

Quality Time: The Equivocal Return of Lizzie Borden

By S D Anugyan Sample Extract

Chapter 2 Other People

She was called Big Donna by her friends, or Big Don; and Bella Donna by her few detractors. In truth she wasn't really that large, only rather full, curvaceous. She was a remarkable woman in many ways, and once she had been a fairly slimmer woman though never actually svelte even as a teenager. In her youth she had discovered that she would rather be plump and happy than the converse, and it was true; she really was happy. She carried herself with sensual ease, her curves moving through the dining room gracefully, lushly, her warmth universal in its generosity. Cassie hated every bone in her big body.

For all that Donna was aware of, and she was aware of a lot, personal enmity tended to pass her by. As a regression therapist, having seen so much darkness at the roots of humanity, she was more impressed by the innate need for light that seemed an ubiquitous, core, driving force upwards. If this were a reflection of her own good nature, she would never bother to determine. What was the point of such philosophical indulgence? For all her intangible skills, she knew esoterica wouldn't keep her warm at night, make her cups of tea, tell her she was loved.

She sat now at Cassie's Milk Party by the window in the dining room, comfortably sipping tea, enjoying the comings and goings, and oblivious to her hostess's vibes. Cassie was suspicious of Donna's blissful contentment, and viewed her out of the corner of her eye whilst attending other guests. Aware of her own simple, flowery cotton dress, with an open white cardigan draped over, she noted the other woman's appearance in all its detail; from the short, neat, blonde hair, the thin grey sweater and skirt hugging her voluptuous body, down to her black-stockinged feet. Shoes being not permitted in the house, Donna's Italian pair had to make do with the trainers and walking boots in the front hall. Cassie tried to attain some satisfaction from the thought. Indeed, she would like to see Donna wear what she wore now as summer progressed, but instinctively

knew the therapist would adapt to all seasons in elegance and style, no matter how limited her budget.

Donna unwittingly dug herself further down in Cassie's estimation as she effortlessly engaged the interest of Tara, an old school friend of Cassie's who had moved to the area several years ago, soon after Cassie. Their lives had followed such parallel routes, it was strange how they didn't see more of each other. They had married at about the same time, both had children, and husbands working in Exeter. Perhaps it was that Cassie's path had more spiritual emphasis, whereas Tara had refuted her bohemian heritage by focusing exclusively on the material. She had come to the party on Cassie's insistence it was an opportunity to catch up. That she would be commandeered by Donna was not part of the plan.

They were not that dissimilar in appearance, both large and elegant. Tara had a firmness to her curves, in contrast with Donna's softness, as if she worked out regularly; and in her white pullover, black slacks, impenetrable dark glasses and tight face illuminated by the afternoon sun in full blaze, she could have been a film star. To Cassie's horror, while attending to her hostess duties, the women had found a common theme in shallow ethics, prevalent, they believed, in the area due to indolent thinking. From buying supermarket lettuces in winter, to the carbon footprint of school runs or household pets, they had arrived, giggling like schoolgirls, at the inability to read labels correctly. "Marmite," said Donna, "which many ethical vegetarians love, is made by Unilever."

As the conversation shifted to how activists were more concerned with the idea of animal welfare than the actuality, her blindness to Cassie leaving for the kitchen in a huff was mainly due to one thing: she was relaxed, enjoying herself in a way that had eluded her for weeks, simply because her extra senses were switched off. She was on holiday. She couldn't choose such a break, being at the mercy of forces she herself didn't understand.

She was known as a Tarot reader with a background in psychotherapy, who specialised in past lives and their influence on the present. Very few knew that the cards were a prop, a ruse, the information coming to her in all manner of other ways, often ceaselessly. With the cards, she could point to symbols for elucidation, picking the ones that expressed most efficiently what she already saw, felt or heard.

In another country she may have been revered as a guru of sorts. Here, despite being in one of the alternative nooks that England provided, she was

merely a fringe interest. This, she blamed on a meeting of old men nearly two thousand years before at Nicea. She wasn't contending with religion, just their version of it.

She never advertised, her clientele was by word-of-mouth, exclusive by default; and known on more than one occasion to travel across the world for a single consultation. She was aware that it was a great gap in western culture, also at times envying the ignorance of those around her, the muted joy of palimpsest recall. We paint the world according to the palette we are given, faded pastels have their attraction; and we alter the narrative according to what we must believe. There may be a few reasons we are drawn more to the mystery than the solving, for the ceaseless input towards Donna was random but persistent. She often felt she knew too much. Some revelations were straightforward: such as the children who treated their parents like servants, fathers expecting their families to snap to attention, or the devoted mother confused by her feelings for a young boy next door. Others were complex and required discretion, such as the conquistador now obsessed with spiritual disciplines all around the world, more cultures to conquer; or her only famous client, the reincarnation of Mary Stuart, paranoid about betrayal, needing to learn how to trust again, and not be so attached to what was in her head. Others were so out-there, she would hesitate to voice the truth no matter how well-paid: the dog newly incarnated as human; the alien from a species of clones realising change could only come from experiencing other forms of life; or the soul split into the two bodies of children whose friendship wreaked merry hell upon their families when one sought to relocate. There were group incarnations as well, such as the child-centred school where the A-frame buildings stood like tipis; the children ran around freely playing in nature much of the day, or choosing to ride the horses from the school stables, often without saddles. The flashbacks to Wounded Knee were unbearable, and Donna found herself at the time collapsing behind a tree, so that the tears could flow unhindered by curious eyes. Wherever they were now, she prayed the children had found peace in this life.

Being at the mercy of these visions, at their constant beck and call, she was grateful when there were none, such as now at Maplecroft, and she could simply revel in the simplicity of the present. She was enjoying conversing with Tara in this absence of extraneous input, they were simply two women having a chat. The gods were not devoid of compassion, it would seem, unless they were merely protecting their investment.

On holiday thus, she couldn't help but retain a kernel of suspicion in her heart, that she couldn't truly ever sign up for oblivion even for a brief recess. She thought of her dumb cat that often couldn't remember that it had been fed. Its persistent crazy behaviour, even with a full bowl right in front of its nose, meant that the problem would be the same, whatever the truth of the matter, a gross parody of eternity. She felt the same about New Age platitudes. People talked about being in the moment. Well, DJs on the radio with their goldfish-memories, were living in the moment. An open mind threatened to let one's brains fall out. Only the principle of unconditional love made her temper scorn for facile ideals. She would attempt to argue that such affection was stupid, that it accepted any form of abuse; yet her experiences had allowed compassion to grow in the face of scepticism; and somehow, despite all her forbidden knowledge, she found herself loving people quite considerably. Even an individual who came to her with manslaughter on his record, she saw as a victim of centuries, whom she was able to help.

In keeping with her cheerful scepticism, she exclaimed, "Only dead fish go with the flow!" to Tara's appreciative laughter, as the room started to fill with people from the kitchen, led by Cassie. An announcement was to be made. Any remaining seats were swiftly taken, and of those left standing, the taller individuals opted for the floor rather than having to bow their heads below the ceiling.

"I just want to say, thank you, thank you all for coming," said the hostess to the crowded room, glowing warmly and raising her glass of fizzy apple juice. "I know this is an unusual time to have a party, and many of you had to make arrangements for your children, speaking of which, mine should be here at any moment..." She looked ostentatiously at her watch with its thin leather strap and delicate square turquoise dial. She had been rather clever in her timing, aware that many of her potential clientele worked selected hours, that the novelty of an afternoon gathering would appeal; and had achieved something of a social success, the first in a long time, as illustrated by the numerous vehicles parked on the verge all the way up from the main road. "Although the milk is the excuse for a get-together, I need to remind you to please write your details on the form in the kitchen, including how many pints you want each week and which hub you prefer it to be delivered to. Payment is in advance, and in cash only."

As she talked on, expounding the virtues of raw milk such as the lactase enzyme, resistance to TB in children, whilst glancing at the notepaper in her

hand, she was also scanning the heads in the room. She was hoping that the local vicar had made a late appearance, as that certainly would count as a social coup. If he had come, her reputation as a Martin Luther King of the area, bridging gaps where none should be, would have been firmly established. It was doubtless because of her distraction, she finished her address with, “Does anybody have any Christians?”

The room burst into laughter, she flustered, putting her hand to her mouth coyly, and the party really took off, everyone forming into spontaneous groups or wandering into the garden and elsewhere with drinks in their hands.

“I think,” Tara, one of the few remaining, said warmly, putting her hand on Cassie’s arm, “the answer is clearly, ‘No.’”

Donna was in the kitchen, filling her small plate with tortillas and guacamole, when a thirty-something couple recognised her.

“You’re Donna, aren’t you,” said the man with a black bushy beard and kindly eyes.

“Yes, I am.”

“Alicia told us about your work,” he said, glancing at his partner, a woman with straight brown hair and a look of gentle determination. “You do past life readings, is that correct?”

“It is.”

“Can we arrange a session with you sometime?”

“Of course. I’ll bring you a flyer in a mo. My bag’s in the other room.”

“No hurry. It must be fascinating work though.”

“Always,” she laughed, and they all laughed. Their group, encouraged in part by the congeners of cider, was growing as others felt drawn to the conversation. Her warmth was infectious. At this moment it was like talking about a duty that was far off, in another country, another person’s problem.

End of ‘Quality Time’ sample