

The Gift

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Michael McGuire was born and raised and has lived in or near much of his life; he divides his time; his horse is nondescript, his dog is dead. He is rumored to have bent an elbow once or twice in D.F. with B. Traven; but the facts in this case, as with so many in the writer's journey, are uncertain. Naturally, McGuire regrets not having passed his life in academia, for the alternative has proven somewhat varied, even unpredictable.

There was a cross on the wall, out back, where *el patrón*, Soledad's mother's father's brother, had been shot to death in an incident so many years ago that it seemed, from the vantage point of a young woman who was a little girl at the time, that they—the years—could hardly be counted.

As nearly everyone in Pueblo Nuevo, the nearest pueblo, with the exception of Soledad, the girl, until she reached womanhood, knew, the gentleman in question had taken a dose of lead while taking a tequila behind his house in Paraíso, a mountain valley with a scattered population, a mere *trago* of the best, taken with his chair leaned back against the wall as the sun sank into the land he couldn't help but love, a single bullet from a .44 drawn slowly from a hand-tooled holster by a young man he considered a friend, since he was grandson of his own brother, *en paz descanse*, a young man who had just learned, perhaps with the help of a *trago* or two himself, gifted by his host, *el patrón*, that the man with his chair leaned back against a wall that might have, so rumor had it, been his, the young man's, for *el patrón*, no saint himself, had acquired this very land by, though it was never said in so many words, questionable means.

The last chapter in the story of those dark green *hectares* that reached to the stream that always seemed to have at least a little water in it, began innocently enough...

"We're friends, aren't we, Juan?" Soledad's grand uncle had asked, lowering the straight and narrow *cabillito* he had just drained, setting it softly near the bottle of good stuff so they wouldn't lose track of each other.

"Absolutely," said the young man, who wore the tightest tailor-made shirts, drove a low black sedan, frequented the softest fleshpots in Guadalajara but, for all his affectations, was known for his thoughtfulness, even his generosity. He was also, given the large number of children born to any woman in those days, though a second cousin and, therefore, technically, of Soledad's generation, old enough to be her father.

"I think I should tell you that..." *el patrón* had paused and begun again. "I think enough years have passed that I might tell you..."

"Tell me what, Don Porfirio?" Juan had asked, innocently enough and always speaking respectfully to the older man, his great uncle.

"How I shot your grandfather. Right here. In this very spot."

The details that followed are of little importance, even if they were revealed, as the tale was told, on the crime scene itself, under the black cross under which Don Porfirio was now sitting as he made his confession to his grand nephew. In any case, in Don Porfirio's mind wherein hovered, if not some black-eyed beauty, then the land itself, the green, green fields just now losing their light over Juan's shoulder, there had been probable cause. But, no matter how many years had passed, honor required, and both men suddenly knew it, the younger man to return the favor on the spot, required the .44 drawn slowly, deliberately, from its hand-tooled holster, and now two souls, each as honorable in its way as the young man's, had departed this earth on the same spot.

El patrón, long buried with one hole in his chest, a larger one in his back, and his guts still in him, for there were no morticians in those days, was uncle of his haughty niece, *la Señora*, and grand uncle of the less than perfect girl, her very different daughter, tiny Soledad who crawled daily, if with difficulty, onto his lap, often enough at some sunset, clearly one preceding the fateful one, a girl who...he knew in some part of his still breathing soul...if she had had something withheld from her, had had something else, in its place, given, perhaps by the gods who so often seemed to find an unlikely balance, if not a preposterous juxtaposition, amusing.

"Look," he would say to his little lopsided grand niece and she, not much given to speech—it was too soon for that—would look out over the green fields he seemed to be eyeing often enough and look back at him with a look in her best eye as if to ask "at what, *tío*?" and he, catching the unasked question would respond with the spoken word issuing from somewhere deep in his yet to be exploded chest, "look, just look."

And Soledad looked and, though it can't be said she saw very much at the time, it can hardly be denied for, as shall be noted, there is hard evidence, she must have, in due course, looked and, eventually, seen. And if one of her eyes, the one with the raised eyebrow, the one that would, in all probability, never see a man that was good enough for her, was her mother's, Porfirio's haughty niece's, *la Señora*'s, the other eye, the quiet one, the one that saw what there was to see, must have been his, her mother's uncle's, that of the

man who, though a good shot, and generally kind enough, might be said to have confessed one of his crimes to the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time.

So Soledad, imperfect in body and difficult, even, at times, a little high and mighty, in temperament, lived on. And reflected upon her time in Paraíso, perched upon her mother's uncle's lap and, one day, would wonder if it was at all possible to somehow get a hold of the present before it—sometimes very suddenly—became the past.

Of course, her mother also lived on and, as with those who have had many children and lost many, reflected upon those who were alive and not doing as well as they might, as upon her yet-mentioned husband who had died relatively young, who was gone and that was that. She would always remember fleeing the man she had been engaged to in order to run off with the man she married, the better looking one, the one who went on to do considerably less than the man she hadn't and then, as God would have it, to die young while the other lived on and on and success followed success until his successes seemed destined to outlive him and maybe even the woman he had married. Still, when *la Señora*, was at Paraíso, the home in the mountain valley where she was born, where she passed her youth and the small fields were still greener than any she had seen since; when she was there, she often took a moment to stand beneath the cross on the wall, to think of the life the uncle she knew best had lived until it had been taken away from him by her favorite nephew; and to think as well as of the lives her children, though they had their lives, were not living.

One of them, our *heroína*, Soledad, could walk if she could not run. She could even walk considerable distances: though she would have appreciated a little support she was unlikely ever to know, say the strong arm of a young man her own age. One side of her body served her better than the other, it had always been like that, that's the way she had been born, with one side a little better, or worse, than the other, and that's the way she would always be. Still, her good eye was good and her hand was steady. Looking, she could stand perfectly still, like an alerted prey animal, or a crafty predator, and that eye—the one on the better side—served her well, especially when there was a camera in front of it.

Soledad liked birds, and horses, all the creatures; she also liked landscapes, even when nothing moved upon them. And, though she liked color, especially the muted colors of both twilights, morning and night, the whited landscapes rather than the yellowed, her own work was black and white. She loved the old pictures of historical times, the men in their oversize sombreros... Why, she wondered, had sombreros shrunken so: was the sun less fierce, did it hit the men and women bent in the fields less savagely than it had in the past, the past that was always with her country, that would never leave it?

She loved, too, pictures of the men in those oversize sombreros, riding the roofs of commandeered trains, riding with their women, their helpmeets, *las soldaderas* who, in the dated photos, loaded the men's dated rifles and sometimes fired them; all, of course, rid-

ing to their deaths, whether they were killed in *la Revolución* that wasn't, the one that, as so many, realized so few of its ideals; or living, perhaps more maimed than she, twisted by human events rather than the gods; living, as they say, to the age everyone supposedly desires, but now taken, if not seized, by the death that is a necessary step in the evolutionary process; necessary, Soledad figured, so less perfect or, at least, less adapted species could get out of the way and the latest versions could take their place.

She wondered why they hadn't invented a machine that could capture the times that were gone, not so far gone, just the ones we remember from the age when we were too young to know we were looking at something that would be gone almost as soon as we saw it; that is to say, in effect, a time machine.

Soledad couldn't remember who had given her her first.

It had, somehow, its own identity: it clicked in an old fashioned way and held only a handful of exposures which had to be sent off to be developed. It was possible for bullies, male and female, especially if you weren't as strong as they, maybe even a little off balance, to pull your film out and, laughing like the barbarians they were, wave it around their heads as they continued, like the war dead, *los soldados y las soldaderas* on the road to extinction, the relatively short road every species, even those sound, and attractive, in body, must take.

Though Soledad couldn't remember how the clumsy thing had come into her possession, she did remember what she learned from it, what she would never forget: the subject of her once mechanical and soon to be programmable enterprise was and would always be, when it wasn't the whited land she loved at daybreak, at nightfall, the human form, the human face. Though perhaps the lesson had not been learned from the thing itself.

It might even have been a book which had somehow come into her possession, a book not of Paris street scenes, of preoccupied pedestrians, but of life *in extremis* in an era more modern, though also vanished but for its photos, that gave her the idea, a timely book published before her time though at the time of her discovery it had held her interest as if it had been published, not fifty years ago, but yesterday. A time peopled, in terms of world history, by her people, *los mexicanos*, only peripherally for, though they had welcomed the refugees of the Spanish Civil War, closed their ports to German submarines, the Aztec Eagles had flown ground support in the Philippines and enough young men had fought and died in American uniforms, it had really not been their, the Mexicans,' war.

Maybe there were pictures by Robert Capa in *Life's Picture History of World War II*, a beautiful big red book published in 1950, Soledad didn't know for, somehow, she had misplaced or lost the volume you could hold in both hands but, in her own way, listing just a little to starboard, she carried it with her. Now Soledad was still young, she knew that, young and, though flawed, nevertheless, in her own way, though the remaining men of Paraíso—most gone in search of a life superior to this one—knew better than to ask her to dance, attractive, her ambition was, not to become a war photogra-

pher, stopping, it would seem, history in its tracks, nor even a por-trayer of the violent, the ugly and the shocking, for she knew there were other scenes, also graphic, photographable, that had little to do with the violent, the ugly and the shocking; though it did seem to her that every city dweller these days, man or woman, standing behind a lens, particularly those who, understandably, shunned sentiment like *la plaga*, seemed to believe, perhaps because of their own relative comfort, that weathered faces and wasted bodies with a backdrop of the flattened cans and plastic bags they lived under were more *fotogénico*, more camera-friendly, than others.

Soledad, too, wanted to capture "reality," just not that kind and, as has been noted, her picture history of the latest world war had gone astray, or been walked off with under an arm stronger than her own, and Soledad had time, and not just those afternoons and evenings when no one had asked her anywhere, on her hands. Maybe on her side too for, she had also learned in her short life that anything worth doing was worth doing slowly, that stillness is worth a thousand motions.

Maybe, a little later, it was Tina Modotti, the wonderful model who'd had so many lovers, so much politics and a camera of her own, and who died mysteriously in Mexico City, possibly at the hands of the authorities, who inspired her. A woman with a fullness of body so unknown to her, Soledad didn't even like to think of the differences.

"Pure your gentle name, pure your fragile life," the poet had written in her epitaph, though whether the lady's life had been pure or whether purity was even a quality Soledad valued was another question.

But maybe it had been the work of the incomparable cinematographer, Gabriel Figueroa, who had stunned her into silence, appreciative silence, as she watched his old movies on the old television with the sound off: the proportioned, the perspectived, compositions; the unexpected angles shot from vantage points few would have thought of; the dramatic contrasts, the blacks and whites, if maybe, at times, a little overdone; and, of course, the stillness, in his hands, of the motion picture camera.

Anyway, once Soledad had discovered *la máquina*, now one a little better than her first, as well as her own eye behind it, she was never without it, raising her little 38mm. for such hurried shots that her subjects might have reason to believe they had failed their instant "screen tests," to doubt their likenesses had been stolen. But, quiet, unobtrusive observer as Soledad, given her own deliberate-ness, might be, by the time she was a young woman she couldn't help feeling that technology, in the guise of up-to-the-minute indifference to everything that moved slowly, and especially to that which didn't move at all, had passed her by.

It now seemed that, to be taken seriously, pictures had to be manipulated, improved upon or, for some reason she could only guess at, made to move more quickly than eye and brain could take them in. Worst of all were the twists and twirls of those who didn't seem to know, or care, that there was such a thing as stillness; not

to mention subject matter, content, something worth pondering for more than a millisecond. Nearly as bad, given the explosion of the field, was the "self-portrait" now indulged in by the...by "the rabble" her mother, with one eyebrow raised, would call them...100% of whom, it seemed, now carried the electronic equivalent of the contraption that had started Soledad on her chosen course.

The professional, she thought, having no desire to appear in his own pictures, must feel the medium to be inherently objective. It practically demanded to take a look at the "other," as well as the natural world behind, and all around, him or her. However, in retrospect, she realized that her focus on forms and faces other than her own had not begun when she found—now she remembered—the little black box somehow forgotten, more likely discarded, on a park bench in Guadalajara. It was back when, as a child she had, with that meticulousness which would always be a characteristic of hers, dis-membered a grasshopper: first one leg, then the other. Her mother, country-born as she was, if with one eyebrow higher than the other, and widowed relatively young, though still known as *la Señora*, and having seen more than her share of country carnage, coming across her youngest daughter in this pursuit, neither ignored nor chided, but only remarked, in passing...

"I don't think the grasshopper likes that very much."

Yes, perhaps that was the moment when, years before the black box had nearly found its own way into her hands, that Soledad became aware of the other; of, if not quite all the others, at any rate of how many of them there were. And if a grasshopper was such an other, how much more of an other a human being, with thoughts of his, or her, own, must be. Yes, it was that discovery that had, for her, preceded her discovery of her art; one which, it might be said that, however indirectly and over what seemed to a young woman to be a considerable passage of time, might well have led to it.

One day, unbelievably, a package arrived for Soledad. Unbelievably, because she had never even received a letter in Paraíso, but this day a man on a motor scooter, a man in a hurry, placed a small box that was fairly heavy for its size, in her hand, asked her to sign for it, and was gone in a cloud of dust. She stood there, one leg a little bent, one breast, as usual, a little higher than the other, and read her name as carefully printed on the wrapping. It was not her mother's handwriting, or printing, she was sure of that.

Inside, she sank into the springs of the ancient couch with the package on her lap for a long time before she opened it. Later, her mother assured her that, as Soledad already knew, she had not sent her this latest thingamajig from the world of thingamajigs. She weighed it in her hand. She read the book. She screwed in the lens and unscrewed it and read how you could get other lenses for other uses but it seemed that this one, designed to take the wide world in, would certainly be enough for one lifetime.

Advanced as the thing was, the period that followed was one in which Soledad, the photographer, became painfully aware of the pictures she missed: thousands upon thousands. Either she was a second too late with the wonder in her hands, or a second too early:

even when she was sure she'd got it, she hadn't. It was as if the gods were laughing at this inability to capture the moment Soledad was certain her eyes had seen. Whatever it was—an instant of desire, of sudden knowledge, of everyday despair or a trick of light—it simply wasn't in the camera. Multiple exposures, as if she had been called upon to settle a "photo finish," were no help. Reviewing her high speed shots, she saw that the thing had, once more, missed that which eyes were sure they had seen.

Soledad's response was to put her new camera away, the better to see only what eyes saw; let that which was out there, in front of her, find its own way to her brain.

La señora, in her own way seeing everything, and from a great distance, for, it was said, she looked down on everything and everybody, saw one of her daughters, the aforementioned Soledad, put down her camera, put it away, maybe open a book, which was the girl's other *pasión*, that is reading, and went her way without comment. After all, she was used to standing in front of her house—she would never deign to lean a chair against the wall—to eye her passersby, all of whom, she was sure, were doing less well than her daughters, any of them, and, in fact, not doing very well at all... though it hardly mattered what they were doing, what they were was what mattered and they weren't very much: children of families that had come down in the world, children still on their way down. Not one had a father like hers, blooded with the blood of landowners, *hacendados* in their way, *latifundistas* by implication (and fantasy) who had received their lands from the Crown.

And that was why, as everyone, with some exceptions, in Pueblo Nuevo had always known, at least one man had taken his dose of lead while taking a tequila behind his house in Paraíso: a mere *trago* of the best, taken with his chair leaned back against the wall as the sun sank into the land he loved...

Soledad, for her part, imperfect in body and even in temperament, lived on, without, for both reasons, a man and, for the moment, without her camera, alone in a house shared only by her mother, *la Señora*.

One of *la Señora's* pastimes, when it was left to her to oversee the lands of *el rancho* by herself, perhaps as an alternative to mounting a horse—she didn't like horses—and riding into the hills she didn't much care for, was to stand in front of her house and peer at her properties through a pair of binoculars. The point was not, as might, once upon a time, have been her daughter's, to watch the light fail upon the land, but to see if her men were lying down on the job, an act, she was sure, they were all too prone to and, if they did do what was so in their nature to do, firing them on the spot when they rode in for their pay.

One day, some years ago, just as she was lowering her binoculars with a silent curse upon all men and working men in particular, her youngest daughter nudged her. No child, still Soledad was the only one remaining in the house, the one, perhaps for obvious reasons, never to be married and, perhaps because she was not yet quite a woman, still called her *mamá mamá*.

"*Mamá.*"

"*Sí, hija.*"

"Whatever happened to Juan? It seems years since I've seen him."

"It is. He's going to hell somewhere, God knows where."

"Why to hell?"

"He killed my father's brother, my uncle, your grand uncle."

"Don Porfirio."

"The very one."

"Why?"

"Because my uncle, in the long-ago, killed his brother, Juan's grandfather, and honor required that..."

"But why? Why did Don Porfirio kill his brother?"

"God knows."

"Where?" persisted Soledad. "Where did all this happen?"

"Out back," said *la Señora* to her daughter, "under the black cross. That's where your great uncle killed his brother and where, years later, your second cousin Juan killed him. Each with one shot."

"Sssss," hissed Soledad.

For a moment mother and daughter looked at each other and, in that moment, Soledad knew that her mother knew where Juan was; was in, possibly constant, communication with him; also, that she wasn't telling anyone, including her. What's more, she knew in her bones, at least in her stomach, that there was some larger force at work here. She knew the word *fratricidio* didn't seem to say it; *parricidio* didn't fit at all. She didn't believe in devils, even the ones slain by the sharp sword of the archangel Michael still statued in the plaza of Pueblo Nuevo, and she doubted if these evils could be laid on the doorstep of any of the divinities that, some said, still resided in these lands.

Maybe it was just time, she thought, time itself—the years, like recorded history, like war, like drought and depression, walking all over us, every one of us whether we know it or not—if it was anything at all.

Soledad, too, knew, if not in that moment then a little later, a few years later, that time was something...as with so many forces in this life, those that only cripple when they're not up to killing... something that had to be opposed by another time, the present made somehow dynamic, at least fluid, by human effort and, in that moment, she knew that somehow, somehow, she would be one of those who fought back.

So Soledad went to take another look at that black cross, to take in the story that she had not been told until not so long ago really, though maybe she had only had to ask, even as a child. She didn't carry her camera. It was too late for that and what would she have done if it hadn't been; if, as a child, she had raised her Kodak and clicked her second cousin putting a bullet in her great uncle. Juan would have only snatched the thing from her hand and dashed it against the wall before he cantered casually off on his thoroughbred, spurs spinning, gone forever. No, she was not destined to be

a crime scene photographer, limping from the police van, stepping around the plastic cups set over the spent shells, clicking away at the bloodied corpse. Or corpses.

It was something else she must do, but with her camera.

And so, taking the thing with her after all, Soledad went away, for a while, into the landscape men had died for, and beyond. She went on, leaving her family's green fields, up and up, far enough from the living stream, the immortal stream it seemed for it had never, in her lifetime, run dry, into land seized by the elements, or lack thereof, that had their bone-dry hands on much of Jalisco, the state, into a land blowing away, where *zopilotes* sat heavily in thick groups upon dead trees and waited for the next cow who, having struggled up only yesterday to scour the land for some edible weed, to seek the faintest shoot of green with cactus stuck to her face, could not, no matter how hard she tried, get up today.

And Soledad shot, shielding her technology as well as she could from the blowing dust that someone had told her was an even greater enemy of such gadgets than water; shot the land as if, though she had left her own particular crime scene far behind, as if the land itself might know more than she herself ever would; as if the past were somehow resident in it, the white rocks, the clay-like soil, perhaps also in the featureless sky that mirrored the land seared by sun and wind; as the sea, in its moods, takes its blues and greens from overhead.

Soledad would not be gone long. She was after all young enough that her still living mother, looking somewhat less down upon her children than she looked down at everything else, might worry, might send a hired man after; not more than one, of course, for most were needed to do the work which was never, from *la Señora's* point of view, done or, at least, done well enough. And though Soledad could cover considerable distance, given her incurable condition, if she took her time, she still could not hobble on forever.

Eventually, not really that far from the family's green fields, she bagged her camera and sat upon a rock. The better to watch the land blow away. She watched the *zopilotes* who knew there was no point in riding the thermals at midday when no animal that had been alive that morning was yet ready to give up the ghost. She watched thin clouds coalesce and just as thinly disperse, not coming together quite enough to cruelly suggest the possibility of rain.

She looked at the land and the land looked back at her. The *zopilotes* didn't bother for, at a practised glance, they could see the young woman was still full of life; that, even given her relative disability, she could certainly limp downhill to the family farm lying so smugly, so slyly, chewing, in effect, its cud of insignificant secrets along the stream that never went dry.

Perhaps, she thought, the land held no past at all, only the recurring seasons, the greater cycles of wet and dry, of *el niño* and *la niña*, of climate change brought on by men who hoped to profit from anything and everything until their species went the way of all others and an overgrazed earth tumbled into a sun no longer young, but...

Shot dead.

Yes, murder was something else. Murder at close range. Murder of an uncle, a brother, or someone else's uncle, or brother.

Soledad could not help but wonder how far back, even within her family, especially within her family, murder went. She knew that, once upon a time, every man in Mexico carried a gun on his hip; that now a goodly number sported an AK-47; that the trifling feuds of yesteryear had become the drug wars of today. That cantankerous old men with bad blood between them, country folk really, had been replaced by men as young as herself, even younger, urban youths slaughtering each other wholesale.

Murder in the streets, between the cars, drive-by killings on the motorcycle of their dreams.

It was not a question, Soledad decided, of ferreting out her thoughtful, even generous second cousin in his too tight shirt, of unexpectedly drawing a pearl handled .25 from a garter belt on her good leg and putting as many bullets as the thing held in his still young chest. It would take a few, she knew, given the small caliber of ladies' pistols, to actually take the life of he who had taken the life of her great uncle who had, in the long-ago, taken the life of his brother.

But these were only the thoughts of an imperfect being in an imperfect world, a creature with a past she could hardly consider her own and no foreseeable future, if such an animal even existed. In stillness there is stillness, however, if that wasn't too simple a thought, she thought, once more taking out her camera. Probably to be preferred to drawing a pistol of any caliber. Once more Soledad clicked and she clicked. There was no human form before her, no human face, and she certainly wasn't going to take her own picture. The world was larger than that. In between pictures she watched the world and the *zopilotes*, curious creatures, watched her.

Was it possible, she asked herself, that her own species was there, in the landscape, even if it wasn't one that had been destroyed by the hand of man? That the forms and faces she valued were present by their absence, not in the shape of a dead tree withering like a human soul, not in a rock that looked amazingly like a human back bent to endless labor; nothing so literal as that, so explicit but, in some way, present by their absence, in the land itself, in the face and form of the planet? And if humanity, in not being there, was there, maybe history was also, in the blacks and whites of time past, not like so many skeletons ground down, pulverized, by ceaseless wind and rare flood, nothing so unequivocal, so final.

And Soledad, camera in hand, glanced up at that featureless sky and wondered if it had ever held the savage gods of those who had held this land for so long, the ones displaced by the old white man, the less than forgiving god the Spanish carried across the sea. And something put her in mind of the writer who had written the best stories of the new Mexico, of the not so distant past now really, the war of the Cristeros, and had stopped writing when not, in fact, that much older than she was or would soon be and, instead, had taken up a camera to point at the land, and yes, at the people

too, that Juan Rulfo who had, perhaps, turned to the photograph because it was as silent as he.

Sitting on a rock which, Soledad realized, is a great equalizer, she felt one eyebrow, her mother's, coming down and, suddenly, she knew that we are all, one way or another, amongst the haves *and* the have-nots. The point must be, she thought, not to moon over that which we have had withheld, but to use that which we have been given.

So Soledad clicked and clicked and sometimes just sat there, on that rock, changing within, like the light changing upon the land, sometimes feminine, sometimes almost masculine, sometimes sexless, sometimes human, sometimes, almost, inhuman, but in all her transformations, the eye, the eye behind the camera, capturing what she could of what was there and maybe, she hoped, just a little of what wasn't, wasn't yet: past *and* future, time itself, geology in motion, if slow-motion, the stillness everyone, living and dead, is part of.

On the other hand, did she have anything at all in her camera, now safely bagged against the dust? Had she, thanks to the gift she held in both hands somehow, this time, captured the past? The present? Maybe some things *were* more or less capturable, even curable. Others, definitely, were not. But, maybe, for some, it was not too late. Maybe that was what the present was, the present, the time she was, really, just discovering; yes, maybe the present was the time in which, when you realized you were in it, it was not too late.

Only time, when it grew tired of chewing, of rechewing, its secrets, might, or might not, tell.

Even as she, twice gifted she had to admit, now knew who... one who had not been, in his way, without his own perhaps not-so-light touch, his own sense of shape and form and timeliness, of, yes, of style...had sent her one of them or, at least, the means to realize it, though she would never know, she knew, deep in her all-too-human bones, quite why.