

One Million Years BC

FORTUNATO SALAZAR

1

Louis Offer with a rusty garden shears was preparing to trim his facial hair in the empty lanai when he heard his name called by the actor, his employer, his good friend as well; they'd hit it off when it turned out that her people and his people were both descendants of the conquistadores who founded La Paz. Her people had gone on to become engineers and musicians and respected actors, while his people took a wrong turn and never made their peace with, or were conquered by, or named churches after, temptation in its innumerable guises, though for the past half century the most favored guise by far had been straightforward pharmaceutical temptation. Her people also had been the first humans to swim for recreation in a lagoon. His people, dressed in hard-won fur, watched incredulously from behind boulders along a cliff edge. They'd been struggling with the lagoon for ages, and at the end of every age would go back to their assigned staging areas and trade milligrams for cubic centimeters or vice versa while they waited and waited and waited under a ragged sunshade. Then were called, but not by name.

2

Her people had gone on to celebrate Easter in bonnets, exchanged the bonnets for hats, tucked away the hats in dedicated hat-storage lockers off-site. Cleared a room the week before Xmas and dedicated the room to wrapping presents. The actor herself tied the elaborate bows, availed herself afterward of the services of a hand massage therapist hired for the season, an actor doing seasonal hand massage. Louis Offer's people had gone on to do seasonal crafting of Xmas wreaths in Quonset huts at the outskirts of Xmas tree forests overflowed by helicopters slinging felled evergreen. All the bows were pre-tied, and no wreath from that line would ever grace any spacious front door hand hewn from Calabrian sequoia.

Carolers at the front door serenaded the actor and Louis Offer, everyone else having left for a stroll around the block to view the front-yard tech. "Late in time behold him come, offspring of the favored one." Ahead of Louis Offer lay a bright future of tidying up the Xmas-gift-wrapping room, which would become the Easter-hat room and then the Xmas-gift-wrapping room again if only he didn't first slip up, blunder, botch some errand theoretically impossible to botch. The actor felt for Louis Offer, she really did, she'd genuinely made a connection and could speak openly to him about their parallel futures. She planned to annex a whole other room. Louis Offer would rise in her esteem as he put one year and then the next behind him without washing out. Eventually she would teach him to tie bows, dispense with the seasonal hand massage therapist.

3

But for now he was the traveling master of the defibrillator, his official pay grade. He heard his name called and quickly stowed the yoga mat, Louis Offer the reformed strong-arm specialist with slicked-back thick black hair and Inca-themed tattoos down to his wrists and the dyed facial hair that he professed to be ready to give up when the actor interviewed him but then she insisted no, a more than friendly no, a radiantly gracious and humane no full of conviction, spontaneous decisiveness: his dyed facial hair was what it was—a stunt that stuck, combat scar, fever blister, he'd sauntered too near a powerful radar—whatever, he must grow with it until he grew out of it, the actor said. If no one

until now had talked him out of his dyed facial hair, she wasn't about to be the first. Something about the preservation of the identity of the characters in her employ, markers of the essential elements of their deepest natures.

4

Curiously, the actor had mentioned nothing about a screening process. Later Louis Offer learned that there'd been an elaborate tried-and-tested screening process which unknowingly he passed with flying colors. The actor had people who did screening for her. Then there was the screening that she did herself. It all happened in the sixty seconds between the grand entrance and when she beckoned Louis Offer to take a seat. He was on the payroll long before he and the actor made the connection between his people and her people.

5

The football. He'd been trusted with it and the trick was not to overtake. To not space out in admiration of the opulence: the profuse flora, or the tech, or some combination of the two such as a holographic orchid which in the instant that he spaced out would morph into a snapdragon—a carnivore—posing as an orchid.

Good clean fun to put a fright into the neighborhood kids, except that as far as he could tell, all the neighborhood kids already had been snapped up. Signs all around the neighborhood reminded drivers that they were not in La Paz. Le Mans. Louis Offer hadn't ever seen a kid in the neighborhood. Not one kid. Hardly any adults either except an occasional animal wrangler whose kinship with Louis Offer consisted in the common mandate to *walk behind*. This week all the animals had made a stop at Wardrobe and stood quietly, stoically observing themselves in mirrors being fitted out with antlers.

Air-conditioned Wardrobe. On the trailer door, a wreath.

And just imagine (spacing out again) some distraction, say a temblor or a sonic boom. One of the pack breaks loose, flees, pursued by the wrangler in khakis and a polo shirt: same wardrobe rack as Louis Offer's. Hanna, a Vizsla, named after the martyr. Makes for the safety of the hills, led by instinct. Wrangler and the baying pack can't keep up because in the confusion the antlers

become entangled. A harrowing night ensues in the hills where the carnivorous stalking predators indigenous to the hills have been known to abduct toddlers in nearby neighborhoods where toddlers actually exist.

And on this one night of the year the stalking predators receive a gift. They steal out of their dens, their noses quiver. Yet hungry as they are, they hang back. Haven't ever stalked an upland hunter that threatens them with antlers, an antlered hunter, Hanna holding her ground, snapping and growling as one bold stalking predator after another puffs out its chest and lunges forward, wary of the antlers.

6

Thump. Once more he'd nearly collided with the actor—the whole idea was to stay behind at a respectable distance so that he'd be right there if she keeled over. Inconceivable. The actor did her own shopping in the village, insisted upon it. Would not be driven by the driver. Made the afternoon trek three times a week. Still swam a hundred laps a day in the saltwater pool as Louis Offer kept watch. Had declined to allow a device to be implanted in her chest, a device *with a wire*. Wouldn't wear a wire, not when she could hire Louis Offer, so ran the jingle in Louis Offer's head as he monitored from poolside, counting laps for the actor so as to stay in the moment, not drift, not wash out.

After he'd washed out at the Quonset hut, he and the supervisor who'd written him up went out back into the supervisor's trailer and emptied Louis Offer's pockets. Another trailer he was seeing from the inside for the first time and the last. Season of black coffee and living in a vial, just like any other season. Sharing from a vial. Season of the certainty of replenishment. Plenteousness in dribs and drabs. Our Savior's birthday, an occasion for short-term optimism.

7

When the actor turned to him and they exchanged pleasantries, it was just as if she'd been overtaken by a friendly neighbor wishing her good cheer, but then again she was an actor, she'd been trained to create the illusion of not speaking across a great divide, no matter how great the divide. Maybe the chitchat came from a place of deep sincerity and an awareness of their shared

forebears, those far-flung colonizers. It never felt like making an effort, but then again it wouldn't, would it.

Thump thump thump thump. That would be the motor inside the actor's chest.

By mid-afternoon, Louis Offer had sampled from the vial just enough to maintain an even keel and not be thrown off by acoustic quirks like all of a sudden hearing clearly the impending cataclysm. *Thump thump.* It was the vial that saved him from being deceived by the *thump thump* and its intrusive bringing of bad tidings that were really all in his imagination. That's what the vial did, it duped and disabused. Conducted through his elbow all the way inside his skull with fidelity the ominous *thump thump*, one *thump* away from exposing him for what he was, a pretender who'd bluffed his way into the actor's trust, forged his defib certification, couldn't even paddle toward a flailing victim, that skill having been lost somewhere down the line of his forebears after they'd been instructed in the lagoon. In the lanai, the vial emptied into him its quirky unpredictable absurdities, *thump thump*, as well as the tranquil competence to recognize the freakishness for what it was, a kind of impure atmospheric that went along with a contract that guaranteed him lots of downtime in the lanai. Nonexistent contract.

Holy night.

Still living in a vial, still earning a precarious paycheck. Tagging along. *Thump thump THUMP.* Every so often one of his people took a nosedive and did what his people swore they'd never do, crossed the line where they drew the line. Her people had moved on from infinity pools to variations on the theme of saltwater enclosures suspended over trompe l'oeil abysses, the saltwater infused with apoptotic phenols, age extenders. His people took refuge in rooms that had since been abandoned, lost their cachet, fallen by the wayside. Yesterday's innovative living space. A vial, with a lid that snapped tight: shelter.

Inside the Trader Joe's, the actors at checkout and the actors handing out free samples vanished into their daydreams of being recognized in some crowded plaza while the actor plied the aisles in her holiday sweater, just another denizen of the land of plenty, stocking up on holiday fare.

His people and her people once had been the same people, descending on horseback upon some peaceful victory banquet or child sacrifice, a village with a thoroughfare where even the mules were bedecked with festive greenery, floral craft. Her people led the way while his people dawdled and tuned out and hoped against hope that it would be another day of uneventful conquest, some of his people tuning out with such force that they were swept off their horses by noiseless stunt riders who'd been up all night preparing a surprise.

As for the restroom, it compared favorably with the many other restrooms of Louis Offer's pre-defib era into which he'd ducked so often to prepare to face the public. It compared favorably with the lanai, actually. The lanai didn't boast a full-length mirror in an antique frame, or a choice of antique tables decorated by an aspiring set designer, or a velvet couch. The conches in the Trader Joe's restroom compared favorably with the conches in the lanai. The privacy compared favorably with the lanai. The wallpaper was so alluring that a dawdler easily could lose track of time. Louis Offer did a quick mental calculation of the kind he'd done so often in less comfy environs, translating hours into milligrams. He'd be in the village for the afternoon, then the long trek back, the underpass, more chitchat, not to mention that in the background loomed the actor's doctor's orders to either swim laps *or* stroll into the village: a situation on the whole that required careful attention to an even keel, thus the precision fractionating on a cleared expanse of antique table.

The utensil stowed, the mirror reassured him that the sun hadn't tampered with the dye that made him who he was, Louis Offer, an asset to his employer.

9

THUMP THUMP. The actor, sprawled in the sand, opened her eyes and took in Louis Offer. Fading, she winked at him. Fragile and indestructible, poised to be revived, trusting herself to Louis Offer and his complicity skills.

All an act. He'd rewired the defibrillator, at her behest. Didn't wish to be brought back in the event of an actual cataclysm.

The last afternoon of her life stomping on her chest ever so peacefully as she put her faith in Louis Offer and the routine they'd walked through in the soft warm sand outside the lanai where guests were entertained around a fire feature. A resuscitation walk-through repeated on a weekly basis so as to drive

the mission-critical steps of the procedure into Louis Offer's capable hands as pure and faultless muscle memory. His experienced hands, which had washed out under the sunless skies of winter wonderlands and many other sunless skies in all four seasons. The actor had walked him through so many times that his hands were emptied of their tainted track record. Scoured in the imported sand.

Afterward, her people would be in touch. She'd provided for him, they'd explain. He was set for life, thanks to his vigilant devotion even if it hadn't been enough to save the actor. She'd known her odds.

His people were always dreaming of this kind of windfall delivered from the afterlife. Some of them had gone out dreaming, alone in a by-the-week motel or crumpled in a backyard hammock that happened to materialize conveniently when they were on the brink of toppling over, having lost count, estimated sloppily. Others got lucky and were resuscitated and swore they'd never estimate again. Mastered some honest skill set and went out honorably, the last faces they saw in this life, honest faces.

10

Ambition, honor, poverty: back where he began. His people and her people had leaped off a cliff together. Just for fun, for a lark. Most couldn't swim. Didn't matter, the salt was pure and the ocean calm. Off to a strong start, side by side, indistinguishable, his people and her people. Began each long day with a prayer. Oh undiscovered worlds, be kind to us, your conquerors. Make us proud that we've been granted the privilege to despoil you. If blood must flow, let it be the blood that cleanses. If we must erase your names, let us place gently on your tongues new names that time will heal, draw the bitterness from. Accept our gifts with forbearance for our blunders, for we are poor and far from done. Whoops, home.

