

ONE

*Sevilla Institute for the Mentally Ill
Sevilla, Spain*

THE PASSAGE FROM FREEDOM to incarceration is never an easy one. The passage from an unacknowledged, untested sanity to a diagnosed insanity is equally problematic. The first time Nurse Consuela Emma Lopez entered his world, it was with nervousness – with the trepidation of a sparrow pecking the ground a few metres in front of a perfectly motionless cat. He was immobile on a bed in the admitting area, restrained and drugged. He'd arrived at the institute kicking and screaming.

Consuela heard the shouting, wondered who it was and what it was that had him so upset. She could have written this off as just another ugly and loud admittance in a long string of ugly and loud admittances. But the sound of someone in pain or distress always gets through to her heart. The sound of this man's voice caused her to pause, to look up from her work and ache a little. The timbre of this particular voice vibrated in her. She cared, immediately. This is not something she likes about herself. Not that there's anything wrong with caring. It's a good quality for a nurse. It's just that she wishes she were tougher, more thick-skinned.

Consuela almost tiptoes into the room – silently but not so timidly as to suggest she is uncomfortable in the admitting room. The lights have been dimmed and a curtain drawn around his bed. They’ve drugged him, she thinks, and they’re waiting for the drugs to kick in. She peeks through a slit in the curtain. It’s difficult to say how old he is but she would guess thirty-five, maybe thirty-eight, despite the greying-verging-on-white hair. He has a kind, narrow face but he’s obviously been through something, some sort of trying experience, an ordeal of some kind. There are bags under his eyes, and there are scratches – some deeper than others – across his forehead. His jaw has been bandaged.

Consuela finds his chart hanging on the far wall. She flips it open and finds an exercise in ambiguity. Scant details about where he was found. The words “Strait of Gibraltar” and “Palos.” No name. A notation on the sedative he’d been given – a hefty dose of Rohypnol. And a number.

Nurses talk. They tell stories at coffee. Two hours earlier a black van had arrived and out had climbed three members of the National Police Force with the new patient wedged between them. They delivered him, wrapped tightly in a strait-jacket, to the admitting area. His clothes were bloodstained, his shirt ripped. Despite the restraints, he was wild. He’d broken the nose of one of the policemen with a lurching head butt to the face. They’d said something about his name being Bolivar and that he’d been found in the Strait of Gibraltar. “In the strait?” a nurse asked. “Surely you mean near the strait?” The policeman had looked at her with dehumanizing, flat disdain, signed the papers that were thrust toward him, dropped the

pen on the counter, and departed quickly. It seemed that the transport and handoff of this patient had been a trying experience for these men. They were glad to be rid of him. Consuela saw them as they were leaving and remembers thinking they were very serious, severe – if they’d had clowns in both pockets of their trousers, they wouldn’t have smiled. They reminded her of her ex. The black, stiff uniforms. Those intensely earnest faces. The type of men that follow orders unquestioningly.

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When Bolivar opens his eyes two days later, he is calm and seems rational. He’s restrained in the bed and there is still one policeman outside in the hallway – just in case. The guard sits straight in a wooden chair to the left of the door. He checks the identification badges of everyone who enters, makes a note on his clipboard. This is Consuela’s fifth time in, and the guard barely looks at her.

“¿Qué día es éste? Por favor.” The new patient stares at Consuela. His voice is demanding, almost commanding. It’s a voice that is perhaps used to giving orders. His head is lifted and he’s trying to see what it is that’s keeping him down in the bed.

“Qué?”

“¿Qué día es éste? What day is it?”

“It is Sunday,” Consuela says.

“Sunday? What date?” He pulls at his wrist restraints, still checking.

“Sunday, the fourth day of April.”

“April? You mean August. Where am I?” He flexes against the ankle restraints.

“Sevilla.”

“How did I get here? What happened to me?”

“You were brought here –” She stops. What exactly can she tell him? She’s not sure.

“I was in Palos. It all went sideways. There were two girls. Are they all right? Everything went horribly wrong . . .” But his voice trails off as if he is slowly finding the answers to his own questions.

“I was in Palos. I remember broken glass. People shouting. The ships were in the harbour.” He stops. He looks at her with such expectant eyes. “And?” he says. “And?”

What did this man want? *And* what? What is he looking for? What was he expecting to hear? Consuela shrugs and looks at him hopefully, looking for help.

“Why am I tied to this bed? I’m perfectly fine. My ships, though. Have they . . . have they sailed?” He’s irritated. Yanks at the wrist ties.

“Ships?” She’s thinking she should probably not say any more. There ought to be doctors here. The psychologists at this asylum are some of the best in the world. In the institution’s lengthy history, they’d had people from all over Europe as patients – even a couple of kings and a few wayward princesses had called this place home for brief periods of time. It had been one of the first asylums in the world to actually attempt to help the mentally ill – to get at the root cause of an illness. When it first opened, so-called treatments in other parts

of Europe were still muddled in the casting out of devils or burning people or drowning them as witches – remarkably final and fatal cures – while the Sevilla Institute was actually caring for the mentally ill. This place, this hospital of innocents, has been a relatively safe haven for many, many years.

“I’ll get a doctor,” Consuela says, turning.

“Wait.”

She stops.

“Get me a phone,” he snaps. “I want to make a call.”

“Pardon?”

“A phone damnit. Look, I am Columbus. Christopher Columbus. I know the queen, the queen and the king. They can vouch for me. I am to lead three ships across the Western Sea. We’ve got a deal, damnit! Just get them on the phone.”

Whoa, she thinks. Consuela can hear the earnest certainty of his voice. He believes what he’s saying. “You want to fall off the edge of the Earth?” Consuela is performing her own little experiment. “You want to die?”

“You don’t believe that. Nobody but a simpleton would believe that old wives’ tale. Try not to underestimate my intelligence and I’ll do the same for you.”

“I’ll let Dr. Fuentes know you’re awake.”

“Yes, let your doctor know that I’m hungry, and I have to piss, and I’m not crazy.”

She shuts the door – the click echoes in the stone hallway. Consuela walks past the admitting desk and around the corner to Dr. Fuentes’s office. She knocks on his door. Waits. Knocks again.

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The door squeaks open, slowly. “Yes. What is it?” He says this with the bearing of someone who has been doing something frustrating and this intrusion is the icing on the annoyance cake. Dr. Fuentes is a tall, clean-shaven man who is a fastidious bureaucrat. He’s just been appointed chief of staff at the institute. Consuela is honestly uncertain about his skills as a doctor.

He holds the door open with one hand and fumbles with his labcoat buttons with the other. The sound of a chair scraping on a tiled floor comes from inside the office.

“Patient 9214 is awake.” Consuela decides she does not want to know who else is in there. Damnit! She hates stuff like this – office politics. Knowing the human contents of Dr. Fuentes’s office would put her in the middle of something. There was no scraping sound, she tells herself. It was nothing. There was no scraping.

“Thank you.” The doctor releases the door but catches it immediately. “Wait. Is he still sedated?” She nods. Fair enough. There was no way to know for sure if this new patient was going to explode again or if he was done.

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Consuela wakes up at her usual time, thinking about this patient who wanted her to call a king and queen who’ve been dead for nearly five hundred years, on a telephone. She’s intrigued. Regardless of his ranting, she liked the colour of his voice. It sounded like burnt sienna, and at the bottom, the colour and texture of fine sand.

She does not work today, and so she grinds the coffee beans, boils water, and makes a leisurely French press. She pushes the kitchen window open and is immediately aware of the difference in the quality of air. It never really cooled off overnight. The air conditioning in her flat is now at cross-purposes with this open window. The warm, dry air pushes up against the cool, forced air of her apartment.

She's been moving around her apartment, waiting for sunrise on the Guadalquivir. This riverside flat has been her home for six years and sunrise is one of the benefits. She loves her mornings with the fine, dusty orange colour inching its way up her walls. This apartment came with a wall of bookshelves in the living room, which Consuela had no problem filling.

She added two more stand-alone shelves in her bedroom. She pauses this morning in front of a row of her to-read books – books she's bought because of a review, a mention in another book, or a recommendation, or because the cover spoke to her. She pauses at Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. She runs her finger down the spine of *Ridley Walker*. She tilts a book called *Tropisms and the Age of Suspicion* by Nathalie Sarraute as if to slide it off the shelf – this was a recent addition, found in a bookstore in Madrid, bottom of a pile, hideously ugly cover but there was something about the title. She eventually picks Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. But decides mornings are not for starting novels. She takes the Bulgakov into her bedroom and places it on the bedside table.

In the kitchen, she opens the newspaper and immediately wants a cigarette. The coffee, the newspaper, and the time spark a memory of smoking. Four years of not smoking and

still the cravings come. Less frequently now, but still. Consuela performs a mental checklist of the places where she's stashed cigarettes in the past. Ridiculous because her stashes have long since been pillaged or abandoned. She knows, positively, there are no secret stashes of cigarettes in her flat. But she remembers where they used to be.

The sparrows are playing in the orange trees and palms along the river. Flirting with the dark river, thrilled at the prospect of light, as if they have the most ridiculously brief memories and sunrise is always an excited surprise. Do birds remember days? There are no clouds in this pink-tinged, predawn sky. It will likely be another blistering hot day.

It seems the front section of her newspaper is always about bombings and killings and scandals. The ramifications of bombings and killings. Accusation of scandals, and the fear of more actual bombings.

Consuela flips to the entertainment section where there are movies, some stupidly violent and even one about bombings – this makes her smile a bit – but for the most part, the news here is pleasant. In fact, it's not really news at all.

Consuela pushes the French-press plunger and pours herself a mug of coffee. She looks across the river, across the city, and wonders what it was like five hundred years ago, before the New World was discovered by Europeans, before Columbus sailed out of Palos. Why would this new patient go *there*? Why Columbus? Why not Genghis Khan or one of the Roman emperors, or, keeping with Spain, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, or Ferdinand of Aragon? Christopher Columbus doesn't seem like much fun. Obsessed with the prospect of discovery.

Desperate for people to believe him. Pigheaded to the point of ignoring all those absolutely correct scholars who repeatedly told him that China was too far – that he'd never make it. Not fun.

She takes a big gulp of coffee. Ah, we don't pick our delusions, she thinks.

Consuela can't tell if she actually knows about Columbus, or if she's simply half recalling the Hollywood renditions of Columbus from the movies about him.

"God, I could use a cigarette," she says to the sun as it pushes its way onto the river, into the sky, and splashes yellow into her eyes.

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Consuela wasn't at that first meeting, but she could see the change in her patient. Columbus had gone from lucid and slightly outlandish to frenzied and implausible – from conversational to incoherent. Must have been a hell of a session. Afterward, it seems he truly went mad inside a steady, over-prescribed lineup of sedatives and antipsychotics, some of which were so obscure that Consuela had to look them up. They threw everything and anything at Columbus to keep him quiet, harmless, and unagitated. Columbus refused to wear clothing. At most, when in the hallways and gardens and courtyards, he wore a robe. He just didn't care. In his room, he was naked, always. He spent days and weeks as a drooling idiot in a corner of his room, slumped over and muttering to himself. He would stare at the stone wall, rock back and forth,

and mutter, “Ships to sea. Ships to sea. This is me. This is me. Ships to *sea! Me! Me! ME!*” This became his mantra – this, and his constant inquiries as to what day it was. The passage of time was important to Columbus. He was diligent about it – obsessive. Even when he was hazy from some new adjustment to his meds, he found a way to know what day it was and how long he’d been at the institute.

The orderlies dreaded going into this cell. *Room*. They dreaded going into this room. Dr. Fuentes insists his staff call the cells rooms. They’re far more like cells than rooms, but the doctor is the boss. Patient 9214 was crafty and fast. Further, he hadn’t weakened. At least, not physically. When they had to get in to clean or check on Columbus, Consuela would dope him up on as much Diazepam as she could safely administer. Even then, while slower, he was still dangerous. He was always good for one crazy lunge or kick. There were times, in the weeks following his arrival, when Consuela had to swallow fear as she looked at him; she had to will herself to be calm, to breathe with long, even inhalations. She remembers being scared silly.

Up until a few weeks ago, Consuela did not go into his room unless she was with an orderly. Those first few days, when he was restrained, she was fine being alone in the room. But after the restraints came off, he was unpredictably violent, as well as incoherent, with occasional bouts of lucidity and a lot of gibberish. Even now he still strikes out with a righteous violence, and his resolve to escape is emphatic. Columbus wants to go to sea. This is clear from his babble. Apparently something horrible will happen out there. Something only he

can stop. There are days when Consuela wonders if she should just tell him how the real Christopher Columbus has already made the journey to the New World – that it’s all been discovered. And it wasn’t exactly India or Japan. It was more a dangerous wasteland filled with risk – not exactly profitable. Not much gold. Some interesting birds. A lot of land for the taking. The real Christopher Columbus has been to the New World and returned. But she thinks that telling this story would be mean. This man does no harm by believing himself to be Christopher Columbus.

For the remainder of April and all of May, Columbus is a testing ground for antipsychotic drug regimens. Near the end of May, Dr. Fuentes announces his engagement to the nurse who was very likely in his office that April day. Sergio, one of the better orderlies, dies in a climbing accident in the mountains at the beginning of June. And Consuela carries on as usual. She continues to date but finds most men uninteresting after a few hours of telling lies over dinner. Once the thin veneer of genuinely interesting wears off, Consuela escapes into drinking too much wine, which eventually leads to her saying something true – usually brutal and true. And, confronted by blunt truth, most men run screaming from the room. Second dates for Consuela are rare.

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June 25 is Consuela’s birthday. When she arrives at work, she looks through the barred hatch at the man who has only a number in her world, though he does have a name for himself.

Officially she refers to this man as patient 9214. Unofficially he is, of course, Christopher Columbus.

Consuela stops in front of the door to patient 855's room in D wing. Inside is the pope – at least, a patient who thinks she's the pope. Rather optimistic to think there could actually be a female pope in the first place, and of course, she is not the pope.

Regardless of the odds against there ever being a female pope, Consuela likes this one. Pope Cecelia the First. There is a regal gentleness about her. Consuela likes chatting with her, is always blessed by her, and certainly does not mind kissing her ring every time she enters or leaves the room. She's not sure if this is what happens with the real pope. Do people kiss his ring? Is kissing somebody's ring the highest form of respect?

Consuela opens the door. "Good morning, Your Holiness."

"Oh, good morning, dear. Bless you. Bless you."

The pope is wearing two housecoats and an ornate purple smoking jacket. She smiles her gap-toothed smile at Consuela. Ashen skin, sandy grey hair. She stretches out her hand and Consuela recognizes her cue.

She takes her leave of the pope and checks again on Columbus.

He's sleeping soundly. The light in the room is faint but she can see a few strands of grey hair across his pillow. Consuela pushes the viewing portal door shut and turns around. She shakes her head, partly with pity and partly with admiration at his dogged, undaunted determination. In his almost lucid moments, he has never wavered from his story.

WAITING FOR COLUMBUS || 17

He is Christopher Columbus, and his mission in life is to venture out onto the Western Sea, straight across the dark ocean, until he finds a route to the East Indies and China. He is going to find a new way to acquire the much-needed spices from the East. Even inside his drug-induced state, his babbling confirms this obsession.