

Prologue

I

The psychiatrist held her appointments wherever the patient felt most receptive. In this case it was in a bar on an unnamed island. The island was in the South Pacific and it belonged to one Lawrence Chesterfield. It was nestled against a backdrop of palm trees and serenity that served as both safe harbor and engineered sufficiency.

The psychiatrist and the patient had reason to covet their sequestered lives. This was no ordinary patient and so the psychiatrist made allowances. Everyone on the island knew why it was populated by Lawrence Chesterfield's chosen few, so it was polite not to linger over banalities. Still, the residents also needed the ministrations of a psychiatrist to soften the edges of their banishment. Listen she did, wherever the patient would allow conversation to flow.

For this patient, public places were good. Public places were safe. She felt camouflaged, blended in and for her, being one of many offered anonymity that eluded her among a few. She had no reason to run away anymore. No one in this place bothered with the details of her legacy; each was there of their own accord, for their own exile.

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Conversation was not hindered by her diminished appearance, nor did it destroy the atmosphere—everyone on the island had their own crosses to bear.

The patient and the psychiatrist waited for a dinner table at an open air restaurant, one of only four on an island the size of Catalina, California. That was sufficient. The population of the entire island numbered under five thousand, including those indigenous inhabitants that served and cleaned, hauled and tended.

The exiles? They continued their research in peace, all at the behest of Lawrence Chesterfield, their absentee benefactor, the father of the patient.

“I have died a thousand deaths,” the patient was saying to the psychiatrist. “I feel them whisper to me when I am at the point of decision; live, die, live, die. Past deaths echo in my memory at those moments, flow back and tickle conscious thought. On a balcony that overlooks the gray tones and neon city lights, leaning on the railing, the sense of flying off it overcomes my blood and jets up my legs. I must back up, for in my soul I know I’d either jump or fall.”

“Or be pushed?” The psychiatrist asked.

“That too.”

The patient was no longer a doctor nor was she a famous, and infamous, scientist. Her name was no longer Doctor Samantha Goldinger. Now it was Sara Annaman; innocuous, anonymous and self proclaimed. Even so, no one referred to her as Sara and she hardly thought of herself as anyone in particular at all anymore. Eternity gave way to existence without the need for such formalities.

Her hands rested one on top of the other, her nails geriatric yellow although her years totaled barely fifty. The skin on the fingers were mottled and translucent, the kind

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of sheer that showed not only blue veins but tenuous muscle as well. Even so, they barely revealed her true age. Such was the price of her arrogance, to think she could outwit nature.

When she spoke she did so with an echo in her voice, the kind of rasping reminiscent of burdensome memories. Her voice whispered ripened nightmares, dusty but unforgotten.

She spoke. “What propels these sensations and thoughts are beyond my knowledge. I speculate that I have known that exact fate. No. I *know* that I have seen those very windows rush by me, felt the falling, falling.”

The psychiatrist waited. She looked at Samantha. Her eyes watched the movement of Samantha’s eyes, her own moving from one to the other in quick spurts of motion. She watched with intensity, transported herself into Samantha’s mind, into what she thought was Samantha’s deep psychosis.

“The pain?” Samantha continued, “It smacks my face and that’s when I am certain that the rushing pavement has met my body. I have spread across cement upon my decease.” She looked up to the psychiatrist, let her voice vaporize in the crowded bar.

Her voice did just that, vaporized. Consumed in a mixture of clinking glasses, silverware on china and myriad conversations, Samantha spoke slowly as dreams would unravel, revealing only so much in her voice, inflection.

“I don’t linger on balconies for very long. For my sanity and safety I look and appreciate the beauty of city lights. I do not stay.”

She wagged hooked fingers, sipped from a crystal goblet. “I always thought hands looked more elegant around crystal goblets. My own fingers left elegance behind,

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perhaps decades ago? Samantha laughed. It sounded hollow. Time no longer had meaning or balance.

“When do you suppose this happened?”

“I suppose this happened at a time when I was able to retain the sensation and memory of it into this life I live now.”

“Samantha, do you imagine this could be an episode that you have created because you were uncomfortable at the railings? At such a height? Anyone might feel pressured or uneasy.”

“I can’t know that, can I? I can’t ever truly find that out. Not unless there were enough details to provide evidence.”

“Always the scientist.” The psychiatrist let a bit of a smile curl her mouth.

“Perhaps, which would make you ever the shrink. But some things cannot be proven by science, as evidenced by our current state of banishment.”

“It’s been bantered about that what we do is no longer science but alchemy and treachery. Eh, no matter.” The psychiatrist shrugged. “Tell me about another such event.”

Samantha filled her lungs, expanded with a deep breath, a welcome savior. “I close my eyes and see above me the surface of water.” So Samantha said, so Samantha did, closed her eyes and looked skyward.

“The water is clear at the surface, murky deeper down where I am. Particles float by me (she waved her hand as if in water) and I can see them as clearly as I see the sun penetrate the upper few feet of water. I am alert. I can smell the brine smell of all things aquatic. Funny, did you know that you can actually smell under water? The pungent fishy smell, salty and earthy in its age and depth, it penetrates the brain somehow. Even

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though inhaling the smell, the water, is deadly, the brain registers the overall aroma without inhalation. It's a strange and mysterious condition, this . . . memory. Sound is muffled, my head is filled with the deafness that comes from a filling up."

"A filling up?"

"Yes. Filled with water. Ears, mouth, throat. A Filling up."

The psychiatrist nodded. "Tell me more."

"I can see. My eyes are open. The water is blue near the surface, turquoise at about ten feet down, where I am. Then navy just below me. Below that, blackness goes on forever beneath me. There is sunlight above, life up there where I can't reach. Below me is death, where I am headed. A person calls and I know they call to me."

"But you can't really know that, can you?"

"I know that to be the case. I can hear the voice, the echo of spoken words through water. Just like smell? I can hear. I can hear the water, bubbles, the heavy living of voices above.

"And the death?"

"I drowned there in that water. My lungs filled and I sank lower and lower, all the time aware that the drowning was happening, that there was nothing I could do but make the memory of it indelible. I knew I was sinking, my brain knew I was dying. I saw the sinking, my feet below me. I burst into death, slipped away into a cold sleep. My brain disguised the pain and cold with a fascination of the world of the water, very clever of it, I think. However, and here's the truly gruesome part; my brain could not disguise the very cognizance of letting go of my life. I cannot express to you enough how thoroughly

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horrifying that is, to *know* and not have any way to deter or reverse that course.”

Samantha tapped her forehead two, three, four times.

The psychiatrist nodded understanding. Compassionate, conspiratorial. “Do you feel it’s possible that this memory was an experience that took place when you merely swam? Could you have been swimming? Could the memory be only a part of a whole, just a bad memory of a time when you were a child perhaps but certainly of this life?”

“Of course. Something happened before and something happened after. However, something held me down there and I gave up the ghost, Doc. It was not of this life no matter what you contend. That memory is real.”

“How can you be so sure? How can you?”

Samantha’s voice rose urgently. Her eyes betrayed her normally stoic nature. “I was poked by an oar or pole. Poking me in the ribs along my side.” Samantha looked into the distance, into the water. “Tied. My hands weren’t free to reach up above me, to push the pole away or grab it to pull me up, up. I was unable to try to live by climbing out. I couldn’t see my hands, just the sun on the water and the pole and the sound of my name being called. I couldn’t understand the words but I understood the inflection. It was my name that he said. Not unlike in a dream when you know you’re a participant even as you participate. But the death, oh, the death itself was the monumental task at the time, wasn’t it?”

“Was it, Samantha? Was it? Wasn’t it trying to live that should have been the monumental task?”

“Too late for that and I knew it. The moment when oxygen exploded from my lungs was the moment I knew, my brain, my heart, my soul knew, my life was over. And

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I did so distinctly know it, was conscious of the most dire certainty of it. I expired there. My life was yanked from me, along with the air in my lungs that was wasted in the water. The water didn't need my air, I did, but the water took it and kept it. I knew it was the thief that would rob me of my existence. I saw my breath in bubbles, feeding the water instead of my lungs. That death was my freedom and my prison." She sighed, heavy weight of resignation, shook her head. Her shoulders slumped.

They sipped their drinks as life around them swirled in tandem.

"What does this help, to know these deaths?"

"It helps to know that this life will not be the only life I live."

"I see. Is there another death that you'd like to tell me about?"

"Yes."

"Which one would that be?"

"The death I am living now." There was an olive at the bottom of her glass.

Samantha stabbed at it, mercilessly, jabbed, stabbed. Victorious, she pulled it up and up out of the drink and gobbled it.

"That's a contradiction, Samantha."

"Not from my side of the barstool, Doc."

"Okay. So how is it that you died now but are here to tell me about living it? Does that mean you are dying a slow death instead of a sudden or violent death?"

"Not quite or exactly and isn't that the irony of our predicament? I left the life I was living. I'll tell you about it if you like. Yeah, sure. You want to know about that? Now they tell me I have little or no memory of this life I gave up so recently. They say that visitors will look like strangers and that strangers will look familiar. Like dreams. It

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all comes from having been dead, you know. Dead.” She shook her head. “Too deeply asleep to wake up and too awake to blame slumber as the culprit. I’m stuck not knowing who I am, Doc, let alone who I was. You want to know about my life? I say to you, which one? This one? Okay, yeah, sure, I’ll tell you about it.”

The psychiatrist nodded, looked right into Samantha’s eyes, eyes that saw too much, that knew too much of this world and the next. She patted Samantha’s wilted hand. “Good. Okay then. Good. Okay.”

The manager approached. “Your table is available now.” He reached for their glasses and carried them, along with menus that clung under his arm. He turned and walked, looked back over his shoulder to be sure they followed.

The psychiatrist rose and looked at Samantha. “Hold that thought,” she said to Samantha.”

Samantha could tell that the psychiatrist didn’t believe her, it was in the eyes. Even if she knew Samantha’s story, her history and why she was banished to an eternity on the island, Samantha knew that she didn’t believe. How could she? She didn’t have Elixonal Twenty-one rolling around in her veins.

Did her arrogance never cease its punishment? Would it ever? Samantha walked to the table, following the psychiatrist and the host, thinking that perhaps the slumber of a thousand and one deaths might be preferable to the memory of any one of them.

They walked into a satellite room off the main hall. Strings and flutes played a fluid Asian tune. Waiters wore bright colors, making them resemble Toucans. The aromas of teriyaki and tempura surrounded Samantha, now Sara, who had died a thousand deaths, and the psychiatrist who believed in none of them.