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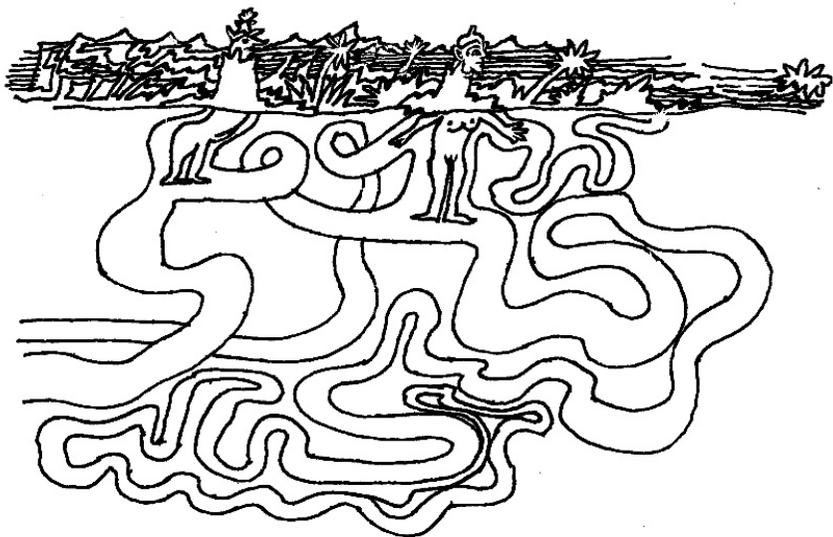
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ISBN: 978-1-8381382-2-6



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1.

*THE STRANGE HOMES OF MR AND MRS
CAMOUFLAGE*

‘*D*esayuno! Por los muertos.’

From the corridor beyond, a call to arms raising a renegade shade from Lord Mictlántecuhli’s penultimate realm, the promise of breakfast, wiping dreamlike recollections – hecatomb realities, gone as though they never were. The one jarring note, the clear plastic envelope on the bed beyond my double’s out-flung hand. Inside, a document headed by his double-barrelled name in looping copperplate above an impressive gold seal, embossed with a skull and cross bones. ‘Double’ looked at it distractedly, putting off checking out the enclosure until later, food being the only thing on his mind just then.

‘*Buenas días, Helga!*’

‘And to you too, munchkins!’ she said, offering up a over powdered cheek to kiss as he stomped into the salon like a matador on the case.

‘Mmm! Chanel *Número Venti Cinco!*’ Double wrinkled his nose at the cloying taste of face powder on his lips. ‘And frying bacon! My favourite smell combination of a morning,’ he trumpeted, taking the

seat opposite, rubbing his palms with happy enthusiasm. 'I'm so hungry I could eat *una ...*'

'*Toro!*' Helga interjected. 'And what you get up to in the *nacht*,' she said, with an appraising look as she raised a denuded and pencilled eyebrow, 'To be having such an appetite?'

'I dun'no.' Double shrugged, wondering what she had against eyebrow hair, finding her voice more gruff, and Teutonic. 'Dreaming, I guess,' he muttered, pondering her cosmetic changes which, though minor still seemed significant, somehow. 'Who knows? Perhaps I've taken up walking in my sleep.'

'*Jal!*' Helga said, studying his face, thoughtfully. 'The house can affect peoples in that way. It would not be the first time ...'

She stopped as the kitchen door swung back on one of the Malinchés entering, bearing a weighty tray.

Food! Double couldn't take his eyes off this vision of a Hispanic *Nueva* York, rebuilt after the fall – tottering *f* *tortilla* towers slotting a red sun spilling a sauce boat, set down before a silver platter and a squidgy morass of *frijoles*, crackling with bacon, heaped, sunny-side up, with *huevos rancheros*, just how he liked them, not forgetting *zúmo de naranja* – freshly squeezed – and, glory of glories, strong black coffee steaming in an earthenware jug. A serious business, Mexican breakfast. He was so engrossed

he completely failed to notice that Helga ate nothing and only toyed with her helping.

'So, just the two of us,' Double said leaning back in his chair, stretching his arms, and cracking knuckles, clasping fingers behind his neck, 'Tell me, did our friend get away all right?'

'And who is this you talk 'bout?' Helga demanded with asperity that was unusual, even for her.

'You know, Herr what's-it?' Double said, discombobulated by a sudden loss of recall. 'The Austrian chappie questing for ... turtles?' He frowned. 'No, that's not right.'

'You must have dreamed him,' Helga harrumphed. 'The only guest is you!'

That was his second jarring note of the morning. And he had such a clear recollection. A florid face framed by flaring sideburns. Silly bastard, really.

'Yea! A dream! That's it,' Double blustered. 'You're absolutely right about the hotel, Helga, weird vibes. Must be the *emanations*,' he grinned, as a sudden vibration transmitting the floor shook his elbows, leaning on the table top. The cutlery rattled, as if to emphasise his point. 'You know damned fine what I'm talking about,' he continued, rationalising the sudden tremor as a collapse of long-abandoned mine workings far below.

‘And what is that?’ Helga smiled, all wiles behind her powdered mask, face powder applied thick as icing on a sponge cake.

‘Treasure, what else?’ he snapped. ‘You can't have forgotten our deal.’

‘You surprise me!’ Conflating, she cast a shadow over the table, as when a thunder cloud, looms out of nowhere on a clear summer's day, ‘Perhaps now your holiday it comes to an end?’ she glowered.

‘What the hell d'you mean, Helga?’ Double frowned, at this new line of attack.

She sighed. ‘Does your mummy never teach you? Sometimes you have to make effort to pluck the apples from the tree.’

Mummy? Double balked, as into his mind came an image of Helga swaddled in the sump of a narrow wooden boat, lying with her bandaged head propped against the prow, gold coins in her eye sockets, winking back at him where he stood in the stern, leaning on a pole, punting slowly across inky water into a fog bank delineating the limits of memory. What was that about? he shuddered, feeling as if Ixotl, the spotted dog of Mictlán had just peed on his grave. This morning he was even weird to himself, and the day was hardly yet begun. Emanations from below? Double doubted it. That bitch across the table, then? The split between the sexes, widening to an unbridgeable gulf? That time of the

month come round again, the full moon bringing on the doomy feeling induced by proximity to blood tides. Periods, he reflected, give women the acuity to see beyond temporal limits, like the curtains of conditioning part a crack. Or crack *ajar*? Perhaps she knew something he was blocking out? Locked away in his parturiated brain, just like every other man, more uncharted regions than the dark side of Neptune, that was for sure.

‘And what’s apples got to do with it, Helga?’ he countered, combatively.

‘Maybe more than you know!’ she snarled, taking the bait. ‘The golden apples of the sun? You never hear tell?’

‘Nope,’ Double grinned, leaning back in his chair, defying her with folded arms.

‘According to the ancient European legends, beyond the setting sun lies paradise and the orchards I speak of, guarded by the three daughters of *nacht*.’ She thumbed towards a shuttered window. ‘The same mountains closing in the town.’

‘You mean *las tres hermanitas*?’ he said, wondering why the window shutters were still closed this late in the morning.

‘What other mountains do you think I am talking of?’

‘So!’ he smiled, changing tack, ‘What’s this, ah ... west-end Eden,’ he said, feeling an odd unease creeping on, ‘Got to do with the, um ... ah, treasure?’

‘Maybe everything, maybe nothing,’ she giggled gaily, switching masks and moods. ‘In the stories there are fourteen, you know.’ She frowned, her face powder cracking some more as her forehead furrowed.

‘Fourteen?’ He reiterated, recalling Cantina Joe’s pronouncement on the subject. ‘I thought there were thirteen?’

‘Yes,’ she nodded, ‘Thirteen blinds, each without substance.’ Her lips curled, advancing the tracery of cracks across her powdered cheeks. ‘Just like the empty promises of the church.’

‘And the fourteenth?’

‘Ah,’ she smiled, ‘*La catorces*, the only one worth having, the legacy of *ventura*.’

‘You mean “lucky”?’ he said, noticing that now her face powder was falling in flurries of tiny flakes onto the table cloth.

‘That is what I say,’ Helga scowled.

‘And who was he, this “lucky fourteen”?’ Double said, wondering if this all connected with the shot-out sign by the rail track in the desert and its bullet-riddled legend, ‘*Catorces*’.

‘A black slave who won his freedom when he pointed out to his master the silver that would make all their fortunes, cooling in the ashes of the camp fire,’ she said, suddenly, unaccountably nervous, reaching up with her big hands and smoothing her tied-back ... *black* hair,

which Double suddenly remembered had been blonde before. 'But you distract me.'

'Eden, wasn't it?' he said, trying to regain focus. Women, you never know them really, he reflected, Most of all not this *bruja*, black to her roots and beyond. Dyed of course, he rationalised, otherwise her hair could not have changed colour overnight -

Little did he suspect there was another, altogether more strange explanation.

'Ah yes,' she beamed, precipitating a further fall of face powder. 'The garden, of course, is long gone. The Spanish, they see to that!' she sneered, her mood downshifting, alarmingly. 'Those conquistadors and their descendants, slash and burn, turn the Virgin to desert. But the temple to her daughters remain,' she beamed, upshifting, again.

'Where?' he groaned, certain the foregoing was a canard.

'Here, you fool,' she said, knuckling the table top, silvery white flakes dancing to her command.

'No,' Double shook his head, 'Credulous and a fool I may be, but you can't expect me to believe that.'

'Why not? Is the custom in Mexico,' she sniffed. 'Cathedrals on pyramid-es and always those on older structures, like the layers of a pavlova pudding. Why not this house, *la Castilla de la Dinero*, on the temple the

Egyptian colonists dedicate to the golden apples of the sun?’

‘I’ve had enough,’ he said, looking away – anywhere but at the cracking medusa mask of her grossly powdered face. Stone, I’ll turn to stone, he thought, unless I get the hell out now.

‘Do as you like,’ she said, catching on fast. ‘But first,’ she gestured towards the mess of plates on the table, ‘You must clear these things away and wash up in the kitchen. Malinché has gone off for the day. It is time you earn your keep, do not you think?’

Returning, after a few minutes, Double sensed she was in a better mood, as he pushed in through the salon door.

‘You finish already?’ she smiled down at him.

‘Yup,’ he nodded.

‘The plates are clean?’

‘Spotless,’ he said, entirely insincerely.

‘And the ones from before?’

‘With the others in the rack.’

‘You do not put away?’

‘I didn’t think that’s what you wanted.’

‘Next time you polish and put away. Promise now.’

‘Yes, absolutely,’ he muttered, finding her overbearing as ever. ‘Can I leave now?’

‘You go to get drunk?’

‘That depends,’ he shrugged, angling shoulders towards the salon door.

Helga sighed. ‘I suppose if you must, you must. Come,’ she said, standing up, ‘I go with you, I have to make sure the sign is still up outside.’

‘A sign for what?’ Double said, as she pushed past and led the way up the long corridor.

‘To keep the perverts away,’ she cast back over her sideboard of a shoulder.

‘What perverts?’ he called after her, trotting to keep up.

‘Perverts?’ she snorted. ‘Pilgrims? What is the difference? You do not notice them swarming like flies in the street?’

‘How could I when you keep the shutters in the salon closed,’ he panted, as her pace increased.

‘I do that so they cannot stare in the windows. So nose the holy fools are, always judging,’ she sniffed, slowing, as she neared the end of long corridor.

‘What’s the occasion?’ he asked, following her into the lobby, which became quite crowded when taking into account the old retainer in his dusty suit of conquistador armour on sentry duty behind the bolted door.

‘Tomorrow begins the festival of Shem up at the cathedral,’ Helga said reaching towards the door, ‘Twenty thousand pilgrims in town tonight. Three days

it lasts,' she whirled around, 'But this year I do not think it goes well.'

'Why not?'

'Because this time the Black Friars refuse to let the pilgrims kiss Shem's sacred shin bone.'

'Shin bone?' he laughed.

'That is what I say.' She scowled down at him. 'The Black Friars use it for divination.'

'I thought the church authorities proscribed that, along with necromancy, black magic, voodoo and the rest.'

'The Friars are Shemites not Catholics.'

'Of course,' Double nodded, puzzled he could have forgotten such a salient fact of the town. He stood back as she drew the long bolt and turned the big key in the old brass lock.

Holding the door ajar, she leaned her head around the jam. 'Good, still there,' she announced over a clamour of discordant chants, distant shrieks and wild hosannas coming from the street beyond.

'The sign?' he ventured, determined to stay on good terms before leaving.

'Ja, it say "*cerrado*",' she smiled, pulling open the heavy door. 'I keep the hotel closed for the whole festival.'

‘Sounds a good idea,’ he said, squeezing past her into bright opaque light outside, swirling with dust raised by thousands of shuffling feet.

‘Don’t get too drunk, munchkins,’ she laughed, slamming the door before he had a chance to step down onto the street.



2. JOE BUTTS HIS NOSE IN ...

Shunted from the doorstep into the street by the heavy door impacting his rear end, Double stumbled over a shaven-headed penitent dragging himself along on bloodied hands and knees, lashing his back with a barbed flail, between prostrations.

'Jaime!' he blurted, pushing himself up, coming face to face with the slaving flagellant. But instead of smiling in recognition, as might have been expected, the self-abuser merely scowled, and averted his bruised, blood spattered face.

'Fuck you!' Double cursed to no effect, minded of a worm, watching the pilgrim's humping progress, bumping his forehead against the cobbles in time to the happy hand claps of the sack-clothed choristers blocking the street. Above them, stretched between poles, was a banner, flapping in the wind. Looking up he noted its canvas was crudely decorated with a long, pale skeletal leg, surrounded by a spectral green halo, which he took to represent Shem's sacred shin bone, meaning that the Choiristers, below, repetitively singing, what sounded like, 'Gory Glory *Angelitos*, were fucking Shemites.

For a moment Double felt like giving up the ghost and abasing himself to a god he couldn't comprehend,

just like all the pilgrims, but his need for a drink in the *cantina* was too strong to join in the fun. Besides, he was desperate to offload to Joe about his narco-nephew. Jaime, last seen – discounting a dream he only dimly remembered – fleeing a battle back in *Happy Valley*.

What the fuck had happened after that? Double wondered. All he could recall was a deafening barrage of explosions; and standing side by side with Jaime in the downdraft of descending black helicopters, before being pursued by into caverns. Then nothing ... absolutely bloody *nada* ... Until, he woke that morning with the most enormous appetite. As if by some incredible feat of somnambulism, overnight he had re-returned from Happy Valley, over the saw-toothed mountains, back across a fucking Norwegian glacier, for Christ's sake, – and then broken into the hotel. Impossible – but how else to explain wakening in his bed? Perhaps those caverns in the Narcos' canyon, led into the lair of one those mythical birds of Joe's tall tales, and he'd been carried over the *cordilleras* in great claws. A ridiculous notion, but while he was on the subject, what were they called? Of course, the *tzitzimime*! Absurdly, Double felt a double-glow of satisfaction, remembering not only the local name of the giant birds the Austrian chappie had insisted were pterodactyls, but also the mad aristo's title, Von Hapsburg, last seen leading the helicopter attack against the Dutch dopers of Happy Valley.

Pulling himself together, Double sighed, sure all the *sabbatistas* were dead now, including poor, poor, Jaime. Time to get that drink in the *cantina* and catch up with Joe, he reminded himself, body swerving an reliquary salesman rattling bones in his face, like every other god-struck mendicant in his way, dusty after the long pilgrimage up from the plains – the majority wearing ecstatic expressions, faced lifted towards the sky, unlike the down-cast flagellants, on bloody hands and knees, their faces filthy, flat and drained. The procession flowing around the bandstand in the Plaza de la Revolución, where Gomez’s victims were buried, and past the Cathedral steps in the direction of three purple peaks like three church spires, framed the slot at the end of the street, where it looked like a large marquee was pitched in the waste ground, at the edge of town

Feeling like he’d crossed a bloody Rubicon, instead of merely the width of a narrow cobbled street, elbowing aside the last *Angelito* chorister blocking his way, Double pushed through the half doors and stepped down into the hole-in-the-wall establishment. After the clamour and dust outside, inside was peace and serenity. Not a pilgrim in sight, he observed thankfully, his eyes adjusting to the dim light. Unusually Joe not around. Instead, one of the Malinchés behind the bar, taking his order like he was a total stranger.

‘*Una doble, señor,*’ she smiled surgically, setting down a glass he wished was as clean as her gleaming teeth. ‘*¿Nada mas?*’

‘Si,’ Double pouted. ‘*Un pocito beso, por favour,*’ he said, surprised at the look of mounting fury he got from her gold-irised eyes. He had only asked for a kiss.

Feigning indifference, taking his drink, he sauntered over to the table by the warm stove in the corner, pulled out a chair and sat down with his back to the bar, wondering whether he’d fantasised the whole scene in the bed with her two sisters. Just like he’d dreamed up old bugger-lugs Baron Von Paedo, he reflected, conjuring his face in the dirty glass cupped between his hands, pooled in oily *mexcal*, sharing murky depths with a worm; silly bastard, really, with his ridiculous nineteenth-century sideburns, waving back from a precipice, unmindful of the native boy rearing up behind, curtain clouds closing on his view ... then a knee knocking into his elbow, drink and a worm slopping the table as he whirled around angrily.

‘Holy shit!’ Double gasped, at finding himself face-on to a porky barrel-busting belly button beneath a denim shirt. ‘Joe, it’s you!’

‘*Perdon,*’ Cantina Joe salaamed, holding one hand to his forehead and a frothing beer glass out in the other, bowing in the manner of dipsomaniac Muslim mullahs. He called back to Malinché behind the bar, ‘*Una doble*