

*1<sup>st</sup> Runner Up*  
*2011 RHA Story Writing Contest*

## **The Cortese Code**

By Diane Rush

Orange opalescence burned behind gray twilight clouds as if fires were consuming foothill forests. It was unusually still—not the hint of a breeze. Sycamore trees should have been silhouetted against the darkening sky but instead, their leaves and prickly seed pods glowed like amber.

As I passed Bradbury on the boulevard, another surprise met my gaze. What is the *Rossmoor Inn* doing there? That was torn down years ago! Curious, I approached and found the door open. Even more astonishing—the interiors appeared as they had in the early '60s—a Tudor fireplace, suit of armor in one corner and medieval banners hanging from the rafters. The mater d' addressed me, "There's a gentleman waiting for you; follow me".

Seated at a booth against the south wall was a swarthy man with a monogrammed leather notebook. He looked familiar but I couldn't remember where I'd seen him. "Look", he leaned forward, "I don't have much time but need to talk with you". I sat down across from him and listened. "I've noticed you have an interest in architecture; I'd like you to have this". He passed a scrap of paper to me with a verse written on it:

*Find the secret at the gate  
if your memory's keen  
A source to illuminate  
haunts the one who's seen*

Just as I finished reading, I looked up and he was gone. His notebook remained on the table with the enigmatic *R.C.*

Saturday morning sunlight streamed through my window. I sat up in bed incredulous, "That's what I get for eating Nori Maki and mango before bed". Grabbing my dream journal, I jotted down the remembered passage.

My afternoon walk took a course down Rossmoor Way and I reminisced on early Rossmoor. Between the San Gabriel Mountains and wetlands, the broad coastal plain was punctuated with water towers, orange groves and strawberry fields. Petrichor\* scented the air and newly graded fields still surrendered the odd sugar beet. Pacific sunsets drenched unfinished plywood rooftops making them shine like copper. Parapets along the Rossmoor Wall between Bradbury and Orangewood were topped with gas

torches, centered by the ornamental gate. I *do* remember! What did the verse say—a source to *illuminate*? Could that mean the *torches*?

I stopped when I came to the gate, making a superficial inspection. Why hadn't I noticed this before? On the crest were twin Corinthian columns and the number 1619. Beneath the image was a banner emblazoned with the Italian surname, *Cortese*. "R.C.—Ross Cortese, of *course*!"

What did I know about Ross Cortese, Rossmoor's builder? He was supposed to have been reclusive and temperamental yet capable of stunning generosity and phenomenal passion, or so I'd heard. A page in my archives claimed he'd left high school through economic necessity to sell produce, a source of shame he'd never overcome. "I'm afraid I won't say quite the right thing in the way I want to say it", he was once quoted.

Could there be more to the gate and torches?

The crest was mounted on a plaque, covered with green patina. It was slightly askew and I reached to straighten it. At my touch, it shifted diagonally, revealing a small slot containing a thin plastic cylinder. Prying it out, I discovered it was a rolled piece of drafting vellum with the inscription:

*Architecture's metaphor  
made with careful choice;  
is the key to the door  
and my only voice*

My last stop of the day was at *Peet's*, a good place to ponder a conundrum. Across from me was seated a college student looking wonderfully absorbed with his laptop, books and papers.

I unrolled the small vellum. It expressed the Cortese persona—the author being verbally inhibited. What message is so profound it can only be articulated as a building?

The aroma of Ethiopian Fancy wafting from my cup proved irresistible. A few sips later, I was back on the riddle.

Metaphoric strength is often illustrated with the pillars of Solomon's Temple like those on the crest. Who or what do the pillars represent? Cortese relied on a design team including Earl Kaltenbach Jr., the original *Tomorrowland* creator and Chris Choate who, with Cliff May, popularized the California Ranch House genre. The architects were definitely *key*. Figuratively, they were also Cortese's voice.

Is it possible that acquiring certain knowledge can enable the seeker to "hear" the builder's voice?

As a child living in Rossmoor, I marveled at the sunlight's play on the detailed home exteriors. They *did* speak, now that I think of it. The offset, sloping eave of the *Montpelier* enticed a shy, thoughtful girl to climb on its roof. What magic!

The cryptic number 1619 could be an historic year, scriptural passage or even a ratio. However, 5 of Rossmoor's 37 models bear names relating to the Jamestown settlement of this era. Rossmoor, like Jamestown, was an experiment—a self-sufficient, walled community.

Leafing through my *Frematic Homes* elevations and floor plans, I observed something for the first time. On the reverse side of the *Plymouth* model, was pencil script in the same hand as the vellum message:

*Thirty-seven different names;  
Their stories set you free  
Each one lives, and proclaims  
—sheltering artistry*

In the margin, barely legible, was a phrase, "*La poverta è la madre di tutte le arti*" which translates from Italian, "Poverty is the mother of all the arts". This, perhaps, is the code that best explains the builder's genius and why we benefit from it.

\**Petrichor* – sweet smell of the earth after a rain.