border. When she died, they had been out of touch for almost three decades. He heard about her passing from one of his bookstore clients. The client didn't know what got her, a bullet or some disease.

Aging plays the worst tricks on memory. There was a decade of remembering the worst. There was a decade of recalling the best. Then there was the humbling decade of both when there was nothing especially good or evil. Robert imagined he deserved the best, but his memory told him otherwise. "If I remember that, imagine what I have forgotten."

The rough outline of a life avoids the foibles and accentuates the anniversaries.

The sun was rising off the sea. The temperature rising. The colors changing from red pastels to shades of blue and gray. His thoughts traversed from his mother to his escape across Baja Norte y Sur on his last day in the Game.

The Surrender to the Coromuel

Beth had burst the bubble. He had heard it but not heard it for twenty years. On a whim, he took the last of two copies of *El Silencio de los Ancianos* out of his vault. He made the copies when Angelico demanded the original back. This was thirty years ago. Then he couldn't understand it, so he ignored it. Now he read Spanish better than he heard it and he had been listening most of his life for two weeks a year. He started to read it.

His eyes searched the printed pages for names so his need to translate would be limited. He found his Aunt Beth's name on page 57. He found his name on page 61. He paged back and found Angelico's and Xavier's. He saw the letters L, S, and D. He saw Aunt Beth, Francisco and 'muerto' in the same paragraph.

"Beth killed Viola's father?" He said. "Oh, no."

He slammed the manuscript shut. His imagination ran wild. How to escape the harm he had done, he wondered. He had time to consider his options. It was months before another trip south. But, Viola, he wanted to hear her voice. He decided to bail and to move to La Paz.

The store needed to be closed. He had long ago computerized his inventory. It was worth hundreds of thousands, but hard to sell. Beth would have burned his store down along with half the block for the insurance money. That was not his way.

As he was reviewing his stock going back and forth from his spreadsheets to his browser looking for current prices, he thought he would try to translate the sentence with Francisco and muerto.

He found the words again and typed “Francisco estaba muerto cuando llegó” into Google.

As he waited for the gears to turn the phone buzzed.

“Death Books, Robert speaking.” He answered.

“Sorry, I’m looking for The Little Red Bookstore.” A male voice said.

“Things are not going well today. What can I do for you?”

“Robert, sit down. You need a vacation.” X’s voice became clearer.

“X. I’ll be damned.”

“I would guess that’s true.” X liked to wait in between sentences as if to hear some applause or laughter. “Called to tell you that we will roll up on you unless you get out of the game once and for all.”

“Thanks for the info.” Robert had not heard from X since the setup in El Paso that led to bullets, blood and Beth telling him Angelico was after him about ‘Silence of the Elders.’ “Listen asshole, remember that book your daddy wanted so badly? Who wrote that? Just curious.”

“His mistress, ah. What’s her name? A porn star, if I remember right. She was not a good writer, but she had a long memory. What brought that up?”

“Been reading it. Very revealing”

“Bullshit. I burned it.”

“I made a copy.”

“You are a dead man.”

“Nah. I will trade it for something you have too much of.”

“What.”

“L, liquid, a million mics. Packed neatly in a non-descript valise in 1,000 mic vials. UPS it to my PO Box 1492 in National City. When I pick it up, I’ll drop the manuscript in the return mail.”

“Like old times, Robert.” He said. “Caught me in a good mood.” He continued. “OK. End of game for that is simple.” He paused. “It’ll be there before you leave.”

X slammed his flip phone shut. Robert didn’t notice, he was laughing too hard. He returned to his inventory and saw his Google reply screen.

“Francisco was dead, when she arrived.” He read out loud. “Wow!”

He spent an hour considering his options. He called his old friend Larry, the poet, and made a deal that was good for Larry’s pocket and ended Robert’s ownership of everything he owned in San Francisco.

A week later he crossed the border with the shipment.

Tijuana is not the city one would generally consider safe. Robert breathed a sigh when he crossed the border into the bustle of Avenida de Revolution. He was headed to the beige motel overlooking the vermillion sea.

“I need to hide.” He said out loud as he drove his rented red Beetle south towards Ensenada. He would feel better once he was past the military checkpoint beyond the port town. He was nervous. This was the last night and the last load headed south. It was not without its cost. Bridges had been burned. Fifty years’ worth of bridges. Not everyone

involved felt good about him. His back itched and would until he unloaded his burden for what would be his retirement account.

Sister Viola's face entered his mind. He had known he was headed to the cathedral since he began reading El Silencio. But that was a step too far. First, the delivery and acquiring the cash. LSD had been good to him he thought. Fifty years he had been successful in exporting liquid psychedelics to clients in northern Mexico. Today would be the last.

The road seemed longer than usual. Every unexpected thing raised his paranoia. He made it to his second home. Went to his room and waited for his contact.

The code words had always been "I am the Eggman." The reply had always been "Coo-coo cachoo." The song was new at the time he began. He and his contact had grown old together. Their conversations were friendly and short.

When there was a knock on his door, he was surprised. These were younger guys. Something had changed but then this was an unscheduled shipment.

He said. "I am..."

"We know, Eggman. Johnny sent the money to your account in Cayman." He pulled out his smart phone and thumbed it for a bit then turned the screen towards him. "See. Coo-Coo Cachoo." The screen showed a transfer from a numbered account to his account in a Cayman bank.

The valise was inspected. Robert took one 1000 mic vial. The youngsters and the OG parted company.

He drove away. As always, he stopped in Mulege to move the funds. His banker was adept at bringing the funds closer to their final destination. This was his last transaction. He kept that to himself.

The Road Police

The road south from Mulege is along Bahia Conception, a startlingly beautiful view, then a long stretch of highway, broken by an intersection, as Highway 1 splits into two routes. One heads west and crosses the peninsula. The other takes the meandering east coast down to Loreto, the last large gulf coastal town until La Paz.

As Robert made his way south he had not taken his usual 100 mics. He was already suffering from spinning thoughts as he mulled over his chances of escaping X's wrath if there was to be any. His experiences with X had caused him decades of paranoia. X in his seventies was a crueler version of his younger self. Paranoia was definitely justified. Robert was engulfed in it as he sped along Highway 1. He was deep into these thoughts and failed to notice how amazingly beautiful the Bahia de Conception was that morning.

By the time he came out of his self-punishment he was past the Bahia and nearly to the intersection. The straight road was boring to drive, otherwise he would have remained in his subconscious if it had not been for the traffic beginning to back up. He saw the emergency vehicle lights flashing several hundred yards ahead.

"An accident?" On Highway 1 there were near daily wrecks, often fatal. The cars ahead came to a stop. So, did he. As he waited he realized people were getting out of their cars. He did the same since the driver ahead of him had abandoned his station at the wheel to stretch his legs beside his car.

Robert had driven up on wrecks before. It would have taken something truly terrible to block traffic on this road for as long as it had already to

create this jam. He stepped into the oncoming traffic lane to get a better view of what was happening. Traffic was blocked in that lane too. Nothing had moved past him going north for five minutes.

At first what he saw was hard to interpret. Between his position in line and the flashing lights people were getting out. Then he saw the Mexican National Guard, La Guardia, armed with assault rifles moving towards him car by car frisking drivers and passengers and looking through their cars and trucks.

“Crap.” Robert was single minded. When he traveled past Santa Rosalia, he kept his car as clean as the day he drove it off the rental lot. No stuff on the floor. Nothing in his trunk. No cash. No drugs. “Ah. The vial.” Except for the vial of acid. He took it out of his backpack. He held it up to his eyes. He shook it.

Robert was a man with simple rules. The one that leapt into his head as he watched the liquid swish around in the small tube was the first rule of ownership: the cops get nothing. No stuff, no surrender, no credit. As he watched the uniformed men move towards him he ran through his options considering the rule.

“I cannot give it up. I cannot throw it away into the brush.” He pulled the cap off and with a small salute to his higher spirits he quaffed it. “Umm. This ought to be exciting.” He crushed the empty tube on the road surface and stepped back as oncoming traffic appeared to have resumed.

The Guardia was upon him. Demanding weapons and drugs they swept through his empty car, pat searched him, threw his clothes out of his

pack, turning each piece inside out, searching seams, searching the glove box and trunk.

As he watched his car being tossed he remembered back through the 50 years he had been on this road. They found nothing again. The closest they ever came to busting him was stopped by a Bible he used to carry. He liked to put it on top of his stash box. The Guardia at the time loved the Bible. They took it as a sign of holiness not to be messed with. They find the Bible. They stop their search. Worked every time.

As his gloating over his string of success the guards moved on leaving him to repack and leave as he would. He re-boarded his VW rental car and seeing the road clearing ahead he moved into gear and went on his way.

In 45 minutes, he began to see rainbows.

He often wondered if he could drive under the influence of more than the recommended dose of L. He was over four hours from La Paz. He worked to stay aware of his driving as the shapes of things were changing in seemingly random ways. He began to laugh as he passed the turn to Loreto.

Highway 1 crosses the peninsula almost to the Pacific side then back again to the gulf and La Paz. The route was easy to find. He knew it well. He was also scared out of his mind from paranoia and his brush with the guard. LSD makes the average person fearful. 1000 mics makes grown men tremble in fear with visions of death running around their head. Robert had never ventured to try this dose and now he was caught in its effects.

Time passed without him noticing as he screamed to himself that what he was experiencing was not real even though he was really having the experience. The road visually screamed past his window, his magical eyes looking steadily ahead. He was in La Paz. He could feel the marina beside him. He turned up the hill inland and found as if by chance the cathedral and the garden gate. He pulled to the curb, the car pointing against the traffic. He thought it was still day time, but it wasn't. He felt exposed, so he crouched down onto the front seat and closed his eyes hoping to become invisible. The streets were quiet. Time passed.

When the idea of calling Viola came to him, he reached for his cellphone and poked out her number on his number pad. This took time. If he tried to focus on anything his eyes were swimming with color. On the third try after two wrong numbers he heard a voice he knew was hers.

“Viola? It's Viejo.” He said.

Viola 1967

She was used to waking a few times at night. There were the times her father checked on her to see if she was safe and sleeping. It was one of those times he found her singing to the music from the cantina she could so clearly hear in her bedroom and the beginning of her career as a blues singer. Her father cared for her and had as long as she existed. He never spoke about her mother. They were not close. There were stories, but they did not leave her feeling better, so she shunned them.

Sometimes she awoke to La Guardia storming down the calle in trucks, bristling with uniformed soldiers holding their weapons for all to see. It was a kind of curfew to scare away the rabble to leave safe spaces for the rich who enjoyed the late night and morning hours for their pleasure. She wasn't supposed to know this, but she did.

The normal sounds did not wake her. Someone playing a new song might wake her. The sounds of the bar and the music alone would not. A fight, and there were some, might wake her depending on the sounds it made. There were rough and drunken men around each other. Things happened. A few had guns.

She woke thinking she had heard a pop. Her ears listened for more, of cries of pain, of the sound of the Guardia, or footsteps on the stairs. Her father's advice was simple "Stay in bed. You cannot solve these problems. Run if you must. Go to the balcony and leap to safety." They had practiced the leap to safety part. She stayed in bed and fell back to sleep.

It was Saturday morning when she regained consciousness. The rising sun was making sleep difficult. As she lay in bed she listened to the

sounds of La Paz waking up. She missed the sound of her father and his 'morning music' he played on the sound system, 'loud enough to wake the dead' he said, as he set the cantina up for another day. She rose and dressed.

As she climbed down the stairs she noticed too many lights were on. Her heart started to speed up. "No." She said. She saw him. She knew what she was seeing. She walked slowly around his body. Something in her speaking of revenge spoke of caution, suppress emotion, seek knowledge.

The second time around she saw the most, saw the wound, saw the blood, saw his eyes, saw his hands, imagined the killer, where he stood, how he left. She did not learn the identity of the killer. She did not learn why her father had been murdered.

She called Renaldo. She waited.

She sat unmoved at an oak table, remembering him, Francisco. He loved wood. It was hard to understand why. As far as she knew he had never been in a forest. She hadn't. There were no oaks in Baja; no redwood, no cedars either. She decided it was for mere possession. He had an oak table. He had redwood paneling. Now he had a small caliber bullet in the wrong place and he was dead as a doornail.

She sat silently watching the coroner remove his body after the police had taken pictures. They had asked no questions. She offered nothing in return. She listened to their heartfelt condolences and offers for care and comfort, especially Renaldo's. He had stayed to clean the floor. They did not talk about the future. She eventually sat there alone.

At about five o'clock she walked through the cantina locking every door and window, barring the front door and double locking the rear escape doors against the chance of thievery.

She took nothing but the keys.

At seventeen her options were limited. It was two months before her birthday, May 11. Until then she had few rights. Her father's death meant she could never see any of her father's assets. She knew stories of daughters losing everything. There were more than a few women who worked in the night life who shared the experience. She needed to hide, and she needed a man, even the idea of a man in her life.

She woke on Sunday, her thoughts sought Father Robert. As she walked towards the cathedral and the monastery he came back into her mind. She began to wish him back with an almost desperate enthusiasm.

The garden

Francisco buried, the cantina stayed shut. The summer cooled into the comfortable months. The sun set earlier. A few Americans had ventured down Highway 1. Viola had settled into her eighteenth year by becoming a gardener for the nuns, two old women who loved each other more than god, she thought. She sang at the priest's request at mass and sometimes at weddings and baptisms. She hated funerals and refused all offers.

She never woke at night. It was quiet in the monastery.

Her habit was to rise early before the sun and walk in her normal clothes to check on the cantina. Then back to enrobe in the traditional Franciscan nun's garb of a brown gown that covered the torso, feet, wrists, neck and scalp. She spent her days in the heat, in the garden from morning tending and renewing it until sunset. The garden and the gardener felt the sun from dawn to sunset.

She loved the sunset. She watched them progress from the point, a minute before the sun disappeared from view, until the light was gone. She would stand there until she was too hungry to deny herself food, then enter the monastery to find food waiting for her, a sign she took that the nuns appreciated her labors.

Sometimes things were slightly different. A chore forgotten that could be done in the near dark like the time she forgot she needed to water the tomatoes. It was not a difficult chore. She had to carry water to each plant. The plants were near the garden gate. She carried the buckets to the well, pulled up the water, filled them and carried them back along the wall and almost to the gate.

He walked through the garden as the last light faded from the day. He did not see her standing where he had seen her first admiring the sunset. He turned and walked back through the trees. As he reached the gate and departure she spoke.

“Father Robert. Is that you?” She said in her practiced English.

He turned towards the sound of her voice. As he did she stood before him. They looked at each other for clues about the meaning of the moment.

“Yes. I missed you.” He said in his practiced Spanish. “I came back to find you. Have you taken vows?” And then in English, “You are dressed...” He brushed his hands against his own clothing.

“Si, pero ...” She said.

“Then Sister Viola, contento.”

“Contento de verte, Padre Roberto.” Her head bowed, her hands pressed flat against her thighs. “Dios tenga misericordia.”

In the safety of the darkness, beyond anyone’s view, she reached out towards him and requested his hand. “Por favor.” He complied. He had been dreaming since Mulege of what the moment would be like. With few words, with voices made of sounds of assent a new life would begin. He only knew a moment would happen but what it was and where it led he could hardly wait to find out.

They held each other fingers. No matter who they were, this moment of uncertainty was overpowering. They held on. Their words failed them. He stepped towards her.

“Hacienda Bugambillas. Una Salle. Esta noche. Tu y yo?” He mumbled his words in sentences he composed using the dialogue from TV shows seen at the beige motel on his way south. He smiled. He held her fingers.

“Si. Si, Amor. Padre Roberto.” She pulled her hand free. Pulled her robe over her head, bundled it under one arm and grabbed his arm with the other. “Andale, pronto.”

The walk

The sidewalks of La Paz are uneven at best once one walks off the Malecon. The tourist industry keeps the “boardwalk” mostly free of ankle turners and the Guardia helps those with needs across the street by stopping traffic. But once one walks away from the restaurants and bars, the sidewalks are obstacle courses with every manner of stair and pothole in unpredictable places. Walking becomes a slow walk with plenty of time taken to examine what is ahead. There are no safe streets for crutches or wheelchairs.

At 21 and 18 they should have been unimpeded by the terrain. But they were newly enamored and the energy that was coursing through them made their path more difficult to travel for their feet. They felt as if they were walking on air and forgot to look down instead of into each other’s eyes. They stumbled alone and for the sake of safety they were driven into the other’s clutches and shoulder to shoulder, arm in arm they stumbled the several blocks to the Hacienda and to room 43 with a balcony overlooking the calle with a view of the mouth of the bay into the gulf. They did not look out the window. Their world was reduced in size to the distance their lips were apart.

The room

There was a chair, a bureau, a door to a bathroom, a closet with no hangers and a bed with a headboard painted in the garish colors of the sunrise. It showed a hawk, perhaps a mythical character, wings stretched, its head with angry eyes, holding the center of the board.

The bed

Viola was feeling the excitement inside her mind created by nature's chemicals pumped into her blood to confuse her. Robert was more visibly moved by their closeness and the sensation of safety from any harmful reality that may have existed outside the door. His senses were free to focus on her. She was aware of herself free as well but from the vast barriers that she had erected to protect herself from the people of the city.

Her hands found his shoulders, her lips his lips. They stood in the room a foot farther in than required to shut the door. The bed was beside them. They stopped and took a step apart. Their eyes fixed on the bed and then each other.

"El baño." She said.

"You first." He said with a wave of his hand. She walked into it and shut the door. He sat on the edge of the bed trying to relax so that he would be able to urinate when it became his turn.

When she came out he went in as if in an emergency. When he came out she was in the bed, her head on a pillow the only part visible. He turned off the lights and joined her. They touched and fell asleep without a word.

The night

Their dreams were all there was. His internal struggle to be what his mother wanted him to be, a career he cared little for, that he rejected to her dismay. His recurrent nightmare had two women he took to be his mother and Aunt Beth.

“If you don’t work with Beth you will be useless.” His mother says.

Robert, whose body is almost always invisible, stands still and answers. “Drugs.”

She yells. “Kill him.” Beth pulls her revolver up towards him. He stirs in bed the dreams desist and he snores.

Viola dreams on the edge of wakefulness. She senses him near her. He is playing on a swing and comes near and then away from her over and over, each time she reaches out. She fails to catch him.

The morning

He woke with a start. Daylight filled the room. He was alone.

She left at the hint of first light to go to the cantina. At that hour, the only people in the street were the cleaners, men and women pushing carts through the most heavily travelled areas picking up what others dropped, or the wind blew into the roadways and sidewalks. Viola passed them in silence walking down the roadway which was often the best place to walk quickly and at this hour few trucks and no cars encountered her.

As she passed the cathedral, her thoughts returned to Robert. She had felt his hands and kissed his lips. It was as far as her imagination had gone. She hoped he would return this evening for sunset. She hoped her meditations in the garden would spur her imagination onward. If he did not return she would try to find him, she thought.

She entered the cantina through a rear door which she closed and bolted behind her. One light switch brought light to the rear hall and the stairs up to the balcony, her old bedroom and her father's office. At his office door, she tried the keys until the three locks were breached and the door open. She had never seen inside before. She entered and her first impression was the odor was his and of course his secret things, which were now hers, arrayed around her.

Touching Robert opened her to the task she needed to attend to which was to learn what her inheritance comprised and begin to manage what she would come to call the Empire, her Empire. To be with Robert she needed to be in command of her world.

She knew from her father's habits that he loved to keep secrets and to hide evidence of them in odd places like in wall safes and concealed drawers. She looked at the keys she had found the day he died and found locks here and there in the house for all but three. They were very odd keys. She would think on them for the night. Time was passing, and Sister Viola must play her part as Father Robert must play his.

As she passed through the garden gate she pulled her robe back over her head and once again set to tending and planting. Her meditations were about Robert and her feelings. She determined to stay Sister Viola and to keep him Father Robert.

She thought about the cantina and what telling him might bring. "Esta es una vida secreta." It was fifty years before she told him.

The sun began to rest on the mountain ridge west of the city. The last seconds of full daylight passed and the twilight began.

"Sister Viola." She heard his voice behind her. "Buenas tardes."

"Noches." She corrected him. She turned and reached for his hand. "Te quiero mucho, Padre Roberto."

"Y yo tambien." He caught her hand. "Sister Viola, what should we do?"

"Primero, te quiero. Segundo, no tienen hijos." She looked into his face hoping to see that he understood her words. "I love you. No bebes."

When they reached the Hacienda from the gate, she discovered he had two dictionaries in Spanish and English. They brought food from a barbeque restaurant and a few Pacificos. They sat on the balcony to eat and as the night air cooled them to go inside they sat across from one

another on the bed and tried to communicate about what it might be that they could do.

He did not tell her what he did when he wasn't with her, just that he lived in San Francisco. She did not tell him what she did, just that she loved to sing the blues and did in her father's club until he died several months ago. She let him believe she was now a nun. He let her believe he was a priest.

They decided to meet twice a year for a week each time. She could not leave La Paz for very long and he was confined to San Francisco most the year. That is how it began their world of secrets and phantasy.

The reality Viola faced began the next morning as she searched her father's office for something that would tell her about the business he conducted, his assets and accounts. Her father was not a hoarder, nor did he have keepsakes scattered about. She took out the three mystery keys and placed them in the middle of the desk top. From her position in the desk chair she opened a drawer and examined every item in it until she knew what was there. She continued to another drawer.

Noon came she headed for the garden and then the sunset and then Robert and then back again to the desk. And again, and again until Robert announced he must return home. They cried. He left. She went to the cantina to continue her search.

“When it all comes down to dust”

She knew to expect him in November and March. He knew she would be there.

Once he left in November, she knew he wouldn't be back for almost 5 months. No one else saw her or knew what she was doing. No one knew her father's business. No one expected anything from her.

Viola found his ledger for each of four accounts. One was the bar account. Another his property rental accounts which gave her a list she would add to the list of land parcels and lots she knew she owned. A third was the taxes he paid along with other costs associated with owning buildings and land. The fourth was a mystery. In the last there was a list of banks and what seemed like savings and checking account numbers. Some banks account information were followed by another number – three banks. When she first saw these, she reached for the three odd keys.

She had spent years gardening and meditating. When her father was killed her meditations turned to speculation. The mystery of her father's death was foremost in her thoughts. She kept it in the front of her mind asking the questions who and why.

The ledgers gave her plenty of information about funds due and payable. She found cash accounts with more than she needed for a lifetime. A friend from high school had an older sister who kept books. Viola hired her. Maria Calderon sent letters to those renters who were behind. The tenants no doubt knew that Francisco was dead. No one had paid since his death.

When Viola figured out more would be needed she visited each property, most within two blocks of the cantina. She dressed in her nun's habit.

The plan she devised was easy. She figured that to best them all she only had to best the biggest and roughest of the renters. He was obvious. A bullish man whose manners had become unruly lately. He had hired private security slash paid killers to accompany him on his tours of the neighborhood.

She found him on the Malecon in his favorite bar on a Wednesday. She dressed in her choir uniform with long flowing robes and a crucifix, gold hanging on a chain around her neck.

Senior Montaña Rodriguez de la Paz he called himself. A very large man he was known for his vices which included crimes large and small. He loved the cops and la Guardia. He gave them ammunition for their rifles and guns because they loved to shoot. Viola found him surrounded by women she took as sex workers. She knew one of them from school.

Rodriguez mistook her presence as a gift, a dress up delight, maybe a virgin. She was very dark for a local, small breasted, probably weighed less than 46 Kilos. Such girls were everywhere.

"Go away." He said.

"Rodriguez." She said. "You owe a dead man money. Pay by Friday or your name will be said at mass on Sunday and your crimes recited."

He laughed at her as she marched from the place.

On Thursday, an envelope was hand delivered to the cantina and shoved under the front doors. Days thereafter all the delayed payments were

made. Viola saw the power she had been given by the property her father had left her.

She had a similar experience when she visited the banks. She carried the keys. She took the legal papers establishing her ownership of everything her father had amassed. She dressed her part. Her clothing was brand new, fashionable, expensive as was her haircut. Her makeup and nails were made to match.

Banco Central was one of the three. She chose the largest, oldest and most powerful first. They would check her bonifides out. She would just use the bank as a reference for the others. She had found a small handgun in her father's desk drawer. It was unloaded. She put it in her purse with the keys. Walking through the doors she approached the most powerful male figure visible in the bank and approached him expecting him to do as she wished.

"Are you in charge here? No? Who is?" When she finally was sitting across from the most senior banker on duty she opened her purse to take out the papers one by one placing them carefully in front of him.

"Señor Sanchez-Alvarez these papers transfer ownership of a safe deposit box my father kept here for most of his life. He has passed, and I am his sole heir." She smiled a tight-lipped smile.

He reached for the papers, looking swiftly at each one. In a few minutes, he completed his inspection.

"Do you have the key?" He asked.

"I do, Señor." She reached into her purse and pulled the ring with the three keys out. As she did the revolver spun out onto his desk. "Excuse

me. That was not intended.” With that she pulled the gun from view and replaced it in her purse.

Sanchez-Alvarez did not smile. He reached for the keys and pointed to one. “This one is ours. Your papers are in order. I will take you to the box now but perhaps the gun could be left here. It will be safe with the papers in my office.”

“No. My father was murdered. I must protect myself against his enemies.” Viola was under five feet tall. She weighed less than most children. As she spoke she collected the papers and her purse and stood.

Sanchez-Alvarez did not smile or assent. He stood. “This way, Señora.”

Finally, after all the banker’s proper steps were completed she stood alone in a room without windows at a tall table, the box before her. It was long. Its cover closed. She opened it slowly as if it were filled with explosives and in a way, it was. She never imagined that her father would possess things that required a safe deposit box much less three. Some of the things were valuable trinkets, some were photos and contracts, and some were ledgers detailing transactions she knew nothing about. One was a love letter to him from a woman who signed ‘Lula’ She didn’t read it. That seemed wrong to her.

Johnny Goat-boy

Baba sat in her lawn chair on the small deck she had built between her beach house and the sand. The 10 by 10 deck held two chairs and a table with room for a towel for sunning after a dip in the sea. The table had a small awning to keep her water carafe out of the direct sunlight.

She was reading a book – a manuscript – Viejo had given to her to read. She was at page 61. She closed the book and placed it on the table. It was an unusually hot day. There was only a light breeze. It was quiet outside but in her head a hurricane roared through the peaceful world she had created for herself.

“Damn.”

She had been reading it for about a week. It was slow going since she knew so little Spanish. She was learning. Every sentence required translation. Some of the sentences included ideas of violence and therefore she had to be correct.

Robert had told her not to speak about the contents, that the book had been aptly named in that the only way to get to be an elder in the game was to keep the silence. They had been talking about Juan Cabral, the club, and the empire he envisioned. He gave the book to her following that conversation.

“Baba, you should know what you are getting into.” Viejo held a manuscript in a paper bag. As he spoke he lifted the book up to her. “This thing almost cost me my life. Not once but twice. Speak to no one of it or its contents. No one, including Viola.”

She wondered about his insistence and now she had a feeling she knew why. She stood and disrobed for a swim. The morning had seen a spectacular sunrise. She was content knowing that Juan was on his way from La Paz bringing breakfast and some excitement, as he did every Sunday.

The entire family had been at the club on Friday night for Viola's blues on stage. They stayed the night and returned to Los Sueños the next morning. She stepped into the water slowly wading to her waist, then slipped below the surface for an underwater swim.

When she came up for air, she turned towards the shore and saw him standing on the deck in his city cloths holding a bunch of flowers in his hands. On the table was a chilled bottle of champagne and a box of raspberries. His favorite breakfast to share with her.

She tried to resist her passions. She meandered out of the water.

As she walked towards him, he leaned over the table and inspected the book. She yelled out to him. He shifted his attention to her as she was now running full sprint directly to him, her arms outstretched.

He became excited and seconds later her arms were around him and a kiss. They laughed.

"Let's go inside." She said. He grabbed the bubbly and the berries and went inside. She re-bagged the book and artfully snuck by him as he was opening the bottle and hid it in the broom closet, a place he would not think to go.

They sat in the morning sunlight as it entered the picture window next to the breakfast table. She was still drying her hair when he handed her

a glass. There was one in his hand. He raised it towards the ceiling and her.

“A toast to your beauty.” He said. He sipped. The bubbles tickled his nose. He shuddered slightly.

She giggled. Took a sip. “Wait. I am your partner, at least in theory. I prefer you to appreciate my brains. However, this time I will toast you, too. To your beauty my handsome man, you.” They clinked their glasses and laughed some more about how serious they were becoming.

As they were laughing, Viejo and Viola came in the back door. Viola was hooting, “Hola? I hope you are all dressed because we’re hungry.”

“How are the novios on this fine morning.” Viejo carried a pot of coffee. “Where’s the dulce?”

Juan Cabral raised his hands in a sign of surrender darting outside towards his car to get the rest of the food from town. When he returned, the three were busy getting the table ready for a feast.

In a few minutes the table was set the food ready and the four partners passing dishes and beverages back and forth. They ate in near silence with only comments about the meal allowed. It was their convention. They exchanged smiles and radiated comfort.

Sunday breakfast at Los Sueños was the way the four decided to meet, to find out the meaning of the partnerships they were forming. This was the tenth or eleventh such meeting, Viola could not remember exactly. She was happy with the outcome. Juan kept the club open. Baba and he were trying to fall in love for the simplicity it would bring to their lives.

She ran the bar on Fridays when Viola sang. The other days, she, Viejo and Viola lived at the beach.

“La reunión de la familia venga a la orden.” Viola loved saying it. The table had been cleared. Water replaced champagne and coffee. She handed out a piece of paper to each of them. “This is our first weekly report. We will build from this.”

Viejo had never been to a business meeting before the family meetings began, neither had Baba. He concluded that Viola had had a few experiences. He made a mental note to ask about that of her at some private moment. She was talking again.

“It seems natural for the elders to be the leaders. But maybe not really. Action is needed in our line of work and age is not a producer of action.” When she finished her sentence, she relaxed into her chair and reached for her glass.

The rules of order they had chosen were simple. Discussion moved clockwise around the table. There was never a word about who was next. That was determined by this convention. To Viola’s left was Juan.

“Youth can generate too much action, which supports our partnership – a balance.” Juan had classroom experiences. He also had street experience which entailed conflict resolution and encouraging meaningful communication between rivals. “I hope we act with the permission and support of all at this table. The young must submit to the elders. There is no other rational choice.” Baba was next.

She passed. Viejo passed.

Viola smiled at her silent partners. “Thank you for your thoughts. Silence is not acquiescence nor disapproval. I learned this the hard way many years ago when my father’s influence was still being felt. This is a long story.”

She sat back as was her manner as she waited for others. When no one spoke, she began again.

“My father’s body was taken to a morgue. I remember that so clearly, but it may not have been. The place may no longer exist, but it was on a corner. You know how memories are. People tell the story of my father’s passing. It was a great surprise. A blood clot, they said. Went to his brain, they said.”

She sat back. No one spoke. She began again.

“The night of his death I was sleeping or trying to sleep upstairs. I was almost 18. My life was dreams. Mostly of Robert. My memory as I laid there in my bed is of a sound. I heard a popping sound. Every night there are fireworks and small explosions. It was late for that, but it happened. One popping sound, no more. I remember no concern on my part. I found him in the morning. Blood had flowed from his mouth. That I vividly recall seeing. A broken blood vessel? I don’t know. The small hole in the back of his head was a more likely cause.

“Renaldo came when I phoned him. I never saw my father’s body again, even at the funeral. Later Renaldo told me who my father was and told me that I must lead his gang or perhaps be killed.”

She paused again. She began again.

“I remember asking him what I should do. He did not respond. I asked him if my father was killed by another. He nodded, Yes. We were sitting at the Oak table in the bar. I rose and walked behind the bar and grabbed the double barrel shot gun.

She stood up as she spoke and lifted her arms, her hands mimicking a gun in her hands.

Baba gasped. Viola searched her face and realized she was done for the day with her story. She sat back into her chair once more and waited.

Juan had the presence to say, “Pass.”

Baba wanted to speak and as if the words would break out of her mouth she clamped her hands over her lips and turned to look at Viejo. He saw her problem and spoke for her.

“She passes. I don’t.” Viejo sat up. He grabbed a dulce and took a bite. The sugar overcame his mouth almost stealing his breath. He chewed and waited. Everyone waited. As he labored to swallow Baba saw his dilemma and handed her water glass to him. He nodded thanks and sipped.

“I make that mistake often. I was once so hungry I ate one of those while fifty feet from my car and water bottle. Baba, a stranger, asked me a question. I choked. I nodded and now she is here. If I had not made that mistake, then, we would not be together. One mistake created this good, the four of us, together.”

He stood as if to gesture he wished to keep the floor. “I have made other errors. We do the best we can.” He sat down.

The meeting continued with Viola's agenda. Juan returned to La Paz. Baba went to the little house for a nap. The elders went to their aerie to enjoy what was left of the day.

Viejo Soldier comes to a conclusion

His train of thought chugged to a stop.

He did not know who killed Francisco though it would be hard to argue that he, Robert, did not benefit from the result. He had flown into La Paz to visit a patron, Angelico. They were not friends. Angie's son Xavier was a running partner on cross border jobs. X spoke the language while Robert was just a gringo. Neither Angie or X left him with a good feeling. He knew they had a lot of past. He shared over 50 years with X. He wondered if Angie was still alive. He'd be in his 90's.

He visited Angelico in 1966 with Aunt Beth, at Angelico's hacienda in La Paz. Gangsters have charming ways about them at times. Angelico was a good host. His cook made hamburgers for their lunch. They talked about 'opportunities' in the 'importation of US made substances' claiming it would be an easy task to build a market in Northern Mexico. They shook hands on the idea and Aunt Beth, who was Angie's partner, seemed pleased that her nephew was going to make something of himself.

Before Robert returned to find Viola on his first trip south by car, someone killed Francisco. The first trip was his first L shipment under his agreement Aunt Beth arranged with Angelico. Francisco's crew would have made the haul, but with Francisco gone his crew was helpless.

Robert sat quietly staring into the sunset's afterglow and the sea's reflection of a ruby red, nearly flame like image, in the wind roiled waves. The glass wall of their bedroom kept the wind away from them. Viola was still sleeping. He was leaning back against the headboard slowly chewing the last portion of a left over dulce.

As he put his water glass down on the end table, Viola stirred.

“Muerto.” She said in a dreamer’s voice. “Papa.”

She talked in her sleep often of late. He wondered at the coincidence.

“Hermana Viola, despertarse.” She stirred again, her left arm searching his side of the bed. He caught hers in his and pulled her towards him.

“What are you dreaming about?”

“Did I talk? Estaba soñando que estaba hablando.” She was looking up at him. “What did I say?”

Robert nodded. “Something about your father.”

Viola groaned. “I can just imagine. I have been thinking about my father, his body ...”

Robert squeezed her hand. “Sorry I asked.” He wished his curiosity had not got the better of his good sense. “Dulce?”

“Robert, a cup of coffee would be heaven. Sugar is not my friend.” Viola was a beautiful woman. Her age gave her power. Newly awakened, her hair was in knots. Robert had never seen her in makeup. Her skin was coffee brown. That was certain.

She was naked on the bed. Not a rare occurrence. The heat and the way they lived made clothing less valued. He could feel the darkness growing. Tomorrow was the full moon. Tonight, the sky would be light with no sun and with a cloudless sky. They might not need lights tonight once the moon rises, he thought.

“Roberto, novio, Viejo Soldier, love of my life, I have a hard to solve problem.” She looked up at him as he stared off into the gathering night. He looked down into her eyes. “Do you see what I mean?” She asked.

“I wondered if you might have run into Angelico or Ursula del Rio.” He smiled. She smiled.

“Yes, then we might share our thoughts.”

“Viola, I accept that what happened happened. Despite what went on around us, ours was the best love, the truest love with or without the witness of god.”

“What can be done to find the killer? Fifty years later?”

“You want to know who?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know. I might be afraid to find out.” Robert leaned down to kiss her face. She stroked his cheek. “You?”

“Yeah. Y yo tambien.” She held his ear close to her mouth. “I seek revenge.” She whispered.

Viejo and Hermana, two old friends, free to be together at last held and petted each other until his bladder screamed and she could hear her stomach growl. They rose into a moon drenched landscape.

When Robert turned the lights onto the stairs, Baba who was standing on her little deck was staring up at the third floor hoping for signs of life and company. Seeing the light, she grabbed the book in a bag and headed towards the big house’s first floor kitchen. Baba Mia was excited and scared.

“We have to find the end of the story. Who killed Francisco?” She said as she walked among the cacti in the garden.

She bolted up the three stairs to enter the kitchen door. Viejo and Viola were standing on the edge of the kitchen staring at her, startled by her entrance from the darkness beyond the bright lights in the galley.

“Hungry?” Robert asked. “Viola wants food and coffee.”

“Hungry? Sure. Some beans and tortillas would work wonders.” Baba sat at the table placing the book in front of her while looking at Robert hoping to catch his eye and bring him into her scheme. She succeeded. He was slowly shaking his head. She would wait a while she thought.

“Baba.” Viola was heating the griddle, dressed only in a white apron, preparing the stove top for cooking. “What’s in the bag?”

“A book.” She said. Robert saw her question.

“Hermana Viola, it is my doing.” Robert knew that once begun the story would be told to its end and the book would be read. “I brought this into our midst. We all want to know who shot your father and the answer may be in this book.”

Viola walked to the table where the book laid. She touched it asking herself if she was prepared for what might come. Slipping the copy of the manuscript out of the bag she read, “El Silencio de los Ancianos.”

“Angelico would have killed for this.” Viejo said. “It was written by his mistress. Ursula Del Rio. She may have known. She may have written it in this book. It is in Spanish. It may as well be Greek to Baba and me.”

“So, I see, it is for me to read to you?”

“If you want to know.”

“Would you burn it if I ask you?”

Robert hesitated. In his hesitation, doubts grew.

“My love, do not worry. It has come this far.” Viola held his hand.

“Remember, we are new born with new names and a new family. The past is dead except for a persistent question that leaves us wondering.”

Robert smiled. “I want to find the answer. No matter who it is. If the book has the answer we must read it. If it is not, we must find its author and if she is still alive perhaps she knows and can tell us. She would be our age.”

Baba has a realization

Sunday Brunch and la reunión de la familia were completed for another week. It was a cloudy day with temperatures in the 60's. Early March can be this way. Viola and Viejo were asleep. Juan Cabral was on his way back to La Paz. She was alone with her thoughts.

La familia had been together for over a year. She remembered the funeral for their pasts.

For the last months, Viola read and translated from the book every night until the death toll exceeded someone's limit. Normally a page or two would suffice. On last Thursday, she finished reading it.

Robert was obsessed with page 61. He had taken the book from Hermana's hands, once she announced the end had been reached. He opened the book and read. "Francisco estaba muerto cuando llegó."

He stood as if before a judge, holding the book to his chest. "We've read the entire book. I have heard nothing that enlightens me as to what went on that night beyond what we already knew." No one disagreed.

That was Thursday and since then Baba had this nagging feeling. As the sun found the mountain tops and the light in her house changed, her thoughts continued. As the darkness grew, her mind focused on the missing words that would satisfy her need for an answer.

Viola sat with her idle hands nested and in her lap. Baba stared off into space, nodding slowly.

Robert turned to the refrigerator and a Corona. Baba slid down in her chair. Viola's eyes were closed and her breathe was close to sleep.

That was when Baba felt there was a simple way to figure this out.

“Music.” She pulled her laptop towards her across the table, pushing aside plates and glasses until she could reach the keyboard comfortably. She typed ‘I cohen isaac’ and pressed enter. She found the YouTube vid and pressed play.

The plaintive cry of Leonard’s blues pierced the silence. She was waiting for the lines her memory said were there.

And if you call me brother now,

Forgive me if I inquire,

"just according to whose plan?"

When it all comes down to dust

I will kill you if I must,

I will help you if I can.

When the song ended, she hit replay and the sounds filled the room. Her mind sought an answer. Once more through the lyrics and she turned it off.

“It must have been a friend.” Baba mumbled. “No one else could have been that close so late after closing. A friend who ...”

Baba stared off into space, her wheels turning, grinding her memories to find the basis for her feeling. “Motive, a close friend with a motive to kill Francisco. Angelico had already ordered him dead, but he was too late, or Beth was too late. If they didn’t do it who else had a motive? Hmm.”

She hadn't paid much attention to Viola who slept and Viejo who sat next to his love nodding off between sips of beer. He snored abruptly and woke himself up, just as Baba said Hmm. Viejo bolted upright waking Viola and startling Baba from her musings.

"Be-ahole, you are too loud." Baba said as she stood from the table to find the book in the kitchen where Viejo had put it down to open his beer. "I want to read the first 61 pages again. I know the answer is in here. I can feel it."

Viejo groaned. Viola said, "Later Mia. I want to finish my dreams."

Baba gave into the current and fell asleep next to her beloved new parents.

The wedding

The 35th weekly reunión de la familia had only one item on its agenda: a wedding. It had taken weeks for the young couple to admit they were a couple. They went slowly through their courtship finally moving into Baba's house as their first home together. Juan attracted his friends who called him Jay and Johnny Goat Boy. "My gang" he described them. Within days Baba had a serious talk with Jay about the need for calm and order around her. Juan took it poorly as a criticism against his upbringing and love for her. She saw his point and alternately gave and took until they were laughing about how if it were not for sex there would be no children. The gang could come on Sunday afternoon after the meeting but not stay the night.

Juan called the meeting to order. He introduced the agenda with a love poem for Baba and a proposal with a ring and music. She cried. He cried. Viola cried. Viejo closed his eyes hoping they would hurry so he could take a nap. Even with all the sugar and caffeine he was still close to dreaming.

"My boys will be here at 2:30 sharp. They are bringing a priest." Robert roused himself.

"No priest." Robert said.

Viola passed. So did Baba.

"He isn't really a priest. He's a hippie who talks to himself like priests do. He ..."

Robert Passed. Viola passed.

“Juan, mi Novio, I want flowers and a band. We don’t even have rings.”
Baba said.

“Amor, I am sorry. We can take more time. I thought it would be fun. You have no one to invite. Outside of the gang there is no one but us four.”

Robert was next. He reached for a dulce and everyone groaned. “Just kidding. Look, I am not old school. We are who we are, and I think I want to admire my bride’s singing for which a band is needed. I want to be married in the dark of night. It adds up to the cantina for me. This Friday would work. Rings are easy to come by in La Paz, so are fancy clothes, shiny shoes and flowers.”

Viola smiled as he talked. She saw in him the man she met a half century ago.

“The wedding.” Viola announced in her turn. “Is at El Nuevo Tiempo, shall we say a week from Friday. Tell everyone. The party is on us. I will sing. The band will play. No one will ever forget it.”

To prepare for the wedding la familia moved back to La Paz. The elders stayed in what was Francisco’s room, upstairs in El Nuevo Tiempo.

Juan had inherited his father’s house which had been Renaldo’s. Baba thought it too masculine with its heavy timbers and bits of armor hanging from the walls in between paintings depicting battle scenes from wars no one remembered.

Juan called it Macho.

Baba asked if they could remove some of it and put up some art depicting family scenes with children and small animals. Juan did not

care as much as she did, so she began to plan her assault on Macho. They stayed together in Juan's bedroom.

Viejo liked staying in the cantina at night. He spent his time on the balcony unless he meant to sleep. There were two bedrooms upstairs and the poker room below with its many couches where either of them might be found napping during the day when the club was closed.

Juan had hired staff to clean and tend the bar. There was little for Viejo and Viola to do except work on ideas to improve the cantina's looks and to increase the gaiety for a celebration.

The cantina was opened as usual and the music was as always the blues. The clientele were the same 'regulars' with a few new ones each night. The singers invited everyone who came in to come back for the wedding. There were rounds of applause when it was announced on the weekend that it would be a party like no other.

The time passed more swiftly than usual since they were busy as they could be with decorations, rings, and clothes. Viola and Baba spent hours at the wedding store fitting this and that. Viejo and Juan shopped for rings.

On the Thursday before the wedding, they ate with the singers to plan the ceremony. They talked and laughed until darkness warned them that tomorrow would soon come.

At seven in the evening of the day, Viola switched the blue light on. The curtains had been drawn back letting those outside see what was going on inside. The El Nuevo Tiempo was packed within an hour. The narrow street began to fill until the block was impassable. People dressed for the occasion in festive clothes of all kinds. The wine was free as was the

beer. The music system blared the works of Viola's favorites until nine when the singers and the band took the stage.

Viola was with Viejo in the poker room.

"Mi Amor, your suit is very sharp." She hugged him crushing his boutonniere. "Oops. At least I did it and not one of those beautiful women out there ready to lay their greedy hands on you."

"Out there?" Viejo had become warmer in his old age. "You are the most beautiful woman in the world." His hands tried to revive the flower on his chest but there was no repair possible. "This is better now that you adjusted it. To tell the truth I can hardly wait to get you back into our wedding bed. I have been having big ideas." They both laughed, hugged and fell onto a couch in each other's grasp.

Juan and Baba walked in on them causing a small commotion of hilarity.

"It is time." Juan said. "There will be years ahead to devote to affection. First, we manage to get through the next few hours." Baba hit him in the arm saying be nice. He feigned pain and she kissed his cheek.

"Ya?"

"listo."

The band began to play 'East of the sun, and west of the moon' as the two couples entered the cantina from behind the stage with the four-piece band and the two singers. They stood facing each other holding hands as the song progressed. At its end, the couples said private words to each other, words meant only for each other. They had agreed to singing together the lyrics to 'Something to live for.'

“I want something to live for
Someone to make my life an adventurous dream
Oh, what wouldn't I give for
Someone who'd take my life and make it seem
Gay as they say it ought to be”

When they were finished, the song ended, they exchanged rings and kissed. The crowd cheered.

The four escaped into the crowd which closed around them with well-wishes. The band played Wild is the Wind.

Don't you know you're life itself
Like a leaf clings to a tree
Oh my darling, cling to me
For we're creatures of the wind
And wild is the wind
So wild is the wind.

They sang and played until ten when the band left the stage for the street and slowly moved past the revelers followed by the newlyweds for a march through the town to the Hacienda Bougambilias and their wedding suites.

The parade passed the cathedral where it was joined by two floats one for each couple. The couples were lifted onto the floats and the march

continued the ten blocks. The grand march ended at midnight at the door marked 'Oficina.'

People in the street most of whom had marched the entire way waited outside under the wedding suites' balconies. They were to act out the role of judges determining the value of the marriages. They waited for five minutes, ten minutes when the men appeared on the balconies and with flare revealed the sheets from their beds soaked in calf's blood symbolizing the successful impregnation of a virgin. The wives were not seen.

The crowd let up a cheer that woke people from blocks around causing a group of La Guardia to appear to disperse the already dispersing crowd.

The day after

Juan had risen early to ensure that the cantina would be ready for the night's normal Saturday schedule. The street was still strewn with flowers. The street cleaners had removed the trash and left the floral evidence of the prior night's festivities. The others joined him and then spirited him away.

The four went to a judge's office to sign their official, now we are married for real, paperwork ending any other interpretation of what had transpired at the cantina. The four then went for breakfast at a small café, two doors from El Nuevo Tiempo, called the Urban Kitchen. It was past noon.

The breakfast went well. They laughed about the past evenings goings on. The meal was small. The time spent eating was short. Not because they were not hungry but because Baba had an idea.

"Amigos y mi Marido, I have a nagging thought that requires privacy."

When they left the restaurant and wandered into the poker room to sit at the poker table, hoping that they could head back to the beach houses soon.

Baba felt the same. "The damn book is on my mind. I have a few passages I want to share with you in the hopes that we can end the guessing about who shot Francisco."

Viola nodded encouragement. Juan was quiet in his acquiescence to his new bride's wishes.

Viejo said he was ready but inside he was conflicted. "I want to know. Baba tell us what you have."

Baba kissed Viejo's cheek. They were sitting close to each other. As they spoke they were whispering so no one would hear them.

"I have discovered things I had not seen or heard before. Here is a paragraph in what is an introduction:

"My name is not Juanita Martinez. That name is fiction to protect me and my family. I spent two decades in the underground economy aka vice and drugs. To say more is unnecessary. The gang I spent the last thirteen years with is called El Norte. This book is about their exploits as they dealt with the opposition to their controlling traffic in Northern Mexico and the southwestern United States."

No one was surprised by the revelations in this part of the book. They had heard it before many times. No one spoke.

Baba scratched her head as she waited for ideas.

"Baba, what do you see?" Viola said.

"Silencio was finished in 1984. That means she joined El Norte about the time Francisco died. She must have been part of another group to make two decades. But which gang? And why did she switch. Here is more.

"Angelico had at one time been a partner of Francisco's in his businesses but as the empire grew tension grew between them. Francisco was stronger then and forced Angelico out so that their partnership came to an end."

Viola saw what Baba saw. "This is Angelico's motive for hiring Beth to kill Francisco." Viejo and Juan agreed.

“One more.” Baba said.

“In the mid 60’s Angelico and his son Xavier took on two partners Aunt Beth and her nephew Robert. This partnership is still in business as of today.”

No one commented.

“One more.”

“With Francisco gone, Renaldo using the young daughter as a captive owner ran the vice businesses his way. Angelico rewarded him generously. The cantina remained closed.”

Again, no one commented.

“I know this is hard.” Baba said. Viejo stirred.

“The book speaks some truths. I was X’s and Angie’s partner until the Coromuel caught me. They attacked me in 1987 over the book. We stayed partners, but I saw neither of them after that. Beth disappeared in 1987, I think. Reynaldo and I never met in this life.” Viejo sank into his seat as he talked. There was no joy left in his voice.

Viola reached for his hand as if to ensure him she was the other half of his soul and the past was an artifact not a living being.

Juan rose hoping the end would come if he did. The discomfort was like concrete, so solid no knife would cut it.

“Let’s go swimming.” He said. Viejo held onto Viola’s hand and the four rose to leave for the Gulf while the mood was too dark to sit still for.

Shit happens

As if the day outside grew to match the environment within, the clouds gathered to hide the sun by the time they reached Los Sueños.

Viejo had fallen asleep on the ride in Juan's modern van. When he woke on the rough road to their homes, he was energetic. He and Viola wanted to be outside.

Despite the clouds the day was warm. The elders walked north a few hundred yards along the beach and sat at the water's edge to enjoy their new togetherness in solitude.

Juan and Baba sat on the deck near the water and began to mull over what they had thought on the way home. They decided to walk to the palapa for a taco and a beer.

The waitress, a young woman, Esmeralda Lorca, had married the palapa's owner's son with whom she would soon share a child. She was near the same age as Baba. They suffered from a lack of a common language and had yet to become friends. She had studied local history and spoke often with Viola who regaled Esmeralda about her experiences a half century ago in the red-light district.

The young couple order ice water and nachos. They sat next to one another, so their conversations might be private. No one cared.

"We were not alive in 1966 through 1985. Only Viola and Viejo could understand what the book was saying." Baba said.

Juan said he knew the history from his father who was part of the El Norte in Juan's lifetime, but he did not know the characters.

“I wonder about the motive for killing Francisco. The past hides unspoken words. I think the author, Ursula, is telling us that Angelico, her paramour, did not do it though he had a motive and tried through Beth to do what was done. There was someone else with a motive that she is unaware of or hiding.”

“What is left after money and greed?”

“Maybe a jilted lover.”

“But whose?”

“Francisco’s?” Juan offered. “Maybe.”

“I am unaware of any of her father’s affections for others. He may have had lovers, but Viola never met one that I know of.” Baba had a copy of the book that she paged through as if the words would reveal their true meaning to her.

Juan sat quiet, thinking about what he learned from the book. His thoughts were about the entire enterprise of drug gangs, The Game and La Vida as it was called.

His thoughts were strong. “You know, I studied business law and ethics among other things. No one ever talked about murder as a means to earn a living much less to form an empire.”

“Juan, there was so much murder in the book. I think the word ‘muerte’ is on every page of it.” Baba wiped a few tears from her eyes. “I love you and want you alive to raise our family. The book exposes more of the sadness of the game. The motive to kill Francisco, no matter what it was, was hardly worthy of death. The men and women seemed small and anti-heroic. There was no romance. Just a family business.”

Baba Knows

Months passed while Baba kept her attention on the mystery. One Friday afternoon on the cantina balcony, Baba and Viola were enjoying flan and brandy waiting for the time for blues.

“Viola Hermana, I have a question.”

“Ask, Baba Mia.”

“You said you never met any one of your father’s lovers but that doesn’t mean you never knew he had one. Is that true?”

Viola sat still. She closed her eyes as if she wanted to rummage through her memories. “You know, I have a slight memory about something. Fifty years back I went through my father’s bank security boxes and I found he had saved a letter from someone, a woman. I didn’t read it. It had a name on it.”

“Remember it? No?”

“No, but we can check it out. Bank closes at 5. It’s 4. It’s around the corner. Want to come we could find the name and still have time to get back to finish our sweets.”

They cleaned up, saved the flan and brandy in the fridge, found the key to the Banco Central box. Viola was certain that was where it was. “I am sure it was in the first one I opened. Let’s go.”

The walk was short. The rigmarole was longer but soon enough to avoid frustration they had the box open in front of them.

“Here it is.” Viola handed it to Baba. “It’s in Spanish, of course. I didn’t think I should read it but if you think ...”

“Lula. Hmm. Is that what you see? Maybe, it is Ula. The old handwriting is so unclear.” Baba looked at each page. “There is no date. It looks like a standard heartwarming love letter.”

“The date was earlier than 1966.” Viola looked a bit twitchy. “Is that all we need? I don’t like vaults. I am getting nervous. We can come back if you’d like.”

“I want the flan. Let’s go.”

On the way back to the club, Baba’s mind was twirling with ideas.

As they walked through the door into the cantina, the alarm rang that started the drill to ready El Nuevo Tiempo to open. Viejo was already at work behind the bar.

“Where did you go?” He asked, his hands busy wiping the bottles of wine clean, so they sparkled in the lights behind the bar.

“On an errand. Went to the bank to look at an old love letter.” Baba grinned as she thought of how cryptically she spoke as if there was humor or news in it. “We missed our flan.”

Viola moved into her routines. Viejo left the conversation for later and turned back to his dusting. Baba wandered through the bar trying to put her thinking to sleep in favor of the Blues. The routines were their own. They no longer had to clean. They cleaned because only they knew what perfection looked like and they took pride in achieving their vision.

The band members arrived early to practice a few new songs and the tension in the room dissipated to make room for gaiety and laughter.

The preliminaries finished, the blue light was turned on, the doors opened, and the drapes drawn back to let in the outer world.

That night the music was special carrying in Viola's voice the pain she held in her heart from the death of Francisco.

I get along without you very well

Of course, I do

Except when soft rains fall

And drip from leaves

Then I recall

The thrill of being sheltered in your arms

Of course, I do

But I get along without you very well.

When it ended, when everyone went home, she saw Viejo to bed and left him with his dreams to sit in the dark in the poker room. She didn't keep a memory of the day Francisco died but she remembered on occasion and for some reason she did not recognize this was one such day.

Once many years ago she watched people in the monastery garden do Tai Chi in the morning sun. They must have been travelling together because she only saw them for three consecutive days and never again. They met and did their movements then left together. She was learning English and they were there in front of her speaking English and she presumed acting out what the words meant.

She learned relaxed breathing and was learning how to move her body so that her 'energies' would be strengthened by usage. She stood and breathed and did the motions she could remember. Then she sat to plot revenge.

Hermana Viola Dons Her Robes

Sister Viola would solve this mystery, she thought. Viola sat in the dark in the poker room after the Tai Chi was done letting her mind run through the evidence of the crime. At first, she thought about finding her father's corpse. She remembered the pop that woke her and the scene hours later when she rose somehow knowing what she would see below.

At the time she circled his body looking for answers to the very same questions she still had. That day knowing little about guns and deaths by guns, she could only take mental pictures from which she would someday such as today put the pieces together and find the killer.

Viola never swore in English. The words were not nearly as nasty in English. She swore only in Spanish. *Sabes qué, ¡Chingate!* was her favorite. Leave it to the Mexicans to write a poem on the subject.

She was not one to find anger unnecessarily. In recent years since she was out of the pleasure businesses there were no occasions requiring her to let her temper loose. Tonight, in the dark in Spanish she recited from *La Insignia* the lines she memorized before she understood the meaning.

¿Quién es la Chingada? Ante todo, es la madre. No una madre de carne y hueso, sino una figura mítica. La Chingada es una de las representaciones mexicanas de la Maternidad, como la Llorona o la "sufrida madre mexicana" que festejamos el diez de mayo. La Chingada es la madre que ha sufrido, metafórica o realmente, la acción corrosiva e infamante implícita en el verbo que le da nombre. Vale la pena detenerse en el significado de esta voz.

She repeated the words aloud in a soft voice without anger as no anger was called for. When she reached the end only two words remained in her before she crawled towards sleep and dreams.

“Ursula. ¡Chingate!”

She rolled over from sitting to laying on her favorite leather couch closed her eyes, murmured some small prayer for courage and forgiveness as Sister Viola wished and found sleep.

In the morning when everyone was still slumbering she dressed as Sister Viola. Then leaving by the back door she walked from the cantina away from the Malecon at a pace between slow and determined.

The day had not yet warmed, the evening breezes had cooled yesterday’s hot streets. As the sun rose she was shielded by the shade of either buildings or trees. The climbing down and up from curb to street to curb tired her out. She came to a hole in the wall cafe. Its empty tables were set out on the sidewalk. One drew her attention.

As she stood in the doorway she said, “Hola.”

“Hermana. Buen dia.” The waitress watched her eyes as she picked her table. “Sentarse.”

Pleasantries complete she sat at the table that suited her needs for shade and privacy. She pulled a small envelope from within her garb. From it she pulled a single piece of paper she placed before her.

She ordered café negro and in honor of Viejo a dulce. When it was delivered she took a sip and a nibble, then turned her attention to the piece of paper which she unfolded.

It was a copy of the letter Lula or Ula had written to Francisco. She read it slowly. Mi Amor. Te quiero mucho. She read those words and the rest which pleaded for her father to marry her to save her from Los Otros who were molesting her. Viola wondered at her father's response, but nothing was left in this life of it whatever it was.

On the back was an address.

Viola had sent for an investigator, a cousin, to find Ursula's home. He met her at the cantina one morning to report. He asked for her city phone book, paged through it until he found her name and copied the address onto the back of his business card which he passed to her, kissed her cheeks and left with a big smile on his otherwise hardened face.

She smiled as she remembered how easy it is for some and impossible for others.

She read the address again, folded the paper and secreted it in her inner robe. Once she was done sipping and nibbling she paid and left heading across the last block that separated her from her prey.

Standing in front of the address on the piece of paper, she opened the gate in the low chain link fence. The house did not appear to be the home of a wealthy person but rather a rough place that showed little daily care. Its one good feature was a palm tree unfortunately untrimmed its brown fronds surrounding the base.

She knocked on the door and waited. She knocked again. No one answered her knocks. She pulled the letter out and with her pen she wrote a note to Ursula asking her to lunch at Las Crepaz for the following day.

She closed the gate behind her. She walked a half block pulled the robe over her head.

Conversation with Ursula Del Rio

In her youth, according to her autobiography's title, *A Bitch named Ursula*, she was a little slutty. Face to face Viola thought Ursula showed no signs of her past. The two women were same aged and either could have been the nun. They met for lunch at Las Crepaz on a corner on the Malecon. It is a little place with two tables on the street. Viola had an avocado salad. Baba ordered a smoothie.

Ursula Del Rio ordered whip cream covered pancakes, a specialty of the cook.

Baba noticed that Ursula could not read the menu. She asked the waiter to help her read. "I need to get glasses," she said. Viola wondered why Ula's love letter had not drawn her attention. Maybe she came just for free food.

Ursula talked about 'the stage' and making films. She owed it all to her tits, she said. To prove her point she took out a small photo book with yellowing photos of her poses.

The pancakes called to Ursula and she took time to eat and to sip her chai. Nature abhors a vacuum.

"You are a writer?" Viola asked. Her salad was chewy, the avocado was perfect.

"Yes, I wrote two books."

"One is your autobiography which I enjoyed by the way. I loved your story about meeting someone from La Paz."

“Angelico.”

“Yes, Angelico. You seemed so close and he did right by you, setting you up in movies. You made eight films each better than the last.” Viola was impressed. “There was another book?”

“Oh, yes. It should be famous. It was never published. Angelico wanted it that way.” She seemed sad.

“Silence of the Elders?”

“How? ... Tell me I must know?” She was shocked by hearing the name.

“How did you know its name?”

“Simple. Angelico has enemies. They are hoping he is in hiding and that they could meet before he dies to settle scores non-violently so Angelico can die in peace knowing his children and grandchildren will be happy.” Viola knew she was threatening her. Ursula had a child with Angelico, though few people would say so. “My father was in the business until his untimely end. A friend of his gave a copy of your book to me twenty or thirty years ago. Said it might have information I could use to find the one responsible for Francisco’s death.”

“I want it. Give it to me.” She stood to accentuate her resolve. “Angie treated me poorly by having Xavier burn my book. I thought it was gone completely.”

Viola remained sitting offering peace by softly petting the back of Ursula’s hand with the back of hers. “I will give it to you tomorrow. But first sit and talk to me about what is not in the book. I promise you can have it. I read it. It is a long and difficult book to read. So much death. Too much.”

Somewhat calmed Ursula sat again while letting Viola hold her hand and touch her softly.

“OK. Let me guess what you want.” She had lost her compatible edge. She withdrew her hand. “Angelico ordered your father’s death. He sent a woman, an assassin, named Aunt Beth to do it. She was a partner of Angelico’s in the expansion of his business. I do not know what became of her.”

“Yeah, but Francisco was already dead.” Baba said. “Ah...”

Viola looked at Baba with a look of wonder. An Ah? So soon.

“Yes, I know.” Ursula insisted.

“Yes, we know you do.” Viola said.

“There is no one left to blame, Angie died a few months ago.” As if she was mourning his passing she bowed her head and stopped talking. Viola had wished for her silence and it was granted.

Viola let the silence abide. Ursula knew something was up, but this was her first and last Baba Ah moment.

“Viola, what is happening?”

“You will see or hear in a bit. Silence is best.” The minutes passed.

“Ula?” Baba asked.

“Yes.”

“Ah.” Baba returned from her ocean of ideas. “It was you.” Baba looked directly at Ursula.

“There is no way you could have known he was dead when Beth arrived unless you killed Francisco. He was your lover before you joined Angelico’s crew. You killed him to keep that relationship a secret. It was later when you were writing page 61 that you learned about Beth and Angelico’s business relationship.

“Me?” She said. Her eyes darted from one to the other. No one spoke to answer her question.

The silence that followed must have spooked her. She stood and with a look of fright in her eyes turned from the table and fled onto the Paseo Alvaro Obregon.

If she had been lucky her escape from her accuser would have ended with her running along the beach until she was too tired to go further. She would have noticed no one was chasing her and stopped to consider her next move. Instead, she left the curb directly in front of a tourist bus that couldn’t stop until the front wheels drove directly over her upper torso. The suddenness of the end shocked Viola, Baba less so. It was the movie ending she expected from such unsustainable activity.

“One down. Two to go.” Baba said as she shuffled through a pack of mordida cards until she found a Christopher safe travel card which she took to Ursula’s crumpled body. “You could use this.” She said as she tossed the card towards the corpse.

The look of surprise was still on Viola Hermana’s face when Baba Mia turned back to her. Viola caught her eyes.

The death of a customer caused quite a stir along the Malecon and among the crew who ran the restaurant. La Guardia were suddenly everywhere.

Baba found the owner at the cash register and paid their bill. She turned and tugged Viola up from the seat and led her out into the open past the crowd around poor Ursula. As they moved nearest her body Viola spit in her general direction calling her a 'pinche vieja' and a few other terms too colloquial for Baba to translate except for a full throated ¡Ursula Chingate!

A block away, a left-hand turn, three blocks, a right and half a block and they were at the cantina. Inside they climbed to the balcony and a sip of brandy to quiet the heart. They sat in silence, each still processing the amazing end of the hunt for the killer.

"Did you say, 'two to go.'" Viola asked breaking the hold silence had on them.

"I did."

"Who?"

"Angelico and Xavier. Beth is dead."

"I know."

"You were there."

"Yes. I found her shortly after I found her name in the book."

"Viola, you saw the book before we met? Of course you did. You told Ursula. That set her off."

"Yes, thirty years ago. It is a long and sad story involving how Renaldo met his end in service of his friend."

"You?"

“Yes, he loved me.”

“Is that why it’s a sad story?”

“Partly, you see I did not love him. Nor did he really love me. He wanted my inheritance to suit his own ends. It was the game. La Vida.”

“How did he get a copy?”

“He said from a gringo who told him to give it to me.”

“And he did?”

“Yes but ...”

“But?”

“He read it.”

“Oh.”

“So did I.”

“Oh.” Baba sat in silence hoping more would come from her. Viola sat in silence, too.

“There is a question I dare not ask.” Said Baba at last.

“Who brought the book to Renaldo?” Viola knew that Baba knew. “It was Robert.”

“But why? Robert didn’t know what was in it. And why did he not just hand it to you?”

“Only he knows.”

The 45th reunión de la familia

With the death of Ursula, a period of silence followed. Viola went to the beach the next day. She was alone except for one of Juan's boys who drove her there early in the morning and back before the time for flan and brandy.

She went into the cosina of the big house and built a fire in the wood burning stove, something she hadn't done in decades. She took her time using her father's knife to cut thin slivers of redwood. It was from the wood waste bin next to the stove. Her father may have put it there for just such an event.

"Are you here, Papa?" She asked the flames that grew rapidly consuming the pile of wood.

As the fire grew to full strength she pulled her nun's robe from a paper bag she had brought with her. She felt it with her hands and then her face as if it were a cat in her arms.

Without trying to hold back her tears she pushed the robe into the fire. It ignited with a roar causing Viola to move back from the stove. She stood to watch the end of a way of life.

"Its over Papa. I am free."

As soon as the flames had done their work she left to return to the cantina. On the way home, the driver's cell phone rang. He pulled off the road to answer the call.

"Señora, It is Señora Baba for you." The driver held the phone towards her. She hesitated. He put the phone on speaker.

“Señora, say Hello.”

“Hello.”

“Hermana, it is Baba. Go back to the beach. We are coming to you.”

“Mia, I will with pleasure,”

The car turned around. Viola fell asleep. She was still asleep when the car came to a halt. The driver stayed by the car smoking cigarettes.

Viejo saw the car and the driver. As his car parked he saw Viola laying against the door. He walked around her car to enter by the other passenger door. She stirred at the sound and the hot air invading her airconditioned nap room.

“Vieja. Its Viejo.”

“Amor.”

“Did you forget the meeting today, Amiga.” He saw the sleep in her eyes, saw the peace that flows across the brow of one having pleasant dreams. “How did you enjoy your car ride?”

“I was visiting El Infirmo to put the evil spirits to sleep.”

They sat for some time holding each other, petting each other in a silence neither dared to break until Baba came to invite them to the pre-meeting breakfast.

Baba made the best coffee. Juan brought the best desayuno and Viejo’s favorite dulce. There was no laughter.

They moved to call the meeting to order in the usual way.

“La reunión de la familia venga a la orden.” Viola began the discussion.

The agenda included an amendment to a contract to allow the birth of a child, an item for review on the end of the search for the killer and the general plan for building wealth.

The first to talk is Viola and in order around the table is Juan, Baba and Viejo.

“This first item is simple. If you do not approve you may as well leave and walk into the gulf. The second item is mine. With due respect I sent a bag of coins to the bus driver as an acknowledgement for his anguish or as a reward for a job well done.”

Juan passed.

Baba did not. “We all owe a gratitude to the random nature of the universe that delivered this relief from the pledge to do to her what she did to him. We can be better for her fate since we did not create it.”

Viejo knew to pass and the agenda progressed without reviewing dozens of private conversations.

Juan spoke. “I want to think and talk. As we all know we do not need money but we seek it. We have homes. We have profit centers. We are headed in a new direction, towards peaceful, familial pursuits.”

Everyone nodded as he spoke. “Our family is small. We have large money to cover expenses. We have no need to follow the past. The crimes we have heard of are probably not all the crimes that brought this money to us. And some might say that we should forebear but if we do we will lose not just our money. Weakness kills.”

Everyone passed.

Juan began again after a short silence for the sake of peace.

“The cantina has become our soul. The blues take us into a new world where we can let ourselves dream again.”

Baba felt she was dreaming that she was at this meeting. Her Ah sense wide open hearing the magic of the words as they flowed by her ears.

She had heard words since Ula’s demise that sounded like a turn in the road for her and Juan. Viola told her a few nights ago that she felt her life completed by the new family and its basis in the blues.

Viejo made an artist’s confession that he had never finished a book. He had started many and ended none. This secret he told was the truth of him and as he spoke to each one of the others it was if he was saying goodbye. He revealed how the secret life was healing and the blues became the way he grew out of his old life into the world of Baba and Juan.

He quoted Bob Dylan: he who is not busy being born is busy dying.

Viola 1987

Sister Viola shared the sunset with no one else but Father Robert. As she gardened throughout the day, following her early morning hours spent at the cantina in her office, people who had business with the Empire, as Viola referred to her inheritance, came by the garden to deliver messages to the owner. She was the only contact they had with the owner of the buildings that housed their businesses.

Renaldo would come by nearly every day at an hour past the heat's apex. He brought a few bits of lunch and a piece of candy. Viola graciously accepted. Renaldo would then tell her the goings on of the day.

"Something unusual happened yesterday as I was walking home from our meeting." He said. "A man, who I have seen around La Paz a few times but never met, gave this book to me and said that it was for you." Renaldo handed her the book.

"Where was the man from?" As she spoke Viola looked at book and put it down in favor of the candy. She put a piece in her mouth.

"A gringo. He spoke little Spanish."

"Hmm." Viola said. "These hard candies are like heaven to the tongue."

"You have a sweet tooth."

"Have you read the book?"

"Some of it."

"What did you learn?"

"Some things I did not know."

“Like?”

“Have you ever heard of Aunt Beth?” Renaldo was not good at gambling. He knew this. He also knew Viola had other friends she worked with in her business. Dealing with her clientele took power. She did not ask him to do anything. He wanted to run her empire, but she kept it all a secret. He hoped the mention of Aunt Beth would raise her esteem for him.

Viola knew not to trust Renaldo. He was trusted by Francisco. He failed Francisco. She blamed him for whoever got a close shot at her father.

“No, Renaldo. Leave me the book and we can talk tomorrow.”

“OK. Sleep well.”

“Be good.”

Renaldo left. Viola went back to gardening. The book she put into a basket she kept with her for harvested vegetables. The sun disappeared. She ate with the two old nuns who had learned to live with Viola’s schedule. Viola financed the cathedral and the monastery. The nuns knew. God provided they thought.

Viola went to her room. The room was in the lower floor of the monastery. The upper floor was unlivable as far as she was concerned. The thick stone floors on the lower level were always cool to her feet. Her room had a window that faced east. She woke daily before the first light changed towards dawn.

On the next morning, she carried the book to the cantina. She made a copy which she placed in a box at the bank. By the time she wanted to begin gardening she put the book into her floor safe and forgot it. She had read enough. She knew who Aunt Beth was.

All afternoon she turned the soil and planted new seeds. Spring had just begun. The sun sets in the same place every spring equinox. After twenty years of watching she knew in advance what to expect of the sun. She was not surprised when Father Robert walked up behind her. She had been expecting him.

The sun set and as if for a cosmic purpose, they stood shoulder to shoulder in the garden.

“Father Robert. Noches.”

“Sister Viola. God is great.”

“Room 43?” She smiled as she asked him. She knew the answer. “Let’s go so we can talk.”

The ritual of sunset on the first night after his arrival had been the same for years. The robe. The walk holding onto each other. The room. The kiss inside the door. The baño. The barbeque dinner on the balcony.

The nearness of Robert drove the book from her mind. She knew he was the gringo. He knew she had the book. He didn’t know what was in it, but he knew her father’s name was in it. He saw that but had no energy for translating it or sharing it with anyone else. That would come later.

They preferred their secret world and the discussion of the contents or the reasons Robert had for giving it to her through Renaldo did not happen in that decade.

Last walk at sunset

Hermana and Viejo Soldier walked north on the beach headed towards the mouth of the bay. It was too far to reach by foot, at least for them. They usually went south, but they wanted something different. They walked in the moist sand, barefooted, carrying their sandals and a bottle of water. The sun was behind them and to the west.

They were holding hands. Smiles on their faces. There was happiness in their voices as they spoke about the things happy people talk about, about family, about their past together. Their minds had grown together into one memory.

“Do you still remember the first time we touched?”

“Do you remember the first time we knew we would live together until death?”

“Do you remember giving that pinche book to Renaldo?”

When she asked that question, something clicked inside. Robert was not afraid of truth. He was afraid of losing his mind.

“Aught-oooh. When was that?” They both came to a halt on their walk. Viola could see Robert hesitating and reached for his hands to reassure him.

“1986 or 7. That was the only thing you have done that I did not understand. Your moves were always simple, designed to keep us safe, but that one, not so much. Don’t take me wrong. Until Persuasion entered our lives, which was your doing, everything was part of our secret life, except that book in Renaldo’s hands.”

“It will be hard to explain because I did not do what I normally would do as I was on my way here from San Francisco. I brought the book with me hoping you would help me understand what was in it.”

“We never talked about it for what 30 years now.”

“I knew little about your 50 weeks a year life. You knew little of mine. Maybe I was trying to change that. Aunt Beth had been nagging me about everything. Xavier had shot me and stolen money from me. Then his father Angie threatened to kill me if I did not give the book back, so I came to La Paz without telling you I was here to deliver the book to Angie and a copy to you.”

“The book and Renaldo told me you were here.”

“Well, I knew that, I guess, since I just showed up in the garden the next day. You were not surprised. I was just happy to see you as always.”

“How did you know about Renaldo?”

“The bars. As I learned to understand spoken Spanish I heard stories about a man who ran the vices in La Paz. The stories said he had control of his former boss’s properties through a reclusive woman, who lived at the monastery. That had to be you. So, I came a few days early with the book for Angie to get him off my back and a copy for you, in case it would help you in the life.”

It was a hot day. Viejo stopped talking to share water with Viola. They smiled at each other again and re-grasped each other’s hands.

“Angelico stood me up for a meeting in California. I had to make a move or be gone. Beth told me the book was a history. So ...”

“So, you watched his comings and goings then timed your giving the book to him for when he was leaving the garden.”

“Yes.” Robert was finished talking. There was nothing more to say.

Viola had no more questions. They turned south holding hands. Viola began singing a blues tune about the beauty of their love. In the middle of a verse she turned to Viejo.

“I am hungry. How about the palapa? Can we make it there?”

“Let’s try.”

Magic wins

Baba was anxious about the future. 'Mind wracked' she called it. Whatever it was, she felt it most strongly when she looked into the eyes of her two old friends. The beach, the cantina, and a growing family was not enough to hold their attention. They spent hours holding hands and speaking softly with their faces close enough to feel the other's breath. It was as if they were seeing the end by staring into each other's eyes.

For Baba getting to see their end from their perspective meant that they had succeeded in opening their secret life to others. Baba knew she had a long way to go to see life as they did. She cared for Juan but not enough to spend so much time with him. In some small way she could connect with the pattern Sister Viola and Father Robert kept for so long.

There were decisions ahead for all of them.

She watched them come back towards the houses from the north. She was sitting under the umbrella on her small deck. As they passed the old friends hailed her and begged her to join them for a late lunch. Baba said she would catch up. Some moments after only their backs were visible to her, when she missed their faces and their voices. She ran after them.

Minutes later they were sitting at the palapa restaurant enjoying a Mahi taco and a Corona. Everything continued in slow motion. They could spend hours sitting and talking. It was hours before sunset. The mid-afternoon sun owned the beach which was now too hot to inhabit and would be until an hour before sunset.

Esmeralda Lorca, the onetime history student, tended the palapa restaurant. She was happily parenting a two year old and waiting on tables. Her husband, the owner's son, worked in the kitchen.

Viola waved her over to sit. Esmeralda had been wandering around their table pretending to be busy. She sat with them hoping to bring Viola around to her way of thinking about the book.

"Esmeralda." Viola said after listening to her pine about unmet desires for knowledge. "There are things that are better left unknown."

"Secrets?"

"Among other things. There is enough death every day. The past is just more." Viola wanted to change the topic. She watched Esmeralda hold back her next argument. "You will agree with me someday. Your child will grow as happy as you are. Believe me you do not want to read the book. It will take love from you that your niño will miss."

Viejo sat quietly perhaps not even listening. He was chewing a bite of his taco and dreaming about a nap. A wave of sorrow washed the smile from his face, leaving the emptiness he had grown accustomed to feeling.

On the way home, wading through the shallow water to save their feet from the torment of the hot sands, Baba walked between them holding one on each arm. They dashed up the beach to Baba's deck and the umbrella that was keeping the sun from touching its surface.

"Better." Said Viejo as he lowered himself into a lawn chair next to Viola who clung to Baba as she lowered herself into another one. "Getting tired."

It wasn't a question, but Viola nodded in assent. "Me, too."

No one spoke for a minute. So, Viola took the time to consider what if anything she wanted. "You know, I could use something to make me different. I am too old to run and too young to die just yet, but I want to say goodbye to life and embrace a new way for the end."

"Maybe it's time for Manana or Mas Tarde." The words were out of Baba Mia's throat before she could hear what she was to say.

"Me. Too." Viejo said.

They sat in silence until Viola asked to be taken into Baba's home where the old ones sat while Baba went for the Mahogany box with its silver inlays and its odd contents. They spread the vials and small boxes out on the coffee table. Baba's notes were reviewed. They renewed their choices of what attracted them.

There is a moment of certainty. Viola had one. Viejo did too. "MDMA, are you sure" was Baba's reaction to their choice for adventure. "Ecstasy is weird."

"What will it do to us?" Viola asked. Baba reached for the piece of paper where she had written a description of its effects.

"Sez here it is called the divorce drug or the love drug. It opens the mind to the end of things and makes the experimenter accept an inevitability. There is more but I can see this is for the two of you and not me. I may be pregnant. It sounds too much for me to endure but you two might benefit."

The box held two capsules. Each one took one with a glass of water.

Baba busied herself on household chores. Time eventually caught up with Viola and Viejo. The MDMA took hold of their bodies and their desires. They sat on the floor looking at each other, fearlessly held in each other's eyes, at times touching, or kissing and cooing loving words to each other. They spoke about the end of their lives. Viejo shared his vision of his own death at the hand of chance. Viola said she would follow him soon after, if he were to go first.

"I don't want to be without you. More than half a century. More than anyone I am yours and you are mine. If I lose you I will have to search for you and since I know where you will go I will find you."

Viejo started crying first.

The MDMA was quickly digested by the blood. Two hours later they were still blissed, but their bodies returned to the natural state. Viejo needed a nap. The two went to the glasshouse and the wedding bed.

Last love scene at sunrise

This morning's sunrise slowly dissolved the darkness that surrounded the glasshouse. Viola and Robert were sitting up in bed. They had showered and enjoyed a small breakfast in the darkness that precedes the arrival of even this small light.

Viejo was reminded of that day decades ago when he woke wounded in a meadow. The idea that he had made it in life, escaping an early death, to see the sunrise from his bed on the Vermillion Sea rather than to die with his face down in the dirt, forced a grin to his lips that Viola saw. Her arm snaked across between the sheets to find his arm and then his hand.

He turned to her, pulled her hand from the covers and kissed each of her knuckles.

"Good morning, Esposa."

They would wait for the light to reach them to begin their festivities.

"There is no god, but is there forgiveness?" Viejo had trouble feeling good about their walk on the beach where the discussion turned to the book and Renaldo. Viola had begun following the first ray by touching him from his shoulders to his feet. She kissed the skin she was nearest before responding.

"You gave me life and love. You didn't kill my father Ula did."

"You gave me kindness for harm but never harm for kindness."

"Not that I know. We fed each other. Now almost 60 years later did you come back to love me or ask forgiveness?"

“Love.”

“Then did you get love?”

“Yes, I suppose there is nothing more we could have given one another.”

The red glow on the horizon ended all verbal intercourse. Their hands expanded the search for the skin warmed by the mornings rays.

Everything else followed as was their custom.

Viejo Checks Out

Viejo stood before the large mirror in the lower landing of the stair in the glasshouse halfway between the kitchen and the rooftop deck. He examined himself completely. He looked for every scar he collected in his years in the Game.

“There’s the bullet wound.” He rubbed his thigh again remembering his time in the meadow wondering where he was. He remembered Xavier. “What an asshole. Wish I killed him, the little chicken shit.” Of course, he knew that X had met his end. Viola told him she heard some youngsters, maybe those he met on his last shipment of L, had removed him as an unnecessary ‘feature’ of the Game, as they referred to him. The young were using the idioms of online games to mimic life. He felt grateful that he had escaped that end.

He gave each scar a little time to let the memory return, most didn’t. He fell off his bike and broke his leg so badly bone stuck out. He was stealing something and got caught as he lay screaming in pain. His leg healed while he was in juvenile detention. That one was still visible and vibrated a little as he was looking at it.

There was no way he could see his back, but he remembered that the beatings he had endured at the hands of his mother healed except for one. That is what Viola had told him when he asked her to inspect it one night in the early days of their relationship.

Death seemed a part of life to him like a place he could go to relax and forget whatever it was that had driven him through life. He noticed that he was growing tired, often wishing he could sleep more than reality, including Viola, would let him.

“Maybe it’s time to go on vacation.” He climbed the stairs to the bedroom where Viola was talking with the maid and helping her change the bed clothes.

When Hermana saw him, she noticed he had changed as if some important part of him had fallen out of him. “Amore. What are you up to?”

“Caught up in reviewing my life, my dearest friend.” He was naked, but since Viejo was 75, the maid, the rare Muslim in Christian Baja Sur, was unaffected. She kept her eyes off him. She had seen him nude many times and though she had an affection for him as an old man who spoke softly when he spoke to her she kept her reserve. She stayed focused on her work. She did not want to disrespect him.

Viejo wandered around the big house by himself. He had taken to being a bit reckless. It was new for him. He went down the stairs and out the kitchen door. Standing in the shade he looked out across the cactus garden to the sea. He had an ah moment and hurried back inside.

He climbed the stairs going where the stairs went. He reached the landing with the mirror. He started giggling deciding to see if he could see his back by looking at the mirror by looking through his legs. He was not very limber. His first attempts were not pictures of a man who was going to accomplish his goal.

He, of course, was the only one to ever know this. He giggled more and started spinning until he was too dizzy to stand. He had done this before in the bedroom which was soft. There, spinning and falling was fun. Naturally, he could not control his feet or gravity. He fell onto his back.

His back fell onto the second stair down. He spun down the stairs until he hit the bottom.

As if maniacally, he rose and fled out through the kitchen door and staggered through the cacti thinking he was running across the meadow escaping a hail of bullets until he fell again into the sand, unconscious.

No one else was there. Baba was in her house and Viola in the bedroom.

Viola gives up revenge

When Viola heard Baba's scream she worked her way down the stairs, aided by the maid, and out the door. There he was. Baba was leaning over him, touching his chest, listening for his breath. She looked up to see Viola standing with the back of her hand against her lips. The maid had turned her eyes away.

The things that usually happen in such circumstances happened. It was as if everyone knows what to do.

Baba thought to call a doctor. It would be an hour before one could arrive. An ambulance might be swifter but then she thought, he would hate me if he woke up in a hospital bed. If he is not dead, he will be soon.

Viola and Baba held hands. The maid scurried to find some sheet to cover him. Viola said, "Leave him be. He is happy as he is ever going to be."

While they waited with him for the coroner and la policia to arrive, Baba held Viola, trying to hear what she was saying in between sobs.

"I must make peace with the past, so I can come back with him to live again in our secret world." Viola was practically swimming in the tears she was shedding. Her hands kept searching for her eyes to wipe dry.

Baba held her. Viola's head on her shoulder. Baba could feel the tears soaking her shirt.

"Revenge is done. The last one is gone." Baba thought that is what she said. Viola collapsed in her arms. She and the maid moved her to Baba's

guest room where she stayed through the ordeal of the official response to Viejo's death.

This was a Wednesday.

Last Blues

The coroner's van carried Viejo's empty body to the coroner's office in La Paz. Baba went with him.

Viola and Baba talked this through. The drill had taught them to share responsibility. Juan and his crew were available. Juan came from town to carry Viola to the cantina. Baba joined them within minutes.

Juan called the meeting to order as soon as Baba arrived.

"There is no agenda other than a service to send Viejo to paradise." He said.

Viola was in control of her voice. She had cried on the ride, sobbing quietly and so discretely Juan did not notice. Now she was finished and wanted to get on with it.

"Juan, the wake begins now and ends tonight. I want to sing once more for my lover and friend. I will call the band to come soon."

The band came in early and warmed up while Baba and Viola shared flan and brandy before descending when they heard the band playing *Goodnight My Love*. When she reached the stage she began to sing.

Goodnight my love, the tired old moon is descending

Goodnight my love, my moment with you now is ending

It was so heavenly, holding you, close to me

It will be heavenly to hold you again in a dream

The stars above have promised to meet us tomorrow

Till then my love, how dreary the new day will seem

So for the present, dear, we'll have to part

Sleep tight, my love, goodnight, my love

Remember that you're mine sweetheart

Yesterday, Viola spent the day getting him cremated and his ashes scattered over the desert floor. He was no more, just a memory.

Baba watched Viola sing on the stage at the wake she had dreamed into existence. Her songs were about missing her friend and lover and about the good times in life they shared.

The wake ended.

Life after Viejo began.

Viola quickly bored of it.

The Mahogany box

Juan left the two women to themselves. He went home after the doors closed and the blue light was extinguished. Baba and Viola decided to visit the mahogany box on their way to the balcony.

Their years long ceremony required the sorting of the contents to find what they thought was correct for the circumstances. Baba sat still and watched Viola hoping that she would know what she wanted.

The box sat in front of Viola. She looked tired. A successful gangster who had gained from planning and strategy she wanted time to reconsider her options.

“Baba, I know what I require is here, but I am not quite ready.” She put her hands on the top of it postponing her choice of poison.

This was Thursday.

Viola's final memories

"Baba Mia." Viola held her on the blue balcony. It was Friday. They were at the cantina passing the day relaxing waiting for the sunset, the flan and brandy, the conversations, the dark and the blues coming later. They still had the empty spot that once was filled by Viejo. They hugged to try to hide their loss. The small table in the corner was the empty spot. Without him they could not sit.

Baba had put all of L Cohen's music on the speakers. The song that was playing was 'Almost like the blues.' The lyrics fit the scene, she thought, in some undefined way.

There is no god in Heaven
And there is no Hell below
So says the great professor
Of all there is to know
But I've had the invitation
That a sinner can't refuse
And it's almost like salvation
It's almost like the blues

Viola listened with an intention beyond her normal. L Cohen was not unknown to her but that night she heard his song in a new way that fit her special form of the blues.

"What is this thing called, Baba Mia? Am I dying?" Her voice was hers, but the words were new to both of them. Baba had never known

anyone who died except her grandparents. She was a freshman in high school: There her friends were the only ones who mattered.

“My dear old friend, there is some joy in passing. Viejo told me in Santa Rosalia that he thought there was some wisdom only the dead knew.”

“What did he say? I hope you remember.”

“Sister, I remember his exact words. The universe is not vast, he said, everything you know about it is held within your head. That internal world is the only world we see.

“I asked him if he was afraid. He said we are all star dust and when we pass we become the traveler who traverses the universes.”

“Did he say the plural universes?”

“He said we need to be patient in death because we will meet again in one place or another.”

“He told me that too. He was over life he said. There is no better word than life. I said that. He smiled as if we were new lovers.”

It was two days since they found him face down in the cactus garden. The first day was spent with cops and coroners. In the old days, a body was examined, and a cause of death was determined or at least guessed at. The day before yesterday no one mentioned a cause, just the death.

Neither Viola or Baba wanted to deal with how he died. The less of that the better was their way of thinking. He was old, old enough. He could hardly walk, how he reached the top of the stairs or the garden alone was never discussed.

They walked around La Paz along the Malecon. The moon was high. They did not talk. Between the singing and the walk, they visited the poker room and the mahogany box. Viola picked through the group called Mas Tarde looking for the morphine she knew was there.

On their walk, they stopped for some bottled water which Viola used to rinse her mouth as the drug coursed through her shutting down her organs. Baba held her as they had discussed and felt her life drain from her. They were sitting on the wall between the walkway and the sand. They sat there for hours waiting for the last beat of her heart.

Baba hailed a cab from among those who had not gone home to bed and the cabbie and Baba carried her to the car and then to the hospital where the obvious was noted and her body spirited off for refrigeration.

Baba stood on the corner where the morgue was and where it had been for as long as anyone could remember. She cleared her lungs in two yoga breaths. Juan was waiting in his van. The driver opened the passenger door, she joined him and they drove away.

This was Friday.

Baba and Juan

The late afternoon lingered. The light changed slowly setting off the body's responses to the loss of light, increasing drowsiness, encouraging sleep.

"I like these mellow afternoons." Baba said in a whisper to the ear of Juan Cabral, her beloved husband as he laid with his head in her lap staring out of the third-floor windows at the reflection of the sunset off the waves kicked up by the mild east wind off the gulf.

They were lounging on Viola and Viejo's wedding bed.

"I miss them." He said.

"How long have they been gone?"

"Two months." Juan slowly rolled and sat up. "It feels like forever."

Baba was tired of her memories.

"I am hungry. To the palapa for fish tacos." She pushed him toward the door and the stairs. "Andale, Muchacho."

"Listen to you."

They walked along the beach near the wet sands.

"Did they ever tell all their secrets?" Juan asked.

"Did they even know what they were, much less speak them out?" Baba had tears in her eyes. "Imagine role playing for 50 years, pretending for the sake of safety, until one day he makes a mistake and their secret world comes to an end." She wanted to make her life free of all the things that made Viejo and Viola's so complicated.

Juan could see her struggle with her conflict. He had taken psychology in college. “Robert made a series of errors that left him better off than he was. He could at long last decide to stay though when he did he thought he had died.”

“And gone to heaven.” She sat at her favorite table. The restaurant was unusually idle this time of year, the weather had turned from the 90’s to the 70’s and most everyone stayed home planning for the winter holidays.

Juan and Baba were holding hands, waiting for Esmeralda to bring menus and water for the table.

“There is something I wonder about still.” Baba said. “During the first week they spent together, Viola learned about her father’s businesses. She knows he was killed. She was vengeful at heart. Twenty years later, Renaldo brought her a copy of the book when only Robert had one. Viola kills Beth from what the book said about her or that’s what it sounds like.”

Juan listened intently. He was about to respond when Esmeralda walked up. Juan ordered the usual fare in Spanish. Esmeralda thanked him for his order, turned to Baba and said. “Yo quiero le libre que está hablando por favor, Señora Baba.”

Baba turned to Juan. “She wants the book? How does she know?”

Juan engaged Esmeralda in a conversation that moved too fast for Baba’s ears. She sat watching her husband charm the history student. The conversation over, Esmeralda moved toward the kitchen and Juan turned towards Baba.

“It seems we have spoken about the book and the hunt for the murderer too often here without noting who might be overhearing us. The book, at least what she has surmised from our discussions, is history in her view so she wants a copy for her studies in local history.” Juan said.

Baba laughed. “Ears are dangerous or is it talking that is dangerous? You were going to say something about Renaldo or the book before the waitress interrupted?”

“Oh, probably obvious that Renaldo would have died for Viola and in fact may have.” Juan was not laughing. “Isn’t that what Viola meant when she said he lost his life to get her a copy?”

“I think she said, “In service to his friend.” I wish she were here, so we could quiz her about this. They both still kept secrets, at least from us.” Baba spoke in a low voice. Esmeralda lurked waiting to bring the soon to be prepared food to their table. Juan moved his eyes from Baba’s lips to the sea. There were dolphins near the shore. They all watched the dolphins as if in a trance.

Juan grasped her hands as the creatures left their view. He leaned close to her ear and said, “You know Renaldo was my grandfather. He was killed by a small caliber handgun in 1987. It was two days after the spring solstice. Sound familiar?”

“1987? Let’s see. Remember the book saying your grandfather used Viola to control the empire? Ah.” She stared off in the direction of Gulf. Juan had seen this once before. In his respect for her he waited.

The wave of Ah ran up on the shore of her mind. She stood up as if shocked.

“Ah. I get it. This is complicated. Wait. No.” Her argument with herself came to a conclusion. “This isn’t good.”

“Doesn’t sound like it.” Juan had his beliefs within which there were empty spaces. He rarely thought it through. He was happy for the peace and resistant to the conflict that came from thinking too much about empty spaces. “Maybe it’s a secret no one needs to know.”

Time is infinite, love is not

Baba, in her twenties having begun her 'real-life' as she referred to it only at age 17 had many memories. Being full of memories at her age she had as many questions as could be.

Juan was often gone from the beach house. He was a businessman doing business which included the cantina. Baba was spending more time at the beach house leaving her nothing to do but think.

She thought about being lonely, missing not only Juan but Viejo and Viola. With so much time on her hands she was tormented about his absences, wondering what gangsterish scams he was up to that he did not share with her.

She wasn't mad just left too much to her own thoughts. That was her conclusion. It did not stop her thoughts. The mill of her mind ground her memories as fine as memories could be ground.

She watched the sunrises and the sunsets. She thought about her old friends in between. On occasion she went to La Paz to the cantina to listen to the blues.

Baba, Juan and a glass of white wine on the balcony

The music generated through the sound system floated up through the cantina stairs to the upper level, down the hallway and out onto the balcony where Baba and Juan were sharing time together.

She was standing at the blue railing that ran between the hand carved posts holding the roof above them. A year had passed since Viejo and Viola died. As she passed her hand along the railing, she remembered the nights they spent doing what she and Juan were doing now, enjoying the time before the drill and the blue light once lit would warn those on the street who knew the blue light that the blues were happening within.

Juan was reading email and facebook on his phone. Every once in a while, he would look to see if she was still there. She had adopted Viejo's habit of ignoring the cellphone as a dangerous bad habit. She preferred her memories and a free mind to plan her life. Watching him absorbed in his secret life left her feeling lonely.

"Hey, bright boy. You have time for a wife?" His eyes darted up to her face.

"Mia, I love you. You want to talk?" He turned his phone face down. She watched him try to decide what to do next.

"You know, the look on your face tells me it takes effort to put your phone down. I appreciate how hard it is to return to the living world from where ever you go on that thing."

“I hear you, Amiga. I know why you don’t do the virtual world. I am coming back to you. Give me a minute.” He stood and hugged her. “Can I get you something.”

“How about a white wine. Have that with me. OK?”

“I am on my way.”

She waited for her husband, partner and friend to attend to her needs. There was a day, maybe her first day in La Paz, after she found Viola and she took her to the cantina to eat flan and sip brandy. As she waited under the balcony for Viola to open the door that day she pictured herself on the balcony sipping white wine and spending the evening talking to her best friend.

She was about to have her dream come true, as Juan brought an open bottle of chardonnay and two glasses to the small table. He poured and she sipped.

“Yum, just right for tonight.” Another sip. She put the glass down so she could hold his head in her hands and kiss his forehead, a gesture he seemed to enjoy. “I love you, Johnny Goat-boy. I want you for a longtime, just like this, free and not bleeding to death on the concrete or in the desert.”

“Whoa. Where’d that come from?”

“My heart.” She laughed at her certainty. He looked bewildered.

“OK. OK. What do you need to make your life perfect?”

“No more Game.” She held his head again, spilling a splash of wine from the glass he was holding onto his shirt. “Why bother? Let the next

gangster have it for free. Let him die for money and power. Let's live with what we have. We already control millions why risk happiness for more?"

"How do I do that? The gang would think me crazy."

"Which you are, if you don't walk away."

"I have no argument against that notion. My father said the same thing, once he saw what happened to his father at the hands of the woman he called the Empress." Juan's voice told a story without words. Baba Mia heard it with a part of her that felt immediate pain. She burst into tears for a few seconds.

"It wasn't Viola who did that to Renaldo." She said after she recovered her voice.

"Then who?" Juan had stood. He was an intelligent man who had no visible violence in him. He stood shaking in what must have been anger.

Baba knew the beauty of the moment she had hoped for was deformed beyond hope. The music from below raged with a song she had never heard.

Darn that dream

I dream each night

You say you love me and hold me tight

But when I awake and you're out of sight

Oh, darn that dream.

"I don't really know. I have to guess a little but not guess entirely. You get me?" Baba wanted to cry as the moment evolved from the best to the worst. "Robert." She said.

"I thought he wasn't a gangster."

"He was something else. An American businessman. No blood is too expensive to spill. Except your own."

"Mia." He said in short breathes between each letter. "I was afraid my father was right that it was Viola, who I loved. But Robert, I loved him more, a wild man, who roamed the west kind of guy, doing good for others."

"Not that time. He stalked your grandfather. He set him up. It caused Viola no end of trouble. It was not Viola for whom he did the greatest service in his mind and in hers. It was jealousy. It was not greed."

"Maybe I didn't want to know that."

"I can risk everything to get my way. I tell you accept me and your son to be a gift greater than money and power. No more Game. If you stop now the story is a romantic comedy. If not, it is a romantic tragedy, if that exists."

"Wow. I don't know what to say."

"Can I help?"

"Yes." He said with tears in his eyes.

"Say after me, 'I'll start today.'"

"OK. Maybe." Juan looked troubled. "I have a problem I cannot solve, Mia Amore y Esposa."

“Amigo y Corizon, I am afraid we will become like them. We have secrets from one another and I do not want to know anything more about them in this lifetime.”

“You already know?”

“Tal vez. No, probablemente.”

“Your Spanish has improved.” Juan wanted to laugh but he knew he was not going to ever find this moment funny. “No mas problemas, Amiga. El silencio es bueno para los que esperan a envejecer.”

“Raise your glass to keeping secrets.” Baba raised her wine.

“The fewer the better?”

“Si, Señor. The fewer the better.”

“Let’s move to New York.”

Silence of the Elders is about the life a gangster written by the gangster's ex-lover. The book is suppressed by the gangster but not before it finds its way into a bookstore in SF owned by one of the gangster's minor partners. The story follows the bookstore owner's life, a secret affair he has with a woman in a monastery in La Paz, Mexico and the re-discovery of the book.

