

First Meeting

Finding a parking spot on Waikiki is next to impossible in the middle of the day—any day. At least Nanna had picked a hotel with its own parking. Maria pulled into the parking garage and left the Mustang with the valet. She caught the elevator and pressed three. The door opened to reveal one of Waikiki's most beautiful casual dining experiences. The Moana Terrace Bar and Grill looked across to the street to Waikiki Beach. A row of swaying palm trees danced to the rhythm of the gentle trade winds. Umbrellas shielded diners from the bright sunshine.

Jack and Maria had eaten here often. The lunch hour had passed. A few older couples and a young couple in love sat at the tables across the terrace. Several children splashed around in the pool. Maria didn't see anyone who fit Nanna's description. What description? Maria realized she knew nothing about Nanna—not even what she looked like. She asked the Maitre D for a table near rail overlooking the street. She ordered an iced tea and waited.

Her ComTab blared. "Listen, Do You Want to Know a Secret? Do you promise not to—"

It was Jack and Maria's song. She had forgotten to set the ComTab to stun. She fumbled to answer.

"Hello," Maria said in a hushed and embarrassed tone.

"Hey. Where are you?"

"I'm sitting at your favorite restaurant on Waikiki waiting for the bureau chief."

Maria felt a pair of hands on her shoulders and a butterscotch voice saying, “Hello, Maria.” A strange, but reassuring, feeling came over Maria. She’d felt it a couple times before, but she couldn’t remember when.

Maria stood and turned, and cricked her neck to see the face of the person standing before her. “Honey, I have to go. He just arrived. Yes. I’ll see you when I get back. Love you . . . Nanna?”

“Yes, Maria, I am Nanna.”

The woman was tall—Maria estimated at least seven feet. She wore unusually large sunglasses that obscured her eyes. Her outfit was also unusual, especially for Hawai‘i. It appeared lightweight, but not sheer. It glittered in the sunlight and culminated with a large hood that loosely covered her head. Maria could make out long blonde hair pulled back and tucked into the back of the hood.

There was something intimidating about the woman—other than her height. Her mannerisms and voice were soft and non-threatening. Yet, Maria felt a powerful sense of menace sweep through her body.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, I’m Maria . . .”

“Love. I know.”

“Shall we sit?” Nanna suggested.

“Certainly,” Maria replied, working to conceal the fear coursing through her.

Nanna sat, framed by palm trees behind her and the broad blue Pacific beyond. Maria studied the woman sitting across from her. Her features screamed Nordic. Even by that standard, Nanna’s skin was pale. Oddly, Maria noted she could only remember Nanna’s face when looking directly at it.

“I hope you will forgive the sunglasses. Bright light harms my eyes,” Nanna said apologetically.

“Of course,” managed Maria, uncharacteristically tongue-tied.

Nanna began, “What is the meaning of our life here on Earth? Is this all there is? Those are big questions, Maria Love. Do you really want to know?”

“I see all business,” Maria said. “They’re big questions. I drove 45 minutes risking stranger danger to get some answers. That speaks well for my desire to know.”

“Understand. I do have answers to your questions, but I must gauge your seriousness in asking them. Why do you want to know?”

“Why do I want to know? Doesn’t everyone?”

“Yes, Maria. Everyone claims to want answers to such questions. Few people have the stomach for the answers. Even fewer people are willing to question what they must question.”

“And what must I question to know these answers?”

“Everything!”

“That sounds challenging and threatening—like a journey rather than a simple response. Must be so complicated?”

“Of course it’s a journey. Thus has it always been, Maria. It’s threatening only to false paradigms proliferating in the world today and those who perpetuate them.”

“What false paradigms are those?”

“They are the very false paradigms prompting your questions.”

“Do I know what those are?”

“They live within you—just below the surface. You long to articulate them, but they’re just out of reach.”

“Can you give me a hint?”

“You’ve had many hints. Don’t look to me to fill in the blanks for you. Humans are far too willing to seek easy answers to complex questions. You allow authority figures and experts to give you easy answers to complex questions. I’ve come prepared to help *you* fill in those blanks.”

“Let’s begin there. Who are you and where are you from? Why did you contact me?”

“I am Nanna. I am here now. You contacted me.”

“I contacted you? Do you mean the tweet? I was just—”

“Maria, see beyond the obvious. Technology astonishes, but it is far from the only way to communicate in our universe. Your heart called me long ago and your thoughts too.”

“Sounds a little *New Agey* to me.”

“Of course it does. Why wouldn’t it? You’ve been conditioned to believe the world is only what your five senses tell you.”

“I shouldn’t trust my senses?”

“You shouldn’t *only* trust your senses.”

“You’re confusing me. Why shouldn’t I *only* trust my senses? What else can I rely on?”

“Why do Jack and you come to Hawai‘i every year?”

“We like it here. It’s relaxing.”

“Is that all? Where does the impulse originate? Do you receive a letter, a phone call, a tweet inviting you back every year?”

“No.”

“When you’re home and you think about Hawai‘i, what’s happening? Why do you want to come back?”

“We have a good time here.”

“Go deeper, Maria. Why?”

“Hawai‘i calls to me—I long to be here. It’s an inexplicable attraction. The idea, the impulse, to return comes from deep within me.”

“Exactly. Everything in this world is thus connected. Hawai‘i calls you without technology. You have called me without technology. Your senses persuade you it’s not possible and yet it is.”

The logic of Nanna's statement threw Maria off balance. The explanation countered all her training as a journalist. The world was a place of facts—facts backed by evidence or better yet proof. Where was the proof for what Nanna was saying? Those feelings—Maria did feel them within her. She heard that calling all year, as she longed to be back in the islands. Yet, it was completely subjective. Where was the objective proof? Would she accept an answer like that during an interview with a politician?

“But there's no evidence or proof for what you're saying.”

“What about those feelings within you? Are they not real? Here we sit in Hawai'i because Hawai'i calls you. Here we sit talking because you have called me.”

“It's circumstantial. It's subjective,” Maria protested.

“Yes. Isn't it?” Nanna beamed.

“It's impractical. How does the President of the United States or a CEO work according to that principle? They have to make fact-based decisions. Their decisions affect peoples' lives.”

Nanna felt satisfied by Maria's spunk and tenacity. That can be a good thing when balanced. “Agreed, but leaders don't need facts. They need *all* the facts. I'm not denying the validity of your senses or encouraging you to deny them. I'm saying they're incomplete, limiting, and only part of the equation. Consider realities that transcend your senses.”

“Do you mean, God?”

“God? Now, there is an interesting concept. Who is God to you, Maria?”

Nanna had touched a very raw nerve for Maria. “I don't know.”

“When next we meet, we can discuss that further. Think about it. Who is God to you? Are you familiar with the mythologist Joseph Campbell?”

“I’ve heard of him.” Maria was happy the discussion about God transitioned quickly. She wasn’t ready to go there and certainly not with Nanna.

“Campbell wrote about what he called ‘The Hero’s Journey.’ He posited that those we call heroes transcend the group consciousness enforced by the tribe. The hero must push through society’s scarecrows and into the invisible, where waited the reward for both hero and tribe.”

“What a romantic notion,” Maria remarked.

“To reach transcendence, the hero sheds preconceptions and experiences the true essence of existence. Most won’t risk the journey and so the tribe relies on the hero, while despising her for challenging their cherished consensus. Maria, are you a hero?”

Now Maria’s emotions burst the veneer of professional skepticism and confidence. Was she a hero? She’d never thought in those terms.

“I’m a woman who’s tired and stressed. I’m a human being looking for answers. The world I see, the world I’ve experienced makes no sense. Does that make me a hero?”

“You are a hero, Maria. Trust me. Tell me why existence makes no sense to you?” Nanna pushed.

“We come here and we die. In between, we suffer and we struggle. Where’s the meaning in it?”

“What meaning do you seek, Maria? Must it make sense?”

“Yes. I mean, it would be nice if there was some purpose behind it.”

“I’m sure your philosophies and sciences offer answers. Do they not?”

“Science claims we’re an accidental collection of molecules appearing for a time and then dissipating without consequence or meaning. It asserts we live in a universe that’s as accidental as we

are. We're a species riding a wave of random mutation to who knows where—maybe the next accident.”

“So, don't believe what science asserts. Other possibilities exist.”

“Then there's religion. Many religious people believe this life is meaningless preparation to a promised life to come. All our human experiences are without significance in some divine plan.”

I watch both of these thought systems at work in our world and I'm forced to ask why? How can it all be an accident? How can an all-powerful God put inferior beings through a gauntlet of suffering unfit for an enemy?”

I *am not* an accident and my life, this life, is not a meaningless preamble! How can I choose between these two worldviews? Why must I? Is there nothing more?”

Maria felt momentarily exposed by her rant, but strangely freed by its emotional release.

She continued, “They say a career and making big money fulfills you. They say becoming famous fulfills you. They say having children fulfills you. They say, they say, they say!”

Maria felt the flush of emotion permeating her face and tears begin to flow. What the hell, she thought. Here I am talking to a complete stranger. I'm ranting and now I'm crying. There was something motherly and accepting about Nanna that seemed to evoke feelings and emotions from deep within her.

Nanna looked intently at Maria for a moment. “Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh. What you seek you will not find. The gods have secured immortality only for themselves. Satisfy your belly. Cherish the child who holds your hand and make your wife happy with your embrace. This is the fate of man?” She ended the statement with the inflection of a question.

Maria minored in near eastern cultures at UT. She remembered the famous quote imploring Gilgamesh to give up his quest for immortality and accept his fate.

Maria wiped her face. “Gilgamesh? Nanna, are you suggesting I abandon my questions, fall in line, and accept the world the way it is?”

“Maria, I’m suggesting that to ask the questions you’re asking is dangerous. To answer them, is even more dangerous. I must know, beyond doubt, you are committed to seeing the answers through to wherever they lead.”

“I suppose.”

“No supposing! Are you a hero or are ready to slide back into the comforting despair of popular culture and forget this conversation?”

“I want answers. Not more challenges!”

“Why did you study journalism and near eastern ancient cultures in school?” Nanna demanded.

Maria was uncomfortable with how much Nanna seemed to know about her. “Who are you?”

“Why did you choose those areas of study? Do you know?”

“I don’t know. I wanted to be a journalist to change the world. To make a difference.”

“Why near eastern ancient cultures?”

“I don’t know it sounded interesting. What does this have to do with my questions?”

“Nothing is an accident, Maria. Nothing. You have been attracting this path for years. You simply did not know it.”

“I’m not sure I believe that.”

“That’s your comfort zone, Maria. You don’t want to believe in anything. You don’t want to believe in science. You don’t want

to believe in God. You don't want to believe in humanity."

"That's not fair! You don't know me."

"You want to sit in your comfort zone and demand answers. A comfort zone is a safe and blissful place, but nothing ever grows there. You cannot grow there."

"Who are you?" Maria shouted at a volume that attracted the momentary attention of the other diners.

"Who I am is not important until you know who you are."

"You're speaking in riddles. I'm serious . . ."

"So am I," Nanna said with a tinge of anger before regaining her composure.

"Maria, finding the answers to your questions will help you and many other people. I must be sure that you're ready for this journey—that you're the right one for this task. The perils of exposing the truth are many."

"Fine. Great. I'll play the game. Where do I begin?"

"This is not a game," Nanna warned.

"All right, Nanna, I want to know. I want to understand. I want to be a hero. Where do I begin?"

"The beginning."

"The beginning? That's a very guru-like thing to say," Maria snarked.

"Your questions involve who you are and why your life has taken this shape. You must start with your mother."

"What does my mother have to do with this?"

"Your mother has everything to do with it. Something happened during your mother's pregnancy. The experience traumatized her."

"What? Was she sick? Was I sick? I've never heard anything about a problem with the pregnancy."

“She shared it with no one, not even you. She remains in denial. She believes it was a dream.”

“She believes what was a dream? How do you know about this? Were you a nurse at the hospital or something? What do you want from me?”

“Maria, you must trust me. I want nothing from you and everything for you. This is your journey, but I offer to walk it with you. My stake in the outcome matches yours.”

“Why don’t you just tell me?”

“I could tell you what happened with your mother. That would be the easy way. Remember, this process is not about me solving puzzles for you. If I provided the information, you wouldn’t believe me. Ask your mother what happened. Ask her for the truth about your father.”

“What about my father?”

“Trust, Maria, trust. What is uncovered through a conversation with your mother benefits her and you. It also helps me build the trust we need to help each other on the remainder of this journey.”

“That’s it? You drag me all the way to Honolulu to discuss the meaning of life and your answer is talk to my mother?”

“That is all for now. Talk to your mother and trust, Maria.”

Maria wanted to debate more; to demand more answers from this stranger, but she felt overcome by an unexpected calm.

“Alright, I’ll talk to my mother. I came here with questions and I’m leaving with more questions,” Maria said ironically.

“Enjoy your vacation, Maria. Jack and you need this time to rejuvenate for what is ahead. When you return to the mainland, contact your mother, and choose to unlock this door.”

“You are so beautiful,” Nanna said as she rose to leave. “You are so much more than you know. All of you are.”

“When will I see you again?”

“You will know when it is time for us to meet again. When you are ready, I will be there.”

“I’ll be calling?” Maria managed a smile.

“Count on it, Maria.”

Nanna brushed her hand against Maria’s cheek, as she passed. Maria’s eyes involuntarily shuddered, as a profound feeling of love enveloped her. Maria turned to say goodbye, but Nanna was gone. Confused, Maria scanned the terrace, but Nanna had vanished. She turned to face the beach. She watched the palm trees sway. She looked to the sky and experienced the puffy whites floating overhead. The buzz of Waikiki and the sound of the waves across the street seemed more vibrant than before. For the second time in Maria’s life, someone had called her beautiful and she believed it.