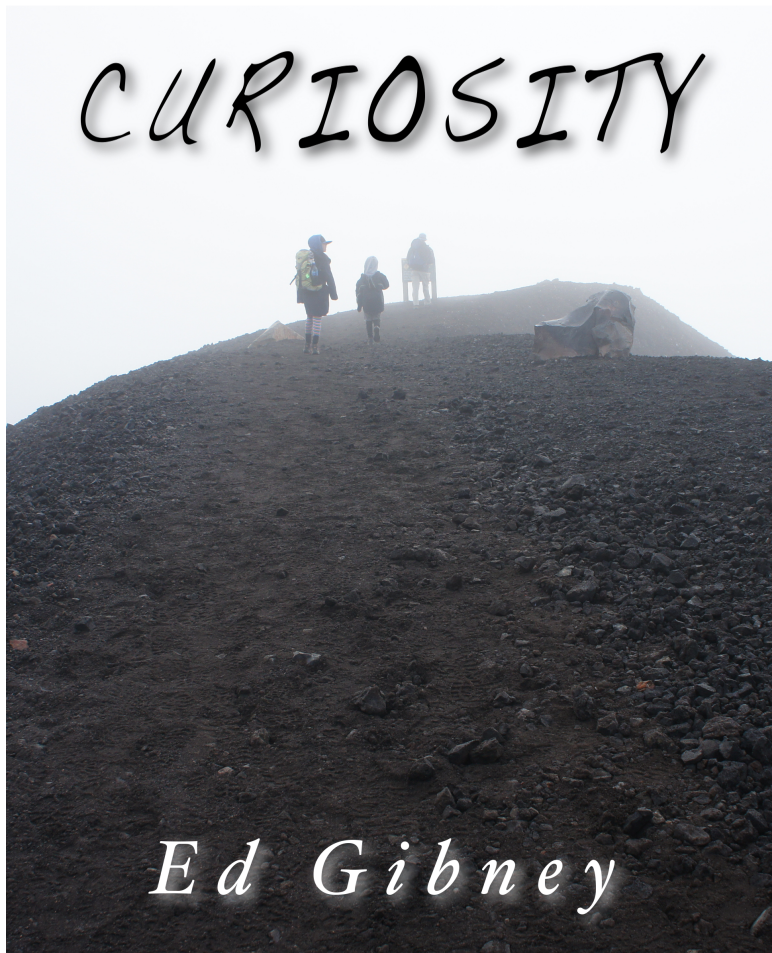


CURIOSITY



Ed Gibney

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by ED GIBNEY



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Curiosity

Interest. Novelty-seeking. Openness to experience. Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering. You are curious about everything. You are always asking questions, and you find all subjects and topics fascinating. You like exploration and discovery.

-- *Character Strengths and Virtues*, Peterson & Seligman, 2004

“Well, did you get it?” Daisy asked her husband as soon as he returned home.

“I’m going to Spain,” Daniel answered, after he had set his car keys down, stood up straight, and looked her directly in the eye with finality.

“Spain?!” she cried. “But you don’t even have a passport. You’ve never had a passport.”

“Well, then I’m going to have to get one. And I’ll need to take some Spanish lessons too. Do you know where I can do that?”

“What are you talking about? What did you find?”

It was late at night, almost 10:30 pm on a Thursday, and Daisy was usually in bed now reading a magazine to help her drift off to sleep while Daniel watched some sports highlights, but Daniel sat down in the living room to tell his wife about the last discovery he had made and the next set of instructions this unearthed. They were straightforward in comparison to the fourth clue, which had proven to be the most difficult one for him to solve yet.

Glimpse the stars standing on a red carpet. A 2.5-foot mirror will help you see ones that have seen 2.5 billion.

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Daniel had received this message from a pharmacist over the weekend and it took him a couple of days to figure out exactly what it was referring to. When his friend Oliver died last month, Daniel mourned the loss of his weekly lunch companion of nearly 20 years. He was grateful that the cancer diagnosis had given them a chance to say goodbye to one another, but Daniel never thought for a moment that he had earned such a prolonged and instigative interaction after Oliver's death by simply and steadfastly keeping his standing lunch date for Tuesdays at 11:45 at Arthur Bryant's Barbecue where Daniel always ordered the "Sliced Pork Sandwich with Fries" while Oliver took turns sampling the entire menu through a series of random impulses that seemed to come to him just upon the moment of his arrival at the legendary Kansas City restaurant. Daniel was quite surprised when he learned that Oliver had left him something in his will, and his perplexity only grew as the "inheritance" continued so far by simply adding to a lengthening trail of strange locations with very little, if any, tangible payoff from the discovery of its path.

"I was right. It was the Powell Observatory. The head astronomer there recognized me as soon as I walked in for his show."

"Did you know him? Have you ever seen him before?" Daisy asked.

"No. He told me Oliver had given him my picture and a sealed envelope—along with his dying gratitude—when he came to say his goodbye. But he had never heard about me before then. Nor I him."

"Just like the others."

"Yes," said Daniel. "Just like the other three. And probably like the next one too."

"So what was in this envelope?" Daisy asked, pulling the blanket off her legs in a heated rush. She had been sitting on the edge of the couch since Daniel's arrival.

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Daniel continued on, lost in thought. “I can’t believe I’ve never met him before though. I can’t believe I never met any of them. The observatory is only 25 miles away and we’ve never gone.”

“But why would we? We’re not astronomers. They don’t even have a planetarium with a laser show, right? I’m surprised that really was the answer to the puzzle after all. I thought for sure it had something to do with an Indian star who was famous in China. Or vice versa, maybe.”

“I know, but it was Powell all right. Just like it said on their website, its 30” mirror that could see stars 2.5 billion light years away was right there on display as soon as I walked in. I guess I’m learning from the other puzzles—the way the wording was off with this one too, the way it said ‘*ones that have seen 2.5 billion*’ instead of ‘ones that have *been* seen by 2.5 billion’. That just told me movie stars weren’t right.”

“Too bad,” said Daisy.

“No,” Daniel corrected her, “it wasn’t. What a place this was. I wish you could have come with me.”

“I had to put the kids to bed and we weren’t sure you were right.”

“I know, I know. It was the right choice, but we have to go back another time. We can take the kids. I’m telling you, it was amazing. The view of the stars, the planets, whole other galaxies, it was...I don’t know how to explain it. But suddenly, life seemed so small.”

“Our life’s not too small,” Daisy was quick to defend.

“I didn’t mean *our* life,” Daniel said. “I just mean life in general.”

“Um, ok. But tell me, what was in the next message?”

“Here. You can read it yourself,” Daniel said, handing her a small, white, stiff envelope.

Find Jose Blanco, no fixed address, in Sacromonte. You’ll need to speak Spanish.

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“Sacromonte? Where is that?” Daisy asked, calling after Daniel as he made his way to the family computer in the kitchen.

“It’s a neighborhood in Granada, Spain. I looked it up on my phone when I was at the observatory. Come here and look at this place.”

Daisy walked over to see the mosaic of images Daniel had pulled up with his quick search for Sacromonte. When she saw them, she gasped a little and put one hand on the flat spot just above her sizable chest. The small, whitewashed walls and doors that were sprinkled among a brown and dusty hillside looked like the hellish alternate version of a lush and grassy hobbit town. She had never imagined anyone in the modern world still living like this, but sure enough, as Daniel scrolled down through the pictures, there were ones showing brightly clad women inside tiny candlelit rooms who appeared to be dancing in these hovels while clad in high heels and frilly dresses.

“According to Wikipedia, it’s a neighborhood of caves carved in the hillside above the city. There are lots of tourists there, but still a few gypsies and hippie squatters too,” Daniel explained patiently, knowing what was about to come.

“And you want to go there?! You think this Jose Blanco character is hiding in one of these caves? What if he’s a terrorist? What if Oliver has just been luring you into a trap all this time? Are you sure he ever forgave you for stealing me away in college?”

“I didn’t steal you. You came after me as I recall. And besides, he wasn’t your boyfriend or anything.”

“No. But we were...close. I never dated him in high school, but he was a good friend.”

“I remember. But in all our lunches together, he only ever asked if you were well. He was happy for us. He always thought our college romance story was sweet.”

“If you say so,” Daisy replied. “But I still don’t think it looks like such a great idea to go to *this* place,” she said, tapping loudly on the computer screen with her long fingers, her tapping doubly

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accented by a clacking of fingernails that ended up sounding like the castanets she was unknowingly touching. “You couldn’t drag me up there if you tried.”

“That’s ok,” Daniel said, shutting down the computer. “I don’t have to. But I’m going. I have to keep going. I have to know what Oliver wanted me to find.”

Over the next few weeks, Daniel arranged to get his first passport. He stopped by a local drug store to get his picture taken in front of its small white pull-down screen and was shocked at how fast and cheap that part of the process was. He went to the library for the first time in his adult life to get some Spanish language instruction books for his computer and smart phone. It was Oliver’s old library—the one he had worked at for the last 15 years—and it pained Daniel that he had never once stopped by for a visit. All of Oliver’s friends that he had met so far on this journey had gotten to know Oliver at the library. Every one of them had come in for something simple—a beach read for a summer trip, an instruction book on how to raise a puppy, a gardening book about tulips—but every one of them checked out with an armful of other items and a new friend for life who checked in on them and their interests whenever they stopped by. It was uncanny how each new person Daniel met had started their stories of how they knew Oliver with entirely different personal circumstances, but each story ended with Oliver knowing just what to recommend to them to fill their needs—needs sometimes that they themselves didn’t even know they had. Now though, when Daniel went to the library for his language guides, he lingered over the checkout desk waiting for a helpful tip about some travel journal or historical biography that would help put his quest in context, but when no such advice came his way, he left for home. He was excited to see what his next step would bring, but deeply saddened that he had not begun the journey a little earlier.

Daisy, for her part, enjoyed the little spurts of Spanish whispers that began to enter their recently more active bedroom.

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That activity had started the night she and Daniel had redeemed the prize that lay behind the second clue.

Find a woman who can sell you a ticket to 46th State!, aisle or row.

After Daniel looked up the chronological order of statehood among the United States, the curiously-out-of-place exclamation point before the comma made the entire clue immediately clear. Oklahoma. *Oklahoma!* had been Daisy's favorite musical performance in the high school drama club that she starred in. When she played Laurey Williams, the independent young woman and love object of one Curly McLain, the proud owner of a fringed-topped surrey, the whole school had fallen in love with her—including Oliver, in the wings of the theater with the rest of his art team, and Daniel, in the audience with the rest of his basketball team. Now, some 25 years later, when she and Daniel went to see a local production of the show—which Oliver must have seen was coming together only a bit too late for him to enjoy—the couple was struck by one of the lesser known songs that they had both forgotten about. A section of lines from *Kansas City*, a song about their home of the last 20 years, were like a bolt out of the blue prairie skies, rending their daily lives apart and allowing old forgotten thoughts and feelings to shower down upon them.

Everythin's up to date in Kansas City.

They've gone about as fer as they can go.

They went and built a skyscraper seven stories high.

About as high as a buildin' oughta grow.

Everything's like a dream in Kansas City.

It's better than a magic lantern show.

You can turn the radiator on whenever you want some heat.

With every kind of comfort, every house is all complete.

You can walk to privies in the rain and never wet your feet.

They've gone about as fer as they can go.

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(Yes sir!)

They've gone about as fer as they can go.

The lyrics hit them both with feelings of nostalgia and embarrassment. For years, all they had remembered about this particular song was the bawdy end that told of a curvy woman *'peelin' off her clothes about as fer as she could go'*, but now in the less sexually shocked world of adulthood, the main refrain was what struck a chord. It made them remember that this was how they felt when they left their small town to go off to college and then move to the big city—that this was about as *'fer'* as they would go. But now those big dreams—once roomy and seemingly permanently outsized—had become snug fits and looked so out of date on them. Somehow along the way they hadn't noticed the change and they'd forgotten that their lives, just about their whole lives, had been born of these old and juvenile dreams. That's when Daniel started to awake from his. That's when the changes from Oliver's game had really begun to take effect.

Despite some welcome changes in her life, Daisy still hadn't made the psychological leap that Daniel had by the time the morning of his departure for Spain had rolled around. It was one thing to hear about such puzzles; it was another thing to get caught up in them personally after receiving them from a friend.

"What could he actually have that's worth all this?" Daisy asked Daniel in the car on the way to the airport.

"I don't know," he replied, staring straight ahead at the morning traffic, "but I have to find out."

"Didn't he already leave everything to his family? I mean what could he possibly have given you that's all the way over in some cave in Spain? This is costing us like \$2,000 to find out. Do you really think it's going to be worth that?"

"Look, I don't know. I know you keep asking me this, but the answer is still the same. I don't know what I'm going to find there. I do know one thing though. I never thought I'd like to cook for myself. I never thought I'd like to see a musical. I never

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thought I'd read a philosophy book. But here I am doing all those things now. So far, with each puzzle, I keep unlocking more and more that I didn't know I would love to know. I think he must have figured something out. I think he must have known me better than I know myself, or at least he knew something about the way the world works that I didn't know. I can't explain it honey but I have to go. I just know it's going to be worth it."

"Ok," Daisy said as she put her hand on Daniel's shoulder. "I just hope Oliver didn't have anything bad planned for you."

"I seriously doubt that. He just wasn't the type of guy that... I'm going to be fine."

Daniel stopped short and concentrated on the road for the last few minutes of navigating the airport drop-off zone. When he pulled over, got out, and got his one carry-on bag out of the back of the car, he said his goodbyes to Daisy.

"I'll give you a call as soon as I can when I get to my hotel. Good luck with the kids and don't be afraid to ask my mom for help if you need it. I've got to go, but thank you. Thank you for this. I love you."

"I love you too," she said, before wiping a tear away, giving him a hug and a peck on the lips, and then circling round the car to hop in the driver's seat for the trip back home.

Daniel wove his way through the airport departure process, taking special pride each time he handed over his uncreased, unstamped, pristine passport to be checked. *I'm going on a plane and flying half way around the world*, Daniel thought to himself with slight exaggeration. *This is amazing!*

His first three-hour flight went by in a blur. It wasn't the first time Daniel had flown—he'd been all around the Midwest for work—but the thought of his impending eight-hour overnight red-eye from JFK to Madrid loomed so large in the imagination that the length of his previous flying capacity suddenly seemed only trivially inconvenient. A third of the way across the Atlantic Ocean, too excited to sleep, Daniel was happy to be pulled into conversation by the handsome woman sitting next to him.

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"I hate to interrupt you," she said, turning to Daniel after turning off the video screen in the seat in front of her at the end of some period drama she had been watching for the first two hours of the flight, "but that book looks very interesting. Are you by any chance a psychiatrist? I only ask because I'm on my way to a psychology conference and I wondered if you might be headed there as well."

"Oh, no. Definitely not," Daniel said as he laughed at the mistake. He closed his copy of *Ax Your Ambien and Ask Aristotle Instead: Using Philosophy To Drop Your Pharmacist*, and turned to explain its presence in his hands. "I'm a mechanical engineer. This was given to me by a friend of mine, well, maybe it's better if I say *through* a friend of mine."

"Through a friend? What do you mean by that?"

"It's kind of a long story," Daniel hemmed, hoping he would get the chance to tell it.

"Go on then. We've got a while and since I'm paid to listen all day I'm rather used to it."

Daniel started from the beginning, explaining to the woman how his friend had died and unexpectedly left him something in his will. The first instructions were rather straightforward.

Find a man who puts shoulders, ribs, and thighs on a table, but only once a week, and right near where you work.

"Some kind of butcher?" she asked, correctly guessing the answer almost as soon as Daniel had finished relating the riddle.

"That's right," Daniel explained. "I found him at the farmers market that runs on Saturdays near my office. I'd never been there before, but Oliver knew I liked good meat. I'd never really cooked any before—just some burgers and sausages here and there on the old grill—but the farmer gave me some really easy recipes and now I'm trying them out on all sorts of cuts of meat that he sells."

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“How wonderful. So that was the gift your friend had given you?”

“No. Well, I guess it was one of them. But the farmer handed me another envelope, just like the one I got from the lawyers who executed Oliver’s will.”

Daniel told the woman his story about the trail to the theater manager who sold him tickets to *Oklahoma!* and how that had brought up lots of old memories for he and his wife.

“Extraordinary,” the woman noted. “How many of these steps have there been? And when did that book come into it?”

“I got the book after the next step,” Daniel said, handing over the slip of paper he had been using as a bookmark inside it. “This was the third clue that led me to the man who gave it to me. There have been five clues so far and I’m on my fifth journey right now.”

The woman pulled reading glasses out of the seat pocket in front of her and studied the clue on the slip of paper.

Find a scrip reader for Element 3 at its Main discovery date minus a pool cleaner.

Daniel sympathized with the woman’s reliance on artificial eyes; he had begun to lean lightly on that crutch himself in recent years. The woman appeared to be about ten years older than Daniel—though a full two generations ahead in terms of elegance—so he shouldn’t have been surprised at her need for the spectacles, but the perspicacity she had been demonstrating throughout their conversation so far had tricked him into believing that she must surely see the world more clearly than he could.

“A pharmacist gave you that book?” she asked, folding her glasses neatly back into the seat pocket. “If you’ve found one that’s trying to put himself out of business like that, you should probably keep his card. He sounds helpful.”

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“How did you know it was a pharmacist so fast?” Daniel asked in amazement. “It took me hours to figure that one out.”

“Oh, don’t feel badly about that. I told you I’m a psychiatrist. *Scrip* is just shorthand for prescription. I know that may not be a very common word, but it’s standard jargon in my profession. We write the *scrips*; the pharmacists read them. I recognized it instantly. I don’t quite know what the rest of the clue means though. Can you tell me more about it?”

Daniel was happy to oblige her request for him to show off the powers of deduction he had already performed. After being confused by ‘*scrip reader*’ for a while, thinking that it had been missing a ‘t’, Daniel had realized that ‘*Element 3*’ did not refer to some ‘script’ of a screenplay, but simply meant an actual element on the periodic table—lithium in this case—and that it had been discovered in 1817 by one Johan Arfwedson. Once he was thinking about the periodic table and element numbers, the phrase ‘*minus a pool cleaner*’ suddenly made more sense.

“Chlorine,” the woman offered.

“Yes. Element number 17. Exactly the amount needed to bring that lithium discovery date back to a nice whole round number,” Daniel continued explaining. “Then all I had left was to figure out that 1800 Main was a street address since that was the only way *Main*—the way it was capitalized and phrased in the clue—made sense.”

“And that’s where you found the pharmacy where you received this book?”

“Yes. And when I had seen ahead of time that lithium is a commonly used element in anti-psychotic drugs, well that just cinched it and I knew I was on the right path.”

“So tell me,” the woman continued, pointing at the title of his book and ignoring the beaming smile on Daniel’s face, “*Ax Your Ambien*, have you been having trouble sleeping?”

“I have,” Daniel replied, surprised to once again be a few steps behind the woman. “Over the last few years anyway. It’s been getting worse and worse but I don’t know how Oliver could

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have known that. I'm sure I never talked about that with him. I've never talked about that with anyone before now."

"It's a pretty common phenomenon, especially among people of a certain age. I mean, younger than I am," the woman was quick to add upon noticing how Daniel reflexively put a hand to his graying temples at her remark, "but often, after the constant striving and growing and learning of youth, which the brain requires much sleep time to process, we find that sleeping troubles regularly arise after all of that gives way to a more settled existence."

"I see," Daniel said, suddenly feeling tired with all the new information coming at him, chief of which was the fact that he had to be up and functioning in a foreign environment in about four more hours. He finished telling the woman about the next clue he had solved and how that led him on a trip out to the observatory where he received his last instructions, which had finally put him on this very trip. After a few idle speculations about what he might find when he met Jose Blanco, the two passengers ended their conversation and wished each other a good night.

The next morning, Daniel was awoken by a rising sun that was meeting him seven hours earlier than his body expected it. Feeling cloudy-headed and pinched behind the eyes, Daniel made his way through Spanish customs interrogations where he was relieved to find perfect English spoken to him by the airport officials. Traveling in a foreign country wasn't as scary as he thought it would be. Not yet anyway.

As he wound his way through the airport toward one final flight, the architecture and decor of the lounges and shopping centers looked just like every other airport he had been in, but the melodious sound of a beautiful romance language raining down all around him tinged the normally boring travel experience with a surprising sense of newness and wonderment. He felt a small thrill of accomplishment every time he caught a word he understood or deciphered a new sign from its context

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and similarity to an American counterpart. The announcements during the last leg of his journey were mostly in Spanish now but Daniel muddled along and always found that help was offered by a fellow traveler whenever he really needed it.

Although he was exhausted, Daniel was still too excited to get more than a few minutes of rest on his last flight from Madrid to Granada. He kept practicing his most important lines over and over in his head, anticipating the search he was about to undertake.

Hola. Me llamo Daniel. ¿Conoce usted a José Blanco?

Hello. My name is Daniel. Do you know Jose Blanco?

Hola. Me llamo Daniel. ¿Conoce usted a José Blanco?

He had been taught that this was the most formal and polite way of asking around for the man he sought. Formal and polite sounded like the right tone for a lifelong Midwesterner to use, but Daniel had barely remembered from his high school studies that such a distinction in the use of the word ‘you’ was even possible. As the plane landed in Granada, the thunk of the tires on the runway triggered a deeper plunge in his stomach as suddenly it hit him that this trip was about to leave the safe cocoon of the familiar airport-to-airport transportation system.

Walking outside to the taxi stand, Daniel stared up into the bright Mediterranean sunshine. He had read that this would help him get over his jet lag, but the cool crisp air of the late morning at 2,400 feet of elevation did more to revive him.

“*Sacromonte, por favor,*” Daniel instructed his taxi driver. A flurry of questions came back at him, to which Daniel could only shrug helplessly, forgetting entirely how to use his words to respond with a simple *no comprendo*.

“What. Hotel. You. Want?” the driver asked his tourist patiently.

Daniel began to set his backpack down so he could fish out his itinerary with the hotel name and address, but stopped short

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and simply told the driver, “No hotel. Take me to the center of Sacromonte.”

In 15 minutes, they were exiting off a main road and heading into the heart of Granada. The narrow and dusty alleys surrounded by tightly packed four-story stucco buildings with red tile roofs were nothing like the broad boulevards and concrete high-rises or vinyl clad houses of the Midwest that Daniel had known his whole life. He looked out the windows in amazement all around him as they passed through the streets. Off to the right, he saw signs pointing towards the Alhambra and made a note to himself to try and find that famous attraction later. As the taxi wound its way uphill and back out the other side of town, the familiar sight of whitewashed caves carved into the brown hillsides appeared through the front window. The scene looked just like the online images he had seen, yet it was somehow both smaller and larger than he had imagined—smaller and off in the distance without a zoom lens to bring the highlights closer, but larger and more alive in general surrounded by bustling life and greater context.

“Ees thees ok?” the driver asked him at a convenient location.

“Sí, sí,” Daniel said, trying to recover his use of the language lessons. “*Aquí está bien.*”

Daniel paid the driver, exited the taxi, and looked around to get his bearings. He had read that higher up in the Sacromonte district hippies often squatted in abandoned caves. This seemed the most likely location for the ‘*Jose Blanco, no fixed address*’ whom he was seeking, so he unfurled the handle on his rolling suitcase and began to slowly drag it noisily uphill. As he made his way up stairs and cobblestone streets, rounding switchbacks, and passing low whitewashed buildings carved into the side of the hill, local touts popped out of their businesses offering him the choice of ‘*hotel, señor*’ or ‘*restaurant, señor*’. Each time, Daniel waved them off, but inquired if they knew Jose Blanco. *¿Conoce usted a José Blanco?* All of the doormen shook their heads and turned away from

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Daniel when he asked them this question so he continued up the hill, not really sure where he was going or when he might stop and give up. Soon after the sixth or seventh person rebuffed Daniel, a small thin man with stained and dirty fingers who was wearing sweatpants and a threadbare t-shirt came up to him from behind after having followed Daniel for the previous two minutes.

“Disculpe. Jose Blanco?” the man inquired, touching Daniel lightly on the back of his arm.

“Si, si, Jose Blanco,” Daniel said, turning around with some excitement at finally hearing out loud the name that had been lodged deep in his imagination. *“¿Conoce usted a José Blanco?”*

“Si, si. Eh, come with me,” the man said in broken English as he pointed up the hill.

Daniel looked around feeling a bit uncertain as to whether this man really knew who he was looking for or whether he was just trying to take him to a cousin's out of the way hotel or restaurant. Or somewhere worse.

“Si señor, come with me. Jose Blanco. I take you,” the man insisted.

Daniel decided to follow the man off the main road and up a narrowing alleyway. The man kept turning to reassure the foreigner that his guide did know the way, but each reassurance only made Daniel begin to question his decision more and more. The seeds of worry that his wife had planted began to grow wildly in the fertile imagination this surreal environment allowed. Daniel began to slow his steps and let the man pull ahead ever so slightly. After several more twists and turns, Daniel had almost lost sight of his leader and was just about to give up on him and try to find his way back to the main road as quickly as possible when he heard the little man give a shout.

“¡Jose Blanco! ¡Yo tengo gringo para ti!”

Daniel rounded the corner and saw a man about his age whose face looked almost like a cousin of his, but whose skin was tanned and leathery, whose gray ponytail was long and greasy,

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and whose body was round and taut to bursting. He had been sitting in a ratty camping chair, sunning himself outside a cave with no doors, but now he bounced up to speak to the little man who had been guiding Daniel.

...TO BE CONTINUED...

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