

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

One morning in early spring, my father comes into the kitchen while I'm slurping morosely at a mug of twig tea, which is as delicious as it sounds. "The alternative health expo is at the Clarion Hotel this weekend," he says. "Do you want to go?"

"Yeah, OK," I say, gulping down the muddy dregs in my cup. "Janet said I should try meditating with rose quartz to awaken my heart chakra. I bet I can buy some there."

It turns out my parents were quite the hippies back in the day, and since I've decided to seek an alternate route to sanity, they've made appointments for me to see a Chinese herbalist (hence the tea), an acupuncturist, and a naturopathic physician. A couple weeks ago I went to a LuMarian mother goddess healing in which I was informed that I was a serial killer in a prior incarnation—of prostitutes, no less, how unoriginal—and that traces of this violent karma cling to me through my latest rebirth (hence the rose quartz). Maybe she says that to everyone, but I'm not sure I'd be surprised if it were true. I have no disbelief left to suspend in the realm of the spiritual and the sublime, and it seems as reasonable an explanation as any.

"How would you like to see a Peruvian shaman while you're there?" my father continues.

"Um, I guess so." The truth is that I have no idea whether all this chakra clearing and weird tea is doing anything for me. I can't tell if my damp heat is improving or my spleen meridian is circulating more chi. Of course I thought I'd be special, that I'd sense these things, but I don't and it makes me wonder if we're all just drifting in isolated spheres of delusion, that we only intersect in places where particles can be measured and observed.

"He's very good," says my father, "I had a session with him to clear some negative energy as the result of a curse I may have acquired after falling out with a Santeria voodoo priest, back in college."

This is the first I've heard about my father being involved in the occult, but it doesn't really surprise me. I'm not sure anything could, now.

"Why did you fall out with the voodoo priest?" I ask.

"He wanted me to study with him and be his acolyte, but I had realized by then that he was manipulative and evil."

"Are there voodoo priests who aren't?"

"Well, perhaps, but I was young, and dark forces can be very seductive." His words are laced with a certain significance. He's not spoken of his demon again since that night, but I think there is an understanding between us. If there's a genetic predisposition to my peculiar sickness, I have surely acquired it from him.

The alternative health expo does little to assuage my mood of bleak skepticism, however. The rooms are full of vibrational healers, neuro-linguistic programmers, maybe some neurolinguistic deprogrammers, crystal workers, and reincarnated Egyptian priests. The only thing more diverse than the healers are the people who have come to see them: college students seeking drug-free enlightenment, people dying of cancer or inexplicably cured of it, people desperately struggling to find their explanation when the gleaming cold idol of science has rung hollow for them. I let myself be swept up in the crowd, jostled past a magpie's hoard of protective amulets and Mother Goddess statues, bins of Chinese herbs and books that promise to help me align my chakras and Find the Goddess Within Me.

All around me, vendors call out to hawk their wares. A lecturer is giving a presentation on ear candling in a curtained-off corner, and someone else is making sample cups of carrot-mangosteen juice with a 1,200-dollar juicing machine. I can get a photo of my aura taken, or for the same price buy what appear to be pieces of glycerin soap embedded with copper wire and bits of shiny foil. A woman draped in gauzy fabric tells me they will saturate my auric field with beneficial orgone energy, but they need to be recharged in the light of each full moon.

I've heard more coherent worldviews expressed in an actual mental hospital, and the Babel of voices surrounding me has the ring of a hundred false prophets crammed into a room that, next weekend, will be full of computer geeks or sadomasochists or aestheticians. I leave for my shamanic healing an hour later with a rose quartz pyramid, a sample cup of carrot-mangosteen juice, and three books that promise to tell me

what this all means, each filtered through their strange, implausible, and yet not perfectly improbable lenses.

Nightfall finds me standing in the scrubby woods behind the home of a local naturopathic doctor, a friend of my father's who invited us to perform the ceremony at his house, since conflagrations and excessive chanting are looked down upon by the hotel staff. Trees surround us, but I can feel civilization encroaching from all directions. A siren wails in the distance, and the air is suffused with a stomach-churning mixture of hot dogs and gasoline.

The shaman has built a fire ringed with stones on a bare patch of ground. His face is a map of intersecting lines, like an aerial view of a lakebed. He is wearing blue Adidas jogging pants and a woven poncho that smells of smoke and some kind of animal. Marco, his apprentice, translates as the shaman begins to speak in a dying Quechuan dialect.

"The soul is not always like a piece of opal or jade, a solid thing that can be given or taken at will," he says. "Sometimes, it is like a handful of sugar that is poured little by little into the cup of another until there is nothing left but the crystals that cling to the cracks in our hands. Tonight, we will perform a *despacho*, a ritual to call the soul home."

Next to the fire is a paper grocery bag containing an odd assortment of objects: a bouquet of carnations, bottles of perfumed water, dried beans, a container of candy sprinkles, and some plastic toys. Marco pours a pile of coca leaves onto a cloth near the fire and sets a ball of waxy llama fat beside it. As he works, he tells me that the pattern of the llama-wool *mesa* cloth is woven to represent the intersection of sky and forest and river and earth, of all things coming together. He says the llama is a sacred animal in Peru, that it provides food, transportation, and clothing. No family is wealthy without a llama. He gestures for me to sit on a fallen log, and demonstrates how to glue three coca leaves together like a fan with a glob of llama fat.

"Breathe into the leaves," he says. "Everything that does not need to be a part of you. Give it back to the earth."

As I exhale against the leaves, it feels like some spiny exoskeleton is lodged in my esophagus. With every breath that escapes me, I see some sharp fragment in my mind. Blue sky above me and a shadow blocking

out the sun, minnows pecking black specks of decay from my feet. Zoë collapsed beside the toilet, pale as a deep sea fish with glittering spines of *With Teeth*. Blue sky above me and a knife in my hands. And words and words and words, half-formed fetal specimens in jars of murky cerebrospinal fluid, nurtured inside me until they are born. I try to breathe them into the earth, but choke.

I look down and there is a heap of coca-and-llama-fat flowers on the *mesa*. I make a motion to indicate that's all I have to give. The shaman takes the container of rainbow sprinkles and scatters some over the leaves.

"An offering to Pachamama," says Marco. "She likes sweet things."

The shaman adds a handful dried beans and tiny plastic zoo animals to the pile, then pours a cross of red sand over them. He folds the cloth with ritually precise geometry that I can't keep track of, and Marco motions me to stand. As I get unsteadily to my feet, the shaman puts a bouquet of multicolored carnations in my hands. He sets the *mesa* on top of my head. The bundle is heavier than I expected, as though it were filled with something denser than leaves and candy.

The shaman begins to chant, ancient words that raise the hairs on my arms, although I do not understand them. Marco shakes a pair of gourd rattles and whistles a lilting melody. I close my eyes and try to imagine the altitude shifting, the scrawny trees giving way to jagged mountain peaks and condors wheeling in a frozen sky. I open them with a gasp as a cold spray blows across my face. The *mesa* nearly tumbles to the ground, but I steady it with my hand. The shaman tips a bottle of flower essence into his mouth, then spews another fine mist across my face. He takes the bouquet of carnations from my hands and sweeps it across my body, petals sticking to my skin.

I stand obediently motionless and stubbornly self-aware, wanting to lose myself to the ritual but unable to stop wondering exactly what it's going to accomplish. This tradition isn't even my birthright—can people be healed by ceremonies so alien to their native culture? If Pachamama were here, why would she condescend to cure a failed Christian of blue-eyed fascist heritage whose own patron saints have maintained a lofty distance, content to let things play out as they will?

The chanting goes on, and the rattle of the gourds seems to vibrate in every cell of my body. I am liberally coated with flower water and carnation petals . . . it feels as if dozens of butterflies have lit on my

bare arms. Eventually, everything stops and I open my eyes. The fire has gone out and there are flowers scattered on the ground, gleaming in the dull bluish void surrounding us.

“That is all,” says Marco in the deceptively simple way of mountain shamans.

That is all. My head rings in the silence.

“Before you leave, is there anything you would like to know?”

I look at the men in front of me, poncho-clad silhouettes with glittering eyes. They are medicine men, not philosophers. But somehow I feel they are expecting the question.

“Do you . . .” I try to phrase my words simply. “Do you believe that our selves continue to exist when our bodies decay, or that they’re contingent—that they’re only illusions that die with us?”

Marco translates for the shaman, then turns back to me.

“Whatever part of you stands here asking if it is real, is real. Every other part of you, not so much.”

The smoke that lingers from the fire shimmers around the shaman’s head, and he watches me inscrutably with a face of petrified wood.

“Can you see auras?” I ask suddenly. “Like fields of colored light surrounding people’s bodies?”

“Yes, these are visible to us.”

“What color am I?” I ask, and cringe at how childish the question sounds.

Marco smiles and speaks without consulting the shaman. “When people come to us, we tell them they have rainbow auras. They like that. Rainbows are very popular in America.”

“I see.”

“And you, you have a rainbow aura. You shine all colors. Red with passion, orange with courage, yellow with optimism, green with generosity, indigo with creativity, and violet with insight.”

“Oh.”

The shaman says something, and Marco looks at me with interest. “Don Martín says your energy body is full of light and shadow, that you stand between this world and Uku Pacha, beneath. Spirits speak to you, they attach themselves and drain your luminous body, your *runa k’urku k’anchay*.”

“How do I make them stop?”

“Oh, you can’t do that. But maybe if their stories are told they will

not play such cruel games with you.” Marco pauses to let the shaman speak again. “Don Martín says you would excel in a profession of exposing that which is hidden: a writer or a social worker or a detective, perhaps. You could even be a shaman. He also says you eat too many heat-forming foods, and that you should drink garbanzo bean water.”

“*Garbanzo* bean water?”

“Yes, for your digestion,” says Marco. It seems there is a glint of amusement in his eyes, although it’s hard to tell. “Before you go, do you have any more questions?”

I don’t even know where to begin, and my mind still seems to be stuck on the garbanzo beans. Aren’t those chickpeas? What does chickpea water have to do with any of this?

“These demons, these spirits,” I finally ask, “are they just out there in the world, waiting for souls to possess, or are they born inside us?”

Marco gazes beyond me for a moment, and I wonder if he did not understand the question. But eventually he says, “The distinction between these, that is not real.”

So much for Peruvian shamans not being philosophers. I feel something tingling in my hand and look down to see a small brown spider scurrying across my palm. The clouds shift above and the forest brightens from shadow to silver. Everything is beautiful and symbolic under the ancient sky: the spider, the moment, and moonlight between the trees. Everything is a circle, and the demon is gone. I flick the spider away with my fingernail, send it spinning off into the dark.

“What will you do with the *mesa*?” I ask.

“If we were in Peru, we would let the water carry it away,” says Marco. “But the rivers here are not clean, so we will bury it in the earth. This is a slower release, but everything becomes earth in the end.”

I look around us. The sky glows orange with light pollution and there are fast-food wrappers half buried in the carpet of pine needles.

“Not everything,” I tell him. “We’ve created things that can never be broken down.”

“Yes, we would like to think so,” says Marco with a peculiar half-smile.

The shaman is sweeping the leftover coca leaves into a sandwich bag, wrapping the blob of llama fat in tin foil. I give Marco the money for the ritual and his smile broadens. “Other people, they come to us because they are afraid of ghosts and curses,” he says. “We are only afraid of the bills coming in at the end of the month.”

He holds out the disheveled remnants of the carnations. “Tonight you should take a bath with these flowers in the water.” He rummages in the paper bag and hands me what looks like a cough syrup bottle filled with clear liquid. “Blessed water,” he says. “Drink it up and add more, a little bit at a time. What is added will become blessed too.”

I thank him and crunch awkwardly away through the woods. I have long since lost the skill of walking in forests at night without a sound.

“One more thing,” Marco calls, and I turn back quickly.

“Yes?”

“Do not forget to drink your garbanzo bean water. It is very important.” His eyes are full of mirth again. Maybe he is telling me that I’m trying to understand too much, that I should put more faith in ritual. But that isn’t how my generation sees the world. Nonetheless, I run a bath when I get home and scatter the red, white, and yellow petals on the surface of the water. It’s like a combination of a funeral and a baptism with my body trapped in its prime between. Already it’s returned to a state of sleek homeostasis after a year of bloating drugs. How naturally it would mate, reproduce, and slowly wither like any fruit of the vine if left to its own devices. It’s only when we know ourselves that things begin to fall apart, when ghosts form in the electrical storm of our machinery and build palace upon concrete palace to prove their mastery over all things. Despite its lonely outcome, sometimes this cold reductionism seems the most poetic explanation of all, and it’s not so philosophically problematic if things go wrong, if an extra *I* is formed or the self is entirely lost—it was only accidental to begin with.

I drain my bath and disperse the sodden flowers in the moonlit yard as I’ve been instructed. I drink my blessed water and add garbanzo beans to the shopping list. Then I go to my room and rummage through the chaos of my desk until I find a pen and a legal pad. My arm is crisscrossed with pale lines of scar tissue, and the irony is far from lost on me as I touch pen to page to forever mark it in my image. What conceit, all the things we do to paper and words, just because their alloy is slightly more eternal than ourselves. It would be so easy and probably better to stay silent. To write of this will surely make me more real than I am, and necessarily him as well. It’s an indefensible risk to be sure. And yet the paper fills with words, the demon has a voice again, and the world, so serenely devoid just moments before, shatters into meaning.