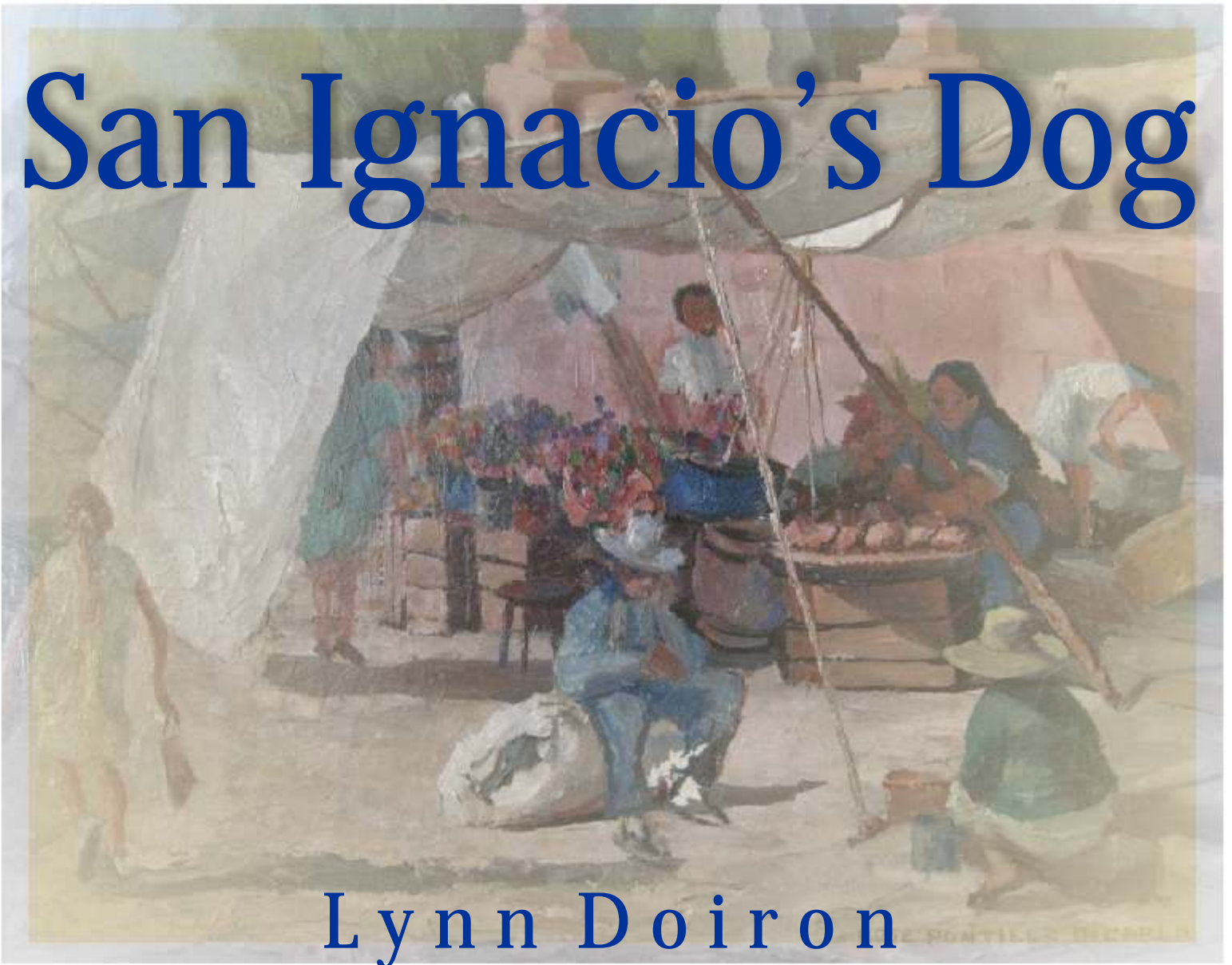


San Ignacio's Dog



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We've stopped in San Ignacio. Now, the GMC Envoy is parked, nosed into an unmarked slot abutting the town's square. We disembark, close the four doors with loud whumps of air and metal. There are hundreds of quiet palms. Their high palm fronds are not clicking—the wind is yet sleeping, still unawake. Underfoot there is flagstone and the road through San Ignacio is flagstone and I am remembering this, remembering the early afternoon light of a February day. Whether the sun cast rose-colored shadows on the stones or it is merely my recollections which color the stones—is impossible to say.

Light, remembered light, is not quantifiable. Reflections of friendship tint what may have actually been. The dance of sun through the clear amber of a sweat-beaded glass of cerveza may have been closer to honey-gold than rubbed amber. The three tacos de pescado on each of our plates may have disappeared less hastily than recollection recalls, the date bread Mike purchased and brought back to share at our table, less moist, less rich with flavors of gingerbread, or was it zucchini, in the actual moment of tasting? And Mike's smile, his face generous with the joy of his find, may have been his everyday smile. But it didn't seem so then, and seems even less likely in retrospect, from here, these several hundred miles north and days after this side trip to a small town after meeting the whales in Guerrero Negro.

San Ignacio's town square: not grass but concrete. And not square but rectangular. Empty park benches with wrought-iron arms for other days, evenings, nights where vendors might vend. Mariachis might play. Dancers might dance. Couples might sway. Children run behind blue-jeaned legs and rippling skirts, the sandals of abuelas, the wheeled strollers of brown-eyed toddlers.

This, all imagined for other times, hours when we are not there. When every face is familiar to every other face, the new and the old, the unchanging familia continually changing, the rosebud lips of the infant hiding the mouth with its buds of teeth yet to grow, the gaps where the baby teeth have said adios, the new smiles coming in, the white dazzle of grins against creaseless brown skins, the creases of laugh lines around eyes, of squinting too long into garden rows or the blaze in the eyes of a woman, a man, the dimming of what can be seen, the sharpening of what can be heard, the calloused intuitions, the lines drawn—happy and not.



Full moon over a receding morning tide. Five hundred plus more-or-less miles between here and there. I can see a horizon that goes on forever. Pink beginnings, yellowing blues, denim-jean frayed cuffs of clouds. Five hundred plus miles and agave, yucca, cirio (boojum)—arid flora spiking the desert sky.

I am home and remembering that other place: the empty courtyard where we tried to dance, the baño sign above an open door across the calle, the little dog—el perrito—and the old man who accepted mi cinco pesos for the use of his bathroom. I picture him, his thinning gray hair, his half-a-head shorter than me height, and his little dog, a stiff-haired, beige little dog, a schnauzer-scottie mix the color of perfectly oven-baked buttermilk biscuits, who would not take a step until the five peso coin had met his master's hand. Only then, the sure lope through an opposite door, a right turn (derecho) down a solid walk, a left turn (izquierdo) along a brick and concrete path where, in the immediate distance an overhead sign could be seen, could be read clearly with black painted letters across the white-painted piece of plywood: baños. Abruptly, as if el perrito could read the sign, he turned and raced back to his owner.



Later, a friend, disbelieving my story about the baño guide dog, crosses the calle. The dog does not move from his stance at the feet of his master until the five peso coin meets the old man's palm; then he takes off at a near run—derecho, izquierdo, a short pause under the baño sign, and back to his master. What does all of this matter? Imagination tells me it does; they are partners; the food of one depends upon the coins of the other; and the coins of the other depend upon the astuteness of the guide.

How many hundreds of years ago did such partnerships begin? The full-rounding payback between two and four-legged friends? Or between no-legged and two-legged friends? Ah, but I have slipped into recollections of the previous days with the whales. This is not good, not when I meant to move forward.

How does one move forward when entering a very old church? A church with lit candles on the altar, with believers occupying the pews, with litanies wafting out through the bougainvillea and past the ripe oranges in the citrus trees of the side yards? The days open and close. Light and dark are miracles of bright becoming followed by unraveling tattered silk scarves littered with diamonds and moons fickle with their phases. Good and evil. Haloes and horns. My mother was an angel long before death took her away from ironing and dishes. Prayers go up, or they did. I like to think Jesus was wise enough to pray for a gift like my mama in his heaven. What is an angel, if not her? What is a heaven if she doesn't fill it? And what use are churches if she is not among those seated on their hard, wooden pews, obeying their chiseled rules?



I am lost. The writing skids to a standstill. Memory has skipped like a stylus on an old 33 rpm vinyl disc. I meant to record Baja, the village of San Ignacio, el perrito and a partnership. Then the church wandered into the words, made a big deal of itself and its oranges. I am listening for birds. I hear my soles scuff a rough wood floor, the tools in the back of a white pick-up truck going hell-bent-for-leather bang the truck's bed. The whush of a bicycle coasting past. No birds. Not a twitter imagined or remembered. And then, too, there were the silent fronds of the date palms high overhead. Not a click. Not a shuffle of sound.