

The Lost Diary of Don Juan

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Extract

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Rumours and Lies

I write in the naked pages of this diary so that the truth will be known and my fate will not be left to the rumours and lies already whispering through the streets of Sevilla. Many, I am sure, will try to turn my life into a morality play after I am dead, but no man's life is so easily understood or dismissed.

I would not risk inscribing my secrets in this diary had I not been convinced to do so by my friend and benefactor, Don Pedro, the Marquis de la Mota. I argued that nothing I would write could be circulated in my lifetime without my being condemned by the Holy Office of the Inquisition and burned at the stake. The Inquisitor himself branded this danger into my imagination just yesterday. Perhaps it is this fresh threat, or the ultimatum of the King, that has at last caused me to pick up this quill and ink these words. The Marquis insisted that it is for posterity that I should write this diary, one's reputation being the only true immortality. But it is hardly vanity alone that causes me to write.

Thirty-six years have passed since my birth, or more correctly since my mother left me, a swaddled bundle, in the barn of the Convento de la Madre Sagrada. It is no doubt a sign of my advancing years that I have been persuaded for the first time in my life to consider how I will be remembered. Yet there is another desire that leads me to write in this diary. It is to pass on what I have learned about the Arts of Passion and of the


holiness of womanhood. Since I have foresworn matrimony and have no heirs of my own blood, I must look to all who follow as my descendants and try to share with them what I have learned from the women I have been privileged to know so well.

A man's recollections always tend towards self-flattery, so I will not rely on my testimony alone and will instead record, as faithfully as possible, not only the events but the words themselves that were shouted during a duel or whispered during a passionate embrace.

It is this same pride that leads me to begin my account with the most daring seduction I have ever undertaken. My ambition was nothing less than to free the King's chaste and lonely daughter from her imprisonment in the royal palace of the Alcázar – for a night. I knew that if I were caught, it would be my privilege as a noble to place my head on the executioner's block and avoid the shame of the gallows.

A man's ambition, however, like his fate, is not always known to him in advance, and as I left the arms of the Widow Elvira, I had no hint of the danger that I would embrace last night.

A Flicker of Passion

 *ne* more kiss,' Elvira said, pulling gently on the sleeve of my maroon doublet as I dressed quickly. I was late, despite having been warned by the Marquis that my very life depended on my presence at the King's audience. I had every intention of arriving on time, but this resolve melted when I discovered that the young woman in my arms this afternoon had been widowed by the sea. Her loneliness and her desire had not been soothed in all the five years since her husband's death. 'Just *one*,' she added, her lips now inclining towards mine. I looked at her smiling face and her black hair, dishevelled by our earlier desire. Her clear brown eyes reflected the flames of the candles that encircled the altar of her bed. How could I refuse her?

I held her cheeks with the tips of my fingers and came closer, approaching her face slowly, anticipation being everything. I brushed her lips gently with mine and then tickled the corner of her mouth with the smallest tip of my tongue. I knew not to smother her with kisses so she would have to defend herself from my assault. I sipped the moist nectar of her mouth as she opened her petals to me. Our mouths fused together, her thirst palpable and her breath short. With our tongues and lips, we drank from each other a cordial as sweet as honey. When I pulled back at long last, she hovered in midair, her eyes still closed but her thirst quenched.

I stroked her soft cheek with my forefinger. 'I am sorry I

cannot give you more than an evening's entertainment,' I said, 'but that is all that I can give any woman.'

'Don Juan, you gave me more than my husband ever did. I'd heard that in your eyes, a woman sees her true beauty for the first time.' She swallowed. 'It was not a lie.'

I smiled and bowed my head, knowing that each woman's soul is a singular treasure. It was when growing up as an orphan in a convent that I first discovered these riches that few men have the privilege to behold. It was in the words as much as the kisses from *Hermana Teresa's* mouth that I learned to hear the quiet whispers of a woman's joys, fears and longings.

The clang of the local church bells was like a rod snapping against my skin. My coachman, *Cristóbal*, knocked on the door impatiently. I knew my opportunity to honour the King and win his protection was quickly slipping through my fingers.

'I am sorry to have to leave so abruptly,' I said as I placed my plumed black hat on my head. 'Where I go is not nearly as enjoyable as where I have been.' She lay back in her bed with a confirming smile. I grabbed my cape and sword before darting out of her house.

Cristóbal was a head taller than me but thinner, and his limbs were askew like those of a scarecrow. He crossed himself nervously, as he always did when he saw me after one of my seductions. 'Another widow, my Lord?' he said with a wince.

'I suppose you believe the priests – that a widow should live like a nun until she joins her husband in heaven. Let me tell you a secret, *Cristóbal* – a woman's desire does not die before her last breath.'

He blushed and said, 'The *audience*, my Lord.'

'What are we waiting for?' I said with a smile, and stepped into the carriage.

'*Quickly now!*' *Cristóbal* urged my mare, no doubt worried for my life, but not just my life. A dead man has no need for a coachman.

Bonita knew our urgency just from the force of *Cristóbal's* rarely raised voice and galloped through the narrow streets of

Lebrija, the wheels of the black carriage scraping against the whitewashed walls. Unlike other coach drivers, Cristóbal never used a whip, and he had a way of whispering into a horse's ear that made her do whatever he wanted. While he had this skill with horses, he was terrified of women. He had always had this fear, ever since I first found him in the Arenal, when he was a boy of twelve. He had run away from his family and was looking for work, and I was looking for a coachman but could not afford a full-grown one. I was no more than twenty-two at the time, and I became something of an older brother to him as we grew into manhood together.

The carriage sped along the rough dirt road back to Sevilla, the wheels spinning dust in every direction. After less than two hours of hard riding, I could see through the carriage window the beautiful walls of Sevilla, burned pink and red by the light of the summer sunset. From within the city, the Giralda erupted to the heavens. At the crown of the tower stood a bronze woman, our city's symbol of faith, a cross in one hand and a palm frond in the other. Next to the bell tower, the round moon, one day past full, already rested on the cathedral like a satisfied woman reclining in her heavenly bed.

Black smoke suddenly eclipsed the moon as we approached a massive crowd gathered on the Prado de San Sebastián, just outside the city walls. The charred scent of burning flesh offended my nose and turned my stomach. I looked around nervously, but there was no other road to take, and Cristóbal knew it was too late to turn back. Bonita was forced to stop, as we were now surrounded on all sides by a crowd watching a hellish spectacle, mouths agape with terror and eyes ablaze with fascination.

Roped to tall stakes were half a dozen men and women. Two stood defiantly, while the bodies of the rest slouched lifelessly. The dead had chosen to confess their heresy and in return received the mercy of garrotting before their burning. Beneath them, piles of kindling and logs fuelled great bonfires that engulfed them and even reached the cross atop each stake.

Within the flames, I saw the face of a boy, certainly no older than I was when I arrived in Sevilla at the age of sixteen. Whether commoner or noble, all the heretics wore the *sanbenito* gown painted with devils and flames. Although I did not know their crimes, some were no doubt followers of Luther. One woman had red hair, and this alone may have caused her to be denounced as a witch. Roped and burning on other stakes next to them were the wooden statues that allowed those who had fled or died in the torture chambers to be burned in effigy. Not even in death did one escape the fury of the Inquisition. The ornate statues looked as real as those figures of Our Lord Jesus paraded during Holy Week and had been carved by the same sculptors. It was of utmost importance to the inquisitors that the semblances were exact; these artists were so skilful that even tears on the faces of the sculptures looked as if they were falling down their cheeks.

The screams of the still-living victims filled my ears as the flames licked their skin.

'Ride on!' I said to Cristóbal, unwilling to spend another moment in this diabolical place. But we could not move – not only because of the thickness of the crowd but because soldiers of the Inquisition were now blocking our way.

The soldiers wore metal-studded red vests over their chain-mail shirts, wide, black leather belts fastened around their waists, and round steel helmets on their heads. They carried crossbows that were fired with a trigger, making them extremely deadly. Several soldiers approached our carriage. Only then did I see who stood behind them.

'Ah, Don Juan, have you come to see what your future holds?' Fray Ignacio de Estrada had deep lines in his cheeks, and his temples seemed pressed into his head as if in a vice. He did not wear the black robe and regal pointed hat with a purple plume that most inquisitors wore. Instead, he wore only the simple black and white habit of a Dominican friar. He wore no hat, just the bald head and halo of hair favoured by any tonsured monk. Around his neck hung a roughly fashioned cross made of olive

wood. Although now in his fifties, the Inquisitor still had the broad shoulders of a vigorous warrior of God.

It was this man who was most responsible for the horror that was occurring all around me. While the inquisitors always turned their victims over to the civil authorities to deny responsibility for their executions, everyone knew who demanded that the kindling be lit.

Fray Ignacio has always seen himself as a holy crusader, sending to their deaths all who offend faith or public decency. He had risen quickly in the hierarchy of the Inquisition and was now second only to the Inquisitor-General himself. I had known Fray Ignacio since he had been my teacher at the monastery. His lessons did not endear him to me.

'Even the greatest sinners,' he added with a smile that was impossible to distinguish from a sneer, 'cannot escape the Wrath of God for ever.'

I breathed deeply and tried to hold my tongue. I could not. 'Futures are famously hard to predict, your *Reverence*.'

'Not yours, Don Juan,' he said through gritted teeth. 'As soon as your favour with the King runs out, I will personally see to it that you are punished for each and every one of your sins.'

'The greatest sinners are always punished last, *your Reverence*. Now with your permission, the King is waiting.'

'So am I,' the Inquisitor said but, bowing to the King's power, he flicked his wrist for the guards to let us through. The soldiers and the sea of people parted, as Cristóbal nervously coaxed the mare forward. The Marquis had taught me many years ago never to show weakness to an opponent, but as soon as we were out of view, I collapsed back against my seat and sighed in relief. We galloped again, and as we descended a final hill to the city, I could see the welcoming embrace of its gates. Yet across the riverbanks stood the stone Castillo de San Jorge, the headquarters of the Inquisition, like a beast laying siege to our city.

'*Quickly now! Quickly!*' Cristóbal urged, shaking the reins as we careened through the gates of the city. Bonita raced the remaining distance to the Alcázar, the carriage lurching back and forth

on the cobblestones, until at last we arrived at the Puerta del León.

After presenting myself, I was permitted to enter through the heavy wooden doors that stood the height of two men. Rushing into the interior palace, I finally arrived at the Salón de Embajadores. Noble well-wishers filled the room, and the whisper of court gossip and political intrigue filled the air. The walls were tiled and plastered in the knotted geometric designs of the Moors. Black marble columns with gold capitals skirted the room, spanned by horseshoe arches. I looked up in awe at the gold dome that glittered like the star-filled sky. It was here in this audience chamber that, long ago, King Pedro the Cruel decided to kill his own brother for falling in love with the princess whom he himself was to marry. I wondered whether I also would be sentenced to death in this chamber.