



the CURANDERO



EIGHT STORIES

by

DANIEL CURLEY



Bk Mk Press
College of Arts & Sciences

University of Missouri-Kansas City
Scotfield Hall, 2nd Floor
Kansas City, MO 64110-2499





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DANIEL CURLEY

DAN CURLEY'S untimely death took from us one of our best writers. True, his was not a name recognized by the audience films and television programs aim at. He never became a fashionable product. His sense of irony was too great; his sense of complexity too well developed; his sense of language and form too subtle and too precise. He took those special readers who want special writers into the imaginations and fears and thwarted dreams of people who had wandered into the depths.

There are textures and contrasts in Dan Curley's writing that show us at once that he is more than another sound writer who somehow missed greatness. His stories grip us too hard for that. Somehow it seems right that Chicago readers should value him so much, not because he was from Illinois but because his toughness and feelings as a writer and a man endeared him to a city that has grappled regularly with so much. Even at the end Curley was exploring territory writers usually avoid. Not every writer looks inside minds struggling with present and past as *their capacities wane with advanced age. Our literature as much as our culture has preferred the lures of youth and dexterity.* Dan Curley did not take the easy way. In his stories he dealt with those most difficult challenges of mind and mortality until the very end.

— Dan Jaffe

The Curandero

PORTER REFUSED TO OPEN HIS EYES. DAY OR NIGHT? HE listened. The nails of the rooftop guard dog (Doberman) clicked on the tiles above his head. A woman's heels spoke sharply from the street. A soft croak meant the night heron (yellow crowned) was fishing again at the hotel pool. Night. A cock crowed. Morning — or not. The church bell chimed. He counted. Ting-ting. Quarter past. Ting-ting, ting-ting. Three quarters. He held his breath. Bong. Bong. Bong. Three forty-five and he knew he was dying. The rote of the surf was more reliable than his pulse.

Still without opening his eyes, he counted the quarter hours until he could decently call a doctor to comfort his dying hours. The cock crowed again and again, but he felt no more betrayed than usual. A cat snarled almost apologetically. The heron replied. And that was that. No karate scream as the cat charged. No beating of the great wings. A door opened and closed near at hand. Two people walked softly. The rooftop dog barked once. The quarter hours passed solemnly.

Traffic began to pick up. A truck. A motorcycle. A sparse procession of cars. A sound like a troop of the guards taking their horses out for exercise in the cool of the morning. His eyelids flickered. He knew it was a parade of some sort. Many people walking together. Perhaps a funeral. In the dark of his mind, he groped for the phone. "Doctor," he said. "Medico. Help me."

"The doctor visits the hotel at nine o'clock," the desk clerk said, the lovely clerk, who was almost too much for a dying man to bear. "In half an hour," she said.

He opened his eyes. Sunlight was streaming into the room. He seemed to have missed something. He lay suspended between the traffic and the surf. The shock was too great. He closed his eyes, although he wondered if he

should lay out a white cloth, candles, and holy water for the doctor's visit.

He missed something else. "Ah, so," the doctor said. It was hard to tell what language he thought he was speaking. It sounded like English with a German accent, although he looked Italian and was undoubtedly Mexican. "Tell me your symptoms," he said.

"What good are symptoms when I'm dying?" Porter said.

"I must certify the cause of death," the doctor said. "This is no time to be selfish."

"To begin with," Porter said, "I'm dying."

"That may be true," the doctor said, "but it is for me to say. Besides, that is not a symptom. It is a conclusion. And, if I may say so, one you are not qualified to draw. Now, symptoms. I haven't got all day."

"I'm weak and dizzy," Porter said.

"Good," the doctor said. "Hold the thermometer under your arm."

"What do you mean good?" Porter said. With a wry sort of skepticism, he tucked the thermometer under his arm. Perhaps that was all right for centigrade.

"I mean those are fine symptoms," the doctor said. "Go on."

"I have a headache," Porter said. "I threw up."

"Good, good. Shall we consider amoebic dysentery?"

"I'd rather not," Porter said. "No diarrhea."

"No," the doctor said. "Too bad. How about hepatitis? We must always think of hepatitis. But I don't believe it. Shall we say *la turista*?"

"No diarrhea," Porter said triumphantly. "Besides, I'm dying."

"That's all you know," the doctor said. He thumped Porter sternly with his cold hands. It was a long time since

Porter had been thumped. He wondered what machine had taken over that function.

The doctor scribbled a fine doctorly hand over two prescription forms. "Take these prescriptions to the *farmacia*. One is for headache. One is an antibiotic. Five thousand pesos."

In spite of his fear of death, Porter quailed until he had calculated the rate of exchange.

"You won't die today," the doctor said as he went out the door.

"And I won't die here, either," Porter said and got out of bed. An hour later he was in his car and on the road.

HE DROVE ALL DAY, although it is hard to say how far he got. He stopped when he realized he had been driving for a long time. The car was parked on a narrow turn-out on a mountain road. Below him in the valley, the church and houses of a village glittered in the setting sun. He got out of the car and stepped toward the village and began a long slow slide down the mountain.

He was sliding on earth that was only dust with a few pebbles thrown in. There was nothing to hold to. He was sliding through tier after tier of tiny terraces, each no bigger than a kitchen table, each enclosed by a low arc of stone wall built out from the side of the mountain, all long since abandoned and grown up in high weeds and even small pines. He expected each moment to come to rest among the weeds, against a pine, but he went on, avoiding all that seemed hopeful and finding only what was surely perverse.

He clutched at weeds. He clutched at pine needles. Nothing helped. Perhaps this is death, he thought. He closed his eyes.

When he opened his eyes, the sun dazzled him. He blinked. But it wasn't quite like the sun really. He looked again — cautiously.

A bare bulb on a bare wire hung just over his face. He turned his head. The bare wire snaked over bare pole rafters under a thatch. A fire burned on the bare dirt floor. There was some smoke but not much. He had some excuse for thinking he might be in hell, but he settled for a more conventional, "Where am I?"

"In a hut outside a village," a man said.

"Oh," Porter said as if he had suspected it all along. He turned his head again and saw the man hunkered beside him. He wore a black poncho and a straw hat covered with dangling ribbons of many colors.

"What am I doing here?" Porter asked.

"You are waiting for your cure," the man said.

"There is no cure," Porter said.

"That remains to be seen," the man said.

It occurred to Porter that the conversation was extremely easy. Looking at the man, a classic Mayan from a temple frieze, he wouldn't have expected so much as Spanish. "What language are we speaking?" he said. "Or perhaps being dead allows me to understand all languages."

"You are not dead," the man said. "And we are speaking English."

"Dying, then," Porter said.

"Quite possibly," the man said.

Terror squeezed Porter's heart, but there was also relief that someone was taking him seriously at last. He smiled and fell asleep.

The flicker of firelight woke him. But, no, it was a candle — two candles — close to his head. He saw as well a white cloth and a small basin of water. "I've sent for the

priest," a man said. It was the same man.

"It's so near, then?" Porter said.

"What is so near?" the man said.

"My death," Porter said. He marvelled at the ease with which he said it, the satisfaction after a lifetime of dread.

"Nonsense," the man said. "You are in no danger of dying, but you are in great danger."

"I am?" Porter said.

"I have watched the shadows of dreams across your face," the man said. He passed the shadow of his hand across Porter's face. "I have consulted your pulse." He touched it lightly. Porter felt it leap.

"I have a very good pulse," he said more like himself. "All the doctors say so, all the nurses, any instrument you can name."

"That may be true — or not," the man said. "But the fact remains that your soul is loose."

"Loose?" Porter said.

"Dangling by a thread," the man said. "Therefore, the priest. Therefore, you must be baptized."

"I can go to the church," Porter said. He jumped up and stood just long enough to observe that he was wearing a long white dress, richly embroidered with the shapes of fantastic birds, beasts, and flowers. Then he fell back on his pallet.

"No," the man said, "you cannot go to church, and even if you could go, the priest could not. The priest is not allowed in the church."

The pallet began a slow, heavy spiral of descent. "The priest is not allowed in the church?" Porter asked.

"By our laws the priest is not allowed in the church. He may baptize at the church door, but that is all. No more." He cut the priest off with a karate chop.

As if the very violence of denial had itself evoked him, the priest was in the hut. "Bless all in this house," he said off hand.

"Don't exceed your authority, father," the man said. He frowned a Mayan frown.

"Sorry," the priest said. "I thought since the house is outside the village —"

"It is better not to think," the man said.

"Clearly," the priest said. "Nothing is as you think."

"Everything is as I think," the man said. "The baptism."

When the ceremony was over and the priest had left, the man said, "Now we can begin the cure. The baptism will bind your soul to your body well enough until I can decide on the proper measures. But first, get out of that baptismal dress."

"I like it," Porter said.

"Out of it," the man said. "At once." It was clear he had never in his life had to repeat a command.

"Can I buy it?" Porter said.

"You already have," the man said. "With money from your billfold." He gestured, and Porter saw a neat pile of his clothes, perhaps freshly laundered, with his billfold on top and a sheaf of bills carefully fanning out as if in an ad for pesos.

He dressed as quickly as he could — not very quickly. He had particular trouble with his shirt, which had indeed been washed and buttoned up. Even the cuffs had been buttoned and trapped him as in a straight jacket.

"Now that you are dressed in your proper garments — including your soul," the man said, "let us have no more deception, trickery, pretense, sham, or lying. Let us have only yourself. And first you must tell me every person you have spoken with in the last two weeks."

"First," Porter said, "you must tell me how you come to speak such elegant English."

"I said no more frivolity," the man said. "No bandying of words." His voice was soft but Porter's ears rang. "It is time to begin your cure, here in full view of the Sacred Mountain." He gestured broadly as if the mountains that surrounded them were all of them sacred.

"But — " Porter said.

"To whom have you spoken in the past two weeks?" the man said sternly. "What did you say to them? What did they say to you?"

Porter was still not convinced they were speaking English, but he went on as best he could. "In the past two weeks," he said, "I have spoken to fourteen hotel clerks. Fourteen times I have said, '*Habitación, una persona, una noche.*' Fourteen times they have said, 'Yes, sir, a room for the night for one.' I have spoken to forty-two waiters. Fourteen times I have said, '*Jugo de naranja, huevos rancheros, chocolate con leche.*' And fourteen times they have said, 'Very good, sir. Will there be anything else?' So I have said, '*Pan tostado, mantequilla, mermelada.*' And they have said, 'Toast, butter, and marmalade come with the meal.' Fourteen times I have ordered a ham sandwich and a bottle of beer — maybe ham and cheese a few times."

"You must be precise."

"All right," Porter said, "'*diez jamón*' and '*cuatro jamón y queso.*'"

"And they said?"

"They said, 'Will that be all?'"

"Nothing more?"

"They said, '*Bohemia, Carta Blanca, Superior, Dos Equis* —' I think one said '*Tecate.*'"

"Are you sure?"

"Sí, one said, '*Tecate.*'"

"And you said?"

"I said, '*Bohemia*' or '*Carta Blanca*' or '*Superior*' or '*Dos Equis*' or '*Tecate*.' I always said the second one they mentioned."

"Anything else?"

"Fourteen times I have said, '*Sopa del día, carne asada, flan*.' and fourteen times they have said, 'Very good, sir: the soup, the roast, the caramel custard. Anything else?' And I have said, '*Cerveza*.' And they said —"

"*Bohemia*," the man said, "*Carta Blanca, Superior, Dos Equis, Tecate*. Anything else?"

"Four laundresses held up two fingers for two thousand pesos and two plus five for twenty-five hundred and three for three thousand and four plus five for forty-five hundred."

"You were being robbed blind," the man said.

"I said to a doctor, 'I'm dying.' And he said, '*La turista*. Five thousand pesos.'"

"And you said, '*Gracias*.'"

"I said, '*Gracias*,'" Porter said.

"There must be more," the man said.

"Twenty-eight Pemex attendants said, '*Lleno?*' And I said, '*¡Sí*, fill it up.'"

"Twenty-eight times?"

"*¡Sí*."

The man grunted as if he had been hit in the stomach. "Surely you can't expect such trash to sustain you," he said. "Surely you spoke to some American if only to know the score of the Superbowl game."

Porter drew himself up. "I don't even know who was in the Superbowl," he said. "I don't know if there was a Superbowl."

"That's the most encouraging sign so far," the man said.

"I tipped them all generously," Porter added, "never less than fifteen percent."

"It sounds as if we were dealing with a basic insecurity here," the man said, "and your soul is still loose."

Porter was astonished to discover that this exchange — and his baptism — had taken up the entire first day of his cure. He was even more astonished to discover that the second day was to be devoted to his dreams.

"That's easy," Porter said —

"I am the curandero," the man said, "and nothing is easy or hard until I say so."

"Sorry," Porter said. "What I mean is that I dream the same thing every night. I'm driving a car."

"Where?" the curandero said.

"Up a mountain," Porter said.

"Describe it."

"There is only the road. It is full of curves and double curves and U-curves and curves one after another like a slalom." He glanced at the curandero.

"I know what a slalom is," the curandero said.

"The curves are always faster than my lights can turn. I'm always trying to see as fast as the curves and faster than my lights. I'm always looking into darkness, never where the lights are. There is darkness on both sides of the road. One side may be a cliff towering above me. One side may be a ravine opening below me. The white lines at the edges are deceptive. Sometimes they are painted a little out onto the air to trick me. The car is always a little out of control, sluggish, slow to respond or leaping madly ahead."

"This is a very fine dream," the curandero said, "but surely it must become a little boring night after night."

"Never," Porter said. "It was as terrifying last night as

it was the first time I had it.”

“Go on,” the curandero said.

“There is always the place where water glistens on the road out in the dark ahead of the lights. I’ll never know how deep it is. I’ll never be able to stop. But I pass. I also pass the dark truck stalled in the curve and dodge around the sleeping bull. But then there are lights coming at me. I am blinded. I can’t find the road.”

“And then?” the curandero asked.

“I wake up,” Porter said.

“Of course,” the curandero said. “And what did you dream the night before that?”

“I was driving my car up a mountain,” Porter said. “There was only the road, full of curves and double curves and U-curves and curves one after another like a slalom.”

“I know what a slalom is,” the curandero said. “Go on.”

And Porter did go on. He went on to the end and then twelve more times. And that was the second day of his cure.

On the third day, even before Porter was quite awake, the curandero said, “What did you dream?”

“I was driving my car,” Porter said.

“I know what a slalom is,” the curandero said.

“I drove through the river that runs across the road,” Porter said. “I passed the truck. I passed the bull. I drove until I met the lights. I followed the line at the edge of the road. It was painted out onto the air. I drove on the air until I was past the light, then I came back to the road.”

“Brilliant,” the curandero said. “Truly brilliant. The dream of power in its purest form. If you were one of us, I’d urge you to become a curandero. Why, I myself had to dream the same dream only three times to be thought worthy.”

“Thank you,” Porter said.