MARIA EVANGELISTE*

Greg Sarris

Her name was Maria, which was what the priest at St. Rose Church called all of the Indian girls, even this girl Maria Evangeliste, who ironed his vestments and each Sunday played the violin so beautifully as the communicants marched to the altar to receive the sacraments that Jesus was said to smile down from the rafters at the dispensation of his body and blood. That was why on a Friday when she hadn't returned by nightfall, and still no sign of her at mass on Sunday, the priest worried as much as her family, and after mass notified the sheriff. The flatbed wagon that she had been driving was found by an apple farmer outside his stable, as if the pale grey old gelding was waiting to be unhitched and led to a stall inside. The two cherrywood chairs she'd purchased on the priest's behalf stood upright, still on the wagon bed, wedged between bales of straw. The priest had contracted the chairs for his rectory from a carpenter in Bodega; and Maria, needing any small amount of compensation, offered to drive the old gelding nearly a ten mile trip west and then back. Still, she should have returned before nightfall for she left at dawn, the priest's money for the carpenter secure in her coat pocket.

A number of things could've happened to her. The horse might've spooked, jerking the wagon so that if she wasn't paying close attention she would've been tossed to the ground -- she might be lying on the roadside someplace, knocked unconscious, a

* Evangeliste was not the actual name.

broken back, God forbid a broken neck. She could've been raped, left in the brush somewhere even. At the time, in 1903, American Indians had not yet been granted U.S. citizenship and therefore had no recourse in a U.S. court. A lone Coast Miwok girl in Sonoma County was easy prey for marauding American men and boys who roamed the back roads, as the old Indians used to say, like packs of dogs.

But wouldn't they have hesitated, considering the possibility that Maria Evangeliste was a U.S. citizen of Mexican descent, a guise many Indians used? Surely, approaching the wagon they would have seen the wooden cross hanging from her neck. If that didn't stop them, she had the ultimate defense, an embroidered crimson sash the priest wore at mass and had given her that morning as proof of protection from the church, which she'd kept folded in her other pocket, ready in the event someone should assault her, even if only to search her pockets to steal the priest's money for the carpenter. But none of these things happened.

As she rounded a hilly curve on the dirt road, which is now paved and called Occidental Road, she spotted two women. They were Indian women in long nineteenth century dresses, scarves covering their heads and tied under the chin, and Maria Evangeliste recognized them immediately. They were twin sisters, childless elderly southern Pomo women from the outskirts of Sebastopol just a couple miles up the road. They did not resemble one another, one twin short and stout, the other taller, much darker, the color of oak bark. But, at that moment, hardly would Maria Evangeliste have remarked at their appearance, or the fact that, side by side, they stood in the middle of the road halting her passage, or even that she was in the vicinity of the rumored secret cave old people talked about in revered whispers. She understood what was happening

without thinking, knew all at once. So when the taller of the two women commanded her off the wagon with only a nod of the chin, she knew she had no choice but to get down and follow them. And, it is told, that was how it started, how the twin sisters took Maria Evangeliste to train her as a Human Bear.

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Why Maria Evangeliste was traveling on Occidental Road is a mystery. The usual route from Santa Rosa to the coastal town of Bodega was, and still is, the road west across the lagoon to the town of Sebastopol and then more or less straight to the coast. Returning from Bodega, she would have had to venture north along one of two or three narrow roads, wide paths really, to reach what is now Occidental Road -- which would have been a longer, circuitous way to go, not to mention more dangerous given that she would be more isolated in the event she was assaulted. There was also greater risk of the old horse stumbling, some kind of accident with the wagon, on an unreliable road. Did she not want to pass through the town of Sebastopol because it was Friday, late in the day, and gangs of men off work from the sawmill and nearby orchards would already be gathered around the pubs, men who were drinking and might catch sight of her alone? There was an encampment of Indians where Occidental Road emptied onto the Santa Rosa plain -- had she a friend she wanted to visit? Winter rain flooded, and still floods, the lagoon -- was she traveling at a time when the water was high, when she needed to cross the northern bridge over the lagoon rather than the bridge in Sebastopol?

Following an ancient story of how the Human Bear cult started, where a lone boy

picking blackberries was kidnapped by grizzly bears and afforded their secrets and indomitable physical prowess, it is said that most initiates to the cult were likewise kidnapped. Human Bears might watch a young person carefully for some time, months or even years, regarding the young person's suitability for induction. Stories are told of Human Bears traveling far distances to study a potential initiate, often in the guise of wanting only to see an old friend or to trade. They might even warn chosen individuals of their impending abduction, reminding them that they had no choice henceforth but to acquiesce and keep silent. Had Maria Evangeliste made arrangements beforehand, driven the priest's wagon north to fulfill her obligation?

Four days later, on a Tuesday morning, she returned. She lived with her family and a changing assembly of relatives forever in search of work in a clapboard house west of town. The small house, said to be owned by a dairy rancher for whom her father worked, sat above Santa Rosa creek. Behind the house, lining the creek, was a stand of willow trees. A relative of my grandmother's, who first told me the story, said Maria Evangeliste appeared from behind the trees. Later another older relative pointed to a bald hillside while we were driving on Occidental Road and mentioned the story, claiming that Maria Evangeliste was first discovered standing in front of her house, not behind in the willows, and that in the faint morning light she was still as stone. Both versions posit that she was unharmed, returned as she had left, groomed, unsullied.

She could not tell where she had been. Did she lie, perhaps say that she lost control of the wagon after the horse spooked? Did she say as much in order to lead others to believe she'd run off with a young man? What was the sheriff told? The priest? However the case was resolved in the minds of the sheriff and the priest -- whether from

whatever story the girl might've relayed or from whatever either of them surmised themselves about what happened -- the Indians were not so easily satisfied. For the Indians, enough of them to pass on a story anyway, the girl's answers were suspect and pointed only to one possible outcome: The two old twins in Sebastopol had found a successor.

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I visited the bald hillside a couple of weeks ago, parked my car on Occidental Road, then crawled under a barbed wire fence and hiked through brush and looming redwood trees, dark shade. Where would the secret cave be -- this side of the hill, below the steep face of naked rock, or around the backside? Would such a cave exist still? Might not loggers or farmers have destroyed it long ago? Unable to see past a thicket of blackberry bramble, I could no longer look back and see the road. The outcropping of rock, exposed above the curtain of tree tops, was a face with crater formations and crevices, as if the hill, like an enormous and uninhibited animal, was observing my approach. I became agitated. The story filled me. Oh, these are modern times, I told myself. What's a story these days? If anything, I should be worrying about trespassing on private property. Nonetheless, I stopped. Looking over the blackberry bramble to the trees, I attempted to regain my bearings, again trying to gauge my distance from the road.

In 1903, when the twin sisters abducted Maria Evangeliste, loggers had leveled the trees a second time -- or were about to. The magnificent original redwoods, reaching down from the Oregon border to present day Monterey County, were for the most part

cleared between 1830 and 1870. The trees before me, a third growth of redwoods, were about a hundred years old, and a hundred feet tall. In 1903 the gigantic original trees that once sheltered the grizzly bears were gone; and, whether or not the second stand of trees still stood, the grizzly was extinct in the region, killed decades before by Mexican *vaqueros* and American settlers. The Human Bear cult, like the grizzly bear, was dependent on the trees and on an open landscape, unencumbered by fences and ranchers protective of livestock. Stories abound -- even among local non-Indians -- of ranchers felling a bear only to find when they went to retrieve the carcass an empty hide. The twin sisters, how did they instruct their last recruit? Did they show Maria Evangeliste a route that was still safe to travel under a moonless nighttime sky? Did they have only memories to offer, power songs unsung outside the old cave?

Secret societies, such as the Human Bear cult, both perpetuated and reflected Pomo and Coast Miwok worldview, where every human, just as every aspect of the landscape, possessed special -- and secret -- powers. Cult members with their special power and connection with the living world played an integral role in the well-being of the village. Human Bears, assuming the grizzly's strength and extraordinary sense of smell, could locate and retrieve food from far distances. They possessed "protection", often songs, that caused illness, sometimes death, to anyone who might attempt to harm them -- or some feature of the landscape they might use, such as a cave. You would thus think twice about harming anyone. Same with a bird, a tree, any tiny stone. Respect becomes the only guarantee of survival. This respect is predicated on remembering that, even with unique power, you are not alone, absolute. As renowned late Pomo Indian doctor Mabel McKay told me, "Be careful when someone [or something] catches your

attention. You don't know what spirit it is. Be thoughtful." The Kashaya Pomo elders refer to Europeans as *pala-cha*, miracles: Instead of being punished for killing people and animals, chopping down trees, damming and dredging the waterways, the Europeans kept coming.

There were numerous secret cults. Many were associated with animals, bobcat, grizzly bear, even birds and snakes. Others were associated with a particular place, a meadow, a canyon, an underwater cave where the spirit of the place empowered its respective cult members. Cults were often gender based: Women's Bear cults were considered among the most powerful. In all cases, cult initiates endured long periods of training, not only learning about the essentials of their animal powers for instance, but simultaneously of the larger environment as well.

Sonoma County, about an hour north of San Francisco, was at the time of European contact one of the most geographically complex and biologically diverse places on earth. Below arid hills, covered with only bunchgrass and the occasional copse of oak and bay laurel, were rich wetlands, inland bays, lakes, a meandering lagoon, a substantial river and numerous creeks where hundreds of species of waterfowl flew up so thick as to obliterate the sun for hours at a time. Immense herds of elk, pronghorn, and black tail deer grazed along these waterways on any number of clovers and sedges. West, lining the coastal hills, were redwoods so thick that several yards into a forest all was dark as night. The shifting shoreline, steep cliffs dropping to the water then to broad sandy beaches, was rich too, rife with edible sea kelps, dozens of species of clams, mussels, abalone, and fish, salmon the most prized. Despite these distinct environments -- arid hills, lush plains and wetlands, redwood forest -- the landscape was usually inconsistent,

tricky even. Amidst the arid hills below Sonoma Mountain were numerous lakes and spring-fed marshes. Meadows, prairie-like, appeared unexpectedly in the otherwise dense and dark redwood forests. A narrow creek might empty into a wide and deep perch-filled pond just on the other side of a small, barren-looking knoll. Traveling through an expanse of marshy plain you might discover, stepping from waist-high sedges, a carpet of rock a mile wide and several miles long, habitat for snakes and lizards that would otherwise be found in the drier foothills. Nothing appeared quite what it seemed. The landscape, complex in design and texture, demanded reflection, study. The culture that grew out of a ten-thousand-year relationship with the place became like it, not just in thought but in deed. Pomo and Coast Miwok art -- the most complicated and intricate basketry found among indigenous people anywhere -- tells the story.

Human Bears learned the details of the landscape: where a fish-ripe lake hid behind a bend, where a thicket of blackberries loaded with fruit sat tucked below a hillside. At the same time, regardless of their unique ability to travel great distances and seek out food sources for the village, they could not disrespect the hidden lake or thicket of berries, needing always to know the requirements for taking the fish or fruit. The lake had a special -- and potentially dangerous – spirit, just as the Human Bear, so too the blackberry thicket. Developing a heightened sense of the Human Bear's unique power necessitated a heightened sense of the land. Ultimately, the Human Bear cult didn't only play an integral role in the well-being of the village, but more precisely in the well-being of the village with the larger world.

By 1903 most of the landscape was transformed. Gone were the vast wetlands. The water table throughout the region had dropped an average of two hundred feet:

Creeks went dry in summer. The big trees were gone. Many of the great animals were extinct in the region, not just the grizzly bears, but the herds of elk and pronghorn, and the mighty condors gliding the thermals with their fourteen foot wing spans. Regarding these remarkable ancestral birds, *Tsupu*, my great-great-great grandmother, sitting atop a wagon toward the end of the nineteenth century, gazed up at the empty sky and asked, "How are the people going to dance without feathers?" If there was a route safe for Maria Evangeliste to travel as a Human Bear in 1903, would there still exist a familiar bountiful blackberry thicket? An ocean cove where she might collect a hundred pounds of clams?

Just as the landscape was transformed, increasingly so too the eons-old way of thinking about it. Catholic missionaries put in the minds of Coast Miwok and Pomo villagers the notion of an eternal and spiritual life that was elsewhere, that could not be derived and experienced from the land. The God of an elsewhere kingdom overruled, in fact deemed as evil, anything on the earth that might be considered equally powerful, worthy of reverence and awe. While Christianity was forced upon the Natives, usually under conditions of duress and enslavement, the new religion might have made sense. After European contact, Coast Miwok and Pomo no doubt looked upon the transformed landscape and found that they recognized the place less and less, that, in essence, they were no longer home. Indeed miraculous, the new people could kill animals, level a hill, without retribution. Couldn't their one almighty God from another world stop a Human Bear? Yes -- seen once as necessary to life and land, a protector of the village, the Human Bear -- anyone who would participate in such things -- was now more and more an enemy of our well-being, dangerous at best, evil.

Did Maria Evangeliste know what stories people told about her? If, secretly, she left a cache of ripe fruit or clams outside her home as Humans Bears once did in the villages, might she not implicate herself, reveal her secret life, in a world hostile to that life? Wouldn't relatives deem the food devil's work and toss it out? She was the last Human Bear, they say. When did she stop visiting the cave? When was it over?

The morning she returned she said that she had lost control of the wagon. Or she said she visited a friend and hadn't tied the old gelding well enough. Or she said she met a man. In any event, she went that afternoon with the priest and retrieved the wagon with its still upright rectory chairs from the apple farmer. And that was how, before sunset, she came back to town, driving the wagon as if nothing was unusual, four days had not passed at all. She continued to play violin in the church. She was still entrusted with work for the priest. Sometime later she married a Mexican immigrant. They had eleven children, all of whom lived to adulthood. A great-granddaughter sat next to me in catechism class. The last time I saw her, Maria Evangeliste that is, was sometime in the early 1970s, about ten years before she died at the age of ninety. I was at a funeral in St. Rose Church. She was in the crowd of mourners, a small Indian woman in a dark dress. She wore a veil, respectfully.

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I left town sometime then, and did not return for thirty years, until only recently. I visited, seeing family. And for the past eighteen years, I have served as Chairman of my tribe, which brought me back to Sonoma County at least once a month. But I wasn't

really back -- I wasn't home -- which I hadn't realized, much less understood for some time. I wrote about Sonoma County -- stories, essays, plays -- from memory. In fact, I'd hardly written about any place else. But what was I remembering? What did I understand?

Sonoma County had changed dramatically. From the center of once small-town Santa Rosa, strip malls and housing developments spread over the vast plain, covering irrigated clover and vetch pastures, fruit orchards and strawberry fields. Gone, the black and white spotted Holstein cows. Gone, rows of prune and pear trees; the apple orchards north and east of Sebastopol, almost each and every one routed by grapes, pinot noir, cabernet. The arid foothills are now also covered in grapes: gone, the copses of oak and bay laurel there. Visiting, I noticed these changes; coming home for good, I saw how thorough they were, how far-reaching. Where was my home?

I bought a house on Sonoma Mountain. Bay laurel trees, live oaks and white oaks surround the house; and, past the trees, there is an expansive view west over vineyard-covered hills and the urban sprawl below, to the Pacific ocean, which is where at night the web of streetlights stops – and where on a very clear night the full moon lights the sea. That light -- that path of moon on the water -- was how the dead found their way to the next world, or so our ancestors said. And those same ancestors gathered pepper nuts from the six-hundred-year-old bay tree outside my gate. But I was like that -- suspended between the old bay tree and the far horizon -- as I negotiated what it meant to be home. I hadn't lived on the mountain before. I grew up below, in Santa Rosa.

Then the place remembered me. Stories beckoned. The dead rose, collected with the living, so that more and more the landscape became a meeting hall of raucous voices.

I knew the faces. Not merely my tribal members, as if I was convening a tribal meeting, but the land itself -- mountain and plain, oak trees and city lights, birds and animals, Indians and non-Indians, Mexicans, Italians, Blacks, Filipinos, Jews -- whomever and whatever I'd known, whomever and whatever I knew, was before me, beckoning. Yes, the dead and the living -- how could anything die this way? History, it's no less tangible, palpable than that grandmother under whose care you found yourself. In a kitchen you have known all your life with its familiar smells and colors, this grandmother sets a plate of warm tortillas on the table with a bowl of chicken soup and says eat.

Driving here and there, to the university, to the laundromat, the market, here and there with no worry of catching an airplane, seeing this relative or that friend before I left again, I had time, the idleness that accompanies routine, and the old lady with the tortillas and soup was able to catch my attention. Driving over a bridge west of town -- west of Santa Rosa -- I glance down and see the riverbank and willows: A bonfire lights a moonless night and Filipino men are gathered around the fire there, and my grandmother, a seventeen year old Coast Miwok girl, eyes my grandfather for the first time, a *pinoy* dandy in his pin-striped suit, the big gold watch chain dangling from his breast pocket reflecting firelight, and the bloodletting fighting cocks clashing midair, their tiny silhouettes jumping in his watch glass like a pair of enchanted dancers performing a wild tango my grandmother already wants to learn. From behind the townhouses on Coffey Lane, Holstein cows emerge one by one, full udders swaying, and collect in front of the 7-11, where Mrs. Andreoli, forty and soon to be a widow, opens the wooden gate to her milk barn. And Old Undle, old Pomo medicine man -- "don't say his real name" -- he's on a bench uptown in Courthouse Square, suspenders and Stetson hat, or he's in his

garden behind the fairgrounds where two hours ago he built a fire below the tall corn stalks and thick gourd vines, witnesses as he holds now an ember in the palm of his hand and sees and hears in the orange-red ash "all manner of things": people and animals, songs, old earth rules. Isn't this how some folks saw Maria Evangeliste when she returned on foot after four days to her parents' house? And years later, when they found themselves next to her, scooping rice in the market or picking prunes in the heat dusty orchards, didn't they still think and remember?

Here I am not a stranger. Looking back, I see how I'd been a stranger, a newcomer at best, wherever else I had lived. I drove back and forth to the university, to the market, in Los Angeles. I did errands in Manhattan. But it wasn't the same. No stories. No old earth rules. Or, put it this way, I had to learn the stories, listen to the rules as a newcomer, and, like that, as mindful as I could be, make a home. Still, Fifth Avenue midday remained less busy for me than a remote redwood grove in Sonoma County. I could be alone in Yellowstone. Or the Grand Canyon. These latter places in particular, beautiful yes. And solitude. But then what is solitude, however blissful? Can it be experienced except by disengagement from the land's stories, spirits? Wilderness. The old people said the land became wild after we became separated from it, when there was no longer enough of us to hear its demands and tend to it accordingly. Could Thoreau and Muir experience the landscape as pristine, and know solitude in it as such, if they knew its stories? If that old woman was there, tortillas and chicken soup in hand, would the land be silent?

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Two weeks ago last Saturday at a tribal General Council meeting, I saw Maria Evangeliste's great-grandaughter, the same girl I knew in catechism class. Approaching sixty, a heavy set woman now with a shock of dyed black hair, she sat amidst the sea of faces listening to questions and answers regarding the status of our casino. She looked disgruntled, arms crossed over her chest, face puckered in a scowl, and walked out before the meeting was over, leaving me wondering if she was mad at me or someone else on the Council or life in general. Her life, from what I'd heard, hadn't been easy. Five children. Two were in prison. One was dead. Ten grandchildren, five of whom she was raising. Where was the soft-faced, flat-limbed teenager who listened with me as Sister Agnes Claire attempted to explain the Holy Ghost? Some tribal members say I've been away too long, that I've gotten "too white." Did she feel that way about me, that I didn't know my people well enough any longer? Her husband, the father of her five children, was a Mexican immigrant. Did she know that her great-grandfather was a Mexican immigrant also? Had she heard the stories about Maria Evangeliste? Did she care? Perhaps I write for no other reason than to leave a record for her or anyone besides me who might care, a set of tracks, however faint, down the mountain into the plain and back, connecting to those infinite other pathways that take us and keep us in the land and its life here. But this is what I'm thinking now, as I consider what it means to be a writer here. It wasn't what I was thinking during the meeting seeing Maria Evangeliste's great-granddaughter.

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I went to the cave. Driving on Occidental Road, I was quite certain of the spot my cousin had pointed to years before -- the bald hillside -- if for no other reason than that a hippie commune was there at the time, a settlement of teepees past the redwoods, which I mentioned, prompting from my cousin her story of Maria Evangeliste.

The road curved under a canopy of oak trees and tall pines; four o'clock in the afternoon, autumn, the land was already in shadow, the road lead grey like the occasional patch of sky above. Human Bears traveled only at night in the pitch black; they did not set out from their villages in human form for their caves until late at night either. Secrecy was the initiate's first rule. Mabel McKay once told me of a father up in Lake County who, curious about his daughter's whereabouts at night, unwittingly followed her to a Human Bear cave, whereupon her cult sisters gruesomely murdered him right before her eyes. "Ain't supposed to be seeing them things," Mabel said. "Respect." With this story in mind and a darkening landscape, it's no wonder that past the barbed wire fence and into the trees, I was agitated, so much so that when I looked back and couldn't see the road, I stopped. Respect? Was I disrespecting? These are modern times, I kept telling myself. What's a story these days? Wasn't I curious just to see the cave as a landmark, an outpost of memory? Yes, nothing more. I would leave something, a dollar bill, my handkerchief, out of respect. A lone jay shrieked from somewhere on the other side of the blackberry bramble. I looked up, above the line of trees, to the outcropping of rock, enormous and still watchful, then I left.

It was enough, I told myself. Enough. But I kept thinking of Maria Evangeliste. In the car, driving back to town, my excitement only grew. Past the overreaching

branches and thick brush on either side of the road, I saw how a uniform grey light enveloped the land, a color such that everything I could see seemed made from it. I had never seen the light in such a way at that time of day; and, I thought that though Maria Evangeliste, after her first four nights with the twin sisters, emerged and came back to town at dawn, the light and land must have looked this way, new, as she had never seen it before. Then I rounded a curve, and, coming down the hill, I saw the broad plain clear to the mountain. City lights shown like tiny flags in the gathering darkness. I pulled over, stopped the car. No, I thought then. After Maria Evangeliste first came out of the cave, it was like this: Stories, places -- an entire land -- that she knew day or night, light or no light, not as if for the first time, but better.