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Mamita · *Geoffrey Martino*

IT WAS SAID THAT ANIMALS came from great distances to be eaten at the house of doña Anita. In truth no animal had been seen coming from farther away than the river — no more than a day's walk for a young man, maybe a little more for a burro or a horse, considerably more for any of the country's numerous rodents.

But rumors were plentiful. One story claimed that a crippled little burro with a red felt collar with a bell had first been seen on a road in a baranca near the capital — and at night at that! If so the crippled little animal had made a three, maybe four, day journey to the house of the fat widow. This story, however, had come to light only after a truck driver had seen the red collar with bell hanging in the patio of doña Anita where she had hung it after finding it on the floor. Red felt collars were unusual, but the story carried little weight because doña Anita couldn't understand how such a rich collar could find itself lying outside her kitchen door. She imagined that some boys had thrown it over the wall and that the bell, banged against the concrete, had not awakened her. She slept very, very soundly, and, as she was very old, she slept much of the time. She had just gotten up from a sleep of three days and was on her way to the toilet when she crushed underfoot the brass ball that was the bell. Only on her way back to bed did she stop to inspect what it was that had collapsed like a jeweler's box against the flesh of her sole. She had not seen a rat for some time.

Of course, stories of strangely guided animals could have been nothing more than rumor told by the local boys, the ones favored by the Mamita, as she was affectionately called, to bring her her supplies — her cloth, her soaps and cremes. It was only natural, in that time of disappearing people, that stories of animals in similar transition should churn in the cycle of full-course rumor and liberally proportioned lies. The boys liked to joke that the big little mama had to eat her meals quickly and wholly as they would not last long in the heat.

In fairness to those favored but gossiping boys, it should be said that it was their dogs who started the rumors. Those worried-thin, blade-chested creatures would enter the street of doña Anita's house only if her door were closed and her window vacant. On the far side of the street beneath an adobe wall they would slip through heat and weeds and trash, running

in streamlined fur, propelled on muscles compressed and expectant. Any movement at the house—a sudden in-swing of the door—and their tautness would explode into sprint. Those frightened creatures would stop only at a distant safe corner and whisper their despair to the dry air in the fast-chattering style of pop-eyed maniacs.

They started it then, the dogs, but they did not develop the quirks and tics so characteristic of the animals of the area until one of the joking boys, one of the many grandsons of the Mamita, made the error of telling the dogs that doña Anita had no refrigerator. The boys told the dogs that the big doña, the woman who could eat whole wedding tables of food, that the woman who could devour an entire half of a pig before a team of men could seat themselves before the other half, that this woman could not stand to see anything go bad. It was then that the dogs took to crying in the streets, whining, spitting, shrieking.

The very threat of disappearing, as the rumor of disappearing came to be seen, brought out a need to commiserate with others. When needing to share their concerns, the dogs took their whispers to the mute cats, the normally free-wheeling pigs, and the clear-chanting roosters. All listened; something was at stake. Dogs are bright fellows who would not share a valuable thing easily. The animals were more than courteous in listening and watched in dismay as the brightest of dogs went off to chatter hopelessly in nervous horror in the light of street lamps and sometimes the moon. At times the animals gathered as if to take common action, but in their agitation their fortitude would not gel as if the heat were responsible for what was melting away. Every trace of solidity gone, the dogs would laugh through maniacal smiles as they made their ways to the darkly open door of the fat widow. Those poor dogs, thinking they had entered sleep, only deep sleep, would deeper go with fluttering eyelids and paws pawing the dark air until in deepest dream their paws would lightly find the cool night floor to take them to the doña's door. Their eyelids at last open, the dogs saw everything in the total darkness of the room where rumors ended.

Dogs aged fast, almost as fast as peripatetic cats, and were soon gone only to be replaced by newer ones. It was useless to resist a process; in the dry, hot season perishables never kept themselves long and had to be consumed readily.

As disappearing was not a particularly difficult thing to accomplish, it took a while for the disappearing of dogs and cats and rats and little burros

to be noticed. But it took no time for vanished children to be missed, so noisy were they when present. It was similar and different with the men who belonged to community groups and political parties and cantina corners—young men with something to share and something to be quiet about. They were usually much quieter than children, but they could not always be quiet enough. When gone they were unnecessarily quiet—such was the subtle line between vocal and silent, between problem and solution. They too were missed.

But their children? There was no need to disappear children. The town elders, little more than youths that they were, talked this over with the town eldest, the old Mamita, whose husband, the don, had been for years the mayor of the town. He had been a very political man and for a time had been secretary to the governor before that man was shot with bullets.

The doña listened contentedly to the pleas of the concerned men but could not tell them much. They had known as much beforehand, but it was somewhat soothing to share their problems with sympathetic ears. Besides, some of these men had earlier been pallbearers for the old don, the great man of the town. It was good courtesy to seek out his as-great wife when problems presented themselves.

On the death of the town's great man, Mamita had opened the house to the public the man had served so long. It was the first time anyone but family and close friends had been allowed to enter the inner sanctum. The public found the yard an appropriate landscape for a funeral. For, other than the widow and her guests, no living thing could be found at the house of the deceased don and his perpetuating wife. Not a creature breathed—not an ant, not a roach, not a leaf. If the soil were to be dug, imagined the more agriculturally minded guests, not a worm would turn. So grim was the yard that it was as free of all signs of struggle as the first desert. And not a more perfect line could be drawn between the living and the absent than the line that extended from the top of the boundary walls upward through the mango and marañon trees that overhung from the neighbours' yards. From every trespassing branch had been stripped leaves, fruit, covering so that only stone-gray wood remained, while on the far side of the wall the plant blushed green as if embarrassed with living.

In the middle of the patio, barely within reach of the naked fingers of those half promising and wholly awful trees, sat the great don's casket. It was free of flowers—they had somehow vanished—so that it sat starkly

shining in its varnish beneath a circular fluorescent kitchen fixture that had been donated and specially erected by the owner of the largest hardware store.

Doña Anita cried like a faucet, though less kind observers would have thought her laughing so strained were her grieving features. Beside the casket, she sat on three chairs in a semicircle and sobbed so much that every now and again she had to throw her thigh-sized arm onto the pine box to enable her to pull air into her body. The fluorescent light showed the great sphere of her face with her lips tightly drawn up like an inked design on an inflated balloon, so free of wrinkles was her abundant face. The present mayor of the town, who, during the reign of the doña's husband, had spent long years in the capital of a foreign country and knew that city's museums, thought that the giant Mamita looked like a grotesque terra-cotta god defecating.

The pallbearers were big men, chosen because the don in life had been a big man and in death would be equally as big. Great men are forever great men. The pallbearers were confused and delighted that their combined strength had made their charge such an easy one; the cemetery was a long walk away. The continued crying of the doña, bawling for what she had enjoyed that was now gone, erased what thoughts the men had that such a heavy man as was in the box should have weighed something more than nothing. But they were strong men and proud and their heads swam with liquor and wailing.

The funeral was the last time so many had been at the sterile house. Only those making deliveries or old, very old, friends stopped to visit. It could still be dangerous—so it was thought—visiting the house of such a political family, even if the head of intrigue had been buried. Indeed it was dangerous. Four of the doña's best friends, all ancient widows, had been vanished after visits to her house. The political connexions of the families of these women varied. One of the women had been married to a ditch digger, another to a practicing drunk. Then again, who knew what were their real callings—or their wives'? Nor was the family of the Mamita spared. All her sons had been vanished. Everyone agreed it was a blessing that each son had visited his mother a last time before not being seen again.

It did not miss the attention of the neighbours that everyone who had disappeared—all five of Mamita's sons—had gone so in hot summer. The older boys in town—there were some fewer of them now—progressed

from half-baked rumors to telling grim tales of meats that would not keep and of dinners and doors and babies and boys. They told their stories now in the presence of adults who were sure to reprimand them or grab the boys' arms as if the arms controlled the offending tongues. The adults didn't listen as well as the roosters and pigs. They listened as adults do when paying attention to something else, say the television. But . . . they did listen eventually. Sometimes an older dog—there were now fewer of them too—would sit by the boy telling his story and look up with lacrimous eyes. Such a serious and silent ally was sure to gain the confidence of a protesting adult.

In the short run of seasons, boys and dogs could not be taken seriously. Winter and cool rain would always come. Political activity would lessen—who would gather on a corner in a downpour?—and the disappearances would also lessen. So it went for season after season, sadness quicker in summer, cooling in the rains, quickening again in the heat. Summer withered every family. Doña Anita's once great clan had diminished itself, so intense was the unseen retribution on so political a family. Only one grandson remained. He kept close to his enduring wise dog and refused to see his grandmother for whatever reason. He and his dog were a scandal. How could anyone think the worse of the Mamita . . . in winter or summer? The mayor, former exile, thought the question. He also asked it, even if the conversation was on another topic. "How could anyone think to bring shame to the good name of doña Anita . . . especially with ungrounded accusations? Of all people—la Mamita!" The exhilaration of his defense of the wife of his former opponent impressed even members of the late don's party who took it upon themselves to establish a vigil on the street where the Mamita lived to see that no harm came to her. It would be a singular tragedy if the town's most famous citizen were herself disappeared.

The very first night of the vigil, in the early light of morning, the two sentinels posted opposite the Mamita's house were awakened by the yapping of dogs scuffling around a black tree trunk in the road. The tree trunk crept forward, and the men cleared their eyes to see that it crept on bottle-sized legs like those of an alligator, which is exactly what it was. As dogs nipped at its claws, the unlikely visitor slip-slapped the soft dust in reptilian rhythm until, midway along the street, the harassing dogs stopped cold. The alligator turned on them, hissing. The dogs whim-

pered, ignoring the reptile's threat. They were staring at the house of the reclusive doña; her front door had silently swung open. Their senses returned, the dogs ran off. The alligator struggled through the door, and the wide-awake sentinels, thinking how fortunate they were to have such a strong ally, obviously escaped from a travelling bigtop to come to the aid of the doña when she most needed it, left quickly and quietly and decided it would never be necessary to again keep watch on the house of the Mamita. They felt very wise in their decision.

Their decision was a good one. It was good they were not on vigil the night, some weeks later, when a huge upright animal that must have been a monkey found the darkened house. Only a drunk had seen the huge tailless monkey tapping his knuckles on the Mamita's midnight door. The drunk passed the rest of the night on the railroad tracks, crying and grunting like a hamstrung sow. It is one thing to see an alligator in dawn's early light and another to see a man-sized monkey knocking on a door at midnight. After a week of sober storytelling, a week of scorn from townspeople, the drunk too vanished. The joke went around that two monkeys had vanished: one tailless and one with a fantastic tale. Weeks later the mayor received a letter from the monkey with the fantastic tale—no one had known he could write—saying that he had made his way to the city and had joined a church where he was allowed to sing quite a lot.

Everyone at the council meeting had a good laugh as the mayor read the letter. It was the will of God someone said, mentioning the prodigal returning . . . but wait till God hears him sing! An older councilman asked if anyone remembered seeing monkeys at the caves in the sierras. He went on before anyone could say no. Years ago monkeys were plentiful. They were plentiful and they made a lot of noise. They would stay by the somber mouths of the caves and disappear inside to escape the heat. "They were as smart as men," he said. The new councilwoman added, "And women."

The mayor agreed with both and looked out the window. Already the rains were gone. The clearness of the blue sky matched the lushness of vegetation. The coming heat would change the green until the trees on the hills would look like the net of hairs on a man's leg—or a woman's. With his pen the mayor pecked at the blank page of his notebook. "When I went to visit my brother, Meme," he said, "I learned that alligators—there is an abundance of alligators there—alligators eat more and eat more

frequently in the summer than in the winter.” So green were the hills, he found himself again drawn to them; they would soon be brown this side of the year.

Dogs tended to hold back at town hall. Every so often, as one now did, a skinny, worried dog would stand desperately panting in the open doorway. Someone would idly glance over, and the dog would shake its head then wearily sit against the outside wall or walk to the fountain as if it were a destination. They had little experience at council meetings, having only just begun to assist them. Unsure of their role, and somewhat agitated—they had recently lost one of their own—the dogs paced or fumbled in the clean corners of concrete and tile. They were tolerated at the meetings as were drunks tolerated in the street. To be sure, what few dogs remained may as well have been drunk as they were always encountered in a somnambulant rage of hysteria.

A big silence filled the little room. The seven councillors, arranged in a rough semicircle in front of the mayor’s desk, looked everywhere but at each other. The man who had talked about the monkeys’ cave seemed to be looking out from its cool darkness as he spoke to a corner of the ceiling.

“It’s a pity,” he said. No one said anything. Then he said, “Everything must change.”

Without moving his head, he rolled his eyes to the mayor. “It’s a pity summer is here,” he said, his eyes returning to the corner. Everyone continued to say nothing.

His head nodding as he panted, a near-grieving dog came to the door. He was much more haggard than his companions. The man studied the presentiment, the door being directly opposite. The animal pulled his chin up. His ears went back, his face becoming taut as his muzzle stretched forward, his lips forming as if to howl or whisper.

Of course he knew the dog was right. The man found the corner again. “Developments,” he said, “are developing too fast,” which everyone in the room and the dogs within earshot—who now in quorum came to stand in the doorway—took to mean that nothing is being done about what should be done.

Pretending to write something, the mayor drew a quick squiggle that looked like a series of open clams and, with some authority, put down his pen. His chin too went up. “Development is a mother who devours her children.”

One dog sat down. Everyone—dogs included—nodded and looked to someone else to make sure that he, she, or it understood. They all knew that the mayor read a lot and had committed to memory a number of quotations from famous people and monuments. The mayor never told where the quotations came from, preferring to leave the authors unnamed. For the man who told the cave-and-monkey tale, the mayor sounded as if he were quoting one of the monuments in the capital where he had so long been an exile. Years ago that city had been particularly sanguine, full of life and death. The mayor knew every landmark, its true meaning, and how long it was meant to last.

Silence again took hold of the room.

“Look,” said the mayor, “I am as saddened as the rest of you.”

Indeed, the entire town was saddened. The beloved Mamita had lost her last grandson, who had been disappeared with his expostulating dog. The dog seated in the doorway bowed his head to the mayor.

“Look, what’s it going to be?” he asked, thinking of addressing his question to the only woman in the room. “Upright or horizontal?”

He pushed himself up on the armrests of his swivel chair. “Guto García assured me that as of the first of the month prices are going up on all refrigerators—in *two days*.”

A dog pursed its lips. No one seemed to care what model was purchased. And price didn’t matter. They all stared at the same nothingness. Two days was not far off. She would be told in the brightest light of day, of course. Of course. But who was going to knock on the door?