

Gibara, Cuba

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Corto Maltese – Travel Notes

Corto Maltese, the character created by Hugo Pratt, is a true symbol of adventure, a modern-day Ulysses, and a guide to a world of freedom and fantasy. Corto is a sailor and his preferred means of travel is the boat, the sail, and by sailing he opens vistas real and imagined. We come upon "islands," spaces and places apart and wondrous, palm-fringed shores, vast deserts, endless tracts of snow, and sultry jungles.

Corto Maltese represents and embodies the authentic, footloose voyager. His murky origins, and his manner of engaging with an endless array of people all tell of a man without prejudices – a man who comes from nowhere and everywhere.

Corto was born in Malta, an island in the southern Mediterranean. Its port sees ships coming and going from every part of the world. His roots are gypsy and Anglo-Saxon, he is articulate and complex, and his mind is fed by fantastic tales of lands and voyages of the past, from More's *Utopia* to the journeys of Bougainville and Captain Cook.

Traveling "In the Style of Corto Maltese" does not mean that when we arrive at a place, we painstakingly describe it – it means seeking out a route that enlivens the mind and awakens curiosity. Once there, one could journey deeper within oneself or lose his way amidst infinite possibilities and coincidences.

Marco Steiner & Marco D'Anna

by Marco Steiner

For a certain period in my life I had the good fortune to participate in the birth of the stories of Hugo Pratt. At a later period I traveled with Marco D'Anna for seven years, following in the footsteps of Pratt's intrepid Corto Maltese, a hero who never wanted to be a hero, but an adventurer, and we have all come to know him as such. Now the moment has arrived for us to take the stories of Corto even further. In each of these, Hugo Pratt has left us open roads, signposts to follow, characters to develop, and places and treasures to continually explore.

Marco D'Anna and I have long wanted to embark on this project and now the perfect sponsor has appeared, Cornercard. They understand and support our unique vision of the "Journeys in the Style of Corto."

The idea behind the "Journeys" is that a beautiful, invented world unfolds as we take our cue from Pratt's worldly sailor. With the combination of Marco D'Anna's photography and my writing, we will describe these excursions through suggestion, flavor, atmosphere, and emotion.

These are not travel tales but tales created in the course of travel. This is why we begin each new endeavor with a broad theme, and then allow the stories to be born directly from the experience of new places and people, through encounters that are planned or serendipitous.

This project will pay homage to the values of exploration, imagination, and intellect exemplified by Hugo Pratt's intrepid character. Corto was never an end unto himself, but a guide to a whole world of possibility. And to open new windows into the worlds of Corto Maltese, we move from the illustrated literature of Hugo Pratt to the tale enhanced by photography.

I look back upon the stories of Corto Maltese and see them not just as beautiful adventures, but also invitations to go beyond appearances. In my imagination, I have seen images spin off from the art of Hugo Pratt, as if I had been looking into a crystal. I get the same sensation when I experience the photography of Marco D'Anna. And it is exactly this experience that I seek to depict in my writing, fantastic voyages that begin right on the borderline between the seen and unseen. Corto invites us to travel free and light, beyond the present world. There is a line from an Argentine tango that goes, "Today you will walk into my past." These few words invoke the present, the past, *and* the future. Our "Journeys in the Style of Corto" shall also be in this prism of time: a future of emotions, visions and memories, along a road that is invented and discovered as we go.

The Sea of Lost Notes

It had been raining for days, unforgiving and continuous, with no intention of stopping. Sea and sky were a single, gray slate, separated in two by a distant, tenuous line.

The patter on the veranda was music. At times the rhythm quickened and slowed, thick streams were loosed, lightning broke, thunder exploded, and then the rain returned to its constant, repetitious music. The leaves shone, and distilled cool, clean drops of water, bending, lengthening, their quickening rhythm foretelling a change but no change came. Everything recommenced, always the same. Corto Maltese sprawled on a wicker seat, his legs crossed upon a chair in front of him, his bare feet glistening with rain.

Corto smoked and gazed upon a world of blue and green now veiled behind a curtain of grey mist. What could one do but lose oneself along the paths in that sodden void. On the table there was a nearly empty bottle of rum, and alongside, a glass with a meager drop or two remaining. A snaking line of smoke rose from the cheroot, gathered into a blue wavering cloud in the air of the veranda, reluctant to disperse. On the ceiling a gecko, still and earnest, observing a spider in his web, also seemingly immobile, but aware of the enemy.

The world was not immobile but suspended. And the rain went on. Perhaps it had decided to overwhelm St. Kitts, and submerge it in the sea. But the Caribbean isles know how to wait. In time, the sun would disperse the rain, dry the mud, and enliven the leaves, and colors. The sailors know this and know, too, that you have but to wait. The sea remains as it is, always an open invitation.

Corto Maltese had been halted by one of those storms that sweep through the isles, that split sails and tear roofs off houses, but the ship remained sound, and was anchored in a sheltered cove. The ship belonged to Madame Java, and that is why he cherished it. He could make it out from the veranda, his refuge when the winds stirred the clouds between Florida and the Gulf of Mexico. In any case, he had missed his meeting with Rasputin at Cayman Brac. There was nothing to do now but wait. It was December, in the waning days of 1916.

Corto smiled. He raised his glasses and observed the spider through the crystal. Perhaps it was one of the incarnations of the god Anansi, son of the sky god Nyame. Perhaps it was he who had brought the rain, but in the legends he did so to extinguish fires, not to waylay a sailor at St. Kitts. The Caribs called the son Nansi, who appeared as a weak and defenseless animal, but pleasing to watch, alert and adaptable to all situations, able to escape quickly along the fine threads of his web, capable of confounding tigers and even kings.

For the blacks of the isles, the spider Nansi had been friend and companion, reminding them of mother Africa, a symbol of escape in the times of captivity and cruelty, in the times of the club and the whip.

Corto thought he saw a single leg raised in a gesture of salute. Nansi was gazing back at him, but it could be a trick of the crystal or the drifting cigar smoke, or the swirling rum. There was something moving in the grass beyond the veranda, a man - coming towards him. He was soaked, barefoot, hunched over and limping badly – one arm in a sling. He was in truly bad shape. He struggled to walk up the few steps to the veranda and looked around him fearfully, a desperate man. He had a long beard and his skin was darkened and weathered by the elements.

Corto looked at him and poured him the last of the rum. The man closed his eyes, threw his head back and swallowed it like nectar, then leaned against the table and took a deep breath. His pants were ripped and filthy, the shirt shiny with grime. The sleeves had been cut away to make the ragged sling for his arm. The knot was yellowed from dried blood.

“I went to another world, Corto. I saw things I could never have imagined and in the process was reborn. Different.”

- Ortiz Gaillardo Gherardo, “Poli”
Santero, La Habana, Cuba

“Thank you,” he said and sunk unconscious to the floor, like an empty sack.

His name was Kees. He had left Le Havre some months before. He was Belgian. He had landed on Martinique and sought out someone to take him around the island but ran into a gang of thieves who had robbed him and were in the process of beating him to death when the typhoon came on. This is how he found himself clutching the sides of a life-raft, his arm snapped, and his sailboat taking water nearby. But there was land, St. Kitts. The wind and ocean did the rest.

Thomas, the innkeeper, cleaned him up, bound his arm and put him to bed. Kees awakened a day later. He was a new man, but the rain was just the same.

“It is a miracle that I ran into you, Corto Maltese.”

“How do you know my name? Have we met before?”

“No. Someone said that you would be the only person able to help me, and Thomas told me where I had ended up.”

“And who was this someone?”

“A friend who is no more, Ronald Bantam.”

“Just what did this Ronald tell you?”

“That Corto Maltese and Ogun Ferraille were the only ones who could help me in my quest, which would otherwise be nothing but a foolish dream.”

“Quest? Could it have something to do with the scorpion tattooed on the back of your neck?”

“That’s a souvenir from Africa. A long time ago. At the start of it all.”

“Why don’t you start from there? Today is the perfect day to listen to long stories.”

Kees was from the Congo. He told his tale with wide, staring eyes, reliving a nightmare. Meanwhile, Corto Maltese poured him cups of tea, adding a bit of rum each time. His father had been a high-ranking official in the *Force Publique*, the notorious military unit that ravaged that country, the so-called Free State of the Congo, during the reign of King Leopold II. His family lived in Boma, the capital.

"My father forced me to practice the piano for hours. He'd say I was too delicate to be a true soldier, that I was too much like my mother. She had been a concert pianist. Many years before, she had stopped making music, and spent her days drinking, sleeping, smoking, playing solitaire, and having her hair combed by servants – all in profound silence."

"How long did you live there, Kees?"

"I was born there and got away when I was sixteen."

"Yes, the perfect age to roam the world alone."

"I was escaping the horrors."

This time, Corto poured him a generous slug of rum.

"One day, while I was playing the piano, the wind pushed open the window and the sheets of music flew everywhere. The servant – a very young woman - bustled around to pick up all those sheets of paper. She gathered them with such care and tenderness and then bent over to replace them on the piano. I smiled and thanked her."

Kees drained his cup. The skin of his hands was calloused and split by exposure to the sun and sea, but his fingers were long and elegant.

"My father barked out her name, he rose to his feet and made her kneel in front of him with her arms held out in front of her. She was trembling. He looked at me in

disgust and took out the strap made of hippo leather and flogged her hands and arms to shreds. He then yelled into my face not to dare ever thank a slave.

The next day he dragged me over to the barracks yard. It was the end of the rubber tree harvest. A clerk was counting up how much each man had collected. The soldiers kept an eye on the long lines of slaves, each waiting his turn with their heads lowered. Some of them held baskets full of something, not rubber. There was a horrible smell from these baskets, I had no idea what it was. My father led me closer. The baskets were full of human hands that had been chopped off. When the slaves could not meet their quota, they had to make up the weight with hands, usually from men of rival tribes. Certain local wars would start up over such enormities."

This time Kees filled his own cup, drained it and lapsed into silence. Corto smoked and looked into the distance. After a little while, the Belgian smiled.

"*Leave this place. Seek out your music ...* In all of those years, this was the only time I ever heard my mother speak."

The gray skies had lifted and the veranda filled with a light the color of ripe mango in the sun. The gecko had retreated to the grass, and the spider returned to her prey, a huge green fly.

"So now what are you seeking, Kees?"

"I have to get to Cuba. Elegguà has shown me the path to the blue scorpion and the lost notes."

"I had a feeling that the spider of the rains would show me the But first tell me something. How did you manage to escape?"

"I believe it was my mother. She must have paid someone to open some doors for me. That same night I ran away with that servant girl. We were joined by two tribal warriors who led us through the jungle with their long sharp knives."

"That's enough for one day, Kees. You'll tell me the rest on board. The sky is clearing and we leave first thing in the morning."

"Tomorrow, then, Corto Maltese."

They sailed towards the northwest, passing Puerto Rico and staying wide of Haiti and the Channel of the Winds. During those long and refreshing days, Kees recovered his strength, but his arm remained swollen and painful.

"I loved that girl from the moment I saw her, but I had no idea she was the daughter of a Yoruba chief. She had been kidnapped by my father's soldiers on patrol for the *Force Publique*."

"I would think that you were treated like a son by the chief, since you had freed his daughter."

"Exactly, but one day everything changed."

"She had been promised to another man?"

"My life as I knew it ended right then, and I began another."

"Kees, your stories are more incredible than those of Nansi the spider."

"I had gone hunting in the forest and was stung by a scorpion. They carried me back to the village, half-dead, and they entrusted me to the shaman."

"Who called upon Obatalà and all the divinities of the forest?"

"Correct. I stayed with him for seven moons, as I learned later. He gave me his brews and sweated me constantly to slowly free me of the venom."

"I see that it worked."

"I went to another world. Corto. I saw things I could never have imagined and in the process was reborn. Different."

"And what does all this have to do with Cuba?"

"Once I had recovered, I noticed that my senses were sharper, especially my hearing, my ability to distinguish subtle differences in tones, rhythms. The shaman said I must go beyond those powers, that I should continue my rituals with another, more powerful than he. Otherwise, I would lose my powers and would lapse into death. I would find this other beyond the sea, on a distant island. He spoke of an admiral who had planted a cross in the ground and had dragged many black brothers to that spot in chains. He drew on a leaf what looked like a bay fed by two rivers and there was a mountain that resembled a saddle."

"Did you also become a real musician?"

"I have spent the last few years composing a symphony, my hymn to nature, but all was lost in the shipwreck."

"You will write it again, Kees, but tell me something else. How does Ronald Bantam fit into your story?"

"If I am alive today, I owe it to a group of English men, in particular to a journalist called Morel. When the shaman told me I could return, I went to the girl'svillage. Everything had been destroyed. There were corpses everywhere with their

hands cut off. The English group was there taking pictures so they could report the massacre. I told them who I was and what I was doing there. Then I told them why the hands were cut off. And then I asked them to help me escape, from my father, and from the horror.”

“Was your young woman among those bodies?”

“Yes. The bodies were piled up in some places and in others they had been pulled aside and mutilated by the hyenas. The huts were still smoking. Morel helped me get to England. He introduced me to several people, including Ronald Bantam. He traveled between Europe and South America. For a while he put me up in London and in Paris. He heard my story and when I showed him the drawing on the leaf, he recognized it as Cuba. The “admiral” spoken of by the shaman was Christopher Columbus and the bay was Gibara, one of the places Bantam knew well, and he told me the mountain I had drawn was the Saddle of Gibara.”

“Robert Bantam. I once met his son, some time ago.”

Gibara is a broad, placid bay, ringed with forestland and gentle hills. On the leeward side a mountain ridge shields it from northeasterly winds. One of the mountains resembles a saddle.

The sun was setting when Corto anchored in the harbor. He was smoking one of his thin cheroots; he lay on his back on a pile of rope, lowered his hat over his eyes, and thus ended the day.

When Kees awakened, dawn was coloring everything, and there was no one else on the boat. It was still at anchor. The white city was reflected in the blue of the bay. A small stone fort stood above the skyline, here and there small piazzas could be seen, ringed with trees, and large doorways the color of apricot. A skinny dog seemed to be sniffing out the smell of baking bread and two vultures circled overhead, scanning for a mouse or some fish bones.

Corto was on shore, speaking with a man standing on a horse-drawn carriage. He was a very thin black man with a long face. He had on a battered straw hat, man and horse seemed akin, and one could count the ribs on the horse. Corto looked over and gestured to Kees to join them.

The city still slept as the three men made their way along the shoreline. After a couple of hours, the horse turned up into a trail that ran along a stream. As they headed inland, the forest became thicker and full of the movements and calls of animal calls.

Suddenly Kees rose up and with his good arm gestured for the carriage to stop. The black man looked at him as if he had just seen him for the first time. The Belgian raised a finger to his lips, signaling them to be silent.

They could make out a distant beating sound in the sultry air. Kees stood listening, his eyes closed, his body absolutely still, and his head tilted to one side. No one moved for several minutes.

“You are hearing *claves*, two hollow sticks struck together, which they use as a basso underneath singing and other melodies. The rhythm you’re hearing is a gathering call.”

Kees was as gleeful as a child. The horseman and his horse stood stock still, mute as the trunks of trees.

“Corto, how did you know to take me here?”

“Perhaps I asked the right person.”

“And just what did you say?”

“That I sought the *santero* of Gibara. He had to be out here among the trees somewhere.”

“We can’t show up like this,” said Kees, “I must prepare myself.”

The coachman reached down and took hold of a stout, curved staff. He then handed it to Kees. Kees took it with both hands, smiled and bowed deeply. He started walking off into the forest followed by Corto.

“Now what happens, Kees? Some African magic?”

“No, Corto. There are things that are difficult to explain. Invisible threads connect us to inexplicable things, but these things are parts of who we are, missing parts. Then something happens to make it all visible for a moment and we must follow where they lead.”

“Are you talking about the stick that you received from that man?”

“Elegguà is the god who protects travellers, and he who opens the way. He wields the *garavaco*, a staff that opens or closes the paths of men. Or it could simply be that this man noticed that we were going into the forest and gave us a stick.”

“So will you open the forest to us with the staff of Elegguà?”

“No. I’m going to meet the *santero*. I will tell him I know his music. The *claves* are sounding a certain rhythm. I will play mine, as a way of asking permission to approach him.”

Kees found a hollow log and sat upon it in silence. He closed his eyes and started beating on the log, taking turns with the *claves* heard in the distance. The two rhythms gradually came together into a unison. Suddenly Kees stopped, and seemed to go into a trance. He arose and forged right into the undergrowth; he wound his way among the broad ferns, twisted roots, and tree trunks. He moved effortlessly, pushing aside fronds, leaping over obstacles – he was one with the forest.

They arrived at a clearing surrounded by walls of vegetation. The light shone directly from up above – it had made its way into the heart of that green magic. An old man with dark, wrinkled skin stopped his drumming, lifted the two sticks and gestured for them to enter his hut. As they entered, a tall, powerfully built man rose to greet them.

This man was very out of place here, a white man wearing a large leather hat, dressed impeccably, with clear blue eyes, a closely trimmed white beard, rings on every finger. He shook hands with Corto and Kees and stared at them for a moment. Then he turned to Kees and placed his hands on his shoulders, smiling broadly. His hands were huge, strong, and very warm. Kees felt the hands moving down his arms. They seemed to want to relieve him of anxiety and memory. The man’s left hand reached the arm injury and stopped there. Kees felt something like an electric current, then cold shivers, then warmth.

“You have suffered much, but now I am going to heal your arm. Otherwise, you won’t be able to proceed,” said the man, looking into Kees’ eyes. “I’m not the man you seek, but you must trust me.”

“What shall I do?”

“Just be still.”

The man washed Kees’ arm and rubbed an ointment that dried immediately on the skin, leaving it cool and refreshed, a feeling that spread to his whole body. The man then tied braided palm fibers tightly around Kees’ shoulder. It hurt, but the pain gradually subsided. The old man outside began his drumming again, and Kees fell into a dreamlike state. He saw the past once more, the face of the girl, torn apart by the hyenas; the comb through his mother’s hair, the whip made of hippo leather, fingers upon white keys, and baskets filled with mutilated hands. He then saw a flash and everything began spinning, and the whorls became darker and darker. Then he saw no more.

The healer took a knife and sank the blade into Kees' arm, who did not move. The man opened up the wound. It did not bleed. He plunged his fingers into Kees' arm and removed a shard of bone. He then squeezed the arm tightly, closed his eyes, and began breathing deeply. Everything was still. All that could be heard was the rustling of trees and the call of a distant bird. The man suddenly jerked and twisted the arm, there was a crack, and Kees' head went limp on his chest. The healer laid him carefully on the floor. He undid the palm fibers, spread more ointment on the arm and wrapped it in leaves.

He seemed to be satisfied with his work. He washed his hands, grabbed two fistfuls of something like dried grass and placed them in coconut shells. He poured boiling water into these and invited Corto Maltese to sit with him. As Corto reached out his hand to take his tea, the man with the white beard stared at the sailor's palm.

"I will not tell you anything other than I see you like to choose your own path."

Corto shot him a quick glance, and drank his tea in silence.

"The rhythms of the old man guide my hands. I have been given the gift of seeing what is happening in the bodies of those who suffer and come here, guided by the music, but it is the old man who sees the harmony of things."

After several hours, Kees emerged from the hut, his face pale and slack. Corto and Kees set out into the forest again. When they met up with the old coachman, his eyes glared directly into Kees'.

"The man you are looking for is in Baracoa. In that place there is a mountain that was cut by Oggun's blade and a river as sweet as honey. Someone awaits you where the clear waters meet the sea.

They sailed east, staying well clear of the sharp rocks and small wooded islands along the coastline. Wooded mountains rose up from the shores, and they passed iron-red land, and crystal clear sea lagoons. After a few days, they saw a mountain whose peak seemed to have been chopped off. They sailed past Baracoa and dropped anchor in the estuary of the river. Everything was peaceful. It was as the old coachman had described, the mouth of the *Rio Miel*, an enchanted place. Small waterfalls emptied into the turquoise waters. Above, red jacaranda trees jutted out among a skyline of shimmering green. A small boat came up alongside Corto's ship, the *Dreaming Boy*. It was a fisherman, with a bright, honest smile.

"Good day. Today the river has been generous. We can share the catch."

“Thank you. We will bring the rum,” said Corto, as he took up the anchor rope.

“What is the name of that stunted mountain?” asked Kees.

“*El Yunque*, sir sailor, and when the sun goes down, the remaining clouds hide themselves up there, so that they will not be swallowed up by the night. It is the house of the *orisha*. It is they who told me that you had come.”

The fisherman’s hut was halfway up the slope. As soon as they entered, they were greeted with the aroma of shrimp frying slowly in a skillet. A pretty, young girl handled the hot pans while moving her hands and body to the chords of a handmade guitar being strummed by a little boy.”

“These are my children, Yolaine and Alejo, my family.” Four dark eyes followed their movements while the gentle music and dancing went on.

“Children, you may eat your dinner and then go off to sleep. I will take care of our guests.”

The three men sat outside, watching the sea and sky trade the colors of sunset with each other. The fisherman reached for three coconuts and with precise blows of the machete he cut a few inches off the tops. Corto had a bottle of Jamaican rum in each hand.

“Allow me, captain.”

“By all means.”

The fisherman poured rum into the coconuts and stuck a thin bamboo straw into each one and offered them to his guests.

“*Saoco*,” said the fisherman, “just what we need after spending a whole day on the water, parching our throats.”

After draining their drinks and a smoke, the three men went back into the hut. The sun had sunk behind the mountain and the sky was a vibrant blue. A sliver of moon hung in the sky like a hammock among the emerging stars.

The fisherman sliced the tops off three more coconuts, spiked them with rum once again, threw a handful of shrimp in the skillet and allowed them to pink over the heat. The scent of the sea permeated the air along with the strumming guitar and the lyrical, soft voice of the young woman. Kees felt as close to paradise as he had ever been. The fisherman interrupted the lovely music with blows of the machete as he cut up mangos and pineapples. He scattered the finger-length fruit among the simmering

shrimp and grated preserved coconut over it all, raised the heat, and stirred with vigor as he doused the pan in rum.

Long blue tongues of flame arose from the skillet. The chef allowed the flavors to meld in the liquid beneath the shrimp while he crushed three large fresh peppercorns in his thick fingers and sprinkled the pungent pepper over the smoking hot food, and finished by adding some black powder from a tiny nut.

“Ready. A dish for friends from the sea, with a dusting of cacao, the very earth of Cuba.”

The first bite took Kees far, far away. All had gone, the storm, the shipwreck, the lost notes, the symphony gone to the water, all gone from memory.

Everything could start again now.

He became aware of Corto’s voice as he spoke to the fisherman. They were drinking *saoco*, smoking cigars, laughing about a Belgian who couldn’t hold liquor, sea, and the Caribbean sun all at the same time. It was like he was looking on, invisible, apart. Everything still existed, but everything was different. From the words being spoken, he came to know that Alejo would take them to the top of the mountain the next day. There they would meet a man who knew the secrets of nature. They called him the Man Scorpion.

The next day Kees awoke on Corto’s boat. They spoke little for it would have been meaningless – the beauty around them chased away all thought. The two youngsters were bathing on the riverside. Alejo dove into the water and emerged with his body glistening, beads of water like pearls. He jumped into his rowboat and started rowing towards Corto’s yawl. Yolaine remained where she was, dipped her head and let the seawater move through her hair, with highlights of honey. She combed it and gathered it up from the surface, like a great flower. He looked on. He looked on like it was the last thing he would ever need to remember. Alejo’s rowboat came up alongside.

“Kees, remember that we’re here for the Man Scorpion and for your lost notes.”

“I know, Corto Maltese, and I can never thank you enough for bringing me here.”

“Don’t thank me, Kees. Perhaps I didn’t come to Cuba just for you. Among these cliffs, islands, and lagoons there must be sunken Spanish galleons, along with the pirate ships that raided them.”

“Where, Corto?”

“Kees, I told you we were friends, not partners.”

Baracoa, Cuba.

It was as the old coachman had described, the mouth of the *Rio Miel*, an enchanted place. Small waterfalls emptied into the turquoise waters. Above, red jacaranda trees jutted out among a skyline of shimmering green.

“The music I want to write is a music of voyage and change, Corto Maltese, the voyage of men who left Africa with the rhythms of the earth, but after having traversed the Atlantic in chains, they transformed these rhythms into music that can never be enchained, for music is liberty, free from time, like nature itself.”

The yawl glided westward, toward the mountain with the lopped off peak. Along the path, halfway up the slope, they came upon a brisk waterfall. It would be two more hours to the top from there. They decided to camp so they would not have to climb by night. The cool, pure water was the color of emeralds. Looking through the spray and vegetation, they could see the valley and the sea beyond.

“This is paradise, Corto. I have found the harmony I have been seeking.”

“Perhaps the sound of the water reminds you of timpani, and some of the other music in your symphony.”

“I’ve always been enamored of the pure tonalities and rhythms of nature. Here, finally, there is the link to a music I’ve only had a hint of once.”

“And what music is that?”

“Some years ago, I went to a performance in Paris, the ballet, *Rites of Spring*, accompanied by the music of Stravinsky. I was lost in those sounds, and taken far away. I felt then that the music I wanted to write was a music of voyage and change, Corto Maltese, the voyage of men who left Africa with the rhythms of the earth, but after

having traversed the Atlantic in chains, they transformed these rhythms into music that can never be enchained, for music is liberty, free from time, like nature itself.”

“And you envisioned all of that while sitting at that concert?”

“It was the beginning of a trip, towards an understanding that only now is becoming clear to me.”

“A trip like this trip we are taking on the sea. I would imagine the concert was a success.”

“Actually no, Corto, there were hoots and whistles from the audience. The reviews dubbed it *The Death of Spring*. Few people truly understood the significance of that music. One of the few who appreciated it was a writer who saw it for what it truly was.”

“Of course, Kees, people are fearful of the new, it makes them feel unsure of their bearings, but what about you? Aren’t you afraid to be forever lost in your never-ending search?”

“Ever since I escaped from my family in Africa, I don’t know the meaning of the word ‘lost.’ I seek liberty, not security, and it is that liberty I want to express in my music. I am not afraid of anything, because I carry my death within me.”

“You are a romantic to the bone, Kees, but what death are you talking about?”

“I must have more of the venom of the blue scorpion. I must have this periodically, and now there’s very little time left.”

The night was full of sounds, birdcalls, the baying of dogs, the whirr of flying insects, stirring among the leaves, amplified through the falling water.

At dawn, Corto Maltese splashed his face and hair with the cold water, and turned to look at the Belgian.

“Last night I heard all of your damned sounds of nature, and I can tell you I much prefer to sleep to the quiet of the sea and the rocking of my boat.”

The top of El Yunque was lush and seemed to host every possible type of vegetation in the world. The sky was covered in braided, shifting clouds in the shapes of trees and leaves. It did not take long to find Macandal, who seemed to be waiting for them.

He was an old man, as stout and knotty as the immense ceiba tree behind him. There was a cigar stub in this mouth, his hair was short and white. He was shirtless, and his torso was covered in tattoos, including that of a scorpion climbing up his neck.

“My name is Kees. I come from far away. I was told to seek out the Man Scorpion.”

“Let me see your hands.”

The old man held Kees’s hands and turned the palms upward. He ran his fingers along the lines, and then gave him four cockleshells. Kees shook the shells in his hands, and threw them at Macandal’s feet. Three of them landed with their hollows face up and the other presented its smoky gray exterior.

The old man looked at them. He took Kees’ hands again and continued rubbing the palms with his thick, dark fingers. On the middle finger of Macandal’s right hand was a silver ring shaped like a skull.

“I see the hell that you have had to walk through. That is done. You are free. You need only two things now.”

The old man turned and walked into a low hut made of bamboo. He reemerged with a drum in one hand and a rooster in the other. He drove a long, curved spike into the ground and tied the rooster’s foot to it. He put the drum between his own legs. Kees remained absolutely still.

The old man began rubbing the skin of the drum, producing a vibration. The rooster seemed to know that things could not turn out well for him in this situation. He began tugging against spike and crowing loudly to alert the old man of his extreme displeasure. He crowed to the skies, to the forest, but eventually resigned himself to pecking the ground.

“My father was dragged to this place in chains,” began the old man, muttering, humming. “He came from the forests of Africa, your forests. Your father’s hands are filthy with blood, but you have helped the brothers.”

Kees looked him in the eye. Corto Maltese shifted from leg to leg looking up at the clouds, which grew denser and darker.

“That is why you must not be visited with power, you must not rip the head off the rooster, drink its blood, and you must not say the words.”

“The words?”

“That you would do the same with the head of a white man if you are called to do so by Abakuà”

The old man, speaking in a chant, said that he was called Macandal, that his father had been a great warrior. He had belonged to a group of men called the Leopard

Men, but one day he was put in chains and thrown onto a ship heading directly for the sugar plantations of Cuba. Macandal had been born in Trinidad, on a plantation where the master, Iznaga, had erected a tower from which he could observe all the slaves working in his fields. One day his father stopped to help a man who had fainted from exhaustion. The foremen had tied him to a stump and left him there for days and nights. No one was allowed to come near him, and he never begged for food or water, but spoke only of revenge. Macandal watched his father die without being able to do anything. He was fifteen years old. Later, a shaman taught him the secrets of plants, the power to cure or to kill, and he inured him to the venom of the scorpion until it could not kill him, and to use the venom to see the future.

“That is why the music led me to you, Macandal.”

“I know what you need to continue your search.”

The old man took a small vial out of his belt and placed it in Kees’ hands. It held a thick blue liquid. Kees held it up to the sky and then threw his head back and drank every drop.

“There is one more thing you must know.”

“I am listening, Macandal. You have opened another passageway for me.”

The old man untied the rooster and held him in his hands. The rooster crowed loudly but Macandal tucked the head under one of his wings and used him like a feather brush, brushing the drum, Kees’ hands, Kees’ head and body, all while continuing his chant.

“We poisoned the white men’s wells and they all died. With my herbs, I kept Iznaga alive and dragged him to the stump where he had tied my father. I had kept my anger alive all those years, and I wanted the memory to be alive for him, too, as it had been for me. We burned all the fields, the orchards, the storehouses. I did not destroy the tower, for from that tower I could see the suffering of the whole world. We would be men of action and the tower was our strength. I remembered the strength of the Leopard Men, and I gathered together the strongest men of the island and we formed a new power on the land, the Abakuà, and we would be independent and defend ourselves. The only ones permitted to join us were men willing to die for their brothers.”

The sky turned leaden, and large droplets began falling on the leaves. A dense mist arose from the ground and remained suspended in the air. Corto jostled Alejo’s arm, who seemed hypnotized by what was happening.

“Young man, I am leaving now. The first duty of the sailor is to tend to his house, and that for me is my boat.”

“But how will you find your way?”

“Don’t concern yourself about that, Alejo, I have never been lost. You just take care of Kees. I don’t need to drink the venom of the blue scorpion to see the future – Kees will remain in your paradise.”

“Good journeys, Corto Maltese.”

“*Abakuà guanalori ponsa empomà aserende*”

“What does that mean?”

“He who does not see the way forward, remains behind. It is an Abakuà saying.”

“How do you know that?”

“I have already heard of the Leopard Men, Alejo.”

Corto disappeared into the forest. Macandal took off the head of the rooster with one bite and let the blood drip on the drum and into three small pots full of small objects. He then took a bamboo cane in his bloody hands and ran it across the drum. The sound which emerged was like a wail, a lament.

Kees attended to the music that seemed to come from the wet leaves of the forest, from the trees, from the drops of rain and this music entered his soul along with the venom of the blue scorpion.

“The highest music is the voice of Abasi, our god who speaks to us through this drum made of the skin of the fish Tanzè. Now that you have crossed the great sea, and have suffered like the slaves, you can understand this music and you can enchant men with the notes you have sought.”

The day after the wind blew from the west. It was a good wind. Corto trimmed his sails and headed northeast. The rocky eastern shores of Cuba slowly disappeared from view and a deep solid blue washed away memory and fantasy. Kees’ curved staff had been left in the boat.

Corto was alone, alone on the sea, heading for another, further island. He uncorked a bottle of rum and lit a thin cigar. In the glass of the bottle he saw the rain and the spider Nansi. He took a sip and looked out over the sea, pure and endless, like a desert. He felt fine. Two seagulls followed along.

Marco Steiner

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