

Stalking



The Average Man

Based on a true story

by **John Axelson**

Stalking the Average Man: Fulfilling Prophecy

John Axelson

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Preamble:

The following events originally occurred within a non-linear teaching scheme designed to force me to reorganize my lessons before I could claim their content as my own knowledge. Presenting my results in a coherent chronology required that I also provide fly-on-wall notes, based on what my teacher must have known to administer a given lesson at a particular time.

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Phase One: The Seduction

Foreword

My name is John Roger Axelson... “Axe” to many people throughout my life, because it is more easily recalled and less strenuous to say. My parents were loving and tolerant, and I enjoyed a comfortable middle class upbringing devoid of undue trauma and tragedy, with a small caveat; we sometimes battled because I was a chronic under-achiever unless the event interested me, and school never did until I took a college broadcasting course.

Stints at preparatory jobs soon led me to working in the big leagues, as a soundman for network television news, increasingly on the road because I could travel without a nanny, and I worked well under pressure. When I was teamed up with cameramen of extraordinary abilities, I graduated into an elite realm of broadcast journalism. The rest, as they say, is history...

Three hours off the plane from working my first war, I was telling tales in the Cellar Blues Bar in an effort to come to terms with what I had seen; my mouth ran freely from fresh scents of death and obscene scenery for hours. As colleagues fell silent, and subdued barmaids quietly served us, I began borrowing from ‘bang-bang’ folklore to recreate the sense of danger and revulsion I had yet to realize now isolated me from their world. And always would.

But when a local beauty—a regular who had always been indifferent to my advances—finally saw me as a fascinating man the template for my post-traumatic behavior was set. I was thirty years old, smart, get-your-pants glib, and rolling in blood money.

Ironically, maybe inevitably, by my sixth sojourn into man’s dark side I was enduring real incidents I had ‘borrowed’ from other crews, and talked about as if they were my experiences. I also began having déjà vu events that influenced some of my decisions, without their underpinnings being evident to others. As a free spirit working in the staid business of television news it did not cross my mind that I had become too familiar with these irrational circumstances. To the contrary, I thought I was becoming uncommonly wise.

My twelfth trip into the lunacy became my last when British Immigration denied my visa renewal. This unexpected event caused me to fly to Vancouver, Canada, to see my best friend, Ed, and to check out the freelance market for soundmen. During this stay my polished tales of crappy ways to live and die enthralled his friend, Tom—an executive at a post-production company—who offered me contact numbers in the film and television industry. He also suggested that my experiences would make an excellent screenplay, an observation I saw as schmoozing from a shameless visionary seeding new business, but the idea stuck.

In the end, I stuffed my worldly possessions into three nylon sail bags and flew back to my hometown, Toronto, because I knew more people in the industry there. This reasoning turned out to be problematic because events had changed me, and not for the better. Sixteen months later, I was again considering moving to Vancouver when a regular call from possibly my only friend by this time reminded me that he’d put me up at no cost if I moved there. Shortly thereafter my

professional world blew apart on the same day that I received word that I had been awarded a Screenwriters Development Grant, so I repacked my sail bags to start over in Vancouver as a writer.

I landed with a fifty percent advance toward expenses, and six months to complete my project; there was nothing standing in my way except my penchant to lead myself astray by following flashes of inspiration that had little to do with established elements of my plot. As a result, I lost valuable time trying to make these insights relevant to my climatic surprise, which as it turned out was on me: with only three weeks to go, elements of the flashes I had coaxed into my story merged to allude to a better climax than I had been crafting. I was not so concerned about getting the balance of the money, as I felt gutted by the fizzling ending that screwed up the potential references offered by the review committee. This meant I had to consign my first professional credit to silence, and start over.

Ed saw that I was troubled, by what he didn't ask, and on his dime invited me to join him, Tom, and two others at the Avalon Gentleman's Club to find a broader view of life than my own colon was then providing. Fortuitously, nearing the end of this evening Tom made a double entendre comment intended to have me speak about my version of the bang-bang, and I told him about an incident in a place I called Goodbye. Because it ultimately involved helicopters, this tale led me to explaining the problem I had with my screenplay. Tom dedicated brief seconds of thought to my problem before saying I should upgrade one of my helicopters, then offering me a business card on which he had scribbled a phone number, he said, "A friend needs help converting her book into a screenplay format. She's a looker," he said seriously.

"Maybe later," I said to not seem unappreciative, but I had a lot to do—his suggestion was a perfect solution.

"That works," he replied, sliding the card between my fingers. "Jeanette is expecting to hear from you tonight... shit!" he exclaimed, looking at his watch as if it had bit him. Dropping cash on the table, he left to meet his girlfriend. Soon thereafter we all went our own way.

Fueled by unnecessary nightcaps and thoughts of lacy undergarments, I made the call.

My name is Jeanette Morrow: I was standing beside my father on a Chicago street when I became mesmerized by the lights circling the marquee, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Without warning, I was propelled into a realm surrounded by countless points of light brilliantly pulsating with a life of their own. Then a cushioned rocking motion enveloped me in a sea of blackness, but it was light. I felt warm, but there was no heat or cold to compare sensations.

I was struck with an incredible calm and an illuminating clarity of mind so profound that fear became an outdated emotion. I felt as if I was cradled in the hand of something immense, yet benevolent and protective, when a deep voice began to speak to me.

He said his name was Kha-li, that it was of ancient Egyptian origin meaning All That Is, and that He was the messenger of the Universal Source. He spoke about the rise and fall of many cultures, of the future, and of the purposes of humanity in the twenty-first century. He said we were in an end-of-the-world-cycle of events, which was not a physical condition because life would and must go on; His emanations had always been clandestinely present in our world to keep Universal knowledge alive for the time when specifically skilled emissaries would facilitate our transition back to sanity. Now was this time. Some of these men and women were of the Original Family of

Man—projections from sources whose beginnings pre-dated the formation of our Universe. Others were of Earth; having evolved over countless millennia, they were chosen by man to participate in this intercession into our ways. In part, this is how mankind recognizes their prophets returned.

Regardless of their source, all emissaries arrive among mankind in the traditional way. Some will be made aware of their purpose at a young age, communicating directly with their Source. Others will live lives designed to fulfill purposes that only direct experience can prepare them for, before they are apprised of their individual tasks. Kha-li said I was such a person, that I was entering a crucial phase in my life and things would not be pleasant, but He would never let me go. When it was time, He would again formally contact me to explain the true nature of my journey, and its purpose. I was eight years old.

Thirty years passed before Kha-li returned.

When my shock had sufficiently settled, He told me that throughout time an ancient entity I could call Saa-ra (saw-raw) had been his messenger; he had served her purposes while she had prepared the way for him. Saa-ra was my life-force; I was a direct emanation whose physical journey had been designed to experience the inequities of the sexes before I could reunite with her to facilitate the training of others. I was to be Kha-li's messenger on the physical plane, and it was time to apprise other emissaries of their purpose. He explained this process:

For countless years mystics of various backgrounds had kept alive, and refined a teaching scheme known in our time as Stalking. In this instance, the term does not refer to the aberrant persecution of another's welfare; the literal opposite is the case as the stalker's goal is to free their apprentice from apparently reasonable behaviors that will cause harm down the road. Without exception, this is an excruciating process that comes with no guarantee of success. Typically the failure rate is high because there is no compromise in the teachings, and no candidate is allowed access to knowledge of true power lest they have acquired the disciplines to handle it. Otherwise, the teacher would be creating a tyrant. In the case of Kha-li's emissaries, there is always another to take up the task.

Forerunners of the coming changes, most of which were unaware of their true missions and influences, had written about the nature of reality as conscious energy, of intentions as actions, and the relationship between free will and responsibility. I was to begin my studies with these written works while Saa-ra expanded upon them with practical applications. In addition, I was to write about my experiences with the Universe, and when it was time speak of my quest to a potential messenger of my own. His purpose included sampling the stalking processes that the emissaries had to master, for in this way only could he legitimately describe, to all who might listen, the mechanisms by which emissaries came to their knowledge and powers. Kha-li said the world would not recognize their prophets returned without these preparations orchestrated by Spirit, facilitated by emanations, and delivered by an average man who had experienced the end-of-times events until he became them.

I immersed myself in these writings, and Saa-ra's lessons, while creating my own journal and providing for two teenagers.

Acknowledging my efforts months later, Saa-ra said that although the Universe's teachings required considerable evolutionary energy, this guaranteed nothing: when I attempted to awaken my student to his potential purpose—he was on his way—I would see that only ruthless applications of the lessons, and selfless discipline on his part, would see him through. As it had been with me, he had no idea why he had lived the life he had chosen, the affects of which could make him the most difficult to teach of them all.

With this counsel delivered, Saa-ra said I was poised to dismantle the aberrant world-view my potential messenger had been conformed to embrace by experiencing mankind's default form of madness. I was attractive by any measure, intelligent, witty, and available. Along with surreptitiously offering him an intellectually redeeming challenge, I would be irresistible bait when I arrived in the disguise of a divorcee to probe his beliefs for personal points from which he would not run, until he could not run. Saa-ra would direct me every step of the way.

Chapter 1: The Fourth Estate

Early the next morning, I inserted a floppy disk into my Atari 64 computer and called up files from my book in progress: Jeanette had suggested that we exchange samples of our work, to see if we were creatively compatible, and as a courtesy act of trust by revealing ideas we had not copyrighted. Confidently pleased over the clever ease and causal humor we had shared in our first conversation, I read the best of my potential offerings without feeling I had to commit to showing it to her.

You Taught Me Well

Chapter 03 –The Good Guys: Part 1

"Axe!" LeBlanc barked as he wobbled into my eye line through the after work crowd at Julie's Mansion; Illona reached sideways from her overstuffed chair and casually grabbed his belt to steady him.

"Couple loose cartons and lots of pins," he said, expelling a lung and a half of steely grey smoke into an unsuspecting room. "No ball caps," he added, waving a fickle path with his index finger. "The fuckers'll steal'em on the way in."

He turned to leave; Illona released him into a lurch that Rob twisted into the pivot of an afterthought by swinging his arm to tap the side of his substantial nose. Rolling her eyes, Illona leaned forward to steady him as he sagely said, "Rio," meaning bring toilet paper, as if I would forget projectile shitting in one of the most beautiful places on earth.

"No sweat. I've still got some Canadian flag collar pins, as well," I said, re-establishing eye contact with the leggy woman who had been checking me out: early thirties, subtly painted, no ring on the killjoy finger. Even if...

"You're gonna know sweat," Rob muttered toward the carpet, apparently willing his feet to move through the tangle of boots and purses that had ensnared him: pausing for an intellectually tedious drag on his cigarette, a solution made its way through the internal haze and he wiggled his toes. Locating his own shoes, he leaned toward the exit; Illona released him into God's hands a day sooner than was scheduled on The Nationals' assignment board.

"The flight to Rochester leaves at ten," I said to his back. "Meet you at customs at eight."

"Anything else he should know?" Percy, a pretentious technician who occasionally worked with him, said dryly: Rob had worked the bang-bang in Vietnam and half-a-dozen other countries that could have killed him just as dead, but with less prestige. I had only been married once so far.

Stopping short, LeBlanc swayed under the influence of combined poisons while the four women on the love seats next to ours snatched quick sips in preparation of another rutted pilgrimage into the remnants of his mind.

"When we hit the ground," Rob replied, turning to locate Percy, "Axe will say nothing he doesn't want every fuckin' one to know, and if the state plumber says shit runs uphill, he'll stand on his head to fart. He won't bitch about humping heavy shit through mined fields, because his second wife is getting nastier by the pound and dying quick is better than word by nagging fuckin' "

word. S'not simple learnin how to *act* like a dumb-fuck who can't find a shithouse without a producer booking the hole," he opined with a questioning glance at our table. An independent thought inserted itself, and he reached into his pocket to pull out a wad of crisp travel money. A twenty fluttered to the floor.

"I got everything except how snot is simple," Percy said, glancing toward the petite brunette sitting next to Legs.

Resolving that retrieving the bill was too risky, Rob jabbed a nicotine-stained finger toward Percy's smug face, forgot what he was going to say, and instead peeled a hundred dollar bill from the stack in his hand.

"R.J., buddy?" I said, tapping my wrist where a watch would have been if I gave a shit about time.

Rob set the bill beside the hundred he had already put there, and left to pack for a three-week road trip.

Percy dismissed him with a pitiful shake of his head, while twice glancing toward the brunette for confirmation that she hadn't caught on that it was his second wife who was gaining weight. She hadn't. At the same time, the busty brunette sitting closest to Doug leaned over unnecessarily far to ask what catastrophe had befallen Rochester, New York.

"They're working a story on cable TV programming," he said, blandly.

"Then they're going to El Salvador," Illona said, picking the twenty off the floor. With a wink my way, she took the extra hundred from the table and handing me the money said just loudly enough, 'If Legs doesn't do you come and see me for your last one.'

"Whom and what was the mad fornicator about?" Legs interjected, pronouncing for-neh-kay-tor conscientiously.

"That depends; do you work for a credit card company?" I said

Percy mouthed "whom?" toward the brunette, who tapped her temple in the universal sign to indicate intellectual capacity.

Without hesitation, in crisp sentences Katerina placed her life in time and space before closing her monologue with what I interpreted as sultry syllables insinuating a satin sheet ride if I was forthcoming. Setting my crystal glass aside, I cleared my throat in preparation of explaining the paradox that was Robbie (R.J.) LeBlanc.

I first told Katie that R.J. was a senior network news cameraman who worked and drank like an obsessive-compulsive never quite getting it right, and that correspondents from Washington to Hong Kong joked about his rare moments of lucidity with a confused respect for nature having compensated him with uncanny instincts, and a brilliant professional eye. I admitted that I hadn't paid attention to his gifts during a year of constant embarrassment, as world events tortuously constructed our personal history, because it took all of my physical energy to keep up with a man fifteen years my senior, and all of my intellect to decipher his transmissions to Earth.

No-one-calls-me-Katie asked me if "Axe" was my temperament.

I told Kathy that I was one of the few among humanity, Nordic countries aside, who could correctly pronounce Axelson when they first read it aloud. Spelling it was another wondrous event, even when transposed from one document to another. As Robbie had discovered after only one attempt, there are three syllables in my name, so I became Axe, it stuck, and I didn't mind.

"How did you come to recognize his genius?" Kathy-is-a-chatty-doll replied. "And Kate will do."

"I didn't realize his ramblings were veins of professional gold until an encounter in the London Press Club." I sipped my drink, and sat forward to explain that, as a part of the

introduction ritual, a producer from France's O.R.T.F. asked me whom I worked with. Without thinking, I said "Leblanc" as if his name was De Gaulle. Overhearing me, an Australian television cameraman passing by with fists full of beer stutter-stepped, expertly tilted the mugs so that only foam breached the rims, and said, "Fuckin'-ell—didn't 'ee go missin' in Biafra? Bin sixteen years since the-bugger-an-me knocked some back."

"He's missing wherever he is," Cliff, the CBC bureau chief would have said with affection had Rob's expense reports never required his signature.

"Shoots crackin' stuff, though. You with 'im?" the cameraman said, motioning a pint my way.

"Ya—John," I said, mindlessly stretching my arm across the table.

"Tim," he said, placing a pint in my hand instead of setting it down. "Tell 'im the Aussie is at the Imperial."

"Will do, but he has a hard time remembering last Saturday."

"No worries mate. Nam," he said turning away.

I told Kate—will-do that no one forgets a combat assignment, and that abbreviating locations is not so much slang as it is an earned turn of phrase, and respected as such. To use it otherwise is at a minimum considered pretentious.

"No matter how hard they live afterwards?" she said, shaking her head.

"There may be some gaps," I said, failing to appreciate her insight.

I next told Kay that in the silence acknowledging the slaughter of illusions that followed the utterance of 'Nam', we overheard Tim say, "You'll never guess 'oose in town," to which a cohort immediately replied, "Must be LeBlanc if he took me fuckin' beer already."

"Recognition like that," I said, to the woman who was eyeballing me like a diabetic at a dessert buffet, "is the highest non-posthumous accolade you can get in this business. I paid attention to everything he said after that lunch."

"How did you learn to understand him?" Katerina-or-nothing said, chuckling.

I explained that R.J. established contexts through historical events and geographical references, like normal people would use Waterloo to reference a defeat. However, there were rarely more than three people on the continent who understood his waypoints—all of them colleagues who were familiar with particular assignments. Even then, Robbie conjufuckgated so many disparate elements of his travels that even close friends were often obliged to intuit his meaning.

"Now that we've shared enough experiences to have evolved our own Waterfuckin' loos," I said, taking a sip of scotch, "there's a beautiful irony about translating his reality for local reporters who consider working with him a trial by fire, while internationally vetted journalists fight over his time."

Staring as though I'd vanish if she took her eyes off me, Katerina asked me why I called him different names—or was it a quirk of all television crews to clip identifiers, she quipped dryly.

"Usually, it's about circumstance," I explained. "Robbie and Rob are off duty names. Leblanc kind of addresses the legend, but face to face, and R.J. is code: he can't see anything to his right when we're shooting, so if I see something he needs to know about, I call him R.J., and he does whatever I say without asking me why." I snapped my fingers.

"There's a lot more to you than you've shown in this place," Kat purred provocatively.

Sadly, this is all I remember about my last truly naïve night on the planet. The morning shoot in New York was also lost to a thumping, dehydration blur that mercifully gave way to an antihistamine-induced coma during the late afternoon flight to the place I would earn the right to

call Salvador in press clubs around the world. And in the wee hours, hope the flashbacks would be in black and white...

I thought the profanity worked in the context of a scene that implied terrible things past, and to soon come again, but I questioned the wisdom of offering a sexploit in the first material Jeanette might read, so I didn't print it. Show and tell could wait; I had wowed her sufficiently, and there was a lot more where that came from.

Chapter 2: Contexts

During her early lessons, Jeanette learned to assess people's beliefs through the language they used. The key, body language aside, was to embrace a conclusion don Juan Matus made in Carlos Castaneda's writings—while endlessly rehearsing our self-image, we unwittingly practice a different set of beliefs than those we state. A related observation from Jeanette, and most helpful in terms of all my early lessons, was that nothing exists independently of anything else. It followed that properly assessing a single statement for its underlying nature reveals a deeper pool of beliefs.

The following slice of conversation is an example of what Jeanette could glean from just a few words. Of course, I didn't realize she had acquired this ability when we first met, but it later explained why her conversational contributions were often quirky, thereby evoking specifically focused responses from me.

We were following two twenty-something girls out of a mall when one of them complained to her friend, "Whatever happened to the customer is always right?"

"Retail is a gyp," her girlfriend commiserated.

Jeanette tugged on my arm to slow our pace, and to let the girls move out of earshot.

"Gypsy's aside," she then said clinically, "customer service is about correcting company or customer errors and misunderstandings according to the policies of manufacturers and retailers. There is no moral imperative, spoken or implied, and little that is personal about transactions between strangers, other than what their perceptions of personality and fairness can create out of an act of commerce. The continuity of the girls' thinking dictates that other aspects of their lives will be plagued by affront and confusion, because they don't realize they have made their happiness subject to availability, credit approval, processing fees, and that reality may not be exactly as illustrated. Their emotional investments come with thirty-day manufacturing defect protection before their satisfaction becomes a warranty issue. True joy for them," she quipped, "has to be hand washed, never bleached, and if the girls read a promise into a sale's philosophy instead of reading the label, they will end up calling 1-800 Tough Go. Does this make sense?"

Because we had discussed social influences by this time, I said, "Everything the girls believed about their circumstance was based on their reasoning being manipulated through their gender, age, and commercial cultural influences?"

"And therefore how they think in general, just as you created a 'man's world' out of selective elements of your combat assignments." She said this as if it was an obvious comparison...which it suddenly was to me.

Chapter 2: Contexts

Finished writing for the day, I went for a two kilometer shuffle I would euphemistically call jogging until it was true, then I took a shower as a rare cloudless blue outside my window bowed to a tawny dusk. Still half an hour early for our appointment, I walked four blocks down Pendrell

Street and across Denman to the English Bay Café, where I expected a double dram of Scottish bog would add sparkle to my personality. I was still dull from the night before.

"Waiting for someone," I said to the hostess, nodding toward the back bar.

"Aren't we all," she replied laconically, as I passed her by.

With a quick glance back, I saw her sardonic grin abruptly change to fright, and I barely managed to sidestep a striking woman in a sea-green summer dress. Quickly regaining my balance, I assembled my boyishly crooked smile to apologize, when she exclaimed, "You must be John!" thereby announcing our circumstance to the entire dining area.

Figuratively off balance, the spontaneous cleverness that having no tact had forced me to develop over the years abandoned me like sincerity in a confessional, and I tardily squawked, "You must be Jeanette!" sounding like an elderly parrot on Valium.

Laughing as if I had intended to be funny, Jeanette tugged on my sleeve leading us to a table as if we were a couple playing a familiar game.

Soon seated with drinks on the way, our exchange of approval pleasantries flowed like the patter of old friends meeting after years apart, including finishing each other's sentences and chuckling at the same unspoken ideas. Ironically, I was thinking this was too good to be true, just as our phone call had been, when she made me think I might be right: Jeanette interrupted my lead line about travelling to England, as a prelude to a battle tale, to say she had made a decision that had irrevocably altered her life, as well.

I hadn't said anything like that, but I couldn't deny that it was true; I dutifully asked her what it was.

"Oh—I'm sorry; it's too soon for that," she said sheepishly. Suddenly pitching forward, with misplaced ardor she said, "Why did you go to England? Why did you leave, for that matter?"

I thought our rapid-fire exchange might have caused a slip of tongue, which made little sense because we had been bottom-dealing nuance since my stunned Polly impression; then I noticed her emerald eyes were illuminating mischief lines in her expression.

"I went to England to freelance, and I left by invitation," I said as if no time had passed.

"Were you standing around the palace when a guard told you to move along, and you didn't think to ask how far?"

"A work visa problem moved me along. Didn't Tom mention that?"

"He said something about a deportation to enhance my interest in you," she said, with a discerning grin. "Why did you end up leaving Toronto to come here—the freelance world not as good as you thought it would be?"

"It was time to go."

"What happened?" she said too eagerly.

"Nothing big," I said, unsure if she was mocking me for some reason.

"It was big enough to bring you here?" she said, innocently.

"I guess stuff just added up until it made sense to leave," I said, cutting short a peppery sip of Caesar.

"Can I assume you're ashamed of that stuff, so I'll stop asking you about it?"

"Not at all." I shrugged to hide my surprise at her assumption. "I hit the wall writing a book, and a friend suggested I enter a short story contest to clear my head. I was fiddling with..."

"What was it about?"

"A guy gets a letter from a friend who's killed while working in conflicts. Still wondering what could have gone wrong, because the old pro had taught the young guy how to work in that world, he makes a call to the network to fill the vacancy."

Jeanette stared as if I had farted.

"It's called, '*You Taught Me Well*,' as in he won't make the same mistake," I explained.

"Ahhhh," she said, stretching a breath, "which is exactly what he's about to do. Clever. Can I read it?"

"Huh? Ya, sure. Anyway, I was working on that when I heard about development grants; I mentioned that last night."

She nodded for me to carry on.

"I had just finished working a job in Northern Ontario, a story filled my head, and I thought what the hell? Maybe four months later..."

"A story just filled your head?" She snapped her fingers.

"Writing the proposal was more like copying than making it up. Anyway," I shrugged again, "about four months later, the short story came in the money at the same time a core client and I weren't getting along. After that..."

"You saw the inevitable heading your way," she interjected, bobbing her head in recognition of a familiar experience.

"After that, my grant was approved on the same day that I got an offer to teach at my old college."

"When it rains..." Jeanette said, "but I haven't heard anything that would cause you to move three thousand miles into unemployment."

"I haven't gotten to that part... for some reason." I said wryly.

"Please continue," she said demurely.

"Thank you, madam. Freelancing in Toronto wasn't looking good in the long term, and the teaching offer evolved into something I wasn't interested in." I picked up my glass. "I talked to Ed, and he offered to underwrite my career change if I moved here. Like I said, little stuff added up."

"Giving up the sure thing was gutsy. Do you know how you actually made up your mind to come here?"

Having no idea what she meant, I grinned and said, "How many ways are there?"

"Four," she replied easily. Glancing at the ceiling, she amended her statement. "No—there are five common ways of making up one's mind," she said confidently.

"Don't let me interrupt you."

With a curious nod to imply challenging her claim was uncalled for, Jeanette said, "We all have an internal dialogue that follows different processes depending on our perceived circumstance." Counting on her fingers, into my less amused expression, she said, "If the timing isn't important, we can boil down some situations into simple arithmetic and play the odds, or," she touched a third finger, "we can grind answers out of our experiences if it's a close call. If timing matters, we might react from necessity, or our egos might take over the ship. Anything familiar yet?" she grinned.

"They all fit to some degree," I said evasively.

"Was your move here a life altering decision?" she persisted.

"Any move could be thought of in that way," I deflected.

"Yet you didn't assess the very moment of making that important decision?"

"I told you, twice actually, that a bunch of little stuff added up."

"You didn't say what influenced that moment of significance." She raised her brow.

"How would I know that after seven months?" I chuckled awkwardly. "And what does it matter now?" I shrugged.

"Do you mean it?"

"Mean what?"

"Do you want to know what influenced you, and why it matters?"

"Go ahead," I said, thoroughly puzzled.

"Let's look at what just passed between us, as a framework for investigating your decision making process."

"Okay, let's do that," I said, looking for our server.

With a crisp grin she might have thought I didn't see, she said, "You thought I was kidding about the ways there are to make decisions, then you felt put on the spot by me asking specifically about one experience. Your ego took over to 'twice actually' put me in my place," she mimed quotation marks, "instead of your brain grinding out an answer you didn't realize was available to you, because it's rare that anyone properly assesses any moment." She pitched forward to touch my hand. "I only speak about these kinds of personal evaluations to special people, because everyone else takes offence so easily." Jeanette painted the word 'easily' with exasperation.

"I can see how that might be," I said studiously.

She settled back in her chair.

"Good," she said, reaching for her drink, "so let's go through the processes: what did you feel in the moment you decided to come to Vancouver?"

Pausing to try to recall that moment, I honestly said, "I felt a mixed sense of loss and relief, like when you realize the end of something is certain, but there's nothing you can do about it. Or maybe there's nothing you want to do about it."

"That's the moment we recognize the demise of a circumstance, which frees us to create a better one. What thought drove the idea of moving here?"

"It's a beautiful place, and Ed lives here."

"How do you know him?"

"We met in basic training for the Navy, in 1970."

"Go back to Toronto in your mind."

"I've been interrogated before," I grinned.

"Meaning?" she said innocently.

"I'm familiar with techniques of loosening people's thoughts to catch them in lies."

"Are you lying to me?"

"No, but..."

"Then why not go back to Toronto in your mind for me?" she said simply.

I wanted to argue the unreasonableness of expecting me to pinpoint a single moment, but my mind shifted focus as if it had been whisked there on her silent command; I suddenly understood what she was after. "None of my options looked good," I said confidently.

"The arithmetic method seems to be how you made up your mind, so why did you call Ed?"

Interestingly, hearing this took me past that phone call to the moment of my actually making a decision; Ed's presence in Vancouver, and his generous offer were certainly influences, but they were not the deciding factor. Enjoying this odd moment of reflective clarity, I said, "This may sound too simple, but I think it's what you're after."

"Don't worry about what I might think... ever," she said softly.

"Ultimately, by which I mean I *know* this was my deciding factor, I didn't feel there was anything wrong with coming here."

"Excellent. That's the fifth option; you did it as an act of faith."

"Pardon me?"

"You trusted that things would work out even though you focused on the negative to discover how you really felt," she said with a tiny shrug.

"Faith had nothing to do with it," I said coolly. "I've seen people pray for a battle to pass by their homes, instead of leaving with us, because they didn't believe a softening up bombardment is an oxymoron. Faith is a sucker punch," I explained into her baffled expression.

Scholastically, Jeanette said, "Your intensity mourns its loss concerning the rest of humanity, but your actions say that something inside you knew what to do. When you stopped fretting over peripheral circumstances your choice became clear." She waved her statement aside as if it had been embarrassingly obvious. Offhandedly, she said, "You can tell me what happened when you're ready. The same applies to your screenplay, by the way."

"The same what?"

"If you were happy with your screenplay, you would have brought a scene to impress me." Wearing an elfish expression to diffuse my affront, in spite of her being correct, she shrugged another miniscule affair. "You also wouldn't have fired a salvo at me if your faith in anything other than yourself hadn't been damaged. As I said, whenever you're ready is fine. Or not."

Puzzled by the warmth of her indelicate approach to sizing me up, I felt trapped into explaining at least one of the issues she had mentioned: I told her about my diluted screenplay plot, to explain why I had arrived empty handed.

"Quality barbershop quartets can create the illusion of a fifth voice called a ringing chord," she said when I was finished. "It's very difficult to do."

"Hmm." I nodded as if I had a clue what she meant.

Chuckling, she said, "Your off-topic insights created the illusion of outside influences being active in your plot, without directly referring to them. You should run with it—it sounds like a gift waiting to be opened." She looked at me expectantly.

"My deadline is too close for that. Besides, Tom came up with a practical solution. Still..." I said, indicating that I wasn't out of trouble.

"You're experienced enough to know that expedience is everything it's cracked up to be, and you're letting a deadline ruin your story after all of that hard work?" Who's to say that listening to the fifth-voice isn't the way to go?" She sipped her drink.

"Following peripheral issues is what put me in shit—not that it hasn't worked before," I quickly added, lest she think I was unimaginative. "You are a curious one," I said ambiguously.

Pushing her drink to one side, Jeanette left me a full sentence behind by dealing with my idle comment as a personally important topic.

"It takes time to get to know people in the best of circumstances, but in superficial surroundings like these it can be more work than it's worth." A bolt of cynicism creased her academic expression, the influence departed with the memory of whoever he was, and she continued casually. "I don't mean some people aren't worth knowing. I'm saying there's no point in trying to penetrate their social mask unless they're ready to look at themselves, like you did a minute ago." She rested a hand on mine. "I also cut to the chase with special people, but it can still unnerve them."

"Is that why you hold their hands down?"

An electric interlude passed between us; she slid her hand away, leaving them both flat on the table. Whether she did this in anticipation of comforting me or protecting herself was unclear.

"It sounds more like you study people than interact honestly with them," I said, my casual tone belying an accusation of deception.

"We all do that in our own way." Jeanette reached across the table; tapping twice on the top of my hand, she said, "Learning what makes a person tick is as critical to my work as understanding the details of combat situations had to be for you. At their core, they're the same thing."

"Where's the threat in here?" I said, relieved that she had revealed the reason for her game playing, not that I understood the need for it.

"Almost everybody in here is in conflict with themselves in some way, and I'm not going to become a casualty of their internal disputes." She leaned forward. "The world is dangerous enough without my help. Speaking of which, Tom tells me you've lived quite an adventure so far: scuba diving, flying planes, parachuting, covering combat?"

The candle casting curious shadows around the pucker of her bust line made me a heartbeat slow at dismissing my splendor, before I said, "All past tense."

"You drive a donor cycle at an age when you should know better," Jeanette replied, dragging a finger across the tablecloth.

"I'm thirty-five and the motorcycle is an economic necessity," I said, answering both queries.

"Some people might think your activities are evidence of a death wish," she said, her grin belying the accusation.

"Some people think backgammon is exciting," I said, nodding toward a game underway at the corner of the bar, "when anything..."

"You did it for the excitement?" she interrupted me.

"... when anything you do can create the wrong impression for people who haven't rolled those particular dice."

"In what way?"

"The further away an event is from everyday activities, the more you have to explain its context. Even then, as you know, it's a waste of time."

"Why do you think I know that?"

"Because you thought better of explaining your life-changing decision until you were reasonably sure I won't judge it or you."

"Which means you know things you won't tell to just anyone, as well."

"Only to special people," I deadpanned.

"Such as?" she said without hesitation.

"Few people understand what living for the day is really about," I replied just as quickly.

"A lot of them would claim they do." Jeanette nodded toward a gaggle of animated singles at the chrome and smoked-glass bar.

I flashed a peace sign toward our server at the same moment Jeanette circled her finger for another round. We shared a smile over our like-mindedness, and the elevation in her status to 'special' as I said, "Intellectually, they know they could drop dead before the next round arrives, but it's not real to them unless their sense of immortality has been blown out of the proverbial nest. I was thirty before that defining moment happened to me, and you know I'm not shy about doing things other people just talk about." I looked away and eruditely said, "An end-of-the-world cataclysm aside, they have a decade to go... if the umbrellas in their drinks mean anything."

"What happened?" Jeanette gushed, grasping my forearm tightly.

Still unsure whether she was playing with me, or why, I reached for a cloth napkin forcing her to let go of my arm. Taking off my glasses, I breathed a spicy fog onto one lens. Rubbing slowly, I said, "It was late April of eighty-one; four-thirty in the morning, our producer called my room ..."

"You weren't kidding about defining a moment," she tittered.

"I have a garbage dump for a mind," I said truthfully, somehow failing to mention that I had reviewed that section of my book hours earlier.

"Anyway Carlos, our driver, told Tony there was a slaughter going on in Mexicanos—that's the suburb where the revolution began." I fogged the other lens and began rubbing. "The shoot-to-kill curfew didn't end until five so I took my time getting ready... just not enough of it." I snuffle-chuckled as I put my glasses on. "We turned onto the street a Death Squad was just turning off, a block away, on the stroke of five so we waited to see if they would circle back."

"Why would you do that? Why would they, for that matter?"

"Death Squads usually drove around the scene of their crimes to discourage witnesses from coming forward. No one ever did." I sipped my drink, swallowed, and said, "Including us."

"You mean they would shoot them, as well?" Jeanette said incredulously.

"Maybe. Eventually. Hard to tell."

"Why would wouldn't they shoot you?"

"It was getting light, and it was too public a place to kill us as long as we stayed put." I cleared my throat to explain the way things were in that place.

"If they came back and we were out in the open, they would take our IDs as a threat that never went away, but our driver and his family would have to vanish as soon as the morning traffic picked up." Into Jeanette's puzzled expression, I said, "The Death Squad could have been waiting to take us out on the empty highway, if we had been spooked into running from the scene of their murders. They would have claimed the killers were reported to have been in a car with Prensa logos all over it—all press cars did—which would also explain why we dared to travel before the curfew was lifted, and were mistakenly killed as the murders leaving the scene of their crime."

"Hold on a minute," she said, taking a breath as if she had been trotting to keep up with me. Resting her palms on the table, she said, "Knowing what might happen around the next corner, you stayed in the car where the worst that could happen would be learning that your driver had to go on the run, because nothing would happen to you beyond the threat of authorities having your names?"

"Correct, except the threat was real."

"And this situation existed because it was five-oh-one?"

"Right, again."

"Okaaaaay," she said. "In other words, the time you personally took to get ready at the hotel wasn't a bit short; it was precisely enough to allow you to see what you saw, and live to talk about it." She leaned in with keen anticipation, of what escaped me.

"Sure, I guess."

She pinched in closer to the table. "Seriously, you're not going to tell me that you haven't thought about what might have happened if you had left the hotel sooner?"

"Correct, I'm not going to tell you that," I said straight-faced.

Poised like Mona Lisa, Jeanette awaited an explanation for my dire lack of curiosity over a potentially life-ending event.

"Looking back," I said, trying not to sound condescending "was a dangerous distraction from assessing the potentials in front of us."

"Such as?" she asked, quietly.

"Soldiers played with us by detaining crews outside of town around curfew time, so that we might run into other soldiers, or the guerrillas, on the way back. This meant we always had to be aware of where we were in terms of travel time to a safer place. San Salvador is in the middle of nowhere, so we did our best to time our work to be no more than half an hour away before curfew.

If we were delayed, we needed to know how far we were from Santa Ana and the Guatemala border to the north, or San Miguel and Honduras to the east. We also had to be sure we had enough water to spend the night in the jungle, if it came to that, which was a bigger deal than you might think. A single person could easily go through two gallons a day, but the biggest thing to get right was making sure someone knew where we were going, and when we said we'd be back. If we were even a minute late, and I mean that literally, someone called the press liaison office to say the next call was going to the American Ambassador. That call would kick start an immediate radio search for the missing crew, because America was spending a billion dollars to support the government, and even the common soldier knew it would be easy to track our movements. The bottom line was that their own Death Squads might pay their own soldiers a visit for risking their finances. That said," I grinned ruefully, "we couldn't count on that irony, so a group of reporters designed photo ID cards with Salvadorian emblems, had them signed by the Press Liaison office, and then laminated them like an officially issued card. Taking the idea as his own, the Liaison Officer made registering with the Salvadorian Press Corp Association mandatory, which created a legitimate safeguard because many soldiers were illiterate."

Jeanette raised her brow.

"Any official looking document was deemed to be permission to be where ever we were, and flashing the S.P.C.A. card left a trail. The downside of it," I said, snickering, "was the general population sometimes thought we were working for the government, and they literally ran from us."

Jeanette's expression briefly betrayed appreciation for the acronym, before she anxiously said, "Wouldn't that apply to the guerrillas, as well?"

"It wasn't a perfect solution," I admitted.

"No kidding." Studiously, she said, "Is your sense of humor based on soldiers being more at risk than you guys, because they just wanted to intimidate you, but you could get them killed?"

"Not at all, three or four Dutch journalists—I can look it up—wrote about government death squads after being warned not to. General Garcia's men kidnapped and killed them."

"Where can you look up that information?"

"I have a pay diary and newspaper clippings to keep things realistic."

"Realistic? Why are you writing fiction?"

"Official history changes with every coup. I'm not trying to correct the past."

"What are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to explain a context for adopting the philosophy of living for the day," I said evenly.

Shaking her head self-consciously, Jeanette said, "I gather the death squad didn't come back to check out the area?"

"Correct." I paused to conspicuously allow Jeanette time to interrupt, a gesture she grinned about for only a brief moment; I told her that we crossed an ominously quiet street before walking through the front door of a tiny bungalow that had been left open as a mark of contempt, and a reminder to witnesses that soldiers weren't accountable to anyone. The first four bodies were stacked in the middle of the small living room. Flies buzzed in clustered clouds around their gaping wounds, and the still-pooling blood on the plank flooring. Three children, ranging from about four to ten years of age, were on the bottom. After watching them die, the soldiers shot their mother in the head, and draped her across the top of the pile. Grandma lay sprawled on the kitchen floor, a few feet away; pieces of her brain dripped off the wall above the ancient wood stove. We found the

husband in one of the two closet-sized bedrooms--his throat had been slit, tongue pulled through the opening, and his severed penis stuffed into his mouth.

"The Salvadorian Necktie," I explained to the wan beauty sitting across from me, "was about the insult and indignity of imagining their death pose as they bled out, while they suffocated. Curb-side mastectomies," I said, picking up my drink, "were common for the women who pissed off soldiers, so I don't know why they shot the mother. Maybe they were tired."

"Jeee-zus," Jeanette whooshed in disgust.

"Nowhere to be found," I said around the rim of my glass.

A suspended moment of incomprehension passed through her eyes; quietly, she said, "Living like that would have pushed me off the edge."

"Then you've almost got it."

She cocked her head.

"My context of living for the day was born in a place that was all edge, all of the time, which is why I don't tell just anyone about it. Or at least expect to be understood when I do."

"It must have taken courage to just leave the hotel in the morning."

"Everyone was scared most of the time."

"You overcame it," she said.

"Nope." I said, glancing toward a naïve-as-a-turd young thing at the bar, twirling a miniature teal and cobalt colored umbrella over her red drink.

Tracking my gaze, a fledgling grin twitched Jeanette's lips as she made a connection between my gaze and her comment.

"Combat changes how you think about a lot of things," I said, dissolving the correlation into a harmless glance.

"Is combat the source of all your secrets; you know, the ones you only share with special people?"

"They're not secrets. People who understand those situations don't talk about them for the same reason you stopped short earlier."

"Which you think is what?"

"Tell me the funniest joke you've ever heard."

"Pardon me?" she said confused, which was satisfying before she understood my point—you had to have been there.

Chuckling appreciation of my illustration, she said, "Maybe you can only defend your philosophy within the context of conflict, so you don't speak about it when that context does not apply?"

"I've got nothing to defend. Before Salvador, I thought you had to be brave to cover combat, then I learned there was a fine difference between courage and stupidity."

"That difference being?"

"It's about knowing what you can and can't do before you have to do anything, which means bravery usually isn't what you think, and heroes usually aren't in the way most people think of them. The bottom line is that before that morning, my life was an adventure that should end according to how I lived, and hopefully it would still come as a surprise. After that day, I knew that we all live within easy range of someone's whim, and that if there is a God, He's ambivalent about us." I shrugged. "There's really nothing to be concerned about, other than trying not to damage things too badly while we're on the way to our long pine stare."

"Oh," Jeanette whispered, which was the shape of her mouth for a poignant moment; excess moisture came into her eyes.

Clearing her throat, she gently said, "Circumstances dictated that you think this to survive emotionally. In fact," she switched topics before I could comment, "it's the politics of the place and time that dictate how we all think."

"By which you mean all circumstances are political?" I replied, relieved that she hadn't tried to justify the dubious existence of a deity to a man who had seen the underside of creation.

Leaving the bodies behind seemed to suit Jeanette as she categorically stated, "We are all political in the sense that we negotiate our way through everything in life, until we learn how to create positive circumstances responsibly. After that, there's almost nothing to negotiate other than the appearance of negotiation to smooth our way. Thanks Allisha," she said as our server set down a fresh round of drinks. "For example," Jeanette leaned forward, taking command of the less disturbing topic, "throughout history the typical artist couldn't pursue their goals without a benefactor. Essentially, they had nothing to lose or nothing they weren't willing to lose." She leaned back. "This circumstance demands that they become a work in progress, as well."

"As in developing character, sure."

"It's more than that." She looked at the singles chatting at the bar, then back to me. "An actor dedicated to learning a character's heart discovers things about himself that his daily personality wouldn't otherwise allow him to see. Writers do the same thing with their character development, by drawing from inner resources they didn't know were available until they made the initial effort." She leaned into a pose of emphasis. "It's little different from you assessing a key decision for its underlying process a few minutes ago. You discovered something about yourself that you can now more consciously trust in other circumstances—which is why it mattered, by the way." She smiled at the fulfillment of her promise.

"Thanks," I said, "I didn't see that." And still didn't: she had talked me through the entire process.

Jeanette continued. "A dedicated creative process always changes the creator of the process faster than people who don't look inside themselves as the creator of their own processes." She giggled. "Which is why it can look like we're not all there." She tapped her temple.

"You seem okay to me," I quipped. Kind of.

"You're not doing badly yourself," she said. "Speaking of which, what specifically did you have to do to get the grant?" She fluttered her eyelids.

Thinking I must have given her only an overview the night before, because it was less important than my scotch-driven tales, I gave Jeanette a detailed accounting of the application process. I added, as an afterthought, that the idea of writing a screenplay had been seeded by our mutual acquaintance, and was I correct in assuming Tom had been a catalyst for hers.

"It was certainly fortuitous," she said, vaguely. "By the way, he told me about you before you left for Toronto, but the time wasn't right for us to meet." She waved away the thought. "Is there any reason why we couldn't get a grant to do my project?"

"Not that I know of—what was wrong with the timing?"

"You didn't know you had nothing to lose until you lost it all, and we needed that in common in order to work together," she said with surprising candor.

"Assuming that's true," I said evenly, "why would we need that in common?"

Jeanette addressed my caveat first. "It's only logical that you finally came here when there was nothing worth saving in Toronto, which is essentially what you told me last night—between the lines." She smiled broadly. "Common experiences create common assumptions, which simplify what others might otherwise view as complex understandings. If we start out on the same page, working together can be as easy as our conversation was last night."

"Makes sense."

"Tell me then," she said, pitching forward again, "what process did you use to determine why you should stop working wars? That must have been a... a hefty moment," she said, looking dissatisfied with the word, but there it was.

Unable to recall all of the ways she had listed, I decided to tell her about a particularly difficult day from which she could draw her own conclusions.

"In Lebanon, we were working a volunteer job in a town we called Goodbye..." was all I managed to say before Tom slapped me on the back.

"This is a good one!" he exclaimed.

Leaning over us in a hover, as I wiped Caesar dribble from my beard, he said, "I had a few minutes, so I thought I'd drop in and see how things are going between you two." He glanced from me to Jeanette and back again.

"Sit, sit!" she gushed. "Glad you could make it."

My telling delay in also inviting him to sit prompted Tom to appear torn between a personal desire, and sacrificing himself to an unnamed responsibility. Having established the pose, he invoked a short squall of social fluff, pivoted smartly, and disappeared like a ghost in fog.

Jeanette and I exchanged amused glances, as if to confirm we had both actually seen him, then dismissing the interruption as an apparition anyway, she said, "You said volunteer job, as in delivering food or medical supplies?"

"No. It's a job that's too dangerous to legitimately assign," I said uncomfortably.

"How did you decide what constituted a volunteer job, and whether to go?"

"Outright bang-bang was always volunteer work. If it sounded too risky, I didn't do it."

"How often did that happen?"

"Technically never."

Jeanette chuckled, as I explained what I meant by technically.

"A cameraman I worked with, literally for a few minutes in Lebanon, later asked me to work a documentary on the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. I couldn't go because I was already booked." I shrugged off the sin of omission—I could have easily gotten a replacement. "That said, they were the bloodiest army of modern times, I would have been travelling through the most mined country in all of history, with a cameraman who had been wounded seven times, while dealing with a language and culture I couldn't fathom." I left it to Jeanette to draw her own conclusion.

"It took that much to cause you to feel a job was too dangerous?" she said, shaking her head.

"Obviously, in the beginning I didn't know better, but it became easier to scope out the potential of crappy things happening."

"And dismissing the ones you were used to, sure... by scope out, do you mean intuit?" she said with a twinkle in her eye.

"Sometimes things felt wrong, or an empty street shouted at us, sure."

"Why did you say a town you called Goodbye?"

"Why do you care so much about that little stuff?"

"You know why; the big stuff rests on it." She cocked her head.

"Uh huh. Western ears tend to have trouble with Arabic, so we simplified place names to avoid confusion about where we were talking about. Anyway, we were holed up in a crawl space below the basement of our hotel during an all night shelling..."

Back on track, I captivated Jeanette with a brief version of the events that might have led me to quitting working wars, after which she asked me to describe the very moment I had avoided talking about. Because I had never categorically thought it was time to quit, I was at a loss for an

explanation when a forgotten event overrode all else in my mind. Chuckling at how acute my memory could be on this evening, yet how hollow this explanation was going to sound, I said, "We were in an armored personnel carrier that was kind of under fire, and I was about to ask a soldier to close the hatch when I just knew that I would be okay. I think that moment planted the idea of quitting, but I went to two more wars to cover other issues."

"Kinda under fire? Is that like technically?" she chuckled.

"Ya—same thing."

Suddenly looking at me intently, she said, "Why did you think you would be okay?"

"I guess because earlier events hadn't killed me." I shrugged.

"Did you think you would be safe in terms of a prophetic certainty?"

Pondering the question only long enough to placate her intensity, I said, "I probably thought my bucket of luck had sprung a leak, and it started me thinking."

"You counted on luck to keep you safe?"

"I worked with some of the best people in the business. We were good and lucky and lucky because we were good," I said crisply.

"I know they go hand in hand," Jeanette said, raising her hands in mock surrender.

"Why the interrogation?" I smiled solicitously.

"You had faith in yourself."

Alerted to the subtle sanctimony of a closet bible thumper, I said, "Maybe you're confusing faith with the penetrating kind of confidence that comes from getting everyday stuff right, in places where the unusual was so usual that you couldn't count on much of anything—usually. If that makes sense," I grinned.

"That depends on what your days were like in the Middle East," she replied slyly. "Were there long stretches of boredom broken by seconds of terror?"

"Veteran crews rarely got bored or became terrified. They lived in between caution and surprise... without much surprise," I amended my statement.

Jeanette lifted her chin.

Searching for the proper words, because she had been right—I had never assessed anything about my past precisely because it was behind me—I said, "In a way, working in the Middle East was the opposite of Central America. There was so much history and politics in play that we lived as if there was always something about to happen, which didn't necessarily mean it was ass-pucker tense like Salvador. We took in everything our experiences had taught us to be aware of, so there wasn't much that could catch us off guard. I don't mean we didn't twitch when the shooting started, just that we knew what to do because, for the most part, fighters on all sides had rules." I snickered. "It wasn't unusual for them to stop shooting to have a morning coffee, and any crews that had been caught out in the open would surrender to one side or the other, have coffee with them, and get on with their day. The fighters in Salvador were all sadistic fuckers. Pardon me."

"Maybe explaining a typical day in Lebanon would clear things up for me."

"Typical?" I said, choking on a pepper-cooling sip of ice water.

Jeanette waited patiently for my recovery.

Amused by this in-depth audition just to do Tom a favor, I told her about a youthful martyr's final expression, and literal spreading of beliefs, by blowing himself up in the midst of those who did not share them. I next assaulted her fly-catching expression with a series of anecdotes that took her imagination on a slick tour of malice and idiocy, the totality of which went far beyond a typical day's events, although their impact on Jeanette seemed to be about right for a crappy day.

Three drinks and dim lighting notwithstanding, by nine o'clock I thought she was perceiving a better looking man than the Barbie and Ken couple across from us saw when they glanced our way, and evidently wondered, why him?

Chapter 3: The Nature of Events

Pausing to sip our Caesars amid my bloody images, it crossed my mind that fascinating as I clearly was to Jeanette I had been dominating our conversation. Dismissing the option of suddenly developing an interest in her job selling advertising space for the Yellow Pages, or more transparently asking about the trials of raising two teenagers alone, I said, "Tom tells me that with a little advice you're heading to the academy awards."

"Actually," Jeanette said, with lines of reluctance creasing her brow, "I've realized I need a full time partner to do it properly."

"Screenplays aren't that difficult to format. Tell me about a scene, and we'll convert it now."

Brushing my request aside, like a maître d clearing offensive crumbs from freshly laundered table linen, she said, "My key characters operated at a level of assumptions you would need to experience, or recognize you have already experienced, before you could script my scenes properly."

"Script? I thought you needed help with technical stuff and basic formatting."

"That will certainly be helpful, but some aspects of a special character's development are... tricky," she said hesitantly. "I need a second point of view about it, but not just anyone's."

"Someone special," I joked.

"Exactly," she replied seriously.

"Tom couldn't help you with that?"

"He has other things on his mind," she said vaguely, but I knew what they were; they were certainly on mine.

"Okay, I've got all night to unravel whatever seems tricky to you."

Her minimalist grin acknowledged my innuendo, before vanishing like Hoffa as she said, "I'm not talking about understanding foreign cultures—I'm sure you can do that better than most people. I'm talking about assumptions that are foreign to every culture's way of thinking." She paused. "It's not unlike how we looked beneath your physical circumstances to assess the nature of your decision making process... which was interesting, don't you think?"

"Uh huh."

She cleared her throat. "My difficulty is that key characters thought this way all of the time—looking for essences—so keeping my audience in step with a plot that develops based on their advanced way of thinking demands that I explain the steps they have taken to be able to view things the way they do."

"Why is that a problem? You walked me through it in five minutes." *And if I had been paying attention, I would probably be able to do it again.*

"I walked you through your own experiences to discover something you knew; you just didn't know that you knew it." She leaned toward me. "This is different: I have to lead a character away from how he is currently viewing events, including his own experiences, by placing them in the context of their true nature. When he catches on..."

"Like I might when you've finished this thought?" I joked.

"Exactly. When he catches on, this context will irrevocably alter how he views the key experiences that shaped his worldview. The audience will then better understand why he embraced

his old view, and why he's leaving it behind." She leaned back a few microns. "I've never observed that process, I just know the steps."

"You must have been through it, so what's the problem?"

Sheepishly, she said, "I learned about essential natures in a different way, but I thought that projecting my understanding on my character's struggles would work." She shrugged. "It's one hundred percent accurate, but it doesn't ring true because it wasn't my direct experience. Credibility is everything in my work, because it's difficult to believe as it is." She flicked her wrist, indicating that she was not going to tell me about how she had learned this new way of thinking.

"It seems to me," I softened my certainty, "that your characters' interactions and dialogue will explain their different way of thinking. I mean, your audience doesn't need to have the actual experience, do they?"

"No, but if I get it right some of them will." She shrugged. "But maybe you're right," she said without enthusiasm.

"It's happened before," I quipped.

Jeanette managed only a polite grin.

"Maybe you're standing too close to it," I said. "Maybe voicing how you set up the two trains of thought in your work would make things clearer in your own mind. I do that with intricate dialogue all of the time, and changes I had struggled with became embarrassingly obvious."

A brief look of intrigue passed through her expression; with anticipation, she said, "Like you and I playing the roles of a teacher and student to see how it sounds?"

Not really. "Sure. What's the background of the scene?"

"I begin separating the two ways of thinking," she said, tentatively, "by having an elder explain to a newcomer why their commune's justice system isn't based on the presumption of innocence, like it is in their city-state."

"What's wrong with presuming innocence?"

"Enshrining any supposition as a fact inevitably generates contradictions that undermine the purpose of the assumption," she said, subtly raising her brow.

"Are you talking about cops violating a suspect's right in some way that's unrelated to their crime," I said, unraveling her point, "but the bad guy gets away with it anyway?"

"Yes."

"As I understand it," I said, avoiding a declaration, "presuming innocence protects people from things like malicious prosecution."

"That's how I understand it, as well," she said agreeably.

Looking over the rim of my glasses, I politely spelled it out. "How does your elder rationalize his society not having those safeguards?"

"*Her* society," Jeanette corrected me, "would say it's the other way around; the newcomer's society rationalizes the precaution to protect the majority at the inevitable expense of allowing some criminals to continue to harm the few."

"Technically, they're not criminals, and the point is to protect the majority."

"Do you think it's logical for a technicality to overrule reality, regardless of the numbers involved?"

"What I think isn't the point. Superior thinkers and centuries of experience have made it clear that it's not a perfect system, but it's better than subverting everyone's right to a fair trial."

"Actually, what you think *is* the point," she said evenly.

"Right—sorry, I forgot we're playing. Go ahead."

With a half-nod needlessly punctuating that we had an arrangement, she said, "The concept of fairness happened to be the stranger's concern as well, so we're already on the same page." She smiled. "The elder started him off with a basic example of their different ways of thinking," Jeanette stated, clearly enjoying herself. "In their time, some societies reasoned capital punishment to be a fair penalty for specific deeds, and a deterrent for those who might rethink doing similar crimes. My elder's culture said hanging a man was murder." She held out her arms, like the scales of justice. Raising one, she said, "Fair, as reasoned by one society." She lowered it and raised the other. "Murder, as determined by the nature of the act." Jeanette placed her hands on opposite sides of the table. "That's how far apart the two ways of thinking can be in an identical circumstance. It's scary, if you think about it—really scary."

"Some political systems take their moral cues from ..."

"I'll stop you there to avoid confusion."

"That ship might have sailed."

"I doubt it," she chortled. "You want to see if I know my stuff."

I shrugged to imply that I was that shrew.

Jeanette continued speaking academically.

"Those who embraced the elder's way of thinking dealt with the essence of any act as a core assumption of evaluation; their view had no mitigating circumstances, so it was knowledge untainted by beliefs." She searched the ceiling for an example. "You can spin a brick to blur its edges, but it's still a brick," she said, seemingly unsatisfied with the example.

"Statistically, that law works..."

"Again," she said, holding open a palm, "lawmakers create their own continuity of justification. The fact that cop killing statistics go down in some of these places, if it is a fact, doesn't change the nature of the event, regardless of how you arrange your so called facts to suit a particular social circumstance. So far?"

"We'll see."

She leaned toward me, as if clarity was relative to the distance between us. "Our culture's assessment of events is based on an ever-evolving set of consensus beliefs that include appearances, and our codes of morality that affect our emotions and adjust our prejudices. This means we translate our experiences so that they align with mass assumptions, but these are essentially an entanglement of current and historical opinions about the way things *should* be. Still with me—you don't have to agree." She grinned and snickered, "That rhymes."

Badly. "I get the drift."

"Specifically," she said seriously, "we define fairness as honestly fulfilling reasonable expectations, and contractual obligations, entered into with informed consent. The concept is also wrapped within commonly understood moral and ethical considerations, which have evolved over time based on their impact on the greatest number of people. I will add to this, again, that our assumptions are based on how we are conformed to the way we are told things *should* be. It follows that if any one of these requirements is not present, then we deem the circumstance to somehow be unfair, or with caveats. Do you agree?"

"I wouldn't change anything," I said, feeling like a dyslexic adrift on a sea of Greek calculus.

"Is there anything you would add?"

"No, you've got it smo—covered."

Speaking succinctly, as if she was trying to hide an accent, Jeanette said, "Plato and Nietzsche wrote versions of, 'the mindset that creates a problem cannot solve it.' This means our assumptions lead our reason astray until one of two things happens; we change our mindset, or the convolutions

our assumptions create *become* our resolution." She waited for me to acknowledge that I was still in the library, if not exactly on the same page.

"Maybe an example of that would help," I said.

Jeanette cocked her head slightly, as if asking, "Are you sure?"

Before I could respond, she said, "To justify your successful risk-taking, you claimed your intellect kept you safe, then you qualified that statement by adding sensing things, preparation, experience, and other people's expertise contributing to you having confidence in a place where the unusual was usual. You also used luck as a buffer between these conditions, to fill any holes in your reasoned explanation. The underlying nature of your reasoning was that you had no clue how you made it through some days, so you arranged what you considered facts to suit various scenarios. As you also interpreted these to suit your reason, you dismissed anything that didn't fit, or you couldn't explain. The result was a convolution you embraced as a resolution."

An intrusive comprehension displaced—maybe erased, is a better description—my annoyance at her presumptive explanation, and I grasped her point. To avoid sounding surprised by having a relevant thought, I casually said, "You're saying I created a continuity of justification to explain how I survived—right?"

"You're this close," she said, holding her thumb and forefinger together, "to experiencing that other level of understanding we're after."

"Your fingers are touching."

"Touching upon a view isn't grasping it: you created a convoluted continuity of clarification because you were *unable* to explain how you survived."

"Okay so how would your elder explain it—my survival, that is?"

Stifling a chuckle, Jeanette said, "To have seen the things you saw close up, and generally survive unscathed in high risk situations, would have shouted that you were on a special journey. You might say that regardless of your interpretation of events, that feeling of deep security you experienced at the core of your being was the Universe whispering it had plans for you."

"Uh huh. As convoluted as my explanation sounded," I chuckled, "it actually *was* an explanation. In fact," I said, leaning forward to scrub the sting out my statement, "I think what you called convoluted is an appropriate description of how we synthesize events into reasonable explanations. Like The Band sang, take what you need and leave the rest."

"Your words perfectly demonstrate my point about our inherent confusion: we are so mired in the myths of our enlightenment that we knowingly build fatal flaws in our social order, and then self-righteously hang our heads for those we sacrifice in the name of the greater good."

Amused by imagining a pulpit in front of her, I said, "What are the myths of our enlightenment?"

"Things like our version of historical evolution, honor, duty, and especially the greater good." She shrugged a delicate affair.

"Are you saying your elder didn't believe in any of them?"

"I'm saying my peo—her people didn't believe in anything they hadn't historically experienced, and properly assessed for its true nature. In this case, it wasn't information or opinion, it was knowledge." She cleared her throat. "My elder explains to the newcomer how her people developed core assumptions about how to live properly based on experiencing logical, interwoven rules about handling energy. Bear with me," she said into my frozen expression.

Briefly lining up her ducks, she said, "Students of this way of life had to learn to see past the curtain of their cultural conformation to acceptable behaviors, and good intentions, to evaluate the true nature of events. They also had to learn that all events have an energy equivalent based on that

nature." She insinuated leaning toward me. "Positive acts generated positive energy regardless of any appearances to the contrary, by which I mean not everyone may recognize an event as positive. Distil this idea, and you can see that the concept of behavior was itself an aberration to their way of thinking, because all behaviors are based on interpretations of circumstances—the blur of the spinning brick—not the actual brick." She mimed the scales of justice scene again.

"You know," I said seriously, "if I'm a test case you're pretty much screwed."

"You're missing the critical difference?"

"Not for the first time."

"Let me bring you up to speed." For some reason she found this funny, got herself under control, and waved her hand by way of apology as she said, "Our social conformation is based entirely on institutionalized continuities of justification. Through the relentless pressure of daily example, these surreptitiously taught us the same process of reasoning. In fact," she edged back, "culture to culture, they taught us to reason the same conclusions, but that's for another time. My point is that cultures act on their beliefs *about* circumstances—the cultural spin. My teachers acted on the true nature of an event—the brick." She took a quick drink, and continued as if her point was now clear to me.

"To learn how to see what's in front of their eyes, without imposing any interpretations on their view, my teachers purposefully guided children through practical situations that proved the principles of energy-efficient living. Simplistically, from a young age they understood that if you hang around bullies at a bus stop, you will eventually get a bloody nose because that's the nature of the energy they would be sharing in that space. They weren't fooled if the bully," she said, leaning back to raise my eye line, "was genuinely funny in his contrived confrontations with weaker people, because they would recognize his humor is derived from intimidation and domination."

"Where does fairness enter into this?"

"If a bus hit a mother of three children, we'd say it wasn't fair."

"You're not saying it would be fair if the bullies were hurt?" I interrupted her.

"Correct, I'm trying to say that it wouldn't be fair or unfair for anybody to be hit—let me finish," she said, raising a finger toward my lips. Choosing her words carefully, she said, "My people understood the nature of the energy of where they were standing, so staying there was a conscious choice no different than you purposefully looking for a battle to film." She brushed the top of my hand as if this would erase my puzzlement. "I'm saying that what you may view as an innocent bystander being unfairly hit by a bus, my teachers saw as a matter of having the personal energy to recognize their situation, because gathering energy is also a choice. If they had enough, they could choose to distance themselves from the gang, and miss the next bus for no apparent reason other than they felt like it; you've done that kind of thing."

We had another brief stare-off, then I said, "Apparently, I'm missing something simple."

She opened her palms and plaintively said, "It's all about awareness, and awareness is about gathering energy, which is a choice."

"If you know about it, sure," I said, feeling silly voicing the glaring flaw in her advanced people's thinking.

"And now you do. It's a great day!" she said excitedly, as if pi had suddenly run its numerical course.

"I appreciate the advantage, but what about everyone else in here?"

"What about them?" Jeanette said innocently.

"Wouldn't your elder think they deserve to know, as well?"

"Nowhere in our definition of fairness did we mention the idea of deserving anything, and I asked you if there was anything you wanted to add."

She looked at me casually. I stared back in disbelief.

She stared harder; a grin seeped through her gaze.

"Are you telling me that fairness doesn't exist for your people—they didn't believe in it?"

"I'm saying that determining fairness is based on inherently biased evaluations, and that the concept has no energy equivalent. To 'deserve' is a perspective that has no relevancy to the nature of a circumstance. It's spin—not substance." She pitched forward. "There was nothing fair or unfair about you sensing which road was safer, nor would it have been fair or unfair for the mother to be at the bus stop at a dangerous time. Those choices are based on the awareness that energy provides, where energy is tied directly to evolutionary development." She tittered. "Use our assessment of your decision making process as an example, then imagine what my people's full examination of a legal circumstance would be like, and tell me which judicial system you'd rather be under."

"Depends on whether I'm guilty," I jested.

"Exactly!" she exclaimed. Calming, she said, "A master of the art of assessment could grill you about your actions back to the very moment of you deciding on them, so lies couldn't hide. They would scream, 'Here I am!' as would the truth, so there was no need to presume anything."

"Not true; they are presuming people will remember events long past."

"You did."

Too silly a point to argue, I said, "Did your people have rights?"

"Such as?"

"The right to privacy, for instance," I said, offhandedly.

"They didn't legislate courtesy, if that's what you're thinking."

"I'm thinking that a system with no starting assumption would need virtually unlimited investigative authority, and that most people would have a problem with cops breaking down doors to find evidence, just because they felt like it."

"Their system's starting point was teaching children how to assume responsibility for all of their actions; it followed that refusing to cooperate was socially irresponsible and tantamount to declaring you had something to hide." Jeanette pitched forward into my favorite view.

"My people's knowledge about the underlying nature of events translated directly into social responsibility, which precluded interfering with the authorities whose job it was to safeguard society. It wouldn't have crossed their minds to feel inconvenienced, let alone invaded." She leaned back, grinned sardonically, and said, "Unless they were guilty." She twitched a shrug. "Privacy is an issue to us only because we'd rather maintain an image of a free society than fulfill the responsibilities that would actually safeguard our freedoms." She reached for her drink. "The same reasoning applies to your wars."

"In what way?"

"A peaceful society would fulfill the responsibilities of maintaining peace, not endlessly fund the means for war."

"Responsibilities of peace being what?"

"Now you're playing with me."

"I know what they'd be if I had my own country."

"In this moment, assume that you do."

"Okay, health, education, a level playing field in opportunity, free beer, and a small army to protect the brewery."

"We're almost on the same page," she said, apparently enjoying something other than my comment.

"What would your people do about aggressors?" I said, evenly.

"I didn't say my people wouldn't fight if they had to, but they'd first have the aggressors look at peaceful options."

This final gaping hole silenced me.

Chapter 4: Spending Energy

Jeanette took a short sip. Gently clearing her throat, she said, "Tell me about the circumstances you needed to know for your safety, and I'll tell you what my people would say to these same circumstances. The point," she continued, heading off my question, "is to extend your understanding of how my people look at things energetically. Good job, by the way. Not many people get this far without feeling that I'm intentionally trying to annoy them." She chuckled.

"Circumstances, as in what I needed to know about a specific conflict or what I'd do in a given situation?" I managed to say as if I weren't frustrated or annoyed.

"A conflict... use Lebanon."

"There's a lot of it."

"As you said, we have all night." Jeanette settled back in her chair.

Cautioning her that I was offering information in the context of my daily activities, not historical accuracy, I told her what I had learned in my first few days in Lebanon...

The Christian Lebanese government had invited the Syrians to send in their army to help stabilize Lebanese society when a civil war erupted in 1976. The Syrian's relatively inert, when not covert, presence during endless civil violence effectively declared them an occupying force, and when the dust finally settled Syria would have a strong influence with the new government. This meant the official referee was heavily invested in the outcome, an interest that showed through whom they assassinated, and with whom they shared intelligence.

In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon, not the Lebanese, to oust the Palestine Liberation Army who had been shelling Kibbutz's with relative impunity from across the border for over a year. I once had the dubious pleasure of being on the incoming side, before I crossed the border and met the guys who were shelling me. Nothing personal, they said.

Jeanette didn't care about this.

For political and practical purposes, the Israelis invited the Americans to help keep at bay the Moslem factions, who were generally too busy fighting the Lebanese Christians to officially hassle the Israeli Defense Forces, but you never knew. Upon their arrival, the Americans discovered that it wasn't prudent to shoot just anyone, because they had no idea to whom they were related, and their official rules of engagement changed at the direct expense of their safety. In terms of the Middle Eastern psyche, the barracks bombing that killed 283 of their sons and daughters was an unfathomable embarrassment to the American army, because it caused political America to circle their military wagons around the airport perimeter. This literally became the outer ring of a kilometer wide target, with soldiers as the bull's eye, thereby leaving the Israeli's more on their own than they'd like to be, spy satellites, and other sources of intelligence notwithstanding.

This change in tactics, or lack thereof, caused the Israeli Defense Forces to embrace their American brethren with more cordiality than respect, because their wealthy cousins from across the sea had been neutered by one big bang in a place where a weak relative is a niece.

Generally unaware of local politics, and specifically ignorant about the Palestinian / Israeli history of tick-tock terrorism by which their leaders came and went, the average American soldier arrived naïve, and went home disillusioned, or died confused.

My point in telling Jeanette this was that travelling near Israelis or Americans was as dangerous as travelling known "terrorist" turf, because both armies were target practice for kids with time on their hands. We also regularly worked the wire at the airport perimeter on the coast road to Damour, and an extremely delicate section of town crews called the Perch. Sufficient to say that it was a mistake to think there were any friendlies in my working day, with the possible exception of the Mafia. But that was another story.

Unofficially, but not a secret, Syria funded the P.L.O. and their hardliners who had shot UN, Israeli, and American forces, because in their world an enemy's friend is an enemy. It followed that Syrian and American troops avoided each other for the safety of both, as we avoided positioning ourselves between them lest we be mistaken for one or the other on a quarter-moon night, after either side had been at the bottle or pipe.

Speaking of positioning, I told Jeanette that Syrian forces and the Israeli Defense Forces literally avoided eye contact, generally because Syria had their ass handed to them in previous conflicts with Israel, and specifically because Israel still occupied their Golan Heights. As a result, Israelis motored through Syrian checkpoints as if they weren't there. Reciprocally, seeing the large blue and white flags waving from the back of approaching Israeli vehicles, Syrian soldiers turned their backs as they drove by. The mood on both sides, whose twitchy fingers rested inside the trigger guards, was something the press corps always needed to consider.

Where the Syrians treated the P.L.O. like their little nephew Abdul, and the I.D.F. treated Americans like Cousin Nancy, the P.L.O. were overtly indifferent to the Lebanese Army and their breakaway faction of the Christian Phalange. They could afford to be because, if push came to shove, their Hezbollah brothers could rally enough temporary support from all Palestinian factions to smack the Christians back into the Bronze Age.

Practically speaking, this was unlikely because it would give America reason to come out of their trenches when Israel rushed to the aid of their de facto allies, the Lebanese regular army, whose alignment with Israeli forces was an unavoidable affront to the P.L.O., who also distinguished a friend from an enemy by the company they kept.

That said, taking on the Lebanese army would be to, in effect, invade the country that wasn't officially giving the P.L.O. sanctuary, which would have been unconscionably poor form in a culture where manners are practiced as an art. This is also what made the P.L.O.'s indifference so insulting to the Lebanese regulars, an attitude that applied to the Christian Phalange for a while, but how that changed into acidic hate was a story for another time. It was enough for Jeanette to know that a click of the tongue from a commander could put into play a scrupulously designed misunderstanding between factions, which would be accepted as a reasonable mistake within the convoluted nature of relationships in the area.

"That's the overview," I said when I felt I was finished. "Do you want to know specifics, like how to deal with roadblocks or firefights?"

"That's not necessary. My people wouldn't change what they needed to know to stay safe, regardless of having that knowledge."

"Which is what?" I said, settling back for the long haul.

"They wouldn't have been drawn into that cauldron of destruction."

"Pardon me?"

"My people would have seen how a number of countries had passed the point of change where logic could prevail, so they would let them battle it out until they came to understand what they were doing."

"That's it?"

"That's all there needs to be. It's all about energy."

"You're harsh."

"Not at all," she replied seriously. "You can't make anyone believe anything they don't want to believe until they're ready to see it," she explained, "and my people knew that doing anything else could only delay the combatants moment of understanding, and eventual reconciliation. My teachers employed the same principle of using their student's own standard of behavior as the most effective way to teach them anything."

"You're really saying they would do nothing if they were neighbors, trading partners or even the Red Cross?" I said incredulously.

"I'm saying they would do nothing as a proactive choice. Every circumstance you described would not have camouflaged the nature of those events."

"Which is?"

"We just talked about it—murder. Mass murder, actually."

I took a lengthy sip to help me swallow the idea that she had summarily dismissed the circumstances I had toiled to list so well. Cautiously, lest I had somehow hallucinated her surreal reply, I said, "This would include no press coverage?"

"To what purpose?"

"You know as well as I do that accurate information allows people to make better choices."

"It certainly does, but you don't appreciate how the *nature* of information guides people in making those choices. The media are instrumental in ways they might not realize."

"Such as?"

"Such as the blanket assumption that accurate information allows people to make better choices masks the underlying nature of their actions."

"Which you think is what?"

"Something large you will discover as we go along."

"What about something small, like my energy part in that?"

"Fair enough," she joked. "My people would say you risked yourself for years to be able to speak intelligently for five minutes about a complete waste of energy that killed thousands of people. But your audience already knew that people are killed in wars, so what you had to learn to survive—which was impressive—was meaningless. I spoke for five seconds on the same subject, nobody died, and my conclusion was something you did not know. Our conversation is a metaphor for spending energy efficiently."

"If you believe in the energetic thing," I said chuckling.

"I thought you understood; my people didn't believe anything—they *knew*."

"They knew what?"

"Where they really were—we're not there yet."

No shit

"Uh huh."

Chapter 5: The Magic of Mankind

It seems that you have an agenda beyond making a living?" I said, more casually than I was feeling.

"I do," she replied agreeably. Counting on her fingers, she said, "Over time, my characters peel back the layers of our common assumptions to reveal aspects of the human condition that are crippling our development now. When they subdue these behaviors with the disciplines they developed to mirror the rules of handling energy," she pulled down a second finger, "my audience will see that by changing our view of ourselves we can change the world."

"Your agenda is to change the world?" I knew better, but I snickered anyway.

Jeanette waited tranquilly for me to quiet, before she said, "I said changing our view of ourselves."

"Into what?"

"Energy," she said, apparently confused that I had missed this aspect of her point.

"Okay, so how much time are you talking about?" I said, as seriously as I could manage.

"Immediately after the opening scenes," she replied, looking pleased at a my casual acceptance of her premise, "I introduce an ancient Egyptian culture as the base setting from which other time frames will reveal the destructive progression of our common beliefs, and the effectiveness of my people's assumptions at turning things around."

"Time frames as in flashbacks?" I said warily; she was smarter than this.

"I place my teachers throughout time, and have them reappear to keep their lessons on track." On no cue I could see, Jeanette lunged into myriad descriptions of ancient architectural designs.

I had no idea what she was getting at, but the respite from mental jousting was more than welcome: I nodded like a dashboard doll crossing railway tracks, alternately meeting her gaze at points she indicated I should acknowledge, between peeks at her cleavage under the guise of introspection. Five minutes of this passed before she paused to sip her drink, and I wryly interjected, "You're not short on detail; that's great for the Art Director."

"My settings are as integral to my story as warfare is to yours, along with learning what makes people tick."

My studious "Hummf", representing the sum of my socio-architectural knowledge, prompted Jeanette to explain why her settings were crucial.

"From sporting arenas through burial customs, every culture creates monuments to their self-interests. The pyramids, for example, are of such precise dimensions and celestial orientation that how and why they were built remains a mystery to this day, but there's no doubt that their builders were miles ahead of us socially, as well as technologically."

"You don't believe the slaves and tombs version?"

"It doesn't make sense that a society capable of building those magnificent structures would enslave generations of people for the purpose of aggrandizing a cruel ruler."

"What makes sense to you?"

"Those structures are a metaphor for a society dealing with ponderous issues with the precision of moving millions of tons of stone."

"I've been to places with high technology and remarkable architecture surrounded by filth you can't imagine. How would you explain that?"

"There's no incongruity; the businessmen and politicians' belief in their comfort and accoutrements of power supersede the needs of the people."

"How do you explain the bodies?"

"The pyramids became tombs after their original purpose was lost to social upheaval."

"Their original purpose being what?"

"A topic for another time. Really," she said apologetically, slowing the pace of our exchange, "it would interfere with you experiencing another level of perception now."

"But I just..."

She raised her and said, "You just grasped my people's concept of fairness at an intellectual level, but there's more to it, and you'll know what that is without having to ask if we approach the issue at my pace."

"Okay so what's the third time frame?"

"The time of Jesus."

Somehow, I was not surprised to hear this.

"If I understand you," I said, hiding my concern about her flawed logic, "you reincarnate teachers so they can continue their own lessons, but how do they know what their original teachings were?"

"It's a process." Jeanette chuckled at a private thought, composed herself, and said, "In an early scene, I have two archaeologists independently experience visions while working at an Egyptian dig site. When they talk about these events, they realize they have collectively received directions to a chamber buried deep within the base of a pyramid. This isn't enough to make them act until they have identical visions about artifacts inside the chamber."

"They find those things, then what?" I hazard a reasonable guess.

With a quick nod, she said, "It's more than that, because visions can carry a virtual encyclopedia of knowledge—and awaken knowledge, but we'll get to that."

"Now's good for me: are you saying they can be awakened to knowledge of past lives?"

"They can, but it's more than that. Patients," she admonished me, setting her glass aside. Jeanette gathered her breath and explained into my stoic expression, which was far better than disdain, "They also discover hieroglyphs written by a man-God named Osiris, sections of which claim that mankind's cycles of birth and death are carefully chosen by the individual so that their experiences address specific challenges of personal evolution. Eventually, individuals have enough energy to knowingly tackle these and other challenges head on. Osiris also wrote that his message is meant specifically for two individuals living in the archaeologist's time who have evolved to this level. They just didn't know it. He also characterizes all other times in terms of his own, by writing things like, 'People live in the sky,' to describe high rise buildings. This allows me to shift the point of view to Osiris dictating his message," she said as I shifted uncomfortably, "and show his culture to my audience. I can also switch between characters in different times to portray the development of the beliefs described in the glyphs. More than this," she said excitedly, "I personalize characters with subtle gestures, or a quirk of phrasing that's designed to awaken deep memories—energy memories, if you will." Her upper lip quivered with anticipation."

"And?"

"And Osiris wrote detailed descriptions of the two archaeologist's lives; there's no doubt about who the messages are meant for when he outlines a quest that defies logic."

"What is it?" I said, thinking that her run up to it was certainly compatible...

"They have to learn that in measured steps; it's too ridiculous to contemplate without preparation."

"In that case, you'll need to tell your audience what it is so they can grasp the elders' thinking, and have something to hang onto."

"Hang onto?"

"As you lay out incomplete pieces toward what should become a more attainable goal?"

Looking at me with gratitude, as if I had invented the wheel to solve her personal transportation problem, she said, "Of course, of course! That's beautiful. I'll add that after my opening scene prepares them for the scale of the plot," she grasped my arm, "but it doesn't give away the farm; the steps the archaeologists have to take to understand their goal will become the audience's journey."

Jeanette lurched forward. Discarding our topic, as if it had been inconsequential, she said, "I'm having trouble portraying Maria and Kristoffer's mental and emotional struggles, because the very nature of their existence is being assaulted by events they can't dismiss as coincidence." She edged back in her seat. "I need to create an ineffable sense of enchantment, because they're stuck with a miracle to explain their identical visions. What's funny about that?"

Sniffing back a snicker in the face of her Border Collie stare, I said, "You're stuck with a miracle to explain the inexplicable?"

"I said I'm having trouble portraying an ineffable sense of enchantment."

"Maybe that's why it's called ineffable. How many gimmicks does your audience have to deal with?"

Clasping her hands, be this in her defense or mine was unclear, Jeanette said, "Osiris designed the process of preparation to pass through common aspects of mankind's magic, which people don't realize they've already encountered. Like you, they had no reasonable explanation for those kinds of events, so they are not gimmicks; they are overlooked or misinterpreted events, like the moment of *knowing* you had in Lebanon. That kind of experience, but more in depth, will reduce what seems to be an outrageous quest into a series of manageable challenges," she said, adding a layer of justification.

"Does everything take place in their minds?" I guessed.

"That suspicion will certainly plague them."

"Because they're being brainwashed by the lessons?"

"Were you brainwashed into making up your experience at Goodbye?"

"No, but..." I had nowhere to go with this idea.

"Strictly speaking," Jeanette said, letting me off the hook, "they're flushing their minds to see things clearly. It's the first step to encountering their own magic objectively. Eventually," she interjected into her own thoughts, "Osiris will inform them that to continue their lessons will break them free from the world they know, and strand them with others of like mind—there's no going back."

"Teasing them with power—got it," I nodded.

Jeanette sat up straight. Her pinched expression conveying that she was taking special note of my comment, she said, "Osiris wrote that ideas exist independently of the mind, within their own parameters of reality. In effect, our brain translates energy-ideas into physically related data that we comprehend according to how our circumstances and experiences color them. Tarot cards, for example, work as a focusing agent, but we need relevant background knowledge to support the ideas a card reader can access. I dabble with them," she said offhandedly.

"What kind of background information are you talking about?" I said, attentively hiding my newest concern over exceptions to complexities that were already shredding her plot.

Working with her wasn't looking good, but she certainly did.

"If two people psychically accessed the idea of a chair," Jeanette said professorially, "the one with the bad back would say it was a firm construction, while the couch potato would see a cushioned lounge. If you went to their respective homes, you would find these ideas faithfully

represented in three dimensional forms, which is how we can determine a society's beliefs from their physical surroundings."

"What background knowledge would a Tarot card reader need about a chair?"

"If I were a small invertebrate visiting Earth from Cassiopeia, I wouldn't understand the structure because I came from a place without chairs. To me, it would be a hieroglyph."

"What about when there is no point of focus?"

"What about it?"

"I mean, how does a mother suddenly sense her child is in danger, and run two blocks to save him from thin ice?"

"Did that happen?" she said, excited by my first metaphysical morsel.

"It was part of a story I worked."

A flash of disappointment, and she said, "My Tarot scenario deals with physical translations of beliefs. Yours is about the mother's concern for her children attracting specific information about them. She tapped into a probability that had actualized."

"What would that mean in English?"

"There's some background?" She grinned.

"Shoot."

"The glyphs state that our spiritual essence is energy, as an idea-identity, and that all ideas transcend time in the same way dreams carry on without regard for physical rules. It then makes sense that we can travel outside of time to choose our next experience, after we die, or before we travel into another time as a three dimensional representation of our idea-self. From this level of perception, we can see that the ramifications of our acts had many potential outcomes, all of which manifest to the degree of the energy we put behind them." She sipped her water. "The mother's natural concern for the safety of her child drew her focus to a probable event that had crossed a point of change beyond which it became inevitable. You do know that this kind of event is common?"

"I do, but it sounds... actually, it sounds like the makings of good stuff, if you're careful with it. Really careful," I said this hesitantly, because pieces of her presentation were clearer to me in that moment; something inside me was stirred by the terms she used to differentiate between events. The moment passed.

"You'll have to be careful about leaving even a little gap in any of your premises," I said, as Allisha came back to our table. "Audiences will turn those into canyons of discredit in a heartbeat. Trust me—it's a long way back if you leave them behind. Doubles please, Allie," I said, looking up.

Allisha looked at Jeanette for confirmation; they exchanged the type of glance that wise men ignore, because nothing would change in the unlikely event that we cared about the explanation.

"Of the same," Jeanette said, tapping the rim of her glass. Looking at me pleasantly, she said, "Do I have reason not to trust you?"

"Or to trust me," I said, sipping the last of my drink.

Jeanette nodded her thanks to Allisha, as I said, "I mentioned the potential problem, because any abstraction will cost you a piece of the audience, you seem to have a lot of them, and they all require more explanations than your movie will have time for." I sat up straight. "Your novel format seems to be the way to go, so I'm not sure why you're doing this? I mean, you're obviously smart enough to know about budgets. Tom is convincing, but..." I shrugged.

"I will demonstrate rudimentary versions of our magical abilities all along the way, so I won't be leaving people behind."

"Such as?"

"At some point in your life, you were unable to recall information that was familiar, like someone's name, then later in the day it popped into your mind, correct?"

"Sure."

"The effort to find this information is akin to sending a messenger to retrieve it; according to my people, with practice..."

"Your advanced people?"

"Sorry, yes. They can access a lot more than the name of an old acquaintance." Relaxing her pose into one of acceptance, she said, "Most people in the audience will have already experienced this, while others will feel compelled to try it, and it will work—maybe not in the moment, but eventually. Can you imagine accessing your entire evolutionary history?"

"Tell me that's not how you expect your audience to understand all of your premises."

"That's not how I expect my audience to understand all of my premises," she deadpanned.

"Then what—Ouija boards?"

Instantly enthusiastic, Jeanette told me about an Ouija board experience she had shared with a high school friend. Far too excited about the pubescent information she was revealing, Jeanette dragged this tale through why average dead people didn't respond from the other side of life, but more highly developed spirit guides did.

Allisha brought us fresh concoctions, as Jeanette concluded her admittedly well organized rant, saying that highly evolved teaching identities were the executors of the knowledge her characters had received in their visions; in part, this was how past knowledge was brought forward. I assumed her anticipatory gaze related to her statement and me, but the connection eluded me like the popularity of Abba's harmonically incarcerating whining, when Black Sabbath's dissonant tritonics could set the inner beast free.

"If you're worried about credibility," I managed to say casually, "how can you have spirits talking to people?"

"As I said, understanding these things is a process." Squaring her shoulders, she said, "If you think about it, we're all a process—works in progress."

"How's that?" I said, obligingly taking the detour.

"Being happy, for example, is an art that takes years of practice to achieve."

I could not imagine how one would practice happiness, but this idea brought me to another insight: with our uncommon comfort level acting as a safety net, my blunt manner had left Jeanette no room to imbue my practical expertise with her creative spin. This would explain the "crisper" moments, even implied threats in her tone. In fact, she probably agreed with me about the pitfalls of gimmicks, but I had cornered her; she could not help but think I was taking shots at her labor of love.

"It must be," I said amicably, "because there aren't many people who are good at it."

"You liked your television work, correct?"

"Sure."

"You weren't really out to save the world from ignorance?" she grinned solicitously.

"There was a time when I liked the idea that our work might influence people toward making better decisions, but I had a couple of beers and the idea went away."

"You can do better than that."

"It wasn't my job, but it would take all night to explain why," I said crisply.

"I'm looking forward to that night." There was no crinkle at the bridge of her nose or creased lip-line to undermine her sincerity. "After reaching that realization," she said, "did you still like your work?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Taking risks made you happy, you practiced it, and you became good at it."

"That's something else I haven't given much thought to, but you're probably right. Is that an energy crime to your people?" I jested.

"It can be—depends." She sipped her drink.

I didn't ask.

We had a light exchange about our school days, friendships, parents, and pet peeves—mine being food shopping because it seemed that I was the only one not treating it as friggin social occasion. I would have been happy spending the rest of the evening in this casual way, especially not taking a detour after every innocent comment I made, but Jeanette had other plans.

Regularly injecting the word magic into our conversation, always without qualification, became so annoying that when she eventually used the word to blithely describe all of human existence I almost lost it. My intention was to satirize a New Ager on recreational pharmaceuticals when I asked Jeanette to define the term, but my exasperation bloomed into the embarrassing sarcasm of an adolescent.

Nonplussed, Jeanette asked me what I found so troubling about the idea.

Relieved for the reprieve, and cued by the flickering candle, I said, "A cave man staring at fire could only explain the heat and light as magic. Time-shift him into your book, and he'd bow to the God Bic by virtue of a billion miracles a day."

"Can't there be magic in fire even after its science is understood?" Her eyes glowed with a beguiling mixture of mischief and delight.

"Maybe... if I knew what it was."

"You are magic," she said, covering both of my hands with hers.

Ingenuously, I maintained an endearingly stupid expression, thereby leaving it up to Jeanette to explain her comment. Instead, she pushed back from the table and said, "It's strange to meet two truly interesting men in one week, when years went by without meeting anyone. I'll be right back."

"Boggling," I muttered, retrieving my credit card and cash tip, in case Allie didn't have to pool it.

Placing them on the table, I signaled for the bill that Allie put beside my payment moments later, already calculated and closed out.

My fuzzy scrutiny of our tab revealed that Jeanette had been drinking Virgin Caesars for most of the night. Nevertheless, when she returned Jeanette insisted on going Dutch treat by putting cash in the leather presenter, and effectively doubling my tip for the entire bill.

I knew I was "in," then, and said nothing about her gesture aimed at demonstrating that she was more generous of spirit than some points in our conversation had otherwise indicated.

But it got better: upon returning with my credit card, Allisha gratefully said, "Thank you very much Mister Alex-son," and a subtle dip-turn of Jeanette's head dissipated the awkwardness of her solo acknowledgment. Finally, when we parted company outside of the restaurant, she kissed me gently and said, "Be sure to call me tomorrow."

"Steel trap," I said, tapping my temple, which she found hilarious like only the smitten can. Overall, it was a perfect ending to a challenging evening.

Chapter 6: The Bridge of Reason

Stalking procedures require teachers to tell students what lessons they have in store for them, but not how this should be done.

The next evening, I worked a job in North Vancouver recording the recovery efforts of firemen responding to a child's fall from the Capilano River bluffs.

"In the summer," the petite paramedic said to our reporter, off the record, "high school kids full of booze or smoke jump into the swirls, because they look deep." Gillian pointed to an outcropping surrounded by dead drops across the gorge. "Maybe a child losing her footing will play on their minds a few months from now," she lamented, searching for something redeeming in her day.

"Appreciate the background," Natalie said.

"No sweat," the paramedic replied with a dismissive gesture.

Natalie signaled a thigh-high micro slash for Matt to stop his surreptitious recording, and in a thickening silence they watched Gillian rejoin her own kind.

"I won't use her," Natalie explained when she was out of earshot. "I like to get the details and the mood on tape when the air date is..."

"Shhhit," Matt hissed, as he saw the crown of a helmet bob over the crest of the road, from the riverbed gully.

"New tape. Risk setting up wide and nothing else. This is a budget and bunny huggers' piece," Natalie ordered succinctly.

The risk she had acknowledged was of Matt missing the moment when the rim of the wire Stokes basket appeared, because it offered endless "final journey" scripting possibilities. "Nothing else," directed him to avoid visual statements that raised an audience's sorrow to fear, the Catch Twenty-two being that the framing of a picture is inherently editorial: the men's lack of haste, exaggerated in a static wide shot, would be enough to cause parents to forbid Sara, Sam, Ben, and Paige access to the free world for a while. Still, Steve would climb cliffs because they were there, and Damon worshipped him.

Matt pushed the eject button, and as the tape unspooled we trotted to a vantage point that would remain outside of the firemen's space. Switching tapes the moment the tripod legs touched ground, I counted to three while it threaded before pushing the record button. "Rolling," I said as Matt centered the level bubble.

Seconds later, we recorded four brawny men taking baby steps to raise a tiny girl's body in a plastic covered basket. To most of our audience, they would appear cautious lest they slip and fracture a bone, but their brothers and sisters in the business of man's folly would know the foursome were engaged in the first ceremony of calamity—gentility—lest something else break.

Natalie moved beside me as I finished scribbling, "EMT's standing around + firemen #2 on the label, then I handed her the box. Deciphering my surgeon's scrawl, she nodded her approval of my concept of a shot list.

"Touchy feely?" Matt said in a neutral tone.

"No, just like we see it," Natalie confirmed her original directive.

Understanding her purpose, Matt stayed medium-wide on the yellow-clad pallbearers cresting the rise, their slow walk, and careful shifting of the body from her cradle onto a padded gurney, and the subtle tender touching of the blanket from those with children. He did not push-in on the line of hairy knuckles grasping the cold aluminum rim, nor did he tilt to catch the aging Pulitzer face trickling a tear into a regulation moustache. Matt's only camera movement was one the audience

wouldn't likely notice—a dirge paced pan to a line of red and gold vehicles, one of which slowly moved away, roof lights off, just like we saw it.

"Follow up for Nightside?" Matt said when the rear lights of the ambulance merged into a single dot in his viewfinder.

"They don't care about parks and recreation," Natalie said, intentionally missing the point; she checked her Swatch. "Get them packing up, then it's a wrap... pack your stuff carefully," she said with a snuffle.

Matt grunted his approval of the new domestic affairs correspondent. Her instructions meant we were not going to haunt the parents with questions that required a ladder to approach ludicrous, take shaky footage of grieving relatives entering the morgue, or do an asinine location stand-up to imply the network's omnipresent guardianship of community awareness. Local reporters would have no competition for the moronic ambush clip of the year award from Natalie. This was a grown up piece. I liked her.

Ten minutes was all we could legitimately waste without a case of beer or act of God intervening, neither of which appeared before we loaded the van as if we were shipping Ming vases across the Rockies by Palsy Express. Our pace effectively consumed all of the time that a local producer might have used to screen our raw footage for a hot roll to air—footage we wouldn't mention if no one asked. Nor would it easily be found on the generically labeled cassettes, at least until the family had time to barricade themselves against the parasitic faction of journalists who would be better off as plumbers if "How do you feel?" was viewed like laughing at a funeral: same product, different form.

Overall, it was a good shoot. Matt's clipped queries had informed Natalie that he knew what he was doing, without questioning whether she knew what she was doing, when she had called for a wallpaper shot. She would probably recommend hiring him again. Matt and I, strangers until this day, had understood what needed to be done to feed the machine without either of us having to delineate craft from responsibilities. He would hire me again.

It was after nine o'clock when I phoned Jeanette.

Instantly excited at hearing my voice, I apologized for the late hour, and riding the coattails of her "don't be silly," I said I had worked a job at the gorge and I needed...

"That was long a day," she said, before I could pitch a nightcap with her. "You should get some rest, and we can meet at Nolan's, on Davie Street, in the morning. Is nine too early?"

Embraced and dismissed in two short bursts, I knew there was no point in telling her that I hadn't begun work until five p.m., our scheduled call time: the job included capturing a setting sun shot of the city around seven p.m. It was clear to me that the other 'interesting' fellow was at her house, a few seconds away from asking Jeanette what had made her gush.

"Nine is good..." I said, thinking that the little girl was probably alive when we left the station for North Vancouver.

Up early the next morning, as always, I first worked on my screenplay then on my book, before showering and heading to the cafe.

Rounding the corner of the West End's hooker high rise haven, from Pendrell onto Denman, I saw Jeanette getting out of a metallic brown, Honda Civic across from Nolan's, four doors away. She saw me at the same instant, waved with exuberant guilt over having stonewalled me the night before, then she trotted across the street to greet me. With a quick hello, and peck on the cheek, she led us inside toward a window booth—the window booth—from which I looked around the cozy cafe to find a server—the server...

Six red leatherette booths hugged three eggshell-white walls with additional seating for two couples in the center of the former Irish pub. A chalkboard on the back wall hung between posters of a mist-enshrouded Boris Karloff in medieval drag, and James Dean dragging on a smoke, listed the soup and sandwich special. To my right was a commercial display cooler of fresh cakes and pastries, behind which stood a stout man of jowled mileage affably doing a brisk takeout business of caffeine and cholesterol, the aromas of which had been Pavlovian from a block away.

To my practiced ear, the newest immigrant owner was from a Baltic state—his accent endearing because it reminded me of Paul, Ed's father, who had met his wife, Elizabeth, while they were escaping Poland and Lithuania respectively: when I left the Navy a few months after Ed did, I flipped a coin at the Halifax Airport to determine where I was going. Heads was back to my hometown of Toronto, tails was to Winnipeg, and the result. Ed had the foresight to tell his parents that I was coming to live with them. Good people, the Koenig's.

Above him, a dour Bogie stared truculently at Bacal whom, with preoccupied indifference, surveyed the inscribed musings of teenagers in heat preserved for posterity by layers of shellac on the solid wood tables from the nineteen fifties.

I identified with the feel of the place. I was a scribe, scarred, from the fifties, and in heat.

Taking off her sweater, Jeanette's disposition shifted to an adolescent-like caution as she retrieved a thin manila envelope from her Aztec imprint cloth sack. "Tell me what you think," she said, sliding it across the table.

To avoid appearing eager, I made small talk until Bréta, the owner's granddaughter, came for and returned with our orders. Jeanette sipped her latté, trying to look casually out of the window while I read ten double-spaced pages of an untitled chapter that began on page twenty-six...

The narrative's point of view was of an elderly man recounting a journey of rescue, from what circumstance was not stated, but it must have been a spectacular disaster: the scale of the operation was so immense that comprehending its intricacies required specialized training, without which his true tale would sound like a fantasy. In fact, the full scope of the mission was kept from potential rescuers for this very reason, until they were ready to hear it.

The narrator, Khalib, also advised the reader that he would defer to other characters' recollections, after which he would return to take the reader to the next stage in the operation...

"The story of preparation begins with the gathering of Aleena," Khalib said.

Aleena's scene unfolded from her point of view, also as an elder, but of what social construct Jeanette didn't say. She was reminiscing on a cloudless fall morning, while contentedly looking across a timber bridge that spanned a sliver of river that would remain so until the spring rains came. In the distance, Falconers were exercising their birds from the grassy slopes at the edge of the flood plain.

Aleena identified with potential prey straying into the falcon's territory when, years earlier, she had first crossed the bridge to enter a horseshoe shaped, open-air market that operated in the mornings every other day. Fresh products and scrupulously honest weights and measures ensured its success equally with the merchant's antics entertaining customers.

The market's short hours aside, the one drawback to shopping here was the merchant's 'no haggling' policy in a land where bartering had been the essence of contracts since men began differentiating grunts. As a result, new customers could not help but feel they were paying too much in spite of likely having priced similar items, as they passed through the town center market. On the rare occasion that a townie insisted on haggling, the merchant explained that she (typically) was paying for the commune's meticulous efforts and expertise, as were reflected in the quality of the products. These were non-negotiable standards.

If this customer did not understand what their work ethic had to do with the price of pears, they could easily find themselves bartering for their own self-worth, as this was the only basis upon which one would argue against the evidence all could freely examine. That said, the merchants were realists so to compensate for some of their customer's conditioning they occasionally added product to purchases after payment had been made, or made small errors in the customer's favor when giving them change.

By page six, I was familiar enough with Jeanette's style to appreciate the irony of the merchant's rule, which explained the secret pleasure they took in simple conversation and utter delight in a debate: anyone who could convince a customer that the purchase of fruit entailed a virtuous principle, the breaking of which would irrevocably diminish the value of both their lives, could have sent a happy customer home with a peach pit in their palm, and not a penny in their pocket. In other words, their bartering rule protected the buyer, the majority of whom corrected the calculating errors and went home feeling righteous. I read on:

Regular shoppers, who had become sensibly confident in the value of their transactions, ascribed these merchant's errors and odd behaviors to a communal affliction. Slow poisoning from the well water in their isolated commune was the chief suspect, primarily although illogically based on the fishmonger being the most odd among a generally peculiar people. That the gentle octogenarian, or so people guessed, did not fish in the community well did not undermine accepted lore. Water and fish went together like birds in the air, and Leith, pronounced "life" in his native Scandinavian dialect, often told his customer's children that the sea whispered stories to him. It was definitely in the water..

Sipping my cooling coffee, I said, "This is dense stuff, and nothing has happened."

"Glad you like it," Jeanette replied.

I continued reading, hoping for some action.

The young, ill-dressed Aleena was drawn to a baker's effusive disposition; she joined a loose line in a position that allowed her to witness two street urchins at work. One of the ragged boys distracted the merchant by bumping into his display, and when they both bent over to pick up dislodged loaves his partner cut through the queue to pilfer from the cart in passing.

Aleena was not certain, but she thought the baker noticed the loss while he was thanking the expansively apologetic boy for assuming responsibility for his clumsiness. Nevertheless, he gave him a sweet pastry of which there was one less than a moment ago; it was a tense moment.

Avoiding the baker's stare, the boy thanked him as he turned into Aleena's shadow and glare; a conundrum locked his knees just as the merchant reached across the cart to tug on the shoulder of his tunic. Believing the baker had figured things out, the boy steeled himself for blows he considered a cost of doing business. It helped that the baker was scrawny, and the boy had seen him coddle his hands on cool mornings.

"There are so few like you. What is your name?" the merchant said, cocking his head deferentially, as if recognizing a prince slumming as a pauper.

"Mihaleh of...Mihaleh," he said, cutting short his place of birth and lineage.

"I am Tartuu, and I will remember you, Mihaleh of Mihaleh". Gushing, the baker said, "That rhymes!" and he handed the anxious boy another tart.

In Aleena's mind, the little beggar's vigilance should have declared his guilt, but Tartuu seemed oblivious to the boy's apprehension, as were the women in front of Aleena too occupied sharing their affront over an ill-mannered brat having bumped them to notice that the sky was on fire, should this have been the case.

In due course, the women went their way without mentioning the incident to the baker, if they had seen it, and Aleena stepped forward to poke potential choices absently, as she pondered the circumstance.

"As fresh as a new beginning!" Tartuu announced to the crowded market, gathering the three loaves Aleena had touched. "Will that be all?" he said.

"Oh—yes, I guess," she said, opening her cloth sack to receive two more than she needed.

"Then it may not be everything?" Tartuu said, placing the bread inside.

"No, no. It's more than enough." Embarrassed, Aleena pivoted to leave, but she managed only a single step before curiosity turned her around. "Why did you let them get away with it?" she said without preamble.

"Why do you ask?" the baker replied, apparently puzzled.

"It costs you," she explained the obvious without judgment, having heard about the communal affliction.

In fact, she had chosen this market because she had one of her own: all of her life, people had said she pronounced some ordinary words peculiarly—the same ones even after they had corrected her. And though she was aware of many of these words, to her ear she always pronounced them correctly, even when the slim grins of acquaintances conveyed that she must have done it again. It is what made her shy away from lengthy conversations, and others suspect she was uneducated...

"Though what you say is certainly true, this isn't what I asked of you." The baker's eyes crinkled roguishly as he said, "Does it really interest you?"

Intrigued by the potential of any intellectual conversation, after months of self-imposed isolation in a new land, Aleena hung her satchel on the edge of the cart to risk engaging the merchant in a friendly verbal waltz: there was flare without fire, grace without pretence, and passion without possession as they grammatically swirled in a refreshingly rhythmic discussion.

Aleena could not help but feel curiously close to the little gnome, who acknowledged her mental dexterity, and apparently flawless pronunciation, with pained expressions whenever one of her views apparently pierced the heart of one of his. Not coincidentally, she was absorbed in a fresh flush of one such acknowledgement when the misfortune struck Tartuu; for no apparent reason, he forcefully said that curiosity is a good thing when applied properly, but a crime to pretend and pillage another's time to comfort one's self-interest.

Perplexed over the sudden change in his demeanor, the compassionate young women indulged the wandering introspection of the man of indeterminate age, certainly no less than sixty years, agreeing with everything he seemed to be massaging from a misspent youth.

Having thusly lulled Aleena, the merchant boldly stated that adolescent male behavior in her personal life had caused her to comment on a stranger's theft.

Startled and confused both by his candor and accuracy, Aleena lifted her nose and stalked away. Tartuu allowed her three paces.

"Your bread," he then said.

A dignified retreat out of the question, she returned to retrieve her satchel, but instead of cutting her losses, Aleena sternly said, "Only a gossip would say anything about me, and by your own measure that crime is a theft of time."

She could have left it at that, but unspoken events demanded that she take her revenge for being made to feel foolish; cradling her purchases over her breasts, Aleena awaited Tartu's defense.

Looking around his cart furtively, the baker lowered his voice and said, "I hear many things. If I wasted time separating the truth from the chatter, I would lose sight of the matter. That rhymes!" he declared to the market place.

Aleena was not sidetracked by the showman; he had passed on an earlier opportunity to demonstrate his mental imbalance. "What matters to you?" she said icily.

"What matters is what I learn by asking the dreaded question," he bowed toward her, and whispered, "why?" in a comically threatening tone.

"What does that have to do with you commenting on the life a stranger?" she said, shifting her weight to her back foot.

"What has it got to do with anyone? Absolutely everything, dear girl!" he declared loudly.

"Everything!" the vegetable seller at the next cart shouted, startling Aleena.

"Absolutely!" the potter on the other side of him declared a millisecond later.

"Dear girl!" little Evie shouted with glee, because she was one.

Confusion froze Aleena's expression, as if she had missed a step on a ladder, while an elderly voice from across the semicircle queried into the sudden and peculiar silence, "Whom may I serve?"

"Serve us!" ten out of eleven children shouted in unison, because Evie was still tittering over her own cleverness.

Tartuu tapped Aleena on the shoulder, startling her out of her trance.

On his toes, he leaned across the cart so that his face was uncomfortably close. With a sly grin, he said, "You saw the boys steal, but you didn't tell me until it was too late to deal. I have practiced asking the why of so many acts that I can see the answers before words cloud the facts. So with all of the respect that is your due, I saw that you resent how a man treated you."

Leaning back, with patriarchal compassion he added, "However, a wiser part of you knows you are also responsible for that mistreatment. I'm right, aren't I? No—don't tell me. I know when I'm right, and I am right. Aren't I?" he settled on his heels, blathering incompetently.

"Wh wh..." Aleena stuttered, torn between dealing with the idiot, the logician, or stomping away, if she could only engage her legs.

"To resolve the conundrum of punishing your man without having him think ill of you," Tartuu settled the matter, "you hurt him in absentia by telling on boys you don't know. However, by not speaking at the appropriate time, you punished me. It's a clever ruse," the baker said, shaking his head appreciatively, "but it is one you played on yourself."

"It was you who let him get away with it," she said, planting her feet.

"You didn't know what I knew, and you chose to pass on the opportunity to assume responsibility, like you're doing now," the baker admonished her gently.

"What I knew has noth..." Aleena stopped speaking as the scythe of truth disemboweled her protest. "What about you?" she tried to demand, but the urge to return his broadening grin dissolved her accusation into a wet warble.

"Fortunately," Tartuu said, "the theft has presented us both with wonderful opportunities that I," he shouted, "will not squander!" He burst into a fit of laughter.

"Well woven!" the weaver shouted, and his customers laughed at the pun they didn't understand, but he was a good man and an excellent tailor.

"A tight weave does not assure a catch," Leith cautioned his sizable audience of children. "Whichhhh," he stretched the word dramatically, "brings us to a verrrry fresh wind blowing east from Graedon." Focusing his mercurial attention on his audience, he said, "How fresh was the wind?"

"Verrrrrrrry!" they recited to the ancient man.

"It was a day like none I'd ever seen," the elder of endless stories said somberly, "and like none I will ever see again."

"Why Master Leith?" little Shan-ah shouted, because she knew he would forget his way if they let him pause too long.

"I cannot leave my responsibilities; there are none who are prepared to replace me."

"No, Master Leith—how bad was it?" the boy called K.T., aka Khol the Tireless, or the Terrible depending on the day, said on behalf of them all.

"There is no bad. There are waters that are unsuitable for passage, and there are people who are not suited to the water." He lowered his voice. "The surf boiled beneath a pitch-thick sky that came tum-tum-tumbling across the horizon."

The children mimicked the tum-tum tumble as best their soprano voices could, while giggling at their own efforts. Leith enjoyed this interlude before becoming absorbed by a space about an arm's length in front of his nose.

"Poor man nearly dies when he even thinks of the sea," one mother said from behind her brood.

"It won't be long now," her neighbor replied prophetically.

"He'll be better off," the first woman commiserated, looking despondently at the man who had entertained her when her mother came to this market, and her mother before her.

"Your opportunity is this," Tartuu said to Aleena, who stared at the bizarre goings on around her. "You didn't know that vitriol mires you in the swamp of self-serving redemption, but now that you know how you use people you can guard against it. It's a great day!" he shouted, backing her up a step and a half of surprise.

"A great day!" the tanner said.

"A great day!" two children regurgitated: their mother's exchanged glances confirmed that the day wasn't as difficult as it could have been without the old fisherman.

Aleena could not voice what was happening to her, but this oddly jubilant scene stripped her of concern, and a blameless conviction settled in her mind: she had contributed more to her circumstance than she had cared to admit.

The baker somehow knew this moment had arrived and that her path would be full of bumps—he would make sure of that—but she had conquered a pitfall that swallowed people of lesser conviction.

"A great day," Tartuu said quietly, facing the direction of the fishmonger who could not possibly have heard him above the din of rambunctious commerce. Nevertheless, Leith paused to smile back at him, before he said to his captive audience with dread, "The flying desert of fine, red sand blowing from the west caused the sky to boil like a cauldron of blood pudding..."

"East!" the children objected as a choir, lest the master monger begin a different tale. "They were from the east of Graedon!" Azmara-the-bold said alone.

Leith raised a bony finger. "The midsummer winds twist before they rise to join the northern currents," the old man said, covering his contrived mistake smoothly. Slanting his head as though to share a secret, he said, "Remember this if nothing else from today; if the wind is westerly and the morning star golden, two titans will scour the shallows and you must not feel emboldened. Go north of the pillars, so they pass beneath you, and stay till the light fades to a yellowish hue."

He waved a thin arm; the children could not help but view the sky in expectation even though the old man's caution was equally old news: generations of children had consumed relevant

oceanographic, geographic, and celestial information, because the sea of life was the canvas upon which the masterful teller of tales had constructed a playground for their imaginations.

Feeling an unusual calm, Aleena said, "Did you not squander your opportunity? Will they not return and steal from the others?"

"There are none here who do not know hunger," Tartuu replied.

"You let them get away with it—all of you?" she said, waving her hand to encompass the entire market area.

"There are times when ..." he began to explain, when a single cloud cast a cool shadow on his forehead. "But this is not one of them." Standing to his full height, which came short of Aleena's nose, the baker said officiously "Dress appropriately for our next appointment." He turned away abruptly, to greet a woman who was unaware that she was his next customer.

Puzzled by the curt dismissal, Aleena didn't return for days, not that she had to, and when she did come back dressed in similar attire she found the baker's apprentice.

"Will it be the same today?" Eirik said.

"I suppose," Aleena said absently, looking around the market. "I came to see Tartuu. We started talking and I forgot to pay him."

"The same today!" the apprentice shouted, scaring her onto another footing.

"The same?" the butcher queried the sky sadly, and his customers looked away while he recovered. So young, so unfair, they thought.

"The same it is," the apprentice said, handing Aleena two more loaves than she needed. "Don't worry about payment. No one can buy what he offers."

"Well?" Jeanette said, taking the pages from my hand.

"It's good as far as it goes," I said diplomatically.

"What would you have done if you were the baker?"

"Pardon me?"

"What...would...you...have...done?" she said as if I had a hearing problem.

"Nothing," I shrugged, "a third kid was probably waiting for the baker to chase either of the first two."

Baffled by my suggestion of a triple whammy, Jeanette processed the idea and, I presumed, mentally tried it out before saying, "Did you think he was clever?"

"With Mihaleh or Aleena?"

"Both."

"He wasn't too bright letting the boy go." I shrugged, "I don't have a clue what he's up to with Aleena. What's with the language thing; are you going to have her say something important that's misinterpreted?"

"Actually, I hadn't thought of that, but I'll keep it in mind." Waving the question aside, she said, "He's offering to teach them both the source of life's trials. I'll begin to show you how tomorrow." Jeanette slid her work into the envelope with a crisp precision that had the effect of closing our conversation.

"Why not just tell me?"

"That wouldn't help me research your development of a new way of thinking." She shifted in her seat and leaned toward me. "My merchants were all teachers who led people to discover their own conclusions, because this process inherently dealt with the laziness of people who demand to know what would be functionally useless information if it was handed to them." She looked me in the eyes, mischievously.

"You think I'm lazy?" I said in disbelief.

"No, because you are this close," she touched her finger and thumb, "to embracing a new assumption."

"I'll have to trust you on that."

"Have I given you reason not to trust me?"

"It's an expression," I said peevishly. "Were everyone's comments aimed at distracting Aleena?" I asked to move things along.

"Actually, it was the other way around. The merchants were shutting down her internal dialogue by overloading it, so that she could process the only event that was important in the moment—Tartuu's words." She grinned. "It'll make more sense later."

"Fair enough. Why did the baker pretend not to notice what happened?"

"He effectively told the kids that he knew what had gone on, by giving the boy a second tart for his silent partner. The next time they come around, he'll set aside some easily stolen items so that neither his cart nor customers will be upset. These contrivances will create an opportunity for the baker to explain how they're playing a dangerous game they can stop; he'll offer to take them in."

"To work off their debt?"

Jeanette looked at me distastefully. "He's going to offer them the chance to change their lives, when they trust him enough to consider it an option."

"It's a good idea, but for clarification offering food to the starving isn't an incentive. It's extortion."

"Offering the irresistible is a principle of an art called How to Teach in my society; it's also immensely energy efficient, which is crucial for boys who are at the end of their options. Left alone," she explained, "they would become permanent prisoners of their society or of their own beliefs, so Tartuu used the strongest lure he had. If things go according to plan, the boys will abandon their old ways as he teaches them how to live properly. How to Live," she parenthesized the term.

"Maybe you should have Tartuu explain his scheme to Eirik, then readers will know what he's up to?"

"Hmm," Jeanette cocked her head in consideration. "I like it... now that I know my audience won't wait to hear it." She chuckled.

"Glad I could help. Will knowing life's trials clear up the contradiction in your haggling rule?"

"What contradiction is that?" she said, placing the envelope safely into her carryall.

"You say it's like a law, but they kick-back money, or pretend to have shorted customers and add to their purchase, right?"

"Correct."

"Both of these things add value to their customer's experience. In effect, they're teasing them into coming back, which is bartering with their expectations." I shrugged. "It's not that big a deal, but if they're not overtly haggling they're being haggled, and once you've got your audience thinking in terms of abstractions you could lose credibility to the ones who might not make the distinction you do."

"You make a good point, but this is one of those situations where doing the right thing for the right reason looks like something it's not." Jeanette settled into the corner of the booth. "My merchants believed that beneath the surface of almost everything the average person does is a predilection to make ourselves feel better. Because of this, they helped their customers express a natural impulse that left everyone feeling better."

"So you admit that your guys were bartering?"

"I admit that my customers got more than they bargained for." She sipped her coffee; still holding the cup near her lips, she said, "Teachers know that the *nature* of everything we do comes back to us. In part, this is why they didn't allow customers to leverage either their personal position or purchasing power against them. Haggling would have allowed customers to act to their own detriment essentially deceiving themselves into thinking deception was an acceptable behavior in places other than the market." Jeanette waved an arm around the café. "We deceive ourselves to our detriment every day, so what's the problem if it takes a little coercion to deliver a gift of knowledge?"

"No problem, except no one will get it."

"Opening these kinds of gifts takes time, and the willingness to unwrap ourselves." Abruptly raising her brow, she said, "Are you objecting to generosity, or the specific influence of a full stomach?"

"Neither and you know that. I'm saying your audience will not understand what's going on."

"Then it's the idea of the boys being tricked that must offend you," she mused.

"I'm talking about..."

"You're concerned with my audience not unwrapping the gift," she cut me off, "but I know what's coming. We are talking about you in the moment."

Not understanding her sternness, I hesitated before saying, "I've never been tricked into something good, but I'm not offended by the circumstance you presented."

"There's a first time for everything."

I chuckled on phlegm; it was better than words.

"Time for the park?" Jeanette said, signaling for the bill.

We split the tab in silence, left the café, and headed toward the English Bay entrance to Stanley Park amid streaks of sunlight that intermittently raised our hope for a dry day.

Setting a casual pace, Jeanette said, "Someone fell into the river last night? I cut you off—sorry."

"You were busy."

Four steps of penalty time later, I explained that the assigned story was about public access and safety versus the prosperity of the flora and fauna in parks. Coincidentally, the incident would lead to a coroner's inquest determining death by misadventure, followed by residents demanding miles of fence that five year-olds could climb. This position would be countered by artists arguing against a fence for aesthetic reasons, and the renowned environmental activist, Dr. David Suzuki, explaining how a fence could create an artificial island habitat for species that had to be mobile to survive.

"What do you think about the issue—you know, after the incident?" Jeanette said softly.

I sniffled and said, "I think George inadvertently killed her."

"Pardon me?" she said, surprised at discovering there may be a crime involved.

"I talked to our reporter this morning—another job coming up: she said that some people credit an entomologist, George Vernon Hudson, with the modern creation of daylight savings time."

Jeanette waited patiently for me to fill out the non sequitur.

"Apparently Mariel—that's the little girl who fell—had waited forty-five minutes for her sister to pick her up, before she took a short-cut home; the coroner noticed that she hadn't moved her watch forward."

Wordlessly, a fine drizzle simultaneously turned us around.

Setting a time to meet the next day at the same café, we parted company.

That night I had a vivid dream I clearly recalled in the morning. This wasn't a particularly strange event for me, because I had a pocketful of dreams I still remembered from different times in my life, the most recent of which was of a convict escaping from an island detention facility near Horseshoe Bay. I had no knowledge of such a place when I first had the dream on my sailboat in the Mediterranean, but the vivid sequence had regularly drawn my attention to British Columbia. Other dreams I still recalled in detail were from when I was a kid, and between nightmares after working in Salvador.

Zzzzz: Innocuous soft tones over Thunder Bay, ozone crackle, a voice devoid of concern prepared us for harsh minutes as we belatedly skirted a chaotic mass of farmer's delight. Earphones plugged into my empty pocket forced the fellow sitting in 12B to tap the pages in my hand, before pointing to the seat belt sign. I nodded my thanks as the plane bucked tomato juice onto the woman's lap in 14C; her shrill scream lit the fuse for unescorted ten-year-old girls sitting across the aisle. A male flight attendant flashed by to rescue the woman's cashmere ensemble. A second attendant made her way to the sister twins, whose faith had been forfeited to a bottle of seltzer and a shaker of salt. They were inconsolable.

Three rows back, a handsomely scruffy twenty-something fellow retrieved a mandolin from the overhead storage bin and, ignoring the attendants' objections, nodded for the businessman sitting next to the children to switch seats. He was happy to do this.

Two men and a woman similar in common physical appeal, youthful age, and rural clothing, changed seats with passengers in front and behind the children, while a tattooed Neanderthal carrying drumsticks stooped to whisper in the tomato juice woman's ear. Abruptly silent, spittle dribbled from the corner of her mouth as the giant turned to sit on her armrest.

Leaning across the aisle, he sang, "Ahhh aa ahhh ah," sticks tap-tap-tapping lightly on the nearest girl's arm. Confusion from the incongruity of a gentle voice emanating from such a physical powerhouse chased her fear away, and envy quieted her sister until the drummer's brothers crooned, "Ohh ha ohh."

Their cousin blended a feathering, "Ahhh-ohh-ayyoh," while his pixie-like sister overdubbed, "Ayya-yaa, aay-yaa," a cappella, surrounding the children with a haunting prelude to an abruptly jaunty tale about fishing off the Grand Banks.

As a hundred tons of technology twisted through the unfriendly skies, I found myself chuckling at the irony of the Newfoundlanders restoring peace to the passengers who didn't know how many men had died there.

That's what woke me up just after four a.m. – chuckling at the irony.

Chapter 7: Positioning

Short of breath, Jeanette came into Nolan's two minutes late, according to the Coca Cola wall clock. Before the door had finished closing, she said, "A newspaper page caught on my wiper."

"Shit, were you hurt?" I said from our window booth.

"Let me finish," she said, sliding into the seat across from me. "When I pulled over to take it off, I saw a picture of crumpled cars beside a story about insurance rates. Naturally," she said with a huff, putting her carryall and jacket next to the wall, "I had to find a place to park and walk here."

"Naturally." I nodded at the manila envelope sticking out of her cloth bag. "What puzzle have you got for me today?"

Finding nothing in my tone or expression that I could be convicted of, Jeanette opened the envelope; handing me the pages she mouthed, "Latté, please," toward Bréta, when she turned to face our table. Then back to me, "There are two scenes. The first is the opening to my screenplay so far, and the second is a continuation of the last scene you read. They don't appear back to back."

"Got it."

TIME, AND TIME AGAIN

SCENE ONE

SILENT: FADE IN SPATIAL INFINITY

View of the galaxy with thousands of points of light, as seen from a distance that only hints from its size that our planetary system is minutely present in quadrant D—lower right. Swirling energies of all colors and consistency cross the screen. Some are cloud-like, others like gentle mists of rain. In their apparently random movements there exists a complex order of motion. The largest cloud swirls to the center occupying one-half of the screen.

FADE IN: MUSIC

Far away and lilting, the esoteric quality of a large choir is joyfully eerie, but calming.

FX: ENERGY CLOUD FORM

(All happens in C-2, the circular middle third of the screen)

The center cloud forms into a pink rose then, petal by petal, they slowly open like a lens aperture to reach out and transparently fill the full screen. C3 (circular center third screen) is the highest density of color. From C3, a bubble of translucent bluish light forms.

MUSIC:

This is sweetened with the addition of an instrument representative of an Egyptian culture, then another from an Asian culture, and another from an African culture, all following a slightly different pattern but in sync and harmony with the base layer. The choir and music now resonate with a multicultural tone and subtle backbeats.

FX: ZOOM IN:

As the central petals of the rose grow to fill C2 and C3, the bluish light streaks from our solar system, creating a ripple as it approaches the aperture that snaps shut immediately behind the light's passage. The bluish light slows and takes on form to shape an astral body of a floating male entity. KHA-LI's white robe shimmers with a blue aura. His hair is white, curly, and shoulder length. His features are strong and angular. He is barefoot, a scar on the right foot shimmers as he walks toward screen left, creating underfoot a translucent stone path that adds length with every step, reaching toward a distant energy construction of a pyramid.

"It's good so far," I said, tapping the pages, "and I have no doubt that your book is meticulously researched, but the cost of period sets and special effects for ethereal scenes can be a problem. I gather there's more of this to come?"

"Words are free," she said miming typing.

"They're also without value if they don't translate into a reasonable budget," I said, pitching forward like she so often did for emphasis, but to lighten the moment. "An agent told me that beginners confuse artistic values with practical considerations that can screw up the sale of a property, like overpricing production values written by someone with no track record." Having reminded her that I had actually written a screenplay—kind of, I leaned back. "It's better to hone the hell out of the dialogue in visually sketchy scenes, and allow the producers to make it their own work."

"To change it?" Jeanette said coolly.

"Just how to film it: I'm saying that you shouldn't script expensive scenes, because you could be spending the opportunity to sell the words." I shuffled the pages below the next scene and shrugged. "It's my first impression, but worth every penny."

"No, I appreciate it, really. Go ahead," she said, nodding at the scene written in a standard prose format.

"Be right back," I joked.

"Me too," Jeanette said, standing to go the washroom...

The setting was a bustling forenoon marketplace in which a soft breeze swirled mixed scents, and children's sounds, around the women who were circling potential purchases. Aleena was wearing a single piece mauve tunic, with a matching neck scarf, and new sandals with a subtle pattern of the infinity symbol burned into the ankle backs. As I read this, I vaguely thought of the tattoo on my dream drummer's forearm: no matter, Aleena's footwear was secured by knee-high straps of a thickness that accented her shapely legs.

She greeted Tartuu enthusiastically, with small talk about the beautiful day. Instantly engrossed, as if she were talking about his mother, the baker effusively tabled everything he knew about the weather's effects on fishing and farming, before switching to the human landscape.

Interpreting his excessive play as relief, because she had come to see him dressed as he had requested, Aleena augmented his observations with some of her own. Delighted by her agile frolicking, Tartuu offered her lead lines until Aleena's mouth ran unchecked: he covered his goods with a thin cloth to give her his undivided attention.

The encounter felt so good to Aleena that it took a while for her to realize the baker's rapt attention had slid into the mental meandering peculiar to many of the commune's residents, particularly the older merchants. To coerce him back into her world, she admonished him, as a parent would tell a child that it was not the time to play because he had work to do.

Nodding in agreement, Tartuu casually accused her of indulging her intellect to make herself feel smarter than most people, which she was and therefore safer than the witless, which she wasn't because her ego would inevitably lead her into traps tailored to intelligent pampering as long as she felt out of place.

Aleena had not gathered enough spit to object when Tartuu explained, "I asked you to wear good clothing to a common market as a way to bring your insecurity to your attention, which you did by over compensating to the point of costing me business. You're getting expensive to know, young lady," he chided her.

"I was playing like you were," she said defensively.

"Do you do everything other people do to fit in?"

"I did what you asked of me." Planting her feet in a wrestler's stance, she added, "I do not deserve a scolding."

Chuckling dryly, Tartuu said, "The first physical step we take is a stand for our independence. After that the world relentlessly tells us where to go and how to get there, but we are not meant to become a product of other's beliefs, so we rebel, only to be beaten back by the keepers of custom until we agree to impersonate our culture. With no safe place to go, a revolutionary heart must protect itself to the degree that our inner actor forgets it is playing a role, and as our full potential suffocates we begin to steal the breath from everyone we meet."

"I have stolen nothing," Aleena said obstinately, failing to see his metaphor. "I have brought payment for everything."

Looking patiently over the top of his nose, Tartuu continued his thought. "Inevitably, the actor creates a secret he keeps from himself, about himself, which feeds a self-image that reason demands he maintain in ever-changing circumstances. To endure this endless compromise, he must embrace flexible beliefs from a contradictory world that has trapped all who came before him, within cycles of justification that ultimately crush their essence. Having nothing to hide, my dear," he said, standing as tall as he could, "means you are not encumbered, there is nothing blocking your view, and everyone's obligations are clear."

"Obligations—in a market?"

"There are only two choices in life: you can live and die stupidly, or you can learn the hard way because there is no easy way. Logic dictates that you are obliged to learn where ever you are." He winked. "Today's lesson is that you are smart enough to keep your self-interests a secret from most people, but you do not take into account that you are not going to live forever; you waste time nurturing your sense of belonging. Make that single change in your thinking, and your child will grow up free."

"How—how did you know?"

Ignoring her question, the merchant said, "It will take time to free your revolutionary heart from the shackles of custom, but you have achieved a noteworthy feat by coming back to face yourself today."

Written in an abruptly poetic manner, i.e.: sparrow soared, terror-turn, frantic flight... Jeanette wrote that a bird wandered into the falconer's training area, sensed its error, and beat a hasty escape directly between the baker and the girl. The flash of grey and the fuph-fuph-fuph staccato beat of wings sent Aleena back a step. Tartuu, lips pursed in brief ponder, withdrew the cloth...

That was it.

"It suits your other piece," I said, sliding the pages across the table to Jeanette."

"But?"

"Same observation as before; you've got to be careful about beating the audience over the head with what will be perceived as abstractions ahead of extending your story line; the need a context for them," I said, hoping she would offer me something more.

"Great, thanks." She scribbled notes on the front page of her work, saying to herself, "Less subtle opening—comprehend intricacies of rescue, not sound like fantasy."

"I don't think I said that," I said, failing to see her focus.

"It's the nature of your comment that matters," she said finishing her note. "If a smart fellow like you is already impatient..." She shrugged as she slid the pages inside the envelope,

then the envelope inside her carryall from which she snatched a five-dollar bill. Sliding out of the booth and standing, she said, "Let's go for a walk."

Hurriedly, I left my share of the bill on the table, and caught the closing door behind her. I said nothing, waiting for her to get over her disappointment as we walked along.

Steering us toward thousands of daffodils that lined the park entrance, Jeanette indirectly justified her manner of presentation. "I'm leading the audience to an ancient principle of learning," she said, "that watching the world for guidance is a metaphysical practicality when you know how to interpret the answer, like you interpreted Tartuu's cue as a shadow of doubt. Thank you for that. It's more important than you know."

"You're welcome. I assume you expect the same from your audience?"

"Tartuu will tell his apprentice—thanks for that suggestion—that the bird wasn't paying attention to its direction in life, and it carelessly discovered that the long way around was the prudent way to avoid a deadly encounter."

"The shadow was a sign that Aleena wasn't paying attention?"

"More than that; it wasn't time for her to hear the whole truth, because new students need to circle that from a safe distance before they can face their death head on."

"It takes that to make them ready to learn about the mission? No wonder you don't tell them about it." I snickered.

"The death is symbolic, about illusions, and it's nothing to laugh at," she said sternly. "It's the most difficult thing they will ever do. After that, accomplishing the mission is almost a fait accompli."

"Good to know," I said, casually looking across the bay at a fog bank lazily rolling toward the inner harbor. "Couple of things; why did you use a falcon to represent the truth?"

Jeanette praised my insight with a shallow grin, which collapsed as fast as it had materialized when she explained, "A falcon is what it is—a hunter that strikes from out of the blue. It has no extraneous concerns, and the wayward path of its prey reminded Tartuu of his first encounter with Aleena, when she realized self-pity was stalking her happiness. He knew that without changing her core beliefs she would remain committed to playing the role of a victim until it killed her."

"Symbolically?"

"Literally, if she didn't change her ways; a person of great energy acting without direction, is a monumental idiot waiting to be hit by the proverbial bus. If she did change her ways, the death of who she thinks she is arrives when she recognizes the essence of her actions for what they really are." She turned toward me. "And what they are is what she is really like. Didn't it strike you as odd that no one but Aleena saw what happened the first time around, and not even one customer in a busy market came by while they were talking afterwards?"

"Actually," I said, stretching my arms, "parts of your dialogue made me feel like a kid eavesdropping on an adult conversation, so I didn't notice. But you can make the point by scripting wide shots to imply people are walking around an invisible fence." I grinned and shrugged, "Then you'll have to explain what that's about."

"To keep us on the same page," Jeanette said, apparently preparing her explanation through a vacant stare, "my people understood that the energy of an impeccable will inherently aligned with the momentum of their life-force's intentions. At my teacher's level of evolution, these energies were a rolling force of unstoppable potential, so they had to be extremely careful literally about what they thought. Another repercussion of the coalition of these energies was that the events the teacher needed to further their student's development had an uncanny way of

happening as a matter of course. You could say that my teacher's energy was an ocean liner and its wake affects events when it passes." She tittered to herself. "From the student's perspective, strange happenings often rocked their boat, especially when they were with their teacher; being left alone to deliver a lesson is a small part of their energy's influence."

"Why was it more pronounced when they were with a teacher?"

"You'll have to take this at face value for now: teachers lend students energy so they can experience specific events while they're in a safe place, and the teacher is available to explain things. Some of these events are subtle and external, like no one bothering them; others can fall like anvils of enlightenment. You said you were having trouble with my dialogue?"

"It's more with your style. Sometimes it's more formal than real people would speak, and the scenes you've shown me are all leading to other things. I mean, it looks like you're building a good story, but I can't tell if you've left something out, or if it's just me." I smirked as a wave of fatigue ran through me. "You might not have considered that most of your audience will have parked blocks away from an expensive seat, be half way through a bag of five dollar popcorn and a three dollar cup of brown ice by the time the lights dim. They'll want some payback for your teasing pretty fast. All of this thinking is wearing me out," I said.

Looking pleased for no reason she cared to explain, Jeanette took my elbow in her hand and aimed us at a nearby park bench.

"You don't think my archaeologist's scene, or the lack of definition of their quest, will intrigue them?"

"For a short time."

"Why is that?"

"Honestly?"

"Have you been lying?"

"We both know I meant you might not like what I say."

"Apparently only one of us knows that can't matter, if we're going to be on the same page." We sat down.

I had no energy to argue silly crap; I paused to gather my thoughts, which for a man feeling he was about to enter a coma was surprisingly easy.

Indelicately without concern, I said, "So far, you've ignored action fans, threatened or alienated everyone who knows anything about mental or emotional distress, your kids are thieves, and your adults play verbal chess with people who think in terms of checkers. On the upside, the Baker's Union will love it. I really need to know the big picture if I'm going to help you," I said.

"Are you trying to back out because it's more difficult than you bargained for?" she teased.

"I didn't bargain for anything," I said flatly, which is what I felt my electrocardiogram would have looked like in that moment.

"By your own rules," she said, cheerfully, "we exchanged and agreed upon our expectations after I said I needed a full time partner. I also demonstrated how my people's way of thinking is outside of our culture's considerations, and you agreed to put in the time it takes to have an experience at their level of understanding, if I created one for you." She tilted her head. "I also asked you to remember that you asked for this." Jeanette squinted flirtatiously; the specter of an elf or leprechaun, whichever one is a pain-in-the-ass, slipped through the aperture of her gaze.

In that peculiarly dense moment, as if I was encased in concrete, I understood that within our entire dialogue she had indeed elicited my agreement to be her partner, the subterfuge notwithstanding.

"You know I can't tell you the big picture," she said, as I concluded my thoughts.

"I do, but I find it strange that you are putting out a lot of energy establishing specifically how I am an average person—which may annoy the shit out of your audience—while tailoring scenes toward rescuers who don't know they're being recruited. I mean, do you really know what you're after, or are you fishing?"

Grinning, she said, "You can say that only if you think we are in a competition of some kind, otherwise there is no incongruity in my approach."

"I need that explained."

"Without competition, you would have realized by now that you are not an average person; you're just acting like one." She switched modes more than moods before I say anything, and speaking as if I wasn't there said, "How a student reacts to a lesson affects the next lesson. This is why I am researching scenes with someone who knows what it's like to know things they can't express someone who made that knowledge a secret influence in their life, but it's not their only secret influence." In her usual tone, she said, "I can tell you this much; my characters are working on a plan of biblical proportions, but they can't know this..." she motioned a follow-the-bouncing ball sequence with her finger, "until they have enough experiences to make their quest feasible."

"You said religion has nothing to do with training your characters?"

"I said my characters weren't religious, not that religion isn't part of my story."

"I'm anything but religious," I said.

"No shit," she said giggling.

The Point Atkinson horn blared a warning to mariners that there was a continent nearby, effectively robbing me of my moment to ask her what the hell she had meant by "acting like an average person," because I had already taken that breath and expelled it.

As the resonating sounds dispersed into the mountain forests, Jeanette said, "What do you think my audience will assume so far—everything that comes to your mind?"

Still feeling physically dull and emotionally uninhibited, I said, "You've implied there's a lost love, you mentioned oversized clothing, and caring about what people think. From that, I thought Aleena was pregnant before Tartuu said anything, and meeting a baker who's really a teacher implies that she needs some kind of internal sustenance, or saving of some kind, like the kids?" I raised my brow.

"Maybe it would help you to know that they are actually against organized religions; you can let that go."

"Nothing I've read tells your audience that they're not a sect of some kind: it seems to me that you're objecting to the impression you created," I said as this thought arrived. "Maybe you've worked so hard at setting up complex interactions that you expect me to see what you think is in plain sight. I've been there, and we're not going to get far if you're going to escort me to the conclusions you want. Done that, as well."

"You are correct. Please carry on."

Vindicated, I nonchalantly said, "These scenes seemed to happen in the Egyptian time frame, in an arid coastal climate. The market setting suits a Mediterranean or Red Sea trading port and the diversity of your merchant's names suggests they're refugees who formed a commune. This implies they could have been running from a war or famine, because they don't care about borders, but I like the idea that persecution drove them away, and Islamic-based thought is probably their common bond."

"Why is that?" Jeanette said noncommittally.

"There are no important women in your story."

"You like that?"

"I meant your character's roles favor that idea. You know that, as well."

With a sly grin, she said, "My teacher's knew their students' words were signposts to underlying beliefs. If their grammar was inconsistent with their statements, chances were good that their underlying beliefs weren't what they thought them to be. This means teachers had to interpret their student's assumptions, and negotiate shared meanings, to ensure they were as much on the same page as they could be."

"Huh?"

"I'm saying that I'm not criticizing your grammar; I'm minimizing the possibility of misinterpretation as we discuss our story, and there's no time like the moment to make a point. This one is to take care that you don't paint your entire canvas with the color of one event."

"Granting you that point, Islamic states don't treat women well."

"You got lucky," she shrugged.

"Is this our negotiation?" I joked.

"In my work," she said seriously, "teachers and students need to share specific experiences. This requires positioning the student to receive them properly, which can sometimes look like an argument, a manipulation, or a verbal beating, when all are kindnesses born of necessity. That said, similar experiences don't necessarily generate the same assumptions in different people; a negotiation of understandings is required to arrive at a single point of view, which is ultimately the teachers." She cocked her head.

"Fair enough—I understand that your straying from the conversation is relevant to the screenplay. Can I continue?"

"You can and you may," Jeanette nodded graciously.

"Taking religion out of it, your commune would be based on other commonalities, like metaphysical beliefs, but how they shared these over great distances, to gather in one place, would take an extraordinary explanation. Even then, your main characters seem to be coercing individuals into joining their way of life; I mean, if they were meant to be there, and yet they got there, why would they have to be tricked?"

"A point I will soon address," Jeanette said.

"Otherwise, helping the kids to grow up safely is probably a metaphor for the rescue mission. That's all I've got."

"Thanks. I'm on track, and we are on the same page."

"But you're not going to confirm anything?"

"As I said—a point I will address."

"In that case, would it make sense to bring you up to speed on some film terms and production methods, so we don't get our wires crossed about those? At least I can contribute something today."

"You have contributed a great deal, but fire away," she said easily.

My intrusive fatigue lifted as suddenly as it had arrived, and I told Jeanette about visual and aural insinuation, as well as reviewing post-production techniques Tom had probably already shared with her. Jeanette learned quickly, her insightful queries reflecting a solid grasp on how to tweak expansive imaginings with inexpensive sounds, and creating nuance with camera motion.

Not surprisingly, she again asked me how I would portray ineffable insights on the screen. Caught up in my relative expertise, I drew from personal experiences of sensing things, but my

attempts to explain what I would write were archetypical: having the character pause with a look of concentration or concern.

Feeling this was inadequate, which is why they call it ineffable, I said, "I think everybody has felt a sudden sense of one kind or another; I wouldn't sweat portraying them. They'll get it."

"That may be," she pondered aloud, "but I suspect that you sometimes knew what was going to happen, and thought little of it because you're pretty bright." Jeanette suddenly turned on me, as much as to me, and for a fractured second her face appeared old, not just older.

The illusion faded as she said, "What do you think fate had in store if you hadn't paid attention to your knots?" Under the imminent threat of tripping over her own feet, she steadied herself with a hand on my arm, and what I had heard as a challenge became an inquiry.

"I wasn't where I would've been, so there's no way to know what destiny had in store," I temporized.

"I use the term fate to mean a better path offered but not taken, in which case a destiny may not be realized: your fate would have been to die, if you had ignored the signs that led you to safety—to being here today."

"I'm here because of making thousands of little decisions." I shrugged.

"As it should be; destiny is a decision making process."

"Fate isn't?"

"Fate is about making decisions that fly in the face of the evidence, or not making them until your choices have evaporated, which you've already defined as stupidity. You also said you didn't have to come to Vancouver, correct?"

"I had options, and I don't know that coming here was the best thing to do," I said, confronting her implication of divine intervention in my life. "Where to?"

We had reached the intersection of Denman and Davie, and I was essentially asking her if we were done for the day, part of me hoping we were because I was feeling strangely vulnerable: Jeanette was staring at me like Einstein on the brink of understanding the nature of time, and there we stood unblinkingly experiencing its passage.

"Take charge!" she suddenly exclaimed.

The force of her comical demand caused me to twitch like I had been shocked, which I cleverly converted into an exaggerated sniffing, like a hound in search of a scent: I tilted my head toward a young couple lazing under a tree, apparently pitching premature promises that one of them would eventually call lies. Turning to my right, I thought of veering toward the beach, but I nixed the idea; walking in sand would be an effort on sore legs. The Denman Street hill, straight ahead, was a better choice and we would have to pass the Best Western Hotel near the corner—the Point Atkinson horn blared an invitation to nervous mariners, as the fog blanketed the western shore.

Taking the hint, I sought shelter in a glass of wine at Checkers.

An hour later, with that pleasantries twice behind us Jeanette led the way out and again waited for me to decide on our course. On an impulse, I crossed Denman to the bicycle path that followed Beach Avenue, in the strip park that paralleled False Creek.

Walking a wayward course around youths beginning the ten-kilometer skate around Stanley Park, we chatted about things promptly forgotten to put a patina on the bonds I may have scratched earlier in the day. Ten minutes later, we came to the Burrard Street underpass where we could have turned around, continued into the city, or turned up a grassy slope to Pacific Avenue and headed back to Nolan's. Option three seemed to be the lesser evil, and we leaned into the task.

Reaching the top with a huff, Jeanette said, "Same time tomorrow?"

"What—sure—why?" I said confused.

She pointed toward her Civic parked fifty feet away. Sucking in a breath, she said, "I had options too, but I knew coming here this morning was the best thing to do, even if I didn't know why." She straightened up. "Call me later." Without a backwards glance, she walked to her car and drove toward the city without offering me a ride home.

Zzz: From a distance, I watched a young Robbie LeBlanc struggling to be heard, baffled that people did not understand the world this strangely endearing man saw so clearly. The contrast ratio of the black and white image paled, and the shadow of a thief come to rob him of wonder melded into toxic tales about Vietnam: jungle green images erupted into patches of boiling black-orange that resolved into Ski (Dave Wilson aka Wizichinski when his father landed in Canada) sitting in the comfortable shade of his wife's common sense and earthy humor. Their forms intertwined to become a corkscrew depositing experiences at the bottom of a carousel. Ski in Rhodesia turned to Leblanc in Biafra, turned to me in Argentina.

The growing pile of experiences needed to be sorted before they jammed the machine, but when I bent down I found myself staring at the tire of a midnight blue Mercedes, the custom hubcap reflecting the cedar covered mountains of southern Lebanon. Instinctually, I checked my pockets.

I had cash for daily expenses in local currency in the right front for easy access, and additional local currency in the lower left pocket, in case I had to grease a palm. Larger amounts of bribe money in British pounds and American dollars were in a velcro-sealed internal slot on my recorder pouch. Official press passes, militia permission slips, and doctored pictures of me with various politicians and clerics were stacked according to the likelihood of encountering their factions.

Maronite Christian, Sunni, Shi'ite, and Druse groups lined my back pockets. Behind my recorder were passes from the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Popular Palestinian Liberation Front, the Palestine Liberation Army - popularity not designated - and a crumpled document emblazoned with all of their official stamps. Technically, I was ready to deal with anyone I met. Practically, I was too overburdened to run from any of them.

Ski honked the horn.

I couldn't leave because my passport was in the hotel safe.

Ski said I was safe; my passport was always with me.

The carousel melted into a brook—the babbling was soothing.

I stepped into the clear water. It was over my head.

Gulping breaths awakened me in the reaper's favorite hour, again around four a.m.

Chapter 8: Uninformed Consent

Toying with another thin envelope, Jeanette began our next meeting at Nolan's by criticizing junk mail, primed by her son jokingly asking her to pick up his free gift on the way home.

"Placing a monetary value on a gift implies an expectation of reciprocity," she said distastefully, "notwithstanding the redundancy of free and gift."

"Greed drains the brain," I said, with a nod toward the pages she was idly tapping.

"Intelligence has little to do with it," she said, ignoring my gesture. "If companies can tease us into thinking we're taking advantage of them, or pick our pockets by pandering to our fears of having less in some way, we're at their mercy. And we both know they don't have any."

"MacDonald's and Mattel are secretly taking over the world?"

"I'm serious. If we spend money on things we don't need, we risk displacing a responsibility."

"We pay for gratification all of the time. It's built into the cost of a free society."

"Excellent." Jeanette opened the envelope and fanned the pages. "Our merchants understood how to manipulate semantics and nuance to stalk students into discovering their own detrimental assumptions. From here, they could embrace new understandings that inspire the imagination to go outside of their experiences, and claim knowledge of entire concepts."

"Meaning they don't really understand them?" Like me, in that moment.

"To claim knowledge in this context is to understand the entire spectrum of cause and effect in a particular arena. It's a mental hologram within which you can instantly reference any point to every point, because you understand the role of each and its influence on the whole."

"Duane Allman could play guitar like that."

"Like what?"

"Roam the fret board: he could take you to undefined places - without drugs," I added, but not categorically.

"Good, so you do understand. Now imagine our social indoctrination in terms of political parties and corporations roaming their threat boards to create public assumptions that obscure the fact that they're plucking our strings."

"I get your point, but a free gift is an outright lie; everyone knows you have to buy something."

"And they do because the indoctrination has become an insidious influence."

"How is a free side of fries insidious?"

"I know you're capable of deeper thought."

"I don't want to use it all up this morning." I nodded at the envelope. "I might need some for that."

"Overall," Jeanette said, placing her palms on the table, "we are so clouded by rhetoric that we can't imagine the harm we cause through seemingly innocent acts. My teachers understood this influence, so they relentlessly taught their students clarity of mind as an art to be practiced like scales, and played like a symphony." She looked at me, the pages on the table, then back at me. "Bear that in mind as you read about Tartuu: he knew the townies would have punished the kids for being hungry, and that they were exhausted by their daily routine, ready to be played by cruel people, and the damage to their spirits could take lifetimes to heal if he didn't intervene."

"Isn't he playing them, as well?"

"Yes, and if all goes well, he'll teach them how to heal themselves."

"From what?"

"They believe in nothing and trust no one. They would be empty without fear and suspicion to keep them going. Tartuu knew they couldn't last much longer, because they were sent to him." Jeanette handed me the pages, as she slid sideways on the bench seat.

"Don't you mean they were chased to him?"

"I mean sent. When the Universe wants to help someone, it sends them where they need to go. It doesn't matter what the route looks like, but it's helpful to recognize it later on." She smiled a secretive affair. "Read between the lines. See if it makes more sense to you." Jeanette left the table and headed for the washroom.

Her latest offering began on page 229 of an untitled chapter; it was awkward and stilted from the get-go. I understood why she had to set up the scene, and why she left me alone with it...

A boy of ten years brought a weary traveler to a communal gathering, where they shared their food and drink while comfortably conversing as if he were a neighbor dropping by. All of them seemed to be oblivious to a girl who was leaning against a nearby tree, rhythmically moving to music in her mind, while her lute lay silent by her side. Close by, two young boys were engaged in a staring contest at a shrub when, well into the meal, an old man asked the traveler what circumstances had brought him to their table on this fine autumn day. The stranger responded cleverly, but glibly, essentially saying that he had become bored with the same routines, quickly adding that he meant no disrespect to those who thrived on routines. They just weren't for him.

To his confusion, his comment launched an in-depth analysis of the cause and effect of glibness between two elderly men, until a woman of middle age interrupted the skirmish to say she had lost the point. Looking for the stranger to reorient her, she asked him again what circumstances had brought him to their table. The traveler answered more honestly, if still sketchily about his situation.

Without embarrassment or preamble, the woman told the stranger that she had patiently allowed time for her husband to deal with an anger issue, but by the time she saw things for what they really were it was too late for words. She had tried to help him see what needed to change, but it made him angrier because he heard everything as a criticism. Between flare-ups, he was engaging to the world and sullen at home, but she could not speak to him. All she could do was escape, which is how she came to be there.

"My fathers," she said looking at the stranger, "have other views about this."

"Parents often do," the man agreed, missing the point of her story.

"Frozen by indecision," the elder father on her left said on the heels of the stranger's words, "she rationalized an untenable position into a conundrum about love and duty to give her suffering's purpose. When she realized it might kill her, she left him and became unbearably sweet with new acquaintances, from the relief of a new beginning."

"Father?" the woman placidly said, looking at the elder sitting on her right.

Sadly, the old man said to the traveler, "I think her inaction allowed the circumstance to become dangerous so that she could justify leaving. She was young, and she abandoned her responsibilities with the knowledge this would ultimately help him and free her. In this way, she could feel sacrificially superior to anyone who might judge her." He looked at the other elder apologetically. "I have trouble reconciling her claim of being patient, then leaving him from fear." He turned to face the stranger. "People who are patient and fearful are deceitful; they become actors who charge admission to their good humor, and when enough people recognize their game they move the show to a new stage." His gaze lingered upon the stranger, as he addressed the gathering in general, "Our daughter's sweetness is a performance to be sure, but it is not deceitful for she has nothing to fear. For her," he looked her way, "it is the most efficient way to conduct her affairs." He faced the stranger. "Do you think you did the proper thing by leaving?"

Although grateful for their hospitality, the traveler was disarmed by the unusual candor of a communal conversation, and strangely disoriented by the slick responses that naturally came to his mind. Wisely, he said the insights he had just been so graciously offered were new to him, and he needed to think about it.

"We know this is a difficult question," the elders said obligingly, in unison.

The gathering nodded in concurrence, but their collective gaze did not waver from the stranger: "Take all of the time you need," their expressions conveyed. "We'll wait until you're ready."

Ironically, by trying to incorporate both elder's views, to justify his uncertainty, the stranger realized personal events had gone too far because he had avoided doing anything about them; a fresh start became his best option. This is what he told the gathering.

"We all made that choice one way, or another," a young wife said, spreading her arms to encompass the abundance of fresh food, a glorious day, and the implied invitation for the traveler to make a new home.

Three twangs on the lute saved him from having to decide in that moment, which seemed to be the design of their conversation. This wasn't all good, because the notes gave rise to a story about a silver-tongued stranger's arrival at a harvest celebration on the cusp of a change of seasons. Beneath the compliment of her attraction on display, this worried him because minstrels were the custodians of history, and his unremarkable journey might be heard in lands ahead of his arrival...

I set the pages down as Jeanette returned to our table.

"Well?" she said.

The lack of names and obvious effort to entice the stranger made it easier to deal with the subtext of the scene, as per her request to look between the lines.

"Your theme seems to be that there are times when doing nothing is best, and that offering help can be premature." I glanced down. "Reviewing the past is also important to understand what to do the next time around, because things might not be what they seemed to be at the time. For that matter, things might not be what they appear to be in the moment."

"I know it's choppy," she said, acknowledging that I had avoided commenting on the quality of her work.

"Why did these people plot to help the guy?"

"To have him realize he had arrived at a place he didn't know he was looking for." Her gaze lingered on me, before she said, "As for *these people*?" She dipped her head in anticipation.

"The woman is Aleena grown up?" I said.

"Correct."

"The elders would be the baker and... another merchant?" I guessed.

"What about the traveler?" Jeanette said, taking the pages from beneath my hand.

I didn't have a clue.

"It's not *in* the chapter," Jeanette said to help me.

I shrugged, and she said no more about it. Instead, she reached into her bag to present me with another short scene, beginning on page 340.

I held my tongue about this annoying practice and dutifully read the extract...

The same characters had convened a council to discuss what to do about the unnamed traveler's practice of extracting praise and favors in exchange for his cooperation; he had not recognized that the elder was talking about him at their first meeting. The council's dialogue pointed out that people who place this tax on relationships can never fulfill the demands of their self-image, and that this fog of self-deception inevitably leads to a betrayal, so they were searching for ways to make the need to change his behavior apparent without damaging anyone.

I followed their plan this far—you can't fix what you don't know is broken—before Jeanette lost me: the elder Tartuu said they should focus on the traveler's romance to come with the minstrel, and the ensuing discussion revealed that the council was a cabal of psychics.

For pure disappointment, this machination surpassed resurrecting dead characters in dream sequences because, my specific objections aside, Jeanette's writing style generated an undercurrent of suspense by alluding to there being 'more' to everything her characters said. I had caught on to that much from her role-playing.

I didn't get it. She was miles smarter than this.

When I looked up to comment, Jeanette preemptively said, "Teachers focus on the subtext of physical events, so when a stranger happened upon a group of people who were celebrating the change of seasons they didn't have to discuss why he was there."

"I got that - or would have. I'm thinking there's no depth to your plot if your guys know what's going to happen."

"By the time the audience gets to this scene they'll know the council can read the momentum of events, which is to say that some events may not have passed the point of change to become inevitable."

"Thereby making a thin gimmick arbitrary?" I said, shaking my head.

"Thereby creating drama, you'll see."

"Or not," I mumbled under my breath.

We paid our bill, and in silence headed toward the park for two city blocks before Jeanette said, "Every scene in my work has underlying circumstances, not unlike how you came to understand where you really were in the Middle East. I think you're frustrated with my manner of presentation because your imagination hasn't grasped the potential dangers of daily life here. You're still far more aware of the overt manifestations of conflict."

"What kind of dangers am I missing?" I chuckled.

"Let's see if we can find something that'll get your attention." She looked feverishly up and down Davie Street; it took me a moment to realize she was making a joke.

Chuckling, I said, "When I was in the Navy, Campbell and I were standing an outside watch on the bridge wings in a dead calm, when we passed a large log. A moment later, an officer cadet opened the bridge hatch and shouted for the benefit of the captain standing inside, 'Did you see that log, Campbell?'"

'Yes sir. It was brown, long, and round.'

'Why didn't you report it?' the cadet said coldly.

'It didn't seem important.'

'Sir!' the officer cadet admonished him. Then he sternly explained, 'There may have been a man holding onto it!'"

I told Jeanette that for the rest of our watch we scanned the horizon for shipping, the mid-distances for Russian periscopes, and the near distances for anything people could hang on to. Nearing the end of our watch, without comment to me Campbell flung the hatch open and shouted, "Officer of the watch...sir! Port lookout reporting shit hawk bearing red one five, angle of elevation thirty degrees, range half a mile, closing fast!" Before the cadet could ask why Campbell had reported a seagull, he said, "There may be a plane behind it. Sir!"

Expelling a rush of appreciation through her nostrils, Jeanette said, "Are you making fun of me?"

"To the contrary, I am acknowledging that there could be danger anywhere."

"Umm."

We walked the rest of the way to the park in a comfortable silence, before Jeanette suddenly became animated. Like a child making discoveries, she pointed to an ancient tree, a tide rip, then a cloud formation, saying things like, "It's elegant," and, "Watch the swirl," then, "Look at it change shape and still be a cloud."

I was envious. She didn't have to work hard at creating the older characters in her commune.

Chapter 9: Beauty, and the Beast

While Jeanette probed and punctured my beliefs, she simultaneously offered alternative views about "the way things are," often in a speculative manner because her initial goal was to orient me to other possibilities. At her own pace, she then extended the complexity of these views into larger so-called facts and philosophies that most reasonable people would dismiss, but she *knew* how to challenge me.

Superficially, she might appear to be a cult leader recruiting followers by causing them to reason their lives with a different set of values. However, her goal was not to have me exchange one set of beliefs for another, but to have me abandon all beliefs to embrace new convictions by way of directed experiences: because our beliefs include the cultural influences and unconscious assumptions upon which our sense of identity, and so our sanity depend, teachers are as meticulous at explaining and then setting up the student to experience a new way of thinking, as they are at unearthing the student's views and demonstrating their flaws. Without this delicate balance in play, the student could lose their mind when their beliefs crumble.

Beauty, and the Beast.

Look, look!" she shouted as if my eyes required separate commands.

With exaggerated concern, I scanned the horizon for a tornado then the sea for a tsunami, before I followed her finger pointing toward a rotund man dressed in a multicolored pullover; he was playing with a retriever mixed-breed wearing a matching bandana.

"The dog could have rabies?" I ventured a guess.

"This is important. Tell me what you see."

"I see a fashion-challenged guy playing with his dog."

"That's what our culture taught you to see. Try it my culture's way, and assess the nature of their interactions." Jeanette pulled me off the walkway to watch the duo work a cycle of heel, sit, down, and stay commands. At the completion of their routine, I had nothing 'advanced' to add to my initial observation.

"Would you agree she has been trained using appropriate methods?" Jeanette prompted me.

"No," I said definitively.

"Why do you say that?"

"She has a penis."

Jeanette managed her laugh into a distorted, "What tells you that his training has been appropriate?"

"Bozo's commands are calm, the dog obeys hand signals right away—maybe too fast because he anticipates them, which means it's a very familiar game."

At that moment, the dog issued a plaintive, diminishing howl that sounded like a blues horn refrain. "Otis is tired of basic training; he's asking for something to chase," I said.

"There's hope for you." Jeanette inhaled audibly, slowly released the air through her mouth, and in a normal tone said, "Otis responds happily even when he doesn't get an immediate reward, because his behavior is governed by how his trainer conditioned him to respond beyond the command." She mimicked the dog's antics at the foot of his owner, taking skipping half-steps

around me before stopping at close quarters. "He has faith that his actions will benefit him," she said with a satisfied huff.

"I don't think dogs are plagued by abstractions," I said, taking her arm in mine.

"I didn't say he thought about it," Jeanette replied, "which is the point; he doesn't know how he has been conditioned any more than we understand the roots of our behavior."

"That may be, but people can choose to act in different ways to identical circumstances. Dogs repeat a behavior until they get a better offer." I thought about this for a moment, chuckled, and said, "Maybe that's not the best example."

"We're certainly capable of making other choices," Jeanette said, stopping to look back, "but our unrealized assumptions shrink those possibilities until we end up doing versions of the same thing in similar circumstances." She looked at me. "Enslavement to our illusions about the way things are continues until we stop to assess the consequences of our beliefs, in the context of the true nature of both." She nodded at Otis. "Set your version of the world aside, and look at them as if you're from another planet."

"Huh?"

"We're talking about illusions; just do it, and you'll discover something."

A moment of mental adjustment: I focused on a bipedal humanoid moving his limbs in a repetitious way. At Jeanette's direction, I closed my eyes and opened them to focus on the four-legged creature moving his entire body in various ways.

"Switch roles," she whispered. "Assume the smaller creature is the initiator, and you'll see that the big one is not as smart or nearly as agile. Look: Otis stands on all fours in a commanding position, but all the man can do is lower his hand. The little one rests his body on the ground, but all the big one can do is raise his hand. Otis gives the human a break by patiently sitting in front of him. The human is happy for the rest so he rewards the little fellow with a cookie."

These actions happened as she spoke, and for a brief moment Jeanette's phrasing caused me to experience the incongruous perception that Otis was training a physically, and possibly intellectually inferior creature to feed him. I laughed at the illusion, then at the cliché—people are trained by their pets in just this way.

"You've got it!" Jeanette said bobbing in front of me like Otis at his master's feet. "Our predilections," she said, settling down, "are shaped by the commands of our culture, which we filter through how we view ourselves, and the risks we're willing to take to maintain that view. Our freedom to respond to identical circumstances in different ways is an illusion, like the one you just experienced."

Grasping my hand, Jeanette took skipping steps trying to pull me along. "It takes discipline to break old patterns, and to see what we're really capable of, because we've designated our self-image to be the guardian of our assumptions."

I let go of her hand, and began walking at a pace too fast for her to maintain her frolicking. Stopping on the grass a few steps behind me, she triumphantly said, "And there it is!"

"There what is?" I said, turning to face her.

"You could have chosen to play with me, but your male upbringing dictated that you should be embarrassed. That's not manly either, so you became superior and distanced yourself from me."

"Not that I agree, but one point at a time: my action was one choice of many possible choices."

"But it was one you would make nine times out of ten. It's the tenth variation of the same thing that creates your misconception about free will." She closed the distance between us. Still catching her breath, she said, "Otis came into this world without ulterior motives. He has no

abstractions to ponder, or images to maintain, so everything that's not a potential adversary in his world is a potential mate, food, a scent to explore, or a circumstance of play. It doesn't occur to him to become nasty in new situations, or when he has to work, because his faith has been focused on inevitable success. He's happy!" she said, mimicking a dog chasing a bouncing ball.

Five paces ahead of me, Jeanette stopped as if she had hit an electronic fence. "Some dogs are trained through cruelty," she said, catching her breath, "which appears to work because the animal's choices are basically limited to survival, pleasure, or pain."

"I'm not advocating cruelty," I said, coming alongside her, "but you get the same result."

"You can't use inappropriate methods to create appropriate behavior with any creature. Obedience based on fear is submission, and that will always emerge in rebellion. Free will is like truth—like a falcon on prey—it will always present itself, and unexpectedly."

"Doggie Uprising Ends Leash Laws!" I jested.

"The point I'm trying to have you entertain," she said wryly, "is that Otis sees the world in the way he was conformed to it, no different than normal people can become hooligans under the right conditions, and conditioning. Obeying his owner is not about hunger, power, or sanctuary. It's a pleasurable game he'll play with everyone, because his actions faithfully generate circumstances in keeping with his focus of play. This constantly validates his conditioning, and creates a positive cycle of play." Jeanette circled her finger as she spoke. "Kindly train a dog and it may corner a trespasser, and bark as a greeting, for attention, or to warn his pack, but his conditioning tells him that he's safe; there's no need to protect anything. A cruelly trained animal will take a piece out of a stranger, because the animal has learned that its safest place in the world is still hazardous. You've seen this kind of thing often enough."

"I have?"

Thinking I was being sarcastic, Jeanette gave me a sharp look, only to realize I was legitimately clueless.

Touching my hand in apology, she said, "You've worked with artists who believed their own press, politicians who indulged personal goals ahead of representing their constituents, and religious leaders absorbed by their status, haven't you?"

"All of the above, sure."

"The underlying threat is that none of them could act like that, and maintain their status, unless the public shared their assumptions."

"You're saying that everywhere," I waved my arm to cover all that we could see, "the tail is wagging the dog?"

"I'm saying our tales are wagging our dogmas, and that good people derive their behaviors from harmfully acceptable practices, which they evolve into personal convictions that camouflage the essence of their actions. Our society is at the point where even clearly outrageous practices fly over our heads, or confuse us if they manage to get our attention."

"An example of that would be helpful," I said, thinking it would be about me. Still...

"You've been tracking acceptable scientific, religious, and cultural beliefs to the grave for years, and I'll bet you lunch and a beer that you're still mystified when spectators celebrate a victory by destroying other people's property."

"You're not?"

"Trillion dollar contact sports, relentless and pointless violence on television, and arcade games based on brutality and death, condition our children to think that destruction is part of the entertainment package."

"Isn't it an outlet for pent up aggression?"

"The demands of our social conformation put a lid on the free expression of our natural aggression,

which is not damaging—it's the force behind our creativity—until there's a mass agreement to say screw it. That's when we emulate the celebrity players who are paid millions to take cheap shots and cheat."

"The courts don't hold game makers culpable when kids mimic them."

"Nor should they; that responsibility lies with the parents, and society as a whole."

"My head might explode," I said, trying to organize my thoughts.

"Just say what's there," Jeanette prompted me. "You know I won't judge it."

Tentatively, because the ducks hadn't all landed yet, I said, "We don't appreciate what our true circumstances are, because we share common assumptions about our world?"

"Yes."

"Which has what to do with danger, here and now?"

"Do you not find it the least bit scary that two reasonably intelligent people can view the same scene, at the same time, in the same place, and see entirely different things?"

"I don't find it scary that we've got different opinions."

"Opinions are a lesson for another time," Jeanette said, apparently giving up on trying to make clear whatever I was supposed to be afraid of—a fit man living in Canada, in the daytime, in Stanley Park, with witnesses everywhere. Really?

"I think any Otis-like conformation analogy will be too much for a movie to work through," I said, moving on. "You'll have to state it in the dialogue, and that's that."

"We will simplify the idea, which we couldn't have done until you understood the connections between what we see, believe, and what we do. Great job. Thank you."

"You're welcome, but I was just piecing things together out loud."

"Has a single experience ever changed something you believed?"

"Sure. That happens to everyone. Why?"

"Do you think it's logical to form a cogent philosophy for life from that experience?"

"Probably not."

"Because the event would color an entire world view, when it doesn't always apply?"

"I guess... yes."

"Look around you!" she shouted.

"At what?" I mimicked her exuberance.

"At the world!" she said, as her arm swept the misty meridian where sapphire sky dissolved into a crown of indigo ice atop late spring mountains.

I did a 360-degree turn at the completion of which Jeanette examined my expression. Finding no ridicule etched in my thin grin, she focused on the distant landscape.

Playing along, I followed her gaze into the darkened hollows of a descending forest, tracking pinpoint points of light as they slashed through explosions of vital greenery where the sun punctured the canopy of clouds and conifer. I re-examined this vista for anything remotely relevant to her exuberant request, but like the outgoing tide grasping for rocks it had been polishing for millennia, I found no point of purchase.

"What do you see?" she said.

"Trees, water, and some shit hawks feeding," I replied honestly.

Sighing with pretentious sorrow, she said, "That's my point: your world view has been so severely tainted by select events that you see nothing but endless days of competing for the survival of your self-image."

"I don't understand how what I see is competing with your view. We just don't agree on what lies beneath the canopy. What's the big deal?"

We began walking, before Jeanette said, "Disillusionment and mistrust create the cynicism that's blinding you to all of this, as it is—not what lies beneath," she waved her arm as if to sweep the horizon free of my jaded view. "It caused you to see a clown where a free spirit was giving a dependent creature a good life, and because you don't grasp how you have been conformed you think it'll take too long to explain it to others. It won't; that's your burden."

"You were talking about everyone's conformation."

"To someone special, yes."

"Special because I didn't see it?" I said, slowing to grasp what she meant.

"Exactly; it could be no other way."

Jeanette chirped an emotion, and she was suddenly three strides ahead: the sounds of water lapping at the foot of the sea wall marked off the next twenty yards, as I made up the distance casually... I had no idea what I had done, but she obviously wanted some alone time.

Not until I was lying in bed that night did I put her apparent disappointment in me into perspective: Jeanette was trying to convince me that I should be afraid of the way things are in our world because, as she had stated, her characters had to be wary of where they were at all times. So I must have created a run in the fabric of her intricate plot by responding as her audience would—not being afraid of people having different opinions. This must have caused her to glimpse the inevitability of having to restructure a key aspect of her story.

It was all I had to go on, but it made sense. I felt genuinely sorry for her; I knew what that was like.

Chapter 10: The Foretime

Mystics throughout the ages have taught that humans know far more than we think we know, because we either dismiss, or have not been made aware of our resources and abilities. Teachers in the stalking realm, and all emissaries, can access both their own silent resources and those of others. Their techniques include facilitating the student's entrance into a state of heightened awareness where complex knowledge can be more easily assimilated, teaching in lucid dreaming where metaphors replace words to create comprehensive understandings, and aiding the student with accessing an energy point in their being called the assemblage point, which stores the memory of every event they have experienced—and much more. When Spirit facilitates these experiences the physical teacher becomes the interpreter of events, including the omen of Spirit's direct participation.

On the morning of our fourth consecutive day together, we met outside a fashionable bakery-cafe in West Vancouver; contagiously chipper, Jeanette began telling me about her night of lucid dreaming. Two steps through the broad glass doors, Brandi greeted us with an orthodontist's smile, and expansively declared that we could sit anywhere, before her youthful charm collapsed at the sound of a soft chime.

I looked for a remote spot in case Jeanette felt like dancing.

Taking in the ambiance, two of the twenty-foot high light tan walls were accented by slashes of green neon, under which stood snowflake arrays of plastic tables surrounded by petals of tub chairs flaunting red slashes down to a Mexican tile floor. The impression of Christmas in Cabo San Lucas suggested that patrons should spend freely in the name of Christ. The other walls of full-length glass provided excellent lighting for customers to peruse the large print while wearing Ray Bans.

We headed toward a shaded spot in the back corner, ordered coffee, then to calm her I told her about an innocuous dream I had when was twelve years old, and still remembered.

I was standing on a dirt roadway that bisected two rolling fields of calf high grass through which masses of translucent people were slowly walking. I knew that the ones coming toward me from my left were returning from a physical life, and the ones walking away on my right were heading into one, not that I believed it, but it was a dream. Ten yards in front of me stood an elderly man dressed in an off-white and tan striped robe. Quietly, he said, "Come with me."

We walked a short distance over the crest of a low rise, stopping on a tree-lined roadside where young men and women, none of them looking more than twenty-five years old, were sitting under a canopy of broad leaves. The group exuded an aura of tranquil pleasure, but there was an underlying power within their casual countenance. Impish glances at me, then each other, made me want to check my fly as the elder introduced us.

That was it.

Nodding to herself, Jeanette reflectively said, "You got a pass between life and death, to meet some very important people in your future."

"Not to be argumentative, but I met half a dozen at most."

"It was clearly enough."

"For what?"

"For now," she grinned, and we got down to business.

Her latest offering of only four pages opened with a display of uncommon linguistic dexterity for a boy of Mihaleh's limited years, telling his roommates what they could do with their suggestion that he bath more frequently. When the usual merchants gathered to discuss the problem, a commotion in a monkey cage created a moment of grinning consent, and they assigned Mihaleh the responsibility of taking care of the animals.

He had no problem working for his keep—he expected worse when he first came to the commune—but he discovered that cleaning the cage properly didn't always last long enough to pass inspection by the keeper. Upon hearing this legitimate complaint, the understanding man said Mihaleh was in charge; he could change the animal's feeding time, camp out to observe their processing cycle, then schedule his duties accordingly. Mihaleh took his advice, which worked well other than the keeper noting an unpleasant smell lingered. Mihaleh rightfully argued that monkeys always had an odor, to which the keeper replied they couldn't help it, as he locked the cage with Mihaleh still inside. Jeanette's scene ended on day three of his incarceration, when he finally grasped what it was like to live with him.

"To the point," I said, handing her the pages before she could snatch them from my grasp.

"Flat?" she said, with a tilt of her head.

"Not at all. It rides the edge of sparse nicely; if you described every little thing like you do with your dreams," I quipped, "It would probably dull the impact."

"What do you think about how they decided to treat the problem?"

"You've established that kind of decision making process, and your audience would get it anyway, but I'm not sure they'll agree with it. By the way, signs or omens weren't one of the decision making options you gave me when we met."

"I said there were five common processes, common being generally acknowledged. This one isn't considered common, but do you agree with what they did?"

"It made the point when talking to him didn't work."

"That's your standard—talk first then do what has to be done?"

"If you have to. Kind of."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning the audience might think Mihaleh didn't commit an offence, just that he was offensive, and your guys literally put him in jail. That's a scare tactic, which pretty much screws up your point about not teaching by fear."

"Mihaleh's teacher's warned him what was to come, and he agreed to it. If they hadn't, the cage would have been a punishment, not a means of making their point."

"He didn't know he agreed to anything—or I missed it."

"We discussed this as an issue of avoiding taking responsibility."

"Hmmm."

"I've also mentioned that the way most people learn anything important is according to their own standards, so if any life lesson seems too harsh you've probably banked too much credit in your wonderfulness account."

"The audience will probably see that he's just an angry kid."

"My teachers will make the point that you can't be angry unless you're afraid. It follows that Mihaleh rebelled as a way to keep himself safe, because the safest place in his world is still hazardous. The same is true with adult tantrums, by the way." She lowered her eyes briefly as she said, "We're going to show our audience that the human cage is constructed of generous beliefs, and that the true enemy is locked inside us. Bring some of your work over, and I'll show where you've built your cage."

"You think I've got one?"

"I know you do. Bring anything; the truth always finds a way to show itself. Ready to walk off some calories?"

"Sure."

Shortly afterwards, we were strolling along Marine Drive when, on no clue that I was aware of, Jeanette began painstakingly describing the mechanics of reincarnation that her merchants taught to the commune's children. Her conclusion, and the point of her speech, was that if we acted as if we came into physical life to engage specific developmental challenges, we wouldn't be so quick to avoid hardships we knew we would face later in life, or in another lifetime. There were some causes of great turmoil, she said addressing my unspoken question, which we could defer to a time when we were better equipped to handle them. However, this was a tricky business because poor timing is invariably the consideration when we avoid lessons that may have taken years to set up for ourselves. Ultimately, by not dealing with the smaller crisis that had inevitably evolved from not dealing with accumulating issues, we added momentum to a lesson that need not have become a devastating incident.

Jeanette also briefly spoke about how teachers dealt with a student's stages of learning, which as far as I knew had no parallel to traditional counseling; her teacher's tactics were swift, if not sometimes callous, and otherwise seemed to lack concern. I voiced this observation.

Jeanette said that what I viewed as calculated confrontations was actually a teacher's empathy cutting short the pain of those who had the energy to make sudden and appropriate changes. She admitted that her methods were not applicable to most people, but the teaching aspects of her story were not about most people. It was about people of energy meeting their teachers, but because of the nature of their teachings, potential students had to be approached with care. Part of this approach was that teachers, who had yet to identify themselves as such, used a student candidate's personal history to lead them into excavating what she called "an

embedded awareness" of a sense of purpose. If they could resurrect this, the teaching process would go more smoothly. She found something amusing in saying this.

She next said the teacher would overlap lessons to aid in this revival to the point of overloading the student, as they deemed prudent or providential. Eventually, a student begins to replace their old beliefs and the crappy behaviors they create—inefficient use of energy—with the most efficient personal practices. A complete transition, which she called the mastery of the self, took years because the student's ego isn't deaf to the teacher telling them how to defeat poor practices. As a result, the ego may lose only its mask of protection, meaning students don't really accept some aspects of what they are really like, they only think they do, and sincerely. She called this a second-hand conviction, which becomes another secret they keep from themselves.

"The ego is remarkably clever at bargaining for what it wants when a belief has been wounded," Jeanette said. "So by itself, discovering that you're being an ass in a given circumstance doesn't necessarily apply across the board."

"How do teachers know what issues the student has?"

"Discovering them involves an intricate teaching scheme we can deal with after we are finished writing; it's not a large part of our screenplay. However," she said with vigor, as an afterthought struck her, "there is an exercise we can use to demonstrate what a buried belief looks like, and how a teacher helps a student to discover it."

"Do your book's students know this is the teacher's goal, and agree to it?" I said, cautiously.

"Absolutely, but they can't appreciate what it will mean until the teacher pulls the curtain back and it's standing their naked.

"Why would anyone put out all of that effort for a stranger, especially one who fights them every step of the way?"

"Are you objecting to people helping others develop?"

"No, I'm..."

"Are you objecting to the pay?" she grinned.

"I'm asking what business it is of theirs, and what's with all the secrecy?" I said, frustrated.

"You could have just said that," Jeanette teased. "The answer is rooted in the core assumptions of that teaching society, but I'll try to translate them into something you can understand." Jeanette pursed her lips. Apparently dismissing two thoughts before she said, "Teachers receive an omen that they should begin to teach someone, but it is more properly a command than a sign or suggestion to them."

"Because?"

"I'm not being glib when I say this, they wouldn't be teachers if they didn't teach, and there is nothing more gratifying, frustrating, and personally advancing than doing for someone what has been done for you. The difficult to explain part is that the teacher *knows*," she emphasized, "that a designated student is either on a mission that Spirit has helped them to design, or the student has reached the pinnacle of their physical development. This is their last go-round in a physical life—their graduate degree to become a master of themselves. Would you think the omen that designated a new student was giving you a choice?"

"When you put it that way..." I grinned.

"Let's put it your way," Jeanette said as if I hadn't grasped the significance of her explanation. "When something inside warned you that going around the next corner was a bad idea, did you turn back?"

"I get it, already. What tells the student to continue to learn under these circumstances?"

"That's an excellent question that has a less-than fulfilling answer."

"I'm used to that."

Smirking, Jeanette said, "There is a combination of influences, one of which is the student's Silent Knowledge of their purpose and potential destiny; this is the constant pull of their destiny leading them to decisions they may not have considered from reason alone. Their sense of self, on the other hand, tugs their focus back to paying the rent. Working together, they go forward safely while the teacher points out how the knocks of life actually guided their critical choices. This opens the student to acknowledging that they received timing cues, and directional clues, when making some important decisions—and some seemingly not so important."

"To be clear, you're talking about being aware that something—Spirit—is looking out for them?"

"Yes, but it's nothing overt, and it works far better as a cooperative effort." She shifted in her seat. "The deepest regions of your being *knew* that the mass of circumstances, and political information, you ingested about working in Lebanon meant nothing in critical moments. Otherwise, you would have to credit your intellect with godlike powers of deduction to have seen things no one else saw." Gurgling the urge to laugh under control, she said, "A student's evolutionary energy compels them to investigate, and to move forward, but they also have the energy to ignore even blatant clues. For instance, you've effectively ignored every event you couldn't explain by hiding them under shallow analysis, or glib comments you don't believe."

"I don't?"

"You wouldn't have arranged your conclusions to credit your intellect for your survival if 'shit happens' satisfied you," she said, motioning parenthesis in the air. "Think about it this way," she carried on, "our default position is to reasonably act in ways that leave us feeling in control. This means it's inherently unreasonable to change the way we think, and that's part of everyone's struggle." She pitched forward. "We pinch our reasoning to suit our sense of power and security, then we focus on the slim point that we made any determination. We talked about this: the tenth choice causes us to believe we are free to choose anything, when our choices are a menu of established options?"

"With you so far." *Kind of.*

"You didn't have a first legitimate choice, let alone a tenth one, so you ignored what might have screwed up your sense of power and security." She leaned back. "The beauty of my teacher's system of retrieving students from their distorted views was they didn't have to threaten these views directly. Their technique was to have them make a conscious effort to withdraw their uninformed consent to mimic the ways of their world, by embracing practices they didn't have to believe; they just had to act as if they would work out."

It struck me that Jeanette's way around any credibility problems in her story was to have teachers tell the audience, through instructions to their students, that they should act as if they believed the movie's premises for a few hours. It wasn't a bad idea...

"So this silent stuff is what keeps students going?" I said.

"That, and when they begin to discover how self-deceiving they really are, they become more willing to learn how they resist the pull of their Silent Knowledge."

"But it all has to sound like crap for a long time?"

"This is where their energy is first put to use."

"That really doesn't explain it."

"And that brings us back to my original point: you use reasoning to assess events, whereas my people's understanding of energy is what guided them. Self-deception is not energy efficient;

if you lie to yourself, you cannot help but lie to others while believing what you are saying, and why you are doing what you do. My teachers worked overtime to show their students where their thinking was off-center, because it could kill them."

"How did they do that?"

"They first taught them to embrace the workings of deception, then how to dismantle it."

"What are the workings?"

"Students are taught that their ego, which is the principal accomplice in self-deception, is a belief filter." She re-seated herself for what I assumed would be a lengthy explanation. "Picture a disco ball: our brain reflects our image from every angle, but it's hanging in the middle of the club so it's vulnerable. To protect itself, it takes inventory of everything it sees and stores that information in an inner sponge. It also filters the activity around it through the assumptions it thinks will serve it, while reflecting club life. The sponge holes are pathways for rationalizations to pass through the facts, and mask contradictions."

"Hang on... hang on – everything comes in, we absorb what suits us, and we reflect what we want others to see?" I said, trying to get it straight before asking how the hell she expected to incorporate this into a movie.

"The mirror is a two way illusion: it accepts what it wants to see, and it reflects what it wants others to see. However, cutting remarks can break facets of our view so we encase the ball in a layer of self-importance that transmits the impact of every assault to the sponge. This cushions the blow with our personal assumptions. Still with me—even kind of?"

"Self-importance transmits shocks to beliefs that absorb the punch."

"Actually, there are three layers." She slowed her speech, as if this had anything to do with my ability to understand her.

"A layer of self-importance defends against events that scratch the image. A layer of self-absorption interprets events that polish our image, then there's a secret-filtering membrane of self-indulgence between them."

"Why is it secret?"

"The membrane isn't a secret mechanism; it filters events through the secrets we keep from ourselves, to distinguish between a polish and a scratch."

"Huh."

Shifted in her seat, again, Jeanette said, "The point is that we process events through layers of protection, deflection, and polish, which collectively form and inform our self-image." She gazed into my puzzled expression.

"I'm stuck on the secret thing: we keep secrets from ourselves?"

"People wouldn't indulge in their apparent wonderfulness through acts of excess unless they were insecure; their excesses are props that shield them from their secret self-image, which is poor. Does that help?"

"It's helpful for self-indulgence."

"Acts of self-importance and self-absorption are even easier to spot: we'll get to them later. The overview is that the sum of all our conditioning, realized and unconscious, is our personality."

"Not clear on that."

"Interpreting every event through our conditioning is to literally practice our beliefs through our behaviors, like addicts feeding the needs of their self-image, which change as circumstances impress us with a different facet of self-reflection. So-you-can-see," she said, running her words together, "we have all of the information and evidence we need to know what we are really like."

The problem is that it takes an external force—a safe-cracker to access those beliefs, and a magician to untangle the convolutions we create to hide our secrets from ourselves."

"We keep these secrets because they are flaws that go against our image?"

"Correct."

"And you're saying that knowing ourselves is not something we can learn by ourselves?"

"Not entirely, because we are inside our delusions looking out. Ultimately, it takes a teacher's skill to move the student to a point of view that reveals their underlying beliefs through how they present them—the essence of their actions—and change their mind-set by severing the strangle hold of entanglements that hide the contradictions. As I said, the ego is a tricky thing to convince."

"Your teachers play both parts—the burglar and the magician?"

"They do."

"Which means you have to know what they do to write your story?"

"I'm sensing you want to see if I can crack one of your beliefs, and show you a flaw," she said casually.

"Go ahead." I shrugged.

Jeanette nodded, took a moment to reflect, then she said, "In one of our conversations you said you hate war, then you said you had nothing against warriors. Correct?"

"I don't doubt you."

"There can be no war without warriors, so you must have recognized the difference between a belief and an action, to not condemn the participants personally?"

"I must have," I said evenly.

"It follows that you would need to express your feelings in this way—that beliefs are not us, they represent a point of view only."

"I see your point; I was not definitive."

"That's not the issue: like you, many people don't realize they have entangled their true feelings with those that support their wonderfulness: in spite of your insightful understanding," she said, straight-faced, "your disdain for malevolence is not separate from those who practice it. It oozes on them in the guise of piety."

"Piety! I exclaimed, spitting the "P." I felt no need to apologize.

"The distance your experiences with warfare separated you from the participants is vertical: you raise yourself above them because your job was not to kill people. The nature of this attitude is piety."

"I told you on day one that everyone was scared most of the time."

"You did, but how you mixed your self-image with your beliefs conveyed something more."

"Which was?"

"When I suggested that it took courage just to get out of the hotel, you didn't say you were scared; you said everyone was scared, and when I asked you about adjusting to fear you simply said, nope. You obfuscated that poignant point further by saying combat changes your thinking, and that concepts like courage became stupidity, before you realized it was all about doing what you had to do. In other words, you turned what most of us view as bravery into an intellectual endeavor, to hide a secret belief from yourself."

"Which would be?"

"Why would you indulge, as a personal excess, going from war to war?"

"If you're suggesting I did it to prove that I was brave, I just told you I was scared."

"Then you blew it off by displaying your extensive knowledge to support your contention that heroes aren't what we think they are; that in fact they're more like you. Between the lines, the elevation of your status gave away that one of your personality masks is piety, which you use to hide another secret that warfare generated."

"Go for it," I said blandly.

"Traumatic experiences can make us afraid of some aspect of the world we thought we understood, sometimes to the extent of feeling responsible for the event. This assumption returns some semblance of power to us—call it the tenth decision. It's a normal part of our learning curve, but to repeatedly endure the kind of soul-piercing events you did would have made your every decision seem extremely important—life and death important. Especially when circumstances took some of those decisions out of your hands, you were left feeling exceptionally vulnerable." She looked at me expectantly.

"And?" I said.

"You still feel that way. None of those events were your fault, by the way."

"No shit."

"No shit," she said evenly.

I had more than enough of her shit: plotting my retreat from the arrangement she had coerced me into, I could only grunt.

"It follows," she said offhandedly, "if you can't afford to be wrong, the idea of me being right about all of us being puppets to social conformation threatens you more than if we were in overt trouble. No one is shooting at us," Jeanette said, sweeping the café area with a gesture. "There is you and me and the sweet smell of baking, but I bumped into a secret you didn't know you have."

Proving her point, something inside me snapped. "You might not know this," I said with a tone of cold rolled steel, "but I was at the Sabra and Shatila massacre while it was still going on, and skeletons were tugging on my pants long before the [Ethiopian famine](#) became a fashionable cause. Acts of God would've been easy to spot," I grinned thinly, "but there was nothing supernatural at either place. If you dared to squint into that blissful beacon of bullshit light you'll probably have healing crippled hearts in your book, you'll see that a soldier's high comes from drowning in his own blood. Raise your sights and you'll see a boy, backlit by the setting sun of his life, trying to tie off a tourniquet on his pumping stump with his teeth. If he makes it, he might thank your God, and swear to walk a peaceful path, but it won't be long before he'll be asking the ceiling, 'Why me?' and in the silence lead a leper's life restricted by wheelchair access. For the record," I said icily, "a loaf of bread doesn't feed the starving masses, that miracle would cause a riot."

"Ahhh," she said with satisfaction, "that's why the concept of miracles angered you so much. It lit the fuse on your view of faith as being dangerous, which fed your cynicism, and excavated your darkest belief.... wow, and you almost saw it!"

I began reaching for my money.

"That's a true act of courage—looking into yourself."

Fuck you. "Uh huh."

"No matter," she said easily, "that's also how a single view can taint everything you see, when it simply doesn't apply."

As a single thought, after passing on the urge to give her a knuckle facial, I knew that the wind chimes in her head would forever filter out unpleasant sounds. And the precarious balance between the joy of our intellectual rapport and my lust, versus the aggravating factors of both

swung mightily in favor of going to the Avalon. I would walk up behind Tom, hit him in the ear hard enough to make him reach to answer a phantom phone for a week, order beer on his tab all night, and he wouldn't say a bloody thing because he knew that Jeanette was a whack-job.

I should have known something was wrong. Why else would he pass a beauty off to me?

Sorting cash from my pocket, I said, "I doubt that anyone will spend the kind of time I have doing you a favor, let alone be trained to agree with you, but you're beyond clever and I wish you the best of luck; your screenplay will take up way too much time."

"How long did you say it takes to get a grant?"

"Forever if you have to explain the elements of your story before you tell it, assuming there really is one." I put ten dollars on the table to cover my seven-dollar tab; I wasn't sticking around for the change. I slid out of my seat, but as I stood Jeanette grabbed my sleeve.

Making a show of subserviently squinting into the sunlight, she offered me her other hand. "Fifty percent of everything across the board, and we work every day that we can to get the training scenes done? I'm not that far away. Really," she pleaded playfully, "you've done much more for me than you know."

Looking at her breasts, on the way up to her face, I formulated a plan that suited my prickly mood. "Done," I said. A few grand was about right for filling out one of those goddamned forms.

"Let's celebrate at my house," Jeanette said, standing.

"Wow—two things in a row we agree on," I jested weakly.

"Now you know that anything is possible," she said lightly.

Ten minutes later, we turned into the short gravel driveway of a million dollar, beachfront property, and I briefly thought that anything really could be possible.

Under the right conditions.

Maybe.

Chapter 11: The Message and the Messenger

Keeping my feelings about her alleged poor financial status in check, I asked Jeanette for a tour of the house as a circuitous way of getting a truer picture. I followed her first into the living/dining room, where she absently nodded toward the back wall—a landscape painting of a winding country road, bordered by broad-leafed trees that ran between two open fields of grass, hung there. I assumed it was by someone important, and although I knew nothing about art, I turned to look at it again before we left the room.

Otherwise during our trek through the double suite, five-bedroom, three bathroom home, she did not refer to her financial status, so I was little wiser by the time we sat down to a ploughman's lunch.

"I had these all of the time in England. Filling and cheap," I said, taking in the details of the open living/dining area, "which still wouldn't explain how you manage this place."

"My rent is probably less than Ed pays for his apartment," she said, crunching on a pickle.

Abruptly leaning forward with unaccountable intensity, she said, "I was about to close a deal on a townhouse in North Vancouver when I hurt my back." She quickly chewed and swallowed.

"Workman's Comp wouldn't cover the mortgage, so I withdrew the offer. The next day, I met the man who was in charge of renting properties the county had expropriated to extend the park from the pier to the sea wall." She waved half a pickle from north to west, across the room. "Getting this place convinced me that it was time to write my book so I quit working full time, and sold a share of my novel to a good friend. Your injuries at Goodbye," she said, poking the green nub at

me, "led you to writing." She took a final bite, and uncharacteristically said around her food, "Tell me about why you moved to England; I cut you off—sorry."

"That was four days ago," I replied, amused.

"I'm still interested," she said evenly.

Between nibbles of French stick bread and pâté, I meandered through my brief engagement to an Argentine beauty, and a job transfer approved so I would not travel, but I had to decline it when Graciela called things off. It was then that I realized every day had become the same, and I had nothing much to look forward to. On my next trip to England, when a friend mentioned the benefits of freelancing, I looked into moving there.

With Jeanette prompting me for insignificant details, as was her way, I told her about my living arrangements in Hampstead, and later in Highgate, while working out of the West End, primarily for CBS and CBC News. I added that many local stories came from south of the Thames or the financial district, which led me to commenting on the wide range of accents that distinguished classes in a small geographical area.

Jeanette aw-hawed, as if I had said something significant, then she asked me to differentiate between local attitudes. Essentially, I said the stiff upper lip crowd claimed to speak proper English, and all things proper followed. As it is in most societies, people with "other" accents were generally assumed to be "less" in nonspecific ways, but they were otherwise expected to follow social dictates. Working men and women learned this from the cradle, so that an underpaid street sweeper wouldn't hesitate to break your face for slighting the monarchy, while royalty tisk-tisked the savagery of the common man.

"Where did you fit in?" Jeanette said, apparently getting to her point of interest.

"I didn't. One way or another, people reminded me that I was a visitor, or a novelty."

"Didn't that bother you?"

"It was the most comfortable I've ever felt."

"Really?" she said, too surprised to really be surprised.

By this time in our fledgling relationship, I was less wary about her making fun of me, and more suspicious about why she would punctuate aspects of our conversations to imprint them on my memory. I mean, why else do it... and what's the big deal about feeling comfortable?

"I think it's normal to want to know where you stand," I said cautiously, "which explains why people screw themselves into a single job for life, or a huge mortgage." I took a bite of bread. Rolling it to the side of my mouth, I said, "There were no social expectations of me," as I was demonstrating.

"I think you were comfortable because you had permission to be who you are, and the worst anyone could say was that you were from the colonies."

"There was an incident or two that helped enhance my stereotype." Swallowing, I said, "A British comedy called Spitting Images used caricature puppets to mock celebrities. In Margaret Thatcher's scenes, two brass balls clanged every time she sat down." I sipped my wine. "Which is what I was thinking when we were introduced at Number Ten."

"And?" Jeanette said, grinning with anticipation.

"I didn't trust my face to agree with what I was supposed to say so I said, 'Hi. How are ya?'"

Inhaling a chuckle, Jeanette said, "What kind of area is Hampstead?"

"Middle to upper class."

"Wine?" she said, refilling my nearly full glass. "After your first war, you were never comfortable back in Canada," said as a statement.

My brain stumbled at the unexpected remark, Jeanette interpreted my brief silence as agreement, and she asked me a series of rapid-fire questions most of which required single syllable replies dealing with comfort.

Initially, this was fun because we were speaking about me, and a time I cherished, neither topic of which was normally a cautious affair. However, when I was speaking about narrow attitudes, narrower streets, and a lack of parking to explain why you can't get a pizza delivered in London, she twice interrupted to misquote simple points. Confused that she thought I might be lying about trivial stuff—interrogation techniques, again—I tapped the corner of my mouth to indicate she had crumbs on hers, and I said, "What's with the third degree this time?"

"The experiences we pay little attention to shape the ones we think are significant. Nothing comes from nothing." She dabbed at the corner of her mouth. "Ready to walk some of this off?"

"Sure."

Jeanette covered the leftovers with plastic wrap, and after a few minutes we were heading toward John Lawson Park—a 200 meter manicured green space at the foot of 16th Street and Argyle Avenue. During this three-block stroll, a pervasive tranquility came over me, not the fatigue I had previously endured; I thought this might be a reaction to my angry outburst, full stomach, and a new business arrangement that I would handle my way if hers didn't pan out quickly.

Free of concern, I gazed across the inlet to the former naval reserve that had become Stanley Park a hundred years earlier. Casually, I envisioned a colorfully clad septuagenarian strategically shifting a large chess piece on a patio board, twelve feet across, while a rucksack and sandals student frowned at a missed opportunity.

This scene transitioned into seniors, dressed all in white, lawn bowling on this perfect day for an affair to begin at Lumberman's Arch: the woman would be tanning during her lunch break, lose track of time, and in a hurry she would bump into the lawyer on roller blades. Eagerly at fault, both of them would apologize, information would be exchanged, and he would call to invite her to the Tea House... a silver/grey Mercedes drove by the front of the restaurant.

I shivered.

Bachir Gemayel's house exploded. Lebanon's president was dead.

I jumped—or tried to; it became a shudder.

"Gas?" Jeanette teased me.

"Sorry. Shit!" I said, embarrassed to discover that we were sitting on a park bench. Jeanette had her arm tightly wrapped around mine as support, not in a romantic way.

"Where were you?"

"Wandering," I said, feeling supremely stupid.

Gazing across the bay toward False Creek, with the sensitivity of experience, she said "Speaking about a nice time in your past can unlock the door to anything in your past. The average person stops short of walking through if it is unpleasant, because no one has explained the benefits of taking that step. A student of their own life will cross the threshold almost every time, because they secretly know that to face the lingering unrealized is to discover its influence and render it harmless. This makes it available for assessment."

"A thought caught me by surprise, is all."

"The abstract imparts guidance on its own terms."

"I don't have a clue what that means."

"In this case, it means the thought that jolted you was a consequence of your evolutionary energy bringing your present outlook to your attention." With a quick squeeze of my arm, she

turned to face me. "Part of what makes people average is that we assume our thoughts happen on a single level, as an autonomous process we more or less control, in spite of how often we are surprised by insights. People of energy silently know there are inner resources available to them, if not yet at their conscious command, so most of them explore those crucial moments when the accomplice is not guarding the door."

"Accomplice?"

"The ego blocking the truth."

"I didn't see anything important."

"You certainly did. You're trying to dismiss it because it doesn't suit your assumptions."

"Assumptions about what goes on in Stanley Park?"

"Whatever it was you saw, was a set up for the finale; it tricked your ego away from guarding the door to a secret, which allowed you to experience that secret as a physical circumstance." Jeanette looked into my eyes like an optometrist seeking signs of disease. Finding only incomprehension, she said, "You had another exquisite event, which if assessed will inform you of the true nature of warfare, as well." Jeanette stood up. Giving my arm a slight tug, she said, "You are a message. Let events be your messenger."

"I mean no disrespect, and I'd like to think I'm not as much of an idiot as you sometimes make me feel, but I don't have a clue what you're talking about." I stood, and we began a slow walk toward the sea wall that underlines the core of West Vancouver.

"If a child's territorial dispute in a sand box goes unresolved," Jeanette began her customary in depth explanation, "the adult version may have property-line disputes. If they don't resolve those, other perceived intrusions on their personal space will draw them to foreign sands, because what we think is what we do is what we will create or be drawn to. The dispute is the messenger of what they are really like, which is insecure, petty, grasping, uncompromising, and afraid to give up anything they think represents their power or security. Dying on a foreign beach makes them the message about being this way."

How I represented death on a foreign beach eluded me like partnered sex until I was sixteen.

"Are you saying we wouldn't go to war if our leaders had shared their sand boxes?" I knew this sounded trite, but I was serious, and Jeanette took it that way.

"I'm saying they didn't assess their actions, or realize there is continuity to their experiences. If they had seen a pattern, and understood the event-nature of their actions, they would have stopped being stupid a long time ago."

"And this means what to me?"

"Assess the experience you just had and find out."

"You know I need help assessing things your way."

"What did you do at the end of your vision?"

"I jumped—tried to," I corrected myself.

"Why?"

"There was an explosion."

"Again, why did you jump?"

"I was surprised."

"What lay beneath that surprise?"

"I haven't a clue."

"Of course you do. Take yourself out of the picture, insert bystanders, and tell me what you see on their faces."

"They're afraid."

"Exactly."

"Why wouldn't they be—there was an explosion?"

"You are them."

"You're saying I'm afraid, again?"

"I'm saying you're surfacing knowledge and experiences you've stored away." Jeanette suddenly shifted topics to speak about her late teens and early twenties. It was surprisingly personal stuff.

Chapter 12: Essential Acts

In her kitchen the next morning, I made tea while Jeanette read the chapter I had brought at her request, but tuned for this occasion; there were no signs, metaphors, or even vague references to cages as far as I was concerned. The scene was about a camera crew changing a flat tire on a deserted street that locals had recently renamed for a fallen son.

When she finished reading it, she said, "Your clinical setting and terse dialogue capture the potential of the crew's lethal circumstance well." She looked down at a page, then back at me to quote, " 'Beads of anticipation trickled into thin eyes; the cotton curtain across the street swayed in the still air.' It needs a tweak, but it's good."

"Thanks."

"Just one thing," Jeanette said, holding up a finger. "This situation came about because your driver was late for crew call, and he took a short cut across a damaged road to...", she searched the page, "Hazmeih?" she said finding the line.

"Yup."

"I think," she said, slipping the pages back into order, "you could capitalize on the delay he caused by emphasizing that the sniper had a short window of time to kill this Ely fellow, and that you were running late for a series of little reasons that kept adding seconds to your time of arrival in his sites."

"El-lee," I corrected her pronunciation, "is ambiance," I said, coming to the table with our steaming cups. "The point of the scene is to establish that there were no real secrets between the press and any fighting faction, so that anything can happen at any time. The delay was fortuitous, and may even be ironic if it causes the sniper to die. I haven't decided on that."

"You have set up his impatience, but the drama rests there because you don't explain why the sniper doesn't wait for you guys to draw out his target for him." She slid the last page from beneath the thin sheaf and read aloud, "There was too much danger in staying in one place." She looked up. "The awkwardness of the sentence aside, you were lazy at a critical point."

Hearing my own words made her point; I had focused entirely on the crew's predicament, and blew off the sniper's point of view. Nodding, I said, "I'll set up those reasons while the driver loses time at the hotel."

"Good. That'll stretch your readers' interest, because they will know there's a purpose to you offering them apparently unrelated details. Speaking of those," Jeanette said, turning the page, "LeBlanc's foul-mouthed prejudices don't go anywhere. I understand he represents battle-aged apprehension," she said before I could, "but racism steals tension from the scene, and that saps the readers' empathy for the rest of your characters."

Reaching across the table, I tapped the page number—eighty-one. "By this time, readers will know racism doesn't enter it; his comments are foreshadowing."

"His preference for working with black revo-fuckin-lutionaries, as opposed to Ragheads are insights?" she cocked her head.

"The reader will know that with the exception of syphilis-ravaged Idi Amin types, modern African guerrilla leaders have degrees from the London School of Economics. They know that war is expensive, and bad press ultimately costs them money, which is why they try not to kill the press. At least, it used to be like that. Middle Eastern leaders may be cut from the same cloth, but having followers blow themselves up isn't something you can anticipate."

"Insulting millions of readers, while asking them to make abstract connections, guts the drama. Why not drop the obscenities and bigotry, and invest that space in suspense?"

"I could do that," I said, spooning sugar into my cup, "if I had a clue what you mean."

Jeanette set the pages on the table between us, and poured milk into her cup.

"Interpreting LeBlanc's imagery will get in the way of readers focusing on the potential of other events, like juxtaposing your driver's delays with the sniper's chances of success slipping away, thereby drawing their attention toward a greater intent at work. Anything could happen, anywhere, and at any time without angering readers—except snipers." She swallowed hard and grinning wryly said, "You're fucking near there," as I sipped my tea. "Just don't dick around with your readers' focus. This shit is complex enough."

Sputtering tea onto the table, I stared as her slow smile had me realize her remarks exemplified the problem she wanted me to see in my work.

My defense was the true circumstance: "Twenty crews," I said, wiping the table with a paper napkin, "were on the ground for the better part of sixteen hours a day, and we all had flat tires—twice a week if we were covering combat." I leaned into her personal space. "The essence of danger was to be in the open and stationary, which means we were probably in a more precarious position when we were changing that tire than if we had been covering a firefight." I leaned back. "If your great unseen was helping us, it was to have us join them."

"This really happened to you?"

"Obviously, I made up the sniper."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

The twinkle in her eye trapped an obscenity in my throat, which I cleared indelicately to communicate that it wasn't a kind thought, as I said, "I appreciate the advice on creating drama, though. It's right there and I missed it."

A quick sip of tea, then Jeanette said, "Another thing you seem to have missed is that LeBlanc's comments will sound gratuitous until you fill out the character, so people know where they're coming from."

"I've done that." To forestall her endless inquires, I said, "I have him swear his way through history, tracing tit-for-tat Jewish/Arab massacres back to tribes throwing rocks from opposite banks of the Jordan River. This establishes that kids on both sides know their versions of events just like we know episodes of Bugs Bunny. In a chapter I called Twins, he also talks about the farce of good and evil, and the capriciousness of war, by looking through a telescope of time. He'll see Attila go into a revolving doorway and the Captain of the Anola Gay come out, Rommel and MacArthur trade uniforms in the clubhouse after a round of golf, and Menachim Begin gets up in the morning to shave a reflection of Arafat. His comments are foreshadowing, and they apply anywhere, at any time."

"Are there no good guys in your work?" she said anxiously.

"That's one of my twists; everyone thinks they're the good guy."

"What examples of blurring good from bad does LeBlanc use?" Jeanette asked, looking concerned for no reason I could fathom.

"The main one is telling a newbie that the Israeli Defense Forces were in charge of the refugees at Sabra and Shatila, and Elie was in charge of the Christian militia who massacred them. Ariel Sharon was Israel's defense minister at the time, and it's inconceivable that he didn't know what was happening for two days, because fifty journalists called him for comments while it was going on."

"The Israeli's did nothing?" Jeanette said.

"They kept us on the perimeter road until the shooting was over. The Red Cross gave us painters masks soaked in cologne as we walked in." I sniffled. "Haven't worn any since."

Having had enough of my reality, Jeanette began talking about her later high school days. This time, I reciprocated with a mixed sense of victory and relief, the tea eventually became wine, and we ended up talking about primarily pleasant personal events until it was time for me to work on my screenplay, and I went home.

Chapter 13: Metaphor

I didn't bring any of my work to our next few meetings because Jeanette did not address where I had constructed my personal cage, in my last offering. She also brought fewer pages of her own work, which were so cryptic in their brevity that I understood little more than her apprentices were acting increasingly eccentric, and subservient, with their customers. I read the second of two installments while sitting at her kitchen table after lunch...

A group of ten to thirteen year old youths from the commune came to the market at the end of a selling day, to ask their nineteen and twenty-year old apprentice friends/brothers and sisters for help resolving a dispute. They first explained their problem to Eirik, who bit his lower lip and shifted his weight from side to side. At the same time, the nearby butcher's apprentice grunted to the rhythm of scrubbing his cart, which sounded like punctuation to the children's sentences.

Believing he had considered every possibility, Eirik finally said, "Rohwan is much better at this kind of problem."

The youths turned to face the butcher's apprentice, who ignored them until the young flautist, Mahrli, asked him what he thought they should do.

"About what?" Rohwan said, huffing through a series of scrubs.

Mahrli again laid bare the problem, but just as she finished, the apprentice's fingers slid into an awkward corner. Holding his injured hand aloft, Rohwan walked to the river's edge to clean the slight wound; all of the youths waited quietly until he came back to his cart, and went about his business.

At this point, Brendah, the bee keeper's daughter, came out from behind her display to purposefully pace off the distance from her station to Mahrli. Thirteen paces. Turning around, she walked back six and half paces and sat in the middle of the ring of carts, staring at her feet. With an exchange of glances, the youths sat in a semicircle around her.

Village kids toting their mother's purchases home found this funny, a few of whom bothered to taunt the commune youths, regardless of their well-known affliction.

Finally, Brendah intoned with mild surprise that the answer was right in front of her. She uncrossed her legs, unthreaded the leather calf bindings of her left sandal, and began a painfully repetitive description of how the youths should tie their sandals until the harvest festival, three months hence. The last of the village children lost interest when Brendah did the same thing with her right sandal, 'for the benefit of those who could not distinguish her right from theirs.'

This comment caused Rohwan to burst into laughter, and Mahrli thanked Brendah on behalf of the group, all of whom retied their footwear as Brendah had directed them...

I looked up from the pages; Jeanette asked me what I thought about the entire section.

"I think yesterday's section, where the apprentices coddle the public, was about money. They're saying, I will treat you well, and you will buy my stuff, but they're young and they crossed the line between being pleasant and sucking up." I flipped through the current pages. "The kids respect the apprentices, but the apprentices were indifferent or abusive, so I'm guessing they knew they had tried too hard to please customers, and they were making themselves feel better. Somewhere down the road, I assume your teachers will straighten that out?"

Jeanette sighed as if her elderly cat had taken its final wheeze.

Picking up her cup, she walked out of the kitchen saying, "The youngsters think they're battling a complicated problem, but their apprentice friends know there's only one worthy battle to be fought—the struggle with self-image."

I followed her into the hallway, through the living room, then sliding open a panel of floor to ceiling glass we stepped onto her narrow concrete balcony.

"Apprentices," she said, sitting in a cheap aluminum garden chair set around a matching table, "didn't contribute to problems by handing out gifts for the asking."

"Gifts?" I said, sitting facing her. "You've explained the laziness angle, but they ignored or made fun of them." I offered Jeanette her pages so she could see that I was right.

Taking them from me, she said, "Eirik's waffling represented societies' disinclination to commit to anything inconvenient. If you wait for those people to make a decision, you'll wait a long time before they'll pass the buck. Rohwan had to have overheard the problem, as it was first explained to Eirik, so he was teaching the kids not to presume upon others by making himself unavailable."

"In which case Brendah undermined them both."

"She underlined them both: Eirik did the last thing anyone expected of a teacher, and Rohwan catching on to the ploy inspired Brendah to seize the opportunity both of them had created."

"To sit in the middle of the street?"

"She would have stood on her head, if that's what it took."

I scratched mine.

Taming a grin, Jeanette said, "During their lessons in Essential Acts, apprentices learn from their misplaced sense of compassion to teach at every opportunity, because the moment might never come again. I mentioned that when I was explaining the teaching scheme."

"Did the townie kids collectively play the village idiot?" I guessed.

"In so far as they were mocking events they didn't understand, yes, but they also served the purpose of trying to distract those who should know better than to waste an opportunity because of embarrassment." Jeanette sipped her tea, as I relived my embarrassment in the park with Otis.

"As young as they were," she said, "they knew enough to assess the nature of these events instead of reacting to them, and they recognized that Brendah had interrupted her life to help them."

"That's what the pacing was about?"

"It was more than drawing their attention to her leaving her work unbidden; retracing her steps meant she was going to cover old territory, and meeting them halfway meant she wasn't going to hand out a freebee. They were going to have to work for a solution."

"Because of laziness?"

"Her way of teaching made the additional point that the opportunity to learn may come at any time, in any place, and in unusual ways. If you are aware of that possibility, willingness takes you more than half way to solving a puzzlement, because for a moment you have suspended your beliefs. The more you practice that, the easier it gets. Some modern day seers call that being aware of the Minimal Chance, as a gesture from their guiding force; it's a big deal to them."

"Uh huh. Toying with them was a way to loosen their focus?"

"She didn't toy with them. She told them how to fix their problem."

"That it was a matter of life and death to cross their straps right over left on one leg, left over right on the other, then reverse it the next day?"

"Exactly."

"Then they're simpletons to put up with that crap," I said, exasperated by her drawn out approach.

"Have you read any conversation to indicate that they're simple minded?"

"All of their conversations are convoluted."

"So were ours until we began to understand each other's assumptions."

"Different circumstance."

"Not really." Gathering the pages before a breeze took them away, Jeanette said, "Convoluted thinking is every student's default position, and a condition through which they can't grasp much of anything. Teachers know this, so they deal with every little point students bring up to clear away the debris in their thinking. If the student doesn't understand an answer, which is usual, at a minimum the teacher has laid track for a discussion that will ultimately render the student's distractions unavailable when they get to the heart of the matter." She slid the pages under a potted plant. "This technique made almost every encounter they had difficult for the student to follow in the early days. Even then, as they began to grasp concepts, the teacher changed subjects the moment they finished with one, or they referred back to an interrupted topic as if it was connected to their last sentence."

"Where's the advantage in confusing them?"

"Actually, it's the opposite effect." Counting on her fingers, Jeanette said, "Ultimately, they're able to focus much longer than they ever had, they've practiced losing their affront because they know there's no time for it, they're patient beyond their years, and their default position is of a keen observer of the world at large. Not much got past them after they lost their sense of self-importance."

"Even if it looked like they all belong in an asylum?"

"They certainly lived in one before the merchants came along."

"You haven't mentioned anything about institutions."

"The world," she said. I could swear I heard, "duh" as well.

"The shoelace thing is psychotherapy?"

"In a manner of speaking; it's designed to help them break the rigidity of their thinking."

"I don't see how they tie their sandals would do that?"

"That's because you think too rigidly." She leaned toward me. "A core requirement of learning how to live properly was changing the routines of life, one point of which was to free their minds and appreciate things like the poetry of Brenda dealing with issues that living on the streets had stolen from them, on the same streets."

"Like what?"

"Their sense of play became less guarded, their trust in people was being restored, and their curiosity was poked with every teaching encounter. Learning became fun, while they shared their discomforts."

"Your poetry may be too clever, and the apprentices will look suspicious, if not superior, by choosing younger friends."

"Your view of friendship is a balanced relationship of reliable exchanges?"

"Works for me. Why?"

"By that definition, two fools could form a lifelong bond based on agreeing with each other's faults, and circulate endless sympathy as their lives never improve. Apprentices were the second best friends anyone could ever have, beside teachers, because they never agreed with flaws." She leaned her head against the house. "You have to understand what your flaws are before you can have a true friendship with anyone."

Feeling that we were on the brink of a confrontation, I lifted a worn running shoe to table height and said, "Will the scene make sense if I tie my laces backwards?"

"It would help," Jeanette said, leaning forward to poke a finger through the slit in the side of my shoe where the glue had given way. "You're due for a new pair."

"That lets the water out." I lowered my foot.

"Treating yourself poorly leads to acting poorly, which gives others permission to treat you the same way. Treat yourself well and you set a standard others must live up to if they want to share your company." Jeanette assessed my appearance from head to toe. "Trimming your beard might make people think that growing it was intentional, and buying shoes will make you feel better about yourself. Maybe some shirts that aren't so tight would help, as well," she said, glancing at my paunch.

"I began running a few weeks ago," I said.

"You must be very tired by now," she deadpanned.

"I'm getting there," I said crankily. "How does this encounter fit in your work?"

"My characters couldn't appreciate the symmetry of their quest, if they thought too rigidly. This meant there remained a chance that they might improvise, and in predictable ways."

"By which you mean like an average person?"

"I do. If they studiously practiced disrupting their routines, they will become fluidly unpredictable, and yet deliberate within their new way of thinking. As you know, outsiders to that way of thinking can't plan for it. Even if they tried," she added, "average thinkers would defend themselves in predictably inappropriate ways, leaving them vulnerable."

"Vulnerable to retaliation?"

"To impeccable acts. We'll define those as we go along."

Chapter 14: The Guardian

A teaching principle of stalking is the use of an "outside force" to keep the student heading in the proper direction. This force may be a physical, psychological, or spiritual threat the student infers from the teacher poking their secret fears. In all cases the force is harmless, because fear never killed anyone.

I was looking through the picture window at a pedestrian drizzle that a soft-rock jock said would end by lunchtime, when the phone rang and Jeanette saved me from having to dress like a lobsterman to cross the bridge to her place. Forty minutes later, we were in our front booth at Nolan's having coffee and Danish pastry.

Taking new pages from an old envelope, she said her commune had designed helping others into their way of life so their children took little for granted while participating in practical cycles of positive cause and effect. For example, the effectiveness of water proofing boats depended upon surface preparation, the quality of fine cloth when required, and the proper blending of oils and saps. Not coincidentally, at some point in their early years every child had gone fishing in a leaky boat, and become exhausted while learning the rhythmic art of bailing water.

In this guided way, and at a pace suited to their individual abilities, children experienced the two-step recipe for creating a beneficial personal momentum. The first step was paying close attention to their economy of action; elders defined this as using the minimum amount of materials and labor to complete a task, while neither skimping nor over doing any aspect of that task. Achieving this balance required forethought, attention to detail, and precision in execution, while mistakes were welcome because teacher's properly viewed these as lessons in fine tuning. In later stages they were a source of humor, or a sign of illness.

Understanding the condition of "complete" was the second step: a task was not finished until the user of community materials had reported their use, or replaced them so there were no surprise shortages. Excess materials had to be properly stored, and waste disposed of or prepared for other uses. In this way, no task imposed on another's space, time, or safety.

Simply stated, which it often was with only the tilt of an elder's head, a person aspiring to live a proper life should leave no debris in the wake of their passing. This principle of living a "tight life" also applied to their relationships, which rendered pettiness, anger, jealousy, and animosity, short-lived experiences even with youngsters.

Inherent to this process, children learned to assume responsibility for their every action, and to regularly go a step beyond basic requirements, because every mother and craftsman had 'unexpectedly' needed an hour's help from them, that somehow became three. Moreover, if a townie had to rebuild after a spring flood or winter fire, these surprisingly capable creatures appeared unbidden, daily supplies and tools in hand, because the seeds of thinking in cycles had taken root. For a commune kid, to help one person was to help everyone in unforeseeable ways, a seemingly fanciful idea that often revealed its potency through encounters with indirect beneficiaries of their labors during market hours—cousins and friends who learned of their actions.

Jeanette said that formal apprenticeships began for those who chose them around the age of twelve; they were a more mature twelve than television and computer games shape in our culture. By their late teens, apprentices had acquired remarkable powers of observation, including understanding the abstraction of momentum, based on thinking in terms of the nature of an act. In no small measure, this understanding came from guided assessments of their own experiences, and attendant responsibilities. This was humbling knowledge, and appropriately so, because with it came the ability to influence events with little effort relative to the average townie's output. As a result, they were cautious about how they spent their energy, regardless of outward appearances—they might walk past someone who looked like they needed a hand, and for no apparent reason help someone with a lighter load further down the road. Or not: their deep appreciation for what one person can accomplish without the interference of personal concerns might be the deciding factor, and the complainer had yet to learn this. To help them would be to rob them of that opportunity. Years of working at these personal practices laid the groundwork for a grand epiphany, which immediately became a comprehensive assumption of how to live a

proper life; they were in charge of every second of their lives, therefore deliberate, responsible choices were the only way to go.

On this grand day of securing their freedom to succeed or fail on their own terms, at only their own expense, life became a bold, often hilarious adventure: pretending to be an average person leapt from a role-playing game into a practical art. In this way only did they sometimes fail to maintain their social facade in the public market, where every customer had become like a child to them. But there was no judgment in their joy; they were looking at themselves.

Fondling the pages, Jeanette said that Cymhon, a teacher whose sight was taken in his youth, was in charge of everything related to the community sheep. Aided by his older brother, Thomahs, their duties included teaching children the entire gamut from birthing, shepherding, and sheering, to designing and sowing clothing and tapestries. Of this seemingly dour duo, Thomahs taught his skills through riddle-statements intended to create uncertainty, while Cymhon's stark mannerisms effectively commanded the young to act without thinking. Only in this way, the younger brother said, could he tell which flock he was tending.

Jeanette finally handed me her pages...

The brothers took a group of youths on a quest to discover the kind of cultural transactions that drained people's energy like a holed vessel. Learning of a man overburdened with personal belongings from Thomahs, Cymhon extracted from the group a detailed description of his belongings and clothing, down to the length of his strides as he made short trips down the village main street. Finally, he asked the youths what they thought was going on. Conditioned to look at the nature of an event, their careful consensus was that making more trips with less weight would allow the man to work longer and complete the job.

"Excellent. What job is that?" said Cymhon.

Knowing better than to jump at the obvious, Donica said, "He wears the traditional garb of Hafnargurd, so he is from the north and new to our area."

"What he carries is local," Evie said, pointing. "I helped make that blanket."

"He's probably working for a meal," Tobias said.

"That's good as far as it goes," the shepherd of wayward ideas agreed, disquietingly. "What about the things I can see?"

"You can't see anything?" Carhmon, the youngest boy said honestly.

"Is it not hot?"

The child didn't understand.

Donica cleared up his confusion. "The decision to move in the midday is poor," she said.

"Not if it has to be done right away," Karol, Carhmon's older sister said.

Excellent! You've seen that the moment is part of determining what is really happening. And?"

The girls' cheeks collectively puckered in a vain effort to squeeze time, the weight of the load, and the distance the man carried it, into increasingly stranger speculations. Cymhon finally put an end to these by squawking like a chicken: dip-twitching his head, and bobbing cloudy eyes completed the effect.

When the children's laughter subsided, he said they were wasting energy clucking at the wind when a direct and mutually beneficial act would clear up the mystery. "Offer to help him," he said. "If he accepts, the stranger will almost certainly volunteer an explanation."

"What if he doesn't want help?" Karol said.

"Then carrying burdens alone is his path."

"Or atonement for an unforgivable deed?" Thomahs speculated.

"There is nothing unforgivable," the children said as one, because they had often faced their own shortcomings.

Thomahs "Ahem-ed," contemplatively. "You are correct, of course. This is the lesson I often get backwards. It may be a deed unforgiven."

"He may be punishing himself?" Gabriel asked.

"May," Thomahs replied, speculatively.

The group cocked their heads before the younger brother said, "Either way, your offer will create an opportunity. Let it run its course," he said as the young students took their first steps toward the road.

"Unless he's stealing," Thomahs muttered.

That was all Jeanette had written.

"As always, so far so good," I said handing the pages to her. "The point of this scene in the movie is what?"

"Observation and opportunities not wasted. In time, the children became formidable analysts of where they really were, with whom, and what choices they had to better their position depending on what they wanted to happen."

"It's no different than how we learn to assess our circumstances, except it's guided," I said.

"That's true as far as it goes, but these kids learned about the people behind the events. In time, if and when they were directed to impart their knowledge, they knew how to approach them."

"I can see where you're going."

"As you should by now."

As seemed to be her way, when Jeanette was satisfied with our discussions she began speaking about anything that caught her fancy; we discussed her work no more. The next day—day two of what was now a tropical depression—Jeanette gave me a passage to assess.

I read: I am Lei-a, the wife of Rashaef. We are teachers in time, connected to and guided by our source. The children of our communities are taught parables of our beginnings, often lifetimes ago, to offer perspective to the purpose of life et al, and what they can do in particular... when it is their time. This is the story of Teyo's era...

The stranger approached with practiced confidence; it was not from his true core, although he would have certainly defended this point, because he did not know himself. Not yet.

Curly brown locks made his short stature appear taller, while a button nose affixed to angular features on a wiry frame made describing Teyo a trial; he was virile yet cute, and a possible match for my apprentice, Jehaneh. The caretakers of our knowledge were always paired. We would see...

Before the evening was over, we learned that he had been raised in a culturally diverse orphanage, and that by the age of twenty he had command of three official languages, although life on the road had caused him to develop a fourth and fifth - flattery and larceny. He artfully displayed both of these when he offered to help us unload our catch in exchange for a meal and a dry bed.

Jehaneh, a sometimes-cook in the beachfront kitchen when needed, scanned a single face among the boat crews before feeding Teyo a hearty meal from the communal pot. During this time, Rashaef casually offered to teach the wanderer the vocation of harvesting the sea.

Between mouthfuls, Teyo praised his kindness, expending an immoderate measure of seafaring bluster for one devoid of revealing scars, and confirming calluses. Then he declined the experience as one he said was best left in his past. He would, however, be waiting for their return to fulfill his end of the bargain.

Excited at overhearing his alleged work history, Jehaneh deferentially advised Rashaef that the arrival of a man of such talent was an omen for the overnight session: they were a man short due to the imminent arrival of his first-born. Surrounded by a brotherhood that literally had less food on their plates because of him, Teyo went to sea.

In Rashaef's eyes, Teyo's spirited excuses for nearly drowning three men with the reckless handling of a net constituted an omen of a different kind. And the young braggart's mournful admission of an equilibrium problem excluding him from some forms of physical labor, with what was close to his dying breath for he was one of the three, cemented his destiny...

Early the next morning, Jehaneh effectively kidnapped him from a bed he had no time to warm, proclaiming that she would not allow Rashaef to make him pay damages so soon after his own struggle with death. A quick glance outside implied that he was moments away from this fate, so Teyo followed her without question.

They crept behind homes, workshops, and gardens, until they reached the farthest downwind point of the community, where they joined half a dozen women who were drying the night's catch. Rashaef would not look for him here, Jehaneh over-assured Teyo as I came looking for my apprentice; seeing the connection between the two, I offered to smooth things over.

"Few outside the community can endure Rashaef's idea of justice," I told Teyo. He could ask anyone who passed through the market, some of whom came from as far as two days away for the commune's renowned products. As I turned to leave, I told him that making himself useful would go a long way toward keeping him out of my husband's thoughts, until I could come up with a solution.

Beginning with that first sleepless night, the women's innocent chatter about their husbands, neighbors, and children, imbued Teyo with detailed knowledge of the community that had imprisoned him with insinuated dangers. There were also many work-related details, as told by the women to their young helpers.

As the days became a week, Teyo heard much about each species they cleaned and preserved, all the while waiting to hear from me: doing her part, Jehaneh assured him that I was utterly dependable, and that one simply had to wait on me.

It was then that Teyo revealed the embarrassing secret of his clumsiness, when he was not specifically focused on the task at hand; this is what caused the accident, he said, and now seemed to be getting worse in his stationary work. Mobility seemed to be important to his health, and he should leave before someone was really injured.

Solemnly, Jehaneh agreed; skilled workers had noticed that he struggled to fillet fish at a continuous depth, which left bones that could puncture a child's cheek, or worse. But not to worry, she quickly said, helpers had caught his errors... maybe he could expand his duties—she would look into it.

Weeks passed before Rashaef asked me about Teyo's wondrously sluggish recuperation -- or so Jehaneh told Teyo, before speculating that it seemed like Rashaef still wanted restitution for his damaged reputation as an excellent judge of character. Solemnly, Jehaneh said Teyo could make himself conspicuously useful until such a time as Rashaef would appear to be petty,

by demanding anything more of him. There was no other way out for Rashaef was a leader, and children couldn't help but spread the word of the incident.

Teyo's affliction subsequently subsided as he began delivering the smokehouse products to my godfather, Leith, thereby making his efforts more apparent to Rashaef.

A character among characters, Leith, pronounced LIFE in his native tongue, was annoyingly meticulous when he displayed the fish alphabetically, and according to their length and girth on his broad leaf-lined cart. This allowed buyers to choose between the more expensive cuts, and cheaper species at a glance. For those who did not know the alphabet, they soon learned it, and how to spell the species they were purchasing—Leith was insistent.

In contradiction to this practice, he was endearingly unconcerned about wearing mismatched colors—a personal display problem of which he claimed to be fully aware. In confidence, he told Teyo that children had a difficult time taking their eyes off him.

Noting that Rashaef spoke deferentially to the old man, when their paths crossed more often than seemed normal for their respective daily tasks, Teyo applied himself to learning how to properly present Leith's products to the public. This was an art the master monger demanded of his helpers, in part to honor all seafaring men's risk and labor. In combination with all that he had absorbed from his smokehouse experience, he could quickly recite all of the species they sold, their characteristics, spawning times, feeding depths, and general habitat. The market day after doing this, Leith didn't review the work Teyo had taken the initiative to deliver on a ready-to-go display cart he had refined and refinished under the direction of an apprentice carpenter.

Instead, Leith slyly said, "Would you like to learn the secrets of my craft? Not that they're real secrets." He chuckled, hushed his tone, and said, "Not that it's my real work."

Teyo understood that gaining any merchant's trust would go a long way toward diffusing the situation with Rashaef, and he humbly accepted the offer he had been angling for.

Like a child, the merchant showed him how to surreptitiously slide an extra filet between the palm leaves for selected customers—always the poor who had learned the rewards of arriving clean, standing tall, and articulating their desires as equal partners in commerce with the old man.

Teyo feigned awkwardness with his lessons in sleight-of-hand, lest the old man deduce his past from his familiarity with a nefarious skill; still, he could not help but give himself away to a master of such things.

As time passed—Jeanette did not say how much time—Teyo took over selling for the merchant when nature called, and sometimes closed out the day's work when the patriarch forgot to return from such calls. Nature subsequently called Leith away more frequently, and during one of the monger's lengthier spells Teyo came to the guilty realization that he didn't want the old man to come back, at least not that day. He loved the hustle of the market, especially shuffling fillets with one hand, while risking laying out the proper coinage then exchanging them for slightly more before the customer closed her fist.

He occasionally did this for well-to-do customers, as well, because that was Leith's directive. However, who received these error-gifts was up to Teyo, with one caveat; the impolite were to be given the same treatment as the courteous.

After a short time, Teyo wasn't shy about filling in for his mentor's legendary banter as well, because as Rashaef had realized upon their first meeting, Teyo was born to talk. In combination with what the women had formally taught him, and knowledge of the town's peoples' general passions and concerns, his larger-than-life personality translated into sales nearly matching that of his mentor's.

Nearly, he speculated in a moment of introspection, because he was a helper—a designation the village children not so secretly guffawed over, because the commune’s helpers were usually under the age of twelve. He knew this circumstance undermined the peculiar relationship consumers assume when dealing with anyone other than the professional, whose polish and expertise they are more willing to reward. In their minds, the young man was knowledgeable, and had proven to be trustworthy if not already mathematically challenged, to their benefit; but he was not someone to spend their loyalty on, because he had not dedicated himself to the business of serving them.

With this thought, Teyo also realized he was no longer a stranger passing through, but a member of the commune. And although apprentices physically did no more than he, they were treated like fine sculptures in the making, whereas he was treated with warmth and respect. Adding to his consternation was that Leith’s apparent status was cloudy... somehow seemingly equal to Rashaef, who treated him with deference.

On a day that Teyo deemed appropriate, after returning to Leith’s home with the day’s tally, he reported his transactions and asked Leith if he could become his apprentice.

“I also want this, my young friend,” the elder said, “but you must ask Rashaef. He is in charge of the sea.”

“Forgive me, sir, but how can one be in charge of that?”

“He embraces his responsibilities to it and to us from the moment he opens his eyes, to the length and depth of his every breath. I am a small part of his processes and designs, a component wearing into the end of its time.”

“I don’t understand. You have ten times the experience...”

“You may protest my station to Rashaef when you see him,” the old man chortled, “but know that his knowledge was his father’s knowledge, and his fathers’ before him—a man I had the good fortune to literally run into when he was first establishing this place.” The old man cackled. “The roots of this community came on an overland quest, but they depended entirely on the sea until crops were established. This happened quickly in this climate, and with great diversity: they were all driven and industrious people who freely taught a thieving stowaway beggar-boy a great deal. And when I had finally shown them that I could be trusted to complete my tasks properly, Rashaef’s grandfather granted me the unimaginable gift of a purpose. In his language, I became an apprentice apotropo, which to him meant guardian. I prefer the translation of custodian.”

“Pardon me, Padrone. You became an apprentice custodian of what?”

“Of knowledge that would be needed when it was time.” He paused to allow Teyo to react, which by this time he had learned to control.

Leith continued. “Grandfather told me all that he had learned from the true caretakers of this place, and I became the keeper of the living history of the sea in this time. I am a guardian of its vulnerabilities, and so the custodian of its future. Is this what you chose to apprentice?”

Teyo’s confusion was complete, and it silenced him.

“Why do you tell stories to our customers?” the patriarch finally said.

“To sell fish,” Teyo replied.

“That somehow happens for me, as well,” the old man shrugged, “but I can’t say why. I am not a salesman.”

“Not a salesman? You are the best I’ve ever seen!” Teyo blurted out. “The way you captivate the children to draw in their mothers is genius!”

Leith raised his hand. “Things are not what they appear to be. My sales are a consequence of quality, which allows me to teach children that we do not plunder our resources or challenge nature.

Every merchant’s story, you would have noticed if you were not always looking over your shoulder, embodies the rules by which the world willingly provides for our needs. Our diverse skills and expertise are merely different ways to follow the rules of prosperity, and the way we prepare our products speaks to our respect for the gifts that they are. I speak to the children of this, because it’s infinitely more difficult to destroy something you understand.” Leith let the moment ferment before he chuckled into a change of focus.

“Rashaef lives in the ever-present because any moment may portend to unimaginable things for the rest of us. Possibly because I have known generations of his family, this includes not interfering with my ways, but this does not change what I am and will always be—his most grateful servant.” Leith looked confused. “For some reason, he has not interfered with you, either.”

“I have heard that you have been the senior monger longer than most people here have been alive. Would this not mean that Rashaef learned from you?”

“Upon his young father’s death, I pledged to continue to teach all that his grandfather had taught me. When I became the interim teacher of a young Master by default, of necessity a gift of unimaginable consequence was bestowed upon me—contact with the original teacher. Rashaef is of that lineage, as is Lei’a, so it was always in the design of their destiny to be taught directly when it was time.”

“Excuse me, directly by whom?”

“You will understand when it is your time.

I managed to bring Rashaef to his time of this meeting, but as an accidental apprentice to the most masterful of teachers through unforeseeable acts of free will. I am no different from the women at the smoker, or the carpenter you engaged to help you influence me. We are all teachers, or apprenticing in some aspect of how to live properly. So yes, I taught him when he was young, but only to make him ready to be taught the unimaginable by the unbelievable. I am not of the kind of power that the wind and the sea deem to be ready to learn what a man cannot study with another man. But I think you might be.”

“Are you servicing a debt to his father?” Teyo said, trying to understand the old man’s position, and vague reference to the original teacher: he quickly calculated that this teacher could not be less than a century plus twenty years. More even...

“I am acting in allegiance with a gift... a gift one cannot repay.” Leith shook off a thought, and said instead, “It is my hope that someday you will be ready to meet this teacher, and come to understand the importance of keeping our knowledge alive until it is needed to thrive in the face of the complacent,” he said solemnly.

“I don’t know any secrets to keep alive,” Teyo said.

Chuckling, Leith said, “That is why they are called secrets.”

Settling, he continued: “When it became clear to all of us that your malady may never heal, and you would surely starve if you returned to your world because of something we pushed you into, I asked Rashaef to permit you to apprentice with me. He said it wasn’t time to decide the matter.” The old Master chuckled again. “Jehaneh have been keeping him away from you, but Rashaef was allowing time for your direction to choose you. Now that it has, it is the time to ask him, and I mean tonight, for time runs short.”

“Why?” Teyo said.

“Time always becomes short when you’re standing still,” Leith said, looking at Teyo’s feet. Teyo immediately left to see Rashaef.

Leading his request by confessing his original lie, Teyo asked to become an apprentice to Leith. Rashaef took Teyo's hands in his, and rubbing them with his thumbs said, “Prove that you can complete a task.” Letting him go, he pointed to an old fishing boat beside the drying room, and said, “Make that seaworthy.”

“As you know, my skills are limited,” Teyo said, examining the rotting relic of foreign design, the only monument to disrepair in the community. “I will need help,” to which Rashaef said, “I will send someone.”

Teyo set about the arduous, and sometimes humiliating, task of what he believed was making restitution. It would be arduous because he had to remove every scale, smooth every potential splinter point, and return all of the wood to the scent of forest and natural preservatives. The humiliating aspect was not anticipated: he waited an hour for help before trying to maneuver the craft away from the building wall, when a passing boy stopped to watch him. Sweating and breathless, Teyo said he would be grateful for his assistance.

Pointing at the ground, the boy said the poles upon which the hull rested could be pulled sideways, one at a time, but only to three times the distance of their diameter. Starting gently with the outer beam, the craft would gradually lie away from the building. As Teyo pulled the remaining beams, the bow would orient to the subtle down slope that had been contoured for a rolling launch, and which provided drainage while vessels were under repair. From here, he could skid the craft along the smooth surface of the beams to give him access to the port side. The dead weight of the hull would rest on the rounded keel and internal transverse beams, limiting the possibility of damaging the craft further, while Teyo removed the planks and restored their integrity and pliability with steam and oils.

This over abundance of information prompted Teyo to ask the boy if Rashaef had sent him, to which the fourteen-year old advised Teyo what tools and materials he would need, and whom to see about acquiring them. Leaving a pouch of water, the boy said he would come back tomorrow to show him how to remove the old wood without damaging the internal structure.

Teyo spent the rest of the day gathering supplies.

The next day, the boy demonstrated how Teyo could work more efficiently, before he again left water and went his own way, for this was how Rashaef's son defined the terms need and help. Eight days later, the carpenter's apprentice Teyo knew stopped by to show him how to determine if parts could be trusted. A new rudder, a double turning block, and the better part of a month later, a girl too young to be a formal apprentice came by to teach him how to make a pitch solution that would seal any properly supported length and angle of joinery.

Knowing about the inevitable effects of wind and water on housing, Teyo questioned her claim, to which Elsbeth said they were not building a house.

With no preparation other than picking up a double-walled canvas sack on the way out of the village, Elsbeth took him on a long walk to an oozing hole of sticky black syrup where she had him choose a comfortable spot, and curl his fingers to observe the surrounding landscape. With that done, but not explained, they gathered goo in the sack and walked most of the night to be back for his work in the morning. The girl did not reveal to him the preparation process that involved gummy tree saps to complete the sealant preparation. It was too early for that lesson.

In the days to follow, after swearing Teyo to secrecy, the metal smith taught him how to forge special spiral nails that pulled the planks together tighter than straight nails merely joined them. This one innovation, he said, had led community carpenters to experimenting with designs

that dramatically improved the efficiency of compression seals, compared to those naturally created when wood absorbed moisture. They also discovered that squeezing a thin line of a refined tar between planks created seals that rendered plugging seams with cloth a cosmetic façade, done only to placate old sailor's ideas of seaworthiness. These techniques led to designs that made the commune's boats drier and sturdier than all known craft, which is why the community shipwrights always had orders on the skids.

The metal smith said the alchemist would have to explain the strange hue on the fasteners that would not rust, then changing the subject he said, "We should make a shackle for the mainsail foot, new sleeves for the rudder and winch, and add two stanchions aft; you're not the first person to throw himself overboard with his net. We'll also need a drain in the hull amidships—make it the size of the sleeves. Large."

"Drain? Is it not a hole directly into the ocean?" Teyo said without restraint.

"It is required," the Smith replied.

These creations required metals, so into the hills Teyo returned with an apprentice shipwright to mine the ores. During these journeys, four in all, because the master of metals needed raw materials for other work, Teyo learned more about the architecture of the landscape—how surface characteristics portend to the existence of subsurface elements, like the black ooze lesson he didn't know he had taken revealed the likely presence of that substance underfoot.

Smelting and fabricating came next, and when these fixtures were completed, Teyo again borrowed the carpenter's tools, and his apprentice's expertise, to make two turning blocks. Assisting with these installations, the apprentice demonstrated how one block affixed to a gunwale with a lateral rotation along the fore and aft line can lift the mast and trim the sail, by running a halyard through the topmast block. Running a line run through a boom's eye, one man could also raise a heavy catch.

With the help of the young girl making a modification to a sealing concoction, these mechanisms turned remarkably freely in any weather, which was how Teyo's days began running together... free, and working in any weather.

As often as she could, Jehaneh spent time with him around dusk, self-consciously commenting on the dropping temperature, moisture appearing on the foliage, and the changing speed and direction of nightfall breezes. She did this because it was her remark that, six months earlier, had put Teyo in this seemingly endless circumstance of reparation.

Teyo could not convince her that he didn't mind, and spending time with her wasn't the only reason. He had adjusted to the routine of layering goals, and entwining appropriate aspects of each for efficiency, because it was like being on the road of survival, except he was warm and dry, and if he went hungry it was by choice.

"I know you can do it," Jehaneh said, pointing at three stars then absently noting their drift across the sky, just as she did every time she was about to leave him. Teyo could have told her their path after only two such meetings, but silence meant more time with her.

Time passed—Jeanette clearly wasn't concerned with how much—until the day Rashaef inspected the hull, the hardware, and surprisingly innovative rigging that supported an ingeniously designed collapsible mast mechanism—Teyo's—that made maintenance and replacement a one-man job, as well.

Nodding his approval at each properly completed project, he said the craft needed only a small mainsail for ease of handling—speed was not important—and a finely woven bait net. Rashaef calculated the dimensions of the sail he required, based on a formula that took into

account the former derelict's empty displacement, waterline length and mid-ships dimensions, then he taught Teyo the technique for determining how much sail vessels of various sizes could safely fly in a nasty sea. Teyo excelled at working with numbers, and surprised Rashaef by making such calculations in his head.

The weaver subsequently taught him how to make the sail, but he said Teyo would have to see another man about how to knot thin netting in a diamond pattern that appeared to stretch.

Elsbeth next taught him how to embed eyelets in cloth, which needed protection against chaffing, and she sent him to a candle maker who showed him how to wax eyelets and seams with a special concoction. This lesson included more than he cared to know about bees, from a woman whose lessons went beyond teaching him about the industrious creatures to include a particularly irritating plant. This led to him learning about infection poultices, and basic healing arts common to sailors' injuries.

During his own recovery period, beginning two hours before first light, Teyo learned to tie knots from a sightless man who craved uncommon knowledge about common days. Was the sea running in the same direction as the morning breeze? Had either shifted since he last spoke to Jehaneh, or since he went to bed or after he got up? Had the morning dew begun to evaporate? Were the clouds high or low, wispy and long, fluffy and tall, or did they wear ragged crowns. "What about now?" he asked minutes later. Were his ears deceiving him, or did he hear water lapping on shore without feeling the air move? Had a vessel sailed by?

Teyo drew deeply upon his linguistic skills to turn things nature had surely intended to be nuance into succinct points of information, such was the degree of detail the net maker painstakingly demanded while his nibble fingers demonstrated a multitude of knots designed for myriad purposes. Some of these, he told Teyo, would never slip, some would lock one way but release with a tug from the opposite direction, and some could do both of these things depending on which end of a looped, wandering hitch he pulled.

During the many mornings it took Teyo to master the versatility of marine knots and splices, his teacher offhandedly explained permutations and feelings that different weather signs Teyo had described generated in his senses. By the thirteenth day, Teyo could not help but check the state of morning dew, winds, and clouds, then close his eyes to feel the day speaking to him before he decided which task he would do next. Telling the net maker of this development pleased him greatly, for the web of knowledge he had his student craft had taken hold.

Overall, Teyo thrived during a year and a half of unrelenting effort in which he felt genuine gratitude from the men whose boats he now knew enough to maintain. Overall, meaning not entirely, because without it being voiced he understood community members deemed some tasks incomplete without a sea trial stressing his workmanship. This brought into question his work ethic.

This single failing grew in his mind until he dared to edge a small craft into the bay, after the fleet had come home to rest. Upon his less erratic return, he had enough confidence to brave the deed as needed in sheltered waters, but he was not fool enough to believe he was a sailor. Nor did those who quietly watched over his awkward experiments, while the townspeople saw what they expected to see from a community full of Master mariners—meticulous sea trials to the brink of capsizing.

Balancing this uncomfortable requirement was that Teyo had great fun on market days; the increasingly frail, always jovial fishmonger taught him how to troll for a customer's self-interest by feeling the undercurrent of their words, and adjusting the depth of his verbal hooks

accordingly. And as always there were the too brief interludes with the woman who knew he could regain his freedom, a notion that by this time had become a disturbing thought to Teyo...

Jeanette next wrote that the intimate nature of his lessons broke down the walls Teyo had built around his past. In conjunction with his lifestyle of diligent study at the hands of Masters of their crafts, who were never called such, it was inevitable that the old man who brought the apparently disparate elements of these lessons together became his life's confessor. When Teyo eventually told him about the ruse that had entrapped him, the old Master simply said, "Everyone here knows you had never been to sea before that night." He laughed longer than the point deserved, but Teyo knew to be patient: the storyteller would explain his behavior, or not, when the time was right.

Two years of training ended on the day that Teyo presented the sail and netting to Rashaef for inspection. With only a cursory glance, because Teyo's workmanship was consistently superb, Rashaef took him into a distant valley where he had Teyo recall every event he could remember since his childhood up to the time he offered to off-load the fish. Though seemingly impossible on its onset, Rashaef told him of a remarkable trick of recall; he was to name everyone he had ever known, beginning with the present, and every important event in his life would follow. It also helped that Teyo and Leith had regularly compared their misspent youths, and become deeply introspective about what they must have been thinking at the time.

As Teyo recalled his life, Rashaef simplified events into themes such as pettiness, greed, cruelty, betrayal, courage, and fear. At the completion of this task, Rashaef had Teyo recall every event he had experienced in the commune under these same banners; the split between how he had lived and how to live properly was immediately evident.

After two uncomplaining days, Teyo realized that his old life, coupled with his lengthy task to create a new life, formed a design—the path of his destiny. And as deeper understandings arrived like torrential rain, Teyo claimed as his own knowledge how the abstractions of behavioral momentum fed a synchronicity of events without stepping on the toes of independence, to create the harmony this enormously loving and productive community enjoyed. He also knew that the world had a natural order, that its secrets weren't secrets, but evidence ignored, and beneath all events lay an unalterable justice of cause and effect. Everyone, then knew, made a journey of imperfect choices to discover they were part of a world of such beautifully diverse complexity that it was beyond expression in any of his languages: he was the grounded boat, freed by the community carefully moving the skids of his fixed thinking to orient him to a new horizon. Suddenly and miraculously, his old beliefs evaporated, and he knew himself.

He was free.

Elation caused him to mutter incoherently.

On this cue, Rashaef took Teyo's hands in his own, and rubbing the calluses said, "You are ready to begin your apprenticeship."

"Begin?" Teyo babbled through a rush of tearful joy.

"You could not understand the Master's secret until you had none of your own. Rest before seeing him; his knowledge is weighty and he hasn't the strength to tell you twice."

Teyo rested less than a day before he went to see his friend, mentor, and official teacher of the secrets of the sea of life.

Comfortably but carefully, Leith explained Teyo's situation: he said he was no longer an ordinary man; his assessment of the true nature of the events that had shaped him, and his properly performed tasks, had emptied him of thoughts about himself. He was still an

opportunist, but not like a thief looking to consume the beleaguered and weary. He was now a vendor of ideas, a spark in the darkness of trampled hearts, a teller of tales who had perfected the masks of social interaction as way to impress people—but now for their own betterment. Leith would teach him the disciplines he required so that no one would ever really know him, only his tales of wonder.

At the conclusion of this emotionally exhausting meeting, Leith extracted a promise from his new apprentice; it was a pledge Leith had made to himself, he explained, but it was clearly impossible to achieve on his own. Unsaid, was that he knew it would set Teyo free on his own journey.

Somberly, Teyo accepted the task before Leith lightened his burden by sharing his only secret: “Like yours,” he winked, “it’s not really a secret.” He chuckled weakly. “When I was a young apprentice, a village fishmonger circulated a rumor intended to undermine my credibility. Without that, customers would suspect I was a scoundrel of indeterminate origins whom the elders were trying to rehabilitate. This perception was not far off the mark at the time, and it could certainly color their view of my products and preparations, but the real damage lay beneath, as it usually does. Of course,” he said humbly, “when the curious tested my knowledge I could dispel the rumor, because my forerunners had put me through the same meticulous preparations you have been through.” The old man lowered his voice. “Generations of children still repeat this rumor as a joke to be played on younger siblings, when it is a truth that has entrapped me for more than eighty years. But to reveal it would undermine my stories, which are my true purpose.” Chuckling at the irony, Leith told Teyo the secret that had survived as such because the few that knew it had long since taken it to their graves: as two victims of identical design, the apprentice and the ancient guardian were heard laughing until the pain of their joy was too great for them to stay together under one roof.

Privately and individually, in their hearts the villagers both celebrated and mourned the changing of the guard.

Short days later every mother and child within walking distance formed an escort from the market, across the bridge, and all the way to the harbor as their storyteller made his final journey. Their husbands and brothers, dignitaries dressed in finery, and beggars in laundered attire, marked the route of his passage as a common fisherman, a baker, a weaver, and an apprentice carried the patriarch’s body aboard an immaculately restored ancient craft from his native land.

Rashaef rigged a line between a turning block and stanchion, attached a perfectly knotted, fine mesh net, and the four of them lay the light body upon it. With elegant ease, Rashaef noiselessly winched his beloved mentor off the deck, after which he delivered a short eulogy only the three could hear. “As promised—no discomforting sway, old friend.”

The baker stepped forward to place a crusty loaf in the ancient arms, to honor the sustenance of friendship that had been his privilege to receive all of his life. The weaver draped the body of the guardian in a simple white cloth, because as his oldest friend had often said about this moment, “Custodians greet no one with pretence.”

Three of them left the craft as Teyo unfurled a small sail. With the fleet following closely, he set a course for the ocean shelf that sustained the community in the same vessel that had carried a runaway boy on the only sea sojourn he had ever made, nearly a century earlier: a falcon and a sparrow glided side-by-side overhead... not as a truce, but because the world was already less.

Keeping the promise the monger had made to himself so many years ago, to never again go to sea unless it was in his present state, Teyo could not contain a smile as he pulled the finely

angled “bilge” stopper to send a servant of the sea home, steady and level, in the only vessel worthy of the journey.

It wasn't until Teyo had transferred to Rashaef's boat that he understood his teacher's final gift; by letting go of his greatest physical accomplishment he could let go of his beloved teacher, and become one. As the mast finally dipped below the surface, he also understood the key to masterful teaching that Leith had bequeathed him: nothing could be about him. Anybody could learn how to build a boat, but few could teach without pity, and fewer could endure learning anything worthwhile with it.

In time, the market's mothers and their children embraced Teyo's outrageous stories about the stars aligning to guide one man's journey, and a whispering wind giving directions to a living sea, as the progeny of Leith's tutelage. The duo's only life skill, talking, confirmed for them that neither man had what it took to cope with the rigors of real town life... the well water, again.

“Whom may I serve?” Teyo sang out loudly.

“Serve us!” the children's choir chimed back.

“It's a great day!” Teyo played with them.

“No,” Khol-The-Daring shouted, “serve us a story, apprentice Teyo!” as the monger would forever insist he be addressed, because he knew true Masters—no matter what they called themselves.

Falsetto voices joined in the refrain as tears of awe and elation began to stream from Teyo's eyes, for as clear as Jehaneh's first, “I love you,” he heard the original teacher say, “We have been awaiting you, young Master. There is much to tell.”

And serve them the custodian did, while the mothers agreed that their days were much better for Teyo's unfortunate malady keeping him ashore...

"What's next?" I said, handing the pages to Jeanette.

"No comment?"

"Again, I don't know where you're going with it, so I can't say how good it is until you pull it off." I grinned like a cherub. "But I enjoyed it."

"What points am I trying to make?"

In spite of receiving the most generous offering of pages to date, I was annoyed at having to interpret her work at all, let alone assess it through the uncommon perceptions she expected of me.

Petulantly, I said, "You've mixed elements of the Tortoise and the Hare, the Grasshopper and the Squirrel, a butcher, baker, and a candlestick maker..."

"I wondered if you'd make that connection."

"Jack and the Beanstalk, the Good Samaritan, a reference to the Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner, an allusion to a fisher of men, and the Old Man and the Sea reeling in his Marlin."

"I also have Simon Says and Doubting Thomas, but there's nothing about Jack and the Beanstalk," she said, amused.

"That's one less plagiarism lawsuit to deal with."

"Ap-par-ently," Jeanette said, drawing out the word so there was nothing merely apparent about what was to come, "you were so busy judging the material that you missed the overview."

I expected her to pause for my response, but that's why they're called expectations...

"Along with the other scenes you've read," Jeanette carried on, "this section demonstrates how the teacher arrives when the student is ready, how teachers teach the unwilling, and how a student can assess his life and see that it is designed for a purpose."

"Like I'm supposed to have seen all of that."

"Don't be too hard on yourself," she said, putting the story away. "It took Teyo two years to understand it."

"Uh huh." *You've got another week.*

Chapter 15: The Crafty Wraith

The next day, I crossed the First Narrows Bridge through a mist of misery—the fine fog that forces bikers to wipe their faceplate every few seconds—to meet Jeanette at the café near her home. Neither of us had brought pages from our books, so our conversation was affably mundane, talking about our early work experiences as the sky gradually lightened. When the first rays in four gray days poked through, we paid our bill and doubled up on the motorcycle to celebrate our parole in Stanley Park.

Walking within the casual quiet of our own thoughts, as had become our way to enter the park, Jeanette said, "Can you tell me why you're opposed to my metaphysical principles?"

Unable to deny her claim, I saw no point in delaying. "I don't think coincidences or suddenly knowing things are evidence of God at work or the devil at play. There's an explanation for everything."

"I agree, but you haven't told me what you have against it."

"I think the metaphysical world takes our focus away from things we could actually do to improve any of this." I waved a lazy hand, almost smacking Jeanette in the face as she appeared in front of me like an ebony panther leaping from a cave on a moonless night.

Dauntingly impassable, her luminous eyes conveyed unassailable assurance in her advantage as I bumped into her, and she said, "What have you done for humanity lately?"

Stunned by the raw power of her challenge, I stepped back awkwardly and said, "What are you talking about?"

"Your objections to the premises in my book are based on their apparent impracticality to the ignorant, poor, and the downtrodden. I'm asking what you are doing about it."

Her challenge was petty, but the residual intensity of her inquisition intimidated me, so I was curt when I replied, "I support a foster child," as I stepped around her.

"I didn't know that," she said, turning to walk beside me. "Nothing else?"

"I'm one person."

"Some individuals have changed the world."

My gut told me to apologize, for what I was not sure, but the notion that a single person could cause significant change on anything other than a nuclear scale was too supercilious to leave alone.

"After how many died paving the way for them?"

"That would depend on what are you referring to," she said, clearly setting a trap because there's rarely a perfect example of anything.

Cautiously, I said, "I'm saying that it's not reasonable to harp on the way things are, and expect the millions of people who made them that way to change, particularly when the people who try to change anything get a street named after them."

"You think the ratio is one in a million?"

"Now you're playing with me: I think there are lots of people who don't mind making futile gestures, but ninety-nine percent of them tire of their defeats and settle for less. I think the one in a million has to be a fanatic," I said, saving her the trouble of asking, "who adopts the tactics of the enemy, and justifies them with good intentions."

"Fanatics also investigate, inform, and explore the unknown for the good of the rest of us."

"The greater good being four wheel drive and zone air conditioning, sure."

Jeanette shook her head in puzzlement.

"Tom must have told you about Argentina."

"Nothing about cars."

"Maybe I didn't get that far," I said. It was hard to remember which version of what story I had told to whom.

"It's obviously time that you did." Jeanette leaned my way, pushing me toward a bench tucked into a niche in the walkway. Off guard, I reached around her waist to keep my balance, she reciprocated, and the tension of our conversation evaporated.

Seated, and looking at the ships at anchor, she said, "You were scoffing at the greater good being about luxury. What was that about?"

"The day we were released into house arrest, we asked the press corps for footage to help with our defense. Jim Clancy, from CNN, agreed to give up his work on the spot, but all of the other head offices told their reporters not to get involved. Hilary Brown handed us her tape anyway, saying the phone lines to ABC New York weren't always clear."

"What was on the tape?"

"The day after our arrest, the Argentines opened a training base to the press corps to show the world that they weren't a bad bunch—just peach fuzz faces, like everywhere else. The footage implied that access to the military was easy, so what we had done must have truly been criminal. For security reasons," I said wryly, "our footage couldn't be made public, when it was so innocuous compared to what they had authorized the day after our arrest our attorney believed the judge would have been embarrassed into releasing us."

"Didn't the two tapes help you?"

"I didn't realize it at the time, but political circumstances demanded that we go through due process. I doubt that any amount of evidence would have changed the pace, or the outcome for that matter."

"If the tapes didn't matter, what changed about your view of the greater good?"

"The official line was that any organization that helped us could be jeopardizing their access to future stories, and that threatened the people's right to know. The truth is that we were expendable to the cause of advertising revenue. It's kind of ironic," I sniggered, "but a greater good cause freed me from that delusion."

Turning to face me for the first time since we sat down, Jeanette said, "The essence of the transactions between my merchants and their customers was to voluntarily sacrifice self-interest in the name of the greater good." She paused.

"Uh huh," I said, failing to see her point.

"You've never done that. You adopted a grand cause because it appealed to your sense of self-importance, which head offices sacrificed to their own interests."

"How do you know I haven't sacrificed for anyone?"

"You would have found a way to tell me by now."

"Four minutes ago?"

"I had to ask you about that aspect of your wonderfulness," Jeanette said, looking across the water, "which tells me you became a foster parent to make yourself feel better. The part of you that knows why you needed to do that kept silent until it felt threatened."

"Diego's in school and he eats regularly."

"You didn't mention his name, food, or education, and that sounds like penance to me. Diego is lucky to be standing in the way of your self-pity," she tittered annoyingly.

"You're missing the essence of my act, which is what I stated without spin," I countered cleverly.

Patting my knee, Jeanette said, "I also told you that grammar is an event." Leaving Diego behind, Jeanette said, "You gave away that you were gutted by disappointment when the world didn't rush to your rescue. You thought, 'Good Guys Unjustly Detained,'" Jeanette announced the headline we never saw, "would have created pressure for your release. When that didn't happen, you dressed yourself in apathy to disguise your outrage, because nothing painful can happen when you're indifferent. Of course," she cocked her head, "nothing good can happen, either."

"I didn't know enough about your world to run and hide in there."

Jeanette looked away. Inhaling deeply, with a cheerless grin she said, "It's the one place you can't hide, because its underlying assumptions strip your descriptions of events to their core."

"You might as well have said that in Urdu."

"You know what I mean—you've been there with me—but you're too pissed to focus so I'll spell it out. Anonymous strangers made a business decision that had such an encompassing negative impact on your ego that you can't imagine a wise person positively influencing large events. This is in spite..."

"You said changing the world, not large events."

"... in spite of history showing us that it is the individual who changes the course of history."

"What has that got to do with my view of metaphysics?"

"It has everything to do with one belief infecting another. Let me finish: the CBC put out every effort to help you, didn't they?"

"As far as I know."

"That seems not to matter to you."

"It's not something I experienced directly."

"Which matters how?"

"It... hmm."

"Good," Jeanette said, patting my knee again. "So here is a remedy for your disappointment about Argentina: the media can't pretend to be a defender of the public's interest then throw even one of you away, because the backbone of any cause is the individual. It follows that the whole can only be better off if its parts are better off. Like you, the networks didn't understand that the greater good has nothing to do with numbers. It's about principles of responsibility, about energy: individuals change the world by tapping into an underlying momentum that's waiting for a push." She closed her eyes. "You have attached your crappy view of the greater good to all concepts of it, and metaphysics is squarely in your sights because you don't understand it." She opened her eyes and looked at me sternly. "It's time to deal with your other illusions about the media, so you can begin to disentangle the beliefs you've unwittingly embraced because of a few key events."

"There's an equivalent in your book – more than minstrels' stories?"

"There is."

"Go ahead."

"Do reporters risk themselves to say, 'War isn't a good thing, but it's sometimes necessary so we're going to focus on our brave boys doing their duty safeguarding our country?'"

"There's always an issue of focus, balance, and interpretation."

"Is it accurate to say that journalists cannot help but editorialize, because the contextual fulcrum of their reports is fixed by their cultural bias?"

"I might have said that differently," I smirked. Then wryly, "Are you objecting to lessening people's ignorance, because it's not a perfect delivery system?"

"You know better than most that informing people about distant wars is a camouflage cause for generating higher advertising revenues than a house fire can command. What is a soldier's job?" she said before I could object.

"In what way?"

"This isn't a trick question; follow the bouncing ball," she said, illustrating the concept with an arcing finger in the air.

"Their job is to protect their nation from threats, real or perceived."

"That's their rational—their cause. What's the event-nature of their actions?"

"They kill people."

"Now we're on the same page. What do journalists do?"

"They're the eyes and ears of the public. Guardians, actually."

"I agree. Did any of you carry weapons?"

"A few. Sometimes. It depended. Why?"

"I'm getting to that. On what did it depend?"

"Obviously, anyone who carried weapons did it for self-defense."

"That's obvious from within the assumptions you hold about the cause of the profession. In terms of essential acts, putting yourself in harm's way is what you have to do to chronicle the nature of harm," she shrugged. "What does arming yourself have to do with that?"

"Being in harm's way sometimes requires protection. Good people have died to get information to everyone."

"How does that change anything?"

"Jesus Christ... it shows exactly what a lack of information can do!"

"Momentum doesn't care about facts. Your colleagues followed erroneous beliefs into the fray, risking their primary responsibilities to family to potentially die for the public's right to know fundamentally useless information. In terms of what they thought they were doing, their deaths were pointless."

"I didn't mention colleagues."

"Jesus Christ, you're defending the risks you all took!" she shouted, making her point in my terms. In a conversational tone, she said, "Someone you know was killed; maybe more than one."

"I doubt their families thought it was pointless."

"So do I," she lamented, looking across the glittering water. "It's a terrible way to learn that your husband's ego was more important to him than his wife and children." She cleared her throat. "Killing strangers in their homeland, in an apparent defense of your homeland, is what soldiers do. Their cause is defense, but we've established the essence of their actions is murder, and the camouflaging spin is of patriotism and duty. Journalists altruistic cause is the people's right to know, and I'm not saying we shouldn't have virtually unlimited access to information," she quickly added. "I'm saying that news organizations don't understand the effect their presence has on conflicts, although the conglomerate owners might well understand what they're doing, but we'll come back to that."

"Carry on."

She nodded. "If a journalist uses a weapon, he becomes a soldier killing strangers in their homeland in defense of his homeland's cause of the people's right to know. The journalists who

carried weapons didn't think of themselves in this way, but we both know that beliefs don't mean squat to the underlying nature of an event. They are spin."

"In Vietnam..."

"Allow me one more point: nothing comes from nothing, energy can never be destroyed, every action causes a reaction, and the observer changes the observed. Essentially, there is no true state of participatory neutrality. This means concepts like necessity and fairness are pliable conveniences. Do you agree?"

"With that much, but I didn't carry..."

"It follows that as war correspondents have never ended a war, they can only be contributing to them. Their work is no different than a story focusing on the grief of a survivor, after his family died in a fire; it can only enhance grief by generating it in the audience."

"If you had watched the news back when, you would know that many of the journalists who carried weapons are the same ones who brought the slaughter of Vietnam home to America, and the public protested enough for politicians to call off the war. That's information causing people to make better decisions."

"That's your camouflage cause speaking. In terms of essential events, viewing the packaged carnage caused those who interpreted patriotism in this way to defend their national image. Voluntary enlistments would have gone up."

"You know that?" I sputtered.

"Let's walk." As we stood, she said, "I know that it's an inevitable consequence of maintaining their particular brand of national image, as long as the news is filtered through the acceptable cultural customs they're exposed to from the cradle to the grave."

"By the same reasoning, coverage of protesters and draft dodgers would have contributed to the war by pissing off flag wavers, whose influences would have pressured kids into doing their duty."

"Nice try, and I mean that, but you've got it backwards. The nature of the protesters' actions was to peacefully demonstrate for peace in the face of tremendous political and social pressure. In this case, television coverage unified people of like mind, some of whom had chosen to contribute to the carnage and then came back to say no more, while others left everything they loved behind, breathing and intact. Television coverage promoted peace because that was the nature of the event."

"You know this from travelling the road of a housewife?" I snapped.

Jeanette held her gaze steady on the pathway for a moment, casually looked my way then she gazed across the water. "Being a housewife taught me that short-changing experiences one hasn't had gives people's true nature away in interesting ways. One of the better ones my ex-husband taught me was that sarcasm is self-pity dressed in a tuxedo." She drank in a deep breath.

"So the point you've been skirting, is that I contributed to warfare?" I chuckled dismissively.

"And you're a victim of it." Jeanette pushed on before I could object. "The British rigorously contained their passion until an essentially harmless incident caused them to go to war with Argentina. Those who had committed to their culture's influences died in the name of a stiff upper lip, as did the Argentines die for whatever illusion they thought they had to maintain." She rubbed my arm. "You put yourself in harm's way because your media culture made the idea not just acceptable, but appealing, and you became a part of the conflict you went to observe. It could have been a lot worse than going to jail for nothing."

"Maybe not for nothing; we drew attention to the kind of government in power."

"Like your friends drew attention to the startling revelation that wars kill non-combatants?" she waved their lives aside. "I know this makes you angry, but if there was no truth to what I'm saying you'd be laughing your ass off at the crazy broad who thinks she knows anything about journalism or warfare."

"Maybe I'm keeping that to myself."

"You're certainly keeping a great deal from yourself."

"Hard to know the difference."

"Difficult to know; concrete is hard."

"Shit—what's with the grammar lesson?"

"I'm trying to leave no gaps in our assumptions, which is especially important now that you're beginning to change yours." She looked into my eyes and declared, "You're walking away from the slaughter of your illusions, but you don't know where to go." Jeanette stopped, flung her arms open wide, and declared to the entire Lower Mainland, and maybe as far as Bellingham, Washington, "I'm here! I'm right here!"

I knew it was asinine, but I said it anyway. "I can see you."

Her jubilation collapsed like Foreman in the eighth, in Zaire. Gathering her composure, she started walking and said, "Try to suspend judgment as I put down another plank of logic: men have been conditioned to malice under other banners, so the true nature of their actions is no more clear to them than the network's activities were to them, or to you. That has been my point since we talked about another level of perception; we are not aware of the true nature of our actions. Fighting for peace is a prime example of how we proudly sacrifice our children to our illusions, which are fostered by those who benefit from maintaining them."

"History shows us that sacrifice is sometimes necessary. Your merchants did that." I raised my brow.

"They sacrificed nothing to a negative momentum, which is how you continue a war."

"Which ends in peace."

"That's the cruel illusion." She leaned my way. "Yes or no, expend energy toward the south and you create a momentum heading south?"

"All else being equal."

"It follows that fighting can only feed fighting, because the reason for fighting isn't being addressed. That momentum is stored in beliefs passed on to children, and on it goes."

"Okay so where does it start?"

Expelling a breath, she said, "For the most part, men form the governments who con the public in order to be elected, then they twist the power of their office that we grant to them into the belief that they are powerful themselves. This belief is enhanced by the corporations who control them. Public concerns must pass through this confluence of power before they will serve the public, and then only within the constraints of serving themselves another election victory. This process of selective representation demands explanations that officials route through an impersonal bureaucracy. Between those machinations and the blind alley of official secrets, inquisitors are worn down, accountability becomes diffused, and important issues are reduced to a series of petty attacks on minor predators in the food chain. Nothing changes. We accept this dog and pony show because we believe the bureaucracy is somehow separate from those who comprise it, as if it were an entity in its own right. After their convolutions have conned us into thinking we're not in charge, we're ripe to reclaim our sense of power through the exterior quests politicians have an interest in blaming as the source our problems, or claim will be future

problems, because we don't demand that our government perform responsibly if we don't demand it of ourselves."

"We enforce responsibility by holding elections."

"A process that comes without a minimum guarantee of performance, based on less than a sixty percent turnout split four party ways? I don't think so."

"Forcing a turnout would go against the principles we're turning out for."

"The results of the process are acceptable under the circumstances?"

"The circumstance of democracy, sure."

"If you're the victim of that greater good?"

I saw the traps of patriotism looming, so I said, "The alternative being what your people would do—nothing?" I began saying this sarcastically, but I lost steam to the realization that this would work just fine.

"Absolutely! No government would last a second without the consent of the public. If we don't want a war, they can't make one, and we don't need to overthrow anything. We only have to withdraw our permission as a proactive choice." She took a breath of consideration. "We'd be taking back the power we granted them, because they're abusing it."

"If you could save a million people by sacrificing yourself, would you do it?"

"Are you arguing the numbers game, and that the networks were right to throw you away?"

"I'm trying to take a step away from my description of events to viewing the essence of them," I said seriously.

"If I sacrificed myself," Jeanette said, taking my arm in hers, "it would be as an informed decision uncluttered by losing face if I declined. I would not bow to the demands of the few who put the million at risk, or the pleas of those who agreed to be put at risk."

'Agreed?'

"Through whatever combination of inaction and poor choices suited their beliefs, victims consent to their danger no different from standing next to bullies, or giving your uninformed consent to participate in the conflicts you thought you were observing." She squeezed my arm. "I know your writings are loaded with good people facing bad situations, and there are some particularly cruel acts between the two that you haven't resolved in your own mind. I also know that working in the shadow of war's wraith hardened your heart, while restricting your vision to things that justify your jaded views." She squeezed again. "The essence of your written work is about moving out of your shadow secrets, which you have constructed to reflect the craftiness of cruelties' affects on all of you. Your Silent Knowledge of that goal won't let you slough it off, because truth is relentless. Next time, bring some of your work, anything at all, and I'll try to show you how you are shinning a light into those shadows."

Again, I didn't mention the personal cage issue, and we ended our formal meeting.

Back on my side of the bay, I put a dozen chicken legs on the barbecue and opened my first contemplative beer because, the inherent strangeness of our relationship aside, something wasn't right. Every time we got together, Jeanette intimidated, ignored, insulted, or toyed with me, sometimes all four, and her explanation of research wasn't cutting it. She was too intense, too moody, and too flighty. Like two people, for that matter.

Mulling over this circumstance loosened a niggling thought that travelled to the heart of the matter like an embolism: no writers I had ever known scribbled on top of anything other than first drafts. They made notes in the margins or between the lines, and none of them folded their coveted inspirations, other than those written on barroom napkins. From this, I realized Jeanette

had to be knocking off pages as she thought were required to keep me interested, and the only reason to do this would be to create the appearance of her story being complete, other than the training scenes. It explained why some scenes were watertight and others required preliminary explanations—which also explained her quick bail-outs through contrived flashes of temper to derail my inquiries.

The chicken bursting into flames triggered a deeper insight.

Jeanette damned-well knew that her character's ability "to know" punched a huge hole in her story. To her credit, she had incorporated a surreptitious plea for the audience to suspend their disbelief, but she was smart enough to know this alone wouldn't cut it. She had to have reached the end of her options, and she was looking for a bigger kind of magic to fill the hole her gimmicks had dug, instead of scrapping unworkable premises. I knew that trap all too well.

I apologized to the tenants upstairs for the acrid smoke then I ate half of my blackened chicken in triumph: an unfinished story meant the path to starting the grant application was wide open. I didn't have to understand all of her premises. I could make up something that would fit them so far, as had to be her goal anyway, and update the outline if I learned anything pertinent before I submitted the application.

I finished dinner wearing the cloak of confidence that Jeanette wore so snugly, and though the fit was smug when I called to test the temperature of our relationship, her renewed warmth confirmed that she was afraid of losing the filter she needed to test out new plot twists, and probably her ending.

In the morning, ahead of plan I called Rogers Communications to request a grant application, before working on my screenplay.

Chapter 16: Changing History

Sitting on her couch the next afternoon, Jeanette gave me a scene in which a group of students was quietly chanting in a circle around a smaller group, who were meditating on objects in their hands. In the foreground, a young girl was dancing repetitive steps, while a teacher explained that by intentionally occupying her incessant here-and-now thoughts, she was silencing her internal dialogue to potentially experience a number of things. One possibility was to have pure a recollection—full disclosure of a distant or suppressed memory. Another possibility was to enter a state of theme-like dreaming to access key memories of past lifetimes, or she could receive new knowledge directly from Spirit. Any of these experiences helped to pave the way for more fantastic experiences.

However, the teacher warned the group, information gained in any of these conditions belonged to that state of awareness; the experience required interpretation into physically related terms. It was common for an epiphany in one state of awareness to become a sense of understanding in another. It also took effort and practice to hold one's focus, when making the transition to bring back what you had learned, because to experience a mural of deep knowledge was useless until the student could explain what they saw.

When asked for an example of a problem with translation, the teacher said that seeing auras around trees proved to the observer that trees are conscious entities, not merely metabolically alive, the knowledge of which advises the observer to respect the journey of trees. The observer can easily bring back this knowledge, but they might not be able to explain a deeper sense of sadness that comes with it. If the observer had explored their perceptions to the extent of aligning their own consciousness with the tree's, as an instant comprehension they would have understood how to interpret colors of consciousness, and deduce the health and mood of not only

trees but of other creatures, because there is a continuity to representative colors. In this, and subsequent aligning with other forms of consciousness, they may also realize that all things are connected, and in their own way everything shares a sense of history in which contact with humans has always been detrimental: we alone act as if everything is a personal resource. Because of this, no consciousness welcomes mankind; they are not our friends. It is an infinitely sad reality.

Jeanette's writings next described two personal experiences of students, one of which was little more than curious to the recipient, and the other profoundly moving.

That was it.

"Chunky," I said, handing her the pages. "Where does it fit in the movie?"

"Practicing these arts made them considerably more aware of the world around them, because in time they will need to be attuned to the ambiance of circumstances, like you were when you had to be."

"I didn't stare at poppies in the Bekaa Valley."

"I didn't say you instigated the awareness. Something set aside your self-interest long enough to allow information to filter through."

"Is it necessary for the audience to understand the rituals, or can you show them as background to becoming more aware of their situation?"

"Rituals are based on arts that have lost their meaning with time. These arts," she said, tapping the pages, "are formidable practices of personal power designed to evolve designated individuals. We'll make that clear to the audience."

"Designated, meaning teachers are nasty to weed out the ones who wouldn't make good magic?"

"Nasty?"

"The girl staring at a crystal has a tearful knowing about why her teacher is so difficult to get along with. I'm guessing that difficult in your world is related to putting kids in cages."

"The student saw through her personal mask to see beliefs she didn't realize she had. This knowledge changed her destiny from an average person's evolutionary path to a direct approach to self-evolvement. By this time," she tapped the page, "our audience will understand that she had crossed the bridge from old beliefs in preceding chapters, where her teacher was methodically tearing them down. With that preparation, she was able to make the leap to claiming knowledge about what she was like." She flashed a grin. "The student understood specifically how she had been fooled by a convincing world, and that knowledge put her in charge of her path. With training, the same thing might have happened to you after your experiences in Argentina."

"It did. I went freelance."

"In terms of essential acts," Jeanette said, getting up to stretch her legs, "you went from an unwitting sacrifice to a volunteer pawn, risking it all for the cause of compensation. Nothing changed other than fast-tracking your path here."

"Thanks," wasn't the first thing I thought to say, and it was for the best. She didn't know better.

"I know that's a hard one to swallow, when you think you've learned key knowledge from a pivotal experience. I earned my Master's degree in uninformed consent at the expense of everyone in my family, but I don't blame myself, or them, for the things we didn't know. There would be too much getting in the way of my journey now."

"You're a forgiving person," I said amicably.

"For some reason you're not."

"I don't see the point of taking a shot at the one person you say can help you," I said casually.

Jeanette's gaze was strained as, nodding to herself, she said, "You are correct. It's time to pull the big picture together, so you can see how our interactions fit into the grand scheme of our work." She went to the rocking chair, tucked her feet beneath her butt, and folded her hands in a Buddha-like pose. Breathing deeply, Jeanette rocked a few times before bluntly saying, "I psychically accessed the details of my society. I'm writing a true story."

"You said you researched Egypt at U.B.C.?" I replied, too stunned to attack the primary absurdity.

"I said I researched what our scientists believe about ancient Egyptian culture." She stopped rocking. "My twentieth century characters will accurately represent our current beliefs about ancient Egyptian society, but mine existed thousands of years before the one we assume to be the first Egyptian dynasty. The teaching entities you have yet to read about, beyond their initial surreptitious contacts with the archaeologists, will tell them how mankind's social order attempted to evolve, failed, and what these entities intend to do about it."

She resumed rocking.

As I tried to marshal my thoughts, she said, "Osiris was a mystic of the most profound order, psychically linked to a teaching entity who was older than time. Various chapters will introduce the entity's guidelines for productive living, which resulted in a culture that outlasted all other organized societies in history, because the population had been conditioned to acting in accordance with the principles of peace and prosperity."

"What happened to them?" I said, looking around the room as if for clues to their mysterious disappearance.

"Bloodline heirs eventually killed the seers, or drove them into hiding, because they knew who was supposed to become the next leader when the succession changed from a family affair. This was the beginning of the end of their culture, because only seers had the energy to teach the disciplines required to access and handle cosmic knowledge. Pretenders changed what little they knew into rigid rites and rituals for a public that was only generally aware of the abstract principles; not knowing better, they paid homage to common thinkers as the source of universal knowledge. This was the killing blow, because it fundamentally subverted the free expression of individuality, and as you know, repression is the stuff of rebellion."

"I get that much," I managed to say respectfully, "except the only consistency in family dictatorships I've ever heard about is the paranoid defense of their status. The bloodline heirs must have thought, and our audience will think, that the seers changed the rules because of their own agendas."

"We will explain that Spirit chooses its placement in physical life, and that the first generations of leaders had to be safely born into the same family, because it was ideal for launching cultural change. That said, it was flawed in the long term because their life experiences were vastly different from the average person's; they couldn't relate to their core assumptions, not unlike you and I when we first met?" She grinned slyly.

Or now. "Got it."

"To resolve that problem, prospective leaders were born into normal society, and readied for training by having pure experiences in the ways of their world; they had no knowledge of their probable destiny tainting their approach to daily living. In this way, they embraced the assumptions and convictions of their culture, then by undergoing extensive retraining they

understood what the average person was really like, and how they became that way. In the first passages you read the baker knew that an ordinary girl was destined to become a leader?" Jeanette raised her brow.

"Sure, but she didn't know."

"You've heard the expression, 'When the student is ready, the teacher arrives?'"

"Around the same time I was pondering the sound of one hand clapping," I quipped, hoping she would lighten up and admit that she was playing with me, as part of her screenplay research.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," she scolded me. "Ready means able, not willing, because the prospect's assumptions are fixed in the mundane task of maintaining their view of themselves. This circumstance requires that the teacher arrive in disguise to probe the prospect's personality, before coaxing them into an intricate teaching scheme for direct evolutionary development. It's called stalking."

"Why?"

With the sudden disinterest of speaking to a houseplant, she said, "Mankind evolves through trial and error, because maintaining images stands in the way of seeing the underlying order of a circumstance. Teaching an ancient philosophy called The Way to Live puts an end to their circuitous learning pattern. Within this philosophy, every circumstance has the potential of eliciting a secret belief from the student's intricate belief disguises, so teachers deliberately situate them in circumstances that will show them to themselves."

"Setting them up?"

"To the contrary, they set themselves up."

"Still sounds like entrapment."

"There is no subterfuge other than of their own beliefs, for one cannot be trapped by behaviors they do not have," she continued with unnecessary formality. "In this way, they learn that all behaviors flow from a few categories of influence, and within a moment of clarity the myriad examples of what they are really like coalesce to force the unconditional surrender of their self-image. However, a lifetime of conditioning inexorably draws them back to their old ways unless they actively pursue new standards of behavior, and eventually make these the conditioning upon which they then act. In this way, the influences of their old personality become reference points for mastering the thirteen principles of The Way to Live. This is everyone's inevitable challenge."

"Uh huh, what kind of disguised behaviors are you talking about, if they're not a set up?"

"Narrowly speaking, in Argentina you understood that the media's purpose was a ploy, and the world's basic goodness was being deceived. It followed that the world was inherently deceiving, because the media reflects the world. Knowing that you had been duped meant you were no longer a pawn, but as a meaningless cog in a corrupt world you felt free to adopt the tactics of the enemy by..."

"I was paid to take risks other people either couldn't or wouldn't take."

"Without a purpose your life did not matter, and that frame of mind freed you to punish corporations by way of large invoices written in the blood of those upon whom you both preyed. Acting with fervor, as you always do," she said as my stomach lurched, "has made a large shift in your perceptions inevitable sooner than might otherwise be. If you focus on learning about yourself, these shifts will bring you to your surrender. If you focus on despair, they will bring you to the brink of your death because you will have nothing to champion, and no one to punish for your circumstance."

"If it's just the brink..." I quipped to knock her out of her officious mode.

"You have never found death amusing." Jeanette looked at me placidly.

"Okay, so why don't teachers explain what they intend to do, and draw from the people who were interested?" I said, moving on.

"Volunteers don't have the energy to learn the ways of power: to easily acquiesce is to demonstrate their indoctrination to the ways of an aberrant world have not fully taken hold. It's a grand irony, but it's a pre-requisite to resist, which is why Spirit chooses candidates by giving signs to a teacher." She shrugged. "It wasn't a completely blind ruse. If you recall, the baker told Aleena what his true interests were, and how he was going to teach her at their first meeting... and their second, and third, for that matter. You could say it's a rule of stalking."

"Not unless you've added that to those scenes."

"He did it in between the lines." She leaned forward. "Their initial conversation was about interpreting experiences in a different way, and how understanding the essence of these experiences propels personal evolution."

"Like we did?"

"The same. Other conversations were about specific beliefs and behaviors that stand in the way of seeing things clearly." She waited for me to say something.

"Also like us, I get it—you were using me before I knew what you were trying to do, but..."

"It was a pre-interview qualifier," she corrected me.

"Fair enough, but why bother taking the long way?"

"At another level of awareness, the student knows exactly what the offer is about; there is no need to risk frightening them off before events facilitated by the teacher infiltrate their focus on the mundane only."

"Wouldn't my other level of awareness contradict the rule of not tainting my mundane experiences?"

"The rule is that a teacher must tell the student what they're up to," Jeanette dipped her head to look over her nose as if she was wearing glasses, "not how they're going to do it." She rocked again. "It works like this: between lives, the teacher agrees to advise the student of their potential destiny when they meet in physical life, and the road they will have to travel to achieve it. When they do meet, the teacher appears to be evasive when they're actually awakening the student's silent knowledge of this agreement. Essentially, they're saying, 'I know you don't remember this in the traditional sense, but I also know that you know more than you think you know. I'm speaking to that level of awareness.'

Here's the scoop: the first part of your physical quest was to have the world indoctrinate you into accepting its ways, including those that create and recreate poor circumstances down the road. These circumstances are the challenges of personal development you purposefully chose to suit your personality, and vice-versa; meaning you designed a personality that would create and confront these flaws, which blossomed according to the time and place, and to whom you were born. These choices included the people you would meet because of these choices, both good and bad, depending on which influence you may need. All of the years we've spent apart, and the people we have helped or hurt, readied both of us for this meeting. Now, my first job is to show you that your interpretation of your experiences is nonsense—the world is not what you think it is, so its ways are not what you think they are. I will do this in apparently separate ways. In the practical terms of breaking you free of society's conditioned reasoning, and the rationalizing your personality flaws demand, I will teach you to view things in terms of core events. Simplistically, I will teach you logic. You will fight me as if you're fighting for your life,

because you are fighting for the life you know, as I lead you kicking and screaming into seeing things as they really are.

In this regard I will introduce you to the abstraction of energy, as the stuff of all creations and manifestations, and specifically that physical reality is an illusion; it is one description of the manifestation of energy in one version of endless versions of reality, as are you." She slowed her rocking motion. "It is the teacher's hope that the student will piece the two together, and claim as their own knowledge that the student is fighting a description of reality. This description includes embracing beliefs their path designed for the specific purpose of learning the errors of embracing them as if they were them, and not beliefs that represent where they are on the evolutionary ladder of understanding responsibility—none of this personal. When the student gets their first real glimpse of how any of this is true, the teacher can more actively tear down their old beliefs, while leading the student to building logical bridges to the core events that shaped them. This is the only way they will trust what they will learn when their platform of reasoning their circumstances turns into a gangplank. But," she said, head-cocked with a realization, "you're familiar with the idea that the journey is one way; you know there's no going back, correct?"

"When you see something as it really is? Sure."

She stopped rocking. "I'm confirming that you understand that an event like meeting Spirit, for example, would be striking a bell you can't unring. Something fundamental about your way of life would have to change, and you could never go back."

"Consider it confirmed."

Jeanette continued rocking. "Tartuu modeled two points of view during his conversations with Aleena, and connected them with a chain of what were to her embarrassing self-interests. One view was her interpretation of the world in general, her experiences in it specifically, and where she thought this would take her. The other view was through his insights about her life, and where he knew the momentum of her beliefs would have to take her. At each meeting, he removed a step in her reasoning, polished it to reflect the truth, and replaced the span between their perspectives with a logic step. Doing this put a constant strain on their relationship, because as the days passed and the gaps between the beliefs she could rely on moved farther apart, other views swayed from the loss of support, because our beliefs are an entangled mess self-supporting contradictions. Unconsciously recognizing that she is losing her fight to maintain what have become isolated views, she will try to manipulate their relationship by bargaining for exceptions to his insights, or threaten to leave. This will cue Tartuu to begin a final tug, because she's ready to fall off her cherished opinions. This tug can take many forms, but the point is to cause her to review all that she has been taught, so there will be times when he has to risk shocking her into making a leap of faith toward logic. If she's more ready than he knows, it's possible that she could leap directly from her reason to his logic. That would be a great day."

"And if she's less ready that he thinks?"

"She may quit."

"Couldn't Spirit ring the bell?"

"Is that what you would want to happen?"

"It would be stupid to go that far then pass on the opportunity."

"You passed on the opportunity to explore a terrific ending with your screenplay." She raised her hand to stifle my protest. "I'm saying it's possible for a smart person to pass on a grand opportunity, if he's not ready for it."

"Fair enough, but I don't see how a student could quit if Spirit chose them. How would you explain that mistake?"

"It's not about Spirit's judgment; it's about the student's free will."

"Wouldn't ringing the bell screw that up?"

"Not if the student agreed to it."

"If your people really existed, they must have left some evidence behind?" I said, stalemated.

"It will be found in our lifetime," she shrugged a tiny effort, "although it will take time to convince people."

No shit. "Uh huh... it is ~~hax~~ difficult stuff to grasp, let alone believe," I said, playing along.

"Any assault on a core assumption becomes an insult to our certainty about everything; leaders in politics, religion, and science, will attack the authenticity of the finds, and the integrity of those who analyze them. But the evidence will eventually rule, because it's the nature of truth to stand squarely in one's face. Closing our eyes won't make it go away."

"What's the core assault about? Archaeologists find new stuff all of the time?"

Puzzled, then amused, she said, "They will discover writings that claim we're nearing the end of civilization as we know it, and emissaries from the Universal Source are coming back to help us transition into a new way to live. These writings will also list what was to them future events that will have taken place, and some that are still to come."

"This rescue mission—it's about end-of-the-world stuff?"

"Yes, but there will be people who won't want to change." She leaned back. "I'm not sure when to reveal the next step in the training, because..."

"Training rescuers—that's who your special people are?"

"It is." She leaned back. "I'm afraid if I give too much away, too soon, I could lose credibility."

"I wouldn't worry about that," I said flatly, looking at the clock on the credenza. "Shit, it's three-thirty. I've got to go."

I stood up; to her silent amusement, I walked away without making my usual promise of seeing her tomorrow.

"Bring some of your work the next time," she belatedly said. "We still haven't dealt with your cage."

I didn't reply before the door closed behind me, and then only to myself.

Stunned by her audacity I stopped at a pub before heading across the bridge, but by the time I ordered my third beer I was feeling a bit foolish: Jeanette had invested all of her money, friendships, and as far as I could tell every waking moment her kids didn't need her, to writing. In that context, her critically serious role-playing made some sense; some, because why she thought she needed to gauge a neophyte's reaction to her claim of talking to spirits was just plain stupid... unless she was looking for a better way to introduce the idea to her audience?

Ahhh... and a way that would also help convince them that the universe was training people—that had to be next.

[Chapter 17: Losing Reason](#)

I arrived at her house the next morning with two chapters of my work for her to assess. The first one, an apology for my rude exit the day before, graphically demonstrated that my plot worked without the influence of the great unseen. I left the second chapter, a polished effort that demonstrated LeBlanc was not an idiot, stashed in my bike as a safeguard against her attacking the first one for being too impersonal.

Knocking twice, I let myself in and climbing the mid-house staircase, said a jaunty, "Good morning."

"Coffee's ready," Jeanette said from the kitchen, as if I had gone to the bathroom and not home for the night. "If the undercurrent of a culture's ideals is convoluted, it's inevitable that good people will integrate fear into their daily way of life and call it something else."

"The stress of daily living," I volunteered, setting my envelope on the hallway table before walking into the kitchen.

Standing by the sink, Jeanette nodded toward the nook table for me to take a seat.

"You can't live in between fact and fiction without confusing what you want with what you think is necessary, or eventually taking what you think you're entitled to. For example," she said, to put us on the same page, "America's right to bear arms was about militias defending the country at a time when they didn't have a standing army. Two hundred years later, they've armed themselves to the teeth without embracing the responsibilities that go with maintaining personal rights. Now they're defending themselves from themselves, which is the antithesis of living free." Jeanette came to the table with two mugs, and added a third of a cup of milk to hers from a ceramic, jersey cow pitcher.

"Are we in an anti-American mode this morning?"

"Not at all," she said, surprised. "I've always been treated well there. I'm making observations about a country we're both familiar with, because it's in a unique position to institute positive global change." She sipped her coffee. "Making them the goat also doesn't offend you like it would if I used Canadian examples."

Cutting short a test sip with a chuckled slurp that trickled through my beard, I said, "You know I don't wave flags."

"You are a soldier at heart," she said, handing me a serviette. "You would rather kill our relationship than risk evicting your convictions by taking the time to evaluate mine. Push that behavior to the extreme, and I'm an enemy of your state of mind. The fact is, you're dangerous to me," she said casually.

"That's a good hook," I said, understanding that she was getting even for my abrupt exit the day before. Dabbing at my lips, I said, "You can't surprise me with crooked or crappy Canadian politicians; I've covered them from all sides, and they're the same the world over."

"It's much more than a hook in my work," she replied. "Yesterday, you ran out of here when I offended your reason. What do you think would have happened if I had stood in your way?" She tilted her head questioningly.

"What you said was absurd on its face, so I gave myself the space to think about the context of what you said. Obviously I did, because I'm here."

"What would you have done if I had stood my ground?" she persisted.

"Go over the balcony."

"And the next time?"

"You can't know what anyone would do from one moment to the next. People are too complex to be reduced to a disco ball or a tenth decision."

Jeanette blew across the top of her drink to affect a casual air—her tea didn't need cooling. After a dainty sip, she set her cup on the table. "Thinking we're complex makes us feel safe and important, as if intricacy had some bearing on our pre-eminence or vulnerability. The most affronting fact I've claimed as my own knowledge so far in my research," she said wryly, "is how much we are alike."

"Stop, you're making me blush."

"How much we are all alike," she clarified her statement.

"Uh huh, how so?"

"We accept a world in which businesses are bereft of social conscience, entertainment is based on violence, and where professions that require the intellectual prowess of professional wrestling are worshipped and rewarded accordingly. You can't evolve a society that way, let alone sustain a world."

"Your teachers knew there was no point in harping at morons about intricate personal development techniques, when even your special people struggled with it. So what's your point?" *Talk about piety.*

"I didn't say we were all morons."

"Intellectual prowess of wrestling?"

"I didn't say wrestlers lack intellect, there's just little evidence of it in their sport, which correlates directly to the inhabitants of a global island with limited resources."

"Sounds like you're insulting everyone who you expect to understand meta-principles, like timeless momentum, by tying their shoelaces backwards."

"And now I see that to forestall scorn from our audience I have to establish the veracity of celestial intelligence right away."

"Hang on." It took me a few seconds to pull together what had happened since I walked up the stairs. "The point of this exchange is to see how poorly Americans would receive news of how you view them, by accusing me of being offended by Canadian flaws? Or is that I am a soldier, a moron, or all of the above?"

"It's great that you're beginning to think in terms of assessments; it means you're confronting your sense of self-importance," she replied, "but none of the above is the answer. I was checking your point of view about living in between fact and fiction, and you confirmed that your general state of mind is fearful. That was my point, and we both know that knowledge is the remedy for fear, so I'll tell our audience more about Spirit earlier in the film."

I slid my cup out of harm's way, and pretended to read a tabloid newspaper. "Updating the gimmick of time travel to a New Age format, this film—what's it called?" I said.

"Time—and Time Again."

"I think that's been done—doesn't matter." I pretended to read. "Time and Time Again tiptoes the audience away from apparently innocent encounters in an ancient marketplace, to trot the audience through time toward global cataclysms that the film claims we are facing now. Secretly, in each of three incarnations the heroes painstakingly recruit incorrigible youths to become part of a utopian culture that will take over when all the stupid people die by their own hand. To the screenwriters' credit, the script avoids directly aligning the audience with the dense and doomed by plaguing endearing wizards with foibles that encompass a broad range of mental and emotional problems. To disguise the discrepancy of unstable characters impressing criminally closed minds, unseen entities oversee the teaching process. However, by the rule of maintaining free will, they must remain phantom characters capable of generating omens and facilitating psychic suggestions only. This means the wizards have to consider the pros and cons of taking God's advice. Otherwise, being able to know things ahead of time, which still might be wrong because free will can change things, guts the ingenuity of a story that could have been a cult thriller cleverly constructed to create panic in the meek who shall inherit the debris." I looked up. "That's what they'll be thinking."

"You really have thought about my story!" Jeanette gushed.

"Enough to know you've trapped yourself."

"In what way?" she said without flinching.

"I just told you: you have extraordinary beings teaching exceptional people how to better their lives, and there's no guarantee that they'll get it when the larger point of nurturing them through time is to train other teachers how to teach other unwilling people the same lessons. I know you intend to bridge that gap with meta-stuff, or outright magic, but those fixes are never enough. And why are your emissaries back anyway—what can they do to stop the crap?"

"Nothing; there are coming to restore knowledge of how to live properly as the major institutions collapse. As for the teaching process, you don't know how Spirit works."

"What about their presence scaring people into changing; you said that doesn't work?"

"All we can do is offer people a clear view of the way things are, what they can do to better their situations, and tell them to not be afraid of making changes before they have no choice. You know what that's like, so you also know that it's your own fault if you don't."

"What about putting cage doors in cinemas?" I quipped.

Smirking briefly, Jeanette said, "Did you bring me something to read?" taking the escape route I had offered.

I got up to retrieve the pages from the hallway. On my way, Jeanette said, "What did you mean when you said you've covered Canadian politicians from all sides?"

"When I was stuck in Argentina, my brother got the Minister of External Affairs private home number," I said, coming back into the room. "Acting familiar, like a colleague would, he asked him about our situation. The Minister confided that he didn't have a clue what the caller was talking about, which was two days after we were arrested. Eventually, my brother's questions gave away that the minister wasn't speaking with someone he knew. After my brother finished telling me about their exchange, he added a heartfelt, "Any Canadian in trouble overseas is fucked, so take it easy from now on."

Handing Jeanette my chapter, I said, "Politics in Canada is still like the Kennedy era; lots of people know who is screwing who, figuratively and literally, but they'd lose access if they said anything: it's difficult enough to prove insider trading, and trace kickbacks in forms other than money. There's also at least one kiddy-diddler."

Jeanette looked up sharply, admonishingly, and then sadly.

"Sorry about the phrasing, I don't mean to lessen the brutality of the act, but..." I shrugged a 'it's just the way it is'.

"Anyway, we talked again when I was on a candidate follow shoot—intimate access for days. I told him that beneath the public oil slick he took hubris, and raging at people close to him, to a new level. I told my brother not the vote for the idiot, that he would plunder the public coffers, and that a year after he left office he would have an unaccountably comfortable life style." I shrugged. "Turns out I wasn't far off."

"Anything else?"

"More than one overseas ambassador sees Canadian politics as pretty much of a joke, because we're yoked to American interests."

"Are you concerned about that?"

"They'll eventually squeeze us into a war, and my brother's kids could be killed for soft wood exports."

Jeanette contemplated my remark, as she looked at my pages, and soon said, "You may be right." She began reading.

I walked out to the balcony and watched the world go its way until she was finished. When I saw that she had begun to review some pages, I came back inside.

"The narrative is so stark," she said as I slid the glass door closed behind me, "I didn't realize how insightful some of your characters were on the first read through."

"Thanks, I think."

Uncoiling her legs, Jeanette sat up. "Clubbing readers with information at the same time you're assaulting them with action is a good way to distract them from how you're setting up things to come. Except in here," she raised the pages to my eye level, "you focus on the predicament, and not enough on the people."

"Readers have to know what being under fire is like."

"Isn't that one of the things you can't explain?"

"I had to make my character's thoughts credible."

"Hmm." Examining a point in space between us, she said, "You might be undermining your credibility by having obviously smart people repeatedly make Herculean efforts to get out of trouble of their own design." She focused on me. "Make the point that their beliefs led them into the trouble they're experiencing, and you've got endless dramatic possibilities because the reader will see how they contribute to their own fate."

A wiser man would have heard the opening shots of a rebuttal to his film review, and said something to take the edge off: "They didn't design anything, and there's endless potential in Leblanc's dialogue. Got any wine?" I said instead.

Jeanette got up. Walking toward the kitchen, she said, "Have you got something to show me on LeBlanc?"

"In my bike pack."

"Meet you back at the couch," she said, disappearing around the corner.

I went to get the pages.

When I came back, Jeanette had filled a single glass of wine to occupy me while she read.

"It needs polish," I said, handing her the pages.

"Don't we all."

"Do you ever let up?"

"I don't know," she said as her eyes fell to the top page. "I'm only thirty-eight."

She read the following:

You Taught Me Well : The Good Guys: Part 2, Page 107

Rolling swells from a decaying hangover caused me to jostle a slightly built man in the baggage claims area; in an unhurried motion, he pulled up his shirt to expose the handle of a pistol. Grinning crookedly at his extra-large companion, in Spanglish he told me that the shoot-to-kill curfew began in an hour, and that the city was thirty minutes away, "Mas y meno."

His buddy said something about the guerrillas owning the night, and that I should be in a hurry, but not to meet them. There is always tomorrow. He chuckled.

My brain was still on life support, but I knew something wasn't right about the too-polite exchange: I apologized profusely for the bump, and thanked them profoundly for the advice. Corrupting stilted laughs with manly phlegm, the duo went their way.

I wouldn't have thought more about the incident except I chanced to see them walk through immigration, not just unchallenged, but almost entirely unacknowledged had it not been for a pudgy official awkwardly changing a salute into a head scratch.

Helping LeBlanc gather our eighteen corrugated aluminum equipment cases, I mentally juggled the tricky little bopper of language that had eluded me in high school French and Latin, possession, to see which variations of what I thought I had been told rang true.

These included, "The curfew begins in an hour, more or less. The city is more or less thirty minutes away, the guerrillas more or less own the night. There is always tomorrow... more or less—" a version my mind attached to something my Uruguayan bartender squeeze in Toronto had said about Hispanic cultures. "Manana literally means tomorrow, but for practical purposes it means 'not today'. For gringo presna covering a revolution, they're probably saying tomorrow might never come."

"I'm not sure who I should I be afraid of," I told LeBlanc, as we stacked cases in front of an immigration desk. "I think I was just threatened by the good guys."

"Saaaw it," LeBlanc drawled, sucking on the last of his cigarette. "Could beeeee," he said, exhaling a plume, "the nuns bumped into your guys," referring to four missionary nuns who had been killed on the road between the airport and San Salvador six days earlier.

"Funny."

"Not shitten ya." He lit another smoke from the butt, and stuck the nub into a red, sand-filled bucket. "A quick chat to find out where they're going, offer some friendly advice... Si-si!" he broke off our conversation to exclaim to an inspector, waving both hands away from his body and toward the carton of cigarettes. "Take them all... da nada, da nada," he said, judiciously exploiting his entire Spanish vocabulary by doubling up on it.

This exchange prompted my official to squint at the fine print of the unopened toothpaste I had bought at the Syracuse airport. Looking grave, he ran a finger down the tube and said something about the environment. I shrugged my ignorance. Leblanc immediately reached into his personal wash kit, retrieved a twisted tube of Pepsodent, and offered it to his own man for inspection.

"Es correct," the custom's man said, pushing LeBlanc's hand away.

My guy held my tube up to my eyes, and grimacing like we were downwind of a hog farm ran a dirty finger nail underneath tiny print: sodium monoflourophosphate.

Impatiently, he said, "Tienes receta," then in fractured English, "Paper-medico?"

"Give it to him," LeBlanc said, stretching his smile as if making room for an extra set of teeth.

"He wants a prescription for Crest, for Christ's sake," I protested.

"J.R.," Robbie said, using my initials to end our discussion, "If he confiscates it, you're a fuckin drug runner."

"Ahhhhh!" I exclaimed, "I have another tube in this pocket." *For your wife, you thieving prick.*

"Si-si!" Robbie exclaimed a second explosion of philanthropy as a third inspector, attracted by the commotion, confiscated his Yankee's jersey for containing a banned dye that apparently wouldn't bother his son.

The speed of the double rip-off cued Robbie to perils unseen, and he jerked me back a step that surprise had me stumble into two and half before he steadied me. "Tick fucking tock," he hissed; I shut the hell up as the pieces came together for me.

Tick—a guerrilla, terrorist, or freedom fighter by any name, kills people. If his side loses, he's a murderer. If he wins—tock—he becomes the minister of defense. During the transitional bloodbath, there is no practical difference between groups and we were definitely in the transition time.

The officials exchanged pleased glances over my public diminishing, and processing us became silently efficient, and moronically transparent when they confiscated our chalecos –

bullet-proof vests: the senior man claimed the guerrillas would go for a head shot, then take them from our corpses. Confiscating them actually made things safer for us.

My protesting of his rational ensured that their inspection of our equipment cases was meticulous, 'In case there are other things the guerrillas can use, signor.'

One official would tisk over an item, another would confirm the problem, their boss with the Yankee's jersey would raise an accusatory eye, and we would both nod our appreciation that we weren't being arrested for trying to smuggle toiletries into El Salvador...

Mad Max's water purification pills and Tylenol went into a milk crate bin behind the inspection table, shortly after his Cottonelle disappeared under the examining table. Brian was allowed to keep his contact lens solution, after he put some in his eyes to prove that is what it was, as well as a pre-squeezed tube of hemorrhoid ointment, the use of which they did not require him to demonstrate. Leblanc lost nothing he didn't plan on losing, because the carton of smokes was a plant intended to influence how our equipment would be inspected.

As it turned out, the Yankee's shirt went to the right guy: every country requires an import/export carnet—copious forms listing serial numbers and the value of each piece of equipment. More often than not, officials pointed to a few expensive items and asked us to prove that they work. If they didn't ask, the inspection could be lengthy; five hours was our personal record. To avoid bettering this time, while junior agents finished sorting through our personal items for their family's benefit LeBlanc took our paperwork to their boss, and mimed the suggestion that he first look at the items listed on page two. Walking a few steps away, the official turned the cover page, pondered the list as if it was a Zen riddle, then still facing away he said, "Camera."

Robbie didn't have it out of the case before the official said, "You go."

Resting the carnet on an empty examining table, he stamped and signed the temporary import sheet, while his underlings stopped their search and motioned for us to pass through.

"Fuckin good guys," LeBlanc chortled, as we pushed three heavily laden carts out of the terminal.

Loading our gear into a red Volkswagen van, out of earshot of our driver Max asked Rob what he had said to the supervisor to hasten our departure and LeBlanc came clean. Max must have damaged something internally to create the kind of hiss that came with his refusal to authorize the bribe. Rob shrugged; looking appreciatively at the setting sun he wistfully said, "Might not fuckin matter."

We finished loading our gear within a strained silence, stacking cases so that when we were done only our driver, Carlos, and Rob could see out of the front window. We drove into the guerrilla's gathering darkness toward the good guy's curfew. Tick fucking tock.

On the way, dust, dimness, and suddenly braking for suspension cracking holes on the broken road had Rob swearing for reasons we could not see, and he did not explain. This unnerving practice turbocharged our imaginations, raising our collective angst so far above cruising altitude that I didn't dare mention how the authorities had put us directly in the line of fire, covered their ass, and I had pissed away precious minutes.

The reality was that we made it or we didn't, and no official gave a shit which way it went: a high-ranking officer had "officially" warned us of the dangers as soon as we got off the plane. He had also told us how long it took to drive to the city, and the hours of national curfew, after which the chances of actually meeting the Savior, and not driving to His city's namesake, dramatically increased. There were many witnesses....

"I like it," Jeanette said, flipping pages back and forth. "Did you call him Mad Max because he was always angry, or did he put you at risk?" she said, as she stood to get a glass for herself.

"He was an extremely bright guy who constantly failed to disguise his distaste for dealing with mere mortals... unionized mortals, anyway."

"Maybe he just didn't like you," she said, with a shrug that signaled a new topic. "LeBlanc was your partner?" she said, sitting down again.

"For legal reasons, I will say he is a remarkable facsimile." I lifted the bottle and poured her a glass. Picking up the first pages she had read, Jeanette shifted closer to me, which was more intimidating than cozy under the circumstance.

"Couple of things: if you're going to tell it like it really was, at least in your mind, you should consider using their real names. Don't worry about trying to change that history."

"There's another history?" I joked.

"Of course—the one you are going to live."

"His name is [Tony Burman](#); I worked with him and Brian Stewart on most of the really hard stuff."

"You should respect how their expertise kept you alive. What was LeBlanc like when he was not in situations of conflict?"

"He's a peculiar guy who learned to act as if he's critically inconvenienced most of the time, so that people would leave him alone."

"With his secrets," she added as if to herself. "From our conversations, I know that he was more despairing over what he had seen than your serendipitous account of his profane and alcoholic behavior makes apparent in your writing." She sorted through the material. "If you tone down the surrounding brutality readers will be able to absorb evocative passages like this." She read a paragraph in which LeBlanc sagely pronounced a newborn baby, "fuckin beautiful," with a cracking voice. Then he reverted to his cantankerous self to deal with a directive from Max.

"Explain why he was like that," Jeanette flipped her wrist with a magician's flare, "and voila! You've got the reader looking into the mirror."

I stared at her uncomprehendingly.

"LeBlanc looked into the abyss and it looked back," she said, somehow thinking this was helpful.

"He would have told the abyss to go fuck itself. Or bought it a drink," I said.

"It's between the lines. It's, it's..." Jeanette stuttered with playful frustration, before inhaling deeply and saying "Was he cheap?"

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"It's not a trick question. You're not seeing the big picture; his beliefs are the same as your readers taken to the next level; we're going to another lookout point."

"He was generous to a fault."

"Did he lie, cheat, or steal?"

"He was blunt, he played to win, he congratulated anyone who beat him, and he claimed bribes as other expenses, like we all had to. He also made people who didn't know him uncomfortable, because his mind and his mouth weren't connected, but he's a good man at heart."

"He's a good man whose heart has been crushed; he became a reflection of his experiences, not a product of their assessment." Sliding the pages back into order, Jeanette said, "The first scenes you showed me dishonor him by attempting to shock people at his expense, and the second section makes him look like an ass, when his journey reveals the profound aspects of

sharing space with the deranged. You need to build the bridge between him at war, and a younger version of him at home. What's that look about?"

"Nothing. I had a... nothing. The scenes are graphic because that's the way it was, and LeBlanc's attitude reflects the difficulty of a gifted man trying to cover events that defy representation. That he's screwed up honors his drive and talent, versus the difficulty of dealing with things people can't smell."

"Did I tell you that you're succinct when you're angry? I think I did—never mind. Anyway, the impression your audience will get is that you're bashing him, if you don't develop the character into a whole person." She raised her hand. "I know, you've told me what he thinks and why, but demonstrating his intellect doesn't tell me about the good man that lies beneath his ragged thoughts. Without that, you're pandering to a culture of pseudo-hero worshippers—doubly so if you don't develop scenes beyond a Roadrunner cartoon." She tapped the first section of pages. "You've got chase after chase for no reason other than to have your character's escape, then they go the hotel bar as if they had been delivering newspapers."

"Why would you run if not to escape, and what else would you do when you got away?" I said, perplexed.

Her gaze lingered long enough to confirm my sincerity, before she said, "Most of your readers haven't had these extreme experiences, so you should deal with the emotional quandary of your characters not just surviving on the heels of those who didn't, but living well minutes later. Readers need to appreciate the deeper influence of those events because, as I said, they can connect to them." Glancing down, she read from the section I had left at the top of the stairs... a different war. It read:

Not twenty minutes later, the night crews settled across from the rookies sitting with their backs to the street level windows.

"Fifty bucks and half an hour?" Robbie said toward the bartender, tapping his ear.

Releasing a soft fart between his lips at the sucker's bet, Hakim shook his head on the threshold of imperceptibility while he poured three fingers of forgetfulness into Bryan's glass.

"LeeAnn?" LeBlanc said.

"Up yours," she said, without unfastening her mouth from the rim of her glass.

"A hundred and twenty in twelve minutes," I said.

Hakim moved toward Horst, shaking his head.

"Done," Robbie said.

Four minutes later, twilight detonated into a second crimson rain of sinew and calcium spikes piercing the gawking crowd. A silent moment passed: our marble floor shuddered, and untainted hands reached for tables and countertops to steady themselves. Those in the know resisted this natural response, and instead covered their ears before ten, six by twelve foot sections of plate glass bowed in unison, plunging compressed air into every body cavity with a rolling whump that was surprisingly painful to the unwary.

Working his jaw to pop his ears, Horst looked at his watch. "Too late to feed the bird," he said to no one and everyone...

Jeanette looked at me questioningly.

"The second bomb kills the crowd and medics who were attending to the casualties of the first one. Birds are satellites."

She nodded, and continued reading:

Hakim casually wiped condensation from the base of Bartholomew Edwards' glass, while he sheepishly picked himself off the floor onto which he had plummeted as if he'd seen a thousand dollar bill fluttering by.

"When is cut off?" Bart said, reaching for his drink.

"Eight-thirtyish," LeeAnn said, painfully swishing a piece of lemon through her Perrier with a bandaged finger. "Depends on the kind of day, and the condition of the driver."

Tilting his drink toward Edwards, LeBlanc toasted a supportive, "Tick-tock, mate. Cheers."

"Axe?" Nikki and Jolynn said together, seeking a translation.

"Two mice ran up the clock. The clock struck the one who stopped to ask, what's that noise? The other one dropped to the floor and escaped without injury."

Edwards nodded his appreciation toward Robbie.

Bryan, who had forgotten more about the Middle East than any three of us put together would ever know, nudged my elbow. "I can't remember why hitting the deck was a good idea."

"Me neither," I said.

Turning to Edwards, he said, "Cheers, we all needed that," meaning we should have been picking up thousand dollar bills as well.

Edwards nodded at us, his expression changing to uncertainty as the first wisp of a pungent odor arrived at bar level.

Bryan lowered his eyes to read a beer label printed in four of the five languages he could negotiate in a pinch.

Everyone's eyes soon inspected the architecture, or their fingernails, lest they influence the decision the multimillion-dollar anchorman had to make in the brief stretch of time before another round of sirens echoed through the downtown core.

"I'll be fucked," Edwards said, shifting from one foot to the other, "I shit myself."

"Not anytime soon," LeeAnn said, blandly.

"Jockeys or briefs?" Hakim said, seriously concerned about his bar stool.

Turning toward the elevators, Edwards said, "Put that strange fellow's tab on room ninety-two. His translator's, as well," he said, nodding toward me as I finally remembered to "pay" Robbie the \$120 he had left at Julie's Mansion in the spring.

"Stairs," Nikki said, not raising her voice.

With a chop-step, Bart angled toward the stairwell: "Hakim—everyone who's ever done this gets doubles."

Horst glanced toward LeeAnn, who shrugged at Jolynn, who ordered gin ahead of everyone else who had eaten a salad washed in hotel tap water. Or who otherwise weren't strangers to an unexpected shit; it was the way it was, and not a big deal in places where death was so busy.

Jeanette placed the pages on her lap, and a shallow smile faded into contemplation as she closed her eyes. And there she sat. Tick. Tick. Tick.

"That scene helps to demonstrate how combat kicks the hell out of normal values. Like I said, context is everything," I explained.

"By glamorizing their risk taking before this scene," she said, "you missed the point that some of them just sat there."

"What point; they were used to it?"

"Exactly."

"Exactly what?"

"There was a time when life and death issues weren't a usual part of their day, a time before the possibility of being shredded by glass had them take precautions, a time when they thought about what they had seen, like you did after El Salvador, and events changed them into who they were in this scene. Right or wrong?"

"I'm not saying they didn't."

"Why didn't you investigate why they sat there?"

"I told you, they were used to it."

"So used to it that living well immediately afterwards was normal?"

"What else would you do?"

"These news crews are metaphors—they're messages to readers who are lounging in the midst of their unacknowledged dangers until they reach the point your characters have reached, and suddenly find themselves asking what the hell they are doing there, and why they didn't take action?" She began searching through the pages. "You allude to this quandary a number of times." She found her spot. "Here, LeBlanc asks himself how killing farmers makes the world a safer place." She looked at me. "This internal dialogue suggests that his personal cause is blowing apart before his eyes."

"I'll have him say it to a buddy," I said, missing the point.

"The question isn't rhetorical." Jeanette shifted on the sofa to give us breathing room. "You implied he's on the verge of realizing that recording depravity for a noble cause doesn't create a revolt against the disgrace of the human condition. His pictures are revolting on their face and perverse in that an audience finds them riveting. More to the point, in that moment he glimpsed his crossroads, and now he secretly knows that his bang-bang days are numbered."

"You lost me between depravity and nobility."

"It's in bee-tweeeen," she stretched the word. "He has created a predicament of entangled beliefs: he saw this kind of thing in his first war, knows he will see it in his next one, and secretly fears that his artistry is raising the standard of acceptable atrocity to an audience that's doing nothing about it. That would be the killing blow."

"To what?"

"His humanity; he can barely function as it is." She shuddered as she shook my pages and forcefully said, "This work airs your assumptions and internal dramas. Different characters represent the different options you've taken in similar circumstances, but you inevitably come back to where you started, because the 'tenth' choice," she paraphrased in the air, "made you think something will be different. It won't: the tenth choice is always a circuitous path back to the first, because your very existence is based on maintaining a continuity of thought and action. You'd have to change a fundamental belief to change the nature of your choices."

Rubbing the top page, she looked at me compassionately. "Your style represents what you think and how you came to think it, both of which portend to an inevitable end that's staring you in the face."

"Which is?"

"Becoming LeBlanc."

Staring, I said, "Your eyes look normal."

"Mocking me doesn't change anything. Your characters represent different aspects of your personality, which you test from event to event to try to resolve personal quandaries. But you corner yourself by emphasizing peripheral issues, like you did with your screenplay, because the core issues either offended or made no sense to you."

"What personal quandaries? It was what it was."

She cocked her head a come-off-it pose.

"Really," I said.

"The first time we met, you said the necessity to act is the basis upon which I should evaluate your character, albeit under the guise of evaluating your screenplay character's character." She grinned. "In other words, necessity is a qualifier of bravery for you, but your characters created necessity from choosing to be there. You couldn't distinguish courage from idiocy or hero from villain because you volunteered to be part of the problem, and that, my friend, is your cage. You became a part of the insanity in order to survive in the insanity." She pitched forward. "But you are correct on one point: courage and heroes aren't what we think they are in warfare."

"This is going to be how your people would think of it?"

"It is. They would know that you can't turn a fundamentally flawed event into a virtue." She relaxed her shoulders. "That's like a medic shooting a colleague, then getting a medal for saving his life under fire." Jeanette leaned back and placed her palms on the table. "It's no different than giving medals for murder under the banner of a duty, awarded by the very people who created the drama while sipping their daiquiris oblivious to the sirens outside."

"There goes the military audience."

"You also haven't fixed an ending in your mind," she said, "because you're secretly searching for meanings in experiences that most people freely admit are insane, yet they still go to them, which can only mean what?"

"It was necessary?"

"Dipping her head as if from the weight of sudden wisdom manifesting—as I saw it—she said, "Within the midst of this madness, LeBlanc had a peek at himself, and he questioned what he was doing there. This tells me that you glimpsed a slice of what you are really like, but your ego slammed that door shut before the secret could slip through the crack in the mirror of your self-reflection."

Untangling her words, and still having missed her point, I heard Jeanette comparing our works under the guise of our characters' beliefs. In this light, I saw her fervor as antagonism aimed at goading me into changing my story to validate whatever she had in mind for hers. It ticked me off.

"My work isn't about special people sowing the groundwork for peace of mind," I said carefully. "It's a glassy stare at the casual cruelty of seeding minefields in fertile land. Mutilation and involuntary crapping may be less appealing social transactions to you than discussing their philosophical implications, but we aren't all on the same step of the evolutionary ladder. I can't write about things I don't know, and neither can you." I steeled myself for the counter assault.

"Shit," she said exasperated. "Am I speaking Mandarin? Do I have to throw you down the stairs to get your attention?"

"That might work if the lesson is about gravity."

Breathing a sigh of defeat, Jeanette picked up my pages and placed them lightly in my hands, as if they were ancient parchment. "Let's move on. Assess events you saw for their underlying nature, and question the odds of these things happening to one person. If you do this throughout your entire book, you should begin to appreciate how your experiences are unique by virtue of what their totality represents. From there some of your shadow beliefs will fall, and the extra light will shine on a purpose." She leaned into my personal space. "Your first thirty-five years are an extraordinary tale that you're turning into a common war story, because you can't make a single leap of faith."

"What leap is it this time?"

"You haven't examined any of your exquisite moments, even though you believe nothing happens by chance; the leap is being willing to accept whatever conclusion you arrive at."

Jeanette suddenly stood and shouted, "I'm right here!" launching her cat into sanctuary under the couch.

"I can still see you," I muttered, my irritation dissolving into consternation over a crazy woman standing as if nailed to a cross.

Dropping her arms, she said, "Would you like a Tarot reading?" as if this was a chore. Realizing her delivery wasn't exactly a gripping invitation, she lightened up and added, "Just for the fun of it. It also might loosen you up, so we can have interesting discussions like this. This was great, wasn't it?"

"Yup."

Not until that night in bed did I fit a critical piece of my daily Jeanette puzzle together: she was trashing my work about adapting to conflict, because she faced her days within the cozy context of metaphysics. This meant that something bad must have happened—something particularly cruel for her to run so far away that she needed me to filter her life through my alleged levels of damaged beliefs, to regain her sense of safety. I was her disco ball.

Zzz: Drifting from a conversation on an El Al flight, my thoughts melted into a camera crew eating lunch at a Kibbutz patio, which became the deck outside of the Horse & Hound. Across the street a family was having a picnic in Hyde Park, a loin clothed jogger stopped to feed a Chinese chow scraps, and the animal turned into a statue of a lion. A small crowd admired it while a weeping man herded sheep into Starbucks. The aroma of coffee wafting from the kitchen lulled me into the present.

Chapter 18: Remodeling Beliefs

Annoyingly, I found myself looking forward to the Tarot card reading, a feeling I suppressed by abbreviating our ritual exchange of small talk when I saw Jeanette the next morning. This change in our routine felt transparent even to me, but Jeanette said nothing about it as she led the way to the dining room table.

Sitting across from each other, she said, "I'm going to deal nine cards face down in a cross formation, then a key issue card to the side." She handed me the deck and mimed shuffling. "I'll turn them in order, explain the metaphorical significance, and as we go on I'll integrate the focus of each card into the next, to refine the big picture, until the tenth one brings everything together."

"Dabble?" I said dryly.

"I didn't say I was sloppy. Cut them into three stacks."

I did as she asked, and Jeanette lay out the cards. Without emotion, she plucked meaning from the first four in clipped tones, spot-welding sentences together with what for her were unusual "ums," and "ahs" she seemed unaware of uttering.

The first card signified impending wealth, the next death, which she said could mean the death of a person, a relationship, or a belief. The third card was about personal development, which changed the death card to mean the ending of a debilitating idea, and wealth became knowledge gained from opening my mind. Go figure.

During the next run of cards, the pitch of her voice dropped as she repackaged information from previous ones, until we came to the ninth card. Haltingly, she said it was about journeys,

but not the getting on and off planes kind. She closed her eyes. Speaking in a distant manner, her words became more formal than her everyday vocabulary, while still flowing with the easy rhythm of forethought. A cynic might call it rehearsed.

Occasionally speaking in the plural, such as, "We see that you will travel extensively on a sojourn that has rippled through time," she served up information that went well beyond the parameters set by previous cards: I managed to wrangle my smirk into a stingy smile over her contrivances, aimed at enhancing my interest, until she said I had lived some lives as a soldier. For reasons unknown, I took offence.

"This occupation performed different roles at different times," she said into my derisive grin. "In one period, they were deterrent peacekeepers watching over their borders, and those of neighbors who acted in concert with the principles of peaceful coexistence. They neither instigated nor intervened in other's hostilities, because that postponed a lasting resolution to problems warring societies had not dealt with sensibly. At this time, soldier's practiced tact over tactics, and mental patients over medical patience, although they were well trained in the deadly arts beyond anything your world knows. Foreign societies honored their total commitment to their tasks by leaving them alone."

Apparently seeking a better response than "Uh huh," Jeanette said that, at this time, I had intimate knowledge of thirteen couples who were learning evolutionary lessons about conflict, both personal and external. These couples shared a telepathic symbiosis that made the sum of their parts a remarkably powerful force.

Essentially, the women preferred to align neighbors, and people of influence, with the side of logic by verbally launching events that drained the mental and emotional coffers of antagonists. On the practical side, whisper tactics, for example, were so inexpensively effective that large segments of populations withdrew the tacit permission their governments presumed from its citizens, through verbal protest and subtler acts of civil disobedience. Undermined, maybe even embarrassed but not stupid, they had a good look at the ingeniousness of their quarry, and they thought twice about forcing the hand of the people who refined diplomacy to an intricate art form.

The men implemented the bolder aspects of the women's machinations, using surprise and opportunity to coordinate sudden cuts in lines of communications, and suspension of trade, to demonstrate the scope of the siege that was possible without resorting to battering rams. A key to the success of using coercion to avoid expensive conflicts was that they never threatened - they acted as a shot across the bow. If only because no adversary knew, for certain, where these people's alliances lay in wait, they saw that it was both logically and financially in everyone's best interests to prefer peace.

Jeanette's tone clearly favored the patient approach, without dismissing the use of force she described as a "necessary potential of other's making." She finally said that I had experienced the former mode of conflict resolution in one life, the butchering kind of soldiering in others, and my most recent occupation had completed my investigation of the illusions that cause all manner of conflicts. I was now assembling the beliefs all of these experiences had generated.

I felt betrayed: Jeanette was putting spin on our moments of candor to lend credibility to her card interpretations. Following this recognition, I felt a wave of disappointment as she mechanically said, "Do not be distressed. You are not subject to a fate based on the past. You have endless choices, all of them influenced by the totality of experiences yet not assessed."

"What card tells you that?"

The glaze over her eyes vanished with a twist of her head, and in her usual voice she equivocated, "It's a composite view from an unusually in depth session." Turning the tenth card, she said I was neck deep in a quest that would take a couple of lifetimes to complete.

Certain that I was neck deep in something I made an excuse to leave, and headed to the Dover pub for lunch.

I didn't call Jeanette until noon, two days later, because it took me that long to see past her abuse of confidences, and clever reconstruction of known information, to recall that she had warned me about teachers shocking students to move things along. That said I was less impressed by her all-out commitment this time...

Jeanette answered on the fourth ring with a breathless hello, allotted me half an hour to get to Nolan's, then hung up as if her tub was overflowing. Thirty-four minutes later, we were chatting about everyday things, as opposed to the paranormal.

When I was as at ease as I ever was with her nowadays, I opened my manila envelope and asked her to comment on the flat tire rewrite I had done following her suggestions. Jeanette took the chapter from me appreciatively, her hand lingering on mine as she said, "I understand what you're feeling, but skepticism is something only you can resolve."

"Fair enough," I said, waving at Bréta for coffee.

Jeanette began reading.

The changes I had made included our inability to find a special tool that released the jack from its moorings, so we forced it from a French-engineered locking mechanism that would have sent Houdini into retirement. Also following the driver's manual instructions, it took us fifteen minutes to remove the spare tire, then we couldn't get the jack to function under load. We solved that problem with C-clamps from our lighting kit, but the spare went flat by the time we had repacked the tools. Previously included, but now polished, was that we caught an elderly man peeking from behind a curtained window across the street, and we asked him where we could get help. He said there was a garage a few blocks away, but it was an uncertain day; it might not be open. It wasn't, and we ended up buying a spare tire from a passing motorist for the price of a used car, because he was the only other person on the road and he knew it.

In the meantime, I wrote about the sniper's opposing thoughts of being caught, and tortured, and those of imagining his friends' faces when he described the moment the red hole in Ely's chest exploded out of his back in a pulpy spray.

Finished reading this section, Jeanette lowered the pages and said, "You've done a good job blending in the delays."

"But?" I said, holding a small aluminum container of milk for her.

"I still don't know what your sniper is seeing." She blew across the top of her drink, a thought manifest, then pitching forward she said, "If you put him on a hill overlooking you guys, you could describe everyone from the sniper's point of view to make the physical distance intimate. I mean," she snapped out words with a gulped breath, "he could tell us if they're tall, have a scar or nose hairs—that kind of thing."

"And have Ely meet us there," I said as the image came to mind, "but he's never quite in sight, so the flat tire gives the sniper borderline opportunities that he ultimately doesn't take. I like it. Except... hmm."

"You can also give the sniper an internal dialogue that has him speculate that he was not destined to get his shot on that day; the pace of fixing the tire was like an omen saying, 'Not here and not now,' so he left without taking it out on you guys."

Not willing to go down the road of omens or Allah's will, I said, "I have pictures of the real people for reference."

"You don't strike me as the type to save..." she paused, "anything."

The implication flew over my head. "My ex organized dig-me press passes and photographs into albums." I shrugged, "I kept it up."

"Let's go," Jeanette said, sliding sideways to stand free of the table. "I want to see the faces of the people who defied the odds with you."

"We were a motley crew."

"You could have been the grateful dead," she said, leaving a ten-dollar bill on the table for two medium cups of Peruvian coffee, winter blend, whatever that meant.

Chapter 19: False Creek

Vertical blinds behind Ed's cobalt blue couch slashed bars of light across pictures of colleagues and cellmates, as I turned the page from the Central and South American section to the Middle East. "These cameramen," I said, tapping the edges of a group photograph, "don't work conflicts anymore. The work didn't suit Franz, and Terry is dead."

"It sounds like it didn't suit either of them," Jeanette said quietly.

"Terry didn't die in combat. He got sick after working in Laos, but the Brits couldn't find out why. They suspected AIDS at the end," I said, turning the page.

Jeanette stopped my hand. "There's more to it."

"He was gay," I ventured.

"That's not important," she said, concentrating on the picture.

"It's all I know... other than it was a strange call."

"In what way?" She pushed my hand backwards.

"I hadn't heard from Doug for more than a year, when he phoned from England to say that Terry had died. I figured it was an apology call of sorts because—it doesn't matter," I said, turning the page back to Amritsar, "Terry was barely a passing acquaintance. This is the Golden Temple. It's like the Sikh's Vatican."

"There's more," Jeanette said, turning back the page. "The official version of his death is what others wanted the world to think happened," she said tentatively. In a disinterested tone, she accurately described the leaden motion of joint grinding fatigue, and pounding thirst of jungle travel. First pausing, she concluded with the stunted wonder of unexpected thoughts rolling off her tongue, "He surprised a group of very private people. The deadly aspect was that he saw a gathering of criminals and government officials; your friend was employed by a security agency. The officials knew him because they were plugged into the intelligence community. They poisoned him."

"Don't know if I can squeeze that in, but I'll keep it in mind."

"You've acted like a spy," Jeanette said in her normal tone.

"Straddling laws was part of the game. I suppose I could tie that to spying, but it doesn't fit the rest of my story."

"What do you mean by straddling?" She took a pillow from the backrest, and then the scrapbook from my lap. Shifting to the end of the couch, Jeanette put the cushion behind her neck and reclined to look at the photograph, and me, from between bent knees. I figured she had settled in to see if I was any more open minded after the Tarot reading, because I had summarily dismissed her psychic suggestion.

I made myself comfortable at the other end of the couch, placing our feet strategically heel to heel to keep us from sliding down. "That must've hurt," I said, pointing to a large circular scar on her bare foot.

"Surprisingly little. Straddling?"

"Right. In Chile, we gave undercover police the slip before a dissident took us to the salt mine where the government executed los desperacidos—the missing. In Pakistan, there were aspects of President Zia Al-Haq's campaigning that he didn't want the world to know about, so we ditched our minder. In Teheran—"

"Hold on. What do you mean by gave them the slip and ditched a minder? These are trained people."

"There was only one car following us in Santiago, the traffic was bad, and the driver didn't expect us to take off. In Pakistan, Ski and I worked a chance remark into an opportunity to lose our guy, and we were jailed for a few hours in Iran for looking like we were taping forbidden sites."

"What was the chance remark?"

"On an internal flight, we bet on how long it would take from full power to wheels off, like we always did. The closer we came to our numbers, the more we glanced at each other, the more our cocoa-colored minder turned a whiter shade of pale. When we finally began our climb out, he leaned close to Dave, asked him if he had ever covered a plane crash. Ski said, 'Just small ones.' Our guy looked panicky-curious, so I told him that metal fatigue from micro-vibrations and years of flying in hot, humid climates caused all of the turboprop crashes I knew about. Ski added that the kiss-your-ass-goodbye clue to the passengers would have been the plane's downward attitude increasing while the air speed slowed. It would feel like flying through mud, which made no sense until you looked out the window and factored in the added drag caused by a wing twisting on Fokker turboprops like ours."

Visualizing how a normal, full flaps descent would affect our man, Jeanette nodded for me to continue.

"We did our thing in Lahore and got back on the same plane, while our guy took a bus back to Islamabad. That gave us a full day to go where the army had polled some towns with fifty caliber certainty of Zia winning."

"Tom said something about you guys insulting the President when you did the interview?" Jeanette said without humor.

"The office, not the man: his press secretary was floating our appointment until election day to make sure we couldn't be in Karachi where they expected protesting. When Gavin and I showed up with a backup camera, the chief of security clenched his teeth in a frozen smile and asked us when the President could expect our producer [Neville Bolt](#), and cameraman to arrive. Gavin offhandedly said, "Oh, they can't make it," as if half a crew didn't reflect poorly on the importance of having access to the President."

Jeanette smiled at the image.

"I shot the interview with Zia while Ski and Smitty shot some tame stuff in Karachi."

Cocking her head, she said, "The office might have thought little of shooting you." Her expression lingered before she said, "Did you cross battle lines?"

"And vice versa, sure."

"When it was in your plans," she honed her question, "were you considered to be consorting with the enemy?" Her confident manner warned me that Tom had told her about that time in Central America.

"That's a rare ban," I temporized.

"The question remains."

"The few countries that care about that kind of thing confiscate passports when you arrive, so you're stuck in-country if you're caught breaking rules. Hypothetically, you could get around that by bringing a giveaway passport."

"You're talking about crews with dual citizenship?"

"A lot of them considered themselves citizens of the world; they had other passports."

"Hypothetically, wouldn't that would be against the law?"

"Sometimes: they considered themselves part of an advanced association of kindred spirits who were doing the right thing for the right reason. Sometimes, that looks like something it's not," I said, tongue in cheek.

"Which is the credo that landed you in an Argentine jail."

"No—well, kind of. We were screwed by the lens seeing things we didn't."

"All of it if you don't mind," Jeanette said, turning back to the first page of the South America section.

I explained that federal interrogators asked us if a portion of a panoramic shot could be still-framed and electronically enhanced, and we said that it could subject to technical limitations. Doubling the size of a car half the distance to the horizon, for example, would make it indistinguishable from a house. Tripling the size would make traffic look like golf balls in a blizzard. Why, they next asked, had we twice held steady on extremely wide shots that showed almost no activity?

Ski explained that he had followed a light aircraft's landing and rollout until it went behind a row of hangars, frame right, then he held steady for a few seconds before swish-panning to hold on the space where the plane would roll into frame left. This was Film School 101 stuff: cutting screen time while sustaining continuity. Authorities said we held steady on a fuel dump on the first pause, and a fighter bunker in the second.

Bad luck, we said, but the British would hardly consider finding fuel or jet fighters at the closest airport to the Malvinas Islands strategic information.

This didn't matter, they said, because we had broken the law.

"Had you?" Jeanette asked me.

"Technically."

"Is there another way?" Jeanette said, curling her toes to poke the bottoms of my feet.

"You've got to admit that journalists are well placed to engage in spying activities."

"Not as much as you think."

"Obviously, more than you'd like to believe. Your footage was viewed by the embassies of all concerned, correct?"

"That's hardly covert."

"Secrecy is not a prerequisite to espionage, it's a method. What was the nature of Terry's assignments? Where did he go?"

[Sean Bobbitt](#), a cameraman I had worked some hard stuff with, was Terry's close friend, so I knew more about him than a passing acquaintance normally would. A fact I didn't appreciate until my list for Jeanette grew to include Afghanistan, many trips to the north of Ireland, plus all of the countries in conflict I had been in—a baker's dozen if you included repeats and internal strife.

"Did he do volunteer assignments?"

"He made me look shy."

"Well?" she said, expectantly.

"I said I'd look into it."

"You said you'd keep it in mind. Listen," she sat up, "I'm not trying to push the spying angle for your book. I'm trying to have you see that your friend didn't understand the world he was playing in—where he really was. This is a huge lesson for my trainees." She looked cross-eyed at me, a thought found a home, then she said, "I think you need a demonstration of what I mean beyond the obvious, otherwise we're going to get bogged down. Let's figure something out over lunch on Granville Island."

"Sure—my tab—I've got some money coming," I said, getting off the couch. "You're talking about a demonstration of where I really am?"

"If you recall our first meeting," she said heading toward the door, "I said intellect had little to do with grasping many of my premises, because you needed an experience to embrace them. Otis in the park amounts to the theory about where you really were, because it wasn't a personal demonstration to you—only a difference of opinion. The experience we are heading for will demonstrate how you reason your perspectives to suit your beliefs, which means your situational awareness is actually a description that applies only in your mind."

"I'll probably figure out what you just said by the time we get there," I said, opening the door for her.

Moving past me, she said, "The point is that our audience needs to appreciate how dangerous it would be for my rescuers to reason a circumstance to suit any belief. They can never lose sight of the nature of events."

"Is this what you meant when you said they don't believe anything?"

"Yes, but there's more to it."

I knew Jeanette should have this scene written, because it had nothing to do with me, but confronting her didn't matter now that I was working on scenes for the grant application on my own. "Got it," I said.

"Let's take the Aquabus," she said, as I locked the door. "The tip is mine."

"Done," she said, then she clicked her tongue like an Arab grandmother discovering too late that her granddaughter had decorated the kitchen floor with flour and water.

We walked half a kilometer to the foot of Hornby Street in casual conversation, then boarded a twenty-foot ferry that offered unobstructed panoramic views through large Plexiglas windows, helmed amidships from a steering station that protruded two feet higher than the cabin deckhead.

According to our "captain", a young woman honing her spiel in preparation for the lucrative Asian tourist invasion, Spanish traders were taking otter pelts from the Pacific rim to the China market when, in 1792, Captain George Vancouver arrived to negotiate for territory and to map the shoreline. The island of Vancouver, not Isla de Ferdinand, speaks to his success. She next told us that shallow waters extended much farther into the strait than seemed reasonable for a mountainous region. As a result, it was rare that a summer's day went by without a sailboat skipper spending quality time with his family, stuck in the soft mud of the Spanish Banks, until the flood tide released his ego. She speculated that as brilliant a sailor as the Captain must have been, it was likely that he also did six hours of penance before ghosting toward shore on the evening's onshore breeze. Tracking parallel to the bluffs of the future English Properties, and the site of the University of British Columbia, he would have crossed the area where John Barrymore would twice anchor his schooner to watch Pacific International Yachting Association

paces during prohibition, before dropping anchor at the mouth of what appeared to be a river draining a continent.

Crossing this protected cove our skipper said that, a century ago, the city stabilized the tidal flats of False Creek so that mining, logging, and various other industries could settle there. The area was officially known as Industrial Island, but for social and historical reasons the name Granville stuck, and as industry left or was burned out, it was replaced by visitor-friendly commercial endeavors. Almost two hundred years since Captain George first saw the twin sand bars of the flats, Granville Island now hosts a marina, a private community of floating homes, and an eclectic array of markets, tourist traps, bars, artist's shops, a theatre, and the Emily Carr University of Art and Design.

At this well-timed point in her monologue, our captain pitched the ferry service itself, declaring that the two-tonne vessels, of twenty to twenty-four feet in length, travelled eight routes around the peninsula that is the city of Vancouver, and is otherwise accessed by the Burrard, Granville, and Cambie Street bridges from the south. The service is a huge tourist draw, while it facilitates the movement of island workers from key parts of the city without concern for parking. Checking her watch, about three minutes for the crossing, she expertly brought the craft alongside the island's ramp at the Arts Club Theatre, and wished us all a great day.

Walking behind a young couple who were holding hands back to front, as they rose from the bulkhead mounted seating to disembark, Jeanette nodded at a stranger waiting dockside, and whispered, "He's in for a surprise today."

"Tell him that on the way by to make sure," I quipped.

"Behavior designs destiny, so we are all self-fulfilling prophets. I don't need to say anything."

"I was making a joke," I said into her elfin expression.

"Oh—sorry," she said taking my arm. "You meant he would have been surprised by my comment; I get it, now. I meant he had already arranged his surprise."

"You knew exactly what I meant," I said coolly, as we exited the ferry amidships, and stepped onto the heavy planking of the pier. Jeanette alternately loosened and tightened her grasp on my arm, as we walked side by side up to the paved landing.

"Months ago," she said when we were at the top, "I was amazed to discover how much difficulty people created for themselves by not saying what they mean or truly meaning what they say. Case in point, you took a shot at clairvoyance because you think it's crap, whereas I interpreted your comment to suit my focus. Then I remembered where I was—with you."

"There was no confusion; you made an assumption no one else would have thought of... but you're entitled to your opinion," I said, reasonably.

"I used to think I was entitled, but what a mistake that was!" Jeanette giggled at a private thought until we stopped to read a menu posted on varnished pine boards, bordered by a hunter green frame. Surrounded by some kind of a creeping plant, the design proclaimed a tofu and wheat germ establishment.

"Public speaking," she said, perusing the menu, "taught me that the less hyperbole I subjected others to, the clearer my ideas were in my own mind." She faced me. "In time, I realized that I viewed reality through how I twisted its fabric, and I made a point to avoid superlatives for a week. I sounded... there's that look again."

"It's nothing." I tugged on her sleeve. "Look—vegetarian lasagna for five-ninety-five!" I said, mocking her dietary preference.

"They have burgers," she said, mocking mine.

Moving toward the door, she said, "On the first day of avoiding hyperbole, I sounded like an answering machine, and from that perspective I could already see how the way I said things influenced my perceptions." Jeanette opened the door and walked through ahead of me. "This is when I decided to use plain language, beginning with clients who expected hype."

"You used to lie?"

Rocking her head in a more-or-less manner, she said, "I didn't need to be so thrilled about quoting before-and-after sales figures of ads, and I always posed the ominous "what if" question to have them see how the train may be leaving their business behind if their competitors were on-board."

"Got it, so what happened?"

"Without the hype or implied promises, clients began to see me as more of a marketing advisor than a telemarketer. That change had me appreciate that I was negotiating peace of mind through good business sense, and that realization led to a moment of clarity." We walked into a cantilevered section over the water. "To my horror, I saw how common gestures had led me to think of some people as inconsequential. Is this good for you?"

"Sure—great spot," I said, and we sat in a shaded corner. "To your horror sounds like hyperbole." I grinned.

Jeanette flip-fluttered a linen cloth before drawing it across her lap in a fluid motion. I snapped mine open and dragged it over one leg as she said, "I'm not overstating the moment I realized that saying 'have a nice day' was a hollow gesture, but far from meaningless, because it brought to my attention how other apparently innocent circumstances could lead to something unimaginable."

"How can they be hollow and meaningful?" I said, sliding two menus from a wire stand; I offered one to her.

"Thanks. I saw how practicing social graces as part of my job generated a momentum that ran contrary to my beliefs. Automatically saying things like, 'Thanks for your time,' sloughs people off. Essentially, it's laying the groundwork for neglect, and without curbing that momentum my business relationships would eventually fade away. I would also become disillusioned by the unfairness of my polite life, and redouble my efforts to talk a good image, which would only add energy to the poor circumstance. Finally, I would talk myself into despair, which is what we all joke about when empty promises have made recognition of the proper course of action nearly impossible." Looking intense, as if she were entrusting me with launch codes, she said, "Everywhere you go, you hear people convincing themselves that they're doing something about the issues they prattle on about, even in jest." Jeanette glanced at the wine list on the back of the menu, and returned it to the holder as a hyper-personable waiter introduced himself, and asked if we would like a drink to start.

In a single breath parody of Daryl, Jeanette ordered a carafe of house red, the veggie mush, and two glasses of ice water. I ordered a fish burger sans seaweed; she hadn't lied to me, they did have burgers.

Smiling deferentially, Daryl bowed and moved away with a "Very good," parody of an English butler.

"The underlying nature of rote social graces is insincerity," Jeanette said, sliding her cutlery to one side, "because we are invested in other's welfare only to the extent that it affects ours. Essentially, we're affirming a peaceful transaction, which is a positive thing, but we don't realize our words are a pervasive force of self-conditioning that can bring unexpected consequences. We've both seen smart people do stupid things."

"I guess."

"You make my point. Your poor grammar, and habit of communicating in incomplete sentences, while leaving gaps you automatically fill with assumptions, has caused you to guess about your own experiences."

"Come on—that's just a phrase."

"Why did you use it in a straight forward circumstance? Really, think about it before you say something else inane." She grinned.

"I suppose I wasn't sure where you were going."

"Precisely, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"You obviously understood me," I backtracked.

"But your ego-accomplice is not allowing you to understand me." She leaned in. "Your turn-of-phrase was based on the assumption that I might be leading you to agree with something you could regret. It follows," she said as Daryl returned with our wine, "that gaps in your thoughts, represented by gaps in your sentences, allow you to misrepresent yourself and conceal the fact that your underlying concern is about upholding your image."

"I don't see it."

"Not sure where I was going—why else would that matter?" Jeanette leaned farther forward, forcing Daryl to lean away from an attempt to pour for us. "Maintaining your image is why you didn't commit to a simple truth. It follows that if you don't have another's best interests at heart in comfortable circumstances, you will, at a minimum abandon them when the pressure is on. If they are the source of that pressure," she leaned back to shrug, "you could be dangerous to them."

I thanked Daryl, holding up a dismissive hand so that he would set the bottle down, but he reached around it to pour two half glasses, before leaving us with the apologetic bow of an inadvertent intruder.

"Intentionally setting out to confuse me punctures your point. I think I've got a better handle on what's dangerous than most people, and I would never hurt you," I said, reaching for my glass.

"I see that you haven't taken the time to assess our conversation about me standing in your way."

"Nope," I said taking a sip.

"Mmm," Jeanette said, sipping. "Is it cruel to be entertained at the expense of another's fear or pain?"

"That's probably the dictionary definition," I said, irrationally feeling like I was throwing a boomerang blindfolded.

"Isn't that what you did with your minder in Pakistan?"

"He was playing in the big leagues, and he struck out." I shrugged.

"It didn't cross your mind that the Chief of Security might shoot him, if only to appease Zia because you insulted him?"

My mouth opened, but no sound came out.

"That's why I used the word horror," Jeanette said, swirling her wine under her nose.

"He knew he was working for a despot," I said, finding my voice.

"What your minder knew has nothing to do with the essence of your action."

"What Zia did isn't my responsibility."

"I didn't say it was." Incongruously, Jeanette flung her arms wide to encompass the entire vista as she exclaimed, "Isn't this terrific!"

"Ya—great spot," I mumbled; the idea that I might have set up a man to be killed slithered through my conscience.

"No—really, it's beautiful, isn't it?"

"I said it was," I snapped as Daryl returned with our meals.

To his credit, being the elephant in the room did not affect his show of grinding pepper from an unusual altitude, which is probably why Jeanette and I initially failed to notice that he hadn't brought the parmesan.

"Good thing personality is worth something," I said, looking over my shoulder to get his attention.

"Don't be too quick to judge. You don't know what might be distracting him."

"Maybe the distraction will take his mind off the tip."

"He owns the social graces, and he's well spoken. He's probably a U.B.C. student, and it's near exam time."

"How are his exams my fault?"

"Fault?" Jeanette said as if I had belched. Setting her fork down, she folded her hands in front of her as a sign that she was lining me up in her sights. "Do you think he's punishing us?"

"No, but tipping is based on the level of service he gives customers."

"My cheese has nothing to do with your lunch, or do you think I'm not capable of handling the situation?" She unclasped her hands to sip ice water.

"Hardly, but..." I had nowhere to go; I shrugged and smirked, letting the words dangle as if she had missed a point.

"You did what you did in Pakistan. Now, you won't do that kind of thing again, and you'll be more careful about doing this again, as well."

"Doing what?"

"Sexism aside, you tried to regain your good standing with me at Daryl's expense, when you haven't lost it."

"Give him whatever you want," I said.

"I will, and your passive-aggression won't change that." Jeanette picked up her napkin and patted the corners of her mouth. "Some friendly advice: you're an all-or-nothing kind of guy at heart, but the world has forced you to pretend to be cautious, so your initial threats sound like sulking. Most of the people who recognize this mode make the mistake of thinking you're negotiating for your way, because that's what sulking is about. However, they don't know where you've been or what you've seen, so it doesn't dawn on them that you're actually giving them their last chance."

"Huh?"

"You challenged me at Daryl's expense: if I give him a small tip, you'll think I capitulated to your way of thinking about fault and punishment. If I give him a large tip, you'll think it was an in-your-face kind of thing, and still think you're correct."

I topped up our glasses. "Give him fifteen percent and be done with it. No harm, no foul," I said reasonably.

"I think ten percent will make the point. Wait!" she shouted as if there were Hemlock in the glass I was bringing to my lips. "He'll think I'm cheap; better make it five percent to emphasize that he screwed up. No," she vacillated. "He didn't spill anything—that's a five percent offence. Seven should sting him about right. Maybe nine—no eight sounds..."

"Jesus Christ, it's just cheeeeeeese," I hissed.

"Ex-actly," Jeanette exhaled the word. "It's just cheese," she said, repeating the gesture that had first brought our surroundings to my attention.

Briefly noting how clear things could sometimes be when I was with her, I grasped what had just happened between us: still thinking about Pakistan, and unhappy about Daryl overhearing Jeanette speak unflatteringly about me, I had lost sight of our circumstance. We were two friends and business partners having a quiet lunch in a terrific setting, the underlying point of which was to give me an experience about how people do not appreciate their true circumstance. Damn.

I chuckled self-consciously.

"Good," Jeanette said, tinkling my glass with hers. "Now that you've seen the absurdity of making a stand for your ego, you can be on guard for it." She sipped her drink.

"I won't do that again," I assured her.

"You certainly will," she said lowering her glass. "Nothing has changed beyond understanding how easily it happens. It could take years of practice to stop that reaction entirely." She grinned. "That's why they're called disciplines. By the way, I'm going away for a week."

"What? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Would it have changed anything?" she said, innocently.

"I—it would have been good to know," I muttered.

"It would have interfered with what turned out to be a GREAT DAY!" she exclaimed the last two words, startling Daryl as he came to our table with a bowl of parmesan cheese.

Apologizing to Jeanette, he explained that he had grated it fresh, and she thanked him as he spooned coarse filings over her pasta.

A part of me felt vindicated, because Daryl should have told Jeanette what he was doing, but mostly I felt used; Jeanette had designed the lesson to smooth over the moment when I was bound to realize there was more to her going away than she was saying, and that something more was Josh.

I got the impression from her double glance and grin at me between bites that she knew what I was thinking; I held my tongue for the rest of the meal, taking care to speak politely, and limit my comments to remarks that were on point. Reciprocally, Jeanette didn't push me for more other than leaving a twenty percent tip about which I said nothing.

With no dialogue underway, the ambiance was on the cool side when we were walking to the ferry and Jeanette made an ironic comment by shivering, and noting there were waves at the dock. Not risking a misunderstanding, I agreed that the wind had come up, and we were not dressed for it. Soon afterwards, I graciously thanked her for paying my fare...

On the return crossing, a Simon Fraser University student told us that Vancouver had loosely formed around fishing, forestry, and a gold rush, but it didn't become a real city until the Canadian Pacific Railway built a terminal at the foot of Howe Street. Putt-putting under the Burrard Street bridge at four knots, he lamented that otters had nested here until twenty years ago, his tone implying we had lost the creatures to a hundred years of unchecked progress, him trolling tourists through their habitat notwithstanding.

As we came alongside the Hornby Street landing, I commented on this oversight in his monologue, as a springboard to asking Jeanette how she practiced appreciating her true circumstance.

"I found it easier to think of it in terms of practicing clarity, then applying that to where I am. Do you want to try it while I'm away?" she said.

"Actually, that's why I asked."

"Every morning before you get up, imagine packing your entire life's inventory for a journey into physical reality. When you enter this world act as if all events are new, and pause to examine what you are about to say before setting your words free to take on a life in other people's minds. That's the nature of the world you've chosen, until you get home." Making our uphill way home with stilted breath, she said, "It won't be long before you appreciate how easily we mislead ourselves, and become distracted from what we're supposed to be doing, because our accomplice is constantly nattering at us."

"By inventory, do you mean taking stock of our circumstances?"

"All of our so-called facts about physical reality are part of our inventory. In narrow terms, if you think you've got a huge problem, the weight of your waking inventory can crush your will to achieve anything before you get out of bed. If you collect things, you drag your decisions through the underlying reasons that made you a collector. Typically, it's insecurity or hubris. In broad terms, your inventory is a repository of all knowledge and assumptions about physical reality from which you engage the journey of self-discovery. We'll come back to that."

"We'll have to."

Chuckling, she said, "You should engage every day with a sense of wonder, to avoid tainting it with judgments. If you do, your days will become less daunting because your outlook will become more positive, and as you expend less energy on crappy thoughts the easier it will become to draw correct conclusions about anything."

"It's about energy again?"

"Always: most people use all of their daily energy converting their events to suit their self-image. You already know you do this, because being with me is exhausting—you react like a black belt on Bennies to almost every new idea that doesn't fit your view of yourself. Part of what Tartuu is teaching Aleena," she said, tapping the back of my wrist with her hand, "is to not waste energy maintaining images. When she begins living like Tartuu will suggest in specific terms, her energy saving will allow unexpected insights to add to her positive outlook, like the one you had in the restaurant."

"Are you saying you're antics set my self-interest aside, and what I understood was waiting behind it?"

"Something set your self-interest aside, and your insight arrived untainted by your normal view. It follows that to appreciate your true circumstance, your first discipline should be to do nothing, as a proactive consideration, in virtually every circumstance you can. At a minimum, this will help you save enough energy to fully appreciate how much you used to waste."

"A student might speculate that this something was you lending me energy?"

"Are you asking or telling?" she grinned.

"I'm telling you that immediately after you said something set my self-interest aside, I recalled you saying teachers lend energy, so students can experience specific events. I also had the illogical sense that after we part company, today's demonstration will become like 1969. Foggy."

Tittering, Jeanette said, "You are becoming an excellent surrogate."

"Or I'm losing it."

Jeanette occasionally tittered for no apparent reason until we arrived at her car outside of Ed's apartment block. Giving me a quick hug, she said, "If you practice clarity by stopping to assess what you're about to say, one hugely humbling insight you'll arrive at will be how much you've been missing. See you on Sunday." She got in her car and drove away.

Unexpectedly exhausted by the mental trek she had taken me on, six days away from her didn't seem like such a bad thing after all. Josh could take the strain for a while.

Chapter 20: The Language of Chaos

During the week that Jeanette was away, I honed sample scenes from memories of her print chapters, jogged in the afternoon, and in the evenings made a game of assessing what I was about to say to Ed. Not all of the time, mind you, but enough that by Wednesday my halting manner caused him to call me to the Avalon, to ease my apparent stress over my screenplay deadline. I didn't tell him that I had finished it, because he would want to read it, and that wasn't ever going to happen with anyone I knew: trying to incorporate the ringing chord of mystery with my altered design of suspense that culminated in Tom's practical solution had gutted both. The measured ingredients of my psychological soufflé had become instant pudding.

Ironically, as the postal clerk weighed it for shipping I realized that Jeanette had been bang-on at our first meeting: my deadline hadn't been too close to make subtle changes, if only I had faith in the process leading me to where it wanted to go. I saw that destination too late to do anything about it. As it was, choosing the expedient way pretty much defined the story's underlying nature—written in a hurry for the money.

During that liquid therapy session, I explained the flat tire scene in my book to Tom, and said that I intended to bring the sniper forward to make him an immediate threat to Ely. However, I wasn't sure how to explain why he didn't shoot any of us, when Ely was never quite in his sights. It was not that this was likely, only that his indecision created a hole in the scene that needed filling.

Tom shrugged and said, "Didn't the guy who sold you his tire help the infidel?"

I had one of those Zen moments wherein things become clear around corners: the farce of good and evil would show when the stranger didn't make it around the next corner, and there was poetic justice attached to his blatant profiteering. The scene would also further establish that there were no safe places to work, thereby silencing Jeanette's appeal for me to include ethereal influences in my life and book: these would have undermined my portrayal of the capriciousness of warfare when the sniper, highly conflicted by moral ambiguity, fired the round that tore through Ely and into R.J. . .

Boom-boom taking a shower in a glass box drew my attention away, and as the warm mists revealed other women apparently in need of public cleansing I mentally relocated the sniper in chapters where the paths of Ely and Robbie literally crossed. Between dancers, I idly tuned into my friends' banter, and unexpectedly experienced them as characters in my book; I knew their dialogue as if I had written it.

The tigress, creeping beneath fluorescent netting to stalk three-piece prey out of mourning their losses at the exchange, interrupted their conversation. When she was finished, I listened intently to my friends, to make sure I really could anticipate their words; I was both exhilarated and embarrassed to hear their personal fables unfolding between the lines. As the final dancer contorted to a punk racket ending in the kick-bass beat of the damned thumping through a cloud of dry ice, I heard their conversation as a series of punch lines from a comedienne's routine about men. A step away from becoming cocky over this perceptual accomplishment, Jeanette's comments stormed into my thoughts: I was no different from them, and then that most of what I had been missing was about me.

This smack to my ego became my motive to listen to other "characters" in the club, to see specifically how they gave themselves away, before Jeanette came home and I embarrassed

myself more than I already had. With this decision made, the relative ease with which I was making distinctions between my friend's words and their undertones dissipated into a struggle for my attention between rock songs and rollicking breasts.

This clarity thing was tricky.

For the next three days I gave the practices of clarity a reasonable effort, but I never achieved the depth I had experienced when I was with Jeanette. Even so, by Saturday I had personally absorbed a piece of knowledge that I had previously embraced only intellectually; people don't stray far from validating themselves in their conversations. I also discovered that my urge to be heard was remarkably strong, which I tried to curb by imagining silence as something only special people could achieve. Still...

On Sunday, Meaghan and Rachel showed up at Jeanette's door less than a minute after I arrived, their overly bright greetings testifying to a rift between them and Jeanette, who confirmed this for me by exuberantly dragging them in for tea.

With our own reunion on hold, I tried to stay in the background while the women repaired their association, but the sassy brunette had other ideas: Rachel, a leggy, late twenty, single mother with waist length dark brown hair, first offered up wry remarks as a social teaser, to which I uncharacteristically responded with restraint. She then became a sultry temptress, and as I pretended her comments were flying over my head the brazen street hustler version confirmed her attraction to me by overtly fishing for reciprocity.

Jeanette's amused glances kept me focused until, in an effortless moment, I recognized that Rachel's preoccupation with the harlot's role was about having suffered at the hands of unmentioned men, and she wanted it acknowledged: our eyes met often, but hers did not linger with promise or sparkle with challenge. Her gaze loitered in poor memories, even as her words tried to set fire to my crotch.

Meaghan was Rachel's pragmatic counterpart, and prissy alter ego. An intellectual C-130 transport plane, she moved bulk cargo reliably toward the horizon of reason, but lacking the guile of a fighter she chastised Rachel's flirtations with expressions of shock that melted into waxen pouts I couldn't place, until Rachel repeated that their children were waiting: Meghan shook her head, and said she was thinking about a leaky faucet. The abandoned look of a single parent, whose ample frame relegated her to the category of "also ran" before the age of thirty, washed her countenance transparently bland and I saw the deeper meaning of her pout. She felt that she was invisible.

I knew there was a lot more to both of them, as my thoughts again became common, but I had no doubt that my sliver impressions were accurate.

When they both were gone, and the room surprisingly quiet, Jeanette said it had been great to see them, but she needed to recharge her psyche. Without further comment, she headed out the door toward the sea wall.

Comfortable within a rejuvenating silence for both of us, we established a careful pace on the rocky beach before Jeanette asked me what I thought of her friends. I went straight to the important point for me, and told her that I had experienced another moment of clarity about what lay beneath their words; it was so clear that I felt like I had invaded their privacy.

Jeanette looked pleased with me, like the first time a puppy sits on command, but I didn't mind. It felt good to get something right, even though I had done nothing.

In the next few minutes, we condensed their reunion into essential points without the loss of ambiance, because the essence of events implied more than words would have limited. I was calm while my brain was fully engaged in its first "efficient" dialogue, when Jeanette asked me

to describe the moment in which I had decided to practice clarity of thought as a serious endeavor.

I began to tell her about my evening at the Avalon, but I stumbled so badly that my delivery became comical. Imagining that I sounded as if I was mocking her advice to pause and edit my words, I chuckled and said, "I need a moment to switch topics."

"Self-delusion isn't a simple thing to stop," she said with a sly grin.

I stared silently.

"You're struggling because you're trying to hide something; otherwise we would still easily be sharing essences and their attendant assumptions."

"I didn't do badly with your friends, though."

"You know I'm impressed with your effort. Why did you just pull for a compliment?"

"I didn't—hmmm."

"It's a lot easier to see other people than ourselves, isn't it?"

"Sure is."

"Sure as in certain, confident, or indisputable, or sure as in noncommittal, deniable, and I heard your question and I'll get back to you?"

"You may assume the former from now on."

"I will. While we're at it, saying things like, 'Don't think so,' as opposed to 'I don't think so,' distances you from the subject, and by failing to assume responsibility for your words you give yourself permission to avoid taking responsibility for your actions. As I told you before I went away, words are events that program our actions, so prudence requires that we handle them like explosives until discipline makes everything we say a deliberate choice. Are we still on the same page?"

"Yep," I joked.

"Yep and ya convey the assumption of an agreement, but they lack the commitment of personal attribution, just like na and nope resonate with indifference or inconsequence, while implying impoverishment or illiteracy."

"Poverty and illiteracy would be assumptions of the average person, not you."

"The point is that you wouldn't have to do battle with our culture's assumptions if you didn't play into them by suggesting you are uneducated, or possess a meager intellectual capacity. More often than not, the barn door will be closed before your actions can speak to your true capabilities, and you can't otherwise know who else is listening. To represent yourself properly is to become aware of how you create a continuity of confusion in your thinking, mislead others, and then how to shatter those practices. Are you up for that now that you've experienced clarity as a reward?"

"Sure. Sorry—I mean, let's give it a whirl."

"Meaning you're not serious about it?"

I cleared my throat. "I'd like to break the continuity of how I create confusion, and all that comes with it. Do you have a scene written about doing this?"

"I have. Why did you add, 'and all that comes with that?'"

"It's becoming clearer to me that all of your teacher's lessons are connected, and we've just begun."

"You are a beautiful man," she said as if... as if I was a beautiful man.

I left it at that—gift horses, etcetera.

Jeanette's delicate facial contortions thereafter noted my inappropriate use of language, or opinionated phrasing on what became a full day of endless offences to my clarity of thought. I

was particularly surprised at how often I used words like ass, crap, and shit, a habit Jeanette put an end to by offering to help me explore the origins of my anal fixation. She also quashed anthropomorphic references, explaining that aligning any aspect of Mother Nature to fearful or disdainful human activities could only contribute to the neglect of our environment.

In part, she said, "Wind is not wrathful, seas are not in turmoil, storms are not angry, and fires do not rage. These are beautiful, natural processes acting in concert to rejuvenate our world in ways we cannot appreciate, because we are unaware or indifferent to the intricate fragility of our own existence."

"What about as literary devices?"

Chirp-chuckling she said, "I have three points to make: the tone of your utterance indicated that you were asking me a question, but it was too vague for me to determine what you were specifically wanting to know. It's also possible that you do not know what you were asking, in specific terms, and that you were relying on me to supply the context of your inquiry as part of my response. Considering these possibilities, I will say that it is generally wiser to communicate in the style of 'See Spot Run,' when you can't afford a misunderstanding. Otherwise, using literary devices for a specific effect requires that you address a literate audience, not a literal audience, like impressionable children whom you might inadvertently make afraid of the wind. Personally, I prefer simplicity, because things only have to be said once. It's also a discipline that undermines pretence." She breathed deeply. "If I have not answered your question, please narrow the field of your inquiry so that I might respond directly."

"I appreciate the demonstration of what can happen when the same assumptions are not shared in even a simple sentence," I said formally.

"Good, now let me presume to add to your appreciation: all things human expand at the speed of our presumed convenience. This is why it's critical to avoid even the smallest of open-ended self-entrapments, like saying sure, or uh-huh. From there, it's only a small step to concocting lies."

"Without your training and vocabulary," I said, feeling accused, "I might not articulate my ideas the way you do, but that doesn't mean people can't understand me, or that I'm not telling the truth."

"This is an excellent point on its face," Jeanette said indifferently. "However, my training and vocabulary have little to do with why I'm more articulate than those who may have less of either. My ability to communicate is unhindered by having to wrestle my self-image for an appropriate adjective, and I am otherwise unconcerned whether others approve of me. If and when I modify my mode of expression, I do it to communicate ideas outside of my internal concerns, not because I've lost control of them." She beamed like a child having recited her first poem.

"All I'm saying is that a little spice adds flavor, and a well placed emotional reference can add depth to make a communication more personal to others. I'm not denying the value of your exercise, but it's also become clear over the last hour that decorations are sometimes required for precision."

"That's too bad," she lamented. "It should have become clear that your thoughts meander, and because they're not always appropriate you have to conceal them. We'll come back to that." She waved her comment aside. "Your versions of depth and flavoring are based on emotional attachments to ideas that skew the point of the communication to suit your moods. Case in point," she glanced my way for the first time in a while. "I first told you that maintaining secrets

is difficult, because the truth is constantly prodding them. A moment ago, I prodded you until you leaked a belief by arguing that my background gives me an advantage."

"What's my belief?"

"You argued the fairness issue again, which means you still assume we are in a competition, and you haven't embraced energy efficiency as a way to determine the correct action over the capriciousness of your beliefs."

"I didn't argue."

"Did too!" she exclaimed, making her point.

My testiness wobbled into a grunt.

Putting her arm around my waist, Jeanette said, "Grunting is an egotistical contrivance that generally flows from ignorance toward condescension. It is intentionally subject to misinterpretations, such as yes, no, maybe, I'm thinking about it, or I disagree. A grunt can also be tuned to imply a threat, while avoiding responsibility for any of these connotations."

"Okay, okay, I get it!" I said raising my hands in surrender.

"Okay does not necessarily designate an agreement, level of quality, or acknowledgment of understanding, precisely because it can be any of these things. In addition, doubling the term may commonly emphasize the assumption of agreement, but it can also be interpreted as condescension, remorse, defeat, or leave me the hell alone, any of which may be a deception because there is no personal attribution."

"The context of a conversation clarifies its meaning," I said, automatically leading with my ego.

"Okay, okay, okay," Jeanette said tonelessly, in ever-decreasing volume.

This laid my point to rest.

After this illuminating exchange, Jeanette simply went silent if I erred, leaving me to discover my offence to clarity. During these lulls, passersby provided me with evidence of just how pervasive our use of verbal coloring really is, therefore how frighteningly extensive is the continuity of confusion in our culture. All cultures, I assumed, which is why her teachers would have made a big deal about it with her rescuers.

I'd have to keep that in mind when I was tweaking my grant application scenes... Jeanette pinched my arm, nodding toward the backs of two twenty-something girls ahead of us. One was complaining to her friend, "Whatever happened to the customer is always right?"

"Retail is a gyp," her girlfriend commiserated.

Jeanette tugged on my arm to slow our pace, and to let the girls move out of earshot.

"Gypsy's aside," she said clinically, "customer service is about correcting company or customer errors and misunderstandings according to the policies of manufacturers and retailers. There is no moral imperative, spoken or implied, and little that is personal about transactions between strangers, other than what their perceptions of personality and fairness can create out of an act of commerce. The continuity of the girls' thinking dictates that other aspects of their lives will be plagued by affront and confusion, because they don't realize they have made their happiness subject to availability, credit approval, processing fees, and that reality may not be exactly as illustrated. Their emotional investments come with thirty-day manufacturing defect protection before their satisfaction becomes a warranty issue. True joy for them," Jeanette quipped, "has to be hand washed, never bleached, and if the girls read a promise into a sale's philosophy instead of reading the label, they will end up calling 1-800 Tough Go. Does this make sense?"

"It does; you're back in the groove we were in before," I said.

"Are we?"

After a moment, I said, "Everything the girls believed about their circumstance was based on their reasoning being manipulated through their gender, age, and commercial cultural influences?"

"And therefore how they think, just as you created a 'man's world' out of selective elements of your combat assignments," she said as if this was an obvious comparison... which it suddenly was.

"Now relax and don't judge," she carried on. "I want you to crush everything I just said into the essence of their two line exchange."

"Their friendship is based entitlement," I said without hesitation.

"Good man," Jeanette said, but I suspected she was talking about me accepting that I had been conformed to the ways of conflict. In what specific ways was yet to come.

"From now on," Jeanette continued dealing with the moment, "if you hear anyone speak about the underlying elements of those girl's comments, you'll know what they're really saying. In a short while, that understanding will attract other relevant information, such as the connection you just made with your combat experiences conforming you in specific ways, and your assumption about entitlement will expand to include broader conformations to other kinds of events. Everything is connected."

"And so on; I get it."

"As we move along," she said, "you'll adopt other symbols in lieu of language—like that girl has become a symbol to you—and build on those to encompass greater symbols. At some point, you will apprehend knowledge directly, as in experiencing a full understanding outside of language. But it all begins with making a conscious effort to avoid seemingly unimportant self-deceptions, which make it increasingly difficult to generate the momentum required to make a complete ass of yourself. More than this, as a matter of intellectual continuity you'll easily see how other people operate, and as a matter of emotional stability, you'll face your days head on, because you've set no traps for yourself. Does this make sense?"

"It does. In the last four days I experienced flashes of the underside of many conversations."

"Then it's time to move on," which she did without taking a breath. "We deal with events based on how we feel about them before we stop and think, which means people can manipulate our emotions to their advantage."

"We talked about that."

"This time we're going beyond advertising gullibility, into how people try to manipulate others often without either of them realizing it. For example, you nearly popped an artery when I raised the tip to twenty percent, because you thought my kindness overshadowed your offer to pay for the meal. Proof of your indignation came when I said there were waves in the creek, and you noted how chilly it had become. Your comment was not about the climate."

"I'm not denying that I thought you tricked me in more than one way," I said, "but the wind made it colder, and neither of us was dressed for it."

"Tricked, not betrayed?" she said.

"There's a difference?"

"I tricked you into seeing something clearly, which your affront translated as a betrayal even though you were better off."

"Do you agree that the wind made it colder?"

"I agree, but let's take a moment to assess your version of that exchange for authenticity."

"The moment is all yours, madam."

"Thank you, kind sir." Jeanette bracketed a phantom scene with her hands. Slowly panning from left to right, she said, "Exterior, day, tracking shot of a man who stood winter watches in the North Atlantic, and who has sailed thousands of ocean miles in all kinds of weather; a man who has been wounded atop a foreign mountain, jailed in three or four countries, and deported from God-knows where for playing games with terrorist heads of state. Widen the shot, and we see that he's walking with an unaccomplished, single mother of teenagers, who makes a casual remark about six inch waves in a sheltered harbor, and he comments on his frailties?" Jeanette nudged me. "You also turned an interesting shade of red when I handed the ferryman two fares. Overall, your behavior last week made my theoretical point personally relevant today, especially now that you've seen yourself in your friends." She took my arm in hers. "Which is part of what you were trying to hide from me."

"What do you think I saw that was so bad I would want to hide it from you?"

"I'm not sure I can separate that from all I can see," she smiled coyly, "or that you're ready to hear it."

"I said I would never hurt you," I quipped.

"Never is a long time, but you've put your faith in me today; it deserves a reward."

"Thanks," I said somehow thinking I was going to hear good things.

"You saw that you are a shadow created by social dictates; shadows have no substance or depth, so you are also transparent, predictable, and superficial. Last week, I saw that you are possessive of things you do not own, like my time and affections, and you expect things that are not your due, such as knowing my plans. Our silence on the boat unnerved you enough to seek reassurance, by asking me about something you couldn't care less about but was important to me, so you are manipulative. That said, I saw your ploy as an opportunity to motivate you into playing my game, which you did, the first success of which you used to learn more so you could better hide what you're like from me, which is deceitful. Today, I see that you've learned you can't hide what you don't know is hidden, and this realization should propel you to correct what you discovered about yourself at the Avalon, for your own evolution."

I managed to remain quiet for that often regrettable half-second that can change a relationship, before I said, "That works for me."

She squeezed my arm. "Obviously it's already working: you did not react, and you've also been succinct for over an hour without being angry, and without making a single reference to rectums or bodily functions. Maybe more importantly, now that you know it's possible to be tricked for your own good, you can cut me some slack and our research will go more quickly."

"I'm all for that."

Jeanette and I thereafter monitored and commented on passersby conversations to cement my appreciation of how accurate, and efficient, communications could be when our assumptions matched, and how much others misinterpreted from concern over how they sounded. By the time we reached her home, I was exhilarated from hearing so much in-between-the-lines of other people's lives, and so drained from editing my racism, sexism, and other grievous categories of ignorance, that I said goodbye from within in a dull, floating awareness. Jeanette noted this about my demeanor, said it would pass without harm, and that I was due for another infusion of energy—whatever that meant.

Emphasizing the utter mediocrity of my mood traffic on the way home seemed bizarrely slow, even though my gauges said this wasn't true. Also strange was that I didn't find it funny

when a middle-aged Caucasian male shouted at an erratic driving Oriental man that they should all walk to math class. Not at the time, anyway.

Entering Ed's apartment, a colossal fatigue overcame me and I collapsed on the couch feeling as if I was under the weight of a trillion... I felt so heavy that I literally couldn't move. Unconcerned, I closed my eyes and listened to an internal buzzing through which I swear I could feel my heart beating. Wishing this sensation would stop didn't seem wise, so I focused on the rhythm until the buzz faded into the sounds of chirping birds; fifty minutes had passed. I got up feeling invigorated, not unlike the last time I had dabbled with cocaine while covering a lazy firefight that became a three-day debacle.

I called Ed to see if he was available for a beer. He wasn't so I went for an effortless jog that took me a full kilometer beyond my usual range, before I turned around still feeling like I could sprint home. Knowing the penalty I would pay for doing this, I meandered at a lesser pace than normal. By bedtime, my level of youthful vigor had settled back into its battered thirty-five year old container.

Chapter 21: Practical Magic

In spite of making steady progress, by the sixth day of Jeanette interjecting her practices of clarity at every opportunity, she grimaced at my unusual number of errors at such a torrid pace that I began to feel as though my personality was fragmenting along character fault lines. My mind finally shut down over a simple menu choice at a Greek restaurant on 4th Street, in Kitsilano.

Grinning foolishly, when Andrea asked me what I would like, all I was missing for an involuntary incarceration in a soft-walled room was the drool as Jeanette explained, "He's exhausted from eliminating reason. We'll share the number three combo, a carafe of house red, and ice water please."

"Excellent," Andrea said, as she always did.

"Now that you know intellectual prowess is your worst enemy," Jeanette said, facing me, "you should approach our meetings as if you need them to survive. That's what a student would do at your stage, because they would understand they're straddling the old and the new as if they were options."

"Before I ask you why they're not options, how do I know what about intellectual prowess?"

"You're a sputtering example of what hiding inappropriate thoughts, and trying to uphold inconsistent views can do to people. Look at you—you're exhausted. It's a terrific day!" she raised her voice.

"Why is the slow death of my brain a cause for celebration?"

"You've got it backwards again, but until this day you couldn't help it: you've finally disrupted the automatic routing of events through your ego, but you haven't claimed enough knowledge about yourself to make a permanent shift onto the clarity trail. For the moment, and I mean in this moment, the Olympian levels of intellectual gymnastics you have always incorporated to make sense of your world have run their course, and left you pending."

"Meaning?"

"Are you concerned about anything?"

"Nothing—still waters run deep." I tapped my temple.

"Peh-ending," she said, hard on the "P" as if she had mispronounced the word. "Let it fill your mind."

I did this without effort, because nature abhors a vacuum.

"I'm pending," I said, aware that I was opening myself to whatever might happen, but not like a predator on an instinctual prowl. I was poised to interact without feeling guarded. It was a curiously free state of placid awareness, apparently run by the low voltage tingling sensation running through my body.

"You are potential," Jeanette said a cut above a whisper.

Without the usual interference of my internal dialogue upholding my assumptions, her words tendered the sense that every second was a moment-choice within which I was free to agree with, or change the momentum of my decision-path; nothing was pushing me onward, or stacked against me. I was in between my decisions, and indifferently aware that my future pended.

"That's a perfect description," I think I said aloud, awed by realizing the power I had over my life; an encompassing fatigue beset me. As swiftly as this recognition had manifest, it was gone. I was embarrassed because I felt like I had forgotten my mother's name.

Jeanette leaned forward and addressed my unspoken feelings.

"Since we began these lessons, you've literally had dozens of opportunities to tell me where to go, but you chose to put your ego in a temporary trance, and address your underlying state of mind. After only a couple of weeks, you've discovered the lucidity available to you simply by not spending your energy on interpreting the world to suit your view of it. This was no small feat."

"Thanks for the perspective," I said, struggling for a deeper breath, "but where did it go—the clarity? I knew something important."

"It belongs to another focus of attention. As you continue to practice, you'll have access to the memories you think got away from you." Suddenly looking tearfully pleased, she said, "You have ended your journey of living exclusively in the cognition of the average man, and realigning core assumptions takes its toll on the body. It's also normal to sometimes feel like lead, when you're new at polishing your link with a massive energy that's becoming free to flow your way."

I had no idea what she meant, but we were both content to leave things at that; we ate our meals in relative silence.

When we were finished, and had placed money on the table, Jeanette said, "How do you understand the concept of spiritual Intent?" for no apparent reason.

"Spirit sees things without spin, so they don't get sidetracked. They also know how to work with momentum so their intentions equal done deals."

"Take it one step further: if they have no personality as we know it, then who and what they are would be indistinguishable from what they do, correct?"

"I can make that connection."

"In which case using the term Intent in place of Spirit would be accurate. Correct?"

"It would."

"Good." She set her cup down, inhaled deeply, and formally said, "Physical experience is an artifice for spiritual development—honing our impeccable intentions—so it makes perfect sense to use our life-force's intentions as a personal guidance system. The trick is strengthening our link within the territory of an ego that wants what it wants when it wants it, thinking it is protecting us from threats we make up. You had to experience the clarity that a simple practice can bring," she said, looking out the window, "to know that it's more than possible, but stupid to deliberately remain a shadow character in your ongoing autobiography." She looked my way.

"With exercise and caution, you will eventually be able to open the door to other exceptional perceptions at will."

"Such as?"

"The kind you'll find disagreeable until they prove themselves," she chuckled.

"Even if the alternative is to be stupid?"

"I'll take that as permission to continue; we can start with simple things," she shrugged. "I shop without keeping track of prices, and always choose the fastest checkout line by feel."

The pervasive fatigue lifted as suddenly as it had come on, as I said, "You must be important for your spirit friends to guide you to a checkout line."

"They're not concerned with those details. I practice to keep my link to them clean. Come on," Jeanette said, getting out of her seat, "it's time to see it in action, so you won't argue about having it in the screenplay." She paused. "We're going to park beside a blue Volvo, fifth row from Zellers main entrance."

"Those are long rows, there's bound to be a Volvo in West Vancouver, and I think blue and grey are their bestsellers. Maybe their only colors," I said, as I thought about it.

"Dented front fender on the driver's side," she said, leaving me behind.

"This I've got to see," I said, getting to my feet.

Jeanette stopped in mid-motion. "You practiced clarity until it proved itself as a magical art, correct?"

"You could say that," I said, baffled by her abruptness.

"What's different now?"

"The difference is that you're claiming to be able to get something out of nothing, which might work in a screenplay, but...." I shrugged, looking around at reality.

"That's exactly what you thought about the practices of clarity, until you were able to focus on conversations much more effectively than ever before."

"Are you saying I can practice being psychic?" I chided her.

"Of course, but let's not get ahead of ourselves."

On the way out the door, Andrea said, "Thank you, Mr. Achison."

"Call me Yannie," I said, just as I did every visit.

On the way to the store, Jeanette drew on past relationships to speak humorously about the ways people retouched the truth to suit their image. I reciprocated with tales about politicians, on what became a comfortable exchange relative to how volatile our meetings could become for me. Too soon, we drove into the parking lot, and after a few turns Jeanette drove to the car she had envisioned: it was where she said it would be, and there was a small dent at the height of a shopping cart basket on the driver's side.

"Well?" she said.

"Do you need groceries?"

"With teenagers? I always—" she caught on. "Ah—you want more."

"Wow—you really are psychic."

Jeanette smacked me on the arm playfully, then she wheeled her car closer to the grocery store, where we picked up milk, fruit, vegetables, tinned soups, and cereal. When we went to the front to pay there was no angle from which we could see how full the carts were at the four open checkout counters, only that they each had queues of two or three people.

"Pick a reference line you think I can't beat through the paying process, and I'll join one that will beat it," she said.

"What if I pick the one you want?" I said.

"You won't; I'm focused on the positive."

I made my choice, and Jeanette joined the line she preferred—in third place behind two men. I stationed myself to watch everyone leaving.

A bagger-boy shifted stations, an older woman fumbled with her purse, and a yuppie swiped a credit card then changed her mind about which card to use, but a price check ultimately decided the matter. Jeanette ended up paying before our reference shopper was finished; with taxes, she was a penny short. The cashier waived it off with a smile.

Handing me a grocery bag, she said, "Don't get hung up in the details. Developing your awareness is about more important things, like recognizing a delay in here could avoid a car crash out there, or missing a turn might bring you to where you needed to be."

What I heard her saying was, "Don't look too close or you'll figure it out," but it was too late. Taking the parcel from her, I said, "I know the trick: the time you spent choosing a line was about finding something in another cart that wasn't marked properly."

"Pardon me?"

"A skeptical student would also say the Volvo belongs to staff in the mall, so it's always there, and that you can do math in your head before they'd believe angels shop at the Superstore."

"How did I price the tomatoes without weighing them?"

"I haven't figured everything out."

"Let's take these things home, then we'll go for a drive and I'll explain my trick."

I thought so. "Okay."

Twenty minutes later we were cruising Marine drive on a gorgeous day, quietly heading for a Cypress Mountain Vista Lookout that rendered a spectacular view of Stanley Park, the First Narrows bridge, the city.... a spectacular view.

When we arrived, Jeanette shut off the car, took the keys out of the ignition, and dropped them into her carryall. Turning to face me, she said, "Original Intent is not a trick. It is our Source Soul and a library of timeless knowledge that some people can tune into for help in any number of ways." She shifted her weight, making herself comfortable for a long stay. "Following the designs of Intent is to learn how to gather the energy we need to ignore a taunting world, so we can tackle only worthy challenges. Today's demonstration was about you and I sharing another teacher/student experience, which will help you cross the bridge between your version of the world into the one you encountered at the restaurant." She relaxed her pose. "Later in my work, you'll read that a conscious partnership between Intent and a teacher is so powerful that events which can fell the strongest people can be dealt with as simple challenges, or pushed aside as a matter of impeccable intentions commanding the right of way."

"How is this relevant to your... our work?"

"The success of my archaeologist's quest depends on them embracing Osiris's ideas as if their life depended on them, because it does. Aligning your personal power with Intent can be dangerous. I need you to...."

"You need me to demonstrate how someone tries to align themselves with it, I get it. Are you saying Spirit is dangerous?"

"No, but some lessons are based on aligning a student's momentum with a flow of events, and I've told you that momentum doesn't think. The student's free will could cause them to metaphorically stand in front of the bus. I didn't mention this before today because it never crossed my mind that, after all we've invested in our project, you would accuse me of lying to you."

"You drove up here to tell me to take all of your premises seriously?"

"Don't be offended. It's a long walk back."

"You're threatening me with exercise?" I said, incredulously.

"That's your ego misinterpreting our circumstance. I'm saying that complaining about what we have to do won't change what we have to do, other than annoying you enough to get out and start walking back." She shrugged, like I so often did with her. "You already know that I'll drive on by."

Grasping at straws, I said, "Is this is the confrontation scene?"

"You have nothing to confront other than your affront, and that's not a challenge worthy of my time."

I paused, thought about the distance back to my motorcycle, and said, "Or mine," capitulating to a truth.

"Excellent." She fished for her keys, which tinked against another metal: Jeanette upended her carryall in her lap, and a penny dropped out.

"I knew it had to be me," she said. "Intent doesn't make mistakes."

I said nothing...

After this chat, we often shopped together so that she could demonstrate what she claimed was a growing ability to tap into her stream of Intent, while I continued to look for ways she could stage the show. I wasn't truly baffled by her charade until the day she took all of her money out of her purse, turned away, and asked me to pocket enough to cover our lunch. If the bill came out to the penny, I was to agree to replace my efforts to find other explanations for her trickery with seriously trying to tap into my spirit's stream of intent; she said her Original Intent had rattled me out.

I agreed.

Having a glass of wine each put us over budget, but I said nothing until Jeanette ordered a second glass only for me. I declined, saying that we might be short on funds. I knew that I had between seven and ten dollars—a five dollar bill and a bunch of change I had grabbed from the top of my dresser on the way out that morning. She said worrying muddied the waters.

With tax, our bill came to \$22.65. A fifteen percent tip brought this to \$26.05. Emptying both of my pockets, I had \$26.05.

"It was a good try," I said, stacking coins on the table, "but you were over."

"What are you talking about, we're bang on?"

"We were bang on—you weren't."

"I told you to take enough for lunch. How could I know how much you had?"

"You implied your money would cover both of us."

"You inferred my money would cover both of us." Laughing, she said, "Are you saying I cheated by intuiting exactly how much money you had with you?"

"I think you told me not to worry because you have more money in your purse," I said, scrambling.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

I hesitated, came up with nothing, and said, "So how do you practice this cosmic wiretapping thing?"

With an errant grin occasionally leaking out of her poise, Jeanette explained the basics of how to stop my internal dialogue without her help. She said these practices ultimately led to another framework of reality called the Second Attention, but I was probably years away from

achieving entry as a deliberate experience, and only if I kept up the practices. That said, just trying to access Intent as a guidance system automatically loosened my death grip on the First Attention, which is a focus fixed solely on physical reality. There was a lot more to know about how our perceptions assemble the world we experience, she said, but focusing between the lines of conversations went a long way toward preparing me for extraordinary perceptions.

Jeanette also explained that "*intending to know*" made her plot edgy, because the apparent meaning of the resulting information played on the assumptions of the First Attention of her audience. As the scenes we had discussed amply demonstrated, what her teachers saw, said, and did rarely agreed with what we thought they represented, but things still worked out. In this way, a simple pause could be dramatic, and possibly create an access point for the audience to touch their own Silent Knowledge about the screen circumstance.

Jeanette reached into her carryall, and took out a scene from her screenplay. I knew she was working on it, but I was annoyed that she had completed something new without consulting me. But I could hardly object.

"I'm still working on the set description, but imagine that the chamber is translucent and that we can see spatial infinity outside. Our solar system will be recognizable off to one side of the Saa-ra character.

"Got it."

I read the following:

SCENE TWO

INTERIOR: CRYSTALLINE CHAMBER WIDE SHOT

Saa-ra, Kha-lib, Jerome, and Phillip are seen as astral bodies with a particular hue differentiating them from the rest of the twenty-six astral body characters. They chat in the foreground of this group, thirteen men and thirteen women who are grouped socially: a few men talking to each other, a few women doing the same, three people in nonspecific gender order, a group of six, etc. Off to one side, PHILLIP is talking to MAN ONE while SAA-RA stands beside him.

PHILLIP

You have shown them much and taught yourself well, but the journey is not complete. We see that it will be brought to a close in this way.

FX: SECTION OF WALL IN FRONT OF MILKY WAY

Saa-ra opens a scene of infinity with a wave of her arm, and points to a whirl of rolling events, as if from news casts that span centuries of warfare, flood and famine, etc. Time is represented by ripples between events.

SAA-RA (pointing)

Probable, (pause), also probable.

With a slower view of news events dating from the 1950's, she says,

There—inevitable.

MAN ONE nods, seeing what is to be, his expression conveys that it could be no other way without regret.

SAA-RA

To have chosen this time and place to seal your destiny is to embrace a hard and lonely path, for you once again meet with those who believe themselves to be powerful, and so important as to not treat others with the love we teach. It will again be them who make you what you are to become, and in the doing you will have need to trust and then lose all trust, love, then lose your capacity to love; it will be a struggle to find reasons to live until you understand your purpose of mastering these lessons of illusions. Such teachings are not for the meek, as only the demand for the completion of tasks will bring true understanding. It will also cost the image of all who will learn and all who will teach.

MAN ONE

I will have to learn who I am and bring that character to his end in this one time?

SAA-RA

In this last time, and you will, but be warned: the task is not to blame yourself for being the message of destruction, as some will perceive, but the messenger of our love. For such as you have agreed to carry that burden, then such is your destiny and lesson, though you will not remember this until we touch you with this knowledge.

MAN ONE

How will I come to know my purpose?

PHILLIP and SAA-RA exchange a glance that speaks to an amused secret.

PHILLIP

(facing Man One)

We have sent a messenger in time; your journey will take you to her, and to you she will say that we have sent many of our selves, and that you are one, if you so choose. Your Silent Knowledge of us and this place will determine your decision as she offers you knowledge to know who we are once again. But beware, messengers do not linger, and our teachers teach only those who will learn, so know that you may not choose that destiny turn. And if memories of this place fade with the damage endured, and you find no relief from terrible knowledge secured, and tears do not cleanse the memory of your quest, and if your silent reply has the messenger leave you to rest, know that you are never alone. You can always find me in this place, for I am your source, and I walk with my children until they understand the nature of all discourse. That is who I am, that is my word, and they are the same for my actors in the theatre of the absurd.

SAA-RA points through the crystalline walls toward the Milky Way.

SAA-RA

As we leave at the same time here (she smiles at the word Time), we enter into the depth of linear time at different points in physical life.

She circles her finger three times, and the atmosphere appears to ripple around the motions in slightly different hues with each circle.)

SAA-RA

Your different years of birth (she motions with her arm to encompass the twenty-six) correspond to the experiences you have chosen in order to meet us at specific points in destiny. This one is the present (her finger ripples a brownish hue), this one is the time of the beginning (her fingers ripples a greenish hue), and...

KHA-LI ENTERS THE CHAMBER

As seen over the shoulder of MAN ONE.

SAA-RA (cont'd)

It is time for introductions.

That was all Jeanette had written.

I straightened the pages and, for no reason, set them down gently. Jeanette tried to hide any indication of anticipation, which only enhanced it as I thought about her work and said, "I liked it. A little tightening here and there, and you're good to go"; except maybe the poetry thing. It's not consistent."

There was something knowingly familiar about it, but I couldn't recall what book or movie I was thinking of.

Jeanette watched and waited, as if I was supposed to say something.

"I gather the first scene introduces Kha-li?" I said, breaking her focus.

"Correct. Are you ready to deal with the premise of *knowing* as if your life depended on it?"

"I'm all ears."

"That'll have to do."

Chapter 22: The Nature of Knowing

Formally, Jeanette said, "My teachers will say that everything is conscious, and all consciousness vibrates at a frequency specific to its genus and individual nature." She moved her finger across our table in a waveform pattern. "Everything is also electromagnetic, so like-minded people attract and contribute to the momentum of similarly natured events. The more evolved the consciousness or nature of the act, the faster it vibrates. Unconditional love is the most rapid event; malice is the slowest."

I nodded to confirm that I had not fallen behind.

"You are magnetic, so the thoughts you generate are also independent magnetic forces. We talked about this at our first meeting." She leaned forward. "At some point in your life, you were unable to recall information that was familiar, then later in the day it popped into your mind. The effort to find this information is akin to sending a messenger that rides the momentum of will, to attract a response that matches the frequency and sequencing of the question. When we turn our attention to other matters, we put ourselves in standby mode to receive the answer. If we don't turn away, and have practiced gathering energy, we can knowingly and directly access information—eventually even our Silent Knowledge.

"Our beliefs work the same way," she said, when I nodded in apparent appreciation of however important this information must be to her. "They lead us to people and experiences of a similar nature; our actions seek and seed events long after we have turned our attention to other matters. This turning away has us miss how much in control of our lives we really are. The bottom line is that we assemble a daily reality that unerringly offers us a view of ourselves through the nature of our relationships to other people, and the kind of world in which we participate."

"Otis and a guard dog," I acknowledged her lesson.

Jeanette nodded in the affirmative. "Knowledge vibrates at a speed that reflects its nature; we can access it to the degree that we focus our will, and the extent to which our personal speed matches the speed of the information. This information can be outside of our direct experience, but its components must be familiar for us to development a context for the conclusion. If we gather pieces of past events, a sudden knowing can feel like a coalescing of information you hadn't thought about in that way, as long as the messenger is free from erroneous assumptions."

"Is that a loophole in *intending to know* something, like free will screwing up a psychic prediction?"

"No. Take the example of sending a messenger to resolve the paradox of what happens when the irresistible force meets the immovable object: all objects are the product of a will propelled by the irresistible force of catalytic momentum into a physical manifestation. It follows that the apparently immovable object is less powerful by the degree of will required to maintain that form. In other words, your question presumes a paradox when there is no such thing in nature. They are a creation of man in which at least one component of a theoretical state is erroneous." She tapped the table. "An identical force of will also presupposes duplicate experiences, with interchangeable interpretations, forming identical intentions. Granting this multiple absurdity, both aspects of the paradox would still lose energy in an encounter, until an outside force eventually determined the outcome. You must have covered battles like that."

"Ya-so you're saying there's no such thing as a stalemate in nature?"

"A cooperative imbalance is inherent to the ebb and flow of all energy."

"The body dies. Where's the balance in that?"

"Death is an assumption based on the limitations of physical perception. Remember where we began... everything is conscious?" she said rhetorically. "The body changes form to become part of the earth, the earth becomes part of the plant, plants are eaten by animals, and we eat the plants and animals. Everything cycles and recycles—everything is connected." Jeanette opened her palms to indicate an irrefutable conclusion, then setting her hands on the table to suggest simplicity, she said, "If any single thing could die, everything would eventually die. In reality, when a physical form makes an apparent change, the spiritual essence has been released to take on whatever forms its speed allows, while the body takes on whatever forms it can in the absence of the spirit."

"We become ghosts?"

"That's one form of energy the speed of our consciousness allows."

"What about a rock?"

"What about a toasted bacon and tomato sandwich?"

"Sorry. Are you saying rocks are conscious?"

"Certainly, but most of us can't perceive their vitality."

"Meaning some people can?"

"Very fast people—seers, can focus their perception and see the energy fields in everything physical. They know that the earth is alive because they can see it like a surgeon watching a heart beating in their hand." She clasped her hands studiously in front of her. "Close your eyes and imagine that all things are events when viewed from a different underlying order of reality."

"For example," I said, closing my eyes.

"A pane of glass is solid within our perception of time," Jeanette explained, "but if we weathered reality from the perspective of a thousand years passing for every second, we would experience glass as a liquid gently flowing in the direction of gravity. The pane wouldn't be an object so much as a circumstance connected to an array of exterior settings, like viewing a bend in the river isn't only about water moving by a single point. The flow has created conditional events downstream, like deltas, based on upstream events, like erosion creating canyons, when our point of observation is the flatland between the two."

"I know that old glass is thicker at the bottom than at the top," I said.

She nodded. "Our point of observation reveals the cumulative effect of the river's experience in that specific time and place, under those conditions, no different from you and I observing an instant of each other's lives right now. Neither of us is entirely apparent to the other, nor are we complete in and of ourselves; we are riding different tributaries toward the same destination of evolutionary fulfillment at our own pace."

I nodded, unnecessarily stirring my drink as Jeanette looked out of the window.

"What about..." I started to say.

"I wonder how they stay open?" she mused.

I waited for her to continue.

She appeared to be as dazed to hear herself say that a company, across Davie Street, was a front for a smuggling operation, as I was stunned to hear it. A brief pause, then she haltingly said the contraband was people, a two-way operation; illegal immigrants in, babies out.

"How did you piece that together?" I said, stretching my unintended mockery to, hopefully, mimic wonder, because her demonstration was juvenile and unnecessary: just write the scene and be done with it. I get the psychic thing.

"Days ago," she said seriously, "I noticed that the staff cared for customers lackadaisically. We're in a high rent area, so I asked myself how they make a profit selling inexpensive items to few customers. The messenger came back today. Look at the sense of secrecy about them."

"How do you look at a sense?"

"Do it and you'll discover the answer."

I watched for about ten seconds before turning my head to make a comment; Jeanette pointed her finger back across the street. The next twenty seconds were no different from the first ten, other than it being twice as boring, until my mind isolated individuals from the context of commerce. I then thought I saw a furtive quality about one of the staff, and his customer's posture. Both of them were hunched slightly, implying they were speaking under their breath. I also saw a clerk cover his mouth when he spoke to a customer who did a quick head-bob snigger.

Jeanette cleared her throat; I came out of my reverie.

"Well?" she said expectantly.

"The sense I get is that they know people well enough to tell dirty jokes."

Jeanette leveled a granite gaze at me. I wasn't kidding, so I stared back.

"Ahhh," she exhaled as if she had received another delivery. "The information is difficult for you to accept because, while it agrees with your views about mankind's malevolence, it

subverts your certainty of its whereabouts. That threatens your sense of security which, by the way, is entirely based on your prejudices."

"My prejudices might be more earned than learned than most people."

Jeanette immediately took me to task on the sidebar point: "Yes or no, per capita gays, aboriginals, and Asians of all nationalities are more prevalent in Vancouver than anywhere else in Canada?"

"Probably."

"How many friends do you have in these groups? No—how many friends have you ever had in any of these groups?"

"I grew up in a middle class wasp area long before it was fashionable for gays to come out, and in an era when political intrigue was about who was screwing who on the school board. When I moved to Little Israel, in north Toronto, I hung out with Jews; when I lived in Little Italy, I hung out with falling and fallen Mics. When I began travelling, everyone in Canada dropped away except Ed, and he was born in Germany."

"You haven't mentioned any women from any time or background."

"There haven't been any who could keep up."

"One of your secret needs is to feel superior, so you can't have any women friends who aren't sexual conquests. But when you think you've bested them, you throw them away as unworthy opponents; this is another of your prejudices."

"Does it make sense that anyone who has seen destruction on the scale that I've seen it because of prejudice, would fall into the same trap?"

"You comprehend why you should embrace noble ideas, but your interpretation of world events has impressed you with a different set of facts. These are that white, heterosexual, secular, apolitical males are more trustworthy, or somehow less scary than any other group." She touched my arm, possibly to keep me from swinging it. "Your experiences have sabotaged your most treasured beliefs, and thinking you know better is camouflaging that from you like it did from me."

Unsure of whether to laugh or utter an obscenity, I did something I had never done in my life. I harrumphed. Funny how it sounds just like the word, I thought as it filled that critical half second before Jeanette noted the event with a fleeting smile.

"The affront you're struggling to contain is not directed at my ability to *intend to know*, because that's a part of the way things are between us now. Instead, I'm trespassing on the monopoly on danger you assume is yours from having paid so dearly to develop what you consider a philosophy."

"You don't think it is, after all I have explained?"

"Your views are the remains of repetitive assaults on your self-image, the importance of which you have elevated by virtue of their survival. You assume other people couldn't possibly have acquired similar understandings from different circumstances, because you have been honing your defenses ever since you... ever since. How you came to your understandings is certainly personal, but what you came to understand is not exclusive information. Like it or not, I understand the depth of mankind's malevolence better than you, because I didn't have the freedom to avoid it, or to leave when the adrenaline rush passed." She inched back. "Neither do hundreds of millions of women live in ignorance of the ways of the world, just because their lives didn't unfold like an action-adventure. They experience cruelty in other ways." Her tone was cool, her eyes accusing; I thought I saw damage lurking beneath her gaze.

Aware that I was staring back as if in defiance, I lowered my eyes and swallowed bile to digest a sudden between-the-lines understanding: Jeanette's world view was an insurmountable obstacle to us having any real fun, in any kind of relationship. As sense of loss trickled through my bowels, I thought it might be time to cash out.

"By leper's lives," Jeanette said, looking out of the window, as if my answer would walk by, "did you mean begging?"

I had no trouble recalling that outburst, nor in assessing the moment: she knew she had gone too far, and the time shift and topic change were damage control.

But it was too late.

"That's one ending," I said amicably, because I could afford to be. "Losers become social outcasts, or they move inside to keep their secrets company."

"That sounds too deep to have come from merely observing warfare."

"I knew a couple of Americans in Toronto. One dodged Vietnam, one didn't, and both of them sometimes wondered, or maybe wished, they had made the other choice. The split in public opinion between branding them killer and coward made them both casualties of conscience."

"Well put. Is that what they moved inside—guilt?"

"Or resentment, maybe both."

"They said that to you?"

"Not in so many words; they knew I had a clue about what it was like; the odd comment was enough."

"Being the coward and the killer?"

"That the overall context of everyday life was forever changed for both of them, and those changes are more or less the same in everyone who experienced what they did. We were on the same page, without having to compare anything."

"You still don't think I understand what the silence is about, do you?"

"Feel free. As you said, it's not exclusive information."

Jeanette did not hesitate.

"I think it's common for combatants to avoid discussing their experiences with anyone who hasn't been down that road, because there's a huge gulf between public assumptions about warfare and a fighter's intimate knowledge of it. I think that chasm is created whenever religious, patriotic, or political motives, disguised as moral certainties, are pitted against experiences so abhorrent that participants can't forgive themselves for believing the lies. I think that the inner denial of this recognition is outwardly expressed in a bottle or a needle, because you can't believe something and behave contrary to that belief. I also think what an anonymous enemy couldn't do with bullets, their countrymen did with personal judgments."

"Impressive—I mean it."

"My turn. When did you develop empathy for the so-called coward?"

"I didn't think he was a coward."

"Could you have been identifying with a casualty of conscience?"

"I suppose—if I thought I had done something wrong. Can't you just like someone?"

"No. I explained the principles of magnetic energy." She dropped the subject. "My place tomorrow at nine, and bring some of your work." Jeanette reached for the bill.

Covering the slip of paper with my hand, I said, "What's the rush?"

"You gave me a way into the confrontation scene, and I want to get it on paper while it's fresh. Thanks." She stood up, blew a kiss in my general direction, and muttering 'casualty of conscious' left me sitting there.

"Anytime," I said meaning it, because there was little of it left.

Chapter 23: Cataloguing Discord

Zzz: Drifting in the periphery of consciousness, on a catamaran in the Mediterranean, instances of colleagues "knowing things" rolled through my mind unbidden. No situation was more definitive than a feeling to stop or turn, but after four examples, I accepted that we all had experienced definitive psychic feelings at some time in our lives, just not with control over them. Another ruse to convince me of her keen ability was that she sometimes seemed to know what I was thinking, which now became clear to me as a consequence of her maneuvering conversations toward landing points I could not anticipate: she had previously checked these out under the guise of the many "what ifs" she had stored for future reference.

Checked out. Store: I could eliminate two thirds of the checkout lines by the age and gender of the customers and clerks. Young and male were faster, because they didn't fill their carts, chat, or suddenly have to search for a payment method, as if groceries were usually free...

Men were the house odds for speed.

Jeanette would certainly have a refined list of clues.

She was good, I thought as my imagination squeezed the catamaran between the Palma welcoming lights and the outer breakwater... good enough to palm a tomato, and by squeezing it for ripeness accurately guess it's weigh from its circumference...

Almost awake, I tried but could not figure out how she did the lunch money trick; it had to be a modification on the shopping scam. Scam—the penny in her carryall was laughable.

At four-thirty in the morning, it was too early to get up and too late to go back to sleep: I let thoughts about her story make their own connections, using her outline and scenes I had been drafting as a flexible template. In the half hour before I got up, I saw her work as a New Age morality play based on religious propaganda. Mystical intrigues aimed at personal development represented the bible's teachings, while diabolical theories that fostered blind obedience under the guise of faith represented the devil. The Christ figure would come from the cult—no rights, unlimited investigative authority... had to be a cult. The man with no name would attempt to teach people how they were enslaved, but not enough of them would listen to make a difference. He would seed lessons—a John the Baptist character—then Christ would come back to conclude them. I got out of bed, made coffee, and began reworking the sample scenes to include my new understandings.

At nine o'clock, I packed a chapter from my book in my tank top bag, and headed across the bridge to Jeanette's house.

Seated in the kitchen, Jeanette hadn't finished reading my work before setting the pages aside to offer me an insight that was more implausible than the smuggling scenario, because I was supposedly a participant. The true event, and scene she was reading, opened in Beirut on December 23, 1983, with a crew arriving at a hospital amid a steady stream of car bomb casualties. Our pictures of outrage and gore were so good that we lingered at the emergency entrance until soldiers threatened us for imposing on their grief.

We went inside to tape the triage tango.

Following the natural progression of events, we went to the morgue; seeing that it was full, we went in search of the makeshift morgue, to impress our audience with the extent of the carnage. At one point I walked past a storage room, doing a double-take when I realized the sacks on the floor weren't laundry. It was here that Jeanette said she had seen me in her mind's eye catch a glimpse of someone inside the room guaranteeing that the occupants were dead.

"Interesting, but it's a trap—nowhere to go with it."

"It's a trap of a different kind," she said. "An integral aspect of our sense of security is our perception of morality, because it can exclude all kinds of nasty things we think people wouldn't dare do to us. You shut the incident out of your mind, because what you saw uprooted the last of your generous assumptions about people, in spite of your penchant to think the worst of humanity. You couldn't afford to embrace that moment of utter helplessness, so you banished the memory to suit your less brutal core."

"Thank you."

"You know you are a kind person, you just don't think you can afford to be," Jeanette said evenly. "You should try to recall every detail about that night, to rid yourself of its effects." Crisp lines at the corners of her mouth suggested that I try this right away.

"What effects?"

"That will become clear when you examine the event," she said, patiently.

"Now?"

"That would be nice."

"Give me a second." I resealed myself before trying to conjure a memory I knew wasn't mine, but why make waves?

After a short while, I recalled being repulsed by the first mutilated body, but no others, including the boy who was brought in on separate stretchers.

"Aloud would be helpful," Jeanette said.

With the dispassion I had felt at the hospital entrance, I described the strain on the drivers' faces, the tense efficiency of too few doctors trying to cope with the slaughter, and my cold indifference when a soldier fired warning shots to make us bugger off: we were so close that the concussion popped the left lens out of Steve's glasses, but the carnage made the rest of his world disappear, and he didn't notice it fall.

I next recalled conversations with crews, up to and including my approach to the storage room, where I again experienced the pungent stench of disinfectant, feces, and sweet flowers. Saying nothing about my olfactory illusion, I told Jeanette that I had called Sean back to the door, then fiddled with recording levels that needed no adjustments. He took an establishing shot, then moved inside the small room. I stepped aside to allow the NBC crew room to pass, handing Steve his lens as he squeezed by. Ann, his wife and sound recordist, stopped outside beside me. I said they paid cameramen to live with that shit. She went in anyway, heedless that bodies make no sounds that can be broadcast.

I told Jeanette that I honestly didn't recall a man with a knife bending over anyone.

Perfunctorily, she said, "Send a messenger."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I pursed my lips to focus on the moment before I looked into the room. In a short while, I heard Jeanette tittering as I repeated a mantra in my mind, "Come back with a replay," imagining a bullet-shaped request racing into deep space.

"Done," I said, opening my eyes to see Jeanette silently convulsing in her seat.

"What?"

Gulping air, she said, "You looked like you were having a bowel movement."

"The messenger had a long trip." I nodded at my pages. "There's more." I got up to get us another cup of coffee.

"Give it another try tonight," she said.

"A bowel movement is a regular part of my routine," I replied...

Jeanette didn't find anything else metaphysical in that scene, nor did she say anything more egregious than pointing out awkwardly constructed passages. I reread these, understood the flaws, then setting my work aside took her to lunch to prod for a reward of information. It couldn't hurt to try.

To my pleasant surprise, Jeanette filled in parts of her novel's overview nicely: her twentieth century bad guys were part of a secretly connected group of the most influential people on the planet—two thousand individuals who had their fingers on the political pulse of the globe, which collectively formed an iron grip on the planet's economic carotids. They bought, sold, traded, and manipulated events in an underground dance of commerce that could finesse a country's financial stability, change educational, agricultural practices, instigate and control the spread of disease through planned outbreaks, and discovering cures timed to the rising need of cartel-priced medicines. Their bottom line, annually in the trillions, depended on the promulgation of greed, fear, and fanaticism, couched in God's word, and patriotism to keep nations, regions, and races divisive. If one of their handpicked dictators, or duly elected presidents, developed a conscience, or otherwise began to think they were in control, a takeover of some kind followed. Conversely, they allowed the obvious good guys of the world to run all of the equal opportunity, level-the-playing-field social activities they desired, because they understood that supporting any bias ultimately promoted the ism's for which it was designed to compensate. For the same reasons, they quietly supported Band-Aid acts of social conscience, because superficial fixes were ideal for helping the world's scavengers and sociopaths to endlessly impinge on the public's sense of security. Jeanette called this odious bunch, whose depravity and despotism knew no boundaries, the Players.

Teasing me, she said I had met some of them in my travels, as well as some of the good guys who would help bring them down.

While the Players practiced their dark trades, her protagonists were studying the disciplines of handling energy. In time, their skills and growing numbers would influence the Players' focus on negative applications of their power, to enhance the impact of the irresistible forces' return they had made inevitable. As I understood her, the focus of these emissaries of change was not directed at felling felons, like cops chasing robbers; it was about stalking the footings of corrupt empires by educating people to their ways, and how they contribute to their damaging ways.

Underestimating the effect of these "woo-woo" metaphysicians, who were actually focusing massive, but as-yet silent existing momentums, when things began to fall apart trusted Players would break ranks. This crack in their global operations would never seal; like water dripping through a pinhole in a dam, wearing through exponentially into a catastrophic breach, so great was their greed and suspicion that the erosion of their empires would become unstoppable.

This was great stuff for me—already condensed to explain who the protagonists were, and why it would take acts of God to bring about change: trying to remember my morgue scene was a small price to pay for what I might get in return.

It did cross my mind that I could lie about trying to do this, but there's too often an aspect of an experience that either isn't known, or can't be faked for those who are in the know. People who claimed to have worked the bang-bang showed me this, and Jeanette certainly knew her shit well enough to question my reactions to exploring deep memories. Anyway, it made no sense to fake something I could take two minutes to try, no matter how stupid it was. And only Jeanette would ever know.

Before going to sleep that night, I tried to recall the crucial moment from a meditative state, but I fell asleep amid a mishmash of events; I tried again in the calm of predawn, until the draw

of the bathroom became too great. To cover my bases, because Jeanette wasn't above probing my failures for authenticity—it might even be what she was after—I tried again after three cups of coffee, but all I managed to do was exhume memories that were better left buried.

With my promise kept, I worked on the grant application scenes, and then a section of my book. Three hours later, I printed six pages of rewritten "ruttled" pages, showered, then I met Jeanette at Nolan's for blueberry muffins, and herbal tea. Preempting the inevitable question, I told her nothing had changed about the hospital scene.

"It'll come," she said, taking my work in her hand.

Jeanette took the entire morning to dissect the minutiae of my changes, asking dickey-little things about my character's feelings, from one moment to the next, and exploring comments like "making the world disappear." She was not confused about what I had written; she wanted me to be aware of the internal nuance of my own experiences.

I wasn't sure what that meant.

"The wind and water references stimulate an emotional sense of your personal presence, as opposed to you physically occupying space," she explained, "then you abandon the natural world to make calculated references like caches and ROMS."

"There's only so much the wind can do."

"What happens after this?" she said, flicking the corner of a page.

"A reporter is killed in a chapter called The Road to Kfar Matta."

"Aaah," she said, tilting her head back. "His death scared you away from intimacy."

"I doubt that I ever met him, but I knew his cameraman, Bryan. Anything else?" I nodded at the pages.

We next had a general discussion about foreshadowing, under the banner of omens such as her passing cloud and the runaway bird had done in her work, then she tied these to other everyday events in a clever way. She said omens aren't necessarily special manifestations of a designed mOMEntum because, to a trained observer, all behaviors portend to a predictable culmination. At the conclusion of this conversation, Jeanette seemed unusually pleased with my input, and our day ended on a positive note.

Trying to recall the morgue scene before going to bed that night, I could not stay focused in the corridor. Instead, I repeatedly wandered through unfriendly memories until finally falling into a troubled asleep. Shortly after five o'clock, one of these memories hounded me awake, and I got up to write.

For reasons I can't explain, beyond willingly going where my thoughts took me because it often paid off, I managed only a few minutes of reworking ROMS into personal terms, before I scrolled to the days immediately after Clark Todd had been killed. To my unexpected satisfaction, there was an abundance of emotional bloodletting in this section, because network poo-pahs had published a version of his demise, the glaring focus of which was on highlighting their heroic efforts to retrieve the body from a hot zone. Lacking the fundamental ingredient of selflessness required of heroism, this article elevated the danger to their wonderful selves at the direct expense of the crew's integrity by declaring they had abandoned a wounded colleague. They also took a pot shot at the international aid agencies that would not enter the contested area from which the highly experienced crew had taken many hours to escape. This otherwise comprehensive personal tribute somehow failed to mention how many medics had been killed or wounded in the preceding months in that area, or that the networks he was working for had refused to pay compensation to Clark's widow and children.

I didn't change a word before scrolling back to the original scene, where my thoughts flowed like molasses—a good thing for nuance—so I had an unusually productive three hours of work on my own book. After a hot shower cleansed the remaining vitriol from my system, I drove across the bridge feeling lighter...

Jeanette read my morning's work over tea and toast in her kitchen, concentrating as if it were an English translation of Albanian assembly instructions for a Korean ceiling fan. Wearing a faint smile of satisfaction, when her lips weren't moving, she read it again. Finally setting the pages down, she said, "You have engineered a series of subterranean references that flow with the electricity of uncertainty and disaster, until your cameraman's musings sucker punched my assumptions. For a moment, I looked at life the way you guys saw it, and it scared the hell out of me. Excellent job," she said pushing the pages my way. "No, not excellent, outstanding."

"Thank you, but it's not much different from my other stuff."

"It's a personal payoff: you discovered what stood in the way of writing the entire scene like this the first time around." She tapped the pages. "The first part is a delicate balance between thin and enticing, which would have lost its edge without the hammering thoughts of your characters."

"I didn't think about doing that, but I guess I did."

Jeanette frowned and said, "We really can't have you guessing anymore." To my chagrin, she began listing all of the meta-principles we had ever talked about, as if I understood few and was guessing at the rest.

These premises included how parents nurture an infant's beliefs into inevitable acts, how the nature of all actions cycle back to their originator, and that a continuity of similar acts builds momentum. Impeccable actions also come back as positive influences, while polishing the link to Intent, which, as a simultaneous force and purpose, makes any goal a fait accompli. It follows that the key to living a productive life lies in learning what we are really like, for only in this way can we do the right thing, for the right reason. This also provides an energy gain, and with the inevitable return of these events to help smooth our path, we can challenge larger issues. Eventually, we earn the energy that a mortal manifestation of the earthbound spirit requires to make a permanent connection to their / our Original Intent. She also reiterated that the practices of clarity, past and to come, where preparation for lessons I would not understand without clear thinking. We had to move the crap out of the way to make room for knowledge.

It was old stuff, but by reconnecting these ideas the designs of Intent came into focus for me: practicing personal disciplines was like taking a course in Destiny Cartography, the other side of this being to wander a relatively uncharted path designed by default—by uninformed consent. Briefly, it was incomprehensible to me why anyone wouldn't want to take charge of his or her lives in this way, then and again, the insight lost its edge.

"Are we close to sharing a monumental assumption?" Jeanette interrupted my thoughts.

"Hard to tell," I said.

Seeing that I was struggling to make sense of something, she did not correct my grammar.

Chapter 24: The Lifeline

With our meeting finished, I went home to write, run, shower, then have a couple of brews with Ed at the Dover before going to bed around eleven, and trying to recall the morgue incident.

Initially, I drew a literal blank when I looked inside the room, then the bundled sheets suddenly popped into view. I assumed my mind was finally creating the fiction Jeanette had

suggested so there was no point in carrying on. I fell asleep amid swirling memories of other general unpleasantness.

In the morning, I awakened feeling somber, a mood that stayed with me while I worked on another chapter of my book until it was time to leave, and was still with me when I arrived at Jeanette's. In little time, she suggested that we hold our morning session outside, "So that you have something positive to look at while you bask in your melancholy."

I saw no point in commenting one way or the other.

Ten minutes later, we were sitting on a park bench at the north end of the sea wall, where Jeanette began reading my latest offering.

A few minutes into it, she asked me why I had phrased my deportation as being "invited to leave Iran," and how that had affected my professional reputation.

"I borrowed the style from British newscasters who say things like, 'An alleged I.R.A. killer is aiding police with their inquiries,' " I explained, "and if the event changed anything in my career it was for the better; countries who deport journalists have a history of killing or jailing their best minds." Seriously, I added, "Most of us hated those places so it wasn't as if we fought to stay."

"A country is not a thing one can hate," she said placidly. "It is a gathering point for like-minded individuals, and you can't hate millions of people you haven't met. What you're saying is that you feared what could happen, because their way of life is radically different from the one you think you understand."

"We've been over this with Otis," I said.

"And you've still written about it in the old way of thinking," she said, holding a page toward me, tapping the top line of a paragraph with her index finger. Leaning forward, I read where two characters were having a vulgar disagreement about what to do in a circumstance that might get a wrist slap back home, but their hands cut off where they were now. Leaning back, a montage of similar circumstances recycled from my uneasy dreaming flooded my mind. I don't know what this looked like to Jeanette, but she seized the moment like a fifty-dollar bill in a laundry hamper.

Placing her arm on the bench backrest, she said, "What are you thinking?"

"I just got the culture of fear thing you talked about."

"Here, or as it applied to when you were working abroad?"

"Away. Why?"

"For the past few days, you've become increasingly morose in spite of me responding favorably to your work, and your clear effort to understand mine. Maybe some of that knowledge is leaking through to our here and now?"

"I couldn't say. Some events suddenly fit into what you said about me not understanding where we were. I didn't think about it applying here, in spite what happened on Granville Island."

"I've got you," she said softly, putting her arm over my shoulder. "You're safe now."

Her words made no sense, but inexplicably I felt like crying; it had been so long since I had last done this the best I could do was breath strangely.

"What's your body telling you?"

It wanted to get up and walk away, but my legs felt like lead as another wave of lethargy overtook me. I have no idea how long I sat there playing mental ping-pong between feeling like an ass, and wanting to know why I felt like my father had just died, but it probably wasn't more than half a minute before I became a spectator in this internalized struggle.

Jeanette was saying something about body memory being stripped of emotion, when this equidistant point of view evolved into a specific mural of memories categorized by their destructive content, and presented as if on a roller for my inspection. Then they were gone: they left no impression beyond me marveling at their sudden appearance and cohesion.

I heard Jeanette say, "Flatten the experience into words, and let everything else get on with whatever memories do when you're not trying to make them serve you."

"What if..."

"Shhhh. Discussing the moment ruins it."

I took a deep breath, paused to still my thoughts, and spontaneously said, "Humanitarian acts could have been rendered by the victors, but they declined the opportunity to begin the healing process."

"That's how you felt about what went on, but your sadness is a manifestation of what lies beneath. Peel back that layer. It's safe. I've still got you."

I felt a surge, like there was a jailbreak pending on my tongue, and I whispered, "Don't pick on every word."

"Don't cloud the moment with any concern, and never about me."

I slipped into an easy, emotionless flow.

"Working on the morgue incident brought back memories of winners punishing losers until they became tired of getting even for their losses, but their contempt was a constant reminder to the losers that they were frauds and cowards. That's the secret they took into their next war, because there was no honor in having fought the good fight if you're not willing to die for the cause you killed for. Parents teach hate to their kids before their toilet trained, which means the next war is fought for their parent's stupidity, guilt, and shame. They are killing their own kids to justify the beliefs they were taught."

"Almost there," Jeanette said quietly, gazing at the water.

"I think that's it," I said, feeling the depth of my ease lifting. "My late night walks in the hospital corridor always ended in snippets of this kind of shit. I guess that's why I've been a bit off."

"You're close: surfacing those memories has frightened you anew," Jeanette said as a matter-of-fact, "and what you call a bit off is a sense of defeat wrapped in the shawl of relief, because you don't have to keep the secret from yourself anymore. Let those ghosts get on with whatever they do when you're not using them as a blanket of suffering. Set yourself free."

"Pardon me?"

"The secret is on your tongue. Let it out... don't think, just say it."

My mood, or lack thereof, had me accept her words as a command.

Speaking mechanically, because I didn't know where I was going, I told Jeanette that amid the chilling rains of an early Asian spring, crews came under the constant assault of half-naked children begging for food or clothing, while their hollow-eyed mothers offered themselves to us in exchange for either. On occasion, a fourteen-year old punk carrying an assault rifle would appear and, imitating his favorite screen revolutionary, shout that we would all die if we dared to help his enemies. We had to walk away because there is no single group, in any country, more dangerous than adolescents with guns. A block farther on, we came across ragged groups of elderly survivors huddling around smoky refuse fires built inside the open garages of bombed out buildings. Their eyes asked us for help.

"Shocran," thank you, they said with dignity when we gave them something. "Insha Allah," God's will, others said without animosity when the kid came around the corner to check on us.

"That's it," I said.

"It certainly is. The punk confronted your self-image, and that's why you feel defeated. It's also why you could feel equal empathy for the Vietnam veteran and the draft dodger, but we'll come back to that."

"It wasn't my job to help. Agency reps took care of the refugees."

Holding up a defensive hand, Jeanette said, "You hated the position the kid put you in, and because the agency people dared to do something you couldn't, you felt ashamed. In part, this explains why you risked your life in meaningless ways after you came home."

"Pardon me?"

"For short but critical times, you challenge fate in the only way you understand the concept of control. This is by riding motorcycles on slick mountain roads, sailing small boats on large oceans, and crawling through pubs to celebrate your survival. You've been down in the dumps for days because your efforts to retrieve a pivotal memory put you in touch with core events that changed you... as they should." Jeanette looked across the narrows toward Granville Island, while the truth stirred in my stomach like a lump of cold lead.

"You designed this discovery experience by asking me to look in that room?"

"You did. I'm just the messenger and the message is this: in this moment, you are acutely aware that your life can depend on the whims of a child strolling around a corner with a weapon, or a corporation polishing their Ethics in Journalism Award at your funeral. Your safe place in the world was taken from you."

"I'm not arguing against the impact of those events, but they were rare, years ago, and thousands of miles from here. You're talking about here and now?"

"That's the bargaining phase of the numbers game speaking." She looked at me. "I knew you were deeply disappointed in yourself from the moment you said, 'Not even us,' when you were telling me about witnesses not coming forward in El Salvador. It's clear now that an act of mercy gutted the soldier of fortune image you concocted after the global adventurer phase died in Argentina." Jeanette patted the back of my hand. "Don't lose sleep over it. Few people understand when to intercede on behalf of others, and many are as careless with their lives as you are."

A sudden rage arose as my thoughts focused on my heroes, and I dared not speak until I figured out what to do with her body: in Asia, the Red Cross and Green Crescent retrieved wounded from all sides, and many of them were shot for their trouble. In Africa, Doctors Without Borders were twisted into emotional knots by the cruelest of ironies; unable to save people for lack of staff meant that losing someone they were treating inside the tents doubled the tally.

Understandably, "heroic measures" became the standard of care for the nurses who carried this nightmarish burden into the dying throngs to choose another child patient, not by assessing their damage, pain, or pleas of an emaciated mother, but by weight. If they were too light for their age, they wouldn't make it anyway. Next.

Enter a mother's love.

Local helpers caught on to the significance of the nurses asking for birth dates, while weighing the children, and in the strictest confidence told relatives how to tip the scales of justice's ultimate simplification. It took little time before every mother was swearing their six-year-old was three, if only to have the child die warm and dry. The meaning of "rounds" for those magnificent people was forever changed, and here sat a placid bitch telemarketer shitting on them.

Suppressing violent urges I did not know I possessed, I settled on being aghast over her view of the risks I had taken for...whatever.

"Motorcycles and oceans are how I have fun," I hissed, redirecting the force of my fury into sibilance.

"You can't have fun as long as you act from fear," she said evenly. "You don't know how to have fun."

My anger fizzled in the face of this asinine statement. Taking a few steadying breaths, I said, "You're seriously saying that I look for danger to convince myself that I'm in charge of my life, because dangerous events have convinced me that I'm not?"

"I'm saying you became a media mercenary, a fanatic willing to die for the cause of compensation. This is the act of a man with no sense of self-worth, a defeated man whose checks are written in other people's troubles to pay for bar stories to convince himself that he's in charge of his life."

"Huh?"

"You really have to stop saying that. It reflects poorly on your college."

It also consumed the half-second of hesitation that may have saved her life.

"You've got it backwards, this time. Risks are what make living worthwhile," I said.

"When they have a purpose. What was yours?"

"To have fun, to recover, to recover from having fun—who cares?"

"Meaning your existence is pointless." Jeanette cocked her head.

"Meaning I'm recovering from trying to make a point of my existence!" I snapped.

"That's the wisest thing you've ever said to me. Speaking of which," she leaned back, "a wiser part of you is constantly showing his hand, by prompting you to reorder your thoughts about your life. It's what drove you away from big money to tackle the frugal challenges of self-discovery."

I stared, open-mouthed.

"Your thoughts led you to viewing the cause and effect of your feelings about yourself, but you couldn't make the connection because they contradicted years of hiding the truth. Your inner awareness knew that I could explain things to you when you were ready, but only you could make yourself ready; this is what walking the corridors was about. Good job." She grinned like the proverbial cat.

Her tension breaking effort was too little and too late, not to mention too spooky. I stood to leave: her fucking inner awareness could explain that to her.

"You always come back," she said as I turned to walk away, "because I answer the questions you have been surreptitiously asking yourself for years. Your Silent Knowledge also tells you that I'm correct. I can see the look a moment before your ego registers my words as a threat."

I pivoted to face her. "I come back because I am seriously attracted to you," I blurted out. "Why else would I do this—for a fucking fairy tale?"

"You have no control over what I think of you," she said, patting the bench beside her, "and you come back every day to argue about fiction? I think not." She patted the bench again.

Feeling used and drained, I sat down; if I was going to feel like an ass either way, I might as well be comfortable.

"Two things you need to take away from this conversation: in a matter of only a day or two, you went through denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and finally acceptance of your own

experiences, which means you have grieved the loss of some core illusions. Now you need to fill those voids, or the crappy ramifications those illusions generated will come back."

"What ramifications?"

"Your rage... you've seen where a lot of it comes from so this..."

"Not all of it?" I quipped.

"I told you, you tucked away the fear your journey generated so this is a grand opportunity to excavate it by picturing all of your disturbing memories as pieces of a puzzle that form a quest." She leaned my way. "All I'm asking is that you grant me a little more trust, like you did with the morgue scene; have faith that your search for a life purpose will lead you to the certain knowledge that you have one."

"Is this what the confrontation scene is about—faith and trust?"

"Until you don't need either, yes."

"Then what?"

"Then you'll *know*." Jeanette stood up. "Brunch is on me," she said, turning to walk toward the commercial of core of West Vancouver.

Chapter 25: The Road to Damour

The next morning I worked on my book until eight-thirty, then I showered while steeling myself for a push to the payoff scene I suspected she had not written: Jeanette had been dead right when she said I couldn't live in between pivotal events. I had finished writing a decent grant proposal she knew nothing about, but it was missing a credible ending. Finishing the actual screenplay was off the table—she could do that—the fifty-fifty split for work she had claimed wasn't far from being finished wasn't exactly a lie, but it was nowhere near the truth of my experiences: extreme experiences.

My plan would be to point out her lie, and leverage it to find out more. Her choices would be to give up her full plot, or try to distract me. My position would be that there is no reason not to start the application process, now that we had crunched some of her society's premises into shared assumptions, but I couldn't do that without an ending. If she was not forthcoming, I could disengage from our daily meetings, and polish the crap out of the mediocre payoff scene I had drafted. If she gave up key information before I was finished, because she had too much invested to let me walk, then great. If not, fuck it, I would submit the proposal myself. The advance check would come my way. The second half would go to her when she submitted the complete screenplay on her own; she could add all of the complicated shit she wanted. That's why they called it a development grant.

Arguing to learn her dramatic closer meant I couldn't lose focus, I reminded myself as I got dressed, because she could twist a phrase so smoothly that by the time I realized she had skewered my objection I had to wonder whether I was narcoleptic.

I also couldn't telegraph my intentions, I thought as I motored into the park minutes later. With Jeanette, one word out of place would be like trying to hide a cow in a closet, bell and all.

I should wait for her lead, I chanted as I ramped down to Marine Drive.

If she somehow changed the conversation, and I didn't get what I was after, I had to remind myself that the shoe was still on the other foot: I had an application almost ready.

I spooled up my courage by running a reddish light at closed-casket speeds, steeling myself for a battle of wills I couldn't lose. Still...

We had been walking the West Vancouver sea wall for half an hour when a jogger passed between us, from behind, and Jeanette said the runner was in financial trouble.

I saw my open door.

Two steps later, I said, "I don't doubt that things come to you, but I think our audience will have a problem with your character's unverifiable *knowings* if you don't distinguish them from their imagination—their shopping habits aside," I joked.

"By which you mean you're having a problem with the concept, even though you're experiencing insights nearly every day?"

"I'm not dismissing the psychic experience; hell, I've taken real risks to avoid the potential of something that felt wrong, but there are only so many of those you can rely on before it becomes a cheap device. I mean, I know now that if you had insights every day you might begin to anticipate them, then your anticipation would insinuate itself on normal circumstances; you'd need a way to distinguish between a *knowing* and speculation. There'd have to be some kind of mechanism of control, and the audience will want to know what it is. Even then...."

"Tell me about a risk you took."

I hesitated, realized the story lent credibility to my objection, then I said, "There's a lot of background, again."

"We've got all day," she said, spreading her arms as if releasing time.

More like ten minutes, I thought.

"Most factions," I said, a few paces later, "could capture any village south of Beirut as a Monday morning exercise in prestige, but they couldn't hold them without controlling the outlying areas; this required resources no faction could spare. They would spend Tuesday and Wednesday sniping at anyone within half a mile, then abandon the place Thursday. On Friday, another faction 'attacked' the empty village, claimed a decisive victory, and stayed long enough for us to get footage of their presence. With me so far?"

"Different groups insinuated power and political control through tactically meaningless territorial victories," Jeanette summed up the situation.

"Exactly. We called most of the roads in these areas Sniper Alley, but there was one that everybody called The Alley." I drew a map in the air. "Damour was on the coast highway a few clicks south of Beirut, at a pincher point between the Chouf Mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. Was, because the Israeli Defense Forces leveled it, but wannabe militias went there to shoot civilians going to and from work in the city. In early eighty-four, there was a half mile stretch of roadside strewn with bullet-riddled cars that our drivers called Death Row."

"Why shoot civilians? Why was the rubble important?"

"The town overlooked the airport. Controlling access to a country is a big deal. Temporary, but big."

"Go on," Jeanette said, with a spring in her step.

"We were assigned a scouting route that a BBC cameraman called, 'an absorbing excursion into hell', because he had been pinned down by a sniper, inadvertently saved by Phalangists, then on the way back a P.P.L.F. gang told them to take another road, and they hit a mine. Anyway, there was a refugee story at the Awali River Bridge—that's about an hour south toward Sidon—the day after a skirmish for Damour's sniping rights. I was primed to turn back if I didn't like the feel of anything, because the winners hadn't had time to calm down, and there was another way through the mountains."

"Why not take that in the first place?"

"It was an hour longer and the story might have gone away."

"The hour wasn't worth your life?"

"Nothing was wrong."

"Carry on."

"We were past the airport grounds, in no man's land, when Kamal slowed the car to pick up a belt of heavy caliber ammunition lying in the middle of the road. I told him to keep going, but to buy time he spoke Arabic so that Sami had to translate, "What's the problem, friend?" for me.

I pointed out that we were on a flat, straight stretch of shell-holed highway littered with car wreck range markers.

"Pointed out," Jeanette snickered.

"I also drew his attention to the coincidence of the ammo lying between the safety of a runway access road behind us, and a dirt road that ran into the foothills in front of us, the significance being that a sniper had maximum time to shoot the enemy soldiers he expected to stop and die of stupidity. Sami knew it as well. He sat upright, waiting for the thunk."

"What did Kamal say?"

"He said we weren't fighters, and the sniper wasn't likely to shoot."

"True?"

"Yes, but the press had no reason to have ammunition; it undermined our thin shield of neutrality making it difficult to convince fighters to let us go about our business. Kamal said, 'Friend, you do not understand my country. I am going to offer this ammunition as a thank you for our safe passage,' and he opened the door to pick up the ammunition on a slow drive-by. I leaned over the back seat, and grabbed the wheel to turn us away. Kamal threw a tantrum at Sami in Arabic, ordering him to put me in my place. Sami knew I was right, but Kamal wasn't used to driving techs through front line areas, and without a producer or reporter along he thought he was in charge."

"A local driver was not accustomed to frontlines?"

"He owned all of the cars CBS leased. When he did drive, it was four man crews to do stand-ups in safe places. Safer places," I corrected myself.

"Didn't he have some say?"

"All drivers had the right to refuse to go anywhere they felt their safety was on the line, but that cut two ways. Kamal either didn't appreciate the circumstance, or he didn't care that he was taking the bait someone had risked his ass to put there, and shooting people for spite and sport was common a day after a battle. In our circumstance, 'not likely' to shoot us was a long way from wouldn't. Another problem was that Kamal wouldn't say a word about the ammunition if we were stopped, because he wanted to sell it. He didn't know that I was on my third trip in-country and I understood that 'the deal' was equal parts honor and commerce in his world so he quietly expected us to risk dying for one of his."

"After his tirade?" Jeanette prompted me.

"I asked Sami to ask Kamal if he knew who was crouched in the debris, and in excellent English Kamal said it didn't matter. I told Sami to tell him that I was sure Kamal could recognize the military uniforms of Lebanon, Syria, Israel, America, the United Nations blue caps, and probably the principle Shiite and Sunni militias, by their badges. But I doubted that driving between Embassy Row and The First National Bank had familiarized him with factions who wouldn't be around long enough to design an emblem. If one of these groups was in Damour, and they asked us who we thought they were when we picked up the ammunition, Kamal would screw CBS by supplying that cause with ammunition, or screw us by guessing wrong because that was admitting supplying their enemies. I then agreed that it didn't matter who was in Damour as long as we weren't passing through with ammunition."

"What did he do?"

"You know Eskimos have something like thirty words for snow?"

"Inuit."

"Them, too. The same thing applies to an Arab tongue click. Kamal's meant I was ignorant and uncultured, which in western terms was to call me the scum spawn of an American soldier and an Israeli hooker."

"Sounds more like fuck off, to me."

"True, but that lacks a sense of historical significance."

"Like most things North American. What happened next?"

"He reversed the car, picked up the belt, then turned and stared at me."

Not unlike how I stared at Jeanette now, who took a moment to process the circumstance before saying, "You were stationary, in the open, blocking the sniper's view of his trap... everyone was playing chicken?"

"You're very good."

"Yes I am. Who blinked?"

"Kamal did when I spoke to him in his own language."

"You don't speak Arabic."

"Money. I said if he didn't put the ammunition back I was getting out of the car and walking back to the hotel. It made him think about losing his contract, and maybe becoming a full time gunrunner—lots of frontline driving," I smirked.

"I didn't know you were that important in the CBS hierarchy," Jeanette grinned.

"Not important—credible. The point was that, dead or alive, everyone would know what Kamal had done, and Lucy would have a little chat with him—maybe renegotiate their deal."

"If I've got this straight, you were willing to risk the sniper because you weren't his preferred target?"

"That works," I said, thinking more along the lines that Kamal and Sami would cause the sniper indecision as they became bigger in his scope. "But it didn't matter. Kamal reset the trap, then booted it into Damour with his eyes slitting my throat every time he checked the rear view mirror."

"And after you drove through town without seeing anyone?" Jeanette guessed accurately.

"A fact Kamal reminded me of until it was time to head back, and I felt that the longer road was a better bet, but he insisted on taking the coast road because the mountain route was terminal to travel at night. It wasn't even dusk when we began to argue at the crossroads, but the moment the sun dropped behind the highest hill it was over." I shrugged. "He must've felt something wasn't right, as well, because we booted it over broken road at around sixty, then punched through a hundred when we came to Death Row... miles per hour, not clicks," I said.

Jeanette nodded.

"Anyway, Kamal crouched behind the wheel when the first shot came, Sami sat upright in the passenger side of the rear seat, and I crowded over next to him to leave a clear path through the trunk to the driver's side."

"What other *knowings* have you had?" Jeanette said, apparently not appreciating my sense of fair play.

To further substantiate my view that anticipating *knowings* would demand that one have a definitive way of distinguishing them from speculation, I said, "I had one after my father had a heart attack. He had been in the hospital for six weeks when my mother said he would be coming home the next Saturday. I knew he wouldn't."

"What did you do in the moment of receiving that information?"

"I made the mistake of saying that he'd die, with the certainty that I felt. I think Mom wondered whether I wanted him dead."

"He died?"

"Yes."

"When else did you experience *knowings*?"

"None," I said, shaking my head after faking a brief search.

"There are more, but you chose to forget them because you couldn't explain their source, or defend their validity without risking ridicule. Maybe subconsciously you believed you were the cause of some events, so you banished their memory, but their effects are still with you." Jeanette winked. "It would explain why you didn't acknowledge having the experience when we first met."

"I don't think..." a stark picture popping into my mind shut my mouth.

"Don't tell me nothing just high jacked your thoughts," Jeanette chortled.

"It has nothing to do with knowing things."

Slowing our pace with a gentle hand on my forearm, she said, "What do you think just happened?" She drew a deep breath. "Again, the experiences student's can have when they're with a teacher are a consequence of them gathering energy through their own efforts, and of the teacher lending the student some of theirs. There's nothing to argue about; it's the way it is, so you might as well go with it. We can talk about the process later, and where it fits in our work, but these events are not random. Now is the time to explore what just happened."

Shaking my head over these befuddling intrusions, and how Jeanette jumped on them as if our roles were real, I told her the flash was about the famine in Ethiopia: a World Vision plane had flown us to the foot of some mountains where other employees drove us up to a feeding station, seven thousand feet above sea level. Cresting the final rise, my eyes were taken hostage by a foliage-free moonscape filled with starving people portentously shrouded in the steely haze of campfire smoke and ground fog. Dumbfounded, I got out of our warm vehicle, a cacophony of pneumonic coughs besieged my ears, and with embarrassing volume I exclaimed, "This cannot be!"

"Which," I quickly told Jeanette, "had nothing to do with a *knowing*."

She nudged me to the side of the path: an acute gaze, designed to compel my unconditional surrender, caused me to step back against a chain link fence.

"Your feelings were whispered directions to keep you safely on the path of your destiny. You didn't understand this because the point of having those experiences was to avoid proving them accurate. Each of those incidents was a sign of Spirit's presence in your life, to the point of them speaking directly to and through you in Africa."

I didn't bite. "The point we're discussing is that having too many *knowings* undermines their validity."

"If you had learned to trust your feelings, like I did," she said, taking a step back as I moved around her, "you would have no doubt about *knowing*, even if they arrived by the truck load. You would also have heard our friends by now. Let's go to the Greek House. It's only another ten minutes."

"You hear voices?" I said bewildered, because there was no net for this claim, and trying to shock me with a hallucination was just plain stupid.

"Yes," she said evenly.

Perched between fact and fiction in my novel, dangling between hope and delusion over bedding Jeanette, and getting paid for it, licking a wall socket couldn't have made me more wide-

eyed. "Uh huh," was the least offensive thing I could think of to say as saliva migrated to my palms.

"You don't believe me." It was a statement.

"Would it be rational?"

"One who denies their experiences, because they don't suit their opinions, is hardly in a position to determine another's sanity."

A creeping pleasure filtered through my wonder. This wasn't a shock tactic; it was the resolution to her plot!

The cosmos had decided to do things directly, because having mere mortals interpret their instructions wasn't working. Of course, this undermined the reasoning behind the lessons—all of the personal disciplines, the need for three time frames, magic, everything was diluted. But I didn't care; how she intended to overcome this flaw in the Universe's plan would have to remain a mystery, because I was done with her. She should have leveled with me from the start, and we would certainly have come up with something better than undermining her admittedly clever set up... all I had to do was decide how we would part company.

I could easily push the voices issue into a confrontation, and our ending would come quickly with acrimony, or I could continue being a student for the day. We'd go to lunch on innuendo, and sip double entendres until we went back to her house where I wouldn't say, 'See you tomorrow,' and Jeanette wouldn't reply, 'Nolan's at nine.' I would leave without the look-back wave that seals little deals, and that would be that. Either way, it seemed fair to offer her a dignified way out. At worst, she would laugh her ass off at my gullibility.

"When I was in trouble as a kid," I said, pushing my glasses up the slippery slope of my nose, "I rehearsed the excuses I was going to use on my parents, and imagined confrontations about the stuff they usually came back with. When I was older, I wrote out things, like Best Man speeches, and memorized them in context by bantering with a phantom audience. It also helped me to see what I should or shouldn't say. Does that sound familiar?"

"Did you ever get proper advice?"

"I'm talking about imagining people's reactions." *Jesus Christ, take the bait!*

"So am I. Did you ever lose an argument, for instance?"

"To myself?"

"This isn't complicated. I'm asking how deep your imaginings went."

"Not so deep that I crossed a point of intensity where I tricked myself into believing voices were talking to me."

"You've just described how your inner voice has been talking to you for years." She waved her comment aside. "My inner voice asked to speak through me, to some of my friends, but my lifelong ties weren't of immediate interest to it—to them. An entity named Kha-lib said he wanted to speak to just Josh and you. I channeled Kha-lib out loud to Josh two days ago. Come on," she said, pulling me along. I didn't realize we had stopped.

I mumbled something about a quack without a duck being a decoy.

"I've always embraced intuition as a normal part of my awareness, so it wasn't as big a leap as you might think to become familiar with its source over the years."

"The source of intuition is a voice?"

"That said," she continued her thought, "in spite of a clever progression of events to make me ready, I wasn't exactly calm about it."

"Mmm," was all that came through my mouthful of cotton.

"How many demonstrations do you think you'll need to accept that I have a personal relationship with Spirit, and that I can know things I couldn't otherwise know, because they tell me things?"

I bent over to remove a phantom pebble from my shoe. Clearing my throat, I said, "A student would demand proof." I stood up, and began walking without looking back.

"Come over around noon tomorrow, and speak with Kha-lib," Jeanette said, tugging on my sleeve to catch up to me.

"More words won't change anything."

"Words are what had you come this far. How likely was that a month ago?"

"Tell me how the voices fit into your payoff scene, and you've got a deal."

We turned a lazy circle around a garden display at the far end of the sea wall, and headed back toward her home. Paces later, Jeanette said, "We already have a deal; maybe Kha-lib will tell you how he fits in our work tomorrow."

Putting my honor at issue was not as compelling a reason to stay alongside her as the distance to my motorcycle represented an infinitely awkward silence. "So we do," I said. "Can you at least tell me about the experience?"

A short pause; Jeanette said the voice directed her to sit in her wooden rocker where a general fatigue soon engulfed her. Feeling as though a large weight was pressing down on her shoulders, she moved her head from side to side, to relieve a kink in her neck before she began rocking mechanically. A minute later, with elbows pivoting on the armrests, she was pumping her arms in the rhythmic manner of a slow motion runner. Finally, she felt an irresistible pressure to speak, and she was as surprised as Josh to hear a male voice introduce himself in a business-like manner.

Jeanette lowered her voice in imitation: "We are teachers. In time, you will find the experience of channeling us effortless, for it is a natural act of acquiescence to those who have the energy to handle the physiological and psychological process. For now, your earth-time consciousness considers us intruders, so we are distracting your ego by giving it something to do."

"Considerate," I said.

"They told me this right away," Jeanette said evenly, "because the physical manifestations of their presence were exaggerated." She chuckled. "The word intruder tweaked me, so Kha-lib said there had never been a single case of spiritual possession in the history of mankind. I could stop channeling him by simply deciding to stop. Otherwise, they would add these physical distractions until I let go of my bodily armor—that's tense muscles." She grinned sheepishly. "I didn't want to fight my movements, but struggling to stay calm while Kha-lib countered my struggling over anything made me so stiff that by the time we were done Josh had to pry open my fists."

"Who is we and they—how many intruders were there?"

"Kha-lib said the plural reference was a term of reverence that recognized everyone who helped him to become all that he is."

"Which is what?"

"He said he's an inseparable aspect of a family of energy-consciousness who are ever-developing in their own ways. We could call him Kha-lib, because we needed to make such distinctions, then he didn't refer to himself after that."

"Why did he say he was talking through you?"

"Part of their purpose for making contact is to explain the context of our existence, to have us understand how we are much more than we believe we are, and that what we do has far more impact than we realize."

"What did he want to tell Josh?"

"He was speaking to both of us, but he told Josh about my internal struggles before getting to the point, which was explaining the evolutionary process we all go through." Jeanette took deeper breaths as she slowed her pace to a geriatric stroll. She then integrated concepts, like our secret accomplice and uninformed consent, into a rolling carpet of beliefs that generated a cyclical momentum within a multiplicity of realities. She next interwove mankind's core follies with the disciplines of spiritual development that countered them, which ultimately made hearing spirit voices a logical closing stage in our physically oriented development—call it the graduate degree.

Early in her dissertation, I knew my grant application would say that everything we do matters, because everything comes back to us, and in this way the truth always shows itself. I would combine these into a sensational catastrophic event, the survivors of which would be the ones who had been trained. At least those scenes wouldn't go to waste.

I neither needed nor wanted to hear anything more, because I understood that Jeanette believed everything she had ever told me. Then there was the customary hole in her premise; why would she need help from me if the Universe was chatting her up?"

With this thought staining every word, her monologue took twenty excruciating minutes to complete. During this, my amazement fluctuated between vacant stupefaction and wondrous shock over her ability to concoct such an intricate load of shit. By the time we crossed the mini-park to her narrow roadway, I was dumbfounded by the dichotomy of a brilliant mind so convincingly supporting its own madness.

Turning up the short driveway to her house, Jeanette said I had been learning how the Universe would help mankind change our ways from the moment I asked her what her book was about. My Source Soul had plans for me in this regard.

"Hmm," was all I could say as I straddled my bike.

Resting a hand on my shoulder, Jeanette leaned close and said, "Don't be angry. I said your beliefs were skewed on day one. Your reactions to hearing how this is true told me that nothing less than an experience in my world would decapitate the opinions you hold about yours, which you also agreed to have the first day we met... think about it. Now you are ready to meet them, so suspend your disbelief for one more day, and don't throw it all away. That rhymes." She grinned. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I nodded mechanically, kicked down into first gear, and pulled away at a reasonable speed for one with narrow vision on a slim road.

I was across the bridge before anger over my colossal waste of time collapsed into a bout of giddiness; I dared to wonder if the revenge of watching Jeanette try to maintain her poise was worth the trip. The transparency of her ruse would be my immediate pound of flesh, and I still could get the grant money.

It was nearly two o'clock when I turned onto Davie Street, so I stopped for lunch: sharp thoughts snuffled from my nostrils until I was sedate enough to arrive at the ironic conclusion that I had too much invested to quit one day before possibly hearing how her story ended. Or the punch line, in which case I would have to find a way to make it look like an accident.

[Chapter 26: Kha-lib](#)

I arrived at Jeanette's a few minutes before noon where, without preamble, she led me into the living area flooded by the light of a southern exposure, and softened by sheers covering the wall of glass facing English Bay. An onshore breeze waved the diaphanous material above her lethargic cat's head, keeping the room cool.

"It'll take a minute," she said, sitting in the oversized oak rocker beside the fireplace.

"I'll be here," I said as she closed her eyes.

Fifteen seconds later, she began rocking in her chair, followed by twisting her head from side to side. A series of stilted breaths preceded pumping her arms, closely followed by deeper breaths that seemed to synchronize her motions. Embarrassed for her, I turned my attention to her cat, but Ginger wasn't any more at ease with me watching her than I was with watching Jeanette's theatrics; she left the room to lie on the balcony.

Not a bad idea.

When Jeanette finally stopped moving, she opened her eyes to explore our surroundings as if she were unfamiliar with them. Then her gaze fell on me with such calm assurance, not the stare of mental vacancy I must've been expecting, that I felt undressed.

"We have been awaiting you," she said in a sonorous, distinctly male voice, not at all like her imitation of it. "All times are now, for the end has met the beginning. This does not mean the end of times as you think of it. Rather, humankind has reached the end of a cycle of evolution wherein your cultural experiments have gone as far as they can go within their current focus. You are now repeating the essential events of your history."

I felt mortified for the rational Jeanette I sometimes knew, and intimidated by the tranquil idiot sitting across from me. Inspecting my toes took care of both feelings.

"Do not bow to us or to anyone. We are not your masters, but your servants," she/he said.

I looked up to protest her interpretive error, but words would not come: her facial features had become square—manly, and continued to change in subtle ways as she spoke with a simple eloquence I found compelling, even from within the turmoil of my skeptical fascination.

In part and paraphrase, as it will always be when I "quote" Jeanette, or the Universe by any name, the Kha-lib persona said the aberrant ways of our world will come to an end by way of cataclysmic events that have nothing to do with the wrath of God. Before encountering humanity, spirit/energy/consciousness, hereafter called the Universe, had never encountered malice. This concept was the antithesis of all that they knew about life, as foreign to them as Aramaic is to an amoeba.

At this time in our evolution, he said the momentum of mankind's destructive path is turning back on itself, accumulating energy at incompatible frequencies, like sound waves exciting the natural resonance of a wine glass beyond its structural tolerance. This circumstance was magnified by a cascading collapse of energies that exponentially propelled events into physical manifestation sooner than would otherwise be their natural flow, resulting in life as we know it becoming increasingly more emphatic.

I envisioned a spinning figure skater pulling in her arms to gather experiences, both wobbly and true, as she increased her rate of rotation: the experience was simple, but I somehow understood it more completely than the visual represented.

Kha-lib continued: "Mankind develops within evolutionary cycles that manifest according to the nature and degree of the momentum generated by their free will. It follows that the closing of your loop of development is not fixed in terms of preordained events; the momentum-consequence of some key choices has yet to pass the point of change beyond which

circumstances become inevitable. Overall, we see that mankind will experience the end-time as a transition in your way of living over the next eighty-five years." He paused.

"Uh huh." *Long dead.* "Go on."

"This does not mean change will always be subtle, for your kind demand an inordinate number of similar experiences before you are convinced of the necessity of change. The purpose of making ourselves known at this time is to reveal the fundamental practices of your daily lives that are literally killing you. This knowledge will be spread by our emissaries, for it is destined to become the foundation upon which future generations will evolve productively." He paused again, I assumed to allow me to digest his words.

"Do not be misled by the timeline," he continued. "Now is a more crucial time in history than has ever been, for within the opportunity to learn from the affects of an entire evolutionary cycle you have developed the ability to annihilate entire universes. It is critical to learn of this peril, for how you each behave will determine in which reality your next physical journey will take place. If you continue to choose hate, war, and deprivation, you will return amid these circumstances until you have understood how you created them.

"This transformation," Kha-lib said, again allowing me a moment to grasp the significance of his words, "must take place on your own volition. Otherwise, we would be robbing you of your hard earned lessons, and we would have to return."

He stared.

I stared back; apparently Ginger had walked out with my tongue.

"A general insanity pervades mankind," Kha-lib said. "This circumstance requires that proof of your destiny, and our existence and intentions, be offered within a strategic process that will undermine the myths you have entrenched in your covert doctrines of morality, and overt acts of terrorism your nations disguise as God-given rights that justify your ways."

Finding my voice, I said, "It sounds like you'll prove you're good at arguing a point. I'll concede that right now," I told Jeanette. "They're just more words."

"To an extent," he/she replied, "we will establish our credentials through physical representatives demonstrating the inherent magic of your existence, while they speak of time's immutable projections that will subsequently take place in front of your eyes. These events will draw your attention to the reappearance of the Masters of The Arts of Life among you."

"Why not pop in, state your beef, and get on with it?"

"If we were to arrive unannounced no one would know us."

"Meaning you've tried?"

"We have always been present in your world to keep our knowledge alive, but the significance of these individuals' abilities is lost to your masses, for now. However, their most recent stories are public record, and blueprints for the development of personal power that others among you will adopt as their quest in partnerships with our guidance."

"Have you tried saying, look at what we can do?"

"Immediate demonstrations of our potential would scare you into submission, thereby tainting everything we have come to teach."

"Which is what?"

"We will assist the first waves of representatives to reveal their underlying beliefs to themselves, from which they will understand how specific aspects of behavior generate distinct events. We will teach them responsibility, and they will leave the world of average men and women to gain conscious control of their destiny. Their personal development will set the stage for those whom your masses will recognize as your prophets returned. Some of these emissaries

will emerge from among the families of the forerunners. Others, cast off by mankind, will be adopted by the Original Family of Man."

What had begun as an undercurrent of hubris in her manner finally clawed at my throat, and a stark sense of foreboding stripped away the bullshit she had fed me since day one: I envisioned Jeanette standing amid the six-point lighting of a techno-cathedral, picking the pockets of sinners by way of electronic salvation. The Chyron crawl at the bottom of the screen read, Dial 1-900-Savior. *Three minute minimum, heinous crimes may take longer. Long distance charges apply... and all of the carnage I had seen generated by religions coalesced into an immobilizing rage. Breathing became a discipline. The systolic thump in my chest hurt.

Unconcerned with my paralytic apoplexy, Kha-lib said I was a direct emanation of an entity I could refer to as Phillip, under whose direction I could advance my own development.

"These lessons are difficult because mankind is difficult," he said, ludicrously challenging me into an alliance with my personal ghost.

Kha-lib bid me farewell with a crisp, "We will speak again," the absurdity of which cyclonically whirled through my mind until Jeanette's eyes fluttered her back into our own space/time continuum.

Beaming as if I had won a lottery, she said, "Well?"

"Well what?" I said, with the innocence of dealing with a collections agent.

We searched each other's eyes until it became a contest.

With no punch line in sight, I stood up and said, "I have a job today."

Jeanette did not challenge my conspicuous lie, possibly because the effort not to laugh twisted her face into a post-stroke grimace that sapped every ounce of energy she needed to control her bladder.

1-900-Fuckyou looped through my mind as I left her house for the last time...

Standing by my motorcycle, I forced myself through a meticulous safety check routine because I had a habit of sharing traffic lanes when I was vexed, and the bridge didn't have a ditch of forgiveness. Well it did, but I didn't have a parachute and a dingy.

I was still incredulous over the extent of her hoax, as I leaned into the onramp—a feeling that dissipated with the rub of the curb and one of Newton's laws kept me heading toward my fate. Thusly refocused, I made my way to Davie Street like a probationary driver on weed, then I inched toward home through Saturday shopping traffic. Feeling supremely stupid for going back to see her actually served to calm me, while two-foot advances grinding away my clutch connected me to a sense of loss. I hadn't moved two blocks before I was debating with myself again, because it wasn't as if I made up my experiences with clarity or intrusive thoughts. My tentative thinking was that I could embrace Jeanette's performance as part of her research, which wasn't farfetched within her meticulous preparations, accept that Kha-lib was real, or that there was a savant-like brilliance gone wrong with her wiring.

A fourth option came to mind, as I pulled over at the Dover Pub; she was researching how a well travelled, reasonably intelligent man, when subjected to endless conditioning by untouchable tits and ass, can be turned into an idiot.

I went inside to soak up courage enough to decide which it was.

Everything Australian was in vogue for some reason, except Men At Work in concert, so a number of Fosters fat cans later I over enunciated "fuck it" into the smoky air, and scraping my chair on the bare plank floor stood to dig out my cash. Two tables over, a stranger grunted in agreement while his muddled buddy turned to look for the bar's resident drunk, Delores.

"Women troubles?" Miriam said, sidling up from wherever servers lurk to scare the shit out of contemplating customers.

"Investment problem," I said, offering her an uncounted wad of cash.

Taking the correct amount of money, she pried open my fingers and snatched my keys. "I saw you leave yesterday; wouldn't want to lose a good tipper. Any tipper," she corrected herself, looking at the sparsely inhabited room of indigent regulars. "Who was she?" she asked, as I moved to step around her.

"Who are they," I corrected her, offering a ten-dollar tip.

"Have it," she said, and I walked outside as free as a man can be in the world I knew.

Chapter 27: The Question of Sanity

To leave the memory of Jeanette behind, I also left the grant application alone and instead concentrated on filling out the civilian ambiance in chapters of my book that preceded events in Lebanon. Background color aside, my thinking was that readers who were familiar with my characters' environment and upbringing would better understand why they made some otherwise incomprehensible choices when the war came to their doorstep.

The drafts of various family scenarios took a tedious nine days to complete, because writing about their social conformation inexorably led to thoughts of Jeanette and her premises. I dismissed these as best I could, until they struck an inner chord: I wondered if Jeanette's eccentricities were a manifestation of an unusually agile mind, kind of like Robbie LeBlanc's, but intelligible?

The thought of translating his world into ours triggered one of those aha moments, and I focused on interpreting Jeanette's fanciful views into their source possibilities: she had been with a good man whose spirit had been crushed, seen his generosity as a ruse, and tried to heal him. Maybe she had been emotionally starved by her parents, as a means of discipline—there were two kids in her book, and she had a brother.

It made sense that her older characters, all kind parental stereotypes, were an ideal that compensated her. No matter, snickering with sad satisfaction, I marveled at how her survivor's instinct had segregated and insulated memories into layers, and that using trickery to unwrap abstractions was just mental masturbation for an ingenious flake in a world of cerebral eunuchs. And her need to dominate to feel safe was satisfied.

I concluded that I was an excellent disco ball, but not what she wanted reflected, so she had to fight for her version of the world even as she left it behind... everything she said I was doing.

With a celebratory beer over my genius, considering all that Jeanette had done to drive me so nuts that I would even contemplate believing her story, I realized that I needed to get away. Taking a motorcycle trip with Ed to Vancouver Island, and a weekend piss-up in a Victoria motel before taking the Sunday afternoon ferry back to the mainland, should rid me her influences. I would check ferry sailing times in the morning...

Zzzz - Sailing close-hauled toward granite cliffs.

Jimi plays chartreuse chords into a pear-scented breeze.

Gusts in C. Gales of grey rolling seas. Can't see.

Narwhal slides to the surface, I hang on.

The beast glides under; we dive deep.

Surfacing with a gasp, I drift on a kapok preserver.

Scarlet orchids rise from John's orchard.

Keith beats on a row of pumpkins.
Janice sings lime sandpaper.
The Narwhal hums rose pulses that push me toward shore.
The distance between artists creates a cacophony of echoes.
They reach me in sync...

A car horn outside my window called the entire street to attention, as I hazily understood there were five soloists working in concert to show me that I was where I should be; the fanfare of an inharmonious world returned me to my futon.

I pushed the ON button of my radio at five fifty-nine to check the weather. The news was the regular crap—pretty much a tape loop of the last decade, except for the last item. There was a police alert for residents of Horseshoe Bay, and surrounding environs, to be on the lookout for a prisoner who had escaped from a nearby island penal facility. The weather would be sunny with late afternoon cloudy periods...

I called Jeanette at seven o'clock.

"Sorry I haven't called. Things have been going well..."

"That's terrific—half an hour on your side," Jeanette cut me off, the hardened plastic bang emphasizing how much on my side she wanted to be.

I sauntered down to Nolan's, turning onto Davie Street just as Jeanette walked across from her parked car; we met at the door sporting the ornamental grins of a first date. Entering the cafe arm in arm, Bréta cocked her head in a pleasantly surprised "Glad you aren't dead," grin, and we ordered mocha lattes before taking our seats at the recently vacated window booth.

Shifting empty cups to the side, Jeanette cast the first line. "Unusual experiences can change the course of one's life," she said.

"Through the isolation they create, if nothing else," I replied, easily.

"That may be true in some circumstances, but not this time. I heard from other entities while you were away," she said, eagerly. "Now there's Saa-ra, Kha-li, Caroline, Jerome, and Philip."

"You've been busy," was all I could think to say.

Grasping my hands like an excited schoolgirl, she squeezed and said, "They told me f-a-s-c-i-n-a-t-i-n-g stuff about how the nature of physical reality impacts perception, and how the teaching scheme incorporates our perceptions to enhance our development." Letting go, she took a calming breath. "But you must have lots to tell me about your book."

"You first," I said, flexing my fingers.

"Sorry," Jeanette said without remorse, but with the foresight to place her palms on the table to minimize my sense of peril as she spoke.

"Physical reality is a realm within which each decision we make unerringly reflects our beliefs in that moment. Broaden that idea, and you can see how the point at which we chose to engage or abandon any event reflects our understanding of the relationship that always exists between our freedom of choice, and our responsibilities to that event." She tapped the table with her forefinger. "These choices determine when and where we will continue our development."

"Kha-lib said something about that."

"They've all added something to what he first told us." With a finger occasionally tapping a lacquered pledge of love between Gail and Patrick, to underscore her favored words, Jeanette said, "There will be three core versions of Earth at the conclusion of our current cycle of evolution. One will be inhabited by those who assumed their responsibilities, as far as they

understood them. In every way, this will be the best place to continue learning. Those whose behaviors demand that they experience the affects of their actions directly will inhabit another version. Teachers will be there to help. The other version," she settled back in her seat, "is this one. We're literally choosing our destination right now."

I grasped Jeanette's hands as Bréta arrived with two oversized cups, and a Danish pastry cut into quarter sections. Picking up the used cups, she said, "A new recipe. Tell me what you think," she said, explaining the welcome back freebee. "Where have you guys been?"

"Travelling the Universe," Jeanette replied expansively.

"In economy—she's jet-lagged," I said to explain why I was restraining her. "You might as well bring us another one of those when you come back this way. Thanks."

Snickering without offence, Bréta said, "I haven't had a straight answer from either of you yet." She turned to greet a regular customer.

"Nice girl, interesting future." Jeanette sipped her drink while I tried the pastry.

Setting her cup aside, she said, "The Universe's teaching style is about showing us how the decisions we make, and the challenges we create, set our course. In simple terms, we save ourselves from ourselves, and it's easier than you might think."

"Except?"

"There's no catch. Every mother who rubs away a child's pain, every shoelace tied by a busy father, every moment of need shared with a friend, every promise made or broken determines which passport we get." She pitched forward. "Don't you see? We don't have to be brilliant, a physical prodigy, or possess even one iota of recognizable talent. All we have to be is kind," she said with a wave of her arm, and her hand struck a glancing blow to the rim of her cup.

"Some people are missing that gene," I said, pulling a serviette from the brushed aluminum holder.

"Some people need more help to see beyond themselves than others do." Jeanette took the paper from me and wiped up the minor spill.

"Does where you live matter? I mean, is a life in ancient Cairo better than one in Palo Alto? Are there places that guarantee certain points of view?"

"Every place and time provides their own challenges."

We subsequently discussed examples that ultimately made the point that we all manufacture our evolution with every decision, regardless of where we are: marveling at the simplicity of what felt like suddenly crucial knowledge, I was embarrassed over having chosen living in the moment as a philosophy that separated me from the bar prowlers. I knew that Jeanette really understood it; and me... maybe not so much.

Wryly, Jeanette said, "The same thing happens to me in the moment that I understand something beyond the intellectual grasp of my reason."

"Pardon me?"

"I'm talking about what just happened to you: a comprehensive understanding suspends the equivocations we rely on to face our days. You didn't know how to act in the moment of comprehension that just passed behind your eyes, because you were entirely free to embrace the fact that you are responsible for the events you encounter. That idea took my breath away, as well." She leaned forward as if to pass on a secret. "If you think about it, you haven't known how to act since Kha-lib disrupted the continuity of your existence."

"I've been doing what I usually do."

"Because that's all you know how to do, but your days aren't the same—you are unsure of how to respond to me now, because you're still not ready to give up your reason."

"My reason for what?"

"To give up reason as a mode of assessing circumstances."

"What else is there?"

"Logic renders reason archaic."

"Are coincidences logical?"

"Coincidence is how the average person recognizes the existence of Intent in the Universe, and the Universe is nothing if not logical. That's what happened?"

"Yes."

Apparently not interested in what specifically had caused me to call her, we subsequently ate and drank within a comfortable exchange of information about our time apart. When we were finished, and had split the tab, I tucked in my shirt and tightened my laces before we headed for the park without speaking, but it wasn't an awkward stroll. Jeanette window-shopped while I pondered the idea of disrupting the continuity of existence as something to put into the application as a plague. I hadn't abandoned my plan, only put it on hold.

With four blocks behind us, Jeanette casually said, "I struggled to accept the validity of my first encounter with the Universe, as well. Not so much at the time, because an eight year-old accepts most things as they are. It wasn't until years later that I wrestled with the question of my sanity."

We stopped walking to lock level gazes for that fickle stretch of time that implied that she knew she had addressed my thoughts, and that I had wrestled with the same question—her sanity. Turning to cross the width of the sidewalk to a bus stop bench, Jeanette sat down; I sat beside her, waiting to hear why she thought she wasn't nuts.

Looking past me, she told me of her first contact with Kha-li, when she was standing beside her father on a Chicago street. When she finished, I asked her when Kha-li had appeared for the second time.

"Seven months ago," she said.

"What happened?"

"I was brushing my teeth, humming 'Turn around look at me,' when something clicked. I turned around and said, 'It's you, isn't it?' I felt that I was right, so I went to the couch to lie down and try to hear them, but nothing happened. So I said, 'If you are here, raise my hand,' and my right arm rose above me head."

"Uh huh."

"I asked out loud, 'How can I hear you', and my hand touched my ear then moved to rest on my chest. I said, 'I can hear you with my heart?' and my hand moved up again.

"As it would."

"I know how difficult this is for you to accept. I sat on my balcony staring at the ocean for three days trying to grasp the enormity of it all." She took a deep breath, stood up, and pulled on my arm. "Let's walk."

"So he spoke to you?"

"Like wearing earphones," she said, stepping away.

Jeanette's idea of "walking" was ten feet to a clothing shop window, where she continued unfolding her personal plot.

"They told me about what was to come, about my life-force, and a bit about you being ready to meet me." She waved the topic aside. "Soon thereafter they began my training by having me

search my past for signs of their presence. I wasn't sure what I should be looking for, so they started me off. When I caught on to the abstract style and context of their contacts, I discovered many instances that pointed to my destiny when I thought they weren't around. This no different from your experiences bringing you to this point in your life; our lives are remarkably similar. That's a good buy," she said about a fifty-dollar sweater.

"I'm glad you think ours is a match made in heaven, but claiming to have friends there will lead to a rubber room. People aren't accepting of that kind of thing."

"Channeling is more common than you realize," she said, strolling to the window of a men's clothing store. "Or could realize... "This cannot be?" she grinned widely.

"So is rationalizing advantages out of a loss. I mean," I said hastily, "you can't be the same person after meeting Kha-li, and people don't let you change. They argue, or they leave you alone. The other side of that coin," I said, pausing to feign sensitivity, "is that you might be pushing people away to hide the inevitable losses meeting him has to have created."

"The people who think I'm nuts have fulfilled their purpose in my life, and parting company is the natural order of growth. What do you think of that belt?" She pointed toward a brown belt with a brushed brass buckle of a steer's head with curved horns.

"I might wear it to a hootenanny: what you call the natural order is what a student might see as abandoning old friends for better ones."

"It's the truth unencumbered by how I feel—felt, because missing them isn't a loss anymore." She looked my way. "The Universe explained the underlying nature of my experiences, as they apply to a specific plan for this lifetime. Along with experiencing their world directly, I had to abandon my penchant to rationalize any event to suit my feelings, beliefs, or desires, like my old friends still do." She took a full breath. "The bottom line is that the unspoken agreements that bound us are gone. What about this one?" She pointed to a narrow black band with a nondescript, brass buckle. "The ache I still sometimes feel is from appreciation for what they did for me. Now, all I can do is go the way of my destiny, and leave my friends with a gift."

"Bewildered is a gift?" I quipped.

"That's the wrapping of knowledge. What about this one?" She pointed to a medium width reversible, brown/black belt, with a silver buckle on one side of the clasp, and gold on the other.

"That's good," I said. Her son didn't dress flashy, and he would have a choice to suit his pants.

Looking at other options, Jeanette said, "I catered to people's silent demands to maintain harmony by telling myself that compromise was fairness, and when it didn't seem fair to me I was being an altruist. Eventually, I saw victimization at the end of that road, and I broke my unspoken agreements to shoulder the burden of other's responsibilities, because it wasn't doing either of us any good. Now, friends are discovering they have to face themselves, or find someone else to carry their baggage. In the first case, they'll unwrap the gift to discover the source of their hurt feelings, and they'll be better off right away. In the latter, they'll present their new friends with the opportunity to learn if, and when, to assume responsibility for their circumstances. Either way, they grow."

"How—," I hesitated to sound less offensive, "how would they learn this on their own if they didn't from Kha-li's ally?"

Jeanette examined my reflection for sarcasm. Finding none intended, she said, "Whiners use up friends because the fine art of sucking the life out of people is never an equitable exchange. Someone always feels they're giving more than they get, and they eventually move on

to share their misery elsewhere. In time, they wear those people out, or they're thrown away so often that they have to consider they might be creating their own isolation."

"Aren't you doing that—isolating yourself, I mean?"

"My experiences with the Universe removed me from the world of common thought in a single act, but it's their lessons that'll cement the specifics, and make that change a permanent gift of separation from the madness." Reflectively she said, "Every day that I work on changing my ways is another day I can honestly say I like who I'm becoming. It's slow, but I'm low maintenance now. Come on." She went inside the shop, picked up the belt, and had me put it on. The salesman commented that Jeanette had good taste, looked for me to passively agree, and she bought it.

As soon as we were outside the door, I said, "I'm saying you might not think there's much to change about yourself because you're pretty much alone now. You have no points of reference."

"And I'm saying I don't feed off other people, so I don't need the touchstone of their approval. As you assume responsibility for your life there will certainly be ostracism."

"What if you need help and your friends are all gone?"

"Following my heart has always led me to what I really need, not what I think I want." Before I could ask, she explained, "I used to think accidents or being without money was unfortunate, but now I can see how those circumstances motivated me into making choices that benefited me in the long run." Restraining a smile, she said, "Like you, I've always been fine in spite of myself. I told you how I got my house?"

"Falling down stairs."

"I cracked my tailbone. Even a little movement hurt, so I limited where I went and shopped at places I wouldn't have normally gone. A man at a checkout line asked me what I had done, which led me to telling him I lost my townhouse deal. He was the rental agent for the county."

"You told me. I think the Universe plays too rough."

"We choose our accidents as certainly as we choose our pleasures."

"Why would I want an accident?"

"To put an end to a particular phase of living, or the momentum of poor choices. You see, it doesn't matter if we are aware of our purpose, because learning how to live properly is everyone's purpose. Mind you, on occasion the Universe directs an apprentice to enhance an experience if both parties agree."

Nearing the park entrance, Jeanette chose to bypass it and instead headed toward the sandy beach, strewn with large sun-baked logs.

"If they didn't push you down the stairs," I said, "what's the big deal about meeting the agent? It's a coincidence, granted, but there's no mystery about a stranger talking to you."

"At other levels of awareness, I chose the event to prevent me from deviating from what needed to be done. Our friends probably softened the blow."

"Deviating from what?"

"A mortgage might have stopped me from connecting with you and Josh."

"You don't know?"

"You didn't know that turning back was right when you did it in Lebanon."

"Our physical friends connected us, which was a lucky thing because there were a lot of people over a lot of time and miles that could have changed either of our plans."

"I'm sure they did many times. The fluidity of a universal intercession can seem so reasonable that we don't think to track contributing events, or as in your case they were acceptably inexplicable." She chuckled.

"A student would think it's more logical that you are contriving personal intercessions with the heavens, because you don't consider yourself a common person. You know—greatest ally?"

"My experiences don't make me a better person than you or anyone else. I am better off than most, because I embrace the minimal chances that life offers us to improve every day. It's that simple and that profound, and being an ally is their claim. I'm not comfortable with it, at least not until I know what it means."

"Minimal? I thought every moment is a new decision?"

"How many of them do you embrace?"

"One more than I did an hour ago."

"Now we'll see if you can pay attention to individual events, and act as if there's a point to everything."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because a lifetime of dismissing everything that didn't serve your personal myths has crushed your view." Jeanette sat on a huge log, and patted the space beside her. I sat as she said, "But if and as you embrace each moment as a new event, you're rewarded with far richer insights than the parameters of weights and measures other people impose on their experience, and that feeds the momentum to continue your efforts. Case in point, this morning you recognized a coincidence that clearly had a huge impact on you." She shook her head. "There was no way in hell you were coming back without something big happening. Now you're bargaining your heart out by questioning me as if you are a student, when you're really looking for a loophole to changing how you think."

"In what way?"

"From acting as if we're researching a screenplay, to acting as if the Universe is talking to you. The former has you arguing over what might take too much screen time, so you're not paying attention to the moment."

"Which means you're not getting the information you want... got it."

"Neither are you," she said with another shake of her head, "so how about this: as a teacher, channeling becomes easier the more they do it, so students could miss who they're really talking to. Whenever you hear me say we, instead of I, you should assume you're talking to Kha-lib. That should help keep you focused in the moment. This is the push I mentioned, by the way."

"How so?"

"These lessons inherently subvert a student's belief in themselves. This means they have to act as if they believe in what they are doing, more than their own judgment. It's difficult to replace one with another, so teachers constantly remind them not to react, and to remember to act as if they have an agreement with the Universe. And because the Universe always keeps their bargains, there's no point in putting things off." Watching joggers in the park many meters away, Jeanette said, "One of the reasons students can't accept that the Universe has an interest in them is that they expect crashing cymbals and thunderous drums to announce and prove their existence. In your case, this is in spite of them having saved your life half a dozen times, given you *knowings*, opened career doors, and orchestrated many coincidences that culminated in the one that you couldn't ignore today." She gulped air as if it was on sale, and said, "Think about it; would a single coincidence have this much impact if it didn't rest on much deeper influences?"

"It makes sense, but why don't they just show themselves?"

"Because you still think in religious terms; you would run."

"Not that I agree, but I'd eventually have to face what happened in front of my eyes."

"Not necessarily. Your world of fixed dimensions still has you denying the validity of mystical experiences, because to acknowledge a sentient unseen would be to admit you aren't in control. Which of course you aren't, but only because of the way you think. That leaves religion as the only context to deal with the inexplicable, and you haven't seen anything other than a master slave relationship in those. That's how you would receive an apparition speaking to you, regardless of what they said—as enslavement." She looked at me, pondered, and said, "If not that right away, you'd forever be saying 'Do it again!' when the point of them revealing their existence is to fast track a student's path to voluntary self-development." Jeanette raised her hand to stop my protest. "The difference is that you have to experience their information, or recognize how you've already experienced it, because that's what turns information and events into knowledge. If their lessons were about memorizing core solutions to standardized problems, you would not appreciate the full ramifications of those solutions, whereas their suggestions require personal interpretations that would reveal the accuracy of your beliefs."

"Crashing cymbals would make me take them seriously from day one," I insisted.

Feigning fatigue, Jeanette sighed and said, "They don't make anyone do anything. Mind you," she softened her tone, "depending on the agreement they have with a potential student, the Universe might make their presence known in an undeniable way. As I said, the ramifications of that are further reaching than you can begin to imagine; you're far better off uncovering their benevolent teaching presence in your life before anything else happens."

"Else?"

Like a surgeon removing a splinter from my cornea—absorbed by something connected to me but as if I weren't there—Jeanette said, "I've spent the morning telling you what I learned about the nature of reality to help you realize how and where the Universe may have helped you, even though you know they have. Come on." She stood up and brushed the back of her jeans. "Your words may deny the source of the help you received, but your actions say you've accepted an inexplicable source of guidance as not only functional in your life, but necessary to your survival. You fight that knowledge because you fear it, and your only recourse is to challenge it through me, by thinking I'm a victim of groundless faith."

It took me a moment to catch up mentally. Still sitting, I said, "What about me tells you that?"

"Why else would you have acted on your awareness of impending danger when there was none apparent to others? By your own admission, you're not a strategic thinker."

"I trusted my senses in those situations."

"If that's true, why is learning the source of your senses at issue now?"

"Maybe flying out of my body would change that."

"Be careful what you ask for."

"After my flight." I stood up, and together we started walking.

"Queasy feelings in tricky situations are normal for most people, and there's nothing mysterious about the average soldier being a piss-poor shot. It also makes more sense that an experienced non-combatant would survive than it does to make magic out of falling down stairs."

"In which case, a student would want to know why an otherwise intelligent teacher would make a claim she apparently can't support."

"That crossed my mind."

"The teacher would speak about unusual events in their own lives, to awaken memories of similar experiences their student has had but forgotten, because the student had no reference point from which to assess the source or value of the experience. It wouldn't resolve anything right away, but it would be the proper time to lay the foundation for a student's epiphany."

"Why wouldn't it resolve anything?"

"The student would think the teacher is trying to secure their self-image in the student's eyes, because that's what students are doing when they tell their intimate tales and reveal vulnerabilities. They are competing instead of comparing, so the underlying point is obscured."

"Competing for what?"

"For power and control. In our case, getting me into the sack has been your prize since you first saw me, more-so now because it represents a conquest over threatening ideas. Ironically, all of the progress you've made would be lost if you won that competition."

"Just get into bed—after all of the time I've spent trying to pry a story line from you?"

"Your prying has always been aimed at undermining my views."

"Arguing is a method of investigation. Do I have to agree with a premise to write about it?"

"Novice students secretly believe their teacher's metaphysical affairs are more important than the student's physical experiences, when in fact they extend the significance of their lives by revealing the unimaginable potential in all of us. In your case, you have bet your future that people will be interested in reading about a version of the world you think you know better than most of them. It follows that if you slay my dragon, your kingdom is safer. And that," she said, letting me go, "would be the end of us."

"If I win an argument, we're through?" I stared in disbelief at the threat.

"I'm saying you can't continue to compete, and also learn enough to help us both do our work. You need to acquiesce to your commitment to me, and act as if my explanations of your past and current unusual experiences are true. You've already done this with your last coincidence, but as I said, our beliefs become irrationally entangled when the world insists that we think like it does. Staying focused is hard."

"Difficult. Concrete is hard."

"Which makes my point," she said, chuckling.

An awkward silence ensued.

Jeanette faced me, and sternly said, "It's important to listen to every syllable of what I have to tell you right now. If you have the slightest doubt about anything, ask me about it until there are no issues in your mind. Can you do that in this new moment?"

"Go ahead," I said, bewildered at her abruptly cold demeanor.

"Do you agree that each fragment of knowledge we gain can change the way we live?"

"Sure."

She waited passively.

"Yes, I can see that," I said definitively.

"The knowledge I can access, and the lessons that will make it your knowledge will eventually render your current way of life untenable. If we are to continue to work together, you must agree to being taught how to live properly, so you'll know what to do if and when your old version of the world falls apart."

"If I trespassed somewhere on our walk, I apologize."

"What are you talking about?"

"The ultimatum?" I said, turning to head back toward Denman Street.

"I'm taking responsibility for my actions. It only looks like an ultimatum because Phillip always fulfills his bargains. If you agree to being taught by him, he will continue to teach even when you think you can't go on. Fair warning, this time will come because the lessons push every student to the limits of their ability.

"What are the lessons like," I said, still thinking about how this scene could be scripted.

Taking my arm, Jeanette said, "I lived in two worlds from the moment I met Kha-li. In the world of average people, I lived in relative ignorance of what was going on, in relative safety compared with what could have happened, and by modest means relative to the wealth around me. My other life was full of magical events where knowledge became the means through which I achieved my daily goals, and safety wasn't an issue because my lessons, feelings, and *knowing* things put an end to most of the risks I might have taken."

"Most?"

"Going out of my body proved that we transition, not die, but I haven't fully incorporated this knowledge into how I live every moment."

"In what way?"

"My certain knowledge of life's continuance brought with it the awareness that I'm here for only a short time. I'm not saying this as a parental concern, or philosophical advice, I mean that we're here for a really, really short time." She snapped her fingers, and I half expected her to disappear. Smiling at my reaction, she said, "I'm aware of how easy it is to waste an opportunity, which is why I try to make my every action as deliberate a choice as I'm capable of making, as opposed to a person who misreads warnings as challenges. I still catch myself doing silly things," she said, smothering a smile because her remark went over my head, "because reprogramming the way the world insists I think requires constant attention. I get help with that." She briefly looked up, then back at me. Swallowing, she said, "What's your decision?"

"What the hell, let's get on with it."

"Done!" Jeanette said so firmly that her ancient cat jumped up off her belly; looking over her shoulder, Ginger trotted out of the room.

Had I been in Tripoli, I would have noticed the crowd thinning and headed for Jordan—best salads in the world, in Amman. As it was, I chuckled over Jeanette's imitation of me as she went to the fireplace. Picking up a paperback by Jane Roberts from the mantel, she said, "This will help clear up the first hundred questions you'll have. And this," she said picking up the bag with the belt inside, "will keep you from having to hike up your pants. Your jogging is working well."

"I thought it was for Kris," I mumbled unappreciatively.

"We are not in a financial competition either, and my gifts do not come with conditions," she said coolly.

Her eyes brightened. "If that's too much to take for a first lesson, think of it as a teaching aid. You can hitch your thumbs through the loops as a reminder to pay attention like a real student, to every syllable of what I'm saying." She cocked her head to one side. "Come to think of it, I need the exercise. Do you want to run together; we can do lessons at the same time?"

"Sure."

"Your commitment is underwhelming."

[Chapter 28: Momentum](#)

Jogging together didn't happen for many weeks, which didn't break my heart because I enjoyed the solitary aspects and the freeness of a wandering mind. Jeanette was sure to be slower, unable to do my distance, and she would probably talk the whole bloody way.

What stopped us wasn't a lack of resolve, but a lack of time, because after our new agreement she began channeling descriptively illusive entities virtually every moment we were together. And when I went home at night, I read Jane Roberts' Seth Material to grasp what Jeanette had told me during the day...

Typically, our days began around nine, always with the Kha-lib persona setting up timeframes and cultural backgrounds for the physical lifetimes of other personas who would then tell tales of personal growth that I could relate to the larger quest: I recognized that Jeanette was acting out the prologue reminiscences in the first material she had allowed me to read.

As an example of this approach, Phillip told a story about sibling rivalry driving him to accomplishments he might not otherwise have attempted; Caroline then spoke about a youthful jealousy that drove her to become a prima donna, before Kha-lib explained that focus was the difference between the two experiences. Smoldering resentment had propelled Phillip to greater achievements, but because acrimony had been his fuel, the journey was without joy and the conquest bittersweet when his sibling was happy for him. Examining the experience, Philip thereafter pursued challenges for appropriate reasons.

Propelled by whispers and ridicule, Caroline had evolved an inventive package of patronizing behaviors, which eventually elevated her so far above everyone that she was utterly alone. When her pedestal of pretence crumbled, because there was no support for her lofty views, the impact of her fall caused her to realize the climb back to changing who she was had to be honest. During that trek, she discovered that she could be loved for who she became because of the collective journey.

Kha-lib added to these stories, saying there was a time when he had played fair, but rarely came in ahead of the cheaters. Those experiences nourished in him cynicism to the point that mediocrity became his standard, and numbing days dutifully followed his lack of vision. With no pleasant memories to comfort him, and nothing to look forward to, he eventually realized that the journey is the thing, and the arrival but a temporary place to reflect upon the quality of the voyage. In sharing these human experiences, he said the collective consciousness—the family of entities—came to understand that hate is a manifestation of the desire to be loved, the opposite of which is indifference. From here, they thought they may have unraveled the mystery of mankind's universally unique behavior of malice, as a confluence of ignorance and fear becoming a tide of self-destruction when we allowed the influences of our ego-accomplice too much latitude.

At this point, I asked Kha-lib why he said, "may have unraveled the mystery." He replied, "Our experience with an endlessly resourceful species has caused us to not underestimate the potential of your irrationality."

This segmented teaching style filled eight to ten hours of our day, the information from which Kha-lib built upon the next day.

On Saturday, when Rachel and Meaghan again stopped by, Jeanette told them she was a channel of universal knowledge, and they were welcome to listen. I enjoyed this because they did not know, nor would they have appreciated, how they were participating in the development of scenes in our screenplay. They came inside because there was no other polite option.

Shortly afterwards, Kha-lib introduced them to their Source Soul personas, who talked about their personal evolution. After they were brought up to date, Rachel's Higher Self asked

them both to come back the following week. Out of channeling mode, Jeanette volunteered my expertise if the ladies wanted to know more about what the Universe had told us so far.

From their initial shock to feeling trapped, then enthralled and now uncertain, both of them were noncommittal.

The first Sunday of lessons, and how most Sunday sessions would be, ran four hours after which Jeanette usually made us a smorgasbord lunch. My contribution was a little shopping and dicing or peeling, while Saa-ra channeled ancient vegetarian recipes.

To say Jeanette's investigation into a student/teacher relationship was comprehensive would be ten levels below an understatement, and it was always interesting because it was unpredictable.

When I went home, I took notes to improve the grant application...

My weekday lessons continued in this layered fashion, until the next Saturday when both Rachel and Meaghan arrived a few minutes behind Josh; his presence wasn't startling, because I assumed Jeanette was subjecting him to the same ideas she doled out to me.

On this day, Kha-lib stayed in the background while Saa-ra initiated a discussion about religion influencing social evolution, saying that most of our laws and ethics are based on ancient teachings, many of which have been misrepresented over time. The culprit for Christians was the Ten Commandments, which started out as simplified disciplines derived from the principles of how to live properly, as were offered in a manner that suited a particular culture in a specific time. She also said Jesus spoke to man of man, so he had to live as men live; she would say more about Jesus later. As these principles of personal growth spread to other lands, and their value was recognized, various sects incorporated them into their belief systems. An eye for an eye, for example, was originally a way to convey the existence of the immutable law of catalytic momentum that brings us face to face with the nature of our deeds. But when this idea spread to the self-important leaders of other cultures, "immutable" became a demand, and the myth of an angry, vengeful God was underway. Of course, His anger could be mitigated and rewards brokered by His earthly representatives.

In our time, Saa-ra said writings will be discovered that reveal there are twelve disciplines that culminate in the thirteenth principle of living a whole life, as demonstrated by the twelve disciples and Jesus. The thirteenth life is not a Holy existence mired in worship to the unexplained desires of a petulant unseen. It is how to live a self-directed, responsible journey of challenge and discovery. How our cultures skewed these teachings is an historical testament to the ingenuity of self-interest that has forced the Universe's emissaries to return, en masse, to the physical plane on four other occasions. Even then, the momentum of our ways out-ran the truth, which is why previous envoys left writings that will make it clear how and why mankind has reached the wretched state we are currently in.

On the next Monday of my solo lessons, Kha-lib focused on humankind's ingenious ability to manipulate awareness: our First Attention holds our root assumptions, which the ego embraces to keep us safe while we're on the physical plane. Root assumptions include gravity, time, distance, and the standard values of weights and measures that literally root our attention in the physical realm.

The more energy we gather, the more versatile becomes our ability to manipulate our awareness into the Second Attention, where assumptions hold little more sway than as reference points to make sense out of Second Attention experiences. This is where we begin to explore the world, and ourselves, as conscious energy constructs.

The Third Attention is the ultimate human accomplishment, for one's life force is outside of the physical construction looking in, literally straddling realms, and there is nothing to stop one from staying out other than the recognition of an incomplete physical journey. He said the Second and Third Attentions can be experienced at the behest of Spirit, the memories of which have to be translated into First Attention terms.

In midweek, Jeanette gave me a book by Carlos Castaneda, "To help you understand the rules and processes involved in the journey to knowledge from a first-hand perspective," she said, sitting back in her rocker. "I've marked a passage you might find interesting." She immediately followed this with, "Who are we?" the *we* signaling that another persona had come for a visit.

Reading this work at night, I discovered two things: Castaneda's teacher, don Juan Matus, was twice the crackpot that Jeanette had become with me. This initially made understanding the book difficult, and the passage she wanted me to read was nothing special: an indolent aristocrat was drinking and screwing himself towards death when, doing the latter under the influence of the former, his heart actually did stop. A seer came upon him at this precise moment, and after a lengthy effort using every metaphysical trick in his book, he saved his life. During his recuperation, he clandestinely introduced the man to the Seer's world, the man became an apprentice, and later a teacher himself...

Ironically, this second source of confusion during my acute learning curve breathed new life into my old suspicions that Jeanette may be the cleverest recruiter alive, as opposed to distinctively nuts. I dealt with this concern on a warm May evening, during a stroll along the West Vancouver seawall....

"Why did Carlos bother going back after their first meeting?" I asked Jeanette on no cue other than we had finished speaking about another matter.

Accepting the topical change as if she had been thinking about it, Jeanette said, "His self-importance rendered it unimaginable that a Yaqui Indian elder could be smarter than him." She started to laugh, fought it off, and said, "You were unable to fathom how I could know anything about conflicts that you didn't know, but you've developed more tolerance for my ideas because they are showing up in your writing by now." Her statement was not a question.

"I did borrow some ideas while I was away," I admitted.

"I'm not accusing you of anything," she chuckled. "What I say to you is a gift. Do with it what you will."

"Thanks. Did Carlos suspect there was some kind of deception going on?"

"Like you do? Of course."

"Why didn't that screw up Juan's credibility?"

"Juan knew how to polish an ulterior motive, which allowed him to lead Carlos into participating in the sorcerer's culture until validating experiences made it impossible for him to stay away. Carlos always struggled to rationalize Juan's ways into a sociological structure he could accept," Jeanette said, with a shrug, "but he didn't realize he had already made the leap into the unknown." She leaned into her explanation. "Your friend, Sami, knew that committing to a decision meant leaving his feet, after which all you can do is engage your destiny with dignity." She paused. "Initially, you tried to manipulate your fate by hunching low, but then you understood your commitment to your decisions at Goodbye. The part of your awareness that's designed to protect your physical journey still thinks I'm crazy, but there's a deeper part of you that knows you've already left your feet. Otherwise, you wouldn't be bargaining for your reason

now. You'd be at the pub conveniently forgetting the special moments you can't properly explain, especially since we met."

"I'm researching your premises like you asked me to—as if I'm a student, not a writer."

"You've softened your approach, but you're still serving an ulterior motive."

"If you say so."

"I did—weren't you listening?"

Before I left for the day, she gave me a book written by Lynn V. Andrews, about her unexpected journey of becoming a Medicine Woman, and another book each by Jane Roberts and Carlos Castaneda.

The effect of Jeanette's daily lessons, and reading at night, was to have me constantly update the minutiae of my grant application: it was taking shape as a well-thought out premise upon which to base an intriguing story, except the climax remained problematic.

Chapter 29: The Gathering

By the end of the first month of Jeanette's elaborate chats with her "Universe," driven by the impact of my vivid dreaming and the escaped prisoner, a typical day consisted of getting up at five-thirty, writing until eight-thirty, then showering before meeting Jeanette at nine. In the early evening, I jogged then kicked back for some TV, or I might try editing my morning's work. I say try, because I was often interrupted by calls from Meg and Rachel asking me about niggling things seeded by Jeanette on Saturday. As a result, I added an official night session of writing to my schedule.

After a supper with Ed at a pub on one of these scheduled nights I sat down to write, and as happened often enough to allow it my creative flow quickly went into scenes that ignored established parameters. Unusually, this time I found myself mentally trotting to keep up with what became an historical hallucination narrated by an unidentified party in my dying character's thoughts. Two paragraphs in I knew it wouldn't fit in my work, but I continued recording this internal dictation as an investment in something I might use later on.

After about twenty minutes my mind emptied as if a tap had been shut off, and I settle back to read what I thought was a rambling parable about a band of wanderers seeking shelter in a town for the winter. To my surprise, the story was clearer on paper than it had been in my mind, because I had to scramble to describe scenes as they continuously unfolded, the essence of which follows:

A caretaker group of one of five gemstones that comprised the tribe's only physical wealth wanted to sell the stone, because their new landlord demanded much labor for low pay. This crystal was one of four that when polished in times of need reflected the true circumstance from which the proper course of action could be determined; afterwards, the vision faded as a lesson learned, and the stone's hue became lighter. I did not know how many levels there were in the stones, only that the last vision revealed a core principle of how to live.

When all four caretaker groups reached this stage, a wizard—I wanted to say seer, but my fingers fought the change—arranged the gems to the cardinal compass points. Focusing the rays of a rising sun, the cornerstones of life illuminated a fifth crystal that projected the design of destiny to the students from every facet. As the new day dawned all of the stones returned to their rich, black luster, and another journey of learning was ready to begin under the guidance of a new leader, as designated by the center stone's projection.

I did not define a time of need, or have a clue what the design of destiny might be, as I read the tale with increasing immodesty: in one pass, I had orchestrated an intricate metaphor about

looking into the darkness for points of light, and in a moment of illumination everything became clear... but I digress.

The wizard objected to the sale, telling the group that he needed all of the crystals to guide them to a place he had been enticing them to seek by calling it Freedom. However, years of living hand to mouth had the splinter group wanting more; tired of being judged because they were poor, and presumed to be ignorant, they made the deal knowing how the layered visions would affect their landlord. As did the wizard, who warned the wealthy buyer that the stone's reflections required deciphering by someone with no interest in the outcome, otherwise misinterpretations of its prophetic properties were inevitable.

Absently manipulating the gem in his palm, the property owner took pity on the tribal patriarch who was transparently seeking an easier existence, as well, and he offered the vanquished leader a menial job serving in his expansive household. The ~~seer~~ wizard accepted, because the keeper of the stones was duty-bound to pass on his knowledge. The landlord carelessly dismissed him to view a vision of affluence in the stone of gratitude.

As the weeks became months of polishing through layers of illumination that increasingly reflected his laziness and greed, the landlord promoted a tenant-wanderer, who proved to be equally adept at managing the landlord's personal affairs as he had cleaning his house.

The seasons cycled, and as more business matters fell to the discretion of this employee, other tenant-wanderers were brought into the fold. They also proved to be more efficient workers and administrators than the local labor pool, because they knew what having nothing was like.

During this time a powerful confidant learned about the stone, and seeing how its reflections came true he quietly set out to purchase an indolent future of his own. A second caretaker group, seeing that their peers had become very comfortable, offered their gem for the price of the first group's current wages and circumstances. The businessman did not hesitate, his new employees soon proved themselves worthy, the man's fortunes began to rise, and there was a bidding war for the third stone: the losers formed a partnership to afford the fourth crystal.

The seasons again cycled as the old guard spent their days peering into layers of desire, while their servants became masters of new systems of commerce by which the land owners blithely and blindly profited. Eventually realizing their predicament when, one by one, the stones began to reflect only lush, idle landscapes, the landlords came to the wizard for advice: he had become widely known for the insights he offered townspeople in the central square, after his duties were done, by simply waiting to be asked what he was doing there.

The businessmen said they'd pay any price, after they were in control again, because their wealth had become ensnared in investment structures that amounted to liens held by each other, against each other's interests: freeing their assets required that, one by one, all of them make themselves vulnerable to losing everything to another of them. In addition, some former wanderers had declined to see their "masters," until a more convenient time. The wizard said he could help them become powerful beyond their wildest dreams. However, he could not do it quickly, or in this place. In the meantime, their empires were in capable, if misguided hands.

In the spring of the fourth year of the wanderer's tacit rule, the landlords, and those among the original tribe who had refused to barter their future, left with the keeper of knowledge to find a place he had often talked about during his servitude.

In time, this new incarnation of seekers of power discovered the supremacy of knowledge, and they reached the cores of every crystal. At the dawn of the summer solstice, all except one among them saw a clear reflection of themselves framed by the lush valley in which they stood. They were free to begin a new way of living. The one who had remained true to the wizard's

teachings during "the winters," as they would forever be known to the descendents of the clan, saw the old town. Gathering the stones that had begun to glow with an eerie darkness, the new wizard began the odyssey of leading his lost friends home.

The internal narration of my character's vision ended when he opened his eyes for the last time, and he told his friend not to mourn him; things weren't what they seemed, then he died.

I told Jeanette about my free flow experience the next morning, joking that her work had infected mine to the point where I didn't understand it. I handed her the pages to see what she could make of the scene. Still on the first page, Jeanette chirped a stilted cry, and stifling a series of sniffles left the room. I made toast for me, and tea for both of us. Ten minutes later, wearing new mascara Jeanette came into the kitchen and said the Universe had given me a message.

"Ed and I rearranged our perceptions a little bit last night, but not so much that we were communicating with the cosmos," I grinned.

"You should make a gesture in return," she said, with a reprovng glare not to be trifled with. "Visualize meeting our Universal friends so you can thank them, and another scene will come to you like this one did." She set the pages on the coffee table. "Be bold. If a door opens, walk through it."

She stood and went to the credenza to retrieve more pages of her screenplay. Handing them to me, she said, "Read it tonight right before you go to bed. First draft," she reminded me not to be too critical.

I didn't question why she wanted this, Jeanette changed the subject, and we got on with another day of persona hopping with the Universe.

In bed that night, I read the following:

TIME AND TIME AGAIN

SCENE THREE: SPATIAL INFINTY

MEDIUM WIDE SHOT: REVERSE POV.

Kha-li walks away from a translucent rose gateway, and it rapidly recedes to disappear between quadrants B (upper right screen) and D (lower right screen). As this happens, the stone pathway he is creating extends from what was five-fold the distance of his every step to reach a glowing energy construction of a pyramid that enlarges to encompass screen left. The top third of it has a golden aura. As camera DOLLY's in, we see that the front of the pyramid has two golden doors with distinct carvings of infinity and the trinity symbols. The doors open outwards on their own, as Kha-li approaches and enters a chamber. He moves through the pulsating crystalline structure toward a hallway. The floor is of a golden radiant cast, still translucent. The walls and ceiling are as if hewn from a single crystal. Spatial infinity can still be seen faintly outside.

FADE IN BG SOUND:

Voices of twenty-six mingling people are heard, the predominant voice by a small amount is Saa-ra concluding her talk with MAN ONE

FX (cont'd)

Kha-li continues his walk toward the voices, as choral music rises in the background. It reaches a consistent volume of a repetitive pattern that western ears would consider New Age at its core. However, it clearly also contains instrumental

qualities of First Nation's percussion, and Asian vocal pitch with African syncopation.

WIDE SHOT: Entire chamber

DOLLY:

Dolly around the perimeter of the chamber, behind KHA-LI as he enters the chamber. We see SAA-RA over his shoulder saying her last line to MAN ONE, and he begins to walk through the gathering. As the twenty-six entities notice KHA-LI'S arrival, their conversations politely stop, and they make their way to the front of the raised dais grouping into couples as they do. Four entities move through them to stand on the dais, their clothing transforming to formal, long flowing robes of iridescent colors further distinguishing them from the twenty-six. The order of the four now standing in a line are from CAMERA LEFT - PHILLIP whose colors are mauve and purple. JEROME in yellow, PETER in red, then SAA-RA in sea green with blue trim. There is a space of a single person's distance between them as KHA-LI steps up, nods to the four, then turns, and speaks to the twenty-six who await expectantly.

KHA-LI

We prepare for the return; you will not be alone. I send with you the emanations of my own heart, (his arm sweeps toward the four) the portions of my personality, which together complete my identity. They are the keepers of time and the gateway of knowledge. They will act as catalysts that you may understand your past, and return to you the wisdom that is yours. We shall return the world to the position from where it began, as it was intended to be. And when the way is paved, I will send you my son, for I must finish what I began millennia ago.

MUSIC:

A distant singing voice is added: there will be four a cappella voices added over the music, and a rising-in-volume choir with each addition as KHA-LI makes the following introductions.

KHA-LI (cont'd)

The angel of the west—number one.

(PHILLIP bows his head—voice one Aahhh aa--ahh-ah is added)

The initiator of action will be known as Phillip.

(PHILLIP raises his head)

KHA-LI (cont'd)

The angel of the north—number two

(JEROME bows his head—voice two is heard Ohh ha ohh-oh oh)

The angel of union. He shall be named Jerome.

(JEROME raises his head)

KHA-LI (cont'd)

The angel of the south, number three.

(PETER nods—voice three Ayya-yaa, aay-yaaaa)

To complete the union of Earth, Heaven and Spirit shall be named Peter. (pause)

KHA-LI (cont'd)

The angel of the east, number four—who is the last cornerstone of the pyramid and the messenger. She shall be named SAA-RA,

(SAA-RA nods—voice four Ahhh-ohha eee yohh)

Number five will be myself, Kha-li. I will be known by another name. I will not be as I was, for when I was once the beginning I am now the end as a rebirth. (Pause to look at everyone). You all will make the way ready.

MUSIC: The four voices blend in with a full choir.

KHA-LI walks toward the exit, his astral body FADES as BG voices of the twenty-six saying goodbye and farewell blend with the choir. Soon after KHA-LI disappears, in pairs the entities draw in their astral bodies to pinpoints of light, and streak away through the crystalline walls into spatial infinity toward the rose petal gateway. The rose becomes more solid looking as the crystal walls shimmer with less density.

ZOOM IN:

Pinpoints of light gather at the gateway, which reform as astral bodies. As the first astral body floats toward the center of the gate, the tempo increases, and expectation builds. KHA-LI greets this first entity with an exchange of warmth and love in their glances, but no words. Kha-li looks into the rose, the music builds, crashes into a crescendo, the aperture instantly opens—Earth is revealed one-third screen size, rotating past the continent of Asia. The entity flashes from his astral body into a streak of light, which laser-like streaks toward Earth. This streak is joined by two outrider streaks of light that have separated from the first: the main light enters at Bombay India, passing through a ripple in time that the outriders go through, creating smaller ripples of their own to signify slightly different times of birth. Other entities station themselves at the aperture to watch. It is a spectacle of majesty and reverence as the aperture opens again and again, allowing one streak, which become three, to enter Earth at Buenos Aires, London, Moscow, and Washington—each with ripples that are never identically placed.

SAA-RA joins KHA-LI at his side.

KHA-LI

Come, a place has been made for you.

SAA-RA

I will see you there.

Her smile of departure is of infinite love, she moves to the gateway. The camera moves to highlight her entrance. The music swells, the gateway opens, and SAA-RA's light streaks into Stockholm Sweden, with a ripple of the present (brownish). KHA-LI pauses the opening of the gateway slightly longer than for other entities, then he turns to face the next entity, bidding him farewell with a simple mention of his name.

KHA-LI

Percodemus

The entity streaks into Rio De Janerio.

KHA-LI

(to a female entity)

Pamela.

The entity streaks into Holland.

WIDE SHOT:

From a wider perspective, the remaining entities streak to Earth, the ripple of time signatures are all shades of the present (brownish to yellowish hues.) The rose petals snap shut.

FULL SCREEN CLOSE UP

The central petals of the rose snap open crisply and precisely, revealing the slowly rotating Earth, 7/8 screen, surrounded by a rim of space in C3. KHA-LI and his outriders streak toward Egypt. We see the ripple wake of the main streak time-signature as a bluish hue, and the outriders turn green and brown respectively. Earth rotates slowly toward North America, and the circumference of the frame (spatial infinity) turns to the hue of the present.

MUSIC: CROSS and FADE CHOIR with BG SOUND RISING:

Summer sounds of birds chirping, a soft wind blowing through tree leaves, a clothesline screeches as it is pulled one foot at a time, light traffic sounds, distant aircraft overhead.

ZOOM IN:

The United States comes into view; the shot centers on the Great Lakes, and syncs with the earth's rotation. DOLLY IN as if from a spy satellite to the final focus on a suburban back yard near the city of Chicago.

HIGH ANGLE WIDE SHOT:

A little girl singing a children's song enters the yard and sees gardening hand tools. A pitchfork is leaning against the garage. The astral bodies of KHA-LI (screen left) and SAA-RA (screen right) emerge into a hover slightly above the little girl. SAA-RA smiles down with an expression that portrays influence on the girl. The girl interrupts her singing as if she forgot the words. Looking puzzled, she begins to play with the pitchfork. SAA-RA's expression implies that she is influencing her again. Wide eyed, the girl plunges the pitchfork into her foot.

SAA-RA

It is all right little one. It has begun.

The girl only then notices what she has done, pulls the pitchfork free, and drops it. Staring at her foot, she leaves the yard confused but not in pain, weeping quietly.

I liked Jeanette's work, and appreciated the premise of simultaneous time better than when we had talked about it. The only reservation I had was the same one I had with her last offering; it was familiar in a peculiar way, but I'd be damned if I could figure out where I knew it from. This was troublesome because smarter people in the audience would certainly know its source.

Setting the pages aside, as Jeanette requested I envisioned walking up an endless flight of stairs. The echo of my footfalls was a conscious addition—a soundman's flare, but the staircase became circular on its own. I walked, and walked, and walked.

Zzzz...

This is what I reported to Jeanette, when she asked me if I had a good night's sleep.

"Work at it," she told me.

"I walked until I fell asleep," I said.

"I'm not accusing you of quitting. I'm saying meaningful gestures are timed to other's needs, not our convenience."

"What could the Universe need from an apprentice?"

"A sustained effort."

She did not ask me what I thought about her work during another day of channeling her personas. It was as if the mention of it was breaking some kind of rule, so I left it alone. She also seemed unusually preoccupied with my demeanor, often looking my way for no apparent reason. I didn't understand: I felt fine, and I was playing our game seriously—I was getting the hang of first assuming that I was student.

I walked the staircase for three more nights, but little changed other than a last recollection of looking at stairs disappearing into an opaque background. On the fifth attempt, I had a nightmare. Thoroughly terrified, I was running through an inky void of viscous air, struggling to get away from a wraith-like form that was steadily closing in on me. When it finally reached out to take my life, I turned, planted my feet, and defiantly shouted, "Fuck off—you can't hurt me!" The sooty hue passed through me, dissipating harmlessly into the darkness within seconds.

I am no stranger to nightmares, but it had been over a year since I had last awakened with a pulse in my beard, so the event was as disappointing as it had been frightening. This feeling lingered into the lessons of the day, in so far as I didn't meet Jeanette's gaze where I would normally confirm my understanding of something, but she let it go because I was otherwise participating. Over lunch, however, I failed to carry my share of the conversation, and she said, "Whenever you're ready is fine."

We had been down the road of denial and delays so often by this time that neither was a consideration. Whatever was her goal for influencing a student's life, it seemed to be working, so I told her what happened adding that I was anxious because my nightmares tended to hunt in packs. I'd prefer that she told me what she was after, and we could be finished with it.

Jeanette contemplated my story for the time it took to tilt her head in empathy: formally, she said, "Now that you have faced your death head on, there is no point in skulking around the periphery of your fears. You can freely access and assess your beliefs for their influences. Who are we?"

"You are Kha-lib... skulking? It scared the shit out of me."

"There was a blockage we needed to deal with. Now there is not."

Kha-lib subsequently told me a personal story about inner cowardice evolving an outward defiance that stoked the fires of what others saw as valiance until it became true.

Jeanette said I should give this lesson some thought before I went sleep that night, because I had literally created a turning point in my life. Later, I was not thrilled about going to bed so I did as Jeanette had asked of me. In a short time, Kha-lib's personal example combined with my lessons on behavior, and an understanding blossomed: my evolution was based on falling and getting back up. There was no other way.

Feeling better about failure in general terms, and holding onto the lingering sense that I was where I was supposed to be, I slipped into a deep sleep: for the next two weeks, I luxuriated in coma-like slumbers devoid of dreams I could recall. I got ready for bed, lay down, sniffed and scratched, and that was that.

I didn't tell Jeanette about this change in my sleeping pattern, but as a by-the-way kind of thing I did tell Jenny, a thirty-three year old, no-nonsense flight attendant, and Ed's ex-girlfriend: after months without contact, we chanced to meet and went for lunch on a restaurant patio.

A waiter cleaned up the deposit a soaring seagull made on our table, just after we sat down, while I told her about meeting Jeanette, and working on her screenplay.

I missed the omen.

Talking about the screenplay led us to discussing metaphysics, during which Jenny asked me to arrange a reading for her. I called Jeanette that evening, and she said she would be happy to do it, paused, and added that Saa-ra had just pointed out how Jeanette was between checks, and low on groceries. Jenny's timely request was an omen to begin charging for her services.

"She offered to pay," I said uneasily, "but I thought it was a no-no to use the gift for personal gain?"

"Saa-ra said she'll explain later. I need to trust in the design of my destiny." She paused. "Everything they've ever done with me has been about making me a better person, or keeping me safe, so I'm embracing the cue and putting an ad in the weekend paper, as well."

Jenny became Jeanette's first official client, paying forty dollars regardless of the length of the session; it turned out to be three hours. This was a great deal in a crowded marketplace of less knowledgeable cosmos speakers, but taking money to research her book bothered me. I said nothing to Jeanette about this, as Jenny spread the word of her positive experience to her flight attendant friends. This resulted in Jeanette booking regular sessions, which took up much of my usual time with her, but it didn't matter; I caught a freelance gig with an independent production house, then another with CTV News the next day. After Jeanette worked her regular job, I was called for a last minute shoot, after which another show called to book me for Friday. When it rains, it pours.

Only a week after officially hanging out her shingle, by word of mouth and a simple advertisement Jeanette had booked sessions up to two weeks in advance, accommodating her client's schedules, while I continued to get gigs at an alarming rate. It was as though I had a real job. In the next two weeks, we may have mentioned our screenplay only three or four times. Then came the day I showed up unexpectedly; Jeanette answered my knock with tears tracking mascara down her cheeks. Before I could ask, she said Saa-ra had just concluded a brilliant lesson.

"This phase is over?" I said, climbing up the stairs behind her.

"We need to discuss some changes," she said, sniffing.

We topped the stairs and turned into the kitchen.

"Tea's ready," she nodded toward a pot wrapped in a blue cozy. Two mugs sat on the counter beside it.

"Has researching what society wants to know changed how your bad guys can trick them?" I said, guessing this was what giving readings had been about.

"Confirmed it: they all ask about love, money, and health," Jeanette said, "but they're more desperate to hear good news than interested in learning how to generate it themselves. This is why Saa-ra told me to be careful, because we don't want followers."

"I thought the point of your movie is to help people to live better?"

"Glorifying the source of how to do that is how religions get started."

"Tough enough raising two kids without heading up one of those," I said. "So is that something you needed to confirm—how easily you can gather followers?" I sipped my tea.

"I hadn't thought about that until Saa-ra made the point." Jeanette slid her cup to one side. "Our guides have always emphasized that choice is the only road to evolution, and they will never take ours away. Good advice," she said sardonically, "is difficult enough to follow from free will, which is why so many people think they need more guidance than they really do. If I

played into their laziness I'd be taking away their lessons, which is what I've been doing." Smirking self-consciously, she said, "Saa-ra told me that I've fallen victim to my teaching role, because I believe I have to do all that I can, for as long as I can, to spread the gift of their knowledge. She had asked me a number of times if I wanted a day to rest." Jeanette chirped to quell a rush of emotion, I presumed because it had been a long time since she last had a day to herself. "She said I've become a follower, not a partner, because I don't distinguish between serving the needs of honest ignorance, and being a slave to people's doubts and fear. She said her knowledge came without obligation, and I should stop pandering to everyone, including her. She also said she had lessons for me that would take up more of my time." She shuffled the mug between her hands. "This means I will need help for a while."

"In what way?"

"You have a decent grasp on how behavior designs your future, and ..."

"Stop, you're making me blush."

"... and your grasp of abstractions, like probable events, is excellent."

"My heart's all a-twitter."

"With practice," she said, flicking a finger at my forearm, "you'll be able to apply these ideas to other people's problems accurately."

"What kind of practice are you talking about?" I said warily.

"Most of my clients call after their sessions, to better understand the principles of building their future, but I won't have the time to deal with them. If you would agree to bring them up to speed, so they can make informed decisions, we wouldn't be pandering. They'd be better off, and our screenplay will be better because you'll know first-hand what readings can do for people. What do you think?"

"You'd be risking my charisma starting a religion."

"Your impatience guarantees followers wouldn't last." She grinned.

Jeanette subsequently schmoozed me into familiarizing her clients with concepts from readings that I learned had sometimes taken her five hours, and they still didn't get it.

With that out of the way, Jeanette said she was going to make whatever arrangements she could make to better her financial position, then she quit her full time job to become a full time psychic reader and teacher. This decision included advertising Saturday morning gatherings as classes in *The Way To Live*. Admission would be free, but she would pass the hat while I became the inbound customer service representative, after the fact.

Grudgingly, I was again impressed by how far she was willing to go to research her work. That said, after calculating the minimum number of readings she would need to live it again crossed my mind that she might have lost hers.

No matter... my end was secure. Hell, I could write the whole thing if I had to.

Chapter 30: Layering Lessons

Jeanette rerouted a call from a client later that same day, and I was pleasantly surprised to discover that I could flatten concepts, and integrate aspects of diverse premises, to satisfy most of her questions. I say most, because my answers invariably gave rise to new questions, and I soon had to explain that I was Jeanette's writing partner, not a psychic. After a second call forced the same issue, I phoned Jeanette to tell her to pass on my circumstance to her clients. The next evening, I learned that she had done both in practice and neither by design:

She had told Rochelle Fletcher-Smythe that I was researching the practical applications of mystical disciplines for a screenplay. In this capacity, I was knowledgeable about cause and

effect beyond what was commonly apparent to others. She also said that I was attuned to the abstract; I could align earthly and ethereal clues to see around corners, and I had been doing this since long before I met Jeanette. So said Mrs. Fletcher-Smythe.

Because of Jeanette's non-disclaimer, call-me-Rochelle-darling wanted new answers to replace the ones she didn't like, which quickly forced me to be curt when I referred her back to Jeanette for that kind of information. With a wonderfully executed quiver in her voice, Rochelle-darling said Jeanette had warned her that I was eager to display my intellectual prowess, but I was reluctant to acknowledge my metaphysical gifts. Rochelle then pleaded for help; important people were coming over, and she couldn't wait for Jeanette to come home to answer a few simple questions. She would pay full fare for my reading. Money was no object.

I couldn't accept the money, but I had made a promise, so I asked Rochelle what Jeanette had specifically said about socializing that puzzled her. Instantly tearless, she gave me a detailed version of one aspect of her reading, adding a blow by blow account of her feelings should I somehow fail to realize she had been verbally assaulted: Rochelle didn't understand how the time she got out of bed mattered in the grand scheme of things.

I understood that Jeanette had focused on the downward spiral of arrogance, and that Rocky, to her close friends, was asking for an off-the-shelf fix—preferably, something her house staff could do. I also thought that Jeanette's persona of choice, Saa-ra, (Sara to Rocky) might have been too subtle in laying out the process of revealing the core of any problem to ourselves, subtlety being the stuff of threats to a frightened person.

Peeved that Jeanette was probably having dinner with Josh, I aligned the bug of Rocky's laziness with the windscreen of behavioral momentum to tell her that she needed to get her shit together at dawn, and stick to a productive plan until sundown. Rocky could rest but not loaf. She had to put away the things she touched in a state ready for reuse, and otherwise not tisk at her hired help, or the general inefficiency of the world that existed beneath hers for the sole purpose of supporting it. When the day was done, she could read and relax but have no social contacts that were not responsibilities, and otherwise break the routines of her daily life until she realized it was a fairy tale.

What specifically could she do that was productive? She could clean, paint, garden, walk her dogs, or take an hour to repair her nails by herself—anything that resulted in an improvement from her own efforts. After a while, she might understand that there was no physical debris around her because of what she had done. From here, she could see how clearing the litter of her social encounters would dramatically lessen the oppression she felt from obligations implied. In time, she would be astounded to discover that she truly owned her time, because she had nothing pending that she didn't want there. She would be in control of far more than her bank accounts, and she could get on with a life devoid of the petty encumbrances over which she had called Jeanette in a panic. I added, flatly, that the chances were good this work wouldn't kill her, as she seemed to think it might, or she wouldn't have called me. I also reiterated something Jeanette had told her: Rocky should make a practice of looking back when she left any room at the metaphorical inn of life. If she could tell that she had been there, she had not appreciated the creativity of the designers, the effort of the builders, or the comfort that daily workers had provided her.

Rochelle argued that she paid people to make her bed, and otherwise keep her house in order.

Losing my patience, I told her that Jeanette's exercise wasn't about doing the maid's job; it was about doing the right thing for the right reason, for herself, and that this always benefited

other people in both direct and indirect ways. The bottom line was that Mrs. Fletcher-Smythe—two Anglo-Saxon references to skilled laborers—should make her passage between worthwhile causes inconspicuous, and otherwise tread lightly so as not to disturb the neighbors. By taking care of the two square feet she occupied when she was vertical, the angels would have less to review when she was horizontal.

Rocky hung up on me.

You're welcome, darling.

Maybe five minutes later, Jeanette phoned to wryly ask me if I had told Rochelle to put her affairs in order right away.

Snickering, I said, "It was you who told her there's no time like the present, because no force in the universe can guarantee any of us will see the next dawn." I chuckled.

"She didn't get it, so you had to get her attention?"

"And I couldn't risk being charming."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Jeanette said.

A short silence. "You think I blew it?"

"No. I knew when she didn't name her house staff that she would shop around until she heard something she liked."

"So why did you give her my number?"

"It wasn't about you. Good job, see you in the morning."

After this day of apparently establishing my bona fides to Jeanette, I realized her first and subsequent Saturday morning topics to strangers seeking enlightenment rarely strayed from some aspect of gathering energy through reshaping our behavior. To this end, she examined some of the political and religious beliefs that influence us, including communist, theocratic, and autocratic structures, as counterpoints to democracy, because we were most familiar with this system of thought, and Jewish, Moslem, and Buddhist beliefs as counterpoints to Christianity's unavoidable influences on western culture.

This may sound like the sessions could be tedious, but two things kept me alert if not intrigued; Jeanette's personas offered material in poignant, if not entertaining ways, while no religious, ethnic, or political group, escaped unscathed, but not judged. Her delivery was without speculation; it simply was the way it was, which also made acting as if I was student more natural when I was with her. This cooler, efficient ambiance became the teaching standard after about six Saturday meetings, and two things became clear to me: new visitors quickly understood this was not a social gathering, and fewer of them came back...

Jeanette had been attracting between seventeen and twenty-five people, which dropped to around twelve with her change of approach; three of our seven core regulars also became offended by what they perceived to be petty challenges by the personas, and we saw them no more. Interestingly, the number of readings Jeanette booked did not drop, other than from her scheduling them according to her responsibilities, not theirs: privately, I asked Jeanette if the tone of her readings had changed as well. She said the ambiance remained cordial, sometimes jovial, and one way or another she advised all of her clients that this was a time of transition. She speculated that, in the beginning, the Universe had accommodated our fascinations while orienting us toward learning things of real value. Then the format change from Q and A to an interactive teaching process was unsuited to people of lesser energy, and they left us.

This observation led to the second one: Josh was quietly affable, but his reluctant participation made him appear shallow. Overall, his disposition was so dissimilar to Jeanette's

that it bewildered me how he had become her boyfriend. Even more baffling, was why Jeanette did not see their relationship as a train-wreck in the making.

Nothing personal; the incongruity was blatant.

Somehow, I did not apply this to me.

This time of change also brought with it a change in our own relationship: Jeanette often suggested that I apply information from her channels toward assessing my life for evidence of Universal Intent—for a life purpose. When I joked about the irony of getting advice on how to live from the dead, the more I thought about this the funnier it became until a cool voice said, "If there be death, then you are more dead than we."

My gut contracted, smothering my snickering before I realized Jeanette had finally slipped up—the egoless Universe had misinterpreted my comment as a slight.

Taking her to task, as a decent student would, I said, "My humor is geared to a mortal audience so it's understandable that you would misconstrue my comment."

"We have lived in your reality many times, and we understand mankind's idea of humor well. There is a time and place for it."

"Humor is a spontaneous part of my being so are you objecting to free will?" I said lightly.

"To you," Kha-lib said tonelessly, "our presence represents the oppression of free will, because your religions have caused you to equate faith with desperation and worship to victimization. You know that we do not seek recognition, nor have we ever commanded anything of anyone. Yet you scorn us under the banner of a freedom you abuse, thereby making yourself your own victim."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You rob yourself of opportunities through self-deprecation disguised as recreation," he said, "when your remarks are judgments that demean all who have helped you. In gatherings, the cynicism you flaunt as wizened skepticism taints everything you legitimately wish to convey, and your peers dismiss you as an angry man attempting to gain solace by having them agree with your fears and disgust. We suggest you stop this, for when you recognize what you have stolen from them, it is your own development that will be interrupted."

"Stop being funny?"

"You cannot cease what you have not begun. We speak of self-pity."

Changing my pose to represent concern, I said, "What do you mean by personal power?"

Jeanette rocked in her chair once.

Kha-lib said that personal power is based on a ruthless examination of our motives, and our responsibility to consciously excavate our secrets. Discovering these leads to selfless acts, which have no barriers of self-pity to undermine their completion. In time, we choose only impeccable challenges.

"What makes an act impeccable to people who can't see energy?"

"If you choose the scenario, you will better understand our reply."

"Okay, if I'm standing with my back to a cliff while a robber takes my wallet, is it fair to antagonize him into rushing me?"

"Momentum will determine his fate, as it does with everyone."

"Even though I intentionally pissed him off?"

"The precariousness of his position arose from a circumstance he initiated."

"What if I grabbed him, and he dragged me over?"

"You would both fall."

"I mean—right—so, it's okay to tease him to death, because he's a short-tempered thief?"

"He volunteered for the journey." Kha-lib flatly stated, "You did not kill him."

His phrasing inexplicably gripped at my chest.

"With training, pure logic will determine your actions," he continued, "not the conditioning of your past, or the influence of emotions that are better focused on pushing your will toward a proper assessment of circumstances."

"How does logic apply when I'm speaking to invisible beings?"

"Is our conversation illogical?"

"Not on its face, but I haven't surrendered any responsibilities to you."

"Has she shown a lack of courage, or anything less than devotion to her children?"

"I didn't say she had, but following imaginary rules of invisible beings looks more like fright than discipline."

"In the deepest depths of love's anguish and despair, when every sinew was focused on placing one foot ahead of the other, who were able to travel the barren lands?"

A lightening image of the famine stole the breath from me: by far, women with children were the last to die. Men gave up earlier. Early.

Finding my voice through thoughts of Kha-lib's comments about self-pity, I said, "If she's not afraid, it looks like she's giving up her role as a parent, and that's worship."

"Is it more logical that our goal is to free her from the clutches of an aberrant world's ways, or that a family of timeless consciousness would be validating their own wonderfulness by manipulating immeasurably less capable beings?" Before I could respond, he said, "What would we do with your adulation?"

"Entertainment."

"There is no other species in any place or time that views ignorance as entertainment."

"I'll have to take your word on that."

"Then we have an agreement upon which to build: to deal with your query, she knows there is a time in the teaching scheme when the student is dependent upon the teacher's impeccability* to keep them safe. This is the transition time between faith and conviction. You are mistaking her discipline for submission."

"Faith is leading her to making objective conclusions?" I snickered.

"Every breath begins with an act of faith; you are objecting to the nature of reality."

"Huh?"

"You take a breath believing you will live to speak your next sentence, just as you blink without fear of losing your sight. You know your physical abilities inexorably diminish, yet you act as if time stands still until you feel like accommodating a circumstance. She acts as if a probable destiny can be made concrete as a consequence of impeccable choices, thereby learning to assume our lessons will lead to her mastering the disciplines of freedom she can pass to her children."

"How long does it take to go from faith to conviction?" I deflected.

"If you stopped viewing our lessons as personal judgments, to assume our apparent ambiguity is not fabricated to make you look foolish, you would conserve the energy you currently expend contriving diversions and race headlong into your destiny."

Taking an organizational breath, I said, "Skepticism seems prudent when anyone asks for trust up front. It's a form of investigation, not a diversion. That I'm talking to ghosts who say they can choose to be seen but don't, notwithstanding."

"How we manifest is integral to a teaching scheme that requires you find your own answers, for only in this way will you never doubt them." Jeanette shifted her weight forward.

"Your skepticism is a consequence of your surreptitious study of politics. When you grasp how this fits your life's quest, your view of us and our methods will change."

I have to admit that Jeanette had me on the ropes until she made this preposterous claim, and I laughed in the face of the proverbial bold lie—the one we tell when the little ones stop working.

Jeanette's indifference shortened my glee until I was able to say, "I know nothing, and couldn't care less about politics. Hell, I've never voted!"

"To the contrary," Kha-lib said, placidly puncturing my self-assurance, "that you have regularly voiced your intricate knowledge aside, you were constantly immersed in political intrigue, often at great risk. The depth of your education is not apparent to you because you observed politics from the point of view of their failures. This personally acquired knowledge is no less valid than the formally educated among you; it is the other side of the coin devoid of the distortions demanded of self-interest and academic publication. However, it is infected by your own reactions, which she is dealing with."

"Leaving me with a un-degree?" I smirked.

"Leaving you unable to acknowledge your accomplishments: optimism for you is a sedentary place in which time pointlessly passes without insult or injury. This moribund state of mind is a grand achievement of passivity for a core predator, for a clear mind paves the way for mastery of your lessons in illusions."

"Mankind's illusions are double sided; to believe one is to be run down by the other.

"Did she not say your journey has two tales, during your first hours together?"

"Funny."

"It is your joke. You have been excavating the secret of your destiny by calling it Twins."

"That means nothing to me."

"For the moment, but the moment will change."

Footnote: There comes a time in the teaching scheme when the student knows just enough to make the leap from reason to logic, but tentativeness may cause them to falter, or not follow through, in which case real harm may come to them. At this time, the student is entirely dependent upon the teacher's absolute commitment to their welfare.

To the student, this is an ultimate act of trust—stepping out of a plane with full knowledge of gravity, wind resistance, and the principles behind airfoils, but having never seen an actual parachute. To the teacher, their commitment is part and parcel of a larger concept called "impeccability". In simple terms, if the teacher's instructions placed the student in harm's way the teacher would die to keep them safe.

Chapter 31: Alpha and Omega

I did not realize he meant right away, because of this oblique approach:

Kha-lib said that any idea may be expressed in endless ways; a grain of sand is to us a miniscule aspect of terrain, but in other perceptual circumstances, it's an entire world. Any interpretation of any "thing," depends on the speed and nature of the observer, and the experiences that allow them to make connections between apparently disparate events in their version of reality. For example, we create music by pulsing air molecules at mathematical values that conform to malleable rules of orchestration. Where a conductor may focus on the relationships between the different instruments, to create a mural of sound, the musician may feel that her notes are telling a private story. Together, they can create a sweeping emotional journey

for an audience, like the William Tell Overture, or they may organize their discontent through discordant riffs.

Simplistically, he said artists are the architects of experiences and experiments that enrich their own lives, after which audiences respond as an internal collaboration based on the degree to which they are exposed to the medium. However, there are always a few who extend that collaboration, forcing audiences to stretch the fundamentals of the form. These are the unreasonable ones who tread the line between an inmate representing their personal asylum, and the trailblazer making lives richer by unlocking the doors of perception that others may walk through. To extend the metaphor, these people have gone from the audience to the orchestra, to become a solo artist, and then a conductor of experiences aimed at having new effects on their audience.

He said, "Our conductors are the artists and architects of the human condition, who use their knowledge to stalk students out of their assumed personality. You knew about this process when you chose your personality for this quest."

"I chose who I am; the same applies to Jeanette?"

"We will discuss the specific construction of personality in your next phase. For now, her preferences are derived from Saa-ra's entire identity, in the same way that you are a portion of Philip. She chose to be the kind of person who, literally propelled by her circumstances and genetic makeup, would succumb to the cultural cruelty and domestic brutality of your so-called enlightened societies."

Jeanette was born in Sweden, and she had lived in the United States and Canada.

"In this way, she knows these circumstances extend to all societies."

"Why did she choose a hard road?"

"She chose the path necessary to experience the ways in which your world mistreats females. This forced her to adapt her mindset toward survival in her cultural milieu, and eventually become an archetype victim to the pressures and practices of society. Her life represents Alpha, the beginning."

"The beginning of victimization is at home, or her lessons lead to a new beginning?"

"Both are true," Kha-lib said.

I didn't bite. "What about Philip and me?"

"You came from a loving home in order to later recognize the brutality of so-called disciplinarians. In time, you catalogued crimes, edited cruelties and tragedies, and met the pompous, greedy, and neglectful people whose collective acts led you into witnessing where their momentums collide. In this way, you fell victim to the requirements of surviving in cultures of conflict. Your life represents the end, for living by the rules of men will destroy you."

"Uh huh."

"Collectively," Kha-lib said, "your experiences form the bookends within which the core influences of your culture can be found. However, this is the first time you have challenged these lessons in your present personality structure."

Having no idea what the meant, I said, "You're sure you're speaking to the right guy?" feeling like Bill Cosby doing his Noah routine. "I've never been accused of being saintly, and what about brains and education?"

"How many Down's syndrome children did you meet on the battlefield?"

"None. They're disabled," I said, confused.

Kha-lib held his gaze until I realized their liability was peace.

"In your world, education and intelligence are applauded as reflections of refined prejudices, when they have no bearing on your global plight, beyond your captains of industry convincing entire populations to serve them."

"I know you're not saying everyone should have Down's Syndrome, but my thinking stops there."

"Many of your so-called deficient individuals have chosen to explore emotions directly. This takes enormous courage in a world made hazardous by your clever people, and a distinguished intellect to assess these experiences when they return home. Their paths are not for the meek; they are pure journeys of heart and grand gifts of challenge for those who have the audacity to be their guardians. As for saintly matters, your remark reveals how religions have influenced you deeply, which is a matter your twin has yet to assess."

"He wouldn't know where to begin," I quipped.

"We will lead you: in part, you presume human imperfections preclude one from attempting meaningful challenges without God's permission or help. This is nonsense. Sufficient to say that none of your biblical figures came into the world knowing everything, but they all learned that The Way to Live is a springboard to the unimaginable—a clear view of how to shape destiny—and they left your world knowing they were co-creators of it, as are you all."

"Uh huh, so?"

"Koram," Kha-lib said coolly.

Shocked at hearing a word I had not uttered since leaving Eritrea—not even one tiny lie—I blurted, "Where the hell were you?"

"We are referring to one who did not fall victim."

His laconic words enticed the memory of a medical outpost run by an order of Catholic Sister nurses, to fill my thoughts: a three year old girl lay on an examining table breathing in a shallow rattle that, amplified by a Sennheiser 415 shotgun microphone, echoed around the spartan shelter. One Sister said she had heard pneumatic gurgling fall shallow into the stillness so often, as she gave the girl an injection, that she knew the girl had only minutes to live. The penicillin wasn't remotely close to a heroic measure; it was something to do when there was nothing that could be done.

Unusually for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, our producer decided we should record her death, and we rolled tape for a few minutes before stopping to wait for signs of change. A short time later, [Birhan Woldu](#) began to pant. We rolled tape again. In a whisper, one Sister said, "She's recovering."

"We've never seen anyone come back from this stage," the other nurse said. "It's truly a miracle."

I thought it was the final goodbye, because some people experience a period of well being just before the end, and the Sisters were predisposed to seeing the bright side. Minutes passed while color returned to Birhan's death mask.

On a follow up shoot weeks later, we found her playing in front of the station with her father and some young friends.

"One out of how many?" I sputtered an impotent mix of menace and exasperation.

"The issue is the changing of the moment: from Down's to intelligentsia, synthetic to symphony, and a massacre to a miracle, a sheep becomes the shepherd. You asked of us 'and so?' And so we say that from the clandestine brutalities that assaulted Alpha arises a master of the malicious illusions they became, Omega, your twin."

Unable to shake images of unfathomable suffering, I tamed my obscenities into a terse, "No time for that in the script." I got up to leave.

"Lunch tomorrow—barbecued salmon?" Jeanette said in her own voice, "Come around twelve, and bring the wine. You can tell me what just happened..." she said in a rising tone as I went down the stairs.

Chapter 32: Assumptions of Physical Reality

That evening I could not help but consider Kha-lib's words, because the impact of working the famine was highly resistant to forgetfulness after clipped scenes of suffering had been resurrected. I resolved that he may have a point about me and religion, but still I wanted to shout, "What about the rest of them?" which took me back to Jeanette's view on fairness; my anger bled energy into a bleak sense of wonder about the ways of her Universe. "Cruel bastards," slipped from my lips as I fell into a fitful sleep.

I arrived at Jeanette's house on time, with a bottle each of red and white wine. Tapping on the side door twice, I let myself in. She called a quick "Hello," from the kitchen, and as if joining sentences with elastics said, "Remember when Kha-lib told us that everything is always changing, but subjectivity influences how we adapt?"

"Can we get a glass of wine first?" I said, topping the stairs.

Apparently not: "We both know that physical experience is an artifice for spiritual development, the natural grace of which is that mankind's endeavors are ultimately self-developing, correct?"

"Yep," I said, walking into the room. "But I have a question. What did Kha-lib mean by calling my core predatory?"

Grinning, Jeanette said, "It's about the basic approaches to self-development; there are two kinds of focus, stalkers and dreamers. You are a stalker by nature—a predator's approach to gaining knowledge. I am a dreamer by nature. We'll come back to this; sufficient to say that one is not better than the other. Fair?"

"Go ahead."

"With lifetimes of gathering energy, the earth-bound spirit can be aligned with spiritual Intent, and when that integration takes place you have become all that you can be in the human form. So if my characters become a unified force, and the momentum they align themselves with is unstoppable, what do you think they could do with their power?"

"Not a trick question?"

"No."

"Anything they wanted to do."

"Exactly; hold that thought. I've said that intellectually we know personality is no more fixed than our tangible selves, but we refuse to change unless we agree that we need changing." Jeanette looked up from sprinkling croutons into a bowl of salad.

I nodded.

"So it makes perfect sense that the broader the view of reality we have, the better we can see ourselves in the grand scheme, and the greater the changes we can make. Is the white chilled?" she said, nodding at the bottles in my hand.

"Just cool," I said, setting both bottles down to rummage through her utensil drawer.

"Kha-lib also said energy takes forms that reflect its speed, and this form is only apparent to forms that vibrate in the same range."

"Uh huh—where'd you hide the corkscrew?"

"Check the dish rack."

"You wash your cork screw?"

"You don't?"

"Twist caps..."

"In that case, I'm honored that you bought corked wine." She picked up the salad bowl and napkin-wrapped utensils. "Yours," she said, nodding at the plates and marinating fish as she headed downstairs.

"In effect," I said, taking the glasses, an extra plate from the dish rack, and the fish, "you're saying that a ghost sees other ghosts as real, and we're illusions to them?"

"Yes, but hold that thought, as well." We negotiated our way through her son's bicycle, basketball, and assorted sports paraphernalia on the narrow side path to the front of the house, where we set our dishes down on a weathered picnic table that a previous tenant had liberated from the Provincial Park Service.

"As we engage new experiences," she said, arranging place settings, "we transcend the apparent limitations of our physically related insights." Jeanette looked at me as I lit the barbecue. "So you see, freedom really is a state of mind!" The fiery whoosh acted as an exclamation point.

"Got it. Experience liberates us from incarcerating ideas."

"Experience is the catalyst to attaining knowledge." Jeanette looked at me questioningly, as if I wasn't taking her seriously. "Try to think like an apprentice." She looked down to find her next words. "Fear focuses our attention on experiences we don't want, when it's our focus that inexorably draws us to or creates those experiences. It follows that focusing on not being desperate is the reverse of striving for joy, because the focus is on desperation."

"Don't focus on the negative as something to avoid, focus on the positive as something to achieve. Got it."

"Good. Now we know that our physical orientations will be the catalyst for change before we come into a physical life, so we choose historical time frames and social circumstances that will provide us with a stage to act out specific scenes. By the close of the show, assessing the consequences of our choices will cause us to realize that we created the events we experienced based on how we perceived ourselves in the earlier scenes."

"You've said all of that." I took a sip.

"As an intellectual idea, but now I know what it means." She took a quick sip. Leaning into her words, she said, "The scope of our freedom to choose a destiny is so great that even the shape of our nose represents part of the image we project into a reality where overcoming appearances is the core of personal evolution. Hair color is part of our self-stalking process!"

"A little less stalking each year for me," I said, taking a dark slab from the marinade.

"Let the grill get hotter. Cajun blackened is what we're after."

"My specialty."

"Eventually, we realize that everything happens from the inside out. Physical form," she motored on, as I put the fish back in the bowl, "causes us to assume that our senses define reality, and we trick ourselves into believing we can buy or build abstractions like happiness."

"It helps."

"What helps?"

"We get satisfaction out of building a new deck—things like that."

"Meaning money helps?"

"You have to buy the wood," I shrugged.

"Take your example to the endpoint: a lot of money can free us from having to do the work ourselves, but free time doesn't bring us any closer to understanding what caused us to focus on collecting money, or what our personal expenses were on the way."

"Such as neglecting other things?"

"Exactly. Another thing Kha-lib said is that our creative abilities can't be granted or taken away, because they are not rights or privileges. They are a consequence of being; our speed determines our abilities."

"So when we say that someone is slow, we're being precise?"

"Clever, but correct only on the surface. Remember the Down's Syndrome talk?"

"Vividly. The brother of a friend in boot camp had Downs. Hot enough?"

"Give it another minute. Speaking of speed, events instantly manifest as we conceive them in our cardinal reality, which would severely disorient us if we hadn't experienced the drastically slower manifestation of our ideas here."

"Kha-lib mentioned that." I forked the fish onto the grill.

"Is something bothering you?"

"Just hungry: we experience slower events, you said?"

Jeanette's gaze penetrated my interior, as she said, "Kha-lib also said our cyclical development is tied to Catalytic Momentum, which functions by the rule of like attracting like. This means there's no greater attraction to an event than those we seed for ourselves. It's the ultimate justice, because there's no judgment involved except our own."

"It's a great idea, but doesn't the slowness of an idea manifesting in physical reality disguise the cause from people who don't have teachers to explain things?"

"Most people don't need to see evolution as a function of energy, continuity, and momentum. They need only try to do the right thing, and they'll learn to ascribe a particular motive to a specific action."

"By themselves?"

"Our choice of parents, friends, and enemies, boxes in our lesson plan."

I poked at the grill. "Why not face all of our ignorance at once, then let the good times roll?"

"You know better than most people that we couldn't survive that. Look at how much destruction it takes just to get our attention. Even then..."

"Point taken, but what about people like Rashaef or Lei'a?"

"What about dandelions?"

"Sorry. I mean, there's not much happening where they live, and they're still calculated about everything, so how much crap could be coming their way?"

Jeanette sipped her wine slowly, then impassively said, "You don't appreciate what it means to be alone, making deliberate decisions that can affect the entire course of people's lives."

"They're together."

"They weren't always. They both had to understand that all journeys to becoming impeccable are solo treks, and be willing to carry on alone. Finding each other is for them a union of power to fulfill greater goals, because their love makes no demands. A consequence of this is that they're comforting and comforted, amused, and bemused by endless reminders of where they came from. Saying they're "together," Jeanette mimed parenthesis, "is like ... like..." she stumbled.

"Ineffably insufficient," I said, catching on. "I'm not dumping on single parenting. I'm sure it's tough."

"I'm not talking about me," Jeanette said, surprised. "I'm talking about a consequence of achieving true freedom. People like Rashaef and Lei'a could shoulder mind-boggling responsibilities, because they understood their true circumstance."

"Didn't Kha-lib say self-stalking is an unalterable condition for everyone?"

"In a physical reality, which is one choice of many, but once you've started you have to finish it. The rule is a function of responsibility transcending time," she explained.

"Okay, so how could any of your teachers make people turn right if they had preprogrammed life for left turns?"

Jeanette grasped my wrist and excitedly said, "If you came into a life designed to interact with a known flow of events, including meeting people who showed you how some left turns took you down dark alleys, what has to happen?"

"Whatever the design dictates."

"Exactly."

I looked at her blankly. "And?"

"Thousands of emissaries are coming, and all of them will understand their roles. Don't you see—nothing can stop them!"

"I see that it will work great in a film where dying doesn't matter."

"You *do* know that you're coming back to finish whatever you do this time around?" Jeanette said, perplexed by me not playing my role to the end.

"Right sorry," I said.

"I think the emerging apprentice in you recognized the inevitable loss of your old way of life, not your life. Don't worry about it; martyrdom wasn't in your cards, and I'm not going to set myself on fire."

"Let's pretend for a second that you did do that... what do teachers say goes on between lives?" I said, moving back into her work's premises.

"We return to our spiritual state and rejoin our higher selves, who are us in our entire identity. From there, we learn that a circumstance we ignored was the opportunity we had meticulously seeded, then avoided because we were in a crappy mood we had yet to recognize was part of our challenge. We'll see how some of the events we instigated in fun were not funny, how some things we didn't really mean took the same toll on our victims, and we'll learn that we saved a life with a kind word or an appropriately harsh one."

"How often do we recycle ourselves?"

"Saa-ra said a thousand life reviews and refresher courses weren't unusual, but they weren't necessarily done one at a time. There's other probable lives, other personalities..." she physically waved off these concepts. "For another time," she said.

"Okay, how do you explain the Universe talking to a person who is on life number one?" I said, addressing the hole in her premise.

"They said, 'in your present personality structure'."

"Which means nothing to me."

Jeanette paused, cleared her throat, and said, "That's something better left for you to piece together; it will have an impact that goes well beyond what I can tell you today, and I might be robbing you of that aspect of a grand assumption. It's enough to know that lifetime after lifetime we acquire the energy to engage experiences that were formerly beyond our capabilities. When we're ready to accept certain truths, we reveal our secret selves, to ourselves, by engaging irrefutable lessons like the ones you went through before meeting me. We just haven't dissected them yet—you'll see. Anyway, when you do assess these lessons properly, you'll understand

how cognizant self-stalking resolves contradictions in our personality, trains us to think positively, and guarantees that we encounter less negative experiences because we know better. Philip's personalities, of which you are a one, have travelled the full course of physically related evolutionary events. He has been to war as a way to defeat his personal flaws, and discovered that it does not tolerate the ignorant enthusiasm of a youth embracing his culture's beliefs without assessment. Your present personality is designed to tackle the final steps."

"Then we're done—like the fish?" I nodded toward the grill.

"Then we're ready to move on," Jeanette said, handing me a plate. "When we've understood the principles behind creating events responsibly, we're on our way to mastering ourselves. This is to become a master of our destiny, not a master over anything else."

I put the salmon on the dish, shut off the gas, and served us leaving one piece on the third plate.

"You'll like this part," Jeanette said, serving the salad while I quickly steel-brushed the grill. "Saa-ra told me that the body is alive within its own measures of consciousness, but it's the energy of Spirit that gives it the means to continue. In other words, our existence is based on a grand partnership in which the body has no more of a human experience than a barnacle has captaining a ship. That's not to say the body's experience is less profound to it than our experiences are to us. They're just different."

"Why should I like that?" I said, poking my spinach.

"It puts you in charge." Jeanette grinned, snatched a quick sip, then she said, "She also said some of us choose short experiences and are stillborn, while others choose a short experience outside of the womb, then we die of things like Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. The rest of us chose our time of death, as well."

"You're saying that every death is a suicide?"

"Yes."

"There goes the Catholic audience."

"This does not relieve people of their responsibility for causing a death. Making fake drugs or car or airplane parts that ultimately kill people that chose these ways to die doesn't change the essence of the act. They are murderers."

"Uh huh, speaking of which," I said as the thought came to mind, "when do we actually begin a physical life?"

"We insert our consciousness into the developing fetus at a time of our choosing, and we can leave it almost as easily before our conformation to physical sensations convinces us that we can't. In between these times, Saa-ra said children regularly speak to their source selves, because they still have their connection."

"Neat." I took a bite, as did Jeanette. "So you're saying," I swallowed, "there's no line to cross that says when life begins?"

"Everything is always alive."

"You know what I mean."

"Think about it; what do you really mean?"

"I think it's between having a functioning brain, and being able to breathe on our own."

"So the larger questions about abortion and euthanasia are answered: moving on, it's the vibratory speed and pulse sequencing of all things that distinguishes them from other things," she said. "It follows that when the speed of our perception is in the same range as the speed of other forms of consciousness, we grant them the status of being real."

"We covered that," I said, around a piece of purplish vegetable.

"I'm making another point." Jeanette stabbed a cherry tomato. Leaving it resting on her plate, she said, "The pilot of a low flying jet would see a constant white line on a highway, whereas the pilot of a propeller craft would perceive the broken lines."

"At the right speed, height, and angle, sure."

"This isn't about physics," Jeanette said, tapping a finger at the corner of her mouth, to bring to my attention that there was something on mine. "If our visual acuity weren't automatically attracted to the brightest light, we would focus on the broken black lines. With me?"

I blotted off a drop of salad dressing with a paper napkin. "I am if you're going to say that the white lines represent our personality, and the black lines represent the beliefs we don't know we have, and that to see both would be to survey the entire road."

"Excellent."

"So is lunch. Thanks."

"Anytime." Jeanette jabbed her fork in the direction of the remaining fish, indicating that it was mine.

"I'm good, thanks."

"Yes you are," she said, spearing the piece so that it broke in half. Leaving it on the plate, between sipping wine and daintily wiping her lips, she continued explaining her realization.

"Less than impeccable actions always create casualties, the majority of which we don't perceive because they lie between the lines, or they're too far down the road for a short-sighted species. However, we can still help ourselves by acting as if we are always heading for a lesson that we can learn before we fly into it, because pivotal events rarely come without a shower of clues."

"Such as?"

"Witnessing an accident may be telling us that we're a decision away from having one, and it's time to assess our own circumstances. It may be that we're going too fast on wet pavement." She shrugged. "If I ran a red light, it may be that the impatience of self-importance is at issue, and I'm about to be T-boned with my attitude." Jeanette raised her brow; I waved my fork for her to continue.

"Being aware of our own actions to this degree leads us to the power reference point for self-development—there are no accidents—every event is of equal in value, and now is the point of power to decide what we will do."

"So a couple bucks a pound for this was a steal," I quipped.

"You're impossible," she said, shaking her head.

"Not true," I replied, shaking mine. "I'm just not easy."

"Not true," she said evenly.

Jeanette next set up life-lesson examples for specific behavioral challenges, which included how a Higher Self could help to create a probable destiny. For example, an old soul deliberately chooses to be born as an early twentieth-century female, amid circumstances it knows will curve destiny toward the practice of medicine. These will also create personal challenges for friends who have agreed to reincarnate in his/her play for their own reasons. The entity also knows it will use personal struggle as a springboard to positive acts, therefore choosing an impoverished childhood will provide her with impetus to better her circumstances, and those who are in her sphere of influence. Because most cultures will consider females "less" by the men who run them in that time, her environment will demand that she live within an ongoing self-examination to keep a clear picture of her self-worth. A lifetime of quashing self-doubt, based on irrelevant

circumstances of race and gender, will cause her to look beyond all apparent limitations and her medical methodology will intuitively peek into the underlying order of health. After a well-earned revelation, she will publish the factual bridges she discovers between attributes of self-image and their concomitant ailments.

One of these could be documenting how liver disorders are common to individuals who are unable to cleanse their secrets of self-image; she first clued into this by aligning the arrogance of the Old Boys Club with the pettiness of prejudiced ignorance she experienced for most of her life. Exemplified by the derision with which they dismiss her new ideas, she will also realize pretentiousness is common to those who secretly know what they are really like, and drink to deal with it. But she will have to be careful about falling into the intellectual trappings of success she has battled in others: although her upbringing pointed her in the proper direction, it is not the only interpretation of circumstances she could make. She could secretly feel that she deserved her status, because she had not earned her poverty.

A different entity might approach these lessons from the point of view of a wealthy, white, male doctor in a predominately black country. While in a detoxification center, he would realize that the ways of his world caused him to assume his status didn't require him to contribute to the quality of life of those who weren't like him. Upon his release, he might fight the inequities of his social system by setting up free clinics.

"In these examples," Jeanette said, "the woman's role is not necessarily more difficult than the man's. It's the choice of the entire environment that guarantees a lesson will be faced, but not how well the individual will do."

"Like I said, a crap-shoot."

"With loaded dice; ultimately you can't lose."

"Uh huh—so how does poverty figure into personal development?"

"Learning to discern the difference between need and want is integral to discovering ourselves. This means that, at some stage, we include a form of poverty in our lessons, but it doesn't have to be torturous deprivation. You and I are broke, but we're not suffering, and we won't as long as we're on a positive momentum. We will have what we need."

"Getting by day by day?"

"What else do you need?"

"We get old. Security would be nice."

"If anyone has ever had reason to feel secure it's you ... what was that look about, and don't tell me nothing just streamed behind your eyes?" she said with disconcerting warmth.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said honestly.

"You understood that you will be fine, but you can't justify the idea so you buried it." Laughing, she said, "What I'd give to be present at that exhumation!"

Chapter 33: Switching Focus

We finished lunch and washed the dishes, including the corkscrew, then we went for a walk along the rocky beach where on no apparent cue Jeanette began recounting key phases in her life. In and of themselves there was nothing extraordinary about her experiences, maybe other than they spanned the gamut from potato soup poverty to caviar for twelve, and back to mock chicken sandwich lunches for three.

In a nutshell, her parents had led her through a wandering adolescence, but in spite of many moves, Jeanette was a good student. When it came time to pony up, there was only enough money for her brother's university education, and so went her dream of a career in marine

biology. She subsequently survived a parade of small minds and petty tyrants at various jobs, because she out-performed her peers before she married and became a successful client entertainer for her emotionally abusive husband. When their relationship ended, her adjustment back to the land of single living included date rape and the financial and social discrimination society bestows upon divorcees with children. These experiences included not qualifying for new car loan rates, or quality rental properties, which in turn led to tradesman's theft for plumbing problems and auto repairs.

As she spoke her heart dispassionately, I had no doubt that she knew a lot about suffering, failure, and limbo-living between mans' sexually influenced decisions. I also believed that she had met some truly nasty people, and I better appreciated how children can simultaneously be the source of one's deepest worries and greatest joys. That said, the physical, mental, and emotional traumas she had suffered couldn't have been too bad, because she had cracked wise about her life from day one. Or maybe she had somehow gotten even?

I felt the same way about her financial circumstances. Our mans' society had made earning a decent wage more difficult, but when she decided to become a writer she had borrowed money from a long-time male friend, and she was paying less than fifty percent of true rental value courtesy of her looks. She also owned her five-year old car, there was always food in the fridge, and her teenagers were clean, bright, and personable, as far as I could tell when they flashed by the doorway.

Overall, I viewed Jeanette's trials as distasteful necessities, and unfortunate inevitabilities of learning self-reliance like the rest of us had to, neither of which had whizzed by her ear at 2300 feet per second, nor came with a distinctive smell that caused her to burn her clothing at the end of a particularly memorable day. This is not to imply that her character was less than stellar, or that the well of courage from which she drew her dignity wasn't deeper than most. Then she told me that her decision to have an abortion had been agonizing, it haunted her for a long time, but another child would have jeopardized the welfare of the first two.

Intellectually, I knew that making abortions illegal took away women's right to design their lives in the same way that a man can, and that as neither science nor the courts could define life's moments of debut or demise, they had no business interfering. Moreover, Jeanette's doctor had declared that she couldn't become pregnant, after he delivered Kris, the knowledge of which should have made me empathetic. Maybe it was the memory of a "doll's" arm lying in the street, before I saw the rest of her anatomically perfect parts that changed me in ways I didn't realize. I can't say other than a sudden anger converted her trials into the admissions of a frightened woman liberating herself from guilt; her humor was evidence of wearing herself down to desperation.

In a rare moment of enlightenment, I realized that creating Saa-ra's persona let her off the hook: Kha-lib and the others were camouflage, so deep and clever was her personal disguise. My anger immediately dissipated into my equally clever deduction.

"Who are we?" she said, cutting short my moment of reflection.

"Sounds like Saa-ra," I replied neutrally.

"It is time to examine your life for evidence of the unseen, for only in this way can you claim knowledge of our existence without frightening yourself beyond learning you are an open book to us."

"Where do I begin looking?" I said, scanning the sky, wondering what I should do. Or did my insight really change anything?

"Examine your so-called accidents and coincidences."

"I'll do that," I promised. Seconds of silence passed. "You mean now?"

"Do you have a prior engagement?"

"Nope—how far back?"

"Begin where your thoughts take you," she said, as the thumping crack-roar of a motorcycle accelerating down Marine Drive filled the air.

"Nineteen seventy-one it is," I said nonchalantly—any cue could be attached to an experience. "The brakes failed on a borrowed motorcycle, while I was going down a steep road that intersected a busy street. I tried to ditch it, but I ended up flying off a grassy slope and landed sideways on the pavement."

"Tell her what was strange about the incident."

"My foot was crushed under the transmission, but there was no pain in the moment, or when they set the bones. Therapy was only uncomfortable." I caught on to the ruse. "You're saying you had something to do with that?" I said indulging Jeanette.

"Tell us about your other flying experiences."

"Commercial, private, or bush country?"

"He has walked away from them all, and still believes nothing unusual has happened in his life," Saa-ra said, as if to update Jeanette. "Begin with the private."

Regretting being hammered, when I talked to her on the phone for hours before we met, and not remembering much of what I said, I told Jeanette that I was finishing the last two hours of my solo training practicing approaches to a long runway at idle power. My angle of attack was perfect for a textbook sink into a ground effect flare when my Cessna 152 was suddenly thrust hard to the right. The stall warning screeched, as it should, but I ran out of corrective rudder pedal—my nose was pointing forty-five degrees off centerline. I glanced at Jeanette. "None of this is good."

"She can picture angular momentum," Saa-ra said.

"I knew I had time to punch on power, and inch back to the middle, which was my last thought before I was slammed sideways into the door. The next thing I remember is sitting in the cornfield at the side of the runway. There was no damage, because little Cessnas land slowly in normal conditions, but with a head wind, furrowed ground, and four feet of corn stalks in my way, I stopped very quickly. After parking the plane, I learned that an eighty mile an hour ground sheer had blown through, evidenced by an expensive Apache Twin lying on its back at the fuel pumps. I was lucky."

"There was more to your luck than landing upright and unscathed," Saa-ra said.

Not particularly surprised that I had given up so many these details through my scotch-affected haze, I said, "My instructor said that an experienced pilot would have gone to full power, edged up the nose, and done a go-around. He also said that going twenty miles an hour faster, and fifty feet higher, would have been fatal if the gust had gotten under a wing... like the one that drove me into the ground and flipped the Apache."

We entered the John Lawson green space, where Jeanette led the way to an isolated bench. Using the table as a backrest, we sat side by side facing the community of Kitsilano, across the water. Quietly gazing at nothing in particular, Saa-ra asked me to speak about the other air adventures that involved damage to the planes in which I was a passenger.

I recalled two more minor incidents, after which she said there was a fine distinction between minor and catastrophic when dealing with commercial aircraft travelling at high speeds on the ground. I agreed with her in principle, but rightfully argued that by force of my physical presence that distinction was moot.

"Mankind requires a great deal of convincing," Saa-ra said blandly. "Tell her of the times when your behavior was unusual."

"She thinks that's most of the time."

"We are not referring to incidents you wish to forget, or have dismissed as understandable under the circumstances. We are referring to the event-moments you have filed away hoping to understand them some day."

Her voice acted like a silky thread withdrawing memories from a rare sense of peace that was settling over me like a warm blanket: I pondered the sensation without worrying about it.

"In your Middle East," Saa-ra focused me.

And there it was: I told her that our crew was interviewing a militia leader when the battery to my VCR died, and for the first and last time in my freelance career, I discovered I had mixed my used batteries with the charged backups. I had to go back to our car, which we had parked on the perimeter of an area that was cordoned off to protect buildings from car bombers, and in plain sight of the guards who had searched us on the way in.

I had almost reached the car when a firefright broke out nearby, so I ran the last few steps to the rear of the vehicle. Crouching, I was trying to determine if I was at the right end of the car when a militiaman racing into the fray shouted at me, "Sahafe!" gesturing that I should scamper to the cover of a nearby building. My first thought was that running garnered attention, while exposing me to the enemy of the hour. My next was that not all friendly fighters knew who I was, which led me to conclude that the chances of being eulogized as the sahafe who had single-handedly attacked Nabi Berri with a dead battery was excellent if I moved at all. Logically, I decided to sit behind the right rear wheel and wait it out, occasionally waving at a soldier who persistently waved me toward him when things got noisier.

"Your normal reasoning was intact. Continue," Saa-ra said.

I told Jeanette that after the shooting stopped, I switched batteries and began walking down the middle of the street toward the apartment complex. From about thirty yards away, the same guard who had cleared me the first time unholstered his pistol, smiled, and leveled it at me.

Groping for accurate wording, I said I felt a stutter in my thinking, and the moment split into two perceptions. One was of indifference; the other understood that the guard was challenging my apparent bravery, because I had sat with my back to the nearby action waving at his friend.

Within this perception, I understood that the guard wanted me to surrender, or at least fake it for fun, and I slowed my pace to decide whether raising my hands or lying on the ground would please him more. At this point, the first perception overrode the latter, and I kept on walking as if I were stalling in High Noon at the Abu K Koral. I looked for Saa-ra to confirm that this was the kind of experience she was after.

She nodded for me to continue.

"Maybe fifteen paces away," I said, "he pointed his gun at my crotch. At about ten, he aimed at my foot. At five, the muscles in his forearm tensed, and at two, he squeezed the trigger. Click. He laughed as if this was the funniest thing he had ever done, which I thought likely as I stepped around him. He patted me on the shoulder, shrugged, and said 'Maalesh.' Roughly, this means it doesn't matter, but it's a versatile word. In my circumstance, I believed it was an expression of grudging respect, and I responded by dipping my head and solemnly saying 'Scheisskopft.' He nodded as if I had said, "And God be with you also."

"You were feeling like your old self," Saa-ra said.

"Correct, so what was the split about?"

"The sensation of duality was a more definitive extension of what you often experienced at the times when you felt you should turn back. Aloofness was also a large part of her (Jeanette) early experiences when we interceded in her ways. When we are finished here, ask her about these times. Continue."

I had nothing more to say until the word "aloofness" snagged an incident from my memory about the run up to the Falkland's war. Still feeling unusually peaceful, I said, "In Argentina, the pressure of three authorities changing the rules caused Tony and Ski..."

"From the beginning, please."

I told her that we flew from Buenos Aires to Comodoro Rivadavia for a one-day look at the Argentine military preparing for war, rented hotel rooms in case we had to stay the night, then drove to the media center to see what venues were available to us. A freelance cameraman I knew from El Salvador came out of the door as we arrived; Manny and I chatted while Ski, Ricardo our interpreter, and our producer Tony did their thing.

Zooming through superficial pleasantries, I asked Manny about the official rules versus unofficial practicalities of working in the area, and he said we had wasted our time. We could shoot nothing without permission, and the only permission any crew had ever received was to take pictures of the town itself. If there was anything military in that picture, "Even a boot," he warned me, it was a criminal offence.

"No cheating?" I said sniggering.

"Not here man," Manny said gravely. "I think you'd go missing faster than in Salvador." Lowering his voice, he looked around furtively, and said, "Bin that way for a long time before the war, and they're good at it. You seen the mothers at the Casa Rosada in B.A.?"

I explained to Jeanette that "the mothers" of the missing, as they were known nationally, although regularly taunted by twenty-something patriot idiots dancing around them, demonstrated in front of the pink palace in Buenos Aires every Thursday. The public was too scared to support them, and the women too courageous to care that they stood alone.

I said to Manny, "Ya, we seen—saw them. You're not pulling my pisser on this because you're with NBC are you?"

I knew better, but I had to ask: Manny had taken huge risks in shooting wars—stories I had borrowed in the Cellar Tavern—and so far this war was just political crap leading up to a national election. Throwing a couple of foreign press in jail wouldn't matter much.

Crossing his heart, he said, "No games my man. Tell your people straight up, this is dangerous shit. It just doesn't look like it."

"So why are you here?" I grinned.

"NBC can afford shit," he said, shrugging.

We chatted for a short while, then in compliance with a safety practice he introduced me to in the Camino Real bar, a year earlier, I told him where we were staying and that we might be back for lunch. If not, we agreed to meet for dinner.

Manny went off to wherever he spent his time, while I went inside the building to tell Tony what I had learned. I emphasized that I knew Manny from Salvador, where credibility was a life and death matter: unofficially and never spoken of, we had all shared information to keep everyone safe, and it didn't go unnoticed back home. Network desk producers regularly complained to their correspondents that all stories from El Salvador, on different networks on the same day, were the same, and they pushed for exclusive material. They didn't understand that they were asking very clever people to quadruple the odds of being killed, so it was customary for crews to "share bodies" first thing in the morning, while reporters coordinated potential

stories before heading out. Gang journalism also made it more likely that truly representative scenes would get past the censors, if only by desensitizing them to the horrors of the same story. It was better than nothing.

We left the press building to discuss the situation, ultimately deciding to look for an army battalion stationed on the outskirts of town, in the hope that their commander would unilaterally agree to us taking pictures. Leaving a trail of legitimate directional inquiries behind us, we became lost in the rural outback to finally emerge on a mesa overlooking a maze of oil rigs. Planes were landing in the distance.

Ski and Tony had a terse discussion about the risk of taking pictures of the distant airport; Tony insinuated that it was ludicrous to think much could come of it—an insinuation that took into account Ski's manhood, CBC's money, and my friend's professional judgment. Ski could only remind him that our pilot had ordered all passengers to lower their window shades when we had landed, two hours earlier. When they dragged Ricardo into the fray, he said it was unwise to test the Argentine authorities: Tony interpreted this as a warning born of a long-established fear from the soft-spoken gentle man, while my silence constituted consent.

Reluctantly, Ski was tracking the slow progression of a light plane on final approach, when he noticed three vehicles racing into frame right, on the empty highway, heading in our direction.

"Shit," he said quietly.

"Keep rolling," Tony said.

The cars turned onto the dirt road we were standing on.

"Fuck," Ski said.

"Keep rolling," Tony said.

Moments later, two black and one grey 1966 Ford Falcons slid to dusty halts in front of us, and half a dozen soldiers scrambled out to form a semicircle of rifles leveled at our chests.

"There was more cause for fear than your story makes clear," Saa-ra said. "The vehicles?"

"Of the thousands of people who disappeared during the mid-seventies," I told Jeanette as if she had not heard this before, "Most of them were last seen being put into grey or black 1966 Falcons."

"Carry on."

I told Jeanette that the soldiers drove us to the airfield where they had a facility to screen our footage, and that we played catch with a ball of gaffer's tape for an hour before a small platoon, led by a young officer, came out of a nearby building. Our six guards dutifully pointed their weapons at us and we stopped playing, waiting to be scolded. Instead, the officer asked us if we had spoken to anyone since our arrival. Other than the hotel clerk, we lied; we said we had spoken to no one.

Without explanation, the soldiers placed us in a bus with dark tinted windows, and took us back to town. One at a time, they took us to the front desk clerk who gave our records of registry to the officer. Soldiers then took us to our rooms where we repacked what little we had unpacked, before they swept the rooms clean of anything we might have left behind. In my case, this included a gum wrapper in the wastepaper basket, and replacing a bar of soap.

Back on the bus, soldiers sat us one man per seat on alternate sides, three rows apart. Each of us was guarded by a soldier sitting one seat behind us, all of whom amused themselves by tapping Latin rhythms on the back of our heads with machine pistols as we headed back to the airport. Along the way, I understood the guards say that our names were going to be removed from the passenger manifest of the morning flight from Buenos Aires.

We parked in front of the civilian terminal for fifteen minutes, before being taken to the military side of the airport where we were told we were going to be placed on a military aircraft going back to Buenos Aires.

"At this point," I told Jeanette, "their practice of disposing of 'the missing' over the Atlantic from military transport planes caused us some trepidation, then something happened to change everything. For over an hour, we watched our young officer stomp from building to building becoming increasingly agitated over not getting whatever it was he wanted; we figured this could only be good for us. We were finally right about something.

We didn't know this at the time, but Manny had gone to our hotel to see if we had returned for lunch. When the clerk denied that we had ever checked in, Manny ran with Salvador rule number one, and he made a phone call that generated a flood of communications between a military junta not used to explaining their actions to foreign diplomats, and a less-than-elite local military garrison in Comodoro Rivadavia. I turned to face Jeanette. "The host country is supposed to inform the embassy of a foreign country whenever they arrest one of their citizens. They hadn't, so I figured our lieutenant was having a hard time saving his own ass."

"Which is what he believed was at stake," Jeanette/Saa-ra said.

"It would only be fair," I said. "Anyway, we spent the night in a city jail being interrogated by federal police, before they locked us in military barracks, around seven in the morning. Around noon, we were put under house arrest at a mom and pop hotel, the only place that would take us, and we were assigned a local attorney. Dr. Hector Viñales."

"Why do you remember this?" Saa-ra said evenly.

"Because he took us on, and I'm here talking to you."

Saa-ra said, "She understands that you considered his representation key in a dire circumstance. Continue."

"His safety was an issue, as well. Anyway, after we gave him our depositions he repeatedly summoned us back to his office to explain discrepancies between what we had individually told the police and our military interrogators. Hector told Ricardo that he expected some mistranslation, intentional and otherwise, but key parts of our stories didn't match: we had all agreed not to mention our conversation about taking pictures of the airport," I explained, "but their interrogators were good, and by morning they knew that we knew what we were doing wasn't kosher. It didn't help that we had obviously lied about talking to people, so they never stopped trying to make us slip up."

"Do you think they seriously considered you to be spies?"

"I think hiding us was designed to keep other news cowboys riding side-saddle, but Manny blew their cover at the point when it looked like they were going to make us disappear in their traditional sense. Because of this poor timing for them, the military, local, and federal police all wanted jurisdiction over our case."

"To what end?"

"To appear fair, to control the outcome, maybe to unmask more of our lies to hide theirs," I shrugged, "to pass the buck."

"Carry on."

I told her that the good news about this internal battle was that three bureaucracies racing to circle their wagons left gaps that made it clear none of them were being completely honest, if only about little things like threatening us. The bad news was that soon after our arrest the British attacked the Malvinas Islands, (Falklands, if you're not in Argentina) and they were threatening to blockade the mainland. This caused various authorities to amend the terms of our house arrest,

to insinuate control over the case. At the same time, Hector said that even a minor change in wording, times three versions of any event, would have a big effect in court; he had to note all of the changes, and our omissions, before he submitted our interrogation documents and depositions to the judge. As a result, our days dragged on in clarification meetings until the morning when everyone except me went to see Hector about boundary phone calls: as another authority amended our restrictions, sometimes only minutes apart and always to a smaller area, we were finally restricted to an area that precluded us from seeing Hector. Royally pissed off, Tony, Ski, and Ricardo went to see him, while I stayed behind to take phone calls from the free world.

Shortly after they left the hotel, three closely cropped young men came into the quaint main floor cafe. Seeing me sitting alone in the empty room, they exchanged smiles, ordered coffee, then walked over and politely asked if they could join me as they sat down. I nodded as if my permission mattered, and continued reading a local newspaper.

"You read Spanish?" one of them said with mild surprise, meaning, "You never mentioned that in your interviews."

"Mostly just numbers and directions," I said, seeing no benefit in telling him that I could understand more words than I knew how to use. "I'm looking at pictures to learn more of your language."

He translated this for his friends, all of whom laughed heartily when one of them said I would have two to eight years to learn their language.

Returning his attention to me, the young leader seriously said, "It is very dangerous on the streets at night, no?"

I turned over the paper to look at the page he could see, and asked him to show me the article he was talking about. Shaking his head, he told his friends that I was not smart, to which one of them commented that this suited the disguise of a foreign correspondent. They all laughed again.

I must have twitched a sign of understanding, because they suddenly stopped to stare at me. My stomach was in a steep dive, but I managed to casually ask him if the danger was specific to a local area of town, or was it everywhere because people were now more afraid.

"I think if you were to stay in the hotel, this would be safest. I am just trying to be friendly in these unfriendly times, no?"

I thanked him for his concern, as a foreign correspondent would, and they left the hotel probably wondering whether I had gotten the point.

I told Tony about this meeting when he came back, and he had Ricardo call Hector, who said he would look into it right away. Later that day, the British sunk the General Belgrano battleship. The next day, authorities ordered the press corps out of Comodoro Rivadavia. The day after that, the same three visitors came back with the same message under identical circumstances.

Tony was so pissed when I told him about this that he demanded of Hector that he complain directly to the federal judge. Hector did this, and the judge permanently established generous boundaries of our house arrest; this didn't stop some young patriot from telephoning a threat to me the next morning.

Two weeks into this bullshit, we pushed our house-arrest limits by fifty feet to go to a restaurant on the outskirts of town. This is when things fell apart. The dislike Ski and Tony had for one another, rooted in an argument they had while covering the revolution that had renamed Rhodesia, resurfaced and each of them blamed the other for our predicament. As the argument got louder and nastier, Ricardo intervened to sternly explain that it was poor form in his culture

for grown men to act like juveniles in public. Tony and Ski quieted, but both of them wanted the last word. Tony's barb topped Ski's dart, and Ski stormed out of the restaurant.

Thinking it was a good time to shoot an escaping spy, I went after him.

Catching up quickly, but with no idea what to say, I put my arm around his shoulder to buy time. This action caused him to slow his pace, because a "born and bred" Midwest heterosexual male didn't like being touched by men, other than hand to hand or hand to jaw. Removing my gesture of reassurance, I felt increasingly detached as I began to talk about the benefits of sharing fear without caving into it. I said that everyone was doubly sensitive to each other's moods, because we were dependent on each other in unspoken ways. I needed his support to get through this because I was scared shitless—that moment notwithstanding, I told Jeanette. I also admitted to Ski that I stayed back to take calls from Toronto, because Sally's pleasantly satirical manner was a transfusion of hope. I left it up to Ski to figure out that I was too scared to step outside.

"You did not judge, nor give him permission to continue his tantrum," Saa-ra said as a statement.

"I guess. Anyway, he turned around."

"Later, your colleague asked you what happened."

"I couldn't remember it clearly; I said 'not much.'"

"What do you recall about the transaction?" Saa-ra said.

"I was far more intimate than I cared to be, and I didn't realize I had made my point until I ran out of words. Still, it would have been a waste of time if Ski's mental toughness hadn't kicked back in," I shrugged. "We all get tired."

"She has often spontaneously told others what they needed to hear, unaware of the effects of her casually precise psychological bombing."

Paradoxically disturbed by the ridiculous implication, that I had been invaded by Spirit, and annoyed that Saa-ra's comments caused me to remember yet another event, I said, "That's good for her friends."

Saa-ra studied the sky as if it was about to change into something else; I couldn't help but take a peek. It felt like forever, but was probably less than thirty seconds before I realized Jeanette would sit there until we were staring at the moon, waiting to hear what had come to my mind.

"I know you're looking for every experience the audience might possibly relate to, but I can guarantee this isn't one of them."

"With what will you guarantee this?"

"I need a break for the can," I said, standing.

"You can tell her on the way back," Saa-ra said.

Chapter 34: Patterns of Intent

A few steps later, I said, "My ex-wife called me, after two years without any contact, and rambled about her life being over because she had herpes, then she made references about making sure her life was over. I had no idea what I was going to say, but I told her to come over, things had happened since we'd last seen each other. I still had nothing definite to say when she arrived, but my mood changed from concern to a feeling of such indifference that when I found a barely related incident I just ran with it."

"What it was, specifically."

"That's the thing, it wasn't specific."

Saa-ra said nothing to interrupt the sounds of our footfalls.

Clearing my throat, I said, "I told Lynda that, in Salvador, the army had started killing people in a small village because they had allegedly helped the guerrillas. If it were true, the villagers wouldn't have had a choice but to help. Nearby neighbors grabbed whatever they could carry, and ran into the jungle. Soldiers had been tracking a couple of families for three or four days when we came across them—first the soldiers, and a few minutes ahead, the families."

Abruptly awash in a wave of sticky vertigo, I reached for Jeanette's arm to steady myself. Cold and baffled, I took a few breaths before I said, "We told them they were really close to being caught, but they chose to stay. It meant certain death, but it didn't matter to them."

"What did your wife think about your story?"

"She calmed down, which surprised the hell out of me, because I barely got the gist of the story myself."

"What was the point of your narrative?"

"Other people had worse things to deal with than controllable infections."

"She heard a story about self-pity killing her; she needed to move on."

I stutter-stepped with the realization that Saa-ra's version hit the mark—it had been in Lynda's eyes, but at the time I wasn't about to screw around with success by questioning why she seemed to feel better.

"We have more," Saa-ra carried on as if she was adding to an order through a takeout speaker. "Your interpretation of stunned amazement suited the moment in Ethiopia when you exclaimed, 'This cannot be.' In reality, Philip was stating his intentions through you and for you. Also, knowing about your father's imminent return to us was an omen of your raw abilities, and evidence of our benevolence, because disappointment cripples you." She paused. "It is also time to tell her."

"Tell her..." I suddenly knew what she meant; "what?" uselessly dribbled out of my mouth.

"If you have no questions, we will leave you for now. We love you."

"Uh huh."

Jeanette's upper body movements became less stiff, and her gate more fluid as we walked toward her home. And walked, and walked.

Finally, clearing my throat from a false start I told her that, in Ethiopia, we were on our way to tape the distribution of Canadian wheat when we came across a withered old man lying on the side of the road. One toothpick thin arm was folded under his baldhead to keep it off the cold, stony ground. The other, shaking under minimal weight, begged us for his life.

We took footage of him from three angles before going on our way.

I half expected Jeanette to do the same thing with me, as we left the park. Instead, with a delicate breath she said, "Thank you."

"Uh huh."

"Like every secret we have, that event was blocking your view to seeing other things clearly." Smiling to herself, she said, "Which means you're ready to hear this: our First Attention establishes perceptual absolutes to seamlessly reason a world that suits our experience. For example, in our physical version of here and now, a brick won't ever feel like a marshmallow; throw a ball and it will always curve down to the ground. Neither of these things would be unreasonable, according to the rules of the First Attention."

"By reasonable, you're talking about what's tangible according to our laws of physics?" I said, relieved to have left the body behind.

"I am including that. Our reasoning is wired to our perceptions, and our perceptions provide only descriptions about reality. In the Second Attention, we can manipulate physically related

assumptions, without embracing them as anything more than representations borrowed from the First Attention. In other words, in dreaming the ball can make a ninety degree turn, or hang in midair if we want it to, because rules based on descriptions don't apply. This," she said, with a sweeping gesture, "is a grand illusion, but it has a vital reality of its own. What we see and believe serve as our reference points for development. Basically, the First Attention is where we learn the alphabet before we can do research in the library of the Second Attention. Here's a critical point: the First Attention uses all of the average person's energy to maintain the descriptions they act and react to."

"I think I need an example of that."

"You don't know?"

"Sorry. I need an example."

"In the First Attention, if we feel anger it's healthier to not express it than to let it out without causing harm. But when we learn that we are angry at a description of events, made personal by our self-image, anger becomes a waste of time and energy. In other words, your ego is keeping you safe from a circumstance that doesn't exist; you just believe it does. With me so far?"

"No... the circumstance is real."

"Again, you can't be angry unless you are afraid, so it's the description of the event—as a metaphor—that has made you fearful. Anger is your camouflage reaction to an event that isn't what you thought it was."

"Is this like hating war, but not warriors?"

"You tell me."

"I'm saying someone like me might condemn soldiers for their acts, when it's their beliefs that are the issue—I mean, I'm just like them, other than buying into the patriotic crap."

"You did buy into it... you were in the Navy."

"It was a job."

"Which was to do what?"

"Drink."

"Your deflection is an admission; you skirted the periphery of your fears again."

A moment to gather my thoughts passed before I said, "Got it."

"The better the conclusions we act upon," Jeanette moved on, "the more energy we save by refining our acting skills. Simplistically, in time we become aware that we are acting most of the time, and we can thereafter choose how we will play a role, as opposed to reacting to other characters because that means they are writing the script."

We turned down the short driveway.

"The beginning point of intentional self-development is as simple and difficult as learning to not react. It's simple because not reacting saves enough energy for us to begin to see ourselves, and knowing why we reacted in one circumstance can free us from that reaction in another. It's difficult because the more we see the more we might not want to see, because it's extremely difficult to put the ego in its proper place."

"The better we get, the easier it is to get better, even at two steps forward and one step back," I said, opening the side door for her.

"It's true that our potential increases, but our focus always determines how far and how fast we will go. Discovering one unflattering aspect of our personality doesn't reveal all of them, and we begin to set up barriers to self-discovery."

"But we're still ahead of the game."

"That focus is a barrier to creating a rolling momentum," she said, topping the stairs and turning into the living room. "If you don't make a consistent effort to find and connect the flaws, they'll draw you back to your old ways." She sat on the couch. "In effect, you're bargaining for an in-between stage where you can say, 'This is good enough,' like a thief feeling better because he's cutting back on high-end burglary. The bottom line," she said as I made myself comfortable in the overstuffed chair, "is that it takes less energy to dedicate yourself to a task, because you're not constantly fighting the inertia of complacency, or updating your excuses. Moreover, you begin to include Second Attention perceptions as you gain easier access to them, and these add to your commitment."

"Second Attention perceptions?"

"Unexpected gifts like coincidences getting your attention, or visions and insights that come as a by-product of the commitment itself."

"Okay, I'm with you on all of that, but why are we talking about it?"

"If you embrace the statement Kha-lib made, you will free yourself from a cage right away."

"What statement was that?"

"You didn't kill him."

I took me a moment to refocus on the old man. Uncomfortably, I said, "I know."

"But your conscience doesn't—it's reacting to a description; that event has meanings that are meant to teach you; we'll get to them. The idea of spontaneously channeling Phillip also frightened you, so to answer your question, I'm explaining how Spirit can easily interact with people in general, and with students in particular."

"Thanks, I think."

"We're almost finished for today. The assumptions of your dreaming reality include spontaneous cause and effect, weightlessness, and fluidity, whereas the continuity of your waking reality rests on the concepts of linear time, gravity, and solidity. It follows that in the former state of awareness you should never become physically tired. Correct?"

"I guess."

"You can commit to an answer."

"Yes."

"It follows that objects like beds should make no practical sense within the continuity of a dream, but it represents a place to rest, and the dream makes sense as a metaphor for that aspect of your waking life."

"Got it."

"There's a huge difference in the scope of information available to us in each Attention. Think of it like a photographer using a wide-angle lens. Technological considerations aside, the lens is objective; it's the photographer's assumptions that contrive the focal point for people who view his prints through the same assumptions, adding whatever personal twists they might infer."

"All of them are drawing from the well of the First Attention, sure."

"Good," Jeanette nodded. "Phillip views events like a lens. From his point of view an average looking, middle-aged, white man, wearing sweats and a T-shirt, standing at the edge of the frame is as detailed as the beautiful black woman dressed in a red coat, center frame, standing a hundred feet closer. The pebble under the toe of his sneaker is a diamond ring, the distance between the couple is the back-story, and the woman taking a step toward the camera makes it her decision to leave. The backdrop of office buildings and a sports stadium could speak to their disparate lifestyles... you can stop me anytime."

"I get it. Philip sees everything at once."

"It's more than that. He sees the *nature* of what is to you a single moment, plus he sees the timeless associations of all objects in his focus; objects are events when you have no artificial focal points to detract from the simultaneous whole. The ring is a piece of inventory, but what it signifies, where it lies, and how distant it is from center frame tells the story."

"Ahhhh, got it," I said, beginning to see a bigger picture. Kind of.

Jeanette leaned forward. "From his vision of your life, he chose to relay an intimate experience that would help your ex-wife work through her problem. From your point of view, you thought you were talking about beds when Lynda was hearing a story about a place to rest."

"I get your point, but I don't remember it well enough to say one way or another."

"That's normal because you weren't focused exclusively in the First Attention. Philip had to set aside the self-image aspects of your story." Chuckling, she said, "I don't know what you said to Lynda before she left for the day, but calling the guard in Beirut a shithead pinpointed the return of your First Attention in that case."

She waited for me to respond... and waited.

"Yes or no," she then said, "throughout your life, you've caught people off guard by uttering insights without thinking?"

"Everyone does that."

"Not everyone says things they couldn't know."

I struggled with the insinuation.

"Accessing other Attentions," she continued, "can be a spontaneous reaction to survival situations, or a gift that occurs at the behest of Spirit, like when you formalized your despair and said humanitarian acts could have been rendered by the victors. Rendered?"

I worked my mouth like a child on a new wad of gum.

Jeanette leaked a snicker through her nose; a snort gave rise to a choking laugh she struggled to stop as she said, "Humanitarian acts, not 'helping people'?"

Finding my voice, I said, "I'm capable of communicating above grade school grammar."

"I used to think I was naturally wise, as well," she said, getting off the couch to head for the kitchen. "No one can convince anyone of anything they don't want to believe, so there's no point in discussing this further." "What would a student do with this information?" I said to her back.

Turning around at the kitchen doorway, she said. "By this time, a student might understand that there's really no place left to go, other than reverting to their former ignorant state, so they would suspend their disbelief. They would look for a pattern of the Universe's presence in their life." She disappeared into the kitchen.

"Didn't we just uncover a pattern?"

"I'm talking about a pattern so large that when you see it," her voice floated out of the doorway, "you'd want to be embarrassed for having missed it. But you won't, because you have to suspend the influences of your self-image to see it, and you can't be embarrassed without that influence."

"How large are you talking about?"

"The events we discussed are the clues that there is a pattern," she said to the sounds of filling the kettle. "Your travels had to be portentous or symbolic."

"I could trace my jobs on a map, and see if they form the letter omega?" I joked.

"That's an excellent idea. Let me know how it goes," she said, appearing in the entranceway. "If you would like to bring more of your work, to help in your search, I'm up for that as well. Coffee or tea?"

On the way home, I bought a two by three foot map of the world, and pins and thread. Hours later, I discovered that dropping a basketball net would have accomplished the same "design" in seconds, which is what I told Jeanette the next day at Nolan's.

"Try plotting the nature of the events you covered instead of tracking every little town," she said, thoughtfully. "You could use a different colored thread for categories, like red for war and green for environmental calamities."

"Sowing a flag?"

"Maybe that's it!"

"Maybe," I said, handing her two short chapters for later consideration, then we discussed how her characters would deal with common personal conflicts to help me understand the concept of an impeccable act. I still struggled with that.

When our day was done and I was at home, I exchanged black threads for other colors as she had suggested. It was tedious, and I welcomed the distraction of a beer call from Ed.

Off and on for two afternoons, color reconfigurations caused me to realize there wasn't going to be a flag, a letter, or a symbol in the strands that had begun to evoke equally linear memories of the events they represented. For example, when Salvador became a red line, it was easier to search my day diary for patterns in incidents, the specifics of which I had preferred to forget.

The police in Soyapango wounding Joaquin Zuniga, a cleverly disguised leftist sleeper guerrilla posing for many years as an accomplished photographer from the Associated Press, added a fanciful dimension to my efforts. As did George Thurlow's wounding—a more conspicuous subversive from the Daily Democrat in Woodland California, because of his Zapata moustache. The third red line pulled my tongue out of my cheek: it represented a local hire, Gregorio Moran, whose threat to the future of El Salvador seemed to have been that he could speak English. He was killed by equivocación—mistake.

I moved on to incidents in the barrios of Suchitoto and Santa Anita, no longer thinking about people, but looking for abstractions that portended to a purpose. On the third day of finding no pattern, I awoke with an indistinct sense of loss. By that afternoon, it was frustration, and by nightfall, it had flashed into despair; I quit searching for patterns that clearly weren't there...

Walking back to Jeanette's, from lunch at a West Van Sprout House the next day, she asked me how it was going and I simply said, "Went."

"Terrific! What did you discover?" she said, misinterpreting my comment too enthusiastically.

"I discovered that not every event can be slotted into a niche. If there is a trail of something in my travels, I need special glasses to see it."

"What couldn't you place?"

"Ethiopia was about the famine, but there was also a civil war going on, both of which were related to political corruption and gross environmental mismanagement. I tried different colors and doubled up on the ones that fit." I shrugged. "That's how I figured out you had set me up."

"In what way?" she said innocently.

"The symbolism I was looking for was what I was doing; literally looking between the lines to see whatever I might be hiding from myself, without emotional interference."

Jeanette stopped in the middle of a side street. Cocking her head, she said, "I would never have thought of that. Your mind is becoming agile. Unfortunately," she said, moving again, "you

focused too closely. You need to assess your entire journey as a metaphor," Jeanette threw her arms open wide, "as an omen of biblical proportions!" she shouted into the bay.

"We've talked about this: I've gotten away with things I shouldn't have, but who hasn't?" I stopped in my tracks. "So that's what you're researching—push hard enough, and I'll begin to see proof of Spirit in my life... fuck, you're manufacturing consent! Excellent, I didn't see that coming."

Jeanette waved her hand as if I had passed gas in the still air. Walking up the side stairs to her house, she said, "I didn't manufacture the long day in the mountains when you knew it was time to quit."

"That was a logical deduction, but a clever manipulation on your part."

"There was nothing logical about deducing you would be safe while people were still firing at you. All you could do was arrange the facts to suit an ill-defined trust in luck, along with an intellect so highly developed that you thought it reasonable that you could out-maneuver shrapnel. The fact is a wiser part of you recognized the entire experience as an omen, which made it a self-fulfilling prophecy."

With a pit stop in the kitchen, we headed out to the balcony with a bottle of wine and two plastic cups.

"We agreed that it's logical for every action to be a consequence of another action, not that everything is cosmically orchestrated," I said.

"We agreed that there is an underlying order to all events, because nothing comes from nothing. It was you who designed a destiny that aligned you with consequences that sometimes didn't happen; the only logical explanation is that you had help."

"Goodbye damn-near killed me."

"Damned near is still a miss," Jeanette said tranquilly. "Remember how your screenplay story just filled your head, and that you suddenly *knew* your father would not live to come home? Same help."

"A real apprentice, and our audience, might see your claim as an example of how faith bends facts," I said, "which reinforces the idea that teachers manufacture a student's consent."

We sat in the aluminum chairs; Jeanette consulted the horizon.

Turning her head, so the sun reflected off her glasses as pinpoints of light, she said, "A teacher would recognize this as one of those crossroads moments, and ask the student to review the incident in detail. Hopefully, the apprentice's lessons to date would allow them to set aside self-interest long enough for an omen to jump out at them." She brushed hair away from her forehead, took a sip of wine, and watched the waters of English Bay.

With her occasionally prompting me for details, I told her the full story.

Chapter 35: The Omen of Goodbye

I had finished six weeks of an open-ended contract when Sean gave his notice to our bureau chief, Lucy. Four weeks was understood by all to be a fair freelance stint, but most of our friends were there, so the extra time wasn't a big deal to me. Sean said I should go home with him because he always missed the big trouble by only a day or two; six months earlier, his regular soundman had stayed behind and was badly wounded—which created the job opening for me. I was considering leaving with him when Sami's soundman was hit; Lucy sent Sean home early, and shifted me to Sami.

"We thought Sean's plane coming under fire was something that would be over by noon," I said, "but his flight turned out to be the last to lift off for months. That night," I explained the

lead-up events, "some of us were intimidated at the Hamra-Skeller restaurant, not that threats were unusual, but these guys knew where we had gone to school, where our parents lived—things like that. The next morning, all hell broke loose."

"What were the threats about?"

I looked into her eyes to see if she was kidding. Apparently not. "They suggested it would be wise to not report on a particular faction's activities?"

"Right—got it," she nodded.

"Shelling from the east fell downtown, and there was heavy fighting around the Green Line. This meant they weren't just trying to pick each other off; someone intended to cross it. There was no fighting around the Corniche, so the touring crews decided to wait out the shelling, but a sniper ruined that idea; we knew something big was happening because no one ever shot at us from the north."

"Us, as in you?"

I nodded. "By lunchtime, all crews had made it back to the hotel, except the Death Watch teams at the airport stayed put while Moslem factions shelled the Christian held west all day and night. This drove us all into a crawl space beneath the hotel. Around eight the next morning, Allan Pizzey, from CBS, asked for volunteers to see who was winning the free-for-all, and Jean Pierre, a freelancer working for NBC, and I did the shoot." I took a breath, a short sip, then a longer second one of each, as that memory seemed to require.

"He had a habit of poking his lens around corners. Not that I blame him, but imagine what soldiers thought they saw, and you can appreciate why both sides tried to nail us within fifty yards of the hotel. Anyway, the next weeks were full of skirmishes, and so many broken ceasefires that we had T-shirts printed that read, 'I survived ceasefire number five, six, seven, and so on, written in crossed-out Roman numerals. Mine was at seventeen when Peter Bluff, the senior producer in the east, asked for volunteers."

"Half of the country was on fire or under fire by then, so the job was a bring-your-own-toilet paper deal, but we wouldn't need a lot because we probably wouldn't be eating. I had nothing to prove, but going with him pretty much guaranteed that CBS would put me on speed dial." I shrugged. "I didn't think it could be much different from working ceasefires."

"Hang on: you were working in the Christian held west, which became the losing side to Moslem factions so you moved east because...?"

"Sami was Christian Lebanese, so when the Moslem factions retook the west he was considered an enemy. It was something CBS hadn't thought through, and Sam didn't mention until we came to our first Moslem roadblock, and soldiers dragged him away to shoot him. When we got back from that, Lucy moved us to the Alexander."

"How did he get away?"

"I don't know."

"What did he tell you?"

"He said they were insulting him when a soldier raised a pistol to his head, hesitated, and changed his mind."

"What did you do when they took him away?"

Agitated by her probing, I kept my temper in check as I said, "I argued that Sam had worked for CBS for years, everyone knew where we were, and that we knew how to conduct ourselves so we would never be mistaken for anything else. That kind of stuff."

"Argued?" she grinned.

"I might have pointed at their heads like they were crazy. Things like that."

"What other things?"

"Nothing else."

"What did you think of doing and not do?" she said, hitting the nail on the head.

What the fuck. "I thought of grabbing my balls and motioning that they didn't have any to kill a defenseless man."

"Maybe your rant was enough to save him."

"No one left my group. Anyway, ceasefires were a bitch because..."

"Your voice had to have carried, or maybe a radio?"

"Trust me," I said peevishly, "the only way I could have influenced anything was trying to run to distract them, which they wouldn't have cared about because if they wanted to shoot me, I would have been with Sam."

Jeanette studied my face as if she was retouching a photograph.

"What's the big deal?" I said. "Every earthquake has a ten day survivor."

"You covered an earthquake?"

"I'm saying every conflict has strange moments when the inevitable is suspended, and there's no accounting for it. Shit happens." An involuntary shiver, followed by an ozone smelling flashback riding a wave of vertigo caused me to tilt backwards: ape-like upright, skin rose and grey, trembling uncontrollably in an incendiary mist, tortured breaths wheezed from seared lungs.

I struggled for breath.

Jeanette's expression was of expectation, not concern. When I appeared to be in control again, she said, "What memory of shit happens did you just have?"

Recovering, I said, "There was a pink guy standing stark naked in the middle of the street. Bodies—pieces of bodies, cars, and buildings were all around him. His clothes had been blown off."

"You must've been close," she whispered.

"What?"

"I said you must've been close when the bomb went off."

"Not really," I said, recovering. "It was the eight-fifteen taking out ambulance attendants." I cracked a sly grin. "Sean and I were still on our way to the eight o'clock bombing."

Jeanette shook her head silently.

"Anyway, ceasefires made the risks in the east the same as the west, until a breakaway faction tried to extort protection money by sniping at the Alexander lobby. When one of them was caught and sent back to his people," I paused, "on consecutive days, his brethren set off a car in the parking lot. The next day, everybody was shooting at everybody south of Beirut, and we had to stop travelling for more than a block or two. A couple of days after that, one of our spooks said a Moslem town had been taken by an alliance between the Christian Phalange and the Lebanese army, then the Phalange had turned on their cohorts and taken their weapons, including a state of the art American tank. This is when Peter asked for volunteers."

"Because of the tank, the double cross, or something else?"

"All of the above." I took a moment to line up my ducks.

Essentially, I explained that America backed the Israelis, who officially backed the Lebanese Army, who had just been screwed over by the Christian Phalange, who were regular army units that had split away for political reasons. Unofficially, but not a secret, the Israelis also trained the Phalange, because the accredited army was not officially at odds with them. They just operated separately. It followed that Americans were de facto allies of both factions, neither of

which should have a top-of-the-line American made Israeli tank. Questions would be asked, conditions of sale and end user declarations investigated, and Israeli /American relations would take another hit.

"What kind of footage could you get? The deed was done," Jeanette said.

"Pictures of the Phalange firing the tank could become historical stuff—a metaphor for more than the end of their alliance. We would also get voice clips to find out what the hell they were thinking." I stretched my legs. "Until that day, the Phalange were borderline large enough to be represented in whatever government emerged from the war, which is probably why they were inspired to convert a secondary military role into a bigger political act."

"Did it?"

"Not like they planned. I'll get to that," I said, pleased that I could say this for once.

I told Jeanette there was no way to drive through contested territory, so we had to slip across the Green Line to the harbor where we boarded two-hundred feet of rust kept afloat by the faith of fifty weekend warriors—students on their way to battle.

"Slipped across a deadly zone?"

"Our driver paid for our way."

She took a considered breath.

"We stayed apart from them while waiting for the sun to go down—the inner harbor was a sniper's paradise by day—because students tended to turn every little thing into a crisis, and we were more likely to be hit by their retaliation than by a sniper. Conversely, the students politely shunned us because our job was to chronicle their deaths.

Steaming south at ten knots," I told Jeanette, as she whispered 'snipers' under her breath, I became mesmerized by the blazing towns that stretched for miles. Time passed quickly for me until the captain throttled back outside of a thick fog bank, around one a.m. With engines at idle, a lazy beam sea soon caused a boy to puke, which set off a stampede to the aft leeward rail. Half an hour of choir retching ensued before two, twenty-foot fishing boats found their way through mists eerily crowned by the gossamer glow of distant flames.

In turns of two, soldiers stood outboard of the lifelines with one leg dangling, until the small crafts rose on the back of a swell and the students stepped into the hands of their companions. This seemingly simple move could not be tentative; straddling bobbing gunwales meant falling between vessels, and either sinking like a stone, or having your head crushed between the hulls.

Everybody made it, our crew boarding with the last load of troops around three a.m. to thump-thump blindly through the incandescent shroud under the power of an ancient one-lung diesel engine. Ten minutes passed before the water flattened into a pane of glass. Maybe a minute after that, we crossed the thermal threshold where a vertical scythe of radiant heat from the shore cleaved the fog as if it were a snow bank, to reveal a vivid vista of a narrow bay. Our skipper hastily shut down the engine, and pointing to a nearby promontory whispered with the tension of a tormented steam valve, "There is the enemy. No more talking!"

Peter and I exchanged comedic glances because, inexplicably, our guy seemed not to appreciate how far and clearly sound travels over flat water in the cool air of a still night. Not that it mattered; our students were smoking like a Kamikaze signals class practicing SHOOT-THE-GLOW as we rowed into an inlet less than a hundred yards from the aforementioned point.

We disembarked under the battle-weary stares of grimy fighters, who led us to a dirt road where they mimed hunching over, and for us to scamper across. Soldiers on the other side took us to a large house where we were led up a steep flight of wooden stairs into a black and barren

room on the third floor. Leaving us with interesting smelling blankets, two candles, and a warning to avoid the windows, he said we would meet his commander in the morning. It was four thirty-five when I closed my eyes against the glow of false dawn merging with the blush of a nearby house's embers.

'Morning' arrived at five-thirty when a soldier came to take us for coffee with a sullen colonel, and his second in command. During the consumption of two thick, high-test thimbles, Peter was circumspect in suggesting that tactics were the essence of victory, as the small faction of Phalange had recently demonstrated in their precise execution of a risky plan. The colonel acknowledged that resourceful maneuvering had served them well, but he said there were times when trading blows was all one could do; brute force capability was essential.

I explained to Jeanette that Peter and the colonel were establishing boundaries: Peter was supposed to interpret generalizations to mean the issue was not to be explored further, whereas Peter wanted the colonel to interpret apparently innocent words as challenges to his intellect, i.e. "precise execution" would imply, "Did you think about doing this all by yourself?"

Their dance of communication formally underway, with British understatement Peter continued to stroke inspired thinking over complex, but superior firepower—meaning, "Do you know how to use the stuff you stole?" To this, the colonel philosophically acknowledged that illumination rarely penetrated far into the fog of war, but when it did, it was more powerful than bombs. Humility then compelled him to offer us a tour of his military might, which clandestinely underscored the rarity of illumination that had been his good fortune to author...

At sunrise, Peter, the colonel, and a driver took the lead in one jeep, while Sami and I were driven in their wake of fine dust.

On the way to view an Israeli armored personnel carrier, our driver twice let them get too far ahead, stopped to put on his helmet, then hunched over to look through the spokes of the steering wheel as he raced through a thickening cloud for what I imagined would be two feet too far. Both times, we slid to a halt on the bumper of the lead jeep, and he turned to grin at us. His attention span problem ended when the roadbed disintegrated into ruts: the roadsides were mined, so it was with cracking teeth, bitten tongues, and pummeled kidneys making asphyxiation a welcome possibility that we finally turned onto the warming sands of a roaming stretch of beach.

Stopping behind a large dune, the colonel cautioned us to stay low because we were only fifty meters from the front. We should also follow his footprints along the midline slope of the dunes, because mines tended to gravitate into the troughs of sand waves, before the wind blew them into flat plains. Ten minutes later, when the A.P.C. crew tired of performing for our camera, we took our real footage then carefully retraced our steps to drive back into the foothills. This time, upon stopping at a signal from the lead driver who raced ahead, I asked our driver what was going on. Putting on his helmet, he said we were about to drive through Sniper Alley; we were staggering our passage and varying our speeds to make it more difficult for a sniper to anticipate his aim.

Annoyed that he had presumed my fate should befall me unannounced, I asked him why he hadn't said anything to us the first time through. In a fluid motion practiced by males from the cradle to the grave in his world, he cocked his head as if he had a crick in his neck, clicked his tongue, shrugged, and said, "Maalesh;" as we lurched into the dissipating cloud of suffocating camouflage.

"Mined roads, mined beaches, fifty yards from the enemy, snipers again.... Christ, John!"

"That's why they're called volunteer shoots. Anyway, I wanted to smack him because he was too young to have evolved piss-yourself fear into the sophisticated expressions of irony I enjoyed from the mature of his culture. Instead, I crunched myself into a less conspicuous target than Sami, who sat ramrod straight for an extremely long minute before we slowed down."

Forty minutes later, I told Jeanette, our polite enthusiasm over a substantial mobile arsenal of arms prompted our commander to reveal that his forces had acquired a state of the art tank, which was by itself holding the perimeter of their mountainous southern front. With keen interest, Peter asked the colonel to speculate on how acquiring a single, intricate killing machine might ultimately impact the Phalange's future on all fronts—fronts meaning military, social, political, and international ramifications, depending on how the Colonel decided to acknowledge the term.

Their exchange was pricelessly subtle, like the timing of a tongue click and accompanying shrug was a study in finesse: tilt to the left, click and shrug, and you conveyed the moving sentiment of, "Mankind's idiocy is beyond words. I'm sorry about the death of your brother." Tilt to the right and click, pause for a hundredth of a second, shrug, and it meant, "Mankind has no words to describe what an idiot your brother was."

In part, Peter had asked the colonel if he had plans for after the war, because somewhere down the shell-holed road elements of the Israeli army, and possibly the Americans by default, would find themselves positioned next to, or between the Phalange and the regular army. Be it through an actual communications problem or a well-constructed misunderstanding, the day would come when someone would quietly abandon their position and the Christian Phalange Army would accidentally go the way of disco, only one of them being a tragedy.

Appropriately, the colonel heard a challenge to the long-term wisdom of his tactic for a short-term gain, but he instead addressed an aspect of his actions that demonstrated he had thought more about the circumstance than Peter may have contemplated: "We are not enemies of America because we outwitted their ally," he assured Peter. "Come—you must see our equipment," the colonel said, reinforcing his original position about firepower's importance to his inspired tactical decision.

Sami and I had no trouble keeping a straight face, because sweat had caked the cement-like dust into that position.

An hour later, we found the tank nestled behind one of two earthen covered houses that protected it from the Druze artillery, across the valley. Between these bunkers was twenty yards of flat, open dirt road.

Grimy, hot, and tired, Peter may have been a trifle curt when he asked the colonel if his men were 'comfortable' with the new acquisition, because the Colonel responded by ordering the crew into action. Moments later, the tank engine roared into life, and without wasted motion, the crew reversed the machine out of the niche into firing position so quickly that I had to pull Sami out of the way. Exposing only a small section of turret above the horizon, the cannon fired, our ears popped, the earth jumped beneath our feet, and a pulse of dust rolled out from beneath the superstructure; the machine lurched behind cover as if it were on a taught spring. The steel ballet was so precise that Sami didn't have time to reposition, and capture the exploding earth-plume erupting in the still air across the valley.

At this point, curious soldiers ambled out of the house-bunkers, while Sami told the colonel that his crew was so good that he didn't have time to do their work justice. If they could just repeat everything as closely as possible, he now knew where to stand to complete the tight sequence that would make the Phalange appear as efficient as they really were.

The colonel gave the order, and the crew replicated the show so precisely that there was only one set of tracks in the cracked earth. Equally exacting, Sami center-framed the arcing 120 millimeter circle of crimson until it erupted into a grayish brown plume on the crown of the next hill. We were all so pleased for our own reasons that no one saw a puff of white emerge from a point near the impact of our first round, and in a sharp moment, the crack-whack of an airburst mortar round shrouded our crest in a rouge-grey mist of shrapnel-shredding roofing tile. The prickly blast knocked Sami and me to our knees.

Dazed, deafened, and not yet feeling supremely stupid for not asking if we were firing at anyone, we hobble-helped each other into the house bunker to our left entering behind two fighters who were carrying a wounded soldier.

Sitting in the cool dimness as occasional rounds burst overhead, we checked ourselves for wet spots while the colonel expertly attended to the boy's injured leg. This is when we learned that the colonel was a physician and teacher at the American University, and our drivers were medical students.

During a reloading interval, Peter shouted across the gap to determine if we were okay; soldiers had bundled him into the house on the right side of the open ground, after he had seen us "falter," was how he later termed it.

You gotta love the Brits.

I shouted back that we were "functional." I saw no point in mentioning the prickling I was feeling in one shoulder and both shins, notwithstanding that Sami wouldn't have mentioned a missing limb if the spurting didn't interfere with taking pictures.

Unnecessarily, because everyone knew these exchanges never lasted long, Peter shouted that we should stay put, and that should have been the end of it. However, when the commander finished bandaging his soldier student, he coldly said we were going back to the safety of the valley. Sami and I looked at each other, as if to question whether we were missing something, then as one we shrugged meaning, of course we would do that as soon as it was over. Our inadvertent insolence prompted the colonel to take out his pistol, aim it at Sami's chest, and tell him to make a run for it after the next bang.

All I could come up with to explain this bazaar moment was that Peter's shout had given the doctor the idea that the Phalange would get poorer press because we had been inconvenienced, or none if we were killed; tension had taken over.

"Tending to the wounded," Jeanette said, "may have lifted the fog enough for him to realize that you guys had played him, and caused a casualty. What happened next?"

"I shouted that we were coming out," I said belatedly, because her speculation resolved years of bafflement over that moment, "a blast interrupted his objection, then Sami and I limped across the open ground. Peter was standing at the door of his bunker, poised to conduct a symphony of invectives until he saw the gun in the colonel's hand."

I next told Jeanette that the Druze clearly had more experience targeting ahead of dust trails rising above the ridgeline than our driver had experience dealing with the explosions. Not that anything came closer than a hit seventy or eighty yards ahead of us, but our driver over-steered long before we came to the debris cloud, and we began sliding sideways down the narrow mountain road. Sami shouted for him to ease off the steering, while our front seat guard maniacally gestured for him to take his feet off the pedals. These actions took care of everything I might have done, and without thinking I sat ramrod straight to watch the landscape pass by a couple thousand feet below my right shoulder.

The scene was a classic action movie tease: The jeep fishtailed onto the precipice; inches away, the tires dug in and swung the jeep hard toward the vertical rock face on the other side of the road. Our driver wrenched the wheel away, taking us back to a wobbling perch on the edge—tires spun furiously on loose gravel.

Finding grip for a second time, we catapulted across the road through a rare opening in the uphill side, crashing sideways into a four-foot high pile of sand that some befuddled fool had brought up the mountain to begin rebuilding his home.

"Did you come to terms with your impending death?" Jeanette said, cocking her head to imply that the Universe was in the construction business.

"A sudden calm didn't descend into a profound moment of introspection, if that's what you mean." I snickered. "I did have a moment to think about how ridiculous it was to be killed rolling down a mountain, considering everything else that could have happened on just that one day."

Jeanette raised a brow to underscore how many other things could have happened in the five years I had worked the bang-bang. I acknowledged this with a nod, as I told her that momentum catapulted me through the half-door simultaneous to our guard riding the front seat into the windshield, out of my way. Sami smacked into the driver's seat, careened up and through the canvas roof, to land upside down across the top of the windshield facing our bloody, unconscious driver. In a short while, soldiers came from a nearby house to carry us to a shelter, where the colonel called on a walkie-talkie to find out where we were. He subsequently sent an A.P.C. to pick us up; sporadic shelling followed us to the bottom of the mountain. That was it.

"How did you get back to the hotel?"

"We were taken south to an Israeli medivac station. As luck would have it, we joined about sixty armored vehicles heading into East Beirut. I went home the next day."

"So you crossed the contested area you had to bypass by sea on the way in?"

"Sixty armored vehicles?" I said, eliminating her point of danger.

"You said the airport was closed."

"It was."

"How did you get out?"

"I'm not sure."

Jeanette waited for me to explain why that was.

Shrugging off my embarrassment, I said, "You'd think I would remember an overnight sail on the Junieh ferry, or a road trip to Tel Aviv, but a helicopter landing in the Sun Hall Hotel parking lot rings a hazy bell. That would've taken some kind of special wrangling between Lucy and the Marines, but if they somehow thought I was a wounded American journalist..." I shrugged. "She was good like that."

"You really don't remember?"

"I had a bunch of drinks the night before, was on some kind of pain medication, and I had slept about fifty minutes out of the last thirty-six hours." I shook my head. "My passport stamp says I came into Cyprus through Larnaca, which is where the ferry comes in across from the Sun Hall Hotel." I shrugged. "Anyway, one thing led to another—no omens in sight."

"You should be dead a couple times over!" Jeanette said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"I think we covered that the first day we met."

"You weren't as educated in the ways of the unseen as you are now."

"After all I've told you about combat, you've got to know I'm not being trite when I say again that shit happens. Sometimes you end up in Cyprus."

Staring at a spot between us, Jeanette nodded at a private thought; as a statement, she said, "You believe omens are knee-bending revelations bestowed only upon the worthy." She refocused. "All of your objections to the existence of Spirit as a loving, guiding force are based on your never-ending suspicion that I am doling out religious propaganda. That's your focus, not mine."

"I was peppered with metal alloys that turned my shins into a barometer, and squeezed through a closed half-door that still allows my hip to register changes in humidity. Logically, I'm either destined to become a meteorologist, or the omen was that I'm on my own."

Looking disoriented, as if she had awakened in a stranger's apartment, she said, "You were told you would be safe!"

"Sure, by you."

Opening her palms toward the ceiling, with papal appeal precluding any doubt that a monumental moment had just passed me by, Jeanette pleaded into the ether, "Please, not the long way."

"There's a longer way?" I chuckled.

Sighing with eternal weariness, she said, "Maybe you would be more willing to recognize the presence of Spirit in your life if I used a term that appealed to your irreverence for all things unseen." Jeanette leaned back and crossed one arm below her breasts, resting an elbow in one cupped hand, and her chin in the other. She remained motionless for an uncomfortable time for me, other than a nibble on her lower lip challenging me to believe that she was browsing through sophisticated abstractions. The minute mark crawled by as I fought off the ghost of giddy to believe she was giving her all to help me. Thirty more seconds and shallow breaths began to betray my anticipation of hearing the single word that might change my life. Ten more seconds and the wisdom of the ages seemed to clarify behind Jeanette's suddenly wide eyes.

I leaned forward to receive this vital knowledge a millisecond sooner.

"You can call them Smurfs," she said seriously. "Maybe that'll get you past religion to see how momentum doesn't distinguish between targets and bystanders, except for you."

Apparently not.

Chapter 36: Designs of Intent

Jeanette gathered her thoughts before offering me an overview of a Universal presence in our world, which she had discovered in the books Kha-lib had suggested I read. She said that from the First World War to the end of the second, Edgar Cayce introduced western cultures to the concept of channeling. From the early 1960's through the mid 1980's, Jane Roberts further established the Universe's intentions and teaching bona fides through her Seth channels. At the same time, Lynn V. Andrews and Carlos Castaneda were chronicling the dexterity of human consciousness, in separate apprenticeships from the male and female perspectives.

"In our time," Jeanette said, "there are growing waves of artists, writers, environmentalists, and healers moving away from traditional practices to form a bigger picture of a Universal influence underway. Their role is to contribute to the collective unconscious and add momentum to changing our world."

"Do you mean without knowing Spirit directly, like ordinary people in your book represent our audience?" I said.

"Yes. Not everyone has access to a teaching entity," she explained, "but they can attract one by making a conscious and consistent effort to do the right thing. To that end, Carlos recorded

how don Juan said Spirit makes its presence known, so people can recognize the contact if it happens."

"So your audience can participate... good idea. How do they do that?" I dutifully asked.

"Spirit reveals itself to prospective students through coincidences and omens that don Juan called The Manifestation of Spirit. The average person ignores these because their normal state of mental tension has anaesthetized them to the magic of their existence. The next step is called The Knock of Spirit, which is essentially the same as a manifestation, but by virtue of a teacher witnessing it, they properly interpret the event as the Universe designating a new student."

"The person doesn't know?" I said.

"Not a clue," Jeanette said good-naturedly. "Spirit next resorts to trickery by arranging unusual events, or manipulating a person's awareness to bring the inexplicable into their field of vision." Rocking forward, she perched on her toes. "Trickery frees a person's attention from their compacted world view. However, personal fears and the elastics of social conditioning cause them to ignore, or reason the experience away." Jeanette released her toehold and rocked back. "They think the less-doubtful existence of an unseen force wouldn't have practical value, and telling anyone about the event would only label them."

"Like you've proven—intentionally?"

"Being labeled for my beliefs and abilities wasn't a choice. The teacher participates at this point," she continued her explanation, "so that the prospect knows they're not alone." She rocked back and forth then stopped. "The final stage is an irrevocable act called The Descent of the Spirit. This event shatters the individual's view of reality in some way, because they can only attribute it to the direct intervention of an abstract force. So!" she said loudly. "Let's start our search for Intent in your life, with your dabbling in the mystical realm. I know you've done this."

Playing her game as best I could, I said, "I had two psychic readings, twenty-one years apart. When I was a technical producer for a radio talk show, a guest speaker offered me information during a commercial break, and he finished his thoughts on air before taking more calls. The second was at a psychic fair; he said I would be leaving radio for television, but I wouldn't end up there, and I would write a book when I was forty-two years old." Anticipating the next question, I said, "I became a community programmer at a rural cable station a few months later. After a year and a half, I moved into real broadcasting because switching jobs is how you work your way up to the big shows. I was twenty-four at the time, and sitting at the console of a light bulb wattage radio station, so the psychic wasn't taking a big risk. As for the book, I'm thirty-five now and I can't imagine taking another seven years to finish it." [\(book\)](#)

"The psychic fair?"

"Last year in Kenora, a girl I met on a shoot wanted to go; I don't remember the reading."

"You were introduced to the mystical realm earlier in life, but not so early that you would bother to struggle with it," Jeanette said. "The psychic didn't say the book would be your first or last, just that you'd write one at age forty-two?"

"Conveniently."

"I told you months ago, there is nothing convenient about dealing with Spirit. That man tapped into the probability that you would become an author at the point in time when it had become inevitable. The actual time of production isn't relevant." She stretched her legs as she said, "The teaching scheme is designed to prod a student's assumptions with the language of probability, and set up lessons that will eventually change these assumptions." She shrugged a miniscule effort. "That's it?"

"That's all."

"All physical events are spiritual at their core, so let's look at an overview of your life."

"My whole life?"

"Do you know someone else's better?"

Clearing my throat, I said, "I'm from middle class parents who gave me a carefree upbringing. When my father died, I left high school and joined the Navy. A few years later..."

"Explore that time," she said.

My cooperative spirit took a blow with her ungrateful command; I focused on the most insipid thing I could think of, as a warning for her not to push me.

"In the navy, I developed an accidental interest in dusters—Zane Grey and Louis Lamour westerns—because they were everywhere on board. Asimov and Heinlein sci-fi came after that, then spy novels."

Jeanette stared as if I was taking a leak in the windowsill planter; I made the connection to her world. "I also read books about the mysteries of the pyramids, the Bermuda triangle, runways on top of a mountain in Peru, and one Edgar Cacey book."

"Any other accidents?"

"That's a leap."

"It was your leap," Jeanette said cheerfully. "Accidental interest?"

Technically, my experiences in aircraft were all incidents not accidents, so I bypassed them for a tale about a minor scrape in a car that had a far greater potential for disaster when the on-ramp lane merged with traffic.

Jeanette claimed to have experienced the identical conundrum—whether to boot it or stand on the brakes—then she led me by saying, "You also had an accident in the Navy?"

I told her that winter weather can quickly turn ugly in the Bay of Biscay, a half-moon Atlantic area that acts like a washing machine for hundreds of kilometers across the northern borders of Spain and France. This is what it was diligently doing while my destroyer, HMCS Nipigon, was conducting a replenishment at sea operation with the support ship, HMCS Provider.

The wind, initially a gusty fifteen knots, created a sea state that was borderline safe for a R.A.S., but we were seriously short of fuel at the conclusion of a NATO exercise. When the breeze freshened to a sustained twenty knots, we had no choice but to terminate the procedure that required us to keep station 150 feet abeam of Provider, doing twelve knots, because it didn't take much of a helm mistake, or rogue wave, to close that distance suddenly.

When the Chief Boson's Mate confirmed for the Deck Officer that all hoses, communications wires, and transfer lines between vessels were clear, the captain ordered Nipigon to full speed, with port helm, to take us away from Provider.

George and I were stowing the last of the jackstay lines down the forward hatch when the ship fell into a trough, as it turned to weather. Our heels left the deck, so we knelt to finish the job just as Nipigon punched into the top third of a breaking roller, shuddered as if she was stuck in mud, and threw us face down on the deck. Recovering, we slammed the hatch shut and lay flat hanging onto the spindle wheel as the bow, twenty feet forward of us, yawed mightily to starboard cutting a deep groove into the quarter-face of the next monster swell.

Our 365-foot ship motored as far on the slant as physics allowed, before the stern slid off the rolling mass and we backed into another trough. The unusual angles of momentum and relative motion combined to point the bow toward the sky, twisting the ship broadsides to what had then become howling winds. A huge smack followed, a disconcerting wobble-shudder raced through the superstructure, and Nipigon yawed dramatically toward Provider, our starboard mid-

ships scuppers under water: our helmsman wheeled opposite rudder, and we began to climb an elongated fluorescent green wall.

Between the ship's natural buoyancy stored beneath the gunwales, and twin screws chewing up huge chunks of ocean on full power, Nipigon rose like a reluctant rocket to punch through a breaking crest, plunging like a broken elevator off the back of a square wave. The main deck was awash as we hit bottom dead center of the trough.

Looking up in wide-eyed wonder, with the sudden stall all we could see was the froth rimmed, curling face of frigid Atlantic effervescence about to sweep us from the world. Anticipating the captain sending my mother a telegram, I clenched my sphincter muscle in a walnut-crushing strain, and hoped my grip was just as strong.

It wasn't.

The rush of water tore our grasps free, then played pinball with our bodies between bollards on the non-skid deck, before depositing George beneath the port side cannon-well breakwater, a three-foot high inverted V. I came to rest in a mirror position to starboard. In time, I don't know how much, George got up, didn't see me, and went to report me overboard.

Regaining my senses, I opened my eyes to see a pair of legs draped over the lifelines, realized they were mine, but I couldn't move them. A couple of drenching elevator rides into the bay convinced me this wasn't the worst thing that could happen, and I managed to hoist myself over the breakwater, flopping into the safety of the cannon well where a lookout eventually spotted me from the bridge. Two days later, the storm subsided enough for a helicopter to take me to Provider, also a hospital ship, where I received my first real medical attention.

I told Jeanette that a radar mast about a hundred feet off calm water line had been damaged: I was fifteen-feet from the normal water line so I granted her the miracle that a greeny didn't wash me overboard.

"Nobody looked for me topside until the ship's interior had been searched," I added, "so I probably should've been swept overboard before I got over the breakwater, as well. But I don't see what was so great about tearing my elbow to the bone, cracking three ribs, fracturing my skull, and turning eighty-percent of my body the color of ochre and plums."

"In the grander scheme of things there are no accidents; we are Phillip."

Jeanette's voice had changed to a masculine timbre, but not as deep as the Kha-lib persona.

"Cool, hi. What about accidents?"

"In part, you chose this adventure in treacherous waters to experience the inept casualness with which the bridge officers would treat your life. Did you not feel this way?"

"The thought occurred to me while I was congealing on deck like a Popsicle."

"You were also less enthusiastic about pursuing that career, because you received what you believed to be indifferent medical treatment, and no special considerations afterwards. Is this not so?"

"The medic didn't bother to wash me after I had been drenched in salt water. I shook for hours, was itchy all over for days, and any voluntary movement I could make, which wasn't much because I was one big charley-horse, registered like a hammer. I've never hurt like that. A pill would've been nice. A pillow over my face would've been better. Anyway, I asked to be compensated for a broken watch, and they said it wasn't required for the job, and they refused."

"Thereby failing to acknowledge your suffering," Phillip said. "Less dangerous events followed, and at levels of awareness unencumbered by self-involvement you knew that the Navy had served its purpose and you requested and received an early release."

I hadn't thought of it that way, but it fit.

"Now," the Philip persona said, with emphasis, "other miracles also took place. Your shipmate escaped unscathed, because his purpose was to ensure you would be found. There was also a disruption to your energy field. This offered us the opportunity to insert a pulse of energy, which we subsequently used to educate you about the dangers that lay ahead. This type of event occurs when there is an agreement between the individual and their Source, for it creates a point of change in their evolutionary momentum. There are many stories of individuals becoming psychically aware through apparently accidental means."

"Why use a monster wave when a brick to the head would have done it, and left the rest of me alone?" I said.

"We did not choose to be on that deck."

"From what Jeanette has explained to me about your abilities, you must have known it was coming—you used it for your own purposes, instead of influencing things so that I wouldn't have been there."

"Were we so arrogant as to interfere with the essence of personal evolution, neglect our responsibilities, or so cruel as to punish ignorance, you would not have survived many incidents. Yet you are still here, all be it little wiser for your experiences, but that too will change."

Chapter 37: Life Strategy

Feeling combatant, I said, "I had an allergic reaction to a cat that drove me from a building into incoming shelling, and I've been saturated, dehydrated, and frozen. Am I missing any more signs of Intent?"

"You chose your own path. View your experiences in this way, and you'll find purpose unfolding with the dawn of each day."

"We stray so often..."

"The design you choose unfolds according to the nature of your beliefs. It follows that even a conscious effort to avoid challenges will bring you face to face with them." Philip scanned my face, "We realize it is difficult to accept how clever you are," he said cheerfully.

"If my strategy is so good, why do I need your help?"

"The scope of your beliefs is too limited for the time you have left to broaden them on your own. However, to identify the boundaries of your personal attention is the first step in identifying responsibilities from which you need not repeat what has befallen you. Continue to trace the steps that led you to this meeting, and you might see how your strategy was as flexible as free will, and so precise as to have made your arrival inevitable."

"They weren't necessarily just my steps, or thought through, for that matter."

"To recall one's journey is the first step in transforming your apparent errors and successes into an encompassing empathy for the efforts of everyone's journey. From this place, recognition of the awesome forces at your command converts the formerly unremarkable into acts of creation. What will you create today?"

Jeanette twisted her neck, implying the Phillip persona was gone, but the unnatural positioning of her hands resting in her lap—upturned, with fingers splayed like a doctor waiting for a drying towel—signaled that she wanted me to believe another persona was on standby.

I took this as a reminder to not lose focus, and to continue my serious "as if" charade.

I began explaining why I moved from Toronto, but Jeanette interrupted me to say that I had to go further back. I restarted with my move from England, but she stopped me again. A final false start brought me to where "Phillip" had left off...

"A year after I left the Navy, I was working in a northern Manitoba construction camp with Ed when it burned down, and we transferred to a site where I worked twelve sevens at night. It wasn't long before I figured out that watching generator dials wasn't my calling, and I wrote to colleges in Manitoba and Ontario to see what they had to offer. Radio and television courses caught my attention, and I got an interview in Toronto for the September seventy-four class."

"Where you were supposed to be," Jeanette said.

"My academic history and the communication's director's assessment of my personality would determine if I would be accepted. I didn't meet the first standard, because my grade-twelve math teacher had told me to leave class until I was ready to learn; that moment never arrived. My father died the day before the final exam, and so after I made that point to the director I was going to imply that I had a genetic predisposition for the course. My mother had written over twenty children's books, and my father had been in radio and print journalism."

"Genetics is the physical manifestation of ideas. You are predisposed," Jeanette said.

I next explained that I had traipsed through a maze of vacant summer corridors until coming upon two men standing in an office doorway, where I introduced myself as Mr. Gunkle's one o'clock interview. Gunkle identified himself by grimacing at his subordinate, who immediately offered to do the interview. Michael Monty introduced himself as we passed through a hole in the wall that contained a desk and two chairs; motioning for me to sit, he began reading the short story I was required to prepare as a demonstration of my raw talent. Too soon, he set it aside to read my résumé.

Flicking through pages as if he were reading a teenager's phone bill, I thought I had come a thousand miles to be imposed on a man who couldn't see the top of his desk through the pile of audio and video tapes that would have been filed in a closet had we not been sitting in it. Then his face lit up.

"You're well travelled," he said, giving me hope.

At the age of twenty-two, I may not have been as mature as parents hope their children will be, but I wasn't stupid: Michael had a tan, and I had overheard Gunkle talking about vacations when I first approached the duo so I translated Michael's remark to mean, "Have you been to...?"

I said the Navy had taken me to more places than most young people get to see, then I rattled off my ports of call, adding some logical stops in the hope of finding common ground.

"Ah ...Spain," he said wistfully. "I just came back from there."

Which was good, but not as good as Portugal would have been; I imported an infamous strip of bars from Lisbon to Malaga.

At this point, Mike leaned forward to talk to John, not his boss's one o'clock, and I risked mentioning a particularly active attraction for seafaring men I had heard much about. Apparently, one house stood out from the mass of green and rose pastels because it was painted in distinctive Navy grey.

Gently closing a predominantly unread packet of altered truths, a scholastically somber Michael said he hadn't seen it himself, but he could imagine that the wear path in the cobblestones would make it easy to find. Taking a solemn breath, he said my experiences and perspectives were suited to a life in the media, a judgment I confirmed by taking him for a beer.

My professional grades were adequate before I jobbed out to a radio station, shortly after which I went to cable TV as a community programmer. A year later, a former classmate hired me at a local television station, and a year after that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation advertised for editors experienced in the new electronic systems. Two weeks passed before I was turned down for that job, but a department head asked me if I'd be interested in becoming a

soundman; it was my experience with new technology they were after. Three years later, Doug quit to freelance in London. I was subsequently resting there between back-to-back assignments in India and Pakistan when he and a barrel of Guinness got me thinking about freelancing. For want of something to do, the next day I hopped a train to the East Croydon Immigration Office, explained my circumstances, then I left the decision in the hands of a petite immigration official. To my surprise, she issued me a work visa on the spot.

"Why did you even consider working in England?" Jeanette said.

"I loved London. Different stories."

"Carry on."

"I finished the job in India, came home, quit, sold my sailboat, motorcycle, and sports car to friends, and three weeks later I moved to London."

"Fast and smooth," Jeanette noted.

"I sold cheap. Anyway, I was about to lie down in a Knightsbridge hotel when the I.R.A. car bombed Harrods, half a block down the road. I was looking out my window at the billowing smoke when CBS phoned. Twenty minutes later, I was working my first freelance job with Sean Bobbitt. At seven the next morning we were on our way to Beirut. After that job, I worked as nonstop as I wanted to work, including all kinds of cushy jobs, like touring Scotland's scotch industry, snooker and darts tournaments, rugby—all kinds of fluff stories."

"Hard life," she said dryly.

"It got better. I took time off in the south of France, and sailing the Greek Islands. The only crappy thing that happened was that my allergies kicked in big time."

I next explained that my visa would expire while I was out of England so I got an extension at the airport before leaving for Africa. When I came back, Immigration asked me about the recent date on the stamp, and I told them what I had done. They next asked me how I had obtained my original visa, a story that revealed a problem; apparently, I should've applied for it from outside the U.K. for it to be valid.

I explained that the issuing officer must have considered me out of the country, in the sense that I was leaving England to quit my job before I would come back to live, but it was a moot point; I had a visa. We argued that point back to the details of my original application, which revealed that I didn't qualify for a work visa—the issuing officer had made a mistake.

Maybe so, I said, but I already lived in their country, to which an officer blandly replied, "This is no longer the case."

Another official said it was the responsibility of the air carrier to take illegals back to their point of embarkation; I was going to be to put on the plane I had just got off, and returned to Johannesburg. I explained that I was one of many journalists who had been banned from entering South Africa, and that our crew had chartered a plane from Mozambique to catch the SAA connection without going through South African Immigration. In other words, the Republic would send me to Mozambique where my entry visa had expired. I was returning from six weeks covering the famine in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and working around another civil war in Mozambique. I was emotionally drained, fatigued from twelve hours on a plane, and stunned at hearing I was a vagrant. I asked them to have a heart.

"We're British," an officer replied to my request, as a fourth official arrived at our counter accompanied by an SAA representative. He said that considering where I had come from, South African Airways would be pleased to fly me anywhere in the world. I said nine pounds sterling didn't go far anywhere in the world; I needed access to my bank. This prompted a short conference between the representative and immigration officials who agreed to send me to

Canada where the value of my money would more than double: I would have cab fare to a homeless shelter.

The absurdity of suddenly being a penniless refugee had me babbling about my work not taking bread off British tables, when a fifth immigration officer appeared from the Arrivals Concourse escorting my British girlfriend. Realizing I was in some kind of shit, because Barbara had greeted the rest of our crew hours earlier, she had approached officials and asked where her fiancé might have gotten lost. Upon hearing this, the first official I had dealt with pointedly asked me why I hadn't mentioned my impending nuptials. Truthfully, I told him that it had not occurred to me.

The growing gang of officials apparently decided that my oversight was logical for a fellow who believed he was legal, and they grudgingly granted me temporary permission to enter England. I had to surrender my passport and return the next day for voluntary deportation to wherever I wanted to begin the process of re-entering their country legally.

"That didn't work out so I went back to Toronto—"

"The design is in the details," Jeanette said.

"The next day, I called or visited everyone I thought could help me, but none of the networks would part with a visa they used to import real employees. Between phone calls and meetings in the West End, I ran into Philippe Billiard, the cameraman I had just worked with in Africa, and he told me that a mutual friend from our Lebanon gigs knew someone who could help me. He gave Maria a call. Half an hour later, Maria had talked to her father, who agreed to arrange a meeting between his friend and me in Paris the next day."

Jeanette held up a hand. "The man you were meeting was a friend of a friend's father, and he agreed to help you?"

"That's it."

"Why?"

"He was Maria's godfather."

"Which doesn't answer the question, but how could he help you?"

"He was the Columbian Ambassador to France. Anyway, I called Ski in Toronto to ask him if I could stay at his place if things didn't work out, and he said it wouldn't be a problem. The next morning, I bought a ticket to Paris before surrendering to British authorities, who handcuffed me; their procedures included making a show of handing my passport to the flight crew before removing the cuffs in full view of the other passengers."

"The Ambassador?" Jeanette prompted me.

"Right. He greeted me as if we knew each other, asked about the health of our mutual friends, and made nonstop small talk while he drove me to a hotel near his embassy. Dropping me off, he said he would pick me up at eleven-thirty the next morning to see the British Ambassador, which he did. Walking into that Ambassador's office, my newest best buddy threw his arm around my shoulder and said, "Nice of you to see us on such short notice, Francis."

"That's quite all—"

"My dear friend, John, has run into the most unfortunate circumstance."

"Well, shall we see what—"

"It's one great misunderstanding!"

"We were done in ten minutes, including obligatory social pleasantries such as, 'Nice country, Canada. Really.'"

"When we left the British embassy, my visa literally looked to be in the diplomatic bag, but the paperwork would take a week to process. Ten days later, my buddy said things would take a

little longer. Paris is an expensive place to loiter, so Barbara called travel agencies and found a vacation package in the Canary Islands that would be cheaper. I flew to Tenerife. When I got back, my ambassador buddy said things would take a little longer, which is when I flew here to check out the freelance market."

"The pilot... your screenplay?" Jeanette interjected.

Backtracking, I said that while flying out of Amsterdam, I sat next to a burly bearded man with a quick wit, who successfully feigned interest in my slim-line electronic typewriter. I told him that I was writing a book, gave him some background information, and brought him up to speed on my uncertain situation. When it was his turn, Paul said he was an industrial helicopter pilot—logging, fire fighting, and construction work—so he knew all about uncertainty. I asked him if he flew with two engines, implying that he had a second chance in his line of work.

"One engine," he said casually, "has exactly enough power to fly you to the scene of the crash."

We drank our way across the Atlantic, wished each other well with our uncertain lives at the Vancouver airport, then we got on with them.

"While I was checking out the freelance market here, Tom planted the idea of writing a screenplay. When I got back to Europe, and the ambassador diplomatically asked me to pay him for his efforts, I knew it was the end of the line: we both knew I would have given him everything I had for a work visa. Not long afterwards, I flew to Toronto with about a thousand dollars. It took me six months to get re-established so I screwed up my credit."

"All of these circumstances," Jeanette said, "pointed to your destiny lying in London until you had the experiences essential to your quest. After that, there was no force on earth that was going to allow you to stay. You had appointments elsewhere. What next?"

I told her that I built my client base by working steadily for Scarlet Productions, and I lectured at Seneca College whenever Michael felt his students' idealism needed a thrashing. After those sessions, we'd go for a beer to catch up on industry gossip, note how well our ex-wives were doing without us, and discuss our respective novels-in-progress.

My lectures seemed to work, so Michael asked me to put together a four-part technical course. I would teach the sound aspect, and take care of the personnel requirements of the other three. After that, I landed a cushy job working for the Ontario government documenting the Spruce Budworm infestation. It was easy because we worked out of aircraft, and our hours were long. We started at four a.m. did interviews at midday, then shot another round of flying footage until nine p.m. We also went to a lot of different sites, three of which became important later on.

"At one of them," I said, "our pilot was a gorgeous blond who was a free spirit beneath her professional mask. At another, there was an impossibly straight company man who cracked us up by taking flippant comments seriously: we flew so low that at the right moment I switched on my intercom and said, 'There's an extra fiver in it if you miss that tree.' This guy said he wasn't allowed to take gratuities."

"The other locations?" Jeanette prompted me again.

"Paul recognized my typewriter case before I remembered him. He was a skim-the-river-at-a-hundred knots kind of guy." I paused. "I paid him about fifty serious bucks."

"When I was back in the city with cash in my jeans, and I told Michael that I was frustrated with my book, he encouraged me to write something short to inspire myself, and maybe clear out the crap. I might even get some money, and an ego fix, from entering a short story contest. Shortly after this, another client told me about a grant process for new screenwriters, and I submitted a proposal for that based on the antics of three helicopter pilots.

"A few months later, I came in the money in the contest, which made me think I was a writer at a time when my relationship with Scarlet was shaky: the company was expanding operations, which created a cash flow problem; I offered to do some unpaid work in exchange for profit-sharing when they began hiring new staff. When that time came, the boss reneged and he also refused to pay me for past work. I was still pissed at him when a CBC producer casually asked me how my freelance career was going, and I told him the writing on my last job was soft. He repeated this to one of the professionals Scarlet was wooing, who relayed my remark to the boss with the added spin of a potential employee's angst; I felt the consequences right away. Scarlet didn't hire me to service a client I had brought to them.

The next day, Michael offered me the possibility of a job that would make freelancing a secondary source of income. The college wanted to start a professional credit, television sound course, the forerunner to which I had already created as an English option. We both believed I was a shoe-in for the position, but I didn't want to burn my smoldering bridge, and I called Scarlet to again apologize saying that I suspected my remark had been relayed with the momentum of an old acquaintance protecting a friend. Coldly, the boss repeated a distorted version of what had become sinister remarks that could ruin his company's reputation, before he blatantly threatened to facilitate my professional demise if I said anything about his personal behavior on the road.

This is when I clued into the full source of his vitriol: I knew things that could screw him worse than a single comment made in anger, and he was afraid I would leverage that knowledge against his promise. I knew him well enough to not doubt that he would do this. That he had already started undermining me with other clients, if only to make me dependent on him, hadn't crossed my mind.

In a final salvage effort, I went back to the producer and repeated what the boss said I had said, making it clear that I was in a tenuous situation. Admittedly, I had been indiscreet and had already lost work because of it, but the exaggerations had to be put straight.

"Instant justice," Jeanette said.

"The producer looked shocked," I said, "and claimed that he had simply repeated my comments in passing to someone we both knew wasn't prone to exaggerating. I asked him to call Scarlet anyway, which he agreed to do. The next day, I contacted the boss and received a frosty, "Scripts are in development."

I understood this meant we would never work together again, but he wouldn't poison my well if I didn't shit in his backyard. Forfeiting my back pay was his pound of flesh. Soon afterwards, a call from a fellow freelancer made it clear that I was already tainted, and that it was probably the boss who had created and spread the exaggerations to my potential clients by asking them if they had heard...etc.

Later that week, the Dean of Communications offered me the position of the staffer they had hired to teach the course I had designed. The upside of this surprise was that I had an opportunity to regroup, and it didn't matter that I knew nothing about the quad format video tape system I was supposed to teach, because it was obsolete. The technological boom was on; new digital frame-storers were changing history from "as it happened," to emphasizing *how* it happened one thirtieth of a second at a time. Simple back-timers, slow motion, fades, and wipes were suddenly at a single editor's fingertips, which screamed there would be no need for a quad teacher—often a three person operation—next year. Another irking circumstance was that the other fellow had never worked in my field. In addition, I was unexpectedly angered that the first

year students I had recently taught were going to learn nothing useful from me, at least not from the curriculum, and less than what they should learn from the other fellow.

For the first time, I seriously contemplated Ed's regular telephone offer of a free place to stay in Vancouver: I could help financially, when I took on freelance work, he always said. Otherwise, I was not to worry if my income was zero.

I called him to see if the offer was still good.

"When's your flight?" was all he said.

I went out for a couple of beers to decide whether I wanted to teach, or chuck everything to become a writer. I came home swaying toward teaching when I opened my mail to discover that I had been awarded the grant. Without consulting Michael, who assumed I would accept the teaching position, I wrote a letter to the Dean in which I said I didn't understand what the school was doing, but I wouldn't be a part of screwing the students.

"That's it. I flew here, and Tom set up our meeting."

"Not until after your screenplay problem," Jeanette corrected me.

I told her more about the problem with my plot, which Tom resolved by suggesting that I contact a helicopter service to find out the lifting capacity of their biggest machine. The company secretary told me their Sikorski was the second largest civilian helicopter in the world; it could place a massive electrical transmission tower on a dime, or lift ten tons of trees at the end of a cable in a dangerously exacting technique called long-lining. You had to be nuts to do it.

This was good stuff, but the pieces didn't come together in my mind until she said the Skycrane flew from one job to another carrying a complete modular apartment beneath it: I envisioned the great machine lifting a broken Jet Ranger out of a fire being held back by the downwash of its hundred foot blades.

"The secretary said the pilots would be in at noon the next day. If I wanted to see their machine to research my work, I could ask them... Paul walked in just after twelve."

"Can't you feel a sense of being guided in all of this?" Jeanette said.

"It was a long road—like this story."

"Look at the pivot points: Ed, Michael, the East Croydon immigration officer, Paul, Tom, your friend in Argentina?" she paused.

"Manny."

"All of them opened and closed chapters to either keep you safe, sane, or push you to your next appointed experience, and the one possession to survive his journey was an omen of your path—the typewriter led you to me."

"I'll give you all of the manifestations of Spirit you like, because by definition that applies to everyone at some point in their lives, but I don't see where that Knock thing comes into it. Doesn't a teacher have to know about it?"

"When we left the hotel, you walked straight to my car."

"As opposed to crookedly?"

"Why was I late?"

"A newspaper blew onto your windshield."

"Specifically, a page pictured a car accident so I changed my route to avoid the possibility of having one, and I didn't stop until it felt right." Focusing on my confused expression, she said, "Leading us to my car was no accident. You thought you had options, just like you did when the rolling force of Phillip's intentions brought you to Vancouver." She leaned back. "Telling you to take charge was Saa-ra's idea, and an act of faith for me to trust that things would work out."

"Uh huh," I said, appreciating the cleverness with which Jeanette had clad the coincidence.

She breathed deeply, seemingly content to let the sleeping dog lie.

Chapter 38: The Truth

Days later, I turned into Jeanette's driveway to pick her up for a rare dinner out, a gift from a client we had both worked with, when the evening view across the inlet between her house and her neighbor's shrubbery reminded me of a particularly beautiful part of Lebanon, possibly because it wasn't on fire. The incongruity of those remarkably hospitable people turning their nation into rubble saturated my mind, like repressed sorrow cresting the dam of denial, disturbing quandaries that had rippled beneath my peace of mind for months. Not the least of these was her general state of sanity.

I tapped on the side door and let myself in, forcing a jaunty, "Ready to go?"

"Ready," Jeanette said over the sound of bi-fold doors sliding through tracks. "Kha-lib just..."

"Hold on—it's normal time," I interrupted her as I climbed the stairs.

"Pardon me?" Her voiced floated hollow out of the hallway closet.

"We fed the brain all morning. It's time to digest things, literally," I said, reaching the top landing.

Jeanette came out from behind the door with one sleeve stalled halfway up her arm. Misinterpreting her stance, I stepped forward to help her on with her coat; she froze her pose leaving me holding one shoulder of the garment as if I was dressing a mannequin.

"You use love as a weapon to manipulate people according to your moods," she said, flatly, "I'll survive without your affection if need be, but I have no intention of changing who I am for anyone."

"Sorry if it came out wrong," I said, letting go and taking a step back. "You know diplomacy isn't my strong suit." I grinned crookedly.

"That's because you never stayed long enough to develop it with anyone who disagreed with you, and there was nothing inadvertent about your remark. It was calculated to see if I care more about keeping your company than I do about speaking my mind."

"We've established that I'm not a strategic thinker." I cocked my head.

"Thinking has nothing to do with it," Jeanette said, continuing her serene assault. "Your predisposition is to manipulate social exchanges so that you can tell people how to act, while establishing the terms of a treaty before a hostile word is even spoken."

Caught in the undertow of whatever was really on her mind, I thought the only safe escape was to go with the flow until I could edge my way out of her current focus.

Giving her comment a moment's thought, I said, "I think that's how everyone negotiates relationships. Our tone and facial expressions are essentially saying, 'This is what I'm like. If you don't like it, we can each move on. If you do, we can dance the next step.'"

"Personal peace can't be negotiated. It requires that one confronts their flaws, like yours of baiting mini battles to establish a right-of-way through people's hearts."

I was about to call her on the feint, of shifting from peaceful relationships to personal peace, but I realized this would probably make her misery about me when her tranquil savaging of my innocent comment had to be about Josh. So it would remain.

"I'll throw myself down the stairs as punishment if that will help."

"Not even if the issue was about forgiveness," she said coolly.

"Notwithstanding that I have apologized—almost twice?" I said, with a boyish grin.

"Your rough charm and contrived sincerity don't fool me. You not only avoided taking responsibility for your comment, you shuffled it back on me."

"How about this," I said as I took a step down, "I won't be charming so you won't be concerned about being fooled, and neither of us will feel like we have to change anything while we eat? Let's go."

"Or you'll go without me?"

"What?"

"You don't realize how you telegraph your intentions, because you're so entrenched in self-defense that even trivial circumstances become negotiations over who is in charge."

"Because I took a step closer to the restaurant?"

"Because you can't just like someone: you are always confirming your status with me, and testing your position in ways you don't realize, like every time you stamp your approval by saying 'done' instead of, 'that sounds like a good idea,' or, 'Thanks Jeanette, I'll try that.'" Dragging her coat, she closed the physical gap between us. "Somewhere along the way, you saw yourself as a product of a world you abhor, which is why you use words as weapons whenever anyone threatens your moral hideout by suggesting you're one of them."

"One of them?"

"Them,' is everyone who has been tricked into doing the unspeakable, because they are told from the cradle that it is necessary, then they are betrayed; they realize their actions became necessary only because they agreed to participate. This is why trick and betray are synonymous to you."

"How was I tricked?"

"You covered stories that could only add fuel to the fire, while your industry made huge profits under an altruistic banner that personal events in Argentina ripped to shreds. That's when you realized it wasn't your job to educate people. Your focus on financial retribution hid the fact that you were playing the same game at a higher level, and you kept going back to reclaim your losses."

"I didn't lose anything—to the contrary." I said no more.

"You discovered you were up to a task that few people are willing to do, and fewer can do well, but you had to suppress the price you paid to feed your accomplice; acknowledging that you enjoyed it."

"Maybe a rush now and then, but..."

She held up her hand. "There are no maybes in an essential act. You accumulated cars and boats based on other people's misery and death, and you enjoyed your work."

"I didn't create their circumstances, and the things I bought came from the possibility of joining them," I said, not believing I was hearing this from her.

"By your own words, you didn't believe it could happen to you when you began covering wars, and by the time you quit you didn't care if it did kill you, so where was the risk?" Jeanette suddenly looked concerned. "I'm sure your sniper kills LeBlanc, because he's a metaphor for the spiritual death of all people of good heart who are tricked into going to war. That metaphor worries me."

"I really don't know what you're getting at, or how we got here," I said plaintively.

"I'm getting at what you are like and why you are like this." Looking at her hands as if they held crib notes, Jeanette quoted me without inflection. "They chose to stay. It meant certain death, and it didn't matter to them."

The angle of her gaze, and short distance between us, were awkward; I took two steps down as she continued.

"It was too painful to recall something your mind had tucked away, but your body remembered everything about that moment; you recalled the families begging you to protect them. They didn't know about your dead colleagues, or that the most dangerous place to be was in the jungle." She leaned against the staircase. "The echoes of those shots manifest in your every waking diatribe and nightmare that questioned whether you could have saved anyone; or maybe you think you should have died in the attempt. Either way, you carried that guilt with you adding to it with every encounter that fed your sense of impotence. What Kha-lib wanted you to know, when you first arrived tonight, was that we all volunteer for events for our own reasons. When and where everyone stood their ground, lay down, or were put to rest, was a choice. You can stop being a casualty of conscience by assessing events in a new light. It might help you to know that your personal killing blow came in Makelle."

"No one who wasn't there knows anything about Makelle," I snapped icily.

"And no one who wasn't in Vietnam," Jeanette said with a dismissive wave, "and no one who wasn't at Normandy, said the fathers who repeated their grandfather's words about the war to end all wars."

"You claimed my experiences were unique." I guffawed at her error.

"I said they are unique by virtue of what their totality represents, and you have not tried to explore what that is beyond using maps and thread. Instead, you've spent enormous energy on quandary and anger, when I've done nothing more than show you how to turn a missed shot into a positive lesson."

Too late to retreat with dignity, my mind whirled in search of the illusive reason that would explain her grandiose effort, fancifully fearful claims, sudden personal attacks, and multiple impersonations: I knew now, beyond an intellectual grasp, that we all give ourselves away, which included Jeanette.

Far from the first time, when I felt critically pressed, my mind began to unwind reasons like a slinky going down stairs, culminating on her key manipulation: she had coerced me into accepting meta-concoctions by treating them as facts that suffocated my common sense, and blinded me to what was really going on. Her endless casual tirades were not about distancing herself vertically from an inferior world, they were about conquering it to make it safe: Jeanette had been making herself ready to reveal a secret to herself, about herself, from the moment she labeled me the bad guy, so her personas could defeat my representative beliefs...

"Any time you're ready," she said.

I swallowed once from reluctance, and once from embarrassment; instead of stepping toward the door, I stepped beyond the edge of our relationship.

"You haven't written your ending because you've been counting on me to free you from a secret. The psychological bombshell you think you're leading me to is about learning why you are the way you are, not how I became the way I am. We already know that."

"And?" She tilted her head patiently.

"You said the human experience is not complicated, because outside of our core drives everything we do is a clue to seeing ourselves as we really are. This is why we design the lives we do, and why you said my book reveals why I think the way I do. So does yours. Later, you told me about moving a lot when you were a kid, you had a liberal attitude toward sex in your adolescence, at least then, and you've had thousands of comfort dreams with super-powerful friends."

I waited for her to catch on, as she had so often done with me; she didn't.

"Look between the lines of your work. Your male characters are all hard-ass masters of something, your women pretend to be timid when they're actually manipulating men for their own safety, and your teachers have unusual bonds with children in a culture conformed to secrecy."

Jeanette's amused expression dropped into a canyon of repugnance trapping a protest in her throat; it was time to leap to the truth she had been so meticulous setting up for herself.

"The memory game you played on me was a ruse you were playing on yourself. If I found a red flag that revealed something terrible had happened to me, you had permission to surface what happened to Aleena, Jehaneh, and every other aspect of your personality set adrift by your shattering childhood experiences. 'Not becoming a casualty of their internal disputes,'" I quoted her. "The townies punishing kids, ready to be played by cruel men, they would be empty without fear." The definitive quote poured out. "I can write about Aleena's life changes as a victim of men."

I made the final leap.

"The world's lunacy is a metaphor for men's cruelty in general, and your dad's barbarity specifically, which is what brought about the surrender of your childhood. Everything you said I'm blind to reflects your desperation to trust anyone, and you're trying to reclaim the loss of not fitting in by exalting trees and clouds as a kind of litmus test for people's level of compassion. Your meta-double talk is about assessing your core assumptions in order to surface knowledge silenced by shame, and the judgments of your neighbors, because you acted out the disgrace that happened to you with their children when you were in the sandbox. I also think you refused to explain some things early on, not because it wasn't time for me to hear them, but because the explanation was still too close; you hadn't beaten the crap out of me to make yourself feel safe in the world I had survived, and you're trying to rejoin. Shit," I said as another piece of the puzzle found its place. "That's when you embraced miracles."

"Which were?" Jeanette said, finding her voice.

"A little girl becoming old enough to remember despicable things meets a messenger from God. He says the world will get worse before it gets better, but he'll be there for her. She believes him in her retreat to a place without sensations, where fear is outdated, and she has faith in her rescue because the ultimate Master is benevolent with servants who explore Universes with him. As she gets older, she has to adjust the metaphor; the stars that surrounded her become a disco ball that can explain everyone's actions, except it can't protect her. It can only warn her about people so she starts speaking with guardian angels about safe places."

"Safe places?"

"You know you're safe when God cares where you park."

"Do you have more?" she said with a disconcerting calm.

"Just that all of the time you spent trying to convince me the world is coming to an end was about you coming to terms with the secret that would put an end to your brutal conformation as a child. In the meantime, being on a mission from God gave meaning to what happened to the chosen one, who had suffered for salvation. Your journey is unique by virtue of what its totality represents, because the rescue mission isn't just about you; you designed and executed it to find yourself." I took a deep breath. "It's an amazing thing you have done, and not just a little bit scary that you used my life to identify the source of the fears you had to neuter," I admitted.

"You are a truly amazing man," she said sincerely. "I can't imagine how much effort you spent gathering and arranging those pieces to suit your views."

"Your defense is that you have a limited imagination?" I took another step down, shifted my weight to my good hip, and waited to hear her interpretation of our interactions. I owed her that much.

"I have nothing to defend." Jeanette closed her eyes; speaking in a disinterested tone, she said, "As usual, you have it backwards: I scratched your mirror of self-reflection by asking for intimate details of your decision making process, and the stories you used to describe yourself. You regularly hid from this knowledge, and punished me through threats like, 'I still don't know that coming here was the best thing to do', and by taking shots at my premises to repair the damage you think I had done to you. Your retaliations had no effect, so the next time I injured one of your beliefs you made up an excuse to leave. But truth is relentless; I didn't have to try to stop you. You next made sure I understood the grave risk I was taking by ignoring me for days, and when I didn't fall to my knees when you came back you quadrupled the threat by vanishing after Kha-lib's first channel. You did all of this to maintain the illusion that you knew better than a middle-aged divorcee, who had forced you to bend reasons, crush facts, and throw away whatever didn't fit, to come up your magnificent concoction, and all to keep your own secret safe from yourself."

"I took a sabbatical when there was a lot to think about," was all I could argue.

"Without an explanation to a friend you've been seeing every day?"

"Without your parting words influencing what I'm trying to figure out."

"That would fly if we both didn't know the mindset that creates a problem can't solve it, and your mindset of running away is your historical focus." She counted on her fingers before I could protest. "You ran into the N9*9***99***avy when your father died, you quit when they wouldn't acknowledge you almost died with as little as a replacement watch, you escaped to England after your fiancée dumped you, then you came here after your error in judgment in Toronto. You've also been testing me, like you tested your mother, ever since we met: 'If you love me, you'll let me get my way.' If I don't buy it, you take a sabbatical."

"My moves have always been a financial or professional step forward."

"All the better to conceal the underlying act of moving to new territory, where you recreated the circumstances you left behind, because you didn't deal with them properly. And how do you benefit when you pick up your pace on our walks?"

"How fast I walk is a failing?" I sneered.

"Distancing yourself implies that you're willing to keep on going unless your friends recognize the threat of losing what was destined to be fleeting relationships anyway."

"Being alone is my destiny?"

"You created that cycle." Jeanette shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "You fictionalized critical events to make things clearer to me, and the women before me, knowing that only the experience could provide their true context. Your secret goal was to trap our intrigue between innocence and revulsion to make us feel vulnerable. If that moment arrived in our eyes, the predacious aspect of seeking relief from your experiences would pounce to comfort us both. But somewhere along the way, you discovered that enhancing events made them less real to you: your practice became a Band-Aid fix on a gaping wound, because you knew that sharing a stark peek at the unthinkable was light years from it peering into their souls. Your relationships had to end with confrontations because you didn't know the true source of your pain, and you never looked back to see yourself through other people's eyes to try to find it."

"Come on. A lot of people just want to have a little fun and forget it." I said, without thinking.

"When did this happen?" she said, instantly challenging my diversion.

"When I was sailing in the Med," I said as if this was my only transgression.

"You were a social privateer plundering favors from a willing tourist trade," she said without pausing. "You did not see yourself as a thief of a lethargic heart when a yarn captivated a wayward waif; you were a free spirit spending grand adventures on intense comfort while with corresponding brevity banishing a stranger's boredom to her own illusions. It looked like a no-harm no-foul circumstance, but the reckless pursuit of compliant prey is an extension of how you maintain your sense of superiority."

"Shit, I stole apples when I was a kid," I snapped. "How does that rank in the grand scheme of terrestrial crimes?" I said, immediately feeling like I had launched sneeze-spittle toward a first date's wine glass.

Calmly, Jeanette took a step down to my eye level. Tapping me lightly on the chest, she said, "Sarcasm may be the most damaging of your manipulations, because it's purposefully aimed at the heart of the unwary for no reason other than to punish them for offending you. Trust me," she said, leaning so close that the word "trust" thrust a fog on my glasses, "you don't want emotional blackmail coming back to you." She leaned back mere millimeters. "It leads to complications that can take lifetimes to resolve, and your next few are already booked. If you can't help yourself, at least try to limit your insecurities to the transparent condescension of small-minded men. That way, the harm you intended is laughable."

Finally noticing her indecorous state, Jeanette slid her arm out of the sleeve and made a peace offering of her coat. I took it from her, and stepped sideways to create room to hold the garment open. Leaving me posing like a matador, she said, "As is your custom, you've bled our relationship dry of comfort, and the pressure of maintaining even cordial contact with me will soon force you to run. You need to know that you've got nowhere to go that won't become the same old circumstance, and I'm afraid of what you might do when you discover this."

Lowering the coat, I huffed and said, "Me bleed you dry? I've told you all I know about screenwriting, and I've been your guinea pig long enough to know you can finish it on your own if I can!" Defiantly, "Shit, that's what this is about... you're trying to break our deal and scoop the whole grant!"

Gawking with wounded surprise, the underlying truth of what I was doing melted through Jeanette's face; my smugness withered with the sharing of another intimate moment. I felt like throwing up. With pursed lips, Jeanette stepped down to our final engagement distance of a single tread and riser; I unblinking awaited the parting shot I deserved. At least it would all be over.

Confusing me to the marrow, Jeanette placed her hands on my shoulders for balance, and leaning forward kissed me gently on the forehead. Pushing away lightly, she said, "You can accept whatever the night may bring in the same way that I've accepted who you are without conditions, or you can call the evening off... to consider what I've just said, of course."

"Let's go," I said, with as much dignity as I could fake.

"Done!" she joked.

Mechanically, I walked down the stairs to the landing where I realized I had to choose between opening the door and holding open her coat. Handing her the garment, I said, "Fool me once."

"Once?" she chortled, stepping into the cool evening air.

[Chapter 39: The End of the Beginning](#)

On the way to the restaurant, I told Jeanette that I cared for her just the way she was; she said she cared for me beyond words, literally. Nevertheless, it was a subdued drive for me, the meal but a diversion from the awkwardness I continued to feel over my betrayal as we compared the challenges and rewards of having cats or dogs as pets.

It was not until we were looking over the dessert cart, with our server hovering, that Jeanette turned her attention to personal matters. Even then, it was as a whimsical refrain that she said, "Your experiences with me should have opened your mind to Intent's propositions by now."

"That all of this real—I'm a student, you're a teacher, and Spirit is... whatever?"

"Do you really think I could have made up those channels—that I knew things you hadn't told me about, that I somehow caused you to have visions and to *know* things?"

Somberly, I said, "Even if it's all true, I think my path was too intense: I'm not up for any more adventures, except maybe that raspberry thingy looks like a coronary threat." I nodded at Evelyn.

"That's understandable," Jeanette said, pointing at a lemon tart topped with a strawberry hat seated in meringue. "Seeing everything you came here to see came at a high price."

Prudently, Evelyn served us without comment, withdrew a step, and wheeled the cart away.

"Months ago," Jeanette said focusing on my plate, "Kha-lib told me that your quest was personally expensive, but I didn't fully appreciate that until tonight on the stairs." Taking a small bite, she said, "Umm," pointing her fork at my plate.

"It's not that I don't want to believe you, especially since I've had more strange stuff happen than I've told you about," I spoke the most honest words I had probably said since... a long time. "But I can't get past the idea that you're manufacturing a Universe to suit your story, and maybe some experiences, no different than you claim I've done with mine—notwithstanding that millions of people would believe my version. No offence."

Carefully setting her fork down, Jeanette patted the corners of her mouth delicately with a vermilion cloth. Placing it aside, she reached across the table to cover my hand with hers.

I studied her cheerless expression for signs of mischief, but found only empathy as she softly said, "When we first met, you delivered your stories with an undertow designed to drag me into acknowledging your intellect, and to conjure courage out of ill-conceived exploits, then you played down your role to luck while pummeling me with jabs of horror. That only made sense if you were defending secrets you held about yourself, by placing experiences I haven't had in the way of me recognizing them."

"I'm not arguing, but why would I want to defend something I don't know about?"

"But you do know—you gave it away the first time we met: you used death as a job opportunity in the first story you wrote." She raised her brow.

I couldn't muster a cogent rebuttal.

Jeanette continued making her point.

"I showed you chapters about how your physical affairs were influenced, but you did not see the omens. I showed you chapters in which characters received knowledge, as you often did, but you didn't make the connection, so all I could do at the time was give you chapters that foreshadowed what was coming your way. This was when you began having more vivid experiences in your mental meanderings, which were gifts from Spirit to help loosen your compressed views, and to see your reflection in my story. Even with the direct energy injections you experienced as sudden fatigue enhancing your capacity for grasping what was going on, you remained blind to anything personally relevant." With a shrug, she said, "The only way I could communicate was on your terms, by making sense of your experiences directly. But you thought

I was being a bitch for reasons you eventually conformed to suit your explanation tonight, then you became derisive to the point of scorning the concept of decency itself. You wouldn't have done this unless you believed you had lost yours, which you confirmed when I prodded your conscience about Sami. Anyone else would have conceded that making noise may have helped him, but you became angry because you think you acted cowardly from the moment the soldiers didn't take you away with him. This is no different than how key events in El Salvador made you feel." She leaned back to give me room to comment; I saw no point in complaining about a headache at a beheading. I waited for her axe to fall.

"An hour ago," she said, "you jokingly gave yourself away by offering to sacrifice the very thing you chose to challenge in me by throwing yourself down the stairs—your integrity. You wouldn't have done that if you thought you had any, not even in jest." She drew a controlled breath: I understood we were standing on my ledge now.

"You're ravaged by a conscience conformed by aberrant ideas, the jagged emotions generated from daring to learn all there is to know about malice, and the encompassing senses of helplessness, guilt, and shame these experiences brought you. You are a warrior who came to believe he is a coward, and to defend yourself from this judgment you lashed out at everyone who came too close to seeing you. The price you paid to claim mankind's most destructive secrets as personal knowledge is that you loathe yourself—a perspective that taints everything you see." She squeezed back tears. "I had to walk away when you couldn't see anything special, in spite of this view being exactly where you were supposed to be. That was what made you special—the damage—and you've still not given up. That's energy, and that's who you really are."

"You think so?" I said as a prelude to giving up.

"The focus of your arguments has changed from defending your ideas to trying to understand mine, which is doing the right thing for the right reason, as an act of faith that voluntarily sets your ego aside. Doing this opened the door to Spirit shifting your perceptions to a new level of learning that most people would have dismissed as mental tricks, or run from; you embraced them as valid experiences, regardless that you couldn't explain them." She held up a hand to stifle my protest. "What you thought you were doing with me doesn't matter. You acted as if these were signs of awakening knowledge, and at the risk of your life as you know it, you've been gathering energy to assess your inventory. Every day for months now, I've presented you with the piffling dares and resulting brutality of men's bravado, and you're still here. This is an extraordinary achievement at the end of a crushing journey." She smiled as though at an injured puppy.

"You have no idea how often or how close I came to leaving, and you really can't believe I'll quit writing my book my way. It's all I have."

Jeanette's look of mystification reminded me of the Canadian ambassador's wife at an embassy dinner in Brasilia, when LeBlanc farted at a pitch that betrayed a hundred percent humidity, as asked her to pass the bread.

"Quit?" she said, when she remembered to breath. "It's key."

"To what?"

"Yes or no," she said, inspecting me for signs of self-awareness, "you've covered flood, famine, drought, earthquake, war?"

"Probably."

"There's no probably about it, you've seen the end unfolding." A ribbon grin crimped her lips. "Picture your string map," she said, using her fork as a conductor's baton to move my thoughts through the signs of the apocalypse.

"Getting fucked up made me special?" I said as that deception suddenly warmed me.

"Those experiences encompass how we create and react to circumstances that ultimately contribute to humankind's most extreme behaviors. In a profound way, you're a crowd that has been conformed to embrace apocalyptic beliefs."

"What do beliefs have to do with earthquakes?" I said, groping for a sense of balance—of reason.

"Unrestrained nuclear testing, sapping the earth of its tectonic lubricant, leveling forests that clean the air and keep the earth in place, draining marshlands that filter water. Shall I go on?"

"Why choose me?" I tried to say as a demand, but it warbled.

"Give me a moment; Saa-ra is here."

I had time enough only to wet my mouth with ice water, before Jeanette's eerie gaze of fire and steel welded my ass to the chair.

"Unrecognized and unchecked," she said, flatly, "generations of mankind have condensed and assimilated their capacity for malice and horror to the degree that a man born in the grace of infinite love, and raised with boundless clemency, blithely participated in the madness. You chose this path to become a great grandchild of the Somme, a grandson of Normandy, and a child of Vietnam, to maul your beautiful spirit in the chaos of your times. You have seen the end and you have become it. Now, as nations lead their children down the path of ruin, the momentum of their egomaniacal focus is methodically killing every relationship they have in and to your world, just as you do. A crucial lesson you all must, and will soon embrace as your own knowledge, is that fear is not a consequence of warfare, it is its source." She dredged the last word like a bucket of toxic waste from the bottom of an industrial harbor. Most harbors, I suppose.

"So tell us young warrior, who weeps bittersweet acrimony over the threads of his humanity, who better to explain the source of mankind's dire circumstances than the archetype aberrant man seeking himself under the brilliant light of his own demise?"

"Explain? I'm supposed to write about the screwed up world in Jeanette's imagination?" I scoffed.

"Your first purpose is to find yourself amid the madness."

"Hers you mean."

"It is a quest that will soon pass a point of change," Saa-ra said, ignoring my comment. "We love you."

"Maybe we should just be friends." I stood to go to the men's room.

When I came back, Jeanette had put a twenty-dollar tip under the vase. I gave her a ten without comment, and pulled out the chair for her. The short drive back was quiet, but not awkward for me because everything that could be said was out there. No secrets, no angst. Nothing left, really.

Getting out of her car in the driveway, I declined her offer of a decaf coffee because I had a legitimate job in the morning. "A bird guy is speaking about fences screwing up the migratory crawl of bugs," I said.

"Ornithologist and entomology," Jeanette said as I straddled and started my 550cc machine.

"You can't help it, can you?" I thought I said under my breath.

"It seems that neither of us can," Jeanette said, ending our confrontation scene.

Chapter 40: The Descent of Spirit

Lying restlessly on my futon, the evening's conversation circled annoyingly around my mind until a cascading mixture of ire and helplessness modeled a revelation framed in humiliation: I so deeply resented Jeanette's deceptions that I had no interest in continuing a relationship in any form. In spite of inexplicable events apparently 'stalking' me, as Jeanette described it, I simply didn't have an act of faith left in me. Within the freedom of again having no expectations in life, I rolled over and fell into a deep sleep.

Around half past three, I awakened from a dream that was lost as soon as I realized I was dreaming, but it left behind a mental itch I could not scratch. I passed time by rehearsing how I was going to tell Jeanette I was finished, without creating a scene. Her efforts and my experiences made it almost impossible for me to disappear.

The alarm went off while I was staring at it.

I showered then met Matt and a local producer, who did the interview with the bird guy after which we walked around the park taking generic cover footage, because there were no bugs of this particularly sensitive species to be found. My day was over in three hours; I picked up a couple bottles of wine on the way home, jogged, showered again, and called Jeanette. She said she was parched. Twenty minutes later, I led her to commenting on her client's interests, to open the door through which I intended to make my escape.

"I'm not surprised that she didn't accept what you said," I said. "My world still makes more sense to me, the contradictions you've chipped away at notwithstanding."

"Chipped away?" Jeanette exclaimed as if I had plugged her finger into a 220V outlet. "I've blasted all reason out of them, but you won't let go!"

"Actually, I have thought about..."

"Do you ever wonder what it would be like to just write? Where would you go if you could do that?"

"Some place warm, I guess. I've thought about..."

"There wouldn't be any guessing about it for me."

Exuberantly, Jeanette filled out her fantasy before apologizing for monopolizing our time—then she asked me about my ideal living conditions in excruciating detail, thereby monopolizing our time.

We explored another wish, and then another, until the afternoon became an evening that passed in a gentle blur until my body called it quits around ten. I was home in bed by a quarter to eleven and asleep soon afterwards, only to again awaken with the feeling there was something I should know. Glancing at the digital clock, I saw that it was three twenty-seven, exactly the same time I had looked at the clock the night before. The itch passed, and I went to sleep.

In passing the next morning, I told Jeanette about the coincidence.

"Phillip was delivering a message. How was your morning writing session? Isn't it a gorgeous day?" and on she prattled, leaving me no opportunity to tell her this was our last gorgeous day together... except there was less reason to rush things: Jeanette was a hoot to be with when she left her elves in the forest.

At three twenty-seven the next morning, I awoke with an overpowering sense that I should know something. For lack of a better idea, and no one would ever know, I imagined sending a messenger into the cosmos. I watched the tree shadows cast from a street lamp dance on my wall while I waited for the postal fairy to return.

In a short while, an old joke nestled into my thoughts and wouldn't leave me alone: East Berlin guards at Checkpoint Charlie suspected that a man who crossed from the west every morning was smuggling. They regularly stripped his shiny CCM bicycle, but they never found anything hidden in the frame, neither did the night shift when they checked his dilapidated Russian built pedal machine.

This ruse cycled in my mind until I realized the messenger had returned; the obvious was the answer—I was being awakened.

With the itch scratched, I went back to sleep.

In the morning, I said nothing to Jeanette about this experience lest I interrupt another great day of wine and wishful thinking.

To test my supposition that night, I decided that if I again awakened early, which I did, I would allow a few minutes to pass before I looked at the clock, which I did at exactly three twenty-seven a.m.

Six hours later, Jeanette was enjoying herself like a parolee reveling in the freedom passersby no longer appreciate, and though I was curious about my early morning awakenings, I didn't risk breaking her spell by talking about them.

My decision to remain quiet also caused me to realize that the ambiance of pending conflict, which had reigned over our meetings since she had first interrogated me at the English Bay Café, was gone. It had been for days: we shared another carefree day, reluctantly parting company in the late afternoon as if it was Christmas Eve, and we were going home to gift-wrap ourselves for each other.

At three twenty-seven the next morning I rolled over and said to the ceiling, "If you guys are here, move my hand." It was the first thing that came to my mind.

A digital minute passed before, feeling sillier by the second, I assumed my usual sleeping position on my right side, with my arm under my head. Wiggling my hip into a non-prognosticating position, I was falling into shallow breathing when my right arm shot out from beneath the pillow striking the wall so hard that I didn't think I had dreamed it. Rolling over to face the ceiling, I said, "Was that you?" not caring if Ed could hear me from his room.

I waited for something to happen for another minute before deciding the event was a trick of my mind, as the time between my request and its manifestation logically suggested. Rolling onto my stomach, I had just placed my hands flat on either side of me for a hip shift when a blunt force struck me heavily between the shoulder blades, knocking me breathless while pushing my face deep into the pillow. Instantly outraged, I rolled onto my back and challenged the ceiling, "If you're really here, do something undeniable, and let's be done with this shit!"

Of course, I was stuck for what this deed might be because I didn't consider recent events undeniable. Then it came to me. "Pick me up," I demanded obstinately, "and I won't ever question you again. Or fuck off, and get out of my life!"

My challenge and shallow promise warbled into me pleading "Put me down! Put me down!" as I rose to the light fixture, and gently back down to the futon.

Sucking air as if the troposphere had sprung a leak, I asked infantile questions to establish that what I thought happened really had. Did I have the ability to awaken myself at the same time every morning? Did I want to break my fist on a wall? Was I secretly depressed over quitting and I had tried to smother myself? Had I been oxygen deprived and made up my flight?

All of the answers literally left me staring at the most irrational, but inescapable conclusion: time passed like gelatin through a straw while I pondered my curiously puny life.

I phoned Jeanette as soon as the seven blinked on the clock.

"You're early," she said, answering on the first ring.

"Are you interested in adjoining rooms at whatever institution we're going to?"

"We?" she said tittering, soon followed by undulating snickering as I told her about the Universe's attempts to reach me, and finally howling laughter through which she managed a choking, "Put me down! Put me down!" until she banged her head on the backboard of her bed.

I knew that sound—not her bed—but not until that moment did I realize how much humor it contained.

When my own gasping transitioned into a weary pant, Jeanette brought me to my knees by role-playing a solo conversation with my admitting psychiatrist...

"Und zo, how long have you been levitating?" she said in an Inspector Clouseau imitation.

"First time, Doc, but the broad in the next room worked for months to make me ready for it," she said, imitating my blasé manner.

"Zee one who hears voices?"

"Actually, it's telepathy. That's a common thing for mothers who..."

"Yes, yes, und do you hear these voices?"

"She says I will."

"Ziss does not trouble you?"

"Fuck, try flying!"

There was more, all lost to me struggling to tell her to stop before I asphyxiated: the irony of this idea, after all we had been through, revved both of us into ragged sobs accented by cackle-gurgles, like masochists joyfully garroting each other with piano wire. Already challenging the limits of human physiology, this quasi-obscene theatre escalated when Jeanette abruptly inhaled what must have been an agonizing double snort for a 130lb woman, and the second funniest sound I had ever heard dropped me to the floor in convulsions. I can only speculate, but the complexity of my sobbing seizure must have been the funniest sound Jeanette had ever heard...

I have no idea how long we writhed in our respective states of euphoria, but both of my hands cramped from squeezing my penis. Saying this did nothing to resolve matters.

Rivers of pain rippling through tributaries of ecstasy emanating from body parts not designed for either activity finally created a simultaneous, double-huffing moment of exquisitely strained anticipation into which Jeanette said, "And you thought *I* was crazy."

Her emphasis immediately evoked the encompassing realization that telling anyone what I now knew to be true would require explaining everything. Shit, not even then: and the ludicrousness of *me* being trapped by the truth was an unbearable delight to my every corpuscle. I dropped the phone and began crawling across the fine pile carpet toward the bathroom, like a slug through my spittle and mucus. I didn't want Ed to find me lying in my own waste, face grotesquely contorted in what a puzzled coroner would eventually call mirthicide.

We met outside of Nolan's fifty minutes later, exchanged nods while visibly stifling impulses as if we each had a soot ring around one eye, then we entered the restaurant taking undue care not to trip over the pattern embedded in the tile floor. We took our usual seats by the window moments after they became available.

Uncertain about what drug we were on so early in the day, Bréta suggested an odd breakfast concoction that Jeanette declined with the unsolicited explanation, "You had to be there. The usual, please."

Bréta shrugged, leaving us in that peculiar space of not knowing what to say after everything and nothing had changed. After one false start each, Jeanette took the lead.

"Every direct experience I've had with Intent brought with it ramifications that transcended their immediate effects. Being yanked out of your body to glimpse our timeless existence, for example, proved that Spirit is real and their quest is really underway, but it also took your recovery past the point of change where it has now become inevitable."

"My recovery?"

"You are the first to be rescued."

"From what?"

"You believe in nothing and trust no one," she said warmly. "You would be empty without fear and suspicion, and the journey has exhausted you. You are on the cusp of becoming a permanent prisoner of your experiences, which is why you were sent to me now."

"But... but all of the lessons?" I stammered.

"...were preliminary," Jeanette said. "They were about having you accept that you need them. Even then you needed a push—a rise actually," she grinned.

"I'm just beginning?" I said, incredulously.

"Think about it; what have you really learned?"

"I can list all of the lessons," I said without hesitation. Then I realized my error. "But that's not what you mean."

"Tell me what I mean."

Working my tongue around unformed thoughts, I said, "You demonstrated how our thinking is dangerously skewed, how we constantly confuse ourselves, and I experienced enough moments of clarity to know how and why we're like this... kind of." I raised my brow.

"You're this close," she said, holding her thumb and forefinger together. "What was the essence of our chat on the stairs?"

My joyfully stunned state of mind allowed me to envision our last confrontation impersonally, and I saw it the way Jeanette wanted me to see it: the student's journey was a message that represented the ways of the masses who would fight to the last of their reason to remain as they were. There would be resistance, and many casualties of free will, but it could be no other way because as a species we're not all there.

"Shhhhit," I said, exhaling a whisper as I realized I had barely skimmed the surface of anything. I was an idiot—still an idiot, but a little less dangerous after the Universe... crap.

"Who... who are you?" I stammered.

"I think you know who I am," she said evenly.

It was too much to fathom: "I guess the question is what are you?" I said, finding courage to voice this thought.

"I guess it is," Kha-li's messenger deadpanned.

Epilogue: Volume One

Simplistically, Jeanette said with a casualness I had never seen when she was teaching, "there are three phases to your journey. Phase one represented your programming to mankind's ways, and their reactions to a world they created. Specifically, fear forced you to focus inwardly so that self-absorption became the shield that blinded you to all that was not about you, and self-importance demanded that you compete against the contradiction of hiding your secrets, while ensuring others acknowledged the accomplishments that created them. As you appeared to win battles in social and professional circumstances, self-interest demanded that you distance

yourself from the carnage both of these encounters generated, and the world you perceived became increasingly naïve. As a self-anointed monarch stranded on an island of his treasured secrets, you used cannon force denial and scimitar sarcasm to defend against perceived intruders, and you balanced these unwinnable conflicts by conquering unsuspecting women to allay your true sense of powerlessness."

"Thanks."

"I choose to accept your words as spoken, and I say that it has been my profound honor to have been gifted with you as my first student, this time around. You are not only welcome, but cherished; it is I who thank you."

"You're welcome," I mumbled.

Jeanette continued speaking with the casual air of what I interpreted as comprehensive relief that she was no longer alone: Josh was trying to be with her in the metaphysical sense, as far as I knew, but that was... Jeanette called it a "work in progress."

"Where phase one represented the unconscious and unavoidable self-stalking lessons created by the average man's choices," she said, "the second phase will assess behaviors that apply to everyone, to convince you that you can knowingly design your future."

"How will you do that?"

"I will lead to comprehending, as a single assumption, that beliefs design behaviors that design your future, and that what you do comes back to you. In particular, you will know that your beliefs are derived from your conformation to living in a physical reality, and your means of interpreting this experience through your personality is by using reason as a tool of assessment. You will know that your reason is based on, and derived from, assumptions imposed on you by your culture, and your interpretation of experiences as influenced by these assumptions. You will know that these assumptions are stairways to the truth, but they are not facts; they are second-hand convictions that generate the sincerity of acquired knowledge, but without the assessment that would make them true. It follows that the design of the teaching scheme is to bring your beliefs into full view, assess their true nature, and have you accept that they are flawed. And if your behaviors are not what you think they are, and you believe they represent you as opposed to beliefs you hold, you also don't know what you are really like.

This knowledge alone will do nothing to change the way you are. Your 'from the cradle' programming demands that a monumental effort, greater than the years of surreptitious influences that created them, is required, and that this cannot be done on your own. Reversing your programming incorporates a new mode of assessment based on energy, not ethics, justice, or morality, as these concepts are inherent to proper energy management. The bridge between using reason to navigate through your decisions, and energy management, runs through logic and pure understanding, to *knowing* directly."

"It sounds straight forward enough... just connect the dots as we go along."

Jeanette closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly before opening them to say, "Theoretically, you could make this an intellectual endeavor aimed at defeating the addictions of personality that uphold your self-image, and I will always try to offer my lessons in this impersonal way. However, I'm not aware of any instances where a student was able to accept them in this way, because they consider their behaviors to be who they are, not how they feel about an interpretation of themselves." She swallowed a thought, and said, "Everything I say will be an observation, but you will be unable to interpret my remarks in any way other than criticism until you can wrestle self-importance to its knees. As a result, phase two is the single most difficult physical evolutionary event you and everyone else will face, while its reward is the most

important achievement an individual can make. This is claiming, as your own knowledge, what you are really like. Without this knowledge your evolutionary journey all but stalls, because access to true power depends upon it. I say all-but stalls because, of necessity, you will know more than enough to harm yourself into reaching this stage at another time. Nothing is static."

"All of this training," I interjected a troubling thought, "means becoming like you—a loner, I mean?"

"Yes, until there are others of like mind, and similar training." She softened her tone. "You are also free to communicate anything to anyone as if you're still average, but know that if you speak about your training and unusual experiences the people who know you will think you have cracked under the strain of post traumatic stress, which isn't far from the truth. And those who don't know you won't want to know a crazy man any more than you wanted to know me in other than the biblical sense. That said," she grinned, "I've found a certain elegance in the irony of which one of us is really crazy."

I chuckled nervously.

"Right now," Jeanette said seriously, "leaving the world of the average man might seem like an arrogantly fanciful task, but you've already left your feet—literally this time—so all you can logically do is face your destiny head on. As you noted, it would be stupid not to."

"I guess I'm feeling—you know, like it's all too much to take in, and I still don't understand why me. I mean, I get that I volunteered, but there has to be a lot of candidates?"

"Kha-lib will tell you about your evolutionary history, and make that clear to you." She shifted in her seat, moving closer to me. "I want you to hold onto these words until the day you die, and I mean this literally, because they might be the reason you choose not to die on that day: you're not grasping the significance of what's on offer. There are many events to come that will overwhelm your sense and senses because they are designed to lead you into a cognition where it is possible to access knowledge directly. This will make life as you now know it antiquated."

I didn't have to ask.

"This other cognition is based on knowledge handed down for millennia by those who learned that we are energy, and that we literally assemble our view of the physical world energetically. From here, they deduced the processes responsible for our everyday awareness—by translating energy into data perception, experience, memory, and language. Cultural differences do not matter; we are all alike under the umbrella of the cognition of the average person. It is the evolutionary starting point of all physical journeys, and there are no exceptions. To believe you are not average by force of any ability, accomplishment, or lack thereof, is to pinpoint a lesson in your journey." She paused.

"So far so good," I said.

"To get out from under that umbrella," Jeanette continued, "one must have the evolutionary energy to deal with a relentless teacher who understands the moods and modes of man so well as to become an overt perpetrator of their student's freedom. Maybe predator is a more accurate term," she said, briefly closing her eyes, "but I'll deal with that tomorrow. To embrace this knowledge as one's own is to live in the cognition of a stalker, which is your natural bent. This cognition will someday include the clarity you frequently experienced and *Intending to Know* as assumptions of your energetically oriented reality."

"Are you saying my brushes with clarity will become a way of thinking, and that what I don't understand I can *Intend to Know*?"

"I am saying you will need to experience these things, because there is a part two to your journey. To help you grasp the enormity of this evolutionary step, simple examples of merely

standing on the doorstep of a stalker's cognition occurred when we shared large assumptions in our snappy conversations, and when you simply understood the back-story of the girls' tales. These experiences were not a function of *knowing* per se, but a consequence of enhancing your general awareness through practicing clarity for only a few weeks. Beginning to get the big picture?"

"Better."

She nodded. "I will not be offering my teachings in the linear fashion that your average means of cognition is geared to evaluate, but be assured, the lessons are based on a coherent system of regulations. I will explain key aspects of this system as they become appropriate to reveal, because grasping the system is key to... something else."

"Are these regulations what made your merchants... and you, look like you've lost your mind?"

Grinning a slim affair, she said, "From the stalker's standpoint, these occasions are reversed."

"So I'm nuts?" I joked.

"And?" she said, enticing me to conquer another intellectual hill using her anticipation as propellant.

"Annd... shit," I said crisply, like the last word spoken on most scorched cockpit recorders. "This place really is an asylum."

Nodding with sad satisfaction, Jeanette said, "There will be a stark moment when you are momentarily standing outside the cognition of the average person, and you will embrace this recognition in its totality. I suspect you will need something to hang onto."

Apparently satisfied with my limited comprehension of my circumstance, she said impersonally, "To help you get you over yourself, and enter into a new cognition, I will use every resource I can to stalk your beliefs into plain sight. Everything you say, think, and do is fair game, including your dreams, because I will either know about them or be in them to propel you along. It is irrelevant if you think you are hallucinating, or that I am lying about anything; the sooner you embrace the fact that Spirit has manifest on your behest, and that I can know whatever I need to know to teach you, the better off you will be."

"Be in my dreams?"

"For our purposes, the dreamer and the dreamed are reversed, so why not?"

"It's a bit personal," I said.

"Nothing is personal. That's the entire point."

"What if I don't make it?"

"Life will become intolerable," she said evenly. "As we get to phase three," she said, interrupting my thoughts, "you will experience the magical arts that the returning emissaries will have mastered, to definitively know their abilities are real. The transition between the gathering phase we've finished, and unmasking the truly nasty person that lies beneath his good intentions, depends on clarity of thought. You will also need to continue developing this clarity to comprehend the magical arts on their terms, because there are few accurate translations into your terms. Tomorrow, we will begin showing you how your reason has been corrupted."

To my surprise, Jeanette stood up, smiled warmly, and with a jaunty wave toward Bréta all but skipped toward the door.

"I'll get the tab," I joked.

She turned, smiled an unrecognizably youthful face, and said, "That lesson could include dismembering the illusion that you are a generous soul. See you tomorrow at nine, my friend."

Jeanette left Nolan's gleefully, and me with a bill plus a ten percent tip that took all of my cash to the penny.

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Phase Two: Crossing the Bridge of Reason

This section deals with how an otherwise intelligent species managed to perch itself on the brink of annihilation, based on our inability to accurately assess our true nature: Jeanette will claim and explain how "reason", as our most valuable asset in a physical existence, has been grossly compromised. This lesson was the first step in breaking me free from the "world of average people," so that I could intellectually comprehend things to come, and accept mystical experiences without fearing that I was losing my mind. Even then...

Chapter 41- Elements of Delusion

Exploring another way of assessing reality requires that the student lose their death grip on enough core beliefs to acquiesce to directed experiences, without embracing these directions as the cause of the experience. When they subsequently glimpse the underlying construction of events as a way of thinking—one of essences—they may become satisfied with their new wisdom, and stall. As this is only a transition point to a broader vision still, the teacher may more vigorously adopt the core moods of stalking as they feel are necessary. These moods are ruthlessness, cunning, patients, and sweetness, none of which are what they appear to be: the stalker is never cruel, deceitful, neglectful, or insincere with any student, and they have no need to be with anyone else. Of these moods, or modes, ruthlessness is required to push the student to the level their evolutionary energy can handle. Such acts are always more than the student has ever before encountered, regardless of them having achieved "extraordinary" feats in the reasoned world of faster, farther, stronger, longer, riskier, and more talented or destructive.

In the stalkers view, the internal struggles of self-discovery are the epitome of human challenge, for to triumph is to open the door to an unimaginable world of freedoms earned by way of mastering impeccability*. Jeanette called this transition point 'crossing the bridge of reason to logic', only from which is the ineffable clarity of accessing knowledge directly possible.

***(Parenting properly is one of many such lessons; it seeks a selfless path that demands the best of oneself as a responsibility rewarded by the progress of others.)**

The day after rising to the ceiling of my bedroom dawned warm and dry, and my mood was positively expectant as I drove to see Jeanette in West Vancouver.

Arriving a few minutes earlier than our agreed upon time, I sat in the upstairs living room until she finished putting on her morning face. Minutes later, she appeared from her bedroom at the far end of a hall, and I stood to meet her at the mid-house stairway. Before I had taken two steps she cocked her head coyly, fixing her gaze on the sofa behind me.

"Shit," I snarled under my breath, and I returned to fluff the green accent pillow I had used to cushion my back.

Without further comment, as was her way after making a point, we left the house for our upscale bakery on Marine Drive; seven minutes later, we entered the multi-terraced open room through wide wooden doors, where Brandi's bubbly greeting always entertained us.

We had toast and tea over an encompassing conversation about the similarities between my personal development lessons—the role-playing that had actually been real—and Carlos Castaneda's meticulously chronicled encounters with the sorcerer, don Juan Matus.

Categorically, my faux apprenticeship had more in common with his than I realized, but at an introductory level primarily focused on revealing specific behavioral flaws. She said that there

were many allegorical tales in don Juan's lessons that applied directly to me, as well, but these were for another time.

For now, I needed to appreciate that the world had confused me with social practices and political policies that did not stand up to logical scrutiny. This could not have happened, she said, had I been aware of my true essence of conscious energy, or spirit if you will: mankind had lost touch with our source, thereby isolating us from knowledge that was otherwise available, and from which we would clearly see the ruse.

Over second cups of tea, she asked me to review the essence of the lessons she had subjected me to under false pretenses, but not as a test: I could better organize and integrate what she had told me into new intellectual relationships, as we moved into my first formal day of lessons in clarity.

Under her casual guidance, this review included how she had surreptitiously presented me with an overview of reasoning versus logic, when she talked about her screenplay characters seeing their world in terms of the underlying nature of events. Many people could not help but argue on behalf of the reason for their actions, because self-interest blinded them to its logical essence. Individually, this focus on "self" explained why seeing events clearly was a difficult process to master, and it became almost impossible when our institutions used it to create a mass manipulation of our reasoning. Their goal was to create an apparently consistent, therefore equally reasonable confusion they could direct.

Because I was inside this manipulation, the first step she had taken to free me from its grasp was to make me aware of how I contributed to my confusion. In this way, I had set aside some of the influences of "self" and eventually created enough clarity to allow me to peek through the fog of my way of thinking. She said this was but a small part of a breath-taking view from which nothing would ever be the same, because it created a pathway that would relentlessly usher me toward a massive assumption. She said I was almost there, but I needed to see how a continuity developed—any continuity would do, but one of communications was my best bet.

In this regard, the heart of the matter was that while words reflect our thoughts, they are also events that program how we think, therefore what we will do. This happens at the level of unconscious assumptions, because we are unaware of the effects of maintaining the continuity of any perception. In fact, we are unaware that we even have continuities that feed a master view of such importance that to shatter it is to irrevocably alter one's life.

Enigmatically, she said her ultimate goal was to shatter my master continuity, but only after she had taught me how to assemble a new one, otherwise I would be an unreasonable man adrift in a world of reason. Equally puzzling, she said she wasn't really teaching me how to reassemble a new life; she was making me ready for Spirit to do this.

She had me acknowledge that, after only a few lessons, I was seeing things more clearly than usual, and experiencing unexpected insights. She had followed this lesson by having me mimic a screenplay character's efforts to gather energy enough to focus outside of the perceptions the average person had available to them, but did not use. Gathering energy, she emphasized again, is based on not behaving poorly because this always created circumstances I would later have to deal with.

As I practiced energy management, precise speech, and following through on what I said I'd do, I also began to recognize other people's incomplete and/or misleading ways. This was the point at which she had me purposefully focus on the words people used, and guided me to assess them for their underlying beliefs—the essence of their statements. This essence was evident after I discarded the manipulations and convolutions pandemic to common conversations. She called

this rehearsing our self-image, attributed the idea don Juan, and said I'd see how this is a precise observation soon enough.

Back to the review, in a relatively short time I had come to see how others secretly designed their personal and professional deceits, just as I had failed to grasp how my incomplete thoughts led to incomplete sentences that gutted my implied commitments. That was my rule.

At this point, I told Jeanette that I was beginning to see the design of her teaching methods, and she asked me to explain what I meant. I said that through her preliminary procedures, and then our crisp exchanges, I had come to think of the word "assumptions" in three levels.

Categorizing these, I said we form unconscious assumptions directly through experiences we never have to assess for validity, because they are ever-present for everyone: these are the root assumptions of reality, such as gravity. We also form opinion-based assumptions through the building of beliefs that evolve as circumstances warrant. This is our Reason, and sharing reasoned assumptions requires that people agree on basic interpretations of events in a moment that may change. For example, the government is doing a good job, but the Chicago Cubs baseball team sucks—or vice-versa.

Jeanette snickered at this, because she had lived in Chicago, and hearing about the Cubs was as unavoidable as sugar. She added that reason-based assumptions are riddled with errors we manipulate into a continuity of thought to avoid disturbing our self-image.

A Stalker's assumption, I next said, is something else entirely. These were deliberately sought and taught, piece by irrefutable piece, and dealt with precise knowledge based on understanding the essences of the events that constructed them. These essences never change—they are pure understandings that effortlessly attach to other essences, as one discovers them. As such, sharing a Stalker's assumption with an apprentice about any topic could replace a book of instructions with a simple glance—as seemed to be their design. These assumptions seemed to be entirely about behavior, so far.

Jeanette added that while behavior dealt with what the average person deemed reasonable under a circumstance, the stalker's point of view was devoid of reason: it was ultimately about energy. Seemingly pleased with my review, Jeanette said, "Now that everything is fresh and condensed, and you've begun to arrange what you know so that it's at your finger tips, I'm going..."

"I have?" I joked... kind of.

"Never forget this: we cannot help but order information, or our lives for that matter, to suit the way we think. It's what gives us away."

"Locked in," I said, pointing to my temple.

"In this phase of your training, I'm going to help you reorder how you think, to build toward a Stalker's assumption in the same way we expanded the definition of entitlement into a broader assumption—not head on, but through application. That's how we learn anything worthwhile. Do you agree?"

"I do."

Jeanette sipped the last of her tea, patted her lips with a paper napkin, and put it under her cup. While she was reaching for her purse, I said, "I've got it this time."

"Thanks." She sat upright, and cupped her hands on the table. "We'll begin building this assumption with a simple overview of your potential cycle of development this time around, and of everyone's eventual journey."

I made myself comfortable.

"In our native state, we are conscious energy that chooses everything about our path of development, because free will reigns supreme. But we are not all-knowing, so we have to learn the energy-based rules of whatever version of reality we're in, which we do from those who have been there before us. This applies whether we are in our energetic dream state, or in a physical reality. So far?"

"So good."

She nodded. "Everything in physical reality is a manifestation of energy vibrating at what we perceive to be physical matter: our literal translations of events are actually metaphors for what we have created, and the lessons we need to learn. Hold that thought, as well. Your entire Identity, with a capital 'I'," she continued, "has chosen a cycle of physically based lessons. In this particular incarnation you are the student learning on Phillip's behalf, and yours: he has designed a lesson-quest to which you agreed, but you could not know what it is while you were in it. This is no different from anyone else who comes here. More over... and this is the crux of the matter, the energy-essence that is Phillip vibrates extremely fast, because he has attained a high level of knowledge. Physical reality vibrates very slowly, which means his knowledge, in its purest form, cannot manifest with you consciously. Instead, you possess the physical translations of his knowledge—their metaphors being your senses, like intuition and conscience, which attach you to his knowledge of what is possible, and how things should be done."

"Still with you... but slipping."

"The goal in everyone's development is to learn what they need to know about traveling in any reality: in your energetic state, this is to use pure logic to navigate through other's environments and experiences while recognizing the sacredness of all things. In our physical state, this translates into learning how to assume total responsibility for our acts. This assessment is based on our ability to reason until we have gathered the energy to transcend the need for reason, and we enter the realm of logical assessment. It follows that the goal of physically based incarnations is to increase our speed, by gaining knowledge, thereby learning how to translate our reasoned physical experiences into knowledge that applies in our energetic existence. In other words, this process takes us from mankind's reasoning, to spirit's pure logic, after passing through a number of steps."

"Still hanging on."

"The first of these steps is to recognize reason as a tool that uses beliefs as a guide, but you can't employ this recognition until you have energetically *seen*, or logically assessed a circumstance from outside the grasp of reason. Tell a fish it is wet, and you get the same expression you're giving me now."

"Catching up. Go ahead."

"As we just talked about, think of this experience as blazing a path to clarity that you will never forget, so my goal is to lead you to having this experience because this point of clarity cannot be reasoned, nor reasonably explained."

"Why not?"

"It employs your inner senses. In fact, the less reason you have in play the better you will be able to utilize these senses. This means we first need to cleanse your reasoning of polluting influences, so that you can recognize the path to understanding the logic of energy—of impeccable acts. Let's get going," said, ending her introduction.

"Simple overview..." I muttered as we stood to leave.

Jeanette tittered until we reached the cash register, where she formally said, "I will list the elements of the assumption we're after through the two cognitions as best I can. These are the reasoning..."

"As best you can?" I said, handing the waitress a twenty-dollar bill.

"Again, some of the elements don't translate while others may only appear to have a relevant conversion. As I was saying, the two cognitions are the reasoning of the average person, and the logic of a Stalker. Don't be concerned about memorizing the elements."

"Things will fall into place?" I interjected.

"Things are already in place; they're just not here. They're over there," she said, pointing imprecisely toward Stanley Park, across the inlet. "You have to cross the bridge of reason to understand what is awaiting everyone who makes that trek."

"Uh huh," I said, as the puzzled cashier handed me a fiver, three one dollar coins, two quarters, and a nickel. I put a dollar in the tip jar.

"So what's the assumption specifically about?"

"That's for you to discover, like you did with the entitlement lesson," she said, taking two quick steps to hold the door open for me, "but nice try."

"Thanks," I mumbled, passing by to the outside. "Where we going now?"

"We go big road to many square huts," she deadpanned.

"Sorry, where *are* we going now?"

Coming along side me, she said, "A walk along the Denman Street shops, then into the park should work for us today. We'll see." Jeanette looped her arm through mine, looking up at the ragged edge of clouds creeping over the western horizon of Vancouver Island.

"Are you ready?" she said, looking my way.

"Go for it."

"All of this training is designed to make you ready to access true power. This power is knowledge of energy you cannot handle in any other way but impeccably, otherwise it might kill you. That wouldn't be helpful."

"I can see that."

"Handling power properly is not something that can be reasoned; it can only be understood after you understand who, what, and where you really are. Right now, you reason who you think you are, so we have to neuter your personality's influence and redefine yourself—what you are—according to energetic rules. Where you really are is what we will discuss today. Without these understandings, handling the knowledge of true power is akin to a child playing with matches in a dynamite factory." She took a deep breath.

"Just curious, why are you beginning with where I am?"

"You didn't notice that we began your formal lessons the moment you stood up from the couch—a lesson you reacted poorly to instead of embracing it as a monumental event."

"A monumental pillow?"

"Some people might think that the first formal lesson, on the first day of knowingly being taught Spirit's ways, was special."

"The lesson wasn't new." I shrugged. "I was pissed at myself because of that. Anyway," I said as the thought occurred to me, "yesterday you said my first lesson would be about how cheap I am?"

"I said it could be, and this is probably part of it: I don't get to choose what I teach—not the way you think I do. So you know," she exhaled, "I have to go through your lessons ahead of you,

and one of my first was to assess the moment—every moment—to see what it tells me. This morning, your actions chose the lesson on knowing where you are."

"How do you figure that?"

"You were with a teacher of Universal knowledge, and you acted like you were in kindergarten." Squeezing my arm, she said, "Knowing where you also are entails understanding your overall conditioning to physical reality, and how you shaped your beliefs into a self-image from which you draw conclusions that you call your personality." She shifted her grip to my elbow, as I mouthed, "Conditions, shape, conclude..." "yup—everything you said was in English."

She looked at me quizzically.

"Your statement was complex," I said, confused that she didn't catch my meaning.

"Be that as it may, the essence of your comment was that you didn't grasp the relationship between handling power, and the elements you must understand so that it doesn't kill you. Instead of taking this seriously, you tried to disguise your ignorance in humor." She stopped short. "The essence of your obfuscation was an attempt to manipulate my view of your intelligence which, again, did not take into account where you really are; or who you really are, for that matter."

"With a teacher, and I'm a student, got it."

"This could be a very long day," she muttered. Then to me, "You must ask me questions as soon as they come to mind. I already know that you're a reasonable man," she said smiling.

"I suddenly have more questions," I said amiably, as Jeanette nudged us to one side to allow a mother with a double stroller room to pass by.

"Go ahead," she said, winking at the infants.

"You said, examine events through the reasoning of the average person, and through logic." We started walking again. "Are you saying reasoning isn't logical?"

She looked my way, staring vacantly.

"Really," I said, "One second the distinction is clear to me and the next... not so much."

"Reason is a tool through which you funnel beliefs that help you develop logic."

"Is logic the Stalker's cognition?"

"Logic is the beginning point for clearly accessing other senses—like *knowing*, *seeing*, and controlled dreaming." She paused, formulated an analogy, and said, "You were conformed to see this world as a solid, stable construction, when it is your perceptions that literally create this apparently seamless physical continuity from an intricate energy illusion. In the same way, you have shaped your beliefs into seamless assumptions from which you have drawn your conclusions about who you think you are. These conclusions are an entanglement of beliefs *about* you. They are not you; they represent how you feel about yourself, and/or how you want to be perceived by others.

"Is my personality an energetic flaw in a physical body?"

Shaking her head in mock frustration, Jeanette said, "You are ignorant; your beliefs are flawed, so acting them out with the best of intentions can wreak havoc." Seeing that I was having trouble making this distinction, she said, "Consciousness is not Spirit; it's a tool—a light that Spirit focuses in endless ways to experience and explore all that it can, because it can. In a similar way, your personality is a tool of self-exploration the elements of which you focus in particular ways to develop understandings that go beyond the need for those elements, and finally the tool itself."

"Elements such as being greedy, for example?"

"Yes—you focus on greed until it proves to be a bad idea, then the reasoning behind not being greedy becomes a logical conclusion. At this point, you've shed that aspect of your reason, and so of your personality. Overall, your personality is that light of conscious awareness when you know yourself. Stalkers literally use their personality as a tool for more advanced development, no different than other's might use greed for the same purpose, or they can discard it entirely."

"Discard their personality?"

"Yes... we'll get to that."

"Uh huh, so I shape beliefs into conclusions about who I think I am?"

"Correct."

"What are they?"

"The point of stalking is to discover them."

"You can't just tell me; I mean do you know how Phillip put me together?"

"I already have told what you are like, but you had no reason to believe me. Now that spirit has introduced themselves directly to you, you do. Unfortunately it's still only a reason, so we have to make my claims undeniable convictions, and finally *knowing*."

"You've lost me."

"To have you understand the nature of the average person's confusion, and gain some semblance of clarity, we had to dissect the elements of confusion. Through practice, we separated you from them; practice is what made them undeniable and easily recognizable thereafter. In the same way, we have to dissect your self-image, and through practice render its elements moot. These elements are beliefs you hold about yourself, most of which are inaccurate... for now."

"So if I've got this right, my personality is a conclusion drawn from an entanglement of inaccurate beliefs?" Before she could reply, I said, "That explains why you're so big on teaching me essences."

"I am not teaching you essences; I am teaching you how to lose your reason, so that you can see them for yourself."

"Lose my mind is more like it."

"It amounts to the same thing," she said, as we reached the intersection of 14th Street and Bellevue. A red neon hand flashed that the traffic lights were about to change.

"For our purposes," she carried on, "the essential elements of all personalities are chosen before birth to suit particular challenges. We shape these proclivities through our interactions with the outside world, which we funnel through three mechanisms of self-perception; I literally mean your perception of self. We've talked about them."

"I remember that self-importance, self-indulgence, and self-absorption form our self-image, but I don't recall their characteristics."

"We'll cover those as they come up again. For now, know that they are the mechanisms through which you shape and express your views, and therefore from which you draw your conclusions about whom you think you are," she said as we began crossing the street. "Self-image is the singularly most formidable assumption of self-corroborating beliefs a human can have. Nevertheless, like all temporary beliefs, a self-image will eventually bring you to experiences that no longer bear out your views, and the image changes. Eventually, you don't need a self-image either—you will *know* yourself."

"An example of changing my image would be what?"

"You might be confronted with a dilemma you thought you were steadfast on, like the fight or flight response, and surprise yourself. Personal attributes need the same kind of dose of reality to be corroborated."

"Personal attributes such as?" I said, as Jeanette's nudge led us toward the park benches on the other side of the railway tracks, near the Ferry building.

"Such as you not realizing you are cheap, but we're taking care of that." She motioned the example aside. "The point is there comes a time in everyone's evolution when their beliefs have outlived their usefulness, as is their design. This is when a teacher..."

"Sorry... beliefs outlive their usefulness as what, again?" I said as we came to a bench. We sat down facing Burrard Inlet.

"Beliefs guide us toward knowledge through trial, error, and assessment; they have no substance of their own. They are directions to consider, and possibly explore by acting on them. Fighting for them is as stupid as defending north."

"Over what else?"

"Over any other idea; it's just a direction?" she said, raising her brow.

"Right, but we use magnetic north more."

"Do you want to kill me over it?"

It took me a moment to realize I had defended magnetic north, which created the turning point Jeanette wanted me to grasp: beliefs are only ideas until we bestow upon them the false substance of our self-image, then they become a cause as artificial as the self-image that created it.

"Point made," I said.

"Excellent—what is it?" she said, surprising me. Before I could respond, Jeanette said, "This isn't a test; it's to cement your gains, and add them to the assumption we're ultimately after."

Nodding, I said, "Beliefs guide us to and through our experiences so that we can examine, modify, discard, and essentially solidify convictions based on logic."

"Correct, then a teacher arrives to dismantle them all, beginning with your personality."

"Just so we're on the same page, essentially your lessons are about dismantling all of the elements; these are my beliefs, the assumptions and conclusions they formed, the personality I formed from these, and the mode by which I formed all of these things—reason?"

"You've got it."

"Leaving me with what?"

"Not with—without."

"Without what?"

"The continuity that makes you human... don't worry about it," she said, casually. You'll understand when we get there."

Apparently editing her thoughts, she slowly said, "Dismantling our vision of ourselves is an excruciating process, but the reward is what don Juan called the single most important achievement in everyone's development." Looking into my eyes, she said, "It's called a Conditional Death. This is the moment in which you embrace, as your own knowledge, the concoction of beliefs and conditions upon which you constructed your personality, and dismiss them in their entirety. In that moment you are euphorically free—an essence upon which you have to replace the void with the disciplines that brought you to seeing what you are really like. Otherwise, the elastics of a lifetime of poor programming will draw you back to the person you once were. I think I mentioned this earlier."

"Is this what you called surrendering your self-image?"

"It is; I didn't want to use words that might scare you." She grinned.

"And losing the continuity that makes me human is calming?"

"I'm not perfect."

"What happens if I don't have one of those conditional things?"

"You need to stop focusing on the negative, as a reactive response to information that intimidates you," she said, shaking her head. "A Conditional Death occurs at the behest of Spirit moving your point of awareness to the position where what you are really like envelopes you." She pursed her lips. "That's not precisely correct, because you intellectually have to be aware of what you are really like to recognize the elements of the moment you are being freed from." No matter," she flicked her wrist. "Without this event," she answered my question, "access to more advanced knowledge is blocked."

"Meaning I'm doomed to be stupid?"

"Meaning you're not responsible with what you think you know, so you're not ready for more," she grinned, "until you are."

"When would that be?"

"We demonstrated that moment first thing this morning: by condensing the elements of what you knew so far, you created an assumption that was more than the sum of its parts, because you're constructing the framework of essences."

"Like you did with the elements of entitlement?"

"Correct, and as you said essences easily and instantly attach to each other. So doing this now would make you ready to learn more of the unreasonable assumption we're after, because you are getting rid of reasoned information, and crushing the remainder into knowledge." She grinned. "Start with the idea that we are energy: if you think of the elements of your personality as a cone of focuses that are always interacting to appear to be consistent, it'll flow more easily."

And it did: After a moment, I said, "From the tip of the cone; we are energy living by energetic rules. We condense this energy, and its rules, into physical translations. Moving down the cone, physical experience indoctrinates us to the affects of the first set of rules as assumptions we never have to consider. These include weight, distance, time, pain, and so on." I motioned the physical laws aside. "The second set of assumptions comes from interacting with people, and they infiltrate all of our personal experiences: we compartmentalize these experiences in the three cores of self-image, according to the personalities we have chosen. Collectively, the beliefs we form from embracing all of these assumptions design our experiences."

"You're almost there: what holds all of these influences together to make our perceptions seamless?"

"I know the answer, but I'm not sure I can explain it because your goal is to have me transcend it: reason is the glue."

"Is it fair to say that your problem is with defining reason?"

"It is, sorry."

"Reason," Jeanette said academically, "is typically thought to be the capacity to comprehend events in a rational way. However, rationality is dependent upon how we view our experiences within familiar environments and conditions, and we initially have no choice but to adopt certain values until experiences customize our view." She paused to allow me to bring our previous conversations to bear.

I grunt-nodded, ready for more.

She carried on: "The process of customization is multi-layered. As we've discussed, our first assumptions about physical reality, such as weight and distance, are interpretations of psychological and energetic conditions that exist in our natural state. These root assumptions are literally forced upon our form causing us to perceive physical reality in the way that we do, while our interactions with others create social assumptions that conform our behavior to suit our culture. Taken together, these influences form a consensus about not just what we see, but all of our perceptions in and to the world at large. Stalkers call this level of perception our inventory, and it includes all of the average person's experiences. For practical purposes, if you can perceive it or conceive of it, it belongs to your inventory." She paused again.

I nodded to signal that I intellectually understood my inventory included everything real and imagined.

"In a nutshell, the world has been incessantly described to us until we are capable of perceiving it as it has been described, then we color it to suit our beliefs."

"That makes sense."

"This process creates an internal dialogue that maintains the description. This dialogue includes the person you think you are standing in the time and place you think you exist, believing the things you were told to believe, when all of these ideas are borrowed and shared translations of our underlying reality." Nodding to herself, she said, "You have agreed with the root assumptions of a physical experience, such as the three dimensions and gravity. If you had not, you couldn't function. You'd probably be dead. Correct?"

"Yes."

"You have also agreed with the consensus assumptions of proper conduct. If you had not, you'd be in prison."

"Correct."

"These conformations create the apparent continuity of our existence: our perceptions literally assemble the world we know, but we need a way to get from point A to point B safely. Otherwise, we would all stare at the four-way stop sign and do nothing. Do you see how that would be?"

"I do."

"To simplify this circumstance, all of the intricate influences of perception we have discussed create your personally reasoned arena of *should*. These same influences apply to the other three drivers, but we all interpret circumstances uniquely so we need a basis of agreement upon which to interact with others in a coherent way. Reason is our operating system. It's the way we assess our experiences as we navigate through our days. That said, as you know from your clarity lessons, there is only the assumption of continuity: the process of reasoning is full of personal gaffs and gaps, but our self-image fills them." She took a thoughtful breath.

"Still with you," I said.

"The point you're struggling with is that reason is a tool—a transitional stage in our development, the same way that learning the alphabet is the forerunner to communicating in sentences. The next stage for everyone is learning how to see through the beliefs and illusions that reason uses, foremost of which is to lose self as the focal point through which we see the world—losing that filter is to lose reason is to gain logic."

She took a breath. "Again, everyone's developmental quest is to see past their literal physical perceptions, recognize the metaphors that physicality represents, and untangle their beliefs to break the trance of their conformations. Doing this reveals the illusions they held about

the world, and their place in it. This is true knowledge, and as knowledge increases speed it brings one closer to the pure perceptions of Spirit."

"Got it."

"Not yet: we have to deal with the first barrier you have to learning an unreasonable assumption—doubt."

Chapter 42 - Enemies of Learning

"I don't doubt you: I know Spirit exists, so it's only logical that I believe everything you—and they say."

"Doubt is reasoned, so it is a barrier to comprehending what we're after, which is setting you up to experience the assumption directly. Blind acceptance is also reasoned, so it would stand in the way as well, would it not?" She paused.

"Other than I believe you, sure." I said.

"The most prevalent flaw in the average person's reasoning process is a ditch where they park their second-hand convictions, and call them logical conclusions. It happens like this," she said, holding up her hand to forestall my question. "Like most people, you change your ways one severe event at a time, while your ego and intellect combine to convince you that the original experience will cause you to avoid it again. This makes you feel safe, and you quickly ignore the potential of similar things happening by way of not assessing the contributing elements, or by molding them into rules you are convinced is knowledge. You subsequently demonstrate that this is a lie by not incorporating that knowledge into your way of living: you pay it the lip service of a belief, and not act on the conviction that your life might depend on your knowledge some day. So while your out-of-body experience provided you with a single conviction, you have yet to develop a new way of thinking from it, because doubt and suspicion are so much a part of you."

"They were earned."

"But not fully learned; you adapted to higher levels of danger in Lebanon so that, during the nightly Beirut car bombings, you didn't even bother to drop to the floor. Correct?"

"Being on the floor wouldn't have changed much if a car flew through the wall."

"So you metaphorically stood on the outside of the branch to get a better view of someone cutting it off, instead of applying your new knowledge to all circumstances?" She gathered her breath. "A minute ago, you took an hours-old incident—proof of Spirit's existence—which created a true conviction from which you claimed you believe everything I say. The problem with your claim is that, not an hour ago, you demonstrated it's a lie." Chuckling at my constipated look, she said, "You couldn't graciously accept a simple lesson." Miming fluffing a small pillow, Jeanette whispered, "Shit," under her breath. "How shallow is that comment on the conviction that you believe everything I say?"

"I didn't call you a liar," I said petulantly.

"My point is that you have not integrated your knowledge into a conviction. If you had, you would have believed me when I said there are no small things in the Stalker's world, that nothing comes from nothing, and to stop any poor practice is to not neglect the power you wield. You didn't appreciate these things, because you filtered your neglect through your self-image."

"The true circumstance being that I was with a teacher... I know that now."

"But you don't: the true circumstance was that this lesson is very difficult to master, that my constant reminders should cause you to focus on what you're really doing, and where you really are at all times. The true circumstance was that these lessons are designed to enhance your energy by always doing the proper thing. Getting pissed at yourself, or anyone, is a waste of

time, which fails to take into account that you will die. It is also a waste of energy, which fails to take into account that you need all you can earn to endure the training leading up to your Conditional Death, without which you can't go further than the average man's ego allows."

"But I really do believe you," I said stoically.

"You just think you do."

"How is thinking I believe you and believing you not the same thing?" I said, perplexed.

Exhaling a substantial puff of patience through her nostrils, she said, "Your claim is missing a decisive element." She cleared her throat. "As an average person, true conviction arrives as a consequence of feeling that your life is at stake. Without this, you are indulging your reasoning on what you deem to be critical beliefs, like sincerely concluding that you believe everything I say. Your claim is an off-shoot of the main event, and it is certainly reasonable, but like most people you do nothing with it but make promises to yourself." She shrugged. "The missing word in your conclusion is that you *should* believe everything I say, because it would be unreasonable not to. This makes your sincerity a second-hand conviction reasoned through the aspect of your self-image that deals with the appearance of rationality. But our goal is to get you to cross that line."

"What put my survival at stake about spirit's existence?"

"You were nearly scared to death on the way up to the ceiling. Speaking of which," she said, as if I might argue the point, "you had a dream that provided you with the conviction to keep going with me, when it was not reasonable to do so, before you had your out-of-body experience—the wraith?"

"Right."

"From a life threatening situation," she said, "you gained the conviction that you were safe. Because it was delivered in the dream state, it also took away your fear of the unknown in general, and the unknowable in particular—that being Spirit." Jeanette leaned forward, stood, and stepped toward home.

I did the same.

"Another example occurred," she said, taking my arm, "after the first channel from Kha-lib. You had to decide whether I was crazy or that, according to Kha-lib, the world was crazy and I was actually one of the saner people in it. Correct?"

"Uh huh," I said, though we'd never discussed this.

"To do this, you had to deal with the apparent incongruity your reason created between my intellect and my foolish beliefs, until you had your out-of-body experience." We stepped off the grass onto Argyle Street.

"What difference did that make?"

"It was a definitive event that made my sanity a reasonable conclusion, because you had a new framework within which to view an otherwise unreasonable event. However, you did nothing more with that knowledge than you did with your extreme combat experiences." She gestured laconically. "You proselytized about the rules to others—facts that begged you to make the next logical leap and employ them all of the time. Claiming that you believe everything I say, based on one conviction, is indulging your reason in the same way because you're really not sure that you're not nuts."

"What? I know what happened, and I didn't make it up."

"But you have yet to make the next logical leap."

"Which is?"

"Which is that you don't understand this world; you literally left it behind. Your continuity has taken a huge blow, and you're pretending otherwise."

"I hadn't thought about that."

"Precisely my point," she said tapping her temple. "You can't help but challenge some of my assertions when your reason hasn't accepted that it is inadequate for dealing with the way things really are. It's defending familiar turf—like the importance of magnetic north, because it has run into the first natural enemy of learning, fear."

"Of what?"

"No quest is ever what we thought it would be, and as you have amply demonstrated most people do not know how to learn. They memorize events like statistics, without assessing the underlying natures or connecting acts that would reveal the continuity of events. Instead, they claim their poignant encounters generated an encompassing conviction, then they roost on the fact of its occurrence with no real understanding of their role in it; they are surprised when it happens again."

"You've made your point about fear, but where does doubt come into it?"

"You have reasoned your fear of learning life-changing knowledge into doubt, which is a more socially acceptable response for a man." She grinned like the Mona Lisa. "The fact is, you must have doubts because you still rely on reason, while at the same time you secretly know that you can't trust it. So I'm not accusing you of insincerity when you say you believe me; I'm explaining how your sincerity is as cleverly contrived through your self-image as is your selective vision of your wonderful self. This is the difference between believing me and thinking that you do," she said as we separated to walk around her car. "To the returning emissaries, this difference would get them killed. It follows that they have to transcend reason, by leaving all of their beliefs behind; they have to *know*. That's their rule."

Leaning forward onto the roof, I circled an unformed point: "Most doctors say that out-of-body events are not indicative of the existence of life after death; that would be the realm of God. They say the experience is a hallucination created in a particular part of the brain, usually under traumatic conditions or drugs. I think they can even map the event electronically," I added as if this mattered.

"And?" she said, leaning comfortably across her side of the roof.

"Some religious doctors also believe this." I paused to better formulate my question, as Jeanette's head-tilt indicated I should.

"If religion has them believe in God," I said, getting a handle on my circuitous thinking, "and science has them dismiss experiences that point to His existence, is science or religion the second-hand conviction?"

Jeanette opened her door and sat inside her car.

I did the same, and we buckled up.

Taking a considered breath, she said, "They have mapped the position where the brain *interprets* a conscious event in physical terms... an event of consciousness is a better way of saying it." She began fishing through her cloth carryall for her keys. "The doctors who dismiss out-of-body experiences as hallucinations are embracing beliefs entrenched during the arduous training they use to define themselves. If they believe in God, a concept they also have not experienced—or recognized as such—they are reasoning away evidence they don't agree with."

"What about patriotism?"

"What about ducks?"

"Sorry, would it be right to say that patriotism is also entrenched during an arduous conformation process, and soldiers use it to define themselves?"

"Not only soldiers, otherwise it would correct to say that."

"Are you implying that all beliefs are second-hand convictions?"

"If they're missing the defining element of logically assessed experience, yes."

"Patriots experience their country every day."

"They define their experiences through reason, which has been culturally conformed to embrace patriotism as a way of life not to be tampered with, especially by logic. That said, they do not and cannot experience their country; they can only embrace the *idea/beliefs* behind the concept of a country—they experience their culture. More to the point, we are our culture and as such we are the caretakers of values that may or may not still be in development. We are not our country, and you can't kill the idea of one by killing the people who it." Jeanette looked over her shoulder. "It's ludicrous that with the simple waving of a flag people will kill for an idea like magnetic north."

"I defended magnetic north without thinking."

"And there you have it in a nutshell—without thinking."

I looked behind us to see what was holding us up: a straggly stream of walkers clad in yellow T-shirts were passing behind us. Finally, I said, "So it's through the gaps that this awareness of self inserts into our reasoning that a religious doctor can explain away my experience without disrupting his religious beliefs?"

"Correct, which is no different than a soldier slaughtering people without tainting his idea of his country, maybe even altruistically enhancing it because it's just an idea you can make do anything you like."

"Why doesn't it taint his culture?"

"But it does; he just doesn't want to see it." She took a settling breath, and said, "Reason allows us to form all manner of ridiculous conclusions. Logically, you either have a source of an infinitely diverse universe, inherently designed with a purpose for all things and the free will to choose the direction of this purpose, or you have a universe formed without a reason. In that case, your existence is a brief and pointless enslavement to chance. Most people live in-between, latching on to the flavor of the month."

"Baffling," I said, absently.

"More baffling is that reasonable people should see the ludicrousness of believing that billions of the smallest of particles in the universe could randomly get together to create a single molecule, each one agreeing on what it should be along the way, let alone create all of this."

"What would a Stalker say about the existence of God?"

"The unfathomable order of life that Stalkers perceive renders a chance creation inconceivable, but they would not try to define that creative power other than labeling what they know about its affects. They don't believe in a greater power, they *know* it exists."

"What kind of perceptions?"

"They can *see* the lines of energetic vitality everywhere, and that it is under relentless pressure is proof of a driving force of intention in the Universe. They also know this force is neither detrimental nor benevolent by nature; it responds according the nature of the energy present, so they choose their daily interactions carefully. When they deem it appropriate, they tread boldly into the face of the unknown, because they have no beliefs to skew their behavior. The rules of energy—of spirit's impeccability—guide their actions. That is their rule."

"If this force is neutral, are you saying that Stalkers think God, or Intent by any name, doesn't give a shit?"

"The opposite: the force can be used by anyone in any way they wish, as a perpetual propellant of free will. What greater gift of love could there be?"

"Love?"

"To a Stalker, all of this," she waved her arm as best she could from behind the wheel, "defines beauty beyond description, intelligence beyond imagination, and cooperation so complex as to stagger their thoughts. Stalkers are humbled by the privilege of experiencing its energy directly. They revere all of this, just as the forces that created it must have to allow for its unfettered development."

"We must look pretty stupid to Stalkers."

"They have been us, and they don't waste energy on judging anything—not even the slightest comment about another's appearance or behavior crosses their mind, let alone slips from their lips. If it is the choice of others to waste their energy, or dismiss the miraculous evidence they are privileged to witness, because it doesn't suit what they think they know, that's the path they have chosen for now." She checked over her shoulder, turned around, and started the car.

Slowly backing out of her driveway—there were still some stragglers nearby—she said, "I need your reason to make a small leap from what you could not help but think, when I raised points in specific ways: I was not expressing my personal opinion, I was discovering where you stood."

"Such as?" I said.

"You think I've slammed Americans for being warlike." She straightened the wheel and shifted the car into forward gear.

"You did, and they are," I said reflexively.

Driving carefully along the narrow street, she said, "I presented you with an outline of how an industrious, generous, and kind people, have been led into blindly participating in the destruction of their society, and by interfering with many others along the way. Their system has been corrupt for years, and the population duped, but they will come to see how this happened."

"Why not pick on Canada? I mean, you know that I know we're no better; we're just more polite about it."

"I'm not picking on anyone: your views are impaired by almost caring about Canada."

"Almost?"

"You literally aren't capable of caring about much other than yourself right now, but we're changing that."

"I have nothing against Americans."

"You also have nothing heartfelt to say for them, but you're familiar with their society, so you can see the points I'll be making from a safer distance than if I tripped over a patriotic thread left in your Canadian identity. What I say about America can be applied to most countries, to some degree."

"So how will they correct their situation?"

"The same way you will recover your sanity." Without further explanation, she said, "You also believe that I slammed both you and the media you represented for being irresponsible, which they often are in a crucial way, but editorial staff don't realize what they are doing anymore than you did. They're inside the manipulations they unwittingly perpetuate, as well. So

you know, I think a free press is the life-breath of developing and sustaining cultures properly: we'll probably get into that later this week."

"I think you lead me to believe otherwise," I said.

"You did that. I never lied to you."

"Maybe not directly." I couldn't recall. "But you didn't tell me the whole truth either."

Chuckling, she said, "I couldn't have done that if I wanted to. You have to discover the truth from your own vantage point."

"There's more than one true point of view?"

"Personal perception does not assemble facts; it creates the assumptions we use to explore ideas until the teacher arrives, and their job is to guide students through all of their assumptions to a place from which they can see the truth. This place is unique to everyone, but what they see is uncompromising."

We stopped in the right lane for a red light, and a biker on a chopped Harley pulled alongside; the dual explosions of patently tuned exhaust forestalled conversation.

When the light changed, and the biker had eased his machine through successive rhythms of pulsating blasts ahead of us, Jeanette said, "To recap, for our purposes there are three barriers to the average person achieving clarity of mind. One of them is failing to understand that our true essence is energy and all that this implies, another is our incessant social conditioning, and the third is our self-image."

"I'm not clear on the practicality of knowing we're energy."

"You have seen human bodies die, so you might believe in death as some kind of finality, instead of the transition point your out-of-body experience demonstrated. It follows that without having this experience you might not believe this earth is primarily a school for personal development. Now that you know you don't die, you can embrace the idea that as far as mankind is concerned all of this is first and foremost a school. And like all schools, its purpose is to be transcended, just as the body is a temporary means for part of your consciousness to learn in this arena. With that understanding comes acceptance of abilities formerly unused—the abilities of seers and mystics by any name. And with that acceptance comes individual practices that gain knowledge in more efficient ways, and knowledge is speed."

"With you all the way on that."

"Good, now condense the poor affects of your social conditioning."

"It created biases, often to the point of me being unable to determine right from wrong."

"And self-image?"

"It causes me to interpret events through the limited vision of my self-interests, which pretty much demands that the world evolve around me. Overall," I said as the thought came to me, "reason screws us from the get-go."

"Your statement," Jeanette said formally, "does not recognize these apparent barriers as the tools this school uses to teach us how to transcend the influences of all illusions. Maybe a better way of saying it is that they create the human experience we are here to master."

"You're trying to have me transcend being human?" I joked.

Seriously, Jeanette said, "I'm teaching you how to integrate your earth-bound energy with Spirit, which includes losing the human form—that's a topic for another time. Otherwise, dealing with these barriers requires only the willingness to explore them. It's a choice—inevitable, but still a choice." She quickly glanced my way. "Question?"

"A while ago you said your job was to convince me to leave my idea of self out of my thinking, right?"

"Correct," she said, grimacing at my grammar.

"I can see why that is, but wouldn't convincing me of anything inherently be second-hand?"

"You're talking about words; I'm talking about leading you to having experiences that preclude the idea of self. Then you will *know*, and when you do you'll recognize the danger of sharing space with those who claim to have convictions they're willing to die for, because it means they're willing to kill you in defense of an idea."

Jeanette became more visibly alert as we reached the ramp. "Review our Saturday classes in your mind, and include your view of the source of the channels; it colors what you think. Hopefully, you can leave some of your reason behind before whatever lesson they're setting us up for begins."

Three lanes of traffic merged into one, and we began crossing the Lion's Gate Bridge.

Chapter 43 -Saturday's Principal Players

I began my internal review by listing the cast of characters' attributes, as I perceived them, as if I would recognize their influences on what they had told me...

Kha-li's first utterance to me through Jeanette was, "We have been awaiting you," then to quell my skepticism, and address my partially formed questions, he said that nothing was what I thought it to be. He soon explained that all entities had to adopt a personality to speak with mankind, because we would otherwise identify poorly with the source of information, and thereby lose much of its meaning. Otherwise, a personality, as humankind knows it, is an aggregate of preferred traits and unresolved issues in our personal development. Spirit has no such issues. Even their male and female representations were preferences chosen for a given circumstance: the female principle, Kha-li explained in simply terms, is the originator of ideas, while the male principle is the power behind their manifestation. Because all entities at his level had command over both principles of power and application, they were neither male nor female. They were whole.

Communication with us was also a much broader concept than we realized. Tone, inflection, choice of words, and pacing were overt influences, but they (Spirit) also spoke to levels of consciousness of which we were unaware. These included our personal store of evolutionary (silent) knowledge, and what he called our cellular indoctrination—the literal programming of knowledge into our cells. He said that, because individuals are unique in their perceptions and programming, how one person viewed Kha-li's "personality" would not necessarily be how another interpreted the same 'event' of speaking with him. He said that, at his core, *he* was an ongoing event.

On Saturdays, Jeanette presented the Kha-li persona like a great grandfather/C.E.O. of a cosmic conglomerate that was exploratory in nature. He also oversaw massive events, but was rarely seen other than by emissaries whose reverence for him was contextually apparent, as opposed to declared in the teaching stories Jeanette channeled from them.

From these tales, one could envision Kha-li as the soothing voice in a frightened infant's mind, and the country doctor who attended to their growing pains by showing them for what they were. He was also the consummate teacher who never shared an answer that a student could deduce or experience. Overall, he seemed to be a ghost-like purveyor of purpose, whose very shadow radiated strength to those who were on his journey-assignments. And when these ended, there was no fanfare to welcome them home. His joy was ever-present, piercing, and pure.

In stark contradiction to this, his teaching personality was that of a remote enigma, i.e. no personality at all. During our private channels, Jeanette's features appeared angular, her jaw-line

straighter, and her full lips flutter below cheekbones that defined a chiseled look out of which a baritone voice seemed to travel down miles of cast iron pipe. To challenge his gaze was to risk slipping into a kind of mental seclusion where rainbow possibilities resonating within a brilliant psychological landscape could suddenly invade my monochrome imagination. One blink and the panorama evaporated, but the information-perception remained. Talk about communication...

Because of this potential inner event, Kha-li's rare appearances could take me through a cycle of feeling honored, insignificant, thankful that his stays were short, then embarrassed and mystified: I was embarrassed because his sessions were the most emotionally draining, when not through poignant pauses or penetrating language then in anticipation of a picture going off in my mind. I was mystified because his persona seemed to be conspicuously disinterested in speaking to anyone. His Portions (defined as direct emanations of his energy-knowledge) had been in physical reality many times, some of which he revealed to us.

Saa-ra: From the context of her lessons, she seemed to be in charge of the Rescue and Rehabilitation division of Kha-li's corporation, personally dealing with the explorer agents and emissaries who had been injured, and the lost souls who had harmed them. Her agent-entities, such as Phillip and Caroline, spoke of a "woman" whose soothing heartbeat had made their fetal sleep deep, and of being nursed into physical and emotional health by Saa-ra patiently teaching them the ways of wonder. Everything had a place and purpose, and nothing was impossible, so they grew up with no barriers to building solid foundations upon which they would make their first true stands at no one's expense but their own.

By mythic name and historical encounter, mankind knew about many lifetimes in which Saa-ra's Portions had been demanding friends to all of good heart, and perceived as a demonic force by those who could not face the truths she dared to tender. She also asked nothing of her Portions that she had not first tasked to herself; she told us of some her physical manifestations, as well. The legacy of her physical portion's passing was of children stumbling graciously through obstacles that might have hindered the harvest of their potential. And when their time was over, no one was more delighted to review their courageous journey, especially the times when they thought they could go around difficulties.

Collectively, other entity's stories implied that the euphoric gateway of light and love we passed through on our way home was a welcoming kiss on the cheek at the entrance to Kha-li's and Saa-ra's school of development and exploration.

For me, and in class only, Saa-ra's Jacqueline Kennedy demeanor created the impression that she lacked depth, which she furthered by way of a 'things simply are' attitude. For example, Jeanette, as Saa-ra, sometimes had informal chats with people before a lesson began. When the rest of us noticed that Jeanette had switched personas, Saa-ra thanked the individual for sharing their concerns before announcing, "Today we will embrace the letter P."

Regulars fell silent, some struggling to conceal their delight over a visitor's expression of "What the hell is this—Sesame Street?" because Saa-ra's often fluffy mannerisms had nothing to do with the material she imparted. "P as in potent, or powerful," she said to Meaghan. "Portion—less than the whole, but encompassing all of its elements," Saa-ra said to me. "Portend—a sign of things to come," she said, turning to face Josh, and then to Rachel, "Potential—capable of actualization." Her eyes swept the room. "The consciousness of your entire evolutionary Selves has helped to shape the destiny of this time. You are here because each of you has the potential of furthering your collective goals; we have just discussed how this can be with our new friend, Georgio."

Georgio's confusion was comprehensive, because his concerns had been about an old car and a new girlfriend, in that order.

Wringing life-lessons out of their innocuous conversation, Saa-ra made his present circumstance a fulcrum between his entire history and endless probabilities, thereby giving us all a sense of our own evolutionary scope. Her downy persona also kicked a few egos in the ass by overlooking them. At these times, I thought that being ignored was far better than getting her attention, because her one-on-one teacher's persona differed from Kha-li's only in that she seemed to care. Kind of. Sometimes.

Kha-lib: I envisioned Kha-lib as the head of Human Resources, Chief Recruiter and Hatchet Man as circumstances warranted. To the best of my recollection, Jeanette's other personas never said anything about Kha-lib beyond having shared experiences that were his to tell.

To me, he was distant, but not like Kha-li's Alpha Centauri routine. He was more like the top non-com in Special Forces addressing new recruits, in that the directness of his questions implied that to answer incorrectly demonstrated a tragic shortfall of intellectual resources. That said, his wit was drier than popcorn in the Sahara sun and the last thing you would expect to hear within serious discussions with a disembodied consciousness who was older than time. As a result, we learned to pay attention to his every syllable, as was his goal.

His teaching techniques also included ignoring commonly accepted assumptions in poorly framed inquiries, so that it could take a while for us to realize he was answering a question as it had been asked, and not as the questioner had intended it. This practice forced us to refine our thinking because, metaphorically, he would talk endlessly about apples until someone interrupted him to say the question had been about oranges. Kha-lib would then repeat the original question verbatim, so that we could see that it had indeed been about oranges... unintentionally.

As a result, feeling foolish amid bolts of ideas intended to graze our comprehension was a normal part of a session with the most exacerbating persona, who gave us more time than all of the persona's combined. A tight gut often advised me of his presence.

Phillip and Caroline: Their individual influences on Jeanette's facial expression made her appear to be enjoying a secret, and my automatic reaction was to relax. More often than not, they spoke humorously about their many stunts in physical reality, and be they rogue or princess, they spoke about every experience with fondness. Dealing with either of them was like going out for a beer with an entertaining debater, because their stories about living productive lives seemed more like an option than a requirement.

Notable by his absence in class was **Ed:** During this first summer of my apprenticeship, our arrangement was that I need not pay for anything unless I came into some freelance money. Not rent, food, or even beer. He was well paid, but far from a wealthy man because, as it is with so many experts, he had less success regulating his own finances. It would be fair to say that I taxed his resources between the ebb and flow of my freelance jobs, and he never asked for repayment because he knew, and had stated, that I'd just borrow it again. This seemed not to be an issue for him, but there were circumstances that could make us uncomfortable...

Ed and Jeanette had gotten together on a number of occasions, where he eventually met his higher self through her channels. Ed was no stranger to the mystical view; his father practiced but did not preach the idea of life and knowledge existing outside of physical form. He had also experienced the occasional *knowing*, and although he was moved enough to try a few internal exercises, an unavoidable circumstance cut these efforts short: I knew much about his exploits and escapades, so he received information of a psychic nature from Jeanette with skepticism, eventually saying that I must have told her things ahead of time. This was inadvertently true in a

few cases, because my escapades were linked to his, and so lay the basis of his reasonable skepticism about all of Jeanette's claims.

The bottom line was that he attended no classes, which meant the distance between us was becoming more than a financial gulf, and not only because of our diverging experiences: In early July, he and I were idly talking about his plans for a summer vacation when he mentioned the possibility of a few weeks sailing in August. It came to me then with clarity and certainty that he should not go away at that time; his father was going to die in August. I said this, just as I had told my mother the same thing when I *knew* my father was going to die, many years earlier. He understood that I was not trying to prove anything, but having said anything wasn't the smartest thing I ever did if only by coloring his summer days.

Chapter 44 - The Classes

I slid lower into the Accord's seat to place my knees on the dashboard, because I had a nerve problem in my hip from carrying the first 'portable' electronic video equipment. I had lived with pain coming and going, with minor movements I could not anticipate, long enough to adjust my body to angles of relief without thinking. Sitting as if I was balancing a book on my head was one of these positions, so Jeanette never commented on my occasional, apathetic appearing posture. You could say we shared an assumption about it.

I continued my review...

In the earliest classes, Kha-lib explained that the personas Jeanette channeled weren't the only entities to teach in our twentieth century. Not to impugn other invaluable materials, but at this stage in our development he said the works of Jane Roberts (The Seth series) would help us to better understand the evolutionary intricacies of personal development, while Lynn V. Andrews and Carlos Castaneda's books made this knowledge physically and personally relevant, from the male and female perspectives within their cultural interpretations...

"What subjects do you teach?" Meaghan asked.

"My fondness is for the arts of living," Kha-lib replied.

"What has that got to do with us?" Jenny said.

"It is said that the teacher arrives when the student is ready. Implied, is that the meeting furthers a purpose of which the student is unaware, because foreknowledge of the encounter would taint the preparation period in which willingness must meet its demise. Is it possible that you are ready?"

"Hold on," Rachel said. After a less than inconspicuous glance toward her friend, she said, "Students live for a purpose that can't be achieved if they know what it is, because they wouldn't want to do it?"

"Knowledge of one's quest would affect how they engaged challenges that are purposefully designed to be encountered from a particular point of view. Therefore such knowledge is counterproductive."

"Blindsiding them isn't?" Elani said with a sardonic chuckle: she was a gorgeous, mid-twenties supernatural blonde, who gave away little about her life as she came to hear Jeanette speak, scrubbed and without makeup, looking like she had not slept. I suspected that she was an exotic dancer; she looked familiar, but in the light of day with clothes on it was difficult to tell.

"You cannot be blindsided if you are facing the proper direction."

"We're paying attention to the wrong things?" Jenny said.

"Hang on." Pulling back one finger after another, Meaghan played catch-up. "If we knew what we were supposed to do, we wouldn't do it right, because doing it wrong shows us how to do it right?"

"Teacher's of The Way To Live know this is a student's predicament by design, because changing fundamental views is a threat to the core of their being. For this reason, teachers arrive in disguise to probe their student's personalities before formal lessons begin."

"Probe for what?" Elani said.

"To learn which core illusions they must deal with, and to what degree they need attention, in order to bring all aspects of the personality along at a similar pace: the teachings are so difficult that, without a balanced approach, the student has less opportunity to succeed than would otherwise be the case." Apparently addressing a common thought, he said, "All apprentices must have doubts, otherwise their preparatory indoctrination has not been effective; it is one of the first issues addressed by a teacher."

"That qualifies us," Josh quipped.

"We're apprentices?" Meaghan said with anticipatory delight.

"Then why don't you deal with us like you do with Jeanette?" Rachel said before Kha-lib could respond, meaning one on one.

Kha-lib faced Rachel. "Teachers have struggled with their personal development like everyone else, for one cannot teach what they do not know. She (Jeanette) is passing a critical point of change in her lessons beyond which we can teach lessons in power directly to her. You have yet to reach this stage."

"What's the knowledge she knows?" Meaghan said, innocently.

"She has long ago learned that who and what you all think you are is a description contrived from how you interpret the physical world, and your experiences in it. Essentially," he said, addressing Meaghan's confused expression, "time slowly manifests your decisions from which you learn that you create your own reality through your view of whom and where you think you are. Everything is a reflection, and you relentlessly summon or create these to help you see yourselves, and your choices clearly. This is the nature of the school you all attend, which means the natures of the events you encounter represent a particular purpose."

"Not sure I follow that."

"You do things in the name of camouflaged interests, the ramifications of which often bewilder you because they come from a broader underlying reality. In many ways, you are like puppies barking at a mirror, confounded by what you see when faced with your own reflection—as if it was an influence outside of yourselves—and often no less aggressive defending your perceived territory on this side of the glass."

"How does that make her different, now that I know the same thing?" Meaghan said.

"She is being reminded of knowledge she long ago claimed as her own at the level of an assumption. This is that the world she perceives is a description about reality, so there is no need to judge or embrace anything or anyone as complete, or an unalterable fact. She understands that for us to say she is acting the fool is a precise observation—the portion of her source-soul that has been conformed to believe is her entire self, known in this time as Jeanette, is acting in a foolish manner that will reveal the drawbacks of that behavior. She understands that she is performing, and that this audition demands of her a personal evaluation after which she will behave differently. In the same way, she knows that soldiers, clerics, skeptics, and artists, are literally projecting their beliefs upon the physical world to probe for answers about themselves in

the reflected consequence. Unlike them, she can already observe and assess these reflections without reacting to their descriptions, as this would be highly damaging for one of her energy."

"Literally projecting?" Elani said.

"Essentially, you have made your home inside a metaphor mirror. This causes you to think that an out-of-mirror experience in a dream, for example, is a contrivance of your mind, so vast is the scope of what you can see and do there. However, reality works the other way around; the dreamer and the dreamed are the reverse of what you embrace as factual."

"Are you saying I'm being dreamed by my source soul?"

"You are a projection of energy-ideas purposefully designed to suit specific developmental challenges. Your reflections are a two-dimensional description of a greater reality, the full scope and richness of which escape you because you focus on only what is apparent to senses that have been conformed to perceive a physical reality in a specific manner."

"Two dimensions?" Meaghan said.

"The third dimension, of depth, is dependent upon experience: you do not perceive it without motion." He carried on, leaving a few 'awwhhs,' of a new awareness in his wake.

"Your dreaming reality is your home base for the human experience, a place to rest and to learn, which is why being taught in your dreams is so penetrating. We mean that literally. What you learn in dreaming becomes part of you, and influences you thereafter, regardless of whether you recall the lesson in what you perceive as your waking state."

"How would Jeanette view an event like being told she was being a bitch?" Elani said.

"She would hear your idea of yourself acting foolishly by judging that which you do not understand." He turned to face Meaghan. "There are endless ways for energy-consciousness to choose to develop. Humanness is the most direct vehicle to ride to the culmination of your sacred journey as a being."

"Do you mean we began our development as something other than human, or somewhere else?" she said.

"There are no beginnings as you think of them. You are translations of limitless beings that form self-definitions when you emerge from energy into form. You chose this mask of humanness to make yourselves responsible during the exploration of the epitome of yourselves in a cyclical arena of situational mazes. To have reached this developmental stage is a major accomplishment, for it is a threshold state for more advanced developmental arenas."

"Are you saying there were easier choices?" Meaghan said.

"There are many choices which, in your terms, need not be as dramatic as being human. However, the price of this relative gentility is the restrictions you put on your experience in those arenas. In your terms, much more time is required, and less freedom permitted, while you master your lessons from the energy state. Time being irrelevant," he said, apparently cutting short Elani's next question, "you may ask why you would volunteer for the relative brutality of a physical education. The answer lies in the nature of consciousness; everything always strives to learn: we will teach the workings of this at another time. In physical terms, trying not to learn is like holding your breath—you still learn something. She (Jeanette) would call it a rule."

Jeanette cracked a smile.

"When you are focused as energy-consciousness in what you view as your dreaming state," he continued, "you are being taught, under supervision, what is possible when you are entirely responsible for your acts. In so doing, your consciousness may long for this vast independence, and desire the physical route to achieve mastery over your thoughts sooner than other routes of development offer."

"It seems like an unnecessarily tough road," Elani said.

"Your choice to manifest lessons in this way was not made blindly: the human being aspects of your journey were known in that your penchant for destruction was expected and anticipated by you and your guides—guides who were our first physical manifestations."

"Our spirit guides had to learn about the human way of development, as well?" Josh said.

"We did, and so we can say that to have chosen physical manifestations are a testament to your great courage, for literally every imaginable core adversity to personal development, in any universe, is present in physical reality. And there is one other, which exists only in mankind's journey—malice."

"And I still chose this?" Meaghan said.

"From your chosen experiences here you will learn to deal with all circumstances from the position of inner strength and knowledge. We are referring to experiences both in a body and out of one, because your world will have shown you what the ignorance of having to be right, from the position of might, brings into any reality."

"Our evolutionary purpose is to control our thoughts?" Meaghan said belatedly, but insightfully.

"As energy, what you think is what you instantly create. Without the apparent time lapse between thought and manifestation you experience in a physical form, you would create circumstances of great difficulty that you are not prepared to deal with. Mastery of your thoughts is essential, but you are free to do so under any circumstance you desire: a father may try to protect his daughters from people who are like he was at their age. A comedienne's humor may come from disturbing trials with men, and the abruptly wealthy may quickly find themselves poor in the ways that had formerly enriched their lives."

Elani cleared her throat. "You're saying the core lessons of mankind are all about behavior?"

"Physical experience is an artifice for your development as energy-consciousness, which cares not for things; this includes beliefs that represent your behavior. Your classrooms of things represent your desires. When you can consciously choose a journey devoid of things not required to sustain your physical needs you are not thinking of you; you are not saying, 'I wish,' or 'what if?' You are acting deliberately from the knowledge of what has to happen, according to the nature of the events you set in motion. Without the influence of self, this translates directly into your Master's Degree in responsible thought. How you achieve this is yours to choose, be that through more arduous predicaments than joyful play."

"No matter what job we do, or whether we have kids, or..." Rachel said.

"Every circumstance is a developmental exploration of an arena that renders knowledge pertinent to the explorer, but it may not necessarily be relevant outside of the physical realm. A doctor of physical medicine, for example, may overtly learn nothing relevant to her patient's energetically manifest disease. However, the psychological and emotional circumstances under which she studied, and subsequently practiced her profession, could be the relevant lesson she was after. In addition, there is a level of exploration dealing with beliefs that healers of all ilks cannot help but encounter. Parents approach their lessons in love, perseverance, and responsibility from a different perspective, as do beggars."

"Essentially," Elani ventured cautiously, "we are in a school of one-way mirrors that grants a Master's Degree in how to live properly when we find our way to the other side of the glass and see ourselves? I mean, what we actually do here doesn't matter. It's how we do it?"

"What you do matters to all that you influence, everywhere, all of the time, to a degree that would astonish you, hence learning responsibility is paramount to moving on." He faced Meaghan again. "You are now, and have always been, apprenticing in personal development." He scanned our faces. "The degree to which you experience core lessons in a given lifetime is determined by the momentum generated by your beliefs, emotions, and subsequent actions. However, formal apprentices in the throes of learning personal power directly from their Source are also subject to the momentum of their Source's intentions. It is therefore essential that they learn how to distinguish where, when, and why they can insert their influences upon an event. If they were a blank canvas of raw energy, their potential for destruction would equal their potential for creation, both of which are beyond description."

Clearing her throat, Meaghan said, "You're saying I haven't learned enough for my Source to take me on directly?"

"The issue is energy; an apprentice must have enough energy to confront the certain death of who they think they are, or their training must end."

"If it's certain," Elani said, "what's the problem?"

"While the death of their illusions is certain, their reaction to the impending death of who they think they are is not knowable. Free will prevails, and we have learned that your kind needs every opportunity to embrace the truth before you make the final leap. The preparatory phase of many lifetimes before meeting a teacher must also have accomplished precise goals to ensure the candidate's massive evolutionary energy is not misdirected."

"What truth is that?"

"The truth of which we speak is but a fragment of the whole; this lies beyond description."

"If you are so wise, why can't you explain it?"

"Your ability to comprehend is not equal to the challenge."

"Why not just teach the people who want to be taught?" Josh said, moving us along.

"There's one on Denman at West Georgia," Elani quipped too lightly.

The group chuckled: an ancient Volkswagen van plastered with a Day-Glow placard that read, 'The end is near—Jesus is the answer,' was a summer landmark.

"Volunteers do not come to their convictions from experiences properly assessed. They adopt and abandon ideals in favor of better ones, better being self-defined as beliefs more agreeable to their unrealized personal agendas. These teachings are the most personally disagreeable you will ever encounter, because the goal is to eliminate the idea of self from your perceptions."

"Not to be difficult," Elani said, being difficult, "but we have to volunteer to follow Jeanette's advice."

"At this point, you are a follower only in so far as learning is a matter of faith, as it is for everyone: you volunteer only your faith, which is easily withdrawn and turned to confrontation. In conjunction with a learning stage in which students believe they are their teacher's equal, following a personal agenda of which they are unaware would be harmful to them, and possibly to the teacher."

"If they're not equal, what's the problem?" Josh said.

"Not equal does not mean weak."

"What happens to people who don't know about you?" Elani said.

"Your century is rife with individuals who have returned to heighten hope and open the door to embracing the influences of their dreams. Those who are attracted to these people are ready

for the messages they offer. Those who are not, either do not need these messages, or would not accept them."

"Not need them?" Josh said.

"There are many kind people in your world doing what they came to do."

"Kind?" Elani said, dubiously. "That's the proper way to live?"

"There is more to kindness than your world understands: at many points, all of you have not known better, and with the best of intentions contributed to the demise of a developing circumstance."

Rachel developed a keen interest in the weave of Jeanette's carpet, as Kha-lib continued, "There are many others among you who have come back to aid in mass changes."

"Come back from the time of Christ?" Meaghan said, taking the focus off her friend.

"Don't they need these lessons too? I mean, they won't remember them, will they?" Rachel said. Looking at Jeanette strangely, she added, "What were their lessons, anyway?"

"In your terms, our emissaries will need reminders of the core lessons they developed both before, and at the time of your Christ figure. However, memory as you think of it is not in play when they deal directly with their Source." He faced Meaghan and said, "Give us a moment." Jeanette sat passively for about ten seconds before the airy, but formal voice of Saa-ra took over...

"The returning Masters and their students comprise one mass consciousness, mystically focused, forming one family from one level of evolution and experience. They have evolved cultures in a cycle of events and conditions, ever changing and ever challenging, for millions of years. They did not appear based on the theoretical evaluations of a superior intelligence, or by the whim of eternal chance. Evolution, as you know it, was learned even by All That Is.

"In your time," she looked around the room as this boggling idea settled in, "this cycle of events is described as reincarnation, which is not quite accurate. However, this concept allowed our students to see their lives in a larger way, and aided them in understanding their grander relationship in and to an ever-evolving universe." She paused, her gaze on Meaghan.

"This family of Masters has been known in many times, by many names. At the time of your Christ figure," she looked away from Meaghan, "which in your time-oriented terms would be their fourth mass intercession into mankind's ways, they were the Essenes."

Jeanette closed her eyes.

"Their Prophets," Saa-ra said at a slower pace, "spoke of the arrival of Kha-li's portion, or son, and members of his family. All of them were channels to the realm of creation, and as Masters of the balances of life, art, science, and the humanities, they considered themselves the eternal, willing, and passionate students of knowledge." She faced Elani. "The Masters developed lessons designed to hold each individual completely responsible for his or her own behavior. Judgment or prejudice against others due to race, age, gender, or social condition was tantamount to declaring war on yourself and your family, since whatever it was that you gave to the world bore the vibratory signature of its originators and participants. Catalytically, this momentum sought out its source to complete the cycle of events."

"Are you talking about Karma?" Elani said.

"In terms of experiencing the underlying nature of what you do, we are. But there is no judgment attached to the momentum of your evolutionary development by any source other than that which you program into your personal choices." She faced me. "It followed that to seed the future with hope the young must be taught and cared for in an atmosphere of love and responsibility." Switching her gaze slowly from Elani, to Meaghan, then to Rachel, she said, "To

the Essene family, no actions would be engaged that threatened the independence of spirit and thought of any child or individual. It was further seen that if mans' home environment was out of control, if grief, pain, deception, and greed found their beginnings within the domestic situation, then the children of such individuals would carry the impact of creating the society itself. On a mass level, such a society could not possibly hope to survive, because each compromise resulted in an immediate catalytic action in social terms. This would result in one abuse after another growing under the impetus of its own thrust until its proportions were so sweeping that only the destruction of the culture and disbursement of the remaining members of it could stem the flow. By that time, all politically motivated questions, be they economic, imperial, or domestic, would be academic. Your current circumstance is no different."

"Meaning it's the end of time?" Josh said.

"Not of time, but the end of cycling lessons you have repeatedly placed in your path and failed to learn," Saa-ra replied. "As a result of these observations," she scanned the room again, "the Masters developed disciplines centered on personal dignity, empathy for the conditions of the less fortunate, and a cooperative effort to hold their shared culture in reverence." Looking my way out of sequence, she said, "These lessons were extremely hard to teach."

She moved on.

"It took continuity and a psychological process which required that the child live up to his or her share of responsibility, not down to it." She paused at Georgio, a passionate Brazilian waiter in his early-twenties, before addressing us randomly. "Those who were capable, did all they could do even to personal sacrifice, but for the right reasons. Their lessons of The Arts and the Disciplines became known to the Essenes as the Kabala. As Kha-li taught these, his students also learned the arts of How to Teach, which addressed the three principle aspects of physical challenge. These are individual cleansing, social evolution and ethics, and national intent." Saa-ra moved on.

"To teach these, the context of the lessons had to be directly proportionate to the arena, therefore proficiency depended upon one's ability to recognize exactly where they were, and whom they were addressing. To this end, fluidity of movement, or the ability to adjust to conditions whatever they might be, became a key portion of their mental and emotional disciplines. Overall, total responsibility for one's actions was an absolute prerequisite. Students had to hold themselves sacred, and act among their fellows as they would wish to be treated."

"Are these the Stalker's disciplines in Castaneda's work?" I said.

"Adjusted for the culture in which he participated, yes," she replied.

"Where did it fall apart?" I said.

"There were those with a little more energy at their disposal," Jeanette said, facing us in no apparent order, "who saw the weakness of a man who never looked beyond his material world or physical fears. These individuals determined that great numbers of people could be easily controlled and mobilized by utilizing the concept of Immediate Need. Within Immediate Need, the individual believes himself to require far more than he actually does, and therein finds a social stigma attached to 'not having'. In the light of these realizations he sees that, to others, he will not be acceptable should he not seek to attain all that he is entitled to." Sa-ar-a stretched the word en-tie-tulled.

"To this end those seeking power perpetrated, on an ever increasing scale, the concept of Immediate Need. The result combines masses of humanity, striving in unison within the philosophy of greed, to attain everything within their grasp. They subsequently connive and cheat to attain anything they believe they 'must have' in order to fit in.

"To these powers, this was a harnessing of a massive energy force that could be manipulated at will, with little triggers created of fear and suspicion. This is how your kind has risen and fallen many times. She faced Meaghan. "The Masters, and those among their children who are ready, are returning to your reality for the express purpose of refining these skills at a time when they are needed most. Be advised," she said, pausing briefly on every face as she spoke, "the depth perception they practice is a precise discipline: they will know where they are, and their every act will be a direct translation of the knowledge they hold sacred. As such, their actions may not reflect your visions of what you term the Second Coming reformation, for they know what you do not—what mankind is really like, and they will deal with you accordingly."

"Meaning they aren't what—angelic?" Rachel said.

"Meaning they represent our purpose through love as we know it, not as you understand it."

"Hard ball," I said, facing Rachel.

"What happens to people who can see the possibility of things falling apart in our world, but they can't accept that your emissaries are here, or you're talking to us for that matter?" Josh said.

"Give us a moment." Jeanette lowered her head and twisted her neck as though to relieve a kink. Kha-lib had returned.

"The pattern of our presence in your part of the world can be found in the writings we have discussed, and some to soon come. Those who are ready will read these works, or have been oriented to the inevitability of our arrival."

"Are all channeled books really channeled?" Rachel said.

"There have always been charlatans," Kha-lib said, then he listed the errors that give pretenders away. These included preaching any form of violence to resolve any problem, practicing revenge under any banner, and taking advantage of the unprepared or weary through fear; from contractors telling the elderly they need home improvements, to preachers charging for salvation—a point he clarified about psychics.

He said, "There is nothing wrong with charging money for a psychic reading, for even a mystic must eat. There is also nothing wrong with gathering large sums of money, for this is the energy your reality uses to bring about change. In time, our representatives will gather vast sums to do their work."

"Is that how we can tell if people are really with you?" Josh said.

"It is not. An entity recently left a legitimate channel, because she fell prey to the apparent power she had over others, and charged them exorbitantly without true teaching or giving back. Now she is faking. When the entity returns, they will impart a grand lesson and she will become a supporter of our work."

"Who is it?" Meaghan said naively.

Much to our surprise, Kha-lib named the faker.

"It seems counterproductive to have a fraud speaking for you in the first place?" I said. "You must have known what was going to happen?"

"At other levels of awareness, frauds and their followers know they are experiencing both sides of the coin of betrayal for their own development."

"Betrayal develops suspicion. How is that helpful?"

"You have all been betrayer and betrayed. For some," he said looking from me to Josh to Georgio, "this has happened many times because you admired the fleeting rewards of selfishness. Consistent with this," he said, as Georgio became absorbed by a hole in the heel of his sock, "charlatans of many disguises blame their victims for being victimized to shield themselves from their own responsibilities."

"What kind of disguises?" Meaghan said.

"They wear the ritual garb of the pious, the uniforms of social order, and the tailored cloth of industry. They are everywhere, but none is hidden from us."

"Then it makes less sense to act against your own cause," I said.

"We are turning over the care and control of mankind's destiny to entities indigenous to your universe—we are not of this kind. These teachers will be more direct with you than the original explorer's have been," he said with an ominously flavored compassion, "for as the hunter and the hunted they are intimately aware of the relationship between gluttony of the body and famine of the spirit."

Focusing on me, he answered another unasked question. "Phillip is not usurping your free will by enforcing an agreement he knows you do not understand. He is hastening the inevitability of your development by stripping you of apathy. In a similar way," he said, glancing around the room, "those who fail to act with honor service their own development while forcing others to make a stand at a time when the anaesthetized among you would come to harm by default."

Reviewing a row of uncommitted faces, he said, "In a short time, you will all have to make a stand. Those who are unconvinced of our presence, or who remain afraid, will have knowledge of the disreputable principles from which to assess our standards. Nothing is wasted."

Chapter 45 - The Classes, Part 2

Coming off the bridge onto the Stanley Park causeway, I realized something now obvious but surprising, nevertheless. Jeanette had targeted me from day one—not that the others were window dressing; they had every opportunity to learn, but they had not experienced Spirit as I had. That said, they also requested nothing extra in terms of lessons, other than miracles of their own: I felt cocky about how special I must be, as I resumed my recapitulation of the first classes with a more fluid ease...

Kha-lib's topics rarely strayed from some aspect of gathering energy through reshaping our personal behavior(s) toward acting responsibly. To this end, he examined the political and religious beliefs that influence us; these included but were not limited to theocratic and autocratic structures, as counterpoints to democracy, because we were more familiar with this system, as were Jewish and Moslem beliefs to Christianity.

These lessons could be tedious to a shallow thinker, but two things kept me alert: Jeanette's personas offered material in entertaining ways, while no religious, ethnic, or political group escaped unscathed, though not judged. Her delivery was always without speculation—the way it was. Nevertheless, I heard her spearing the bastard scoundrel looters, prophets, and profiteers in whose hands we had placed our trust, and who in return had placed their hands in our pockets.

As time passed, the design of these lecture-type lessons increasingly involved our input, which was subtle at first, but carried with it ramifications we could not have anticipated. For example, a first-time attendee introduced himself as Hilding, and as a father of precocious boys asked Kha-lib for his opinion on corporal punishment in our schools. Kha-lib replied by asking Hilding to consider the lasting effects of authority figures inflicting pain on the impressionable, justifiably ignorant, adolescently rebellious, and physically defenseless with the permission of those upon whom their safe existence depended. Hilding reasonably countered, saying that teachers and parents know that discipline sometimes needs a literal helping hand, therefore being impressionable is a plus, punishment by nature shouldn't be something that can be defended against, and ignorance was the issue being addressed. To this, Kha-lib asked Hilding why our universities did not attach electrodes to students' genitals, and shock them into their degrees.

At the conclusion of their exchange, which included the negative impact of using fear as a teaching tool on any living thing, Hilding sincerely thanked, "whoever you are," with satisfaction.

"You are most welcome. May we explain to the others before you go your way," Kha-lib said, "so they do not remain distracted?"

"Please do," Hilding replied with mild surprise, causing us to assume he had told no one his true objective.

Kha-lib stated that Hilding was adamantly opposed to corporal punishment. As a new member of the local board of education, he had come to pick a mystic's brain in the hope of better presenting his own views to policy makers, whose records showed little evidence of thought beyond projecting influence in their meetings.

Ironically, after this session our free flow exchanges became lumpy with reluctance, because attendees rightly suspected that Jeanette could discern their motives. Not all were willing to reveal the ones they were aware of, and fewer risked discovering the ones they didn't realize they held in an open forum.

This circumstance made it inevitable that a lengthy pause, after Kha-lib asked a question that we deemed too risky to answer, created an elephant in the room. When he probed our collective hesitancy, "So that we do not misconstrue tranquility for understanding," the ease and warmth of our gatherings began to erode.

The next clipping of our collective comfort came with specific lessons in the responsibilities of freedom, two of which were that we blindly follow others, and we do not finish what we start.

Jeanette's affronting example of the latter problem came when she said that what one is like at home represents how one treats their entire lives: a cluttered home reflected a cluttered mind, and a cluttered mind manifested neglect in other areas of life. If such a person was responsible for another's welfare, they were putting them at risk. A personal discipline that could resolve this problem, she said into an amalgam of skeptically sheepish expressions, would be to look back whenever we left a room. If we could tell that we had been there, we had left behind a monument to our neglect. It didn't matter what this monument might be; a spoon sitting on the counter or a toothpaste tube cap represented an attitude that has a concomitant value outside of the home. As continuity in one's life reigned supreme, this value could grow to cruel proportions.

Jeanette said that to argue leaving a toothpaste cap off the tube was indicative of a callous disregard for humanity was ridiculously petty, as I had, was to say that whoever replaced it was performing a task that was beneath the social station of the neglectful person. They are self-important, not having time to clean up after themselves, and they will habitually treat others as servants in other ways. The proof of this, she explained blandly to a newcomer, is evident when the culprit is informed of their neglect and they treat the circumstance with disdain—as I had just done. She added that there are no small things in life, only small perspectives.

As simple as this exercise may sound, Kha-lib explained that our programmed penchant for laziness and neglect was so deep that just remembering to turn around invariably required the help of another person. This situation quickly became confrontational, which was another lesson in self-importance and servitude.

He said, "It is from experiencing the difficulty of turning around that you can appreciate how careless you really are, and that it is your irresponsibility that leaves you feeling vulnerable, thereby robbing you of joy."

Thereafter, Kha-lib dryly asked attendees if their clothes closets were in order—all items clean and on hangers—or did we reuse items that should have been washed. Did we leave

cupboard doors and drawers open so that someone else's hip or forehead could close them? Was there a shoe perched on a stairway landing, like a banana peel, instead of in the hallway shoe rack? Did we leave anything pending until a more convenient time? Did we have insurance?

Into the silences his questions created, he said our stillness spoke of our willingness to be followers. Questions represented the will to learn, and formed the personally relevant framework for a meaningful reply. Without establishing this relevancy, his sessions would amount to information doled out by volume, from which the deceitful could become hypocrites espousing a philosophy they did not practice, the arrogant could become pious in their unexamined understanding, and the self-important could become fanatics, as beliefs acted upon without examination knew few boundaries.

As if these lessons weren't making us uncomfortable enough, he dealt extensively with the designs of our intentions relative to the responsibilities that went hand in hand with personal freedom. Essentially, he said that good intentions were a ruse, because we programmed personal events through the true nature of our actions, not what we thought we were doing. As a reasonable species (I heard this as a cryptic pejorative), we had lost our discernment.

His first example startled us: a defense worker knowingly making products whose exclusive use is to kill people, uses the spin of cultural reasoning to say they are not pulling the trigger. This reasoning includes, it's just a job, and/or they are doing their patriotic duty, as an act of necessary defense, making cashing their check acceptable to their conscience. "Better a stranger die because of what I do than I change what I do," doesn't enter their thoughts.

They may also enjoy what they do technically, but the essential act is one of fear and destruction, so their lives are lived amid the ramifications of putting their faith in fear. It follows that their children cannot help but be influenced in ways the parents cannot fathom when they suddenly explode. Kha-lib said the solution was to commit to acts of heart. In simple terms, if what you do is not designed to harm anyone, and you like doing it, then what you need comes with the positive programming of your intentions.

I interjected, saying that the theory was clear but we had to eat. Moreover, many great artistic works had gone unrecognized in their time, while the artist lived a harsh and impoverished existence. I didn't think the theory of acts of heart held up—not in one lifetime.

Kha-lib said that all of the great works I cared to name had been completed, therefore the means to do so were provided. If I would learn to view money as energy, and to distinguish the difference between want and need, my ideas about money would change. I would be free from them, and so free to follow my heart.

This session caused us to examine our jobs for unseen threats to others, but without a true understanding of the underlying nature of our daily events, vis-à-vis the defense worker's reasonable view, we remained unsure of what was productive and what was harmful.

To help us in these assessments, Kha-lib said our choice of words, body language, and especially our deeds were irrefutable evidence of what we are really like, therefore what we regularly do. His examples of our misguided reasoning, such as punishing misdeeds as opposed to teaching their equal and opposite conditions to perpetrators, programmed the energy we expended in negative ways. For example, a child who does not take the responsibility of putting their toys away, because they "forgot," can soon expect the parent to forget where she / he put them, as well. In this case, the parent is taking responsibility for teaching responsibility at the level the child designed.

Predictably, the immediate complaint from parents in our group was that they had to deal with the tantrums that followed. To this, Kha-lib said this circumstance provided them with

another opportunity to teach their children about social responsibility. A quiet room, in this case, was an appropriate place for the child to consider how taking care of their toys yesterday would have avoided them disturbing the peace today. When a mother said her child's tantrums often led to them refusing to eat, Kha-lib rhetorically wondered how many six-year olds could hold out longer than one meal.

This mother returned no more.

When another attendee implied that her leaving was due to Kha-lib's uncompromising approach, Kha-lib said that teaching anyone how to live responsibly required discipline and continuity in proportion to how the student had unconsciously learned to behave poorly. In time, proper practices were no longer an effort for them, but a way of life that had replaced their former way of life. It could be no other way, for the responsibilities of freedom knew no compromise.

"That's contradictory," Elani argued.

"We speak to responsibility boding no negotiation; you may compromise your freedom as you wish."

This statement was a head-scratcher that we explored into the topic of impeccable acts, where I was again left behind.

As the weeks went by, and Jeanette continued to explain the responsibilities of freedom in terms we had never entertained, it became abundantly clear that spiritual development was not the passive endeavor many of us had believed it to be. Nor was it an adjunct to how we lived our daily lives: it was how we could practice living all of the time.

For the most part, I was used to these no-nonsense encounters and I went with the flow, but there came the time when a particular lesson put me on the defensive, as well: the session had just broken up, and as I stood to leave, Jeanette caught my attention and nodded toward an accent pillow on her couch.

"What?" I said.

"The pillow," she replied.

"What about it?" I said, puzzled.

"Is that where it was when you sat down?"

"On the couch, sure."

"Wasn't it propped in the corner between the side and backrest?"

"I guess."

"Two things." she grinned, making a peace sign. "Don't guess, and you need to make a practice of leaving things the way you found them unless it is an improvement. For the time being, you don't appreciate what constitutes an improvement, so it's probably best that you leave things as they are... if you can remember that much."

Understanding that she was already back in research mode—discovering what her student-character's response to any spontaneous circumstance would be—I returned to the scene of my odious crime and positioned the pillow in the way she said it had been before my arrival. The next week, I remembered the pillow lesson, but I didn't put it exactly where it had been, touching only the backrest. The week after that I forgot to re-fluff it. Ultimately, the number of times I forgot to properly place and/or fluff the pillow grew to embarrassing proportions.

Overall, in spite of Jeanette fulfilling many of her student's expectations about New Age teaching, such as holding lessons and meditations while burning candles and incense, those who came to hear her on a part-time basis missed the progression of what I perceived as aggression in

her lessons. Including those who had experiences with the white robed soft spoken, teachers of the mystical way, this was their cue to be affronted by something and not return.

Out of about 150 people who had come to hear her in the first four months—an excellent turnout of twenty or so people that filled her downstairs living room every Saturday—there remained only seven regulars to face the first recognizable stalking lesson upon our small group: Jeanette opened her eyes at the beginning of a channel, and said, "Who are we?"

Those who did not venture a guess were forced to participate, as she gazed from one person to the next, repeating the question each time. When no one bothered to ask Kha-lib why he was doing this, Kha-lib said, "Do not guess about anything. Be certain about even seemingly unimportant decisions, otherwise your commitment to them will lack conviction. In time, you must be willing to make a stand and fall on that spot."

The second overt lesson was based on our regular queries about money matters, such as how long a car or old washing machine would last. Kha-lib put an end to these by saying, "You need not concern yourself with funds. In the near future, she (Jeanette) will receive a large sum of money—a relative's legacy to all who are involved in our quest. She will distribute this to sustain you during your lessons. You need to discuss what to do with it before it arrives."

Though there really was a source of large funds in her distant family, Jeanette said she believed the legacy was knowledge.

As our suspicion and disappointment grew with every empty mail call, Kha-lib responded to our guarded queries by increasing the amount of wealth we were about to receive. Still, after a few weeks Rachel asked Kha-lib what the problem was.

"A point of change has yet to occur," he said, "which will route the funds to her." Days later, Rachel asked him if this point of change had happened; she would call the rest of the group and let them know.

"Your benefactor has not died, but he soon will," Kha-lib told her; by early evening, we were all eagerly anticipating the death of a stranger...

A cabbie cutting through traffic, to arrive at the red light at Georgia Street seconds sooner than us, refocused me on the lush scenery of the park giving way to the Coal Harbor Marina, and the narrow vista of office buildings beyond. I also noticed that the sense of fluidity had settled in deeply—a feeling that had happened a few times since I had met Jeanette, and a few times before I knew her, most often in dire circumstances. At these times, I had put the experience down to a reflex action, so that I did not cloud my choices with emotion. Jeanette and I had since talked about these instances of what she called heightened awareness; I now accepted that something was about to happen that required my full attention.

This would be something more than Jeanette having parked, exited the car, and left me sitting alone, musing over my sense of fluidity.

Chapter 46 - The Gesture: A Minimal Chance

Catching up to Jeanette, she glanced at me curiously—I understood that she wanted me to take note of something, as we walked silently downhill under the canopy of broad leafed trees that lined the street of apartment buildings.

After a short while, Jeanette said, "According to Stalkers, the most important lesson a human can learn is to embrace the concept of the Minimal Chance. To do this, and I mean with you right now, you must act as if every moment is an offer to be evaluated in the terms we've been discussing: where you really are and what's really going on." She walked a few more paces,

looked back at her car, then straight ahead. Formally she said, "Teaching the Minimal Chance is to make the apprentice aware that they have a connection to an energy-essence some call Spirit, their Source Soul, or Higher Self. Because the abstract should not be limited to common descriptions, I will also call this energy-essence Intent, and when we talk about its greater reality we'll simply call that the Universe."

"Works for me, except I already know that Intent exists. Hang on," I said slowing, because I was feeling light-headed.

Looking at me in an approving manner, she tugged on my sleeve and said, "It'll pass," as we reached Denman Street. Automatically, I tried to veer left toward the park.

Pulling me back toward the shopping area, she said, "I didn't say exists. I said have a connection with, and constant awareness of that connection is the Minimal Chance."

"Why is it difficult to be aware of—you just told me?"

"Awareness to the average person is to be cognizant, but their focus is erratically at the mercy of their self-interest; this is what will screw you until you catch on. Awareness in the Stalker's world is to apprehend every moment in its true nature, especially as opportunities arise such as the Universe making a gesture to them. If you had thought to assess our morning's events, you might have seen that we began with the pillow lesson, then we reviewed your personal lessons by categories based on Castaneda's and Lynn Andrews experiences. As we drove here, you filled out these categories with a recapitulation of our class lessons. When we parked, you were focused elsewhere and I literally left you behind. When I prompted you to think about something you had missed, you didn't see what was going on in front of your eyes. Are you with me now?"

"I am."

"In terms of essential events, we have done a comprehensive review to position you to encounter a Minimal Chance event. That's the lesson I recognized unfolding, and I'm telling you about it because you're new to consciously employing heightened awareness. That's what you're feeling again."

"I'm not controlling it."

"You have recognized its occurrence. Now you can more easily choose to focus on the nature of what is going on around you—to observe, as opposed to becoming involved."

"Understood." And I did.

"At this point in your progression, recognition of a Minimal Chance rests on what Stalkers call the most critical piece of knowledge available to mankind. There is..."

"Hang on, the conditional death-thing is the most important achievement, the chance thingy is the most important lesson, and now the most critical piece of knowledge?"

"Really—having just spoken about memorizing events?" she chastised me.

"How else will I learn?"

"You will recollect all of this when it's time, but I suggest that you don't use 'thingy' as a reference point."

"I'm sharp, but not..."

Briefly resting her hand on my arm, Jeanette said, "Recollecting is not remembering in your day-to-day type of thinking. As I was about to explain, behind our shoulders is a fist-sized ball of energy called the assemblage point, because it literally assembles a view of our world from an infinite number of possibilities depending on its position. One of these positions of perception stores every event you have ever experienced, which is why you need not be concerned about remembering everything. Another position is of absolute clarity—seeing the essence of a

moment unfolding—which makes every event a potential opportunity to gain knowledge far beyond what is apparent to the average person." She checked my eyes. "Where are you now?" she said, not 'How are you feeling?' a distinction I registered with a grin, because she clearly knew what was going on with me.

"I'm kind of in two places. I mean, I'm more aware of everything in a broad way," I said, as my concern for what I can only call the dinky stuff in life dissolved into the awareness that it had been blocking my view. In the next moment, my focus expanded like a wide-eyed stare without fear, and I no longer felt light-headed. Strangely, I felt bigger.

"Hmm...cool," I said.

"Your point of perception has moved closer to the Place of No Pity." Jeanette said.

I languished in a blasé mood, uninterested in definitions; Jeanette pulled me closer, to allow room for an elderly couple to pass while still walking side by side.

"You are feeling the aloofness of the observer," she said, "not here and now, but here and there, like you did when you needed to in your wars. Intent has set up your lesson, and positioned you to grasp it. Let things unfold; don't stare at a rose—you'll judge it. It's the entire garden you need to hold in your view."

I was pondering the possibility that I must be a genius for understanding her so clearly, as I stepped on Jeanette's heel peeling her sneaker off her foot.

Holding my arm for support, she bent down to put it back on. Rising, she said with warm reminiscence, "This temporary shift in your perceptions also brings with it the sense that you're an inseparable aspect of everything—no better or worse. You need to hold this focus, as well, or it could slip into marveling at how insightful you think you are." A puff of amusement escaped her nostrils.

With little effort, I regained my sense of what Jeanette had perfectly described as a sense of being here and there, as we separated in anticipation of walking around a man who had apparently realized something, and slowed his pace in the middle of the busy sidewalk. Taking the inside route, Jeanette had to suddenly dodge a rotund man emerging from a donut shop with his attention so firmly fixed on the contents of a carry-out bag that he stumbled on the aluminum transition strip between the inside flooring and the outside step. Instinctively, I reached out to help her, and promptly ploughed into the side of the man who had stopped and was turning around: he immediately apologized, quickly explaining that his mind had wandered and he had passed where he wanted to go.

Laughing, Jeanette touched him briefly on the forearm—an odd gesture for her—then nodding at me, she said, "We understand how that can happen."

"Sorry about that," I said meaninglessly, because I felt nothing as I sidestepped to walk around him.

Matching my motion to remain in front of me, the man said, "Any little help you can offer will go a long way toward getting me back on my feet today." He closed his mouth self-consciously.

I was initially confused, because he did not hold out his hand, then his words sunk in and I realized he was panhandling: I scrutinized him without subtlety while my fingers searched to separate the dollar coins from the other change I had in my pocket.

Jeanette leaned uncommonly close in what to me was a clear effort to detect alcohol on the stranger's breath. The man smiled briefly with amused tolerance, while she casually leaned away and looked at me in a disinterested way. This action was antithetical, because her glance had marked the moment.

The scene was unfolding like a play for me: viewing the man as an actor in costume, I placed him in his mid-thirties, a weathered face and wider than normal stance spoke to time at sea, or a visit with the needle, and his world was spinning a little faster than mine. Except his eyes, a peaceful Mediterranean blue on Clorox white, were clear and focused. He was also clean-shaven, and in the still air I smelled industrial soap—the waterless kind that mechanics use.

As if for further inspection, he removed his Seattle Mariners baseball cap and smoothed his short brown hair. It was clean, and appeared to have been recently worked on by a friend with a penchant for acute angles. When he put the cap back on, I noticed that stray fibers on the worn cuffs of his red and black checkered shirt had been evenly clipped.

Briefly marveling at how observant I was, I retrieved one of the dollar coins that had clinked against another in my pocket, and handed him \$1.55, palming a penny as being insulting.

He thanked me evenly before turning his tranquil gaze toward Jeanette, who had been rummaging through her purse and withdrawn a neatly folded ten dollar bill. Placing it in her left hand, under the strap, she looked for something smaller and came up with a crumpled five dollar bill from a pouch into which her son habitually crushed her change, after buying milk at the local convenience store. She put this on top of the ten, then freeing a quarter and two dimes from the grasp of corner seams, she handed him all the money she had.

His expression did not even graze surprise, but went straight to appreciation; he bowed his head minimally, thanked her quietly, and humming a familiar tune stepped toward his intended destination with purposeful strides, as if he had a business meeting.

Jeanette and I continued our walk toward the Denman Street Mall, my aloofness dissipating with each step.

""You're in a good mood today," I said, boorishly.

"I am now," she said cheerfully, wiping at the corner of one eye.

"He'll probably hurt himself with that much cash," I ventured.

"I doubt it, but that's none of my business."

"Aren't you responsible if your generosity causes something crappy to happen?"

"To give things with strings attached is not a gift. It's a judgment of others to be less than you, when you have no idea what they may have gone through to be where they are." She winked. "We didn't purchase the right to tell him how to live."

A warm flush ran through me. "Why did you dig so deep? That's not your usual way."

"Until today, whenever we've been approached for money we were on our way home. I've always given whatever I can afford, which never included a bribe." She glanced at me. "People cannot be coerced into changing their ways, other than for show. They can only be confronted, without judgment, into recognizing how they got where they are, and only when they are ready to hear it." She chuckled to herself. "I was going to hold onto ten dollars for my son, then I recognized you were literally fulfilling that man's request: I had no choice but to give my all."

"Literally?" I said, confused.

"Did he not say that any little offer of help would get him back on his feet today?"

"He did, and we gave him almost... no, exactly twenty bucks. That's not enough to get anyone back on their feet. Probably the opposite," I sniggered.

"The total wasn't important; it was the value of our gestures that fulfilled his request." She squeezed my forearm. "You took him literally and offered a *little* help, which represented a view that would keep him on the streets if he believed he was worth loose change. My reference point was that he was worth everything I had to help him get to where he had planned on going, but a concern had distracted him. The metaphor behind him losing focus was that he'd lost his way,"

she chuckled, "just like I left you behind, so my money was more importantly a sign that allowed him to muster that final surge of courage most of us need to complete a difficult journey. In effect, we cajoled him to keep his appointment. We're a naturally good team."

"It's possible he was a clever junky, or a drunk. You checked his breath," I said, not grasping her interpretation of events.

Jeanette let go of my arm to gesture. "His manner showed us that he knew he was no one's victim but his own. At some point, he thought he had it all then lost it, because he thought 'it all' did not require the maintenance of his care and concern. He had embraced things so tightly that he squeezed the life out of them—the spirit behind what these things represent. Since then, he has summoned the courage to start over by focusing his care and concern where he can, like maintaining dignity by keeping himself presentable. This is the starting point of cleaning up one's life, and to a man making that climb there are no little things. He appreciates everything, as you so meticulously noted." She touched my arm. "He didn't mention money directly; he asked for help, but he didn't plead hunger or explain his circumstance because he knew you wouldn't have believed him."

"What other kind of help could he have been after?"

"Toothpaste or mouthwash; he covered his mouth because he was conscious of his breath. His smile revealed good teeth."

"Uh huh."

"It's logical that he was preoccupied, because he was going to a job interview," she continued, "and he wanted everything to be the best that it could possibly be. You told him it wasn't worth the effort. I told him it was worth everything I had for him to get the last of the little things he needed on this day."

"What's courageous about washing?" I scoffed.

"His courage was evident in not pretending that his circumstance was anything other than what it was. He wasn't apologetic, as if he was a lesser man burdened with private failures, nor was he defiant, as if the world owed him something." Jeanette shrugged. "He's no longer fearful, so he doesn't need things to validate his self-worth."

"Good thing," I chuckled.

"His physical poverty," Jeanette said, with a disapproving glance, "caused him to see through the superficiality of the world. Now he is not a poor man, no matter how little he has." Speaking to a spot on the sidewalk, "If he was an ordinary man," she said enigmatically, "he would make it back, and never again make the judgments that brought him to us—judgments such as, 'Good thing.'"

"Are you saying that he won't make it?"

"Always focused on the negative," she said, shaking her head. "I'm saying that he was a gift of the most beautiful kind—a Stalker's projection sent to us specifically for this lesson. I touched him to see if he was real," she tittered. "I know about projections, but I never recognized one before now."

"Let's find him," I said, turning around, "I want to meet a..."

"He's not here anymore," Jeanette said, grasping my arm. "His job is done."

"What... he was a ghost?" I quipped sarcastically, looking for a Mariners cap bobbing down the sidewalk.

"He was a gesture of Spirit and Spirit wastes nothing. He is no longer needed so he is no longer here." Jeanette sniffled and said. "Your roaming mind had me take my eyes off where I

was walking, so that I could explain where you were heading in your apprenticeship, then you ran into a stranger who had stopped to get his bearings. The event gave us all a direction."

"Directions from Davie Street to Robson, maybe."

"That man's contemplation was about a direction in life, and your lesson was to see the underlying nature of an event—recognize your Minimal Chance as a direction to take—which happened right away." She snapped her fingers. "The panhandler made it clear that you need lessons concerning judgment, generosity, and appreciation. When you accept these, it'll change the way you are going as well." She looked behind her. "It was too perfect to have been administered by an average man."

"Generosity? I gave him almost half of my money," I protested.

"Half of your change," she corrected me, "and you did it to show yourself that you are generous, otherwise why keep the other half when you still have five dollars?"

"Prudence."

"You are a miser," she said crisply.

"Come off it. I spend as much on you as I do on myself, even if it's not so smart in the moment."

"That's how you camouflage the underlying truth from yourself. You hold onto your last dollar like a pauper to a prayer, regardless that you have no immediate need for it; you camouflage your secret fear of poverty by equating angst with generosity."

"Did I ever hold out on you?" I said coolly, not bothering to unravel what she had said.

"You regularly decline to have a pastry with your coffee, or dessert after a meal." She chuckled. "You've perspired when I thought about ordering one, and you become trite because it adds to your split of the tab."

"Split?" I chuckled mirthlessly. "You might think about how we've been sharing costs for the past few weeks—which," I quickly added, holding up my hand, "is fine. I appreciate that you've done the same for me."

Jeanette's expenses had shot up to cover her car insurance and son's sporting goods/summer wardrobe needs, which I knew had tapped out her monthly household account. At the same time, my freelance work was flourishing, and I knew that she was in arrears with her power bill so I had causally offered to help. She politely refused, saying only that it would work out. I believed that she expected Josh to offer, which as far as I knew had not happened.

"You can't be afraid and appreciative at the same time," she replied, "and the momentum of pettiness undeterred leads to cruelty." She bit her lower lip, looking at me expectantly.

Missing the head's up, I said, "You can't convince me that twenty bucks would change anyone's direction in life, other than getting two or three bottles."

"You claim that nothing changes for anyone you might help, because nothing in you changes from making contributions that aren't selflessly offered."

"Some people gushed with gratitude," I said lamely.

"If not a show for your benefit, they were gushing temporary relief from their fears, which is the other side of you helping them to keep your own fears at arm's length. When you're willing to explore this idea, as our friend back there did," she said, thumbing behind us, "you'll find your heart and stop being a miser with it as well."

Counting off rebuttal points on my fingers, I said, "I give money to strangers. I spend the bulk of what I have on us, I usually give most of the rest as a tip, and I'm a miser? What would I be if I gave the last dollar away—Saint Nick?"

"You'd be desperate, as long you're paying off your self-image."

"What does the amount or my motivation have to do with anything? The guy got a freebie," I said, frustrated.

"Hardly," she chortled. "You made him pay with a strip search followed by a meager offering, and now you're trying to accuse him of a deception because I caught you in yours!" She laughed.

"What if there was another guy with him who obviously needed it more?" I said without purposeful focus.

"It depends. I'd probably split it."

"So how much you'd give, and to who isn't an easy choice?"

"It's whom, and my quandary would be about giving it in such a way that it would do no damage." She grimaced sympathetically; a thought struck her. "This is not a hypothetical is it? You've been caught in these circumstances, or you wouldn't be defending yourself so adamantly." She drawled, "Ahaaaaww, I didn't see that coming: it wasn't a question of should you help, or how much, it was that you couldn't do anything. You had to walk away because you understood the fourteen-year-old punk in Beirut might kill them for taking your money."

"Or let them starve," I said quietly.

"You did the right thing."

"Nothing?" I scoffed.

"In the grander view of behavioral evolution, that punk was safeguarding their lesson. I'll explain..."

"You've got to be fucking kidding," I snarled.

"As you can clearly see," she said flatly, "I am doing neither. Circumstances dictated your course of action, and you listened to them. You were not responsible, nor were you meant to think you were; you were there as a witness. Besides," she punched me lightly on the arm, "need isn't necessarily obvious. Our panhandler friend took better care of himself than you do. You're fighting me because you feel guilty. Let it go. None of this is personal."

"Uh huh," I said, rounding off the corner at the intersection.

I was two steps across before I noticed that Jeanette was still standing at the curb, looking at unstable skies; a light drizzle began to fall. Though the sun was visible, so the shower would be brief, I walked back to her and suggested that we stop at a local hotel lounge until the drizzle passed.

"I can't afford it," Jeanette said, smiling apologetically.

"I've got it covered," I said, waving her objection aside as though striking at a fly circling my nose.

Jeanette gave me a peculiar look, as though a foul smell had wafted her way.

Chapter 47 - The Undercurrents of Fear

We stopped at a convenience store cash machine, where I withdrew the last of my cash. Offhandedly, I flashed the twenties her way and mentioned that we were good for a couple of glasses of wine and splitting an appetizer. Jeanette nodded in a preoccupied manner.

Half a block later, nearing the door to the lounge, she unexpectedly stretched her last two steps to get ahead of me, then she just stood there. I reached around her to open it.

"Thank you kind sir," she said in Victorian fashion.

"It pleases me to fulfill m'lady's expectations," I said as she walked by.

Jeanette tch-tched me, then headed toward our preferred table in the back tier, three steps up. With a confirming nod to Catherine's raised brow, a familiar server who was dealing with another customer, I trailed behind her jaunty pace wondering what the hell I had done this time.

Catherine soon brought two glasses of red wine—maybe rain wine would be more accurate, because we went into Checkers only when the sky was bleak, which was enough for her to recall our preferences.

We exchanged belated pleasantries and comments on the capriciousness of Vancouver weather before Catherine reported the contents and price of the lunch special. After she left us to make our decisions, with fatalistic cheeriness I said, "Was my bow too shallow, or did I forget to spread my cape across the threshold?"

"You turned a courteous act into a power play."

"You scripted the play," I replied reasonably.

"The core of stalking is spontaneity. It doesn't matter if I contrive circumstances, because it doesn't change the nature of your response."

"Why go to the trouble of creating games, when you can just tell me what you're trying to teach me?"

Sighing, she said, "People don't believe much of anything unless they are shown it. Even then, they have to agree with the procedure, and like you, they still don't work at making it relevant to other circumstances." With a softening smile, she added, "You are caring and kind until someone offends your image so your loyalty and generosity come with conditions; we all give those away at some point. How often have you heard a diatribe followed by, 'I don't know where that came from' or, 'That wasn't like me?'"

"Often enough."

"Did you ever see a hand up their butt, forcing caustic words out of wooden lips?"

I chuckled at the imagery

"Irrefutable experiences followed by an assessment of how they apply to your entire life are the only way to turn those clues about your true nature into knowledge. Minutes ago," she nodded toward the street, "you limited your help to a stranger, which told me that you were feeding the camouflaged belief that you are superior, based on your judgment of his circumstances. That you did this with your assemblage point in an advantageous position, and me having just told you to pay attention to the nature of what's happening, not what's happening to you, tells me how damaged you really are. Your comment after opening the door was just as revealing."

"That I judged you—how?"

"I'm a woman."

I snorted at the implication.

"You interact differently with men, including the apparent maleness of representatives of Intent, than you do with me, Saa-ra, and Caroline—with less respect."

"I really don't think I do that, at least not consciously," I said as if this mattered.

"You hide it in culturally acceptable ways, but words are deeds and yours are loaded with male attitude." She shifted the silver condiment container to one side, a symbolic gesture suggesting there was nothing standing in the way of her making a point, or me seeing it.

"We've discussed the concepts of momentum and continuity enough for you to know that you can't logically think in one way and act in another." She cocked her head in a fait accompli gesture: the effects of momentum and continuity were no longer issues to me, not because I

could read or dissect them well, but because my otherwise fucked-up world of random violence made more sense under their auspices.

"What words give me away?" I asked her quietly.

"You know full-well that it's not just about you, but if we are going to create another shared assumption..." she shrugged.

"Go ahead."

"Most women in everyday circumstances use gentler words, such as 'nonsensical', whereas you would say 'crap', as if judging things gently with a club. You have been scared shitless, but never frightened to the core; you have been fucked over, but not betrayed; shit happens did not convey the hollowness of sudden destitution when all that you owned burned to the ground."

"I'm a bit more graphic than women," I shrugged.

"Your shallow, clipped, and callous judgments of specific events extend to other circumstances whether you mean them to or not. You know you can't help but maintain the continuity—no one can—because the very nature of our perception, and so our sanity, is based on maintaining apparent continuity. The unintended consequence of that momentum takes you to the manifestation of those intentions while you're focused elsewhere, and then you're surprised at what you created."

"What was the clue I gave away at the door?"

"Expectations."

"I don't..."

She raised her hand, and said, "Figure it out."

After a short moment, I said, "That I am a chauvinist or superior in general?"

"Both are excellent starts." Jeanette shifted in her seat, a sign that she was constructing a more comprehensive point.

I took a slow breath in anticipation of it being my last calm one for a while.

"The momentum of a nation made fearful enough to expend enormous resources in preparation for war focuses on all of the possible scenarios that could blossom into one. This makes war inevitable because you get what you focus on, which justifies the preparations. You can see how that continuity feeds on itself?"

"Yes."

"In the same way, constantly having to guard your own secrets from yourself means you will always find something to threaten them. If the threat is something basic, like someone wanting to get to know the real you, you increase your vigilance because your deepest secret is self-loathing. This creates the need for additional subterfuge to protect yourself from what you feel lurking in the shadows of your unrealized fears, but you can't define what's there because you never had to. You always ran away, or went to war with them."

"War with who—whom?"

"You created a momentum of conflict by elevating your defenses, from subtle satire through condescension and sarcasm, to bold-faced lying. By essentially attacking innocent circumstances, because the boogie man of truth has by this time become too difficult to conceal, your partners either leave, or you break up with them." She cocked her head.

"All I did was open the door," I said as Catherine came back for our order.

"And you are not pleased about it now that I'm presenting you with your reflection in the glass." Jeanette looked up. "The poached salmon, with two plates, please."

"Maybe I'm annoyed at your poor perception of me," I said, quelling the anger I felt at hearing her order without consulting me: that Jeanette knew I enjoyed salmon, but rarely bought

it because it was expensive, didn't calm me as much as my having the foresight to show her how much money I had. I could hardly pick up the menu and check the price; it would be close.

Leaning toward me, she said, "I told you that self-importance has to be dealt with head on; I'm orchestrating experiences that will show you to yourself in an infinitely safer way than your travels did. I'm not the enemy," she said, reaching over to tap me on the chest. "The enemy is always within."

"It's comfortable there."

Leaning back and ignoring my comment, she said, "You felt awkward about our encounter with the panhandler, so I pricked your ego to put your defenses on full alert. Then I presented you with an opportunity to reconstruct your self-image so that you could see it for yourself."

"What should I be seeing?"

"You tried to gain control of a threat to your autonomy by presuming grandiose authority over an insignificant circumstance."

"Grandiose authority over a door?"

"You blithely assumed you could fulfill my expectations, which tells me that your sense of self-importance is the size of a free state!" Her grin complemented the breadth of her arm span.

"It was role-playing—an expression that suited the circumstance you created," I said scowling at her contrivance.

"I told you, prodding your calculated attitudes and fears to the surface is tough stuff. Stop acting like an average man, and I do mean acting; it's getting old." She sipped her wine.

I did the same before saying, "What calculated attitudes?"

"Why did you both show and tell me what you could afford?"

"Prudence: it's all I've got."

Jeanette looked away, failing to conceal a grin from which I caught on that this circumstance was by design; it always had been.

"I'm broke until my check comes in on Friday, which you couldn't have appreciated when you ordered; what's miserly about me spending everything?" I said reactively.

"What's prudent about it?" she countered.

"Liking you affects my judgment," I said evenly.

She looked at me as if memorizing features for a police sketch artist. "You should make a habit of treating yourself well. You've been cheap for so long that you don't recognize the contradictions it creates."

"Such as?" I said, proving her correct.

"Feeling that you are spending unwisely and doing it anyway demonstrates two things: as an average person you are extracting recognition, while the Stalker in you knows you'll be fine, because you always have been. Speaking of which, it is Friday and your check is in." She withdrew her touch and added, "But thank you for letting me know where our accounts stand. By the way, remember this word... zipper."

"Why?"

"You're right. Forget it."

Chapter 48 - Deconstructing Personality

Without pause, she said, "We are going to discuss the construction of a personality, which will help to explain the techniques we're going to use to take yours apart when we get to that part of your training."

"Other than going through doorways?" I jested weakly.

"Whatever I need," she replied. "Here we go: beliefs are not sacred or immutable, as if we are all-knowing at any given point in our lives. Their purpose is to create a particular approach—the one we require to service our personal development. I know this sounds paradoxical, but tearing them apart is not personal—making them personal is why it's so difficult to change beliefs that are merely agreements with circumstances that we want to represent us. So far?"

"So good."

"What makes them personal is that we shape them through the three contributing mechanisms that form our self-image." She took a breath to line up her ducks. "Self-importance causes us to think we are the center of the Universe, so we are affronted at anything that challenges our majesty or perceived subservience. We cannot overcome these challenges because they are self-sustaining myths, so we fall into the warming arms of self-absorption where every comment is about us, and then self-indulgently grasp for the illusionary prizes our cultures create by aggrandizing useless things that we think better represent us. This process is energetically exhausting, because the prizes are ever changing. Taken together, the beliefs we have hardened through our self-image are, to us, immutable facts that we have defended since their inception; we will literally fight to the death for them."

"That's clear—all of it."

"Good, hold onto it as a background landscape." She swallowed quickly, and carried on integrating previous points with her new lesson. "Everything the average person learns from the moment of their birth until the moment of their death touches on the three core perceptual agreements of humanity; root assumptions of physical existence, social and cultural conformation, and the personality we have concluded is who we are. This trio forms a broader harmony of consequences that is greater than the sum of its parts—a grand consensus as basic everyone agreeing that a tree is a tree, and as pervasive as all of using reason to assess our circumstances, without realizing this is how we have been conformed to perceive our world."

Her enunciation conformed to the Queen's English. "Stalkers call this master accord the cognition of the average person, and from which the human personality can be objectively categorized." She paused.

"As in definitively listing the elements you've talked about? Sure."

"No, as in crushing those myriad elements into basic categories."

"Are you saying we're more alike than we'd care to admit?"

"You might put it that way," she grinned guardedly. "From the perspective of the Stalker's cognition, there are only four personality types."

"Everyone falls into them?" I said, dubiously.

"There is a category of assistants and companions," Jeanette carried on, "which Stalkers call the perfect secretary. These people are gracious, efficient, and some of the nicest people you will ever meet. The fatal flaw in their personal development is that they are virtually useless without direction." She looked at me inquisitively.

"I'll wait until you're done."

She continued. "The opposite of the perfect secretary is the petty, devious, and egocentric person. Insecurity makes them envious, so they talk almost exclusively about themselves to be the center of attention. Their fatal flaw is that they will kill for power."

I nodded.

"The dreamer is the middle ground: they are mostly indifferent to outside events, and instead spend their energy creating the illusion that they have great things waiting for them. They

also talk incessantly about things they don't do anything about, which makes their fatal flaw neglect."

"Do you mean that literally, or in terms of personal growth?"

"I mean it literally and metaphorically," she said, tapping the tabletop. "If you can't operate without direction, what's to stop a devious person from using you to death—a person who talks but won't intervene?" she said rhetorically.

"Point taken."

"The fourth personality," Jeanette said, "is what some seers call a Warrior. These people can accept events without judgment, then choose to act upon them or not. Either way, their choices are deliberate, and include following the dictates of impeccability; we will have to expand the meaning of both these terms." Jeanette gestured the point aside. "Go ahead, ask it."

"You are saying that we are not unique?"

"I am not saying that. Our uniqueness lies in the one-off arrangement of our energy construction, which constitutes our accumulated knowledge and undigested experience that allows for the endless variations of perception we find between our experiences and other's versions of the same events."

"So I'm unique, and like everyone else at the same time?"

"You are like everyone else who is energetically encased in the modality of your time. This encasement includes your unique means of interpreting events, which underscores your assumption of autonomy."

"In English?"

"I'm saying your conclusions—your personality being one of these—are limited to the cognition of the average person."

"Artists create unique things all of the time."

"They create unique interpretations of their perceptions." She waited for me to process the distinction.

"Meaning these interpretations are drawn from the same four core conclusions they think of as who they are?"

"You're getting it." She feigned a strained grin. "But my point goes deeper."

"It would. Shoot."

"If all of our assumptions have been shaped by the same fundamental forces, then so have our decisions."

"My decisions have been shaped by... okay, I see your point."

"I think not," she grimaced. "I'm saying that all of your so-called independent decisions are actually acquiesces to pre-existing assumptions drawn from the cognition of the average person."

"I have never made an independent decision?"

"Correct, no one can make a truly deliberate decision until they have left reason behind."

"That's just bullshit," I smirked.

"So says your reason, which is what we're trying to have you leave behind." Jeanette looked at me inquiringly. "Logically, if all that you think you know has been shaped by the same perceptions that have been hammered into everyone, what else can you conclude within that cognition?"

"Okay, let's try what impeccability is about again. Maybe I'll see your point from there."

Looking into my innocent eyes, Jeanette realized I had not grasped much of that concept in our Saturday classes, either. In a monotone, she said, "You have a difficult day ahead. Grasping the pervasive nature of your conformation is critical."

"Still..." I held my ground.

Shaking her head at whatever I was in for, she relented.

"To a reasoning mind, impeccability can look like ethics or morality, but it can fly in the face of both because it's about the regulation of energy. In simple terms," she cocked her head to one side, indicating this was not a definitive explanation, "impeccability means doing the right thing for the right reason, which can include doing nothing as a proactive decision. Where it can get complicated," she grinned ruefully, "is that reason doesn't apply to decisions based on the regulation of energy. Reason is inherently energy inefficient. More than that, impeccable choices have to take into consideration where you really are, so that you act in proportion to the arena. Otherwise the amount of energy employed will not be correct, and interfere with an otherwise appropriate influence."

"Let's start with what you mean by it looking like ethics, then we'll go to acting in proportion to the arena," I said evenly.

"Reason deals with the 'because' of an event you have interpreted in a particular way and subsequently decided you should respond in a way consistent with your interpretation. This maintains the continuity of thought through action, which always seems reasonable under the circumstance. It follows that there are many ethical standards—meaning no real standards that everyone can embrace as the most moral, or apparently beneficial to the most people."

"Understood."

"There are no variables affecting a Stalker's motivation: they would say a circumstance beckoned them, and they responded with the most efficient use of their energy. This response could mirror your reasoned choice and look ethical, or it might confound you with its apparent irresponsibility."

"I'll need an example of that, but what does acting in proportion to an arena mean—it sounds like a variable?"

Jeanette gave this a moment's thought before, suddenly sporting a wide grin, she said, "Imagine that you are driving the third vehicle to arrive at a four way stop simultaneous to a fourth car on your right. You know the correct order in which to safely proceed, but what usually happens?"

Her pleasure came from knowing this circumstance was a pet peeve of mine: in casual conversation, I had used it to support my declaration that twenty-five percent of driving-age humanity was terminally stupid. Being generous with Murphy's Law, I said that we are certain to encounter at least one of these people seventy-five percent of the time at four-way stops in most of Canada. The exceptions were in Halifax, where a cluster of identical signage was uniformly thought to mean, "Just go ahead when you can," and in Nanaimo, "Slow your truck, create the impression that you know what you're doing, then go."

"Someone goes out of order, because they either don't see how discretion and law can be in the same sentence, or they can't figure out their left from their right. Then there's the one who waves a car through ahead of their own rightful turn, because it adds to the confusion of who goes next."

"In what way?" she said.

"Did the waver give up his turn, thinking he should go next, or did he relegate himself to the last person to go through?"

Nodding, Jeanette said, "In the context of this arena, doing nothing is the impeccable choice."

"Going last?"

"Your reason says you are going last, but logically you are making the best decision you can make in a muddled circumstance." Into my puzzled expression, she said, "Your intention is to get from point A to point B. Does a fender-bender help you do that? No," she carried on. "So why not wave everyone through with a smile and a shrug, and achieve your goal without risk at the cost of thirty-seconds of doing nothing?"

"Doing the right-thing for the right reason is the most efficient use of energy?"

"Yes, but there is more to it."

"I'm shocked."

"Describing this presents a problem," Jeanette chuckled, "because I'm speaking about the momentum of energy while addressing the limited vision of your reason." She sipped her wine and said, "But I'll give it a shot." She set her glass aside.

"The driver who gave up his legal and expected turn was thinking only about his wonderful self, not the potential consequences of his actions. The energetic overview considers that the essence of an act will always enhance a similar continuity of events."

"Which was what?"

"His apparent kindness to one driver carelessly disregarded his true circumstance; this was the arena of legal, standardized procedures that create safe and reasonable expectations for everyone. Doing nothing takes that altered situation into account, and does not add to the confusion."

"It would piss off the guy behind me."

"How does that affect your safety, or his, for that matter?"

"Okay—right so the energetic overview would be that the good guy encouraged other drivers to be careless?"

"Which would be their choice, of course, but we're not talking about cause and effect in the arena of reason or discretion. We're talking about expending energy properly, which will always equate to efficiency and safety."

I nodded my understanding of her energetic overview, so far.

"Now take the essence of an act further." Gathering her thoughts, Jeanette raised a finger to signal there was a preamble to her explanation. "The human form is a literal translation of our Spirit's purpose for a given lifetime. By practicality and design we cannot recall all that we really are or know, but knowledge of our purpose is literally designed into us. This includes the personality that best suits our challenges, which means the beliefs that we will embrace based on our conformation to a time, place, and our parents' influences are highly predictable. Moreover, we constantly revisit our choices under guidance in the dream state. We'll talk about this in depth," she said, motioning this topic gently aside as if sliding something delicate out of reach of a child.

"My point, which is a key consideration about the concept of impeccable acts, is that we choose everything that happens to us; there are no accidents. These choices include mass agreements to experience even hellacious circumstances for our own development, over many lifetimes. Have I lost you in your memories, yet?"

"No," I said petulantly, because she caught me drifting into my past.

Without commenting on my tone, she said, "In your experience, the Ethiopian famine was a mass agreement to learn developmental lessons they had failed to grasp in less impressive forms, at other times in their developmental history. Those people needed and chose an undeniable lesson in order to move on at this great time of change, when the momentum of all events is extremely high."

"You're not saying that we shouldn't have helped them?" I said, bewildered.

"Correct, I am not saying that. I am saying that those who died meant to die and those who didn't were meant to live, just as those who helped them made a choice, and those who didn't made a different choice. There is no judgment either way. There is only the energetic intent to participate in any circumstance, which contributes to the momentum of similar events."

"Okay, but a month ago you said we shouldn't go to war, as in, the media shouldn't cover them."

"As in no one should go," she corrected me. "I told you, peace simply 'is' if you leave it alone. You can only further war by going to war in any capacity."

"But you included peacekeeping armies, as I recall," which I did because, for all of my apparent failings, I had a steel-trap memory. This is why I was rarely caught in a lie... before now.

"So that we are clear, are you asking me why we can provide relief in a famine, but not in a war?"

"Sorry, yes. I hadn't formulated the question."

"That's a convenient habit you need to break."

"I... right, I understand."

"If a conflict is artificially ended," Jeanette tackled my question, "the reasons for it remain intact, and you are postponing the inevitable because peace is not something that can be imposed. It has to be sustained by the free will of the population, just as a country cannot go to war without their agreement, be this silent or overt."

I nodded that I understood the principle: we all were in charge.

"The reasonable point of view is that Peacekeepers stop the suffering, but it is short-sighted. Their temporary influence allows cultures and combatants time to sharpen their beliefs, and arm their children with them, when a developmental lesson is to not follow in their father's footsteps." She shrugged sadly. "The nature of the Peacekeeper's actions is to interfere with an undeniable lesson—the end point manifestations of thoroughly crappy beliefs, which will kill the combatant's, their children, and their children's children, until they finally understand what they are doing. Logically, the impeccable choice would be to let them slaughter themselves as an undeniably impressive lesson they have failed to learn in other ways. Then we can help the survivors, who might know better the next time around."

"I get the principle. Still..."

"You are thinking about the innocents that still haunt you; that is your conformation to reasoning imposing itself on the developmental overview." She touched my arm. "You needed this experience to see the big picture when it was time, which is now." She removed her touch and pursed her lips. "Part of what makes this your time is your awareness of the existence of Spirit, therefore your own immortal status, and the ways mankind develops through cycles of birth and death. As others become aware that this cycle is an inseparable, sacred aspect of the physical journey, they will have a context within which to view the deaths associated with the earth's end-time cleansing as well."

"I can see that intellectually, but how is working a famine different from working a war?"

"Think in terms of contributing to the nature of the act: in a famine, official observers and bystanders have the option of alleviating suffering in an event that has reached its final manifestation. Inserting your positive influence does not create more suffering; there is no onus attached to it. It is not as if participants would want to make life or death stands for the right to starve. Correct?"

"No shit."

"As I said, those gruesome events also provided millions of people with the opportunity to choose to help those who would never again behave in ways that would lead to them to starving to death. What's the puzzled look about?"

"I'm trying to wrap my mind around letting it all go to hell. I mean, dictators would be popping up everywhere if they thought there was no form of global peacekeeping to keep them in check."

"It's the other way around: if you want to see rights and freedoms blossom, allow genocides to run their course and populations around the world would know better than to allow the power mongers and the corrupted to lead them."

"Because it would be covered by the media?" I raised my brow.

"Unsanitized coverage—we'll get to that."

"Still," I said stoically.

She clasped her hands. "I can't go further with this today. Explaining the right thing to do isn't something I can spoon-feed to your reason, and as I said, your day is going to be difficult enough. Can we go back to the constructs of personality?"

"Fair enough," I relented.

"Where were we?" she grinned.

"Jesus, how do you expect...?"

"It was your insistence that stopped the flow of the lesson. Deal with it."

Taking a considered breath, I said, "If I have this right, my sense of self-importance has me think I'm unpredictable, if not unfathomable, but in terms of my overall conformation to the world and behavioral evolution I'm old news?"

"Correct."

"There are three kinds of average people, as defined by those who are unaware that the only battle worth fighting is with themselves?"

"And these are?"

"The perfect secretary is sweet, but useless without direction. The petty egocentric has to be the center of attention, and would kill for power, and the dreamer is always waiting for something so they're not reliable."

"Very good."

"Which one am I?"

"Can you operate without direction?"

"I usually resent it."

"Do you talk about things, but not do anything about it?"

"You know I don't." The opposite was the case; I did things and talked about them endlessly.

She cocked her head while I did the math, scoffed, and said, "I couldn't care less about power."

"Not to put too fine a point on it," she said, looking at a young couple entering the doorway, "you manipulated your government minder in Pakistan to take away his power over you, which could have led to his death." She looked back at me. "You were party to controlling a key circumstance in Lebanon, where you literally caused soldiers to shell other soldiers for your benefit. As far as maintaining control over yourself goes, you bet you would kill if you thought you had to." She took a needed breath before dismantling more of my self-image.

"You also planned on applying for the screenplay grant on your own, which was deceitful, and when I filled in the gaps in my story line, you put the application on hold to learn more to advance your work—not ours—which was devious."

I blushed as she looked outside.

Focused on something I could not see, in a disinterested tone she said, "Your personal storytelling is entirely egocentric, and pettiness is yours to discover." She faced me. "It's too rampant to catalogue. Is that enough for now?"

"There's more?" I mumbled, mockingly.

There was now.

"Do you recall our talk about the Law of Catalytic Momentum as it applied to relationships?"

"All of them," I said warily.

"What was their essence?"

"Everything is conscious, charged energy, and because like attracts like we attract like-minded people and events to us."

"You've been meeting these kinds of key people at critical junctions of your journey to move you along, because it's their nature to use people and throw them away, like you do."

"Such as?"

"What was the fellow who ran Scarlet Productions like?"

I took a moment to edit my expletives, before I said, "He was ambitious, vindictive, loved control, and always had to be right—but he was a good father and provider," I added to not seem too lopsided.

"This is the man who defrauded you out of earned money, deceived you out of a partnership, and then to be rid of you enhanced an otherwise reparable transgression to deprive you of your livelihood in Toronto?"

"Okay, he was a fucking dickhead."

Jeanette stared, waiting for me to make a connection.

I didn't, so she did.

"You had just finished being shaped by your wars; you had all of the negative programming in place but you lacked the opportunity to display it. He was you, moving you along to me."

I withheld my sneer to reassess the possibility that I would kill for any reason.

Chapter 49 - Essential Flaws

"In time," she continued as if speaking to a plant across the room, "three of the four categories of personality types will become assumptions of the way you look at people, most of whom will give themselves away through three common personality flaws." She faced me again, apparently finished with whatever had taken her attention away. "These flaws are categorized as the pious, the bigot, and the obsessed."

"Three types of average people, three crappy flaws, got it. Before you go on, you're not saying these are the only flaws we have?"

"Correct. I am saying that the most prevalent among mankind's behavioral aberrations fall into three types." She held up one finger for each as she said, "The pious agree without assessment, and feel they always know what's going on. The bigot thinks he is always correct so he ignores what he doesn't understand. The obsessed can't decide which way to go, because they can't ignore or accept events entirely." She lowered her hand, and with an effort kept a straight face, which was akin to laughing at me: I didn't have to ask, because we had been down this road

the day before. I was the bigot, always having to be correct, and too many times to count I had ignored what I didn't understand about my metaphysical experiences. Maintaining my sense of continuity, ergo sanity meant that I had a history of this behavior.

"I will warn you," she said with a fading grin, "that some of the behaviors appear to line up with the personality types, but there is no easy rule about that. We are enormously clever at disguising our flaws, so there is no reason why a perfect secretary can't disguise a streak of bigotry in piety, or an obsessed dreamer can't appear to take charge of a circumstance they may have mulled over until it was virtually resolved. That said, everyone in every possible mix of behaviors can have the energy to hunt their flaws, and become a Warrior to battle them."

"Why you call them Warriors?" Apparently, I said this distastefully.

"Warriors are in an endless struggle, first with hunting their flaws, and then with overcoming them. You don't like the term because you assess it with judgments ranging from utter stupidity to callous murderers, no different than how you have acted in professionally camouflaged circumstances. We can call them Stalkers, if you like—that's where they're headed if they choose to go there." She leaned my way as if to whisper, and enigmatically said in her normal tone, "You never know who you might be talking to."

Jeanette raised her gaze to look out the window with more intensity than was required to see if the weather had changed. "For now," she said, leaning back to face me, "make a habit of placing your questions about behavior inside the boxes of these six categories, and you'll discover the answers on your own. As we go along," she said, refocusing somewhere over my left shoulder, "you'll also be making connections about the way you are, and you will be miles ahead of just having organized information."

"You told me not to bother memorizing lists," I said crisply, becoming annoyed at her lack of focus.

She looked squarely at me. "I said no such thing. I said not to be concerned, because that would have distracted you from the key points I was making. When we're done for the day, you can be as concerned as you like about memorizing everything... which you have been doing at the expense of trying to understand their connections."

"Speaking of distractions, what's out there?"

"Nothing important." She smiled wryly.

"Coulda fooled me."

"I just did: I wanted you to know what your concerns are doing to your ability to grasp what's in front of you."

"Like what?" I challenged her, thinking she meant right now.

"Exactly my point... Stalkers," she continued without hesitation, "relentlessly make connections to these personality categories, and practiced flaws, until they know themselves thoroughly. From here, they can learn to know the rest."

"The rest of what?"

She inhaled patiently, a signal I interpreted to mean that had I been paying attention her explanation would not be necessary.

"We all begin as hunters of the truth, as we know it. Think of it in terms of a child asking, 'Why am I here?' as everyone does sometime during their lives, but they can't become a Hunter—capitol H—until they understand the landscape in which their prey resides."

"Part of that landscape being the elements of personal and social confusion?"

"Yes." She grinned at my simultaneous effort to make connections and amends. "The landscape of a Hunter is the reasonable world, and their prey is the detrimental beliefs they have

embraced from that world. When they accept that these beliefs are forerunners to logic, they can become Warriors stalking the behavioral flaws their beliefs created. When they have subdued these behaviors, they have slain their concomitant beliefs, and their personal landscape is clear. From here, they can *know*. To answer your question, the rest of it is to understand human behavior to perfection."

"I don't see how, when..."

"Don't bother arguing for the uniqueness of our individuality, again. In terms of this physical school of development," she said, with a wave of her arm, "we all have to learn the same core ideas." She paused and said, "To unravel the Stalkers' system of regulations is to know that human behavior can be assessed to perfection."

"Force of habit... sorry."

"Think about it," she said less casually than a rhetorical remark would be delivered, "if all of your decisions have been shaped by global assumptions encapsulated in core perceptions, why can't Stalkers know what you are like when they are standing outside of these illusions looking in?"

"That makes sense, but let me catch up. If I heard you right..."

"By which you mean correctly, or left?"

"Sorry, if I heard you correctly, by definition the average person does not know they live in a world of limited and manipulated perceptions from which they have reasoned their beliefs to fit into what is essentially an irrational circumstance... speaking about now, that is?"

"It wasn't always that way, but you are correct."

"So," I hesitated, "realizing just this much—to hunt down crappy beliefs," I said, framing my query awkwardly, "would be a huge accomplishment."

"It is."

"Then becoming a Warrior would be friggin huge."

"It is."

"So becoming a Stalker is..." I stalled.

"So huge that it requires the overt involvement of Intent."

"And Stalkers can do these magical things because they've left their ego behind, or their reason?"

"You've been relentlessly trained to tell your ego what to do, so that it supports your reason, but the ego doesn't need your direction. It knows its purpose perfectly well, which means teachers have to train their students to stop talking to it, while cajoling their reason to stretch toward logic. Stalkers have achieved both."

"I get that all of your categories are how Stalkers think, but can't an average person assess people in the same ways?"

"To begin with," she said, twisting her lips as if untying a thought, "a Stalker can assess circumstances in ways that average people can't, such as through *knowing*, so it's not accurate to say 'according to how they think.' That said," she straightened her body, "There is no reason why you couldn't make these personality assessments, but you'd be hard pressed to get them right as long as your beliefs filter them. This doesn't mean these penchants are bad, or that they can't have redeeming applications," she said, anticipating my next question. "They are subjects to be studied from a particular point of view in order to arrive at another point of view."

"Please," I said with a short sweep of my hand, magnanimously inviting her to continue plumbing the surprising depths of my ignorance.

"Poor behaviors are a means of exploration, which can have inherently good qualities. Bigots, for example, usually take the initiative, and one way or another demand that people conform to their standards. If they have a good head for fundraising, running a charity might do some good in the world. But I'd check the financial books often," she winked.

"In effect, you're saying they can't have redeeming qualities—not to a Stalkers way of ~~thin~~—assessing events?"

Jeanette gave this question more thought than it deserved before saying, "I use the term 'redeeming' in the context of the average person's cognition, which is to make up for something. There is no equivalent in the Stalker's world. If a Stalker screws up, he screws up, the event is over, and its event-energy has been propelled onward according to the intensity and nature of the screw up. If a Stalker sees it's the right thing to do for the right reason, which might also alter an event's outcome, that is a separate event with separate energy. The Stalker is not redeeming anything; it was too late the moment he set the original energy on its way."

Chuckling, I said, "Now you sound like he can redeem himself, he just doesn't see it that way."

Unexpectedly, Jeanette reached over and clasped my hand tightly. "You are learning about energy, not reasoning; energy doesn't think." She squeezed and let me go. "To a Stalker, making up for an act is preposterous. He would no more think about redemption than a pope would consult a psychic."

"I get it, I get it," I said, raising my hands in surrender. "What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that you have no idea what you are really like, or how much energy you have, so you're not concerned about the damage you can cause by waving someone ahead of you at a four-way stop." She relaxed her shoulders. "Definitions are problematic because they attempt to contain ideas for the convenience of our reason, when we are trying to shatter that container. This means..."

"It's a paradox in the training?"

"No. The context of our lessons broadened the moment you left your body; some definitions simply stopped mattering, and others became assumptions you no longer have to question. It follows that other terms will change with new experiences so where you're standing now will not hold the weight of your reason later on."

"Why would a Stalker bother defining anything—just curious?"

Catherine appeared with our order already split, asked us if there was anything else she could bring, and left us to our meal.

"Definitions help your reason agree with what is inherently unreasonable to you," Jeanette said as if no time had passed, "but only as a temporary circumstance." With a poised fork, she checked a space in the air slightly above my head, and said, "The average person treats words as if they are knowledge. I'm using this conditioning to gain your ego's agreement to accept ideas it would otherwise defend against, until you have the experiences that teach it to sit down and shut up—like an out-of-body experience told your ego that it's okay to fly. You'll understand this better the first time you access knowledge directly." She took a bite.

"Like when I knew about Rachel's motives?"

"No," she said before swallowing.

"What then?"

"Accessing knowledge directly isn't reasonable, so it doesn't translate. The best I can do is to say that, at some point, your First Attention will ignore your inventory of the physical world, and from the Second Attention you will claim as your own knowledge that words are highly

limited, symbolic representations. In terms of their ability to communicate ideas, you will know that they are near the bottom of the food chain, because a single simultaneous vision inherently informed you of this... and more."

"I think you can do better than that," I said, seriously.

Chuckling at my constipated expression, Jeanette said, "The First Attention contains all of your assumptions, beliefs, and symbols you both create and uphold according to the rules of physical conformation. The Second Attention has access to far richer symbols, but it can use the ones from the First Attention to illustrate a point, without embracing their related beliefs or assumptions."

"For example?"

"If you throw a ball in the First Attention, where all of the root assumptions of our physics are in play, it moves in a mathematically predictable trajectory, and falls at a precise rate to roll to a stop. In the Second Attention, neither physical laws nor their attendant reasoning apply; the ball could travel in a straight line forever, climb, turn, or vanish as soon as it left your hand—whatever you wanted it to do. The apparent drawback of these experiences is that they need to be translated into First Attention terms, to be retained in your normal memory." She set her fork down. "Generally speaking, without training your assemblage point to shift back to the place where these experiences occurred, your memories are vague and leave only impressions, such as a sense of mystery, unexplained joy, or apprehension. If Spirit wants you to remember details, you will recall highly vivid dreams that better replicate the knowledge/experience symbols." She took a satisfied breath, allowing a moment for me to grasp what she claimed we could do in the Second Attention.

"Everybody has had similar dreams of flying, weightlessness, and walking through walls into entirely different locations," she continued. "Most people don't try to interact with these events, because they don't know they're either agreeing with a teaching lesson, or creating the content as a reflection of their emotional or psychological condition. Speaking of which," she said academically, "Emissaries chose the specific focus of seeing the full and true nature of human beings, as opposed to exploring the other worlds they could focus on... other than the Players' probable worlds."

"The what worlds?"

"This is material for your dreaming lessons. Just know that we've chosen most of what we do in the First Attention from the Second Attention—which is part of our dream state reality. There is also a Third Attention where probabilities are seen and /or assembled, but that's not for now."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"You tell me."

"The emissaries can see what the Players are planning?"

"Yes, and they set up activities they will act out in the First Attention."

"Then the Players are..." I exhaled in wonderment.

"They are what?"

"I was about to say that they're pretty much fucked, but I will amend that; they're entirely fucked."

"They are indeed."

"With that kind of power and knowledge, why can't the emissaries just shut them down?" I snapped my fingers.

"Impeccability and free will must reign, which includes allowing the Player's their choices lest they interfere with a lesson yet to be completed." She leaned in. "Influencing an existing momentum, without attaching yourself to it, is also a fine art. This is why I literally took you by the hand to make a point about focusing your energy so you don't get sucked into someone else's vortex." She dipped her head in thought. "How did your friend Manny, in Argentina, put it when nothing was happening in that remote town you went to... 'This is still dangerous shit?'"

I got the point; three weeks under house arrest cemented it.

Clearing my throat, I said, "When my ego learns its place, I'll be able to look at other people, and with a few categorical clues know," I emphasized, "what they are like without having to dissect all of their camouflage behaviors?"

"Like recognizing the elements of entitlement—correct."

Noting my subdued grin, Jeanette said, "It's not the treat you're thinking it might be." She cocked her head a minuscule amount. "For a Stalker, knowing someone is like having power over an ant. It's meaningless. If anything, they must take great care not to step on them."

"That sounds hugely arrogant and manipulative."

"There's no gentle way of saying this; I love my cat, but we can't talk about the things that are important to me."

"Average people are like pets to Stalkers?"

"I've explained this: they've been us, but now there is a huge gap in our understandings of not just what's truly important in life, but in the nature of reality itself." She swallowed an idea and said instead, "I know the journey of the average person, and I empathize with their difficulties, but I could not tolerate on-going friendships based on past experiences I have turned into knowledge, and they have not. The people in my past have their own agreements with the life they have chosen, and I have mine. It's that simple. I am not better than anyone else because they are me in future time, as I am someone else's past version in developmental terms. That said I am infinitely better off as I consciously strive to pass through my learning stages, and tomorrow is a new experience that might cause me to leave someone else. This is not because I judge them, or because I am ready to move on; it's because I have to move on. This may appear to be arrogant, but it is simply not spending energy on the behaviors that come with having a personality. I'm not that reasonable anymore," she deadpanned.

Missing the joke, I said, "Your idea of being better off sounds like humility masking superiority."

"Everyone you interact with is a choice you both agree on, as a potential means for both of you to explore yourselves. Fundamentally, this is the design of the average person's journey—I told you, there are no accidents. Stalkers know this and have transcended this unconscious phase of self-evaluation; having an advanced outlook may seem like superiority, because transcending less mature views includes dispensing with the need to feel anything about it. You misconstrue aloofness with superiority unless it is warmed to suit your sense of self, and then you call it a deception."

"To tolerate is not condescending?"

"The knowledge that I am *my* living challenge," she emphasized, "that my development depends on the choices I make, and that there is nothing standing in my way except me, is humbling by itself. I am a creator of experience, mine and others, and I am aware of it. I am also aware that I am flawed relative to the power that I wield, so to say that we are all children with nuclear capability is not a stretch. This is why we are not alone; our source souls guide us, but they force nothing on us even though we are like ants to them, yet they love us without

conditions. That is the essence of humbling; to either condescend or bow to anyone is ridiculous." She sipped her water, then said, "The bottom line is that people of power have no choice but to learn. That is the rule, because standing still is intolerable. It follows that change is a requirement of gaining knowledge, not a consequence of it, and it has nothing to do with whom they are standing."

"No exceptions to the requirement?"

"Are you asking me if there is an off-ramp?"

"Sorry—I mean what about me?"

"What about popcorn?"

"No... you're teaching me about self-stalking. How did I bypass the Hunter stage?"

"You lived thirty-five years of it!" she exclaimed. "Now we're assessing the beliefs you gathered by stalking them into view."

"That's a warrior's phase."

"Indeed."

"Oh—hmm; it just flows from one category to another—there isn't a break?"

Laughing, Jeanette said, "Your knowledge won't allow it whether you consciously pursue the Warrior's path or not. Try holding your breath."

"Okay so how's a person supposed to get by socially, if they're essentially bored with everyone?"

"They don't care about socializing, but when they have to interact they use a stalking art called Controlled Folly. It has specific rules, but explaining those now would sound like they're masters of deceit."

Unable to let the idea go, I said, "Just to be clear, emissaries can see through everything a person does?"

"It's not that they can do this, they can't help but do it."

"Okay so when they talk to an average person, it would be like a tiger playing with a mouse—now that you've mentioned deception."

"It's the other way around. As you well know, the average person is inherently self-deceiving, but unaware of it." She cleared her throat. "Little of what a Stalker says is what it seems, because the average person interprets everything according to reasoned assumptions filtered through their self-image. The Stalker needs neither of these to speak with another Stalker, but they have to use the average person's assumptions to appear to be communicating with them."

"When they're not?"

"I told you, they've transcended that phase; maybe you would understand this better if I put it in your terms." She shifted her fork on her plate to one side, and set it down. Leaning slightly forward, she said, "They couldn't give a shit about the weather, or uncle Arnie's gout. You've listened to and assessed the prattle of the average person... are you interested in it now?"

"Never really was."

"When we're finished taking your personality apart," she said, leaning back, "you won't be interested in talking about yourself either."

"Leaving me with what?"

"Clarity, and Controlled Folly if you choose to go on."

"I'm still confused by what you mean by appearing to be communicating when they're not."

"When we first met, you and I appeared to be on the same exploratory page as we established our views, but my understanding of yours lay in knowing what you were giving away beyond what you think you were conveying." She picked up her fork and took a bite.

"You were pretending to be interested?"

A moment to swallow later, she said, "Not at all. I was sincere in everything I said, and deeply interested in what you had to say. I'm saying that I knew more about the situation than you did."

"How much of a mouse am I to you?"

"You are a student, and there is nothing more precious to a teacher." Listen," she said leaning closer, "you have studied the elements of confusion, clarity, and assessing the nature of an act, so what you can learn about others from a few sentences far exceeds what the average person would understand, or believe they are giving away. Correct?"

"Correct."

"Are these people idiots?"

"Not categorically. There's about twenty-five percent of..."

Jeanette's rigid stare stopped me short.

"I get it. Can you give me a sample of what you mean by using the average person's assumptions to appear to be communicating with them, but not really?"

"Your own example will have more meaning to you."

"I can say anything?"

"Anything at all," she said, mimicking my shrug.

"Okay." Pausing briefly, I said, "Hi, how are you?"

Without hesitation, Jeanette said, "I am clearly alive and apparently well, so at the least you are being insincere under the auspices of established social graces." On an impulse, she reached for her carryall to retrieve a pen, and an old receipt on which she scribbled some words. Turning it face down, she said, "My reply is 'I'm fine, and you?' by which I mean I'm finely tuned to your deception."

"Me too, by which I mean I'm feeling fine."

Jeanette said nothing.

"You don't care what's on my mind?" I finally said.

"I know what's on your mind." She tapped the paper. "You had the opportunity to choose any topic, and you chose a common deception to camouflage the most common concern. Asking me if I cared what was on your mind confirmed my assessment—not that I needed it. I know you."

"Meaning you have been misleading me since day one," I complained.

"You have misled yourself. I haven't lied to you about anything, whereas you have lied to me endlessly... the overt one's aside," she said blandly.

"But you knew what I was doing?"

"Which doesn't make me responsible to explain what I know," she grinned, "but I am because I'm teaching you now."

"What does a Stalker mean when he says, 'Hi, how are you,' to another Stalker?"

She stared as if I was a stranger. Finally, she said, "They'd probably die laughing—or the other Stalker would seek immediate medical attention for his friend."

Gathering my thoughts, I said, "Can you give me an example of reason versus logic in assessing a neutral circumstance?"

She looked at me as if I had said, "Pull my finger."

"Really, I'm not sure about anything right now."

"Why is that?"

"Because I just saw how using a person's assumptions can sound like one thing, but mean something else, or more... or whatever." I motioned the point aside to articulate my thoughts. "This means I don't know what the hell I'm really saying, even as I say it; my reason only thinks I do," I said, spontaneously creating a separation between the two ways of thinking. "Shit... this is what you mean by how a Stalker sees things!" I exclaimed as if I had discovered this on my own. "Come on—give me another example!"

Shaking her head in amusement at my apparent solo discovery, Jeanette said, "It's more effective to experience the difficulty of escaping reason than it is to demonstrate logic. I can give you an example of that."

"Go for it," I said, confidently.

Jeanette puckered, breathed deeply, and nodding slowly she said, "I'm going to offer a riddle to your reason that logic can easily solve. To help you as best I can," she said as I ate, "I will tell you that it contains no subterfuge, no secret information, no assumptions you need to properly make, nor tricks in the phrasing. I will contrive nothing to throw you off; there is no question you need to ask for clarification, and no answer that will help you. Arriving at the logical answer requires only that you ignore all of your conditioning and personal views, and embrace the event as if you are from Mars—as is. In fact," she tittered, "hammering on these conditions might become a reason for you to feel unsure, so I will end by saying there is no information that will alter the nature of the event, and no justification I can use to have misled you."

"So what's the catch?"

"That's my point," she laughed. "There is nothing I can say to make the resolution to the riddle any clearer, and your reason still *had to* interfere with the problem." She tittered. "And you'll do it again."

"We'll see."

Smothering a smile, Jeanette robotically said, "Eight men enter a room in which stands a padded gurney. Beside this is an intravenous tube that runs underneath a cloth-covered table. There are two syringes on the table top; you can see that only one of them is attached to the intravenous tube, but by design which one is inactive is unknown to everyone including you." She raised her brow.

"I'm good with that," I said.

"Five of the men are wearing identical khaki uniforms. The sixth man is dressed in a business suit, the seventh in a white medical smock, and the eighth in a prisoner's orange jump suit." She tapped the table to stop me from getting lost in the descriptions. "The costumes mean nothing; they are merely a way of distinguishing between individuals. Make them all naked if you like. It won't change a thing."

"Understood."

"Three of the men in khaki are restraining the struggling man in orange. The man in the business suit nods, the man in orange is forcefully strapped to the gurney by the three men in uniform. The business suit nods, the man in the white smock inserts a needle into the orange man's arm. The business suit man nods again, and the two remaining men in khaki simultaneously push the plungers on their syringes. A man dressed all in black, except for a round white collar, enters the room, and speaks under his breath while motioning in a ritualistic

manner. The man in orange dies. The white smock man tests for vital signs. How many murderers are in the room?" Jeanette said.

"Including the prisoner?" I said, cleverly I thought.

"And there it is," Jeanette said, shaking her head.

"In for a penny—does logic exclude the man who pushed the empty syringe?"

"There it is again: which one is that?"

"I don't know," I shrugged.

"Neither did he; how many murderers are there?"

"Two," I said with an 'it's obvious' shrug.

Jeanette dipped her head and said, "Look at the nature of each individual's actions."

"The priest wasn't relevant," I stated categorically.

"I just told you the answer."

"Six," I said with conviction.

Jeanette grimaced as I listed the doctor, the three guards to hold him... I had to clear my throat... and the two on the plungers.

"On whose orders?" she sighed.

"The warden didn't physically do anything," I deadpanned.

Jeanette closed her eyes, breathing deeply.

"Okay, we're back to one—the man wouldn't have died without the warden's order," I said, chewing on the inside of my cheek.

She raised her eyes as if in prayer and said, "Could he have done it by himself?"

"Seven," I stated as if this was my first deduction.

"Finally," she exhaled haplessly.

"Except was it a murder?" I said, with furrowed brows.

"Jesus John! Did he commit suicide?"

"No," I answered innocently.

"Did he die of natural causes?"

"Nope."

"If your friends held a defenseless person and you killed him with a club," she said in a rush, "what do you think the police would charge the guy holding onto his left arm with?"

"I see your point, but we don't know why..."

"You know all you need to know!" she gushed, exasperated.

"I know multiple syringes are sometimes used so that no single person feels they killed him, but the fact is only one of them did it."

"Without both of them present, the event would not have taken place. Otherwise, there would be only one syringe. As both of them entered the room willing to be the killer, and they subsequently pushed a plunger and a man died?" She left the sentence hanging.

"But if one guy had refused, another guy would have done it, and the orange guy would still be dead."

"In which case, the man who refused would not be a murderer." Noticing the trembling curl of my lips, she said, "You bugger... you're playing me."

"You really are psychic," I said, feeling only slightly better for not having given away how many tries it really had taken me to arrive at the number seven.

Laughing at herself, Jeanette said, "Does that example suffice—as an assessment devoid of reason?"

"I think I'm getting a handle on logic, as well."

"As well as what?" she said seriously.

"As well as how to wind you up," I said, stepping down a tier. It did my nerves a world of good to hear her titter; it told me that she wasn't a full-fledged Dreamer-Stalker thingy.

Chapter 50 - Translating Reality

When I came back, Catherine had cleared our plates and left a small silver tray speckled with cello-wrapped, peppermint hard candies. There was no bill.

"A question, if I may?" I said, taking my seat.

"Shoot," Jeanette mimicked me.

"It seems that going forward isn't such a given. I mean, you say you have to move on, and I can see that, but you can fail. Kinda harsh, if you ask me."

"Are we getting close to what you really want to ask me?"

"Sorry—inevitability seems to interfere with free will."

Sighing, she said, "You have an agreement with Intent, so the question is moot." She grasped my hands. "Again, I strongly suggest that you don't focus on how difficult you think these lessons will be. So far, it's just been words and you have a reasonable grasp on those; there's nothing to be afraid of."

"I'm not afraid, I just don't get it."

"Get what?"

"What you mean by logic."

"You experienced the difference between reason and logic not two minutes ago!"

"And now I can see how your resolution was reasonable." I shrugged.

Jeanette gazed into my innocent stare with the astonished awe of an astrophysicist discovering something denser than a black hole. Eventually taking an audible breath, she said, "You are unable to imagine processing your daily circumstances through the logic of a Stalker, as if your experience a minute ago was a reasonable oversight, and you think that hammering at what you think you know will lead you to understanding something that lies outside of reason."

"So answering won't help?"

"I don't know; your interpretations are unique."

"Give it a shot," I also said tonelessly.

"Stalkers have broken their bonds to the conformities of reason. They understand, but have no attachment to the rules the average person uses to maintain their perception of continuity, because they can figuratively and literally see beyond what they were told to perceive. This includes what lies in the gaps of reasoning and physical perception. The idea that everything is a metaphor is a root assumption to them—they can see energy, and think in terms of essences, so what they *should* believe is irrelevant. They don't believe anything. They *know* or they don't, and they assess every event in-between the two like we did with the murder room: where are they really, and who did what to whom." She touched the top of my hand. "When I said you should act as if you don't understand your true nature, the nature of the events you experience, or the world et al, I was not passing judgment on your education or intelligence. I was speaking literally." She raised her hands in a 'this is simple' gesture, and said, "It is reasonable people who have taken a beautiful creation and twisted it into a place of endless wars and virulent diseases, where the abuse of the weak and dependent has horrified even The Creator. Can you tell me that mankind's reason has not run its course?"

"Are you saying everyone will go through this shi—stuff?"

"Everyone will have to face the nature of their beliefs at some point in their development. How they choose to do this is another issue; as far as I know, learning how to *see*, to *know*, and to reposition the assemblage point are not mandatory lessons for graduation. They are part of becoming a teacher, and you are learning about them now because your lessons coincide with the return of the Masters. It's a huge advantage for your personal evolutionary journey."

"I'm supposed to become a teacher? I thought you said..."

"Your quest is to learn the alphabet of what it takes to become a Master, in part because these lessons will help you evolve, and because you can't describe an emissary from here—you have to know them from there." She cocked her head.

"Describe them? Right—I get the connection. So I'm not supposed to actually be one?" I said with relief.

"There is no rule about how far you can go. Now, the emissaries will present our core human traits," Jeanette moved on, "and their concomitant beliefs to the world in clear terms. People will then have to choose between working for a loving, peaceful existence of challenge and discovery, or working for themselves and coming back into what they leave behind."

"So having a choice is the point of... of the Second Coming?" I found this difficult to say with conviction.

"The point is to educate people so that their choices can be made from the most advantageous position. To this end, the Second Coming is not a hundred yard dash; it is a marathon of layering knowledge and setting the foundations for changes that are now inevitable."

"How does free will jibe with the emissaries influencing people's choices—I mean, as I see it, their kind of influence is more like a hammer to the head?"

She stared at me.

"I'm not arguing against a universal intercession." I took a moment to formulate my question. "Doesn't having a huge advantage affect the rules of impeccability?"

"The rules of impeccability inherently forego the concept of advantage; there is only the most efficient application of energy. Think of it this way: there are no beginnings or endings, yet every act is also an absolute if one's focus specifically brackets an event, but its momentum goes on."

"Like a Stalker's view on redemption... got it."

Jeanette nodded. "Everyone's unique perception of exterior events is their reality. Then it follows that there are endless realities, meaning there are endless events that offer infinite choices?"

"Yes."

"To restrict the infinite to a definitive few, at a critical time when the momentum of this shared reality is unusually fast, is to force people's movement one way or another. So the advantage is not the emissaries'; it's yours and everyone else's."

Chapter 51- Iran and the Blues

I pondered her point of view, and sniggered dryly over the impossibility of getting people to listen as Jeanette said, "We're going to look at your travels to consider the conformation process in different cultures."

"Ready when you are," I said as if it mattered.

"I think maybe you are," she replied. "You'll recall from our conversation at Chez Michel's," she said, settling into the new topic, "that you designed the span of your experiences

to encompass how the average person's beliefs are formed, and how people react in various circumstances of increasing pressure and fear. You now know that you represent individuals who represent nations who are leading their children down the path of ruin."

"I remember; you're saying that my fear is archetypical?"

"You could have it no other way, and it's more pervasive than you can imagine... for now."

She tapped the table lightly as she made her points.

"When we first met, you were so sensitive to the word magic that you claimed there was no such thing as a mystery—just ignorance. You also claimed that nothing spooky had happened to you, as a derisive term, when I was talking about a mysterious side of mankind's awareness. You did this because unimaginable depravity had crushed your sense of wonder in general, and your faith and trust specifically. Your stunned reaction to meeting Kha-lib, and dismissive attitude about anything spiritual, also proclaimed the degree to which religion has influenced you because you viewed it from the standpoint of their failures."

"That information was so far off the norm that you surprised me."

"You told me that you had lost the capacity for surprise?"

"I said that in the context of malice and cruelty, not in the sense of hearing pure crap. I know better now."

"Do you? I think that you were not surprised; you were frightened." She sipped the last of her wine and set it aside. "There are two chapters in your book that form the bookends of your surreptitious study of a society's conditioning to fear. What do you think they are?"

"Hang on: to be clear, part of my personal quest was to become severely affected by the average person's beliefs taken to their end point, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then recover from them so that I understand the full cycle?"

"Also correct?"

"So what does that have to do with the alphabet of mastery of anything?"

"Emissaries can't teach what they don't understand, and only experience can bring them to the comprehensive knowledge of their individual missions. You needed to know this definitively, while you also needed this specific lesson, so nothing is wasted. We were talking about your study of a society's conditioning to fear..."

"Right - El Salvador was the big one," I said with a shrug. "It was all-pervasive; nothing else ever came close."

"There was nothing surreptitious about fear El Salvador," she said with a dismissive wave. "A short while ago, I helped you reassess a section of your book in which you said crews hated working in some countries."

"You said we couldn't hate people we had never met, and that we actually feared cultures we didn't understand. That was about Iran."

"And?" she grinned.

"Working there wasn't too bad." I chuckled at an event that could have been tougher on us, but it had worked out.

"Again, the fear I'm talking about isn't the gripping kind that comes with overt events. I'm talking about the insidious manifestations in everyday life that prepare us to react to specific stimuli in directed ways. Tell me about working there."

Leaving nothing out, because I was missing her point, I told her that I had arrived in Iran on day eight of the hostage crisis and experienced what was to me an unbelievable zealotry over heaven and hell. That I did not understand the basis of this enthusiasm, and the Iranians could

not imagine how I could be so unconcerned with such issues, was a constant problem: countless citizens solicited our opinions on the situation, to which I explained that I was covering a story, no more or less. Typically, they also asked me if my work was my purpose in life, or did I serve my God through my work. Their expressions implied that if I did serve a God, He was not Allah so I was destined to roast anyway. That's how I saw things after only a few hours.

I said that having a personal purpose was a murky issue, but I liked what I was doing, to which the youths (usually in their twenties) told me that serving Allah was their purpose.

Reading between the lines, I understood that Allah approved of, if not actually ordered the taking of the embassy, a divine act for which I showed no appreciation. I may even have inadvertently challenged their beliefs, because I had no understanding of the depth to which religion pervaded their society when I said that following one's faith into a withering hail of bullets was certainly a glorious demonstration of the power of personal conviction. However, I thought it was asking a lot of those who were not so sure that the immediate spiritual journey such an act of devotion precipitated was worth it.

I gleaned from their conspiratorial glances that I was slated to endure a nightmare worse than having to explain my life to them in perpetuity.

"Would you agree that part of what camouflaged the source of their zealotry from your view," Jeanette said, drawing on our previous conversation, "was the intelligence, high degree of education, and unexpected sophistication of the people in general?"

Nodding in the affirmative, I said, "I was generally ignorant, and specifically held a western bias, partly because I had no opportunity to research the country. The telephone had rung at three in the morning," I explained, "my wife said that if I answered it she would not be there when I got back; I was on the plane to Iran by seven-thirty." I shrugged again.

Jeanette knew the whole story about our mutual infidelities, so she knew the phone call wasn't the cause of my divorce—that my work frightened my wife, and I was away a lot, aside. It was a final nail.

I told Jeanette that, aside from dealing with issues of religion directly, we also had confrontations over nationality. The theme was that Canada was a puppet state of America, therefore Canadians are Satan's cousins. Only once did I unwisely argue that if geography was the criteria of similarity, was it that the Iranians were more like the Iraqi's, or were Iraqi's like Iranians? This brought one youth to near apoplexy, which would have been funny were we not standing amidst a crowd of (officially estimated) one million believers at the time. As a result, we left the area amid a fusillade of angry Farsi before the Revolutionary Guard came to see who had started the ruckus.

So ended our first full day in Tehran.

Day two began with us removing identifying country flags and network logo stickers from our equipment. Everything in Iran, we had realized, reflected one's rapport with Allah at this crucial time of social revolution. Ironically, it turned out that having no stickers was considered an act of subterfuge, according to the attention it drew, and by lunchtime we had put on stickers that were more acceptable to the public. For reasons I did not know, ZDF of Germany did the trick most of the time: when we were questioned about anything—meaning we were about to be caught as English speakers, I'd point toward the black smoke of another Jimmy Carter burning in effigy, and crisply shrug off the only phrase I had gutturally mastered, "Ich liebe dich!" then we'd trot off into the crowds.

Although there was no shortage of smoking Jimmies to keep us on the move, we finally had to flee from a German-speaking student who could not bear the deceit of two more... whatever

we were to him, in addition to the three hundred million Americans he seemed to know by individual offense.

We got out of that situation by moving into the depths of a roaming crowd, and replacing our ZDF stickers with an Italian network logo. When the ranting about an American television crew disguised as Germans penetrated the din, I shrugged to those around us, pointed to our logo, and uttered the most important foreign phrase I knew at the time, "Dov'è il bagno?" (Where is the bathroom?)

"They had you on the run from day one, correct?" Jeanette said.

"Now that I think about it... but it wasn't a pervasive concern."

"Why not?"

"From our perspective, a crowd larger than the number of people we could personally defend ourselves against, which was maybe two septuagenarians in wheelchairs, was moot."

"That's not the pressure that got to you. The issue with huge numbers lies in the potential for a trigger-point to cause the masses to relinquish their individuality to a mob mentality... as in smoking Jimmies?" She raised her brow.

"Except the crowd was remarkably civil."

"Or afraid of their own regime at the level of an assumption?"

"Maybe," I shrugged. "It would mean the same thing to us."

"For a guy who claims to be unaffected by the views of his own society, you displayed the intolerance of a Crusader with the foot soldiers of Islam," Jeanette said evenly. "The strength of the crowd's fervor was not just about religion; it was a reflection of the restrained nature of lives lived under a daily threat, and surreptitiously reclaiming their personal power as representatives of greater forces."

"I can see that. Iran is supposed to have the highest per capita cocaine usage in the world. There's their relief."

"You also witnessed this kind of devotion to beliefs with the passive zealots in India, who held an arm up in the air, sat in a tree, or refused to speak for years as demonstrations of their piety."

"And?"

"At these times, you felt obliged to silently judge them on behalf of your indistinct Christian philosophy, when you knew next to nothing about any of these cultures or religions. For that matter, you still do not understand how one can interpret a frozen arm as a spiritual act, any more than you can see the influence religions can have in cultures more closely aligned to your own. As you said, you had a Western bias; you just didn't realize how large that was—still is." She raised her brow. "Anything come to mind about the other bookend?"

"Not really."

"By which you mean no?"

"Sorry. No, nothing comes to mind."

"What's the last thing left in this world that touches your heart?"

"Sailing."

"That's where you convalesce. What about Otis?" she said, referring to a dog she had used for a lesson about social conformation.

It took me a moment to tie my love of dogs to a job I had worked in a culture more similar to mine. "Arkansas?" I said, perplexed.

"Recount that job for me."

In October of 1981, we were on a story involving the mid-American Bible Belt. One of our stops was fifty miles from Little Rock, where shacks built from crates and aluminum sheeting spotted the countryside. The roads were narrow and bumpy from lack of maintenance, and domestic and wildlife carcasses. Otherwise, there was a spectacular beauty as the leaves of autumn turned the forests to fiery hues; the air seemed to have a sweet flavor.

Our destination was a parish where the Baptist minister was known as a gifted speaker, and purportedly a prime example of how religion ruled the back-country. Our quest was to document whatever we found in this regard: we expected a high degree of incongruity between the theory of brotherhood and social equality, as represented by the lifestyles of the idealists who existed on the funds of the practitioners. And we did.

The church was nestled within a forest off the main road. Evidently, this modern structure of wood and glass, large enough for a small city to take pride in, was a central point of reference—the poor man's Vatican situated in the middle of its most needy followers.

As impressive as its exterior was to the eye, the inside was pristine. Deep pile, blue carpeting ran throughout and between highly polished pews, surrounded by three balconies. The podium was professionally lit, innocuously wired for sound, and positioned higher than necessary for the congregation to see the preacher from any seat. His elevated status reflected his relationship to God, as it is in most places of worship.

At the rectory, we asked where we might find the preacher.

"Home. You cain't miss it," one of his minions said.

Another one thought to describe its location to us...

At our first stop for additional directions, we heard, "Yu'all, go anudder bit ta-thu birch, thane turn that-a-way at the sign. Up yonder you'll see it."

Prior to our second stop for directions, we learned that internationally recognized aids to travelers did not carry the same meaning in the Arkansas out-back that they did when I had passed my driver's test in Toronto. Stop signs, for example, were regarded as targets, whereas Yield signs were overt challenges, and possibly a rite of passage into manhood—or the great beyond. No signage at some crossroads remained a perilous mystery.

After our third stop for directions, our British producer, Neville, cracked the cultural code that had taken us on an otherwise beautiful drive in the countryside. 'That-a-way' was the direction one nods their head, and not necessarily the direction in which one points—the hand is often used to scratch a body part at the conclusion of a sentence. 'Up yonder' is color commentary that bore no direct relationship to inclines or distance, other than to imply 'not obvious.'

'Anudder bit' turned out to be roughly a half mile.

The birch tree was an unmarked historical reference point, certainly KKK related. As it was one tree among many birches, it also rendered the phrase, "You cain't miss it," as portentous an utterance in the southern USA as it is everywhere else in the known universe—in time, it would be true.

When that time came, we entered a winding, tree-lined driveway that paralleled the banks of a private lake, ending at a ranchero style home half-buried in a hillside. The interior furnishings tastefully matched its exterior design with modern functionality, if not quite overt opulence.

We talked to the preacher for half an hour, before we went back to the church to set up for his sermon. This is when I discovered some of my expectations had been wrong; I had thought his flock would be desperate and miserable people. Though obviously poor, they treated us with

a casual respect, did not intrude on each other's privacy or ours, and viewed life in black and white terms. Literally.

When we asked, they said they attended church because they were raised to do so, and though there was a significant difference in lifestyles between God's mouthpiece and their mouths, this was an understandable demonstration of what the nearness to God could do for you. That the congregation paid for the preacher's lifestyle made perfect sense to them, as did the pomp and circumstance of the Vatican make sense for Catholics living in barrios.

When we were alone, I asked our reporter, [Gavin Hewitt](#), if he understood where the blockage in their reasoning might be, to which he said that wealth was not a criterion for evaluating the value of one's life. However, he agreed that illiteracy, filth, and hunger, would likely diminish the quality of it. Noncommittally (BBC) British to the core...

We decided to shoot additional footage of the people at play, to balance our story visually, when we learned that a couple of "the boys were 'goin coon huntin."

The scene was straight off a Hollywood lot. The first pickup truck to arrive was a faded red, ancient Ford with round, dented fenders, and battered body. The owner, dressed in baggy denim overalls, was gangly thin, but I could tell I wouldn't have done well arm-wrestling him.

He was casual but deliberate, treating his hound with a rough affection that did not undermine his manhood, before setting the dog loose to sniff a tree and pee. Then he called him back, "Bleewww ... Bleewww-boy. Git heeah!"

Jerking his head toward another open-back pick-up turning off the road, he said to us with a nod, "Cuzin comin yonder."

The second truck and its occupant came from the same library of cliché stock shots—used and tattered. The mandatory deer antler gun rack mounted over the rear window bore a well cared for shotgun, as had the first man's vehicle. The hound was a clone of the first animal.

Gavin went to chat with him, as the man reached the back of the truck: he treated his animal with a manly, rough affection before setting the dog loose to sniff and pee on a tree—the same tree. Then he called him back. "Bleewww.... Bleeww-boy. Git heeah!"

Blue number one proved to be a wanderer, and required some attention, whereas Blue number two was conscientious and quick to respond. As a result, the soundtrack made little sense as "Blues" could be heard every few seconds, followed by different commands from two sources. The explanation of the full church, and the minister's private estate, resonated with every command—absolute conformity.

With his fiery sermon on tape, and interviews from members of his congregation safely in the can, it was time to leave; we went to the rectory to thank the preacher for his cooperation. Unexpectedly, he ushered us into a room where he all-but forced us into a row of four chairs, which had been set up for the specific purpose of catching us when he stood so close that we had to back into them, or ask him to slow dance.

Up close, he was even better than we had on tape—a riveting soul-saver, sans spittle, fully in command of our personal space. Flanked by his honor guard of three dark-suited lay employees, he first blessed, prayed over, then salvaged Gavin's wretched soul. Ski was the next to be spared ill-determined ravages, before the chorus line sidestepped to me.

Having time to think about it, I acted as if the preacher was having trouble saying goodbye, and interrupted his fervent prayer that I avoid the fires of hell: "Too late," I said, standing to shake his suddenly limp hand. "It's in Central America, and I've been as close to heaven as I'm going to get." I leaned forward and whispered, "Rio de Janeiro," as if his acolytes might rush to the ticket counter ahead of him.

On this cue, our crew stood to shake everyone's hand.

"You think this had an effect on me?" I asked Jeanette when I finished retelling this much.

"I'm not saying it affected you—I'm saying you witnessed the shaping of different cultures through fear and blind obedience, but at the time you failed to view it in this light, because your own conformation had risen you above them. The same applies, to varying degrees, to all of the countries you visited."

"Right—sorry. That's about it."

"Do you recall telling me about Iranian Generals sending children into Iraqi minefields to spare Iranian fighting forces? As martyrs going to their great reward," she said as I nodded affirmatively, "that society viewed children as acceptable losses."

"Maybe officially, but I doubt that their parents felt that way."

"You'd be surprised. At any rate," she waved my words aside, "Western societies thought this was barbaric, yet they always bomb their enemy's infrastructures to preserve their own fighting forces. They know they are killing children, but they presume the moral high ground of good intentions and lesser numbers, by trying to limit these casualties. But what's the reality of warfare?"

"In what terms?"

"Any terms that come to mind—say whatever comes to your mind at anytime, for that matter."

"More civilians are killed than soldiers, but they're not targeting children," I said inanely.

"Which matters how?" she said.

I waved her on.

"America awards endless medals to preserve the idea that patriotism expressed through warfare epitomizes duty, courage, and honor, when it demonstrates the absence, failure, and misplaced application of them all. These..."

"Hold on. Are you categorically saying that we don't owe allegiance to our nations, and that there is no courage or honor demonstrated in warfare? I know you've said this before," I added, "but I didn't quite follow—not all of it."

"I'm still saying our motives are misguided until and unless we understand the true nature of our actions. As things stand, the conditioned reasoning of the average person has them believing that duty, courage, and honor, can be derived from the unnecessary savagery in which they have chosen to participate, and without whom it could not happen. That's like your partner in crime getting shot while robbing a bank, and you save his life by turning him in for a reward."

"Let me catch up with that one," I chuckled.

"I'm saying it's not heroic, or a sacrifice, even if you turned yourself in without immunity. It's the best choice you can make after having made a spectacularly stupid one."

"It's still selfless."

"Unnecessarily so, because it's predicated on the original crappy choice." She pitched forward. "We've covered this: an apparently good end can never justify a poor means, because it is the means that generates events down the road: the greater good is about principles, not numbers. The reasoned outcome is the fog of self-interest that limits our view of the true nature of the event, and its consequences remain hidden from our self-proclaimed enlightened view." She leaned back. "Westerner's idea of patriotism has them bowing to equally deviant versions of duty, courage, and honor, to those of the Iranian's religious beliefs having them sanctifying the death of their children. The nature of both acts is to celebrate the slaughter. All arguments to the contrary are reasoned spin based on second-hand convictions. There is no caveat—no middle

ground in 'what is'—but survivors and the families of the dead buy into the reasoning that there are circumstances that approve of such events, because they need these beliefs to justify the sacrifice and placate their sense of loss."

"Can you strip down duty, or courage, or honor in the same way?" I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling as if I was on the edge of really, really, getting it this time.

"Logically," Jeanette said, "our first duty is to learn about and assume our responsibilities for ourselves—it's our journey, and our parents and friends are caretakers and assistants to that journey. When we are able, we can take care of those whom we have attached to our lives and/or can't properly fend for themselves. This takes great courage without giving into your own flaws and damaging others, thereby honoring their independent path and purpose. When we can deal responsibly with the two square feet we occupy our nation cannot help but deal with issues responsibly, because our leaders would come from their own two square feet; they would not be separated from us by the aphrodisiacs of power and immunity. They would understand responsibility based on the nature of their actions, not based on the numbers their decisions may immediately affect. The numbers follow as a matter of momentum.

"Good—back to celebrating the slaughter thing," I said before I lost my train of thought. "I agree that partying after a war sucks as a 'look at what we did' kind of thing, but aren't medals and parades also a celebration of survival for the participants—maybe even closure to them, and to society as a whole?" This idea prompted a related thought. "There wasn't any celebrating at the Vietnam Memorial."

"That wall isn't what you think it is."

"No doubt," I sniggered. "What's the Stalker's version of it?"

"It is an attempt to reconstruct a national image of a just and caring people. In fact, it honors the useless sacrifice of loved ones based on the shame of defeat, and from society throwing away their returning veterans. It is a national memorial to carnage, and a source of sad inspiration for generations of cannon fodder to come that will see it as an error in tactics, and not that war is wrong in every way."

She took an elongated breath.

"It's impossible to grow from experiences not properly assessed, because you are dragging the weight of your errors in judgment with you, and applying them to new circumstances. This is why it's beyond America's view that events like Vietnam represent the culmination of their evolutionary ways. This is not closure; it is the end of a cycle in which their momentum has caught up with itself, and now it's tearing them apart from within." Jeanette thumbed toward the door. "Like you showed me that you are still at war with yourself."

"My core behaviors parallel America's?"

"As do the Iranians under different auspices."

"There goes that audience."

"Joking won't derail me: when we first met, how you relayed your stories of combat, and your high opinions of those who participated alongside you, made it clear that your memories of risk and terror are memorials to your self-image. Your superior attitude told me that you're keeping a secret that undermines your basic camouflage of an affable intellectual, whose adventures have made you a just and fair man, if not always wise in his impetuous incursions into other's lives. Our society has also effectively thrown you away, because of what your experiences did to you." She looked at me for a piercing moment. "Another of your deepest secrets that supports self-loathing is about courage. You don't think you have any, which is why you act in verbally brutal ways to prop yourself up."

Snorting at the idea, I said, "Really, what do I have to be frightened of?"

"I thought you'd catch on by now." Resettling in her seat, she said, "You've made your secrets monuments to your misery, and altars from which you defend them with the forces at your disposal. This is not closure; it is the end of a cycle in which their momentum has caught up with you, and now it's tearing you apart from within." She let that idea settle in my mind for two seconds.

"America portrays their powerfully virtuous selves through military incursions that essentially defend their bloody history as a memorial to their national-image. They are also keeping a secret from themselves about true courage, because the politics of fear have taken hold of their reasoning. Like you, they relentlessly express their fear through what have become more than acceptable acts, but what is now seen as acts of courage, such as killing whoever the government tells them are impinging on their freedom: the courage implied comes from facing death in defense of their country. The courage fighters infer comes from having the balls to kill people. This idea meets its maker on the battlefield for those who realize it was really about beliefs, and you can't defend or kill anything that has no substance. The abstraction of country remains the country, but it is tainted by the caretakers of its values failing to perceive the underlying nature of their actions. The caretakers also make up the culture, so their culture is diminished. As we have discussed at length, reason overrules that which diminishes our view of ourselves, and too-few have the real courage to face that view. The meek justify it, because the original atrocity came from fear. This is what you are doing when you rant in defense of your ideas about yourself."

"I don't kill people."

"You kill your relationships when they impinge on your secrets." She motioned the redundant point aside. "Peaceful societies have thrown America away as a true friend, because they fear what they've become. There can be no real trust, because peaceful societies know there is no courage involved in killing anything. Living properly requires it by the bucket load." She raised her brow.

"I get that much, but..."

"But your reasoning is standing in the way of applying it to your own life." She shifted in her seat. "My point is that you've seen the consequence of cultural conformation through the suppression of individuality in some cultures, and the surreptitious directing of beliefs in others, so that people fit in. Both are stereotypical..."

"Lost me," I interrupted. "Directing of beliefs?"

"Trucks, clothing, guns, and attitudes varied only to the extent that males were named after their grandfathers, who were named after Civil War Generals or Apostles. One dog in each household was named Blue, because that was what a good hound sounds like when he's on the hunt. Even a tree was a common cultural reference point, and they all went to church to display their commitment to conformation. Take everything I said about America, substitute the word religion for patriotism, and you've got another match."

"But under different levels of pressure?"

"The principle applies to all nations. The symbols might change but, like the people you experienced in Iran and Arkansas, all of us are shaped to accept, and be accepted in our particular cultural circumstance. This makes it difficult to see that we are all brothers and sisters on the same journey."

"Makes sense."

"Your fears differed only in that they were more obviously earned, and buried as a way to cope with the unmanly sense of helplessness you experienced in more circumstances than you've revealed to me. They created deep feelings of self-loathing and unworthiness, which you can't see because the places you feel safest don't remotely resemble where you earned your fear."

"I came from a place that doesn't practice fear, got smacked with it, and came back leaking it all over the place so that I couldn't miss it?"

"Yes, but with the addendum of knowing American culture well enough to see how their institutionalize fear is the infant from whom otherwise good people agree to kill strangers, because they are told to: no warrior nation is exempt. Canadian culture has not been subjected to living in fear as a way of life."

"So much for a human audience."

Jeanette stared at me placidly.

"All of this is from opening a door?" I said with transparent nonchalance.

"Not at all: I told you weeks ago that there is a constant undertow in how you present yourself, which is designed to drag people into acknowledging your bravery. A simple wow propels you to anecdote after anecdote within which you play down your presence in volatile circumstances so that others will raise the issue. You wouldn't do any of these things if you thought well of yourself, and neither would the stereotypical American—who you pointedly avoided being cast as even when you were in safe places, like London or Athens. True?"

"True."

"Have you been to the other Wailing Wall?" she said.

"Other? Ya—sure—a few times."

"As students of their version of God's ways, and that their society has been taught to believe in suffering for salvation, they ensure that they do. It's no different than the other memorials affecting the patriot zealots on this side of the world ensuring their sacrifice continues, because this idea underlies their national focus." She sat slightly askew, fidgeting to keep both cheeks from going numb on the lightly padded seat.

"I agree that life scares most people, but maybe it should. I mean, otherwise it would mow them down."

"Am I speaking Mandarin?" Jeanette said, feigning exasperation. Maybe not feigning by now. "Not understanding the true nature of our own actions extends poor circumstances, while we think we are making a stand for what is right. And it's from fear that we are mowed down, not the other way around." She pitched forward. "You get what you focus on," Jeanette said, moving her glass aside to lean closer.

"This is critical for you to understand. The art of change is not to be against poor circumstances, because the focus is on poor circumstances. If you want positive change, you have to focus on creating, joining, or unifying an existing momentum of positive action, if only by withdrawing your silent consent to allow crappy ones. This will inherently starve the poor situation of momentum.

"How do you separate the two when you're like me—in the middle?" I said, perplexed.

"We've just been over that: strip the event of reason."

As frustrated as she may have been with me, I was doubly flustered and flummoxed that, once again, I couldn't crush my reason to clear my view. Gathering what was left of my composure, I said, "On a peace march, if the police leave the protesters alone there would be peace. Right?"

"Yes."

"If they confronted them, they would be doing what?"

"They would be giving away what they're really like."

"You mean brutal?"

"Brutality is based in fear, so the question is what are those who control the institutions afraid of—peace?"

I chuckled, thinking her statement was rhetorical.

"I'm asking you a question."

"That would make no sense."

"And yet the evidence is staring you in the face." She resettled in her seat.

I saw that the weather had cleared so I signaled for the bill as Jeanette said, "This is not a question of metaphysics. It is logic: what we do reveals what we believe, and it will always show itself when the pressure is on because nothing comes from nothing. This is the average person," she said, holding her left palm open at hip level, "and here is normal behavior—the consequence of their beliefs." She held her right palm open an inch away from her left. "Now, here are the average person's beliefs under pressure, therefore taken to their final manifestation." She raised her left hand over her head, stretching it as wide as she could reach. "Here is their idea of normal," she raised her other hand, positioning it in the same manner to the other side, "which reveals that the underlying nature of normal is traumatic." She lowered her hands. "You are still under pressure, but in a less pressurized world than the one you left behind, so you stand out when you let your guard down. In Sweden, you might be hospitalized for trauma. In Lebanon, you'd be a celebrated comic. In America, you are one of the masses returning from doing your duty."

"If you put peace under pressure, you'd get what?"

"You'd get creativity you couldn't begin to imagine, instead of destruction that's unimaginable."

"I know we've covered this, but most people say pressure is the reason they behave badly?"

"Pressure is the camouflage behind which we give ourselves away; it has nothing to do with the nature of the act we're giving away. Pressure is the canary in the coal mine that registers the toxicity of our beliefs; it does not create the toxin." Looking into my dull expression, she dipped her head and said, "Let's try it this way. Recently in Canada, local politicians flexed their power from the fear of being perceived as weak, which is precisely what they did by ordering the police to act with force against a peaceful demonstration. What was the nature of their actions?"

"Suppressing freedom?"

Pursing her lips, because I was guessing, she said, "In larger arenas, countries have used their own military to suppress the public. Is the nature of the act representative of an open, free, and democratic society?"

"No, but... " I didn't know what else to say.

"Exactly—but your reasoning is standing in the way of accepting a logical deduction: our freedoms were usurped. Moved to a larger stage, a coup of the government you thought you had elected either will, or has already taken place, because...?"

"Because nothing comes from nothing, but what if..."

"There are no special circumstances. You can't be a little bit pregnant, a part-time murderer, or live in a kind of free society. You either have the right to participate and protest, or you do not, just as the police have the responsibility to not allow vandalism—which is how they get away with their own brutality: protesters screw up, or the police are directed to incite them so that they can justify the suppression of the public's rights."

"No compromise anywhere?"

"Now you're getting it!" she said, enthusiastically.

"I've done a comprehensive shoot on police work, and I know that it's an incredibly hard job on the nerves. People don't understand their lives."

"Are you offering this as an excuse for brutality?"

"No, I'm saying that I can see why they can abuse their authority, even enjoy the release, because they live a different world than ours. They keep us safe, but have to deal with danger and disrespect all day."

"Meaning they are reacting to these circumstances in otherwise peaceful circumstances, like soldiers do from the undercurrents of fear in their lives?"

"Exactly. So what are you advocating?"

"I am not advocating anything. I am explaining, and can see that you are agreeing with, how the foggy reasoning of the average person can cause them to commit terrible acts—justifiable acts to them—because they are focused on their conditioning, not what is in front of their eyes. As a result, they form special cliques to separate themselves from those who haven't walked the walk," she said as Catherine brought us the bill.

Jeanette smiled, nodded her thanks, and continued making her point as Catherine quietly retreated.

"Initially, you lacked fear because your parents and our culture did not promote it, and as a non-combatant you naively went off to war. Once there, you were harshly conformed to its ways on a scale that propelled you far beyond the cultural script that had instructed the fighters you were with, so that you could see its stark influence without hesitation." She paused. "This will be a dreaming lesson, by the way."

"Being propelled beyond the cultural script to see its influence?"

"You told me it was common for crews without reporters, meaning you, to do independent interviews; what struck you the most about them?"

"The stock answers soldiers gave about why they were there; no real understanding at all."

"Exactly," Jeanette concurred. "The bottom line is that the fighters you came to know did not see a coup of their freedoms taking place in front of their eyes. They had become just what you saw right away, but could not fully grasp—they are not defending the gates of freedom from foreign tyranny, they are the marauders storming foreign lands. So blinded by patriotism and duty are they, that they've killed their own people to maintain the farce."

"I assume you mean the Kent State thingy—it's making sense to me now."

"It should; it happened to you."

"Huh?"

"I'll take that to mean you would like an explanation?"

"It was more of a 'what the fuck' huh, but go ahead. Are we still aligning my behavior with America', or are we dealing with how I can't see my own conformation to fear?"

"They are one and the same."

"Kent State?" I prompted her to continue.

"Killing those students probably did more to gut America's drive to fight in Vietnam than any other single event, because beneath the overt act lay the truth—even a nation of veterans could see who the real cowards were."

"What were the national guardsmen afraid of?"

"Losing their assumptions, if they acknowledged the validity of the protest." She pouted sadly, and added, "Which is exactly what they did."

"So the My Lai massacre would have done that, as well?"

"Absolutely. It gave people a real view of warfare." Jeanette hesitated before saying, "The message was diminished by the delay in it becoming public, and subsequently lost when the public shunned the returning veterans, as if warfare for Americans should somehow be cleaner than it is for other countries. For the powers that be, it hammered home the need for the sanitizing of their actions in their wars." She shook her head slowly. "Canada is no different—no army is clean. They all kill civilians, they all kill prisoners, and they all kill each other if they are pissed at someone in a place without rules."

I knew this was all true, so I said nothing.

"Are you aware of the number of Vietnam veteran suicides?"

"More than those killed in action, as many as sixty thousand. Why?"

"It's much more than that," she said with her eyes closed. Then looking at me, "They were thrown away when they came home, leaving them with no way to feel justified in their actions, or compensated for their personal losses. In other words, left alone the momentum of their acts and years of indoctrination manifest in the only way it could; it killed them."

"I can see that, as well," I said, nodding intellectually.

"You haven't been moved by the scope of that tragedy, because you can't see how you are little different from them." She reached over to take both of my hands in hers. "You were practicing killing yourself when I came along."

"You don't have to threaten me into continuing with this," I said, sliding mine away to look at the bill, as if I was disinterested in it.

"You don't have to interpret a logical comment as a threat, but your view of a hazardous world—even here—demands that you do. Now," Jeanette said, leaning back, "Can you tell me what Americans might have metaphorically seen in themselves at Kent State?"

Having no idea where we were heading, I took a few moments to organize what little I knew. Finally, I said, "They killed four young people who were no physical threat to anyone. In fact," I said, as the thought arrived, "they were killed for exercising a right upon which the nation was founded."

"Describe their physical and geographical status?" she said, her growing grin making no sense to me.

"As far as I know, they were young whites being educated more or less in the heartland." The weight of the event struck me. "They represented the American dream—innocence acting on the unalterable expectation of prospering in a safer, freer society for what they were doing. A couple shots killed the illusions."

"Excellent."

"Thank you."

"Before you take your customary time off to celebrate your wisdom, there's more for you to consider. Let's get out of here."

Standing, I put all of my money on the tray, which included a slightly larger than 15% tip; keeping the overage would have made me look cheap, while prudence wouldn't have fed a parking meter.

As she stood, Jeanette slid the crumpled receipt she had written on towards me.

"I know what it says," I said, leaving it untouched.

A few steps toward the cash register later, we both chuckled at the same time, thinking about what Catherine would make of a note that said, "How do I feel about you?"

Once outside, we headed toward the broad beach at English Bay; Jeanette continued making her point about Kent State.

"Your experiences slaughtered your altruistic illusions, which were defenseless in light of your comfortable and caring upbringing as a young, white man educated more or less in the heartland of Canada. Specifically, your sense of self-importance and naive expectations of continued living in a safe society were crushed when the press corps abandoned you in Argentina. After this, you deliberately determined to prosper from others suffering by diligently over-charging them for your pain and suffering. You missed the irony, and contradiction, of acting as they did, including putting others at risk to the extent that you were willing to be injured. Historically," she motored on, "this has been an all-or-nothing proposition for both of you: America is dangerous to anyone who dares to confront their muted fears and unchecked greed, and you are dangerous to me because I'm confronting your fears. The minor difference between you and America is that you're further ahead now that you know you reconstructed your image from the same rules your perceived enemies live by."

Jeanette waited for me to acknowledge this truth, which I did by turning a shade of Nordic usually seen on the first weekend of Spring daylight.

She continued: "You both have experienced how changing fundamental assumptions is tantamount to committing suicide, but neither of you have recognized that the deaths are of illusions only."

We crossed the busy intersections of Denman, Davie, then Beach, and the seaside bicycle route, as smoothly if we controlled the traffic signals. Stepping onto the grassy skirt surrounding the beach, I said, "I can't imagine the home of the brave and the land of the free seeing it any other way than you're attacking them... and Jews, and Iranians, doctors, and all religions for that matter. The movie isn't going to make any friends."

"Those who are free of fear will understand me, and the brave will strive to be free, just as you are attempting to do in the only way it can be done—by discovering and facing the truth. As I have said many times," she bumped my shoulder, "I'm not attacking you or any culture. I'm talking about how they created the way things are."

She slowed her pace, stopping short of a three-foot diameter, thirty foot log. Apparently pondering how much she was going to tell me, she said, "America is in a unique position to facilitate global changes, but not through their military might; that is the means of their downfall. I'll come back to that. For now, it's enough to know that they have the economic influence, and a particular population needed to create a wave of new thinking. They also have a massive pool of uncorrupted courage to make the changes that will be required of them to survive."

"Only them?"

"America can lead, because it's their lesson. The population chose it, and now it is their time." She stepped to the log, brushed the top of its worn surface, and sat down. I did the same.

"The free among your audience might agree with you," I said, bumping her shoulder lightly, "but the rest will see your views as a personal attack because, as you've said, they've lost too much to their indoctrinations to change their thinking. I think our movie won't be made, or you'll be shot. Maybe both," I added as the thought arrived.

"Between being told what to fear and what to overlook, leading a nation into bankruptcy through greed and warfare isn't difficult. When that reaches the tipping point, a spark will set fire to the myths they have been defending so vigorously as to give away that they are myths." She looked across the inlet toward Point Atkinson. "There are a lot of them awaiting the flask point;

many more than any government would care to admit, or are aware of, because they've used them and thrown them away, as well. They'll be a formidable force when they organize."

"But you're not advocating that," I teased her.

"I have not lived their experience, so I have no voice."

Uncomfortably, I said, "You were saying wars are scripted long in advance—that we don't want peace?"

She looked my way. "I'm saying the Players don't want a healthy population, or peace in particular, because there's no money in it compared to the alternative. We've been following their scripts into debt and degradation for decades."

"Do you know who specifically is designing our fear?" I said, shuffling sand between with my feet.

"You can figure out some of them with a little research," she said, removing her shoes. "I'll tell you what to look for at another time, but you will have to assess these events through your own experiences. You've met some of them."

"No doubt," I quipped, but I meant it.

"Their basic manipulations," Jeanette said, breathing deeply, "lie in the generation and relieving of aspects of fear in everyday life. If it were overt and non-stop, everyone would become like you—no one can make you go to war anymore. But wiser, nastier people have long since understood how reasonable people can be manipulated by regulating key aspects of society."

"Such as through television?"

"Take it deeper: the media is the most influential institution of mass manipulation that can surreptitiously make us feel unnecessarily guarded. The most easily observable aspects of this are reporting agencies relentlessly causing us to focus on the negative, ostensibly awaiting resolution. They call this news when they present, as hype, only half the story, and endlessly speculate or spout indecisive clichés under the guise of insight and drama. 'How this will end, only time will tell,'" she said with a sniffled smile: Jeanette knew that pontificating drivel drove me nuts, because its natural evolution into infotainment was taking hold, and people were receiving both as if they were gospel.

"Moreover," she said, "the negative focus of the media contributes to negative events as a matter of energetic momentum manifesting within a particular consensus, or about the evils of the world in general. Even sterile financial reports focus businesses on risk management—the focus being on risk."

"I wouldn't have thought of that one."

"When you have time, assess weather reports," she said, throwing her hands in the air. Suddenly somber, "Another influence is the bombardment of what we supposedly need, and I'm not talking about advertising turning want into need for the moment. I'm talking about the media introducing us to whatever the powerful want us to think we need to have a better life, through political means and cultural reformation. They do this while we are literally focused on the small picture through which ten-second sound bites create the stark impression of expertise. This process transcends the obvious goal of pulp news programming. They have not just infiltrated—they own highly regarded programs that investigate the seeds of fear the Players want to germinate through talk show interviews, expert debates, and opinion pundit forums that contribute to a momentum that can be directed."

"All sides of a debate take hits," I said.

"Thereby splitting our focus." Jeanette scootched a few inches away from me, set her hands by her side, and raised her butt off the cool wood. "Within this process," she said, "the media sets up the acceptability of a country going to war, by having the population buy into the lengthy preamble that's placed on our dinner tables months, or even years ahead of time—but that wasn't your beat," she said, waiving the issue away. "In terms of your personal quest, the media was your way to experience the fraud inherent in the representation of the truth, and its complicity in manufacturing consent from the public."

"The media can't see how they're doing this any more than I did."

"Which matters how?"

"Sorry... ingrained defense, again."

"To be clear, I'm not saying the main editorial characters necessarily know what they're really doing, just that they do it by not crossing the lines that direct experience forced you to cross. I'll come back to this." She turned to face me. "For the Players, it's enough that you were made so afraid as to appear to be the one that's mentally and emotionally off-balance, when your reaction to warfare is exactly what should be experienced by reasonable people."

"Are you saying I'm not really crazy because it's a *should* thing?"

She smiled at my grasp of the correlation between reason and *should*, as she said, "Your reaction is unconditional evidence of the underlying nature of the acts you've been coerced into agreeing with."

"So I'm on track—cool."

"I'll take that to mean you're uncomfortable with the idea of being unstable, but you understand the reasons for it. You are the canary: the pressures of combat magnified the toxic beliefs that are required to have a war, and you learned how to fit it." She looked down, gathered her thoughts, and said, "Extend your discomfort and embrace this idea: the so-called normal world was systematically brought to the point where it became reasonable to farmers, college graduates, and production workers to kill strangers on the say-so of people they don't normally believe, yet will follow if they wave a flag. They were like a blindfolded man, oblivious to being posed against a pockmarked wall, hoping cancer won't touch him as he takes a last drag on a smoke." She slapped my thigh lightly.

"I'll say it again; nothing comes from nothing, so there has to be a prologue—a continuity of controlled events presented to the point where a spark lit the fuse of momentum that was sown within the fabric of everyday life. That's how the absurd becomes reasonable to good people."

"So the media influences things everywhere," I mused aloud.

"More than everywhere."

"What else is there?" I chuckled.

"Nowhere," Jeanette said seriously. She cleared her throat twice slowly, compelling me to settle into a neutral mindset.

Softly, she said, "The media's underlying influence places us in an in-between state, where we feel that we have to buy into something, anything, or there's something wrong with us. It doesn't matter what we believe, only that we choose between what's on offer, while the incessant bombardment of the same underlying events cause us to not look beyond those choices. The more adamant and outrageous the better the distraction, and the less likely there will be a unification of right-thinking people, who are targeted for ostracism to make credibility an issue. And once raised...?" She motioned her point aside as one previously stated. "I want you to focus on your personal progression of fear."

"Get me started," I said, still processing her point, and unsure of what she meant.

"You were terrified in El Salvador and, as far as I can tell, never again were you particularly afraid in combat. True?"

"Kind of—not in the same way. I see your point though; I got used to it."

"Relative to the horrors of your first exposure, yes," she added. "By *particularly* afraid," she parenthesized with her fingers, "I do not mean you were without fear. I am talking about accumulating it in various circumstances, which you interpreted as adrenaline rushes that you tamed by guzzling beer. Warrior cultures are no different. They accumulate fear," she said, stacking her hands one on top of the other, "becoming accustomed to it until something has to give. This could be a race riot based on a traffic ticket, or the deliberate construction of an event designed to relieve the stress, such as attacking the alleged threat a government puts in front of us."

"How do you define warrior cultures?"

"Total the number of years of peace and those of war any nation has experienced since its creation, and draw your own conclusions."

"Their causes will skew the numbers."

"Not in any way. Peace 'is,' without doing anything. The question is, who will be willing to face themselves, and who will have to repeat their lessons in self-treachery?"

"How would I know?"

"You sound like a tourist shouting, 'You can't do this to me!'" she said, chuckling. "The question was rhetorical."

"That reminds me of an incident in Iran," I said, deflecting.

Jeanette cocked her head in puzzlement.

"You asked me to say whatever comes to mind?"

"So I did."

Chapter 52 - Cruelty

"Around day eleven of the hostage crisis, the Revolutionary Guard arrested us for allegedly taking pictures of restricted sites. We hadn't, which our confiscated tape would prove, while our jailers entertained themselves by poking bayonets into our cell. Joe Schlesinger, tired of the taunting, leaned against the bars..." I chuckled, "and told four guards that the new regime was staging massive demonstrations for the benefit of western reporters, and he was about to miss his deadline!" I laughed.

Jeanette looked perplexed.

"You can't do this to me?" I said with transparent glee.

"I understood that. I just don't see the humor in your situation."

"I guess it came from nervous tension at the time," I said lamely.

"And now you're bringing those fears into the present. You must have been angry with him?"

I had forgotten about that: I was severely pissed at Joe for possibly provoking the guards into using us for serious entertainment.

"I was for a moment," I admitted, "because I didn't understand our situation the way he did. It wasn't really dangerous."

"Why not?"

"Holding us was their job, but intimidating a source of national exposure for their cause was assuming more authority than they had. Besides, the Iranians hadn't harmed any of the hostages

so they weren't about to hurt us." I shrugged. "Just like it was in Argentina, we were a warning to the rest of the press corps to play nice." I sniggered, "which they all soon did." I chuckled.

Jeanette waited for my merriment to pass, which it did quickly in that vacuum.

I explained, "When we were released, a guard told us that although LeBlanc had been carrying his camera casually, the lens had remained relatively steady pointing at a restricted building. At the time, crews were in short supply and there were a lot of places to stake out in case they released the hostages, so producers worked all of them for as long as they could stay awake. The only way anyone got a break was to walk down the street carrying their cameras in a casually steady way." I grinned.

"You spread the word about how to get arrested?" Jeanette said surprised, instead of laughing as normal people did.

"If you carried a couple of old tapes with you, it could take six or seven hours for them to clear a crew, who got some sleep while being paid."

"You don't think this was dangerous?"

"I just explained why it wasn't. Twice actually," I said, perplexed at the density of her usually supple mind.

Jeanette nodded as if she finally understood me. "What was your most nerve wracking job?" she asked me, casually.

"You know it was in El Salvador."

"You must have spent hours howling over that war," she said, levelly.

"As best as I can recall," I said, missing her point, "there was only one genuinely funny event. These two women," I chortled, "walked into..."

Rolling her eyes, Jeanette cut me off by saying, "Set up the ambiance so that I can separate a tension guffaw brought forward, from your sense of humor today. If there is a difference," she added.

Awkwardly, because I sensed that nothing good could come from telling this story either, I continued my tale...

During my first hour in El Salvador, [Manny Alvarez](#), a CBS freelancer, warned me not to discuss politics, or my personal feelings about anything to anyone in public. The streets were full of part-time and wannabe informers who ingratiated themselves to the military by pointing out crews with subversive ideas. Manny leaned forward and whispered, "Interviewing guerrillas is at the top of the list."

"Why are you whispering?" I said.

"Spooks are all over this place," he replied, pointing out two of them by way of micro-nods, as he scratched his head.

I told Jeanette that their above average quality, but out-of-style clothing easily marked them.

"We talk shop in our rooms," Manny explained. "Running the shower isn't a bad idea."

"Just a moment," Jeanette stopped me. "Are you saying troops arrested everyone you talked to, because they suspected they were guerrillas?"

"They interrogated a lot of them sometimes in front of us, and sometimes in front of the alley where their bodies were found in the morning. Civilians crossed the street to avoid us even approaching them. That made it hard to connect with the guerrillas."

"But not impossible?"

"No, but you couldn't be sure you weren't being set up to lose your accreditation. At least your accreditation," I added as a legitimate tension builder. "Anyway, by the third round of drinks Manny had explained the press corps daily routine to me: In the morning, every morning,

there were a couple anonymous souls lying on the curb near the hotel, and they remained anonymous because no one wanted to align themselves with whatever reason they were killed. Only the clergy dared to speak to us openly, Manny told me, before he accurately predicted their demise because of it."

I explained that journalists also received friendly warnings, "For your own protection, signor," about the hazards of attempting to cover some stories. Many of these warnings were delivered anonymously over the phone, or by a passing stranger on the street. The brief kidnapping of a crew then made the intended point that the protection we needed was not from the guerrillas.

Leaning into my tale, I said, "Manny told me that a man the media called the Little General, but never to his face, often threatened the press with helpful advice like, 'Be careful where you go and who you speak with. My troops are not so dee-cee-plined that they will see the rifle you are carrying is really a microphone,' was a standard line for newcomers." I settled back. "Manny said the Little General wasn't a man to be fucked with. I've already told you why."

"He killed journalists."

"That, and the family massacre."

"Remind me of that."

I knew this was a set-up: Jeanette hadn't forgotten a single syllable of the story I had told her within half an hour of us meeting for the first time.

Feeling as if I was goose-stepping through a minefield, I retold my tale...

Our crew had seen a death squad, dressed in regulation army fatigues, leaving the scene of a family slaughter just as we rounded the corner of the same street. We waited in our car, because death squads often circled the block to discourage witnesses from coming forward. Five nervous minutes passed before we entered the house. Tony took slides of the carnage while Brian tried to avoid staring by taking notes he would never need. LeBlanc shot his pictures while I meticulously recorded the sound of flies buzzing around the still-pooling blood.

From the gore, and listening with every fiber of my being for the sound of a troop truck, I began shaking so much that my feet were literally bouncing off the plank floor. It didn't help that I was sure LeBlanc would soon be saying something professionally caustic and personally humiliating to me, because the vibrations had to be interfering with his work. But no one made a sound other than to gag.

Finally, LeBlanc declared that he could do no more, and as a unit we moved toward the door and fresh air. Tony and Brian passed ahead of us, while LeBlanc stopped to draw the curtains closed. "Won't rot so fast," he said, staring at the leading edge of shade as it moved across the stack of corpses. Then loudly, "We need some fuckin' witnesses," he said, as we exited the house.

Of course, we found no one willing to speak to us on camera or off, nor would our own driver divulge how he knew the massacre was taking place, when he called us at 04:00hrs.

We called it a wrap and piled back into the car, which is when I noticed that the smell of violets, blood thick and sickly sweet in the humid house, had invaded our clothing. Manny had told me this would happen, and I would have to throw them away. During the drive back, I avoided revisiting the scene by thinking about where I would hide the cost of a new shirt and pants in my expenses.

It was breakfast time when we got back to the hotel so the lobby was full of journalists planning their day. They knew by our expressions and aroma that we had recently stood close to

death, but they let us pass. After we had showered and gathered again to eat, representatives from each network, in turn, sauntered over to our table to ask us where and how many.

"That was the ambiance of my day, and most days, when the Swedish team came into the bar, but there's another incident that..."

"How did Brian slant his story to avoid the wrath of the Little General?" Jeanette interrupted me.

"I pretty much accused him of implying that the family had committed suicide," I said, peevishly, "but it didn't matter; Toronto telexed that evening, 'Contents too graphic to air.'"

"How did you feel about that?"

"I was pissed. Really pissed."

Jeanette drew a deep breath, exhaled, and said, "We view our experiences so as to support assumptions that are inextricably tied to our sense of self-worth and safety. When events undermine either of these, the validity of our very existence seems threatened and we do one of two things. We choose to assess the experience for the knowledge it contains, and adjust our view of the world and our place in it accordingly, or we adjust our view of the event to suit our assumptions, thereby becoming more enslaved to our convictions. In the first case, we are constructing a more insightful, less threatening view, because our fear of apparently random events diminishes in proportion to the scope of our new understanding. In the latter scenario, we are reconstructing our visions according to the ever-narrowing parameters of increased fear."

I nodded that I understood her; I saw the world in narrow terms.

"Initially," she carried on, "these new parameters give us back some of our sense of security—better the devil we know. But the mental gymnastics required to contrive a safe place become so great that we eventually glimpse our own insanity, and redouble our fear." She raised her eyebrows.

"So?" I said, stupidly.

"That day caused you to question the very existence of mankind's moral core. Without that, you assess every event and everyone through a filter of danger."

"Everything in Salvador was dangerous."

"This brings us to the problem you had when the focal point of your existence became a salvage operation of your assumptions."

"Lucky me."

"For the next five years, you reconstructed your views while drenched in fear and surrounded by malice and madness. The only way you could regain your assumed safe place in the world was to become a part of that world." She tapped the log. "You got what you focused on. Your dangerous desires should tell you this."

"Working combat assignments?"

"I'm talking about your fit over the footage not being aired."

I had no idea what she meant.

"It was based on you wanting the sacrifice of your assumptions paid for, by assaulting your audience's sensibilities. You didn't think about your driver's safety, and the Little General certainly wouldn't have allowed such a damning story without retribution, would he? For that matter, I'd bet you didn't stop trying to interview people on the street even knowing what could happen to them."

Jeanette leaned back, giving me the psychological room to accept her points; a sheen of sweat materialized on my brow.

Brightly, she said, "Now tell me about the Swedish women."

"The ha ha moment seems to have passed," I muttered.

"You mean the contrivance of interjecting a thought, to avoid facing what you and America are like seems to have backfired?"

"That too."

Sucking it up one more time, I blandly told her that the ladies walked into the long, mirrored lounge soon after they had checked into the hotel. Briefly surveying the scene, they glanced at each other and silently agreed not to hover over the trough with the rest of us. The statuesque blonde followed the lithe redhead to the far end of the room, both of them probably thinking that our lingering glances were based on impure thoughts generated by their fluid movements down the narrow aisle between tables. Though this held some truth, at this specific time it wasn't the reason behind our widening grins, which they could not help but interpret as lust bouncing back from the mirrored walls. It was that with every inch that they moved into the empty seating area they were breaking two rules of personal safety: as I had recently learned, veterans of combat coverage position themselves near an exit, and away from windows, if they can. They also do not isolate themselves, which is moot if you pay attention to the first rule because one faction or another in every war eventually tries to put the press corps in their place. To separate one's self in any way is to make the choice simpler for them.

Should one follow these rules, they would also quickly become acquainted with the peculiarities of that conflict by mingling with veteran crews who have nothing to gain by holding back on what it's really like. Eight days earlier, upon our arrival at the Camino Real Hotel, LeBlanc—a Middle East, Africa, Vietnam, Bangladesh veteran cameraman, had virtually ordered me to mingle in the bar as soon as I had my gear unpacked. "It's the only safe OJT you'll get," he said. (On the Job Training.) Manny had provided that for me.

If they had known better, the women would have sat nearby, or at the bar, which would have put them across from the only exit to the lobby, and away from the huge plate glass windows that paralleled a thoroughfare. By thinking we'd be more interested in hitting on them than helping them, we knew this was their first day in their first war: no one in the bar had ever experienced the kind of butchery and random cruelties of this war, which tickled our collective fancy to the nth degree on this night in particular...

Early that morning, troops had sealed the road leading into a village to conduct a house-to-house search for weapons. The media were not allowed in until it was safe, meaning there would be no witnesses should they find weapons, or even not. We paced around our cars on the outskirts of town, except one enterprising crew crept in through the bushes. From hiding, they taped a young mother frantically calling for her young sons to get out of the way of the scurrying soldiers. Well aware that the civilian population derisively called soldiers chicos, behind their backs, the soldiers interpreted her calls as a flagrant insult. Two of them held her as she hysterically explained herself, while a third cut off her breasts. They walked away laughing as her children raced to her side to watch her die. Realizing the significance of what they had captured on tape, the crew decided to get away and sort out what to do with the footage later on. A soldier spotted their retreat, and called after them.

When the crew had not been approached to give up the footage by dinnertime, we realized the army didn't know who specifically had the footage, and that the Little General would be reminding us that anything detrimental to his army's image was dangerous to have.

At 19:55hrs his spies left the bar. This was the cue for everyone to leave, or at the least stand behind the large commercial refrigerators behind the bar area.

Leblanc and I abandoned our chess game at the exposed corner of the bar, and with drinks in hand we joined an AP photographer and an ABC camera crew sitting on the floor in front of the refrigerators.

The Swedes seemed to be entertained by our strange game, possibly thinking that we were clowning for their attention when the sniper's shot crashed through the glass at the stroke of curfew, 20:00hrs, as had happened every other time the General wished to make a point.

Instantly terrified, the ladies scrambled the full length of the room on all fours, while we adjusted our watches to official time for curfew's sake.

"What a hoot!" I told Jeanette, who stared as if I had a booger hanging out of my nose.

I pressed on with accentuated glee, having interpreted her gaze as dazed wonderment at the ways of a world she thought she understood.

"Not two minutes later," I chuckled, "four spit-and-polish bodyguards framed the Little General's waltz into the room. With exaggerated sincerity, he apologized for not protecting us as well as we had the right to expect from him. 'Fortunately,' he told us, pointing to the hole high on the inside wall, 'thee sni-per was not a marksman. Maybe eet is better for you dat we doan catch heem. The next one could be a good shot—no!'

"The guy burst out laughing," I told Jeanette, sniggering where ever my narrative required a comma, "but seeing that he was alone, he translated his remarks for his bodyguards. Three of them saw his point before it was fully made, and they guffawed in the transparent way subordinates must. The fourth man, we figured he was the sniper, struggled with the possibility that the General might 'catch heem' as a show for the American congress!" I laughed harder.

Jeanette blandly asked me what happened next.

"You really had to be there," I said, chortling awkwardly.

"I can see it clearly enough. What happened?"

"Acting barely inconvenienced," I said with strained delight, "most of us were having trouble containing ourselves in this cartoon-like sea of contradiction. You should have seen it..."

"I am about to."

I explained that the General's unbridled arrogance emanated from physical features that were a cross between Elmer Fudd and Baby Face Nelson. His height and girth, about equal at five-foot two, put a huge strain on a wide brown belt that held matching pearl-handled revolvers. Far from emulating Santa Anna, he looked like a miniature Michelin Tire man impersonating the Lone Ranger. It was even money amongst us whether he could have reached his guns. Priceless.

"On the other hand," I continued upon seeing that I was alone in my merriment, "he knew that we knew he was a psychotic prick: he had ordered the killing of the four Dutch journalists that Manny had told me about, to convince me not to even think about fucking around with the rules. Anyway," I concluded in a rising tone, to entice at least a grin from Jeanette, "the Swedes staring in opened-mouthed incomprehension at the bizarre situation was more than some of us could take." I paused to feign the need to regulate my breathing. "And the General was thrilled that we'd finally found our sense of humor!" I burst into laughter, just as I had six years earlier.

"You are a cruel man," Jeanette stated flatly.

"It was a joke!" I blurted through asphyxiating glee.

"It would not have been funny if your casual chauvinism, augmented by your practiced disregard for dangerous circumstances, hadn't blinded you to what you were doing."

"I didn't do anything!" I protested.

"That's the point. You didn't do anything because your beliefs were the same as the soldiers."

"What the fuck," I said, baffled like an obsessive-compulsive at a blinking red light.

"They butchered that woman," Jeanette said flatly, "as a manifestation of years of viewing women as tits and ass, and objects to be conquered in bed. The amputations were the ultimate conquest. Their malice was a joke to them, no different from how you took delight in staring at ass moving ever-farther into danger, then cheering at their terror. You were the chicos my friend."

"I guess you had to be there."

"Meaning it was a special circumstance?"

I had nothing more to say.

"A few weeks ago," Jeanette said, softening her tone, "you told me a similar humorous tale about your travels in Pakistan; when you duped your guide into leaving you guys unattended, your punch line was a play on words about how he was probably shot because of it."

In that moment, all of her assaults on my behavior finally made a dent, and the possibility that I was more than a devious bigot had me salivating as if I was eating a finely ground sand and Szechuan sandwich.

"When I made you open the door for me," Jeanette continued laconically, "you opened the door of opportunity to learn that you are far more dangerous than you know. As a person of power, this should scare the crap out of you." She stood up to brush the back of her jeans. "There's only so many times we can travel this road, and your tolerance is limited. We'll need to cement this lesson soon, now that you've seen at least this part of yourself."

Jeanette started to walk down the beach toward the low-tide waterline. As if I was still beside her, she said at normal volume, "There is another important aspect of the Swede's story we need to explore, because it attaches directly to the promotion of fear, and the media's role in controlling it."

"Uh huh. I mean, go ahead," I said catching up.

"When you returned from that job, you no longer fit into our society in many ways—we can explore these later, and construct a comprehensive continuum of changes. The point is that events transformed you into an advocate of peace, if not an activist against war. Do you agree?"

"Yes."

"This is exactly what the Players do not want, and why that critically defining footage never aired. If people saw war for what it really was, they would not support it. We're not that stupid, and we are that squeamish when it comes to viewing a neighbor's corpse."

"I'm confused... by which I mean more than usual. Last week you said airing the slaughter in Vietnam would have enhanced enlistments."

Scuffing the sand with her foot, she said, "I said this was an inevitable consequence of maintaining their particular brand of national image from the cradle to the grave. Their brand is a skewed vision of duty, patriotism, and sacrifice, which they would apply to scenes that would effectively raise the standard of acceptable atrocity, because the focus is on the spin. If television coverage was as relentlessly stark in presenting reality as it is now lopsided, most people would see the insanity, just as most people saw that the core message of the peace marchers...especially when authorities tried to break that peace."

"I'm not clear on your distinctions."

"Intimate coverage of warfare, without spin or cultural trappings, would promote war in the same way that throwing yourself off a cliff wearing a flag would promote hang-gliding. That was what the government was afraid of." She skimmed off a thin pane of water with her heel, and a mirror of translucence burst from her foot, collapsing in sheets on either side of her ankle.

"So coverage isn't the issue; it's the packaging that matters?"

"The media sanitizes atrocity, which anesthetizes the public to make human aberrations acceptable," she said, "as if they exist in small numbers, far away, and under extreme circumstances that we can somehow better by reporting them." She looked my way. "The corporate giants that sanitize reality do so under the banner of maintaining a prescribed level of taste, to allegedly protect our sensibilities." She tapped my thigh with the back of her hand. "Think about it; what's sensible about war that needs to be protected? Who sets these levels of acceptability, and why? For that matter, who tells the public what movies to watch through the regulation of mass distribution, and what documentaries that reveal the true processes of aberrant power see the brighter lights of day?"

"I get it," I said in a clipped tone, feeling the need to defend the media; but I had made that mistake more than once.

Chuckling, I said, "I'm sure you said this is just an overview day to get me started."

"I never said it would be easy. By the way, what was that 'as close as I will ever get—Rio,' remark about?"

Thankful for her contrived respite—she knew I needed a break, and jumping back to a previous conversation was not unusual—I said, "I took Catholic lessons when I was in basic training, to get out of the barracks; we were all restricted to them for the first six weeks."

I explained that, a month later, our platoon went on all night maneuvers. Around seven on a frosty October morning, after a sleepless night playing silly soldier in deep, wet grass, a jeep pulled up to our riverside camp and the driver announced that anyone who wanted to be confirmed Catholic had to come with him; the Bishop was waiting back at the base. As we were theoretically heading for a stretch in purgatory anyway, Ed and I figured we might as well get a ride part of the way. The rest of our troop had to march five miles.

Chuckling, Jeanette said, "You paid for those miles a long time ago—let it go. Speaking of going," she said, looking at her watch, "I have to drive my son to a basketball tournament."

"And it was just getting interesting," I muttered.

"Reading Castaneda's views on being stalked will be interesting as well," she said, heading toward her car ahead of me. "Later," she said with a wave over her shoulder...

I thought to call Ed's office from a pay phone on Denman Street, before I headed home. His secretary said he was on a service call, and that she didn't expect him back. I walked four blocks to the Dover Pub, where I found Ed and Roddy—the president of a collection agency—finishing their 'service calls' dressed in civvies. Ed said he would cover my costs until I cashed my check; it was in the apartment.

I finished my first day as an apprentice of *The Way to Live* by getting as properly pissed as an average man can get. Jeanette worked all day Friday, so I had a full ~~recovery~~ study day off. During this time, I decided to reread all of the books we had ever talked about. Otherwise, I reminded myself that I should do whatever she asked of me regarding my lessons. As a result, my upcoming days were full of 'gathering energy' whether I was with her or not.

Chapter 53 - Self-Interest

At our regular Saturday morning class, Kha-lib told us that Jeanette's relative had "returned home," but heirs were contesting their percentage splits, and lawyers were fighting it out. Nevertheless, the legacy would come our way; the many points of change that turn a probability into inevitability were at a momentum-zenith."

"What points of change?" Josh asked.

"The disposition of the estate has stipulations regarding the amount of each disbursement, depending upon the willingness of its recipients to meet certain conditions. Not all of their responses are known to us."

Kha-lib then continued his lesson about how we could most effectively use the money, because it was seen that at least one beneficiary would not meet a condition of the Will. As a result, there would be an additional hundred thousand dollars in our legacy, which should arrive two Saturday's hence, in the morning, by messenger.

This ended our session.

Jeanette had a private reading booked, followed by a dinner with Josh, so I went home. I took Sunday off to watch the five football games I could switch between from morning until night: I loved living in the Pacific Time Zone.

Meeting at the corner of Pendrell and Denman on Monday morning, Jeanette said nothing beyond "Hello," as we crossed the street and turned right on Morton to enter an area of gardens and statues that were a prelude to Stanley Park. After a short while, we crossed Beach Avenue to sit on a bench facing Spanish Bank Beach, across the English Bay anchorage. West Vancouver was ninety degrees to our right. North Vancouver was behind us.

As the silence stretched, I commented on the general beauty of the area, to which Jeanette gestured over her shoulder, to the north-west, and asked me what it communicated. Not knowing what "it" was, I assumed she was asking me to speak generally about Stanley Park, so I said something inane about it representing the diverse nature of nature.

"What did you just communicate to me?" she said.

Prudently arriving at the honest answer quickly, I said, "That I don't have a clue what you're asking me."

"Why didn't you say that instead of trying to B.S. me?"

"I thought I'd give it a shot, like a good apprentice."

"You've learned to deceive under the banner of acceptable social practices so well that it doesn't cross your mind that you are lying." She said this as if it was a passing thought, but I knew better.

"You've made that point, and I get it, but what does it matter when everyone agrees with an innocuous practice to keep things friendly."

"What's wrong with clarity to keep things friendly, especially after you've experienced it at heightened levels?"

"There's nothing wrong with it. Like I said, we all do a similar verbal dance so that we're not misunderstood on a basic level. You know I understand the continuity of confusion issue," I chuckled at the memory of my struggles to make fewer errors, "but we're sitting here talking about nothing important to be confused about."

"Let's see if it's not important." Jeanette looked over the wide inlet, her eyes settling on the farthest point of Stanley Park that we could see, which was the Second Beach Pool only a few hundred yards away.

"What does the bridge communicate?"

"Traffic, I guess," I said a moment later, understanding that extending her line of sight beyond the pool would transect the causeway leading to the Lions Gate Bridge.

"That's what it facilitates. I said communicate."

"You'll have to explain what you're after."

"Finally some honesty," she whispered as if to herself. "A few months ago, I said you can't live in between fact and fiction without confusing what you want with what you think is

necessary, or eventually taking what you think you're entitled to. Living in-between can only generate fear of the unknown, and confusion about what you think you know, because there is no true standard to rely on if the standard is moving—like a dance." She looked toward Second Beach. "That structure is a bridge of communication: goods, services, and workers cross it every day, but the knowledge and intentions of about sixty-thousand people cross into the city as well, and all of them are spreading what they think they know, or need to know, to achieve their daily goals." She widened her eyes in inquiry.

"I can see that."

"The assumptions of the people crossing it include the certainty that the structure is categorically stable, and how long it takes to make the commute, while anticipating the inevitable summer construction. Most of them," she smirked, "having learned the benefits of meshing when two lanes become one, also assume this courtesy." She entwined her fingers.

"Most," I agreed.

"In other words, the bridge is reasoned to be structurally sound and predictably timely, assuming the cooperation of all who use it. It is the truth to most people, when it actually represents a means to reaching another destination. This is why they call it a bridge and not a fact." She raised her brow playfully.

"You're saying our language is the bridge to facts, and our cooperative assumptions smooth the way?"

"I am, and...?"

"Neither is the truth; we're just heading that way?"

"Yes, and if something isn't exactly the truth, but represents it, it's still not the truth."

"Understood," I said warily.

"Consider the impact on Vancouver if the bridge wobbled."

"Economic instability?"

"Don't guess."

"Uncertainty."

"Now you're getting it: think of our culture as a suspension bridge that bounces slightly with every step, and each rebound as a nuance of interpretation that is the wiggle room that keeps people more or less centered. What you can't detect is the lateral sway of the structure; we'll call that our consensus conformation overlooking a fact, because you are looking down at your reasons—each of them being a plank moving in sync with the sway."

"I've got the picture."

"What would standing on that bridge be like if you could break the spell of your conformation, and for a second look off to one side?"

"I'd detect the motion, and it might be harder on my nerves," I said, putting myself inside the metaphor.

"Make that professionally relevant."

I stared at her.

"Your television work," she prompted me. "What common practice of representing facts takes the place of the truth?"

"We have people stage common actions, so that we have pictures of them working during the voice over, but that's not really a contrivance."

"Why not?"

"Because they'd normally do these things; they're innocuous moments in the life of the subject."

"Are they not re-enactments?"

"Technically, but it would be confusing to draw attention to a guy walking down a hall by keying in the word 're-enactment' at the bottom of the screen." I bracketed the word with my fingers.

"Why is that?" she asked me innocently.

"It would generate a false sense of relevancy; the audience is literate in the language of television, so they know that some staging has taken place in the same way they know that a visual jump cut means some time has passed." I took an organizational breath. "Staged pictures are not meant to be informative, per se, because there's nothing in them that doesn't happen every day. If anything, they provide a minimal context of time and place, as an alternative to showing boring graphs and charts. No harm, no foul."

"We'll see about that. To recap, a correspondent does not undermine the factual certainty of his presentation by staging events, because the audience's conditioned assumptions about the language of television allow for it. By this I mean they speak the nuance of acceptable practice to the degree that if the reporter calls these scenes re-enactments, the truth actually confuses them?"

"It's not confusing so much as an insult: we don't key in the word cat when we first see one."

"Is the cat an assumption?"

"Huh?"

"From your reasoning, some members of the media have presumed that any action they could prompt by their presence would have taken place anyway, or had already happened before they arrived. Down the road, the momentum attached to what seemed to be a reasonable way to create visual continuity allowed some well-known personalities to ask soldiers about their ability to do things, knowing full well that this would propel them to do it. They allowed themselves this stretch by saying soldiers have a choice, and that they do it every day. True?"

"I've been there and done that; I literally have the T-shirt, in the case of ceasefires⁽¹⁾.

"Would you agree that there may also be an underlying tit-for-tat mentality, because you all have covered events that were flagrantly designed to mislead the public?" She shrugged. "Why not cover news that is staged as an accurate reflection of reality?"

"That may be, but setting aside for the moment that television news without pictures is called radio, a correspondent without the smarts to get pictures of bang-bang in a war will soon be covering flower shows."

"And this reality of the business allows trickery to become a trap, because staging the way it is does not have him pull the trigger?"

"A fake office scene never killed anyone," I countered.

"It certainly has: somewhere, a reporter facilitated an extreme manifestation of a staged action, because it was seen as an attribute of clarity. Your own words by the way, if you care to review them."

Clearing my throat, I said, "Minimal staging is a standard ever reporter understands, and by otherwise incorporating the language of television it avoids having to explain the obvious, or emphasizing elements that aren't relevant. This is no different than you and I building more complex assumptions into our lessons than most people can appreciate, so we don't have to explain every little thing we know."

"What we understand is knowledge; our version of an assumption has no wiggle room because our beliefs have been discarded to the facts."

I scratched my beard.

"You are still failing to grasp the importance of momentum," she said, addressing my consternation. "The average person's assumptions create the illusion of a factual continuity in everything. Based on this, the media uses chosen information and professional technique to create a place that's between fact and fiction through which the public assumes they're watching the truth precisely because it has been designed to suit their assumptions."

"Sure, because assumptions carry our communications; otherwise, saying hello would take us half an hour."

Shaking her head, she said, "I am saying that cleverly designed assumptions have been incessantly implied to us until we perceive them as the truth. In fact, they blur the truth, which is that our experiences are re-enactments of our beliefs—they did not happen by themselves." Jeanette stepped away from the creeping surf, as she said, "They have become a part of the internal dialogue that maintains our illusions."

I thought about this, almost grasped something larger, then it eluded me... like Jeanette following the waters retreat seaward again.

"There is something else you've missed today," she said without me having said a word. She gestured toward the causeway.

"The bridge..." I said after a moment. "You were talking about things I couldn't see?"

"You're catching on. The lesson was a metaphor to help you see events as essences, by demonstrating that what are facts to the average person don't mean much to a hunter of the truth."

"Clever."

"Not at all; it's the way it is without reason interfering with perception," she said, raising her palms in a 'that's simple' gesture. "We also dealt with the so-called dinky stuff in your television practices to help you see the whole picture—pun intended—because you're still playing with your language. This tells me that you haven't seen the potential harm of that becoming a large issue—a misinterpretation at a critical time. Our lesson today should make it clear that there is nothing too small to ignore, because maintaining our continuity reigns supreme, and all continuities create a momentum that runs rough-shod over its flaws until you catch on, or they kill you."

"You said it yourself; I was playing."

"Until you weren't: you quite reasonably argued on behalf of the correspondents' discretion, the audience's intelligence, and the sharing of a common assumption without which the narrative would be more like radio. What you're missing, still and again," she emphasized, "is that I'm not criticizing either of them for what they don't know. I'm trying to have you see the pitfalls of using any of the average person's assumptions—even tiny ones—to assess essential events. You can't. They'll implode on the flaws of your reasoning, and as I've said a few times handling energy is dangerous. For some reason, you don't believe me."

"You know I believe you."

"And yet you do nothing about it. Sound familiar?"

Our conversation about second-hand convictions and sincerity flashed through my mind, as I said, "I need to be absolutely deliberate and strict about how I say things all of the time?"

"Until you don't need to be—yes."

"When is that?"

"When you understand the importance of practicing it, it will become part of your behavior."

(1) In early 1984, factions declared ceasefires so often in Lebanon that we had T-shirts printed that stated, "I survived ceasefire X11, X111 X1V XV, XV1."

Chapter 54 – The Assemblage Point

Jeanette stopped to use a log for balance while she brushed sand from her feet, and put her shoes back on. With that done, she said, "Our encounter with the panhandler was your first official lesson about the Minimal Chance. Your awareness of Intent manifesting a gesture also had an underlying point about how difficult it is for the average person to see the essence of what is in front of their eyes. This is why your perceptions were aided by Intent shifting your assemblage point closer to the Place of No Pity."

"Which is what, exactly?"

"This is where you have no emotion, no compassion, and no concern about events; these are self-based judgments, and part of the inventory of the First Attention. Great clarity and resolve are found in this position."

"If it's without compassion, wouldn't you be cruel?"

"To have compassion would mean you'd want people to be like you, and you'd waste energy helping those who aren't ready for the head-on challenge of self-discovery, but you must have empathy for people—I'll explain the difference later. What did the big man with the donut bag represent?"

The sudden shift in topics did not throw me: I thought about his near collision with Jeanette, then admitted, "It has to be about me in some way, but I don't know what that is."

"Put self-image in the bag; he was feeding on it to the exclusion of watching where he was going, and stumbling through his day like you did by walking on my heel."

"I wasn't thinking about myself. I wasn't thinking or feeling much of anything."

"He represented the average person's key distraction." She grabbed my hand as we stepped back onto the grass, and began leading us toward False Creek.

Letting me go, she took a considered breath and said, "Yesterday, I told you that everything is a reflection, and that we relentlessly summon or create these metaphors so the natures of the events we encounter represent our purpose for being here. Later, before our encounter with the panhandler, I told you that your awareness was erratically at the mercy of your self-interest, and that awareness in the Stalker's world is to apprehend every moment in its true nature. In other words," she exhaled deeply, "I effectively told you to pay attention to your version of here and now—here it comes—here's your lesson—then bam! You literally walked straight into it." She looked down and whispered. "It was beautiful."

"And I still missed it; why didn't Intent shift me all the way to Place of No Pity?"

"You would have learned what is possible to perceive in other than dangerous circumstances, but not what is required of you to achieve that perception." She took my arm again. "You were doing well noticing things you would not normally bother with, but you lost your sense of being no better or worse than everything else. Pausing to congratulate yourself would have been enough."

"I didn't do that."

"Did you stop your evaluation of the circumstance at any point?"

"No, I... hmm. I noticed the clarity and detail of my perceptions."

"As I said..." she licked her lips. "You also abandoned your heightened awareness to maintain the image you have of yourself as a generous person. In essence, you gave yourself an example of what is possible to perceive in a pure moment, then you reverted to the cognition of the average man to defend an illusion."

"You make it sound like it was the only time I will get the lesson."

"Two things," she said, holding up two fingers. "There are magnificent perceptions that lie ahead of you, which your suspicion and skepticism can manipulate into something sinister because that's what they do. This can cost you years of effort to put it right. There is also no force in the Universe that can guarantee you will still be breathing an hour from now, so you have no time to waste on self-indulgence, such as how smart you think you are, or justifying your personal views. I can't seem to get through to you that this is not personal."

Before I could comment, she said, "I haven't mentioned all of the practices that Stalkers use to overcome their flaws, but you're familiar with the idea of using death as an advisor, from Castaneda's works?"

"Familiar only."

"I mention this so what I just said doesn't scare you." Jeanette officiously carried on with her original topic. "At times during your dangerous assignments, the aspects of your personality that stood in the way of perceiving knowledge directly were set aside to allow you to experience the critical nature of the moment. In these times, when you chose to not go down one road or turn back, you may have entered into heightened awareness, aside from Phillip's influences. As we discussed in the last few weeks, you forgot about or dismissed these occasions, because you couldn't explain them. In the case of knowing things ahead of time, such as your father dying, some part of your thinking was afraid that you somehow caused or contributed to events. Now that you're learning heightened awareness can happen spontaneously, you will better allow for it, even summon it, and make it a personal practice to not interfere with it."

"Now that I know what's happening, sure."

"I'm telling you this because it's not all that will happen, and I don't want you to think you're losing your mind as we stalk the positions of the assemblage point." She chuckled. "Actually, you're going to do that anyway. I'm saying don't be concerned about the apparent contradiction of intentionally undermining your reason. The payoff is experiencing ever more instances of pure understanding for no reason other than you intend to." She grinned like a cherub.

Holding up two fingers again, she said, "For a Stalker, there are two one-way bridges of knowledge." She lowered her hand. "One of them is from Reason to Silent Knowledge, the doorway to which is through the Place of No Pity, and the bridge deck is called Pure Understanding; it entertains no behavioral influences. You do not bother believing or not believing anything. Things simply 'are'. You experienced this with Nabi Berri's guards in Beirut."

"Ahhh... that makes perfect sense."

"It follows that latent concerns can block your shift to this positions, which is why it's critical to stop talking to your suspicious ego." She drew a concluding breath.

"Also understood," I said, chuckling at her reasonable explanation of an unreasonable phenomenon, and me understanding it.

Hesitating to assess something, Jeanette then said, "The other one-way bridge is from Silent Knowledge to Reason, and the bridge deck is of concern for the source of your Silent Knowledge. This just happened to you."

"Not be contradictory, but I wasn't concerned. Like you said, it just happened."

"We've been over this: you regularly *Intend to Know*, which is to activate concern." She looked toward the Lions Gate Bridge, then back my way. "In the moment immediately before your 'Ahhh,' you took all of the pieces of that event from your reason, through the Place of No Pity, and you *knew* the whole experience at the level of your Silent Knowledge. As we've

discussed, knowledge without expression is useless to you, so you had to bring what you *knew* back to where reason would grasp it. The bridge from reason is one way—your pure understanding saw things clearly, but not how to express what you knew—so you had to find another way. This was the bridge from Silent knowledge, through concern for the source of what you knew, back to Reason."

"These are like simultaneous acts?"

"These are experiences you need to know are possible, regardless of how I explain them." Grinning, she said, "We have talked about stalking mostly in terms of a student's comprehension of the process, which is to reveal and examine the core nature of behavior. The stealth aspects lie in me knowing what will result in a given circumstance, and you being unaware of what's coming, but willing to face what happens. Do you agree?"

"Sure... I mean yes."

"Now we're going to deal with stalking in a Stalker's terms: In an overview," she carried on without pause, "stalking is about behavior, specifically saving energy by deliberately choosing to act impeccably. The critical point I'm dealing with is that this choice of behavior is a function of the position of the assemblage point, and as you get better at making these two evaluations, deliberate and impeccable, a much broader clarity will placate your ego's drive to interfere with your decision making."

"What do you mean by placate my ego? I thought I had to stop talking to it?"

Her focus seemed to drift before she slowly said, "At one time, the ego awareness was perfectly adapted to maintaining our health and safety. Over time, our reason put more and more trust in the ego, and we allowed our leaders to impinge on areas of life where it was not needed. This created an illusion in man, which was useless in situations of survival—a self-image that interjected self-interest into the essential nature of events."

At her normal pace, she said, "In our time, every member of their culture is taught the illusion of their ego's independent power through the nature of the acts they experience and witness. But the reality remains; the ego doesn't think. Instead of just keeping us safe, it responds to the secrets that our reason has us keep from ourselves." She circled her finger in the air, and sorrowfully said, "As you're learning, it takes a monumental struggle to free ourselves from our entangled secrets, so you are blessed that an out-of-body experience made it unreasonable for you to refuse to learn how to escape that momentum. More than this," she said as a concluding thought, "because your ego learned that flying doesn't threaten it, it considers other formerly unreasonable events safe to experience, such as *seeing* and *knowing*. It has been placated, and need not interfere unless you tell it to by introducing any element of self."

Jeanette continued formally. "From birth, we are relentlessly taught by every external experience and personal encounter within this modality to repeat an endless dialogue about the world we perceive. This dialogue is a description—a translation of energy into beliefs and assumptions that we internalize, the force of which keeps our assemblage point fixed in the cognition of the average person, with all that this implies about our common personalities and typical behaviors. Otherwise, its position is random. It follows that to practice stopping the internal dialogue is to access a view of events untainted by your common conformations to the physical world, with all that this implies about then behaving far differently, because the essence of events is clear. Does this make sense?"

"So far."

"When this day is done, I will give you procedures to practice an art called not-doing*, to help you stop your internal dialogue. When you're comfortable with the idea, we will work on

them together. Moving on," she flicked her wrist. "As an average person, your assemblage point is rooted in the Place of Reason; we'll call that the First Point of Knowledge or the First Attention. Again, this is our most precious tool of development in physical reality, but in relative terms of all that is available to us perceptually, it is like the letter 'A' to a Shakespearian scholar: absolutely necessary to know that letters exist, to teach kindergarten reading, but long since supplanted not by sentences, but by classic works."

"I can imagine that potential difference better, because of the first assumption we shared about entitlement."

Nodding, Jeanette said, "The Second Point of Knowledge is the Place of No Pity: without any sense of attachment to your perceptions from this spot, the better you understand the true nature of events, alongside accessing knowledge directly, the more likely a complete novel can reveal itself with just a glance." She snapped her fingers. "This is why I've been teaching you how to assess the nature of events since the day we met. It's part of a vastly larger picture."

"So you have," I said, then realizing that I had stood no chance of impressing her in any way. To the contrary, my personal events were...

"The Third Point is of Silent Knowledge, she said, and then immediately waved the topic aside. Nodding to herself, she said, "Stay with me here. Seers can see the energy lines in all things, including the apparent nothingness around us." Looking around us, she said, "They can see the infinite intelligence and vitality of the Universe, and within that vitality they can see there is a constant pressure." She focused on me. "Don Juan called it a predatory force that relentlessly tries to enhance the awareness of all things. In other words, we have no choice but to learn, whereas free will allows us endless choices of how we will do that—with an exception of sorts. We are no longer free to wantonly endanger our planet to the point of no return; that's the line we're standing on, and why the Universe has sent emissaries here to help us get on track."

"An exception to free will sounds like a contradiction."

"Free will must ultimately reign, so they can't stop events that are unfinished or otherwise attach themselves to them, but they can affect the conditions that allow for these events to continue." She closed her eyes. "This planet is the core probability that came into existence because of a quest that... at the behest of Intent. Because of this, they are taking responsibility for it and us, for now, until we choose which version we will come back into. Our behavior makes that decision, which is the point I'm trying to have you grasp at a Stalker's level of understanding." She took a deep breath. "For the average person, behavior is literally practiced according to the silent designs, and overt commands, of outside events impinging on their moods and self-image. For Stalkers, behavior is a conscious choice, and a favorite is the Place of No Pity, but it's common for people caught in a sudden crisis to slip into this mode and act as if a stranger had taken over. It has happened to you."

"No argument here."

"This position of the assemblage point helps to explain why you were almost never outwardly afraid after your first war. However, your body remembered everything and stored your fear for a time when you no longer needed it to keep you focused. Of course, you have to get rid of it, which you do in terms of coloring and influencing events that don't warrant your fearful interpretations. It follows," she quickly carried on, "that the most critical piece of knowledge a man can know at this time in history is that the assemblage point exists, and that we can control its position."

"Not everyone is a mystic."

"You're missing the point that no behavior has to be subject to outside forces: it's critical to know about the assemblage point because we literally teach it to respond to circumstances we have been conformed to receive in particular ways. In simple terms, if our self-image tells us we've been insulted, our assemblage point says 'your wish is my command,' and it shifts to where we feel angry."

"But we really do feel angry?" I said confused.

"Because we told our assemblage point to shift to that point of perception."

"You mean we can tell it to shift somewhere else?"

"You can tell it to do anything you like by cutting out the voice of reason, and the ego's efforts to protect you from the secrets you hold about yourself. Remember, without constantly being conformed to sit in the cognition of the average person its position is random."

"Isn't that like suppressing feelings, or outright denial?"

"It's taking charge of your reactive life." She leaned my way. "If an event makes you laugh, your assemblage point automatically moves to the position where you laugh, but it does so on your unconsciously conditioned command. If you have control over your behavioral conditioning, there is no reason why you can't train the assemblage point to move to a place of vast sorrow, and you will just as legitimately wail like a baby at the funniest joke you ever heard."

"But one reaction is natural and the other is contrived?"

"Control over our contrived indoctrinations is the essence of self-development, and you have no idea what is natural because your decisions have all been conformed to suit pre-existing conditions." She took a breath. "Be it a mystic or a musician, crying in a comedy club is taking charge of one's conditioning, and making it whatever we want it to be, not what the world tells us it should be." Jeanette grinned ruefully. "There is no time to laugh, cry, or become angry, that we have not decided to do so, and we can exchange our reactive responses for good decisions. This is why it is critical to understand that your behavior reflects your beliefs, so understanding the true nature of your beliefs is to be able to change the crappy ones by practicing better behaviors. Doing this repositions the assemblage point."

"Wouldn't that be lying to your emotions?"

"Only to the *should* of your conditioning, which is precisely what we are trying to get rid of."

"So consciously reversing self-deception..." I said, hesitantly.

"Feels deceptive," she finished my sentence, "because you are aware of what you should feel, which would be arbitrary had you not been conformed in specific ways." She took a breath and repeated, "Behavior for the average person is literally practiced at the behest of outside events impinging on their self-image. For Stalkers behavior is a conscious choice."

"Okay, so a simpler example of consciously changing my behavior would be what?"

"Instead of complaining about a crappy event, which reinforces it, you could immediately fix something that was broken, clean your house, or go out and commit a random act of kindness."

"How does that work with emotions?"

"When you learn to use them without the involvement of self, a setback, for example, is not sad. It is an unexpected challenge happening on planned routes that never turn out to be what we thought they were anyway."

"So it doesn't have to be an extreme change; taking control is the issue."

"Exactly, which brings me to the pivotal idea that changed my thinking about controlling my behavior: it takes just as much energy to learn and practice how to live a self-oriented, ill-considered, reactive, and risky life, as it does to learn and practice facing challenges without self-interest." She stared, waiting for this idea to make a dent.

It was a good thing she was patient.

Eventually, I said, "Does this mean that if we started out learning how to live properly, we wouldn't need a massive amount of energy to change our ways?"

"It does: if we are taught incomplete and self-oriented versions of love and responsibility during our most influential years, at best it will take us an equal amount of effort to undo the damage. Moving on... because the assemblage point is initially fixed in the cognition of the average person, Stalkers describe a permanent shift away from this position as loosing the human form. This is our goal—separating you from the world of average people." She hesitated, then said, "I'll explain this further; for now I want you to be aware that the average man is driven by the *should* of reason. This makes them dangerous because they feel they must do things only because they've been told to feel that way, without questioning why or examining their true circumstance, assuming they are able to do that. An underlying affect is that they're automatically afraid of what others may know about them, and they'll fight you to the death of your relationships to maintain their core illusions." She squeezed my arm, meaning this still applied to me.

"This circumstance is dangerous for me," she continued, "and why I'm asking you not to reveal my identity to anyone until I tell you otherwise."

"I won't, but aren't you... you know—protected?"

"My integration process is a partnership. I am not yet capable of keeping myself, and my children, safe while I learn the impeccable designs of Intent."

"Understood." Kind of.

"To be clear about our circumstance," she let me go, "you are free to discuss your own journey with anyone, but I caution you again that it will cost you those relationships. You might not be ready for that. Not all at once."

"I recall."

"Learning from me will cost you that anyway, but it isn't a loss. As you leave your reasoned agreements behind you won't be interested in maintaining contact with people on the same level you met them, and you won't want to speak about your lessons until it's time. It would be useless if you did—who would believe you?"

"What time is that?"

"If and when you are guided to teach someone who has the energy to learn," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "Now," she declared a switch in focus, "for an average person to remain ignorant of their assemblage point is to guarantee that they remain average, with all this implies. For the Stalker, controlling the assemblage point is about more than controlling perception: they know that it is literally a connection to Spirit, which they can work with directly by earning the energy required to move it at will." She slowly shook her head, pondering.

I cocked mine.

"That's not incorrect, but it's not entirely accurate. Let's just say that saving energy by behaving properly makes it easier to move, which includes working directly with Spirit who then offers advanced lessons through the principle of the Minimal Chance."

"Always?"

“They do not tell you anything you need to experience, and because you live in a metaphor your lessons comes as essences, not facts.”

“I understood all of that.”

“Then there’s hope for you.” Refocusing, she slowed our pace to a lover’s stroll without the romantic ambiance, as if to allow more of my daily allotment of energy to pull my head out of my reason.

“We’ve covered the perceptual mechanisms that affect your behavior, so it’s time to make it more relevant to you; glass of wine at Bridges?”

“I’ll probably need a bottle.”

Chapter 55 - Zippers

Our slow walk to the Aquabus dock took fifteen minutes, and crossing False Creek to Granville Island only five more. Along the way, Jeanette continued her technique of reviewing my lessons while expanding them, and having me integrate this information into a larger view:

“We choose physical incarnations from our primary state of conscious energy,” she said, “which is translated into what we perceive as the physical form. This idea-form has chosen, and is therefore predisposed to engaging specific lessons, and bypassing experiences that are more appropriate to other challenges.”

I nodded patiently.

“As we experience early life without explanations, we translate the nature of events into their influences on us as sublimated beliefs. This programming always translates into behavior at the instigation of related events. With the development of language, our still-developing personality accepts, rejects, or modifies our beliefs, based on what we conceive to be in our evolving best interests.”

“Still with you—is this the point when our personality is set, and we begin adopting our predominant flaws?”

“Which are what?”

“Pardon me?”

“You said you are still with me, so you can either *intend to know* the flaws, or you can shift your assemblage point to the spot where that conversation took place. Don’t try to recall the conversation in conventional terms; you naturally use *intending* well, you just don’t know that you do.”

Knowing better than to doubt her, I said, “Give me a second.” I closed my eyes sought the conversation as an intention, not an ongoing effort, then following her instructions I waited quietly. Soon recalling the beginnings of that conversation, I trusted more would be there when my mouth got to it, and I said, “The pious assess nothing, but claim to understand everything, the bigot is always right because he ignores what he doesn’t understand, and the obsessed are pretty much ping-pong decision makers.”

“Hold that position: explain the translation process for the development of any belief.”

Still with my eyes closed, I whispered, “What the fuck.”

Jeanette tittered.

A moment later I found my starting point; it also filled out as I spoke.

“I am a translation of energy—a living metaphor of my beliefs—that had to translate familiar energetic concepts into unfamiliar physical laws about my new existence, which my experiences transformed into a way to apprehending my new place. That way is called reason,

which also made sense of my early experiences before explanations began to conform them to accept other meanings."

"An example of an early event would be what?"

"Shaking me as a baby would scare me, and maybe create pain, so I'd cry more. As I grow, and learn that fear and pain are how grownups who love me, also teach me, the shaking would have taught me to shake my own kids to make the point that, although I love them, crying isn't acceptable." The impact of this idea settled in. "No wonder we're all so fucked up," I said, coming out of my rhythm. "This," I said, waving my arm to encompass the visible world, "is the Tower of Babel!"

"You might have intuited the origins of that myth: what is the essence of the act you described?"

"Abuse."

"It is certainly that; what is the nature of the damage?"

I saw how the abused child's views had been skewed by the experience, but I didn't know how to articulate it; this is what I told Jeanette.

"Their consensus reasoning has been altered to include brutality as an acceptable personal practice, at the level of an unconsidered assumption. This will rob them of the comfort that comes with growing up feeling safe, and that they fit in. In the same way, sexual abuse is a heinous cruelty that deforms one's reason toward accepting aberrations that are passed on, robbing victims of a normal developmental path for generations. By the way, you're headed for a lesson in appreciating that particular disgrace."

"Why is that?" I said perplexed.

"You are a person of energy. As such, what you say and do programs what you need to experience... kiddy-diddlers?" she said.

Not fully understanding her, but nodding uncomfortably I said, "I have a question. Yesterday, you said I was the first to be rescued."

She nodded.

"But your goal isn't to have me rejoin the world I left behind as a better person. Sorry, as a better-off person, because I'd just be better off in the midst of the same bullshit—right?"

"Correct."

"This means your goal is to have me leave the world I know, apparently literally," I chuckled, "by moving my assemblage point to a place where I will perceive a different set of assumptions."

"Assumptions that are elements of a Stalkers' cognition, correct: you knew that much from working on our screenplay," she said curiously.

"I did, but I'm asking you how far away from that old world view am I, because of my experiences since I met you?"

"How well are you doing?" she grinned.

"Ya—yes."

"You began the transition long before you met me, by joining the millions of people who perceive their world differently than they did before their personal wars." She looked at the recreational boating activity around us; I understood this represented my original view.

"Through trauma?" I said.

"As a Stalker would see it," she said, refocusing on me, "you are literally deranged when the assemblage point moves because the original position presents the version of reality that has been hammered into you. But being deranged is neither a permanent nor definitive position." She

cleared her throat. Subduing a smile, she said, "It is a transitional state in that you have perceived a truth that people who are still assembling your old version of the world haven't perceived." She touched my hand. "They may consider you unstable, because they think your combat experiences screwed you up, when it's your agreements with their version of the world that have gone *beyond* theirs. This does not mean the experience didn't screw you up, only that it was meant to, so rejoining their world is as insane to you as you are to them."

"And feeling so much better for knowing this," I quipped.

"All you need is help translating your new knowledge into a workable continuity. Let's head toward the University," she said as we pulled alongside the Aquabus mooring on Granville Island.

We disembarked behind a tourist couple—fanny packs and Vancouver Aquarium T-shirts, who I then realized had been looking at us strangely for most of the crossing. I felt like checking my fly, but the thought had no momentum: I was somehow outside, looking in at our circumstance, and pleased to realize that Jeanette's teaching methods had probably caused me to focus in this way. I would have to ask her about that. . .

Through a thin grin, and a stabilizing breath, I said to myself, "I look crazy to my friends because my assemblage point is not centered on the version of reason that theirs is. But in a Stalker's view, I'm less reasonable—as a good thing—because I resolved a puzzle that my friend's reason hasn't dealt with, because they don't know that war is insanity on display in real time." I had a sudden thought. "It's a second-hand conviction to them, which is why they say it's nuts, then they still go to them?"

"Good so far," Jeanette encouraged me.

"My shitty experiences became my personal landscape, and it was toxic; fear infected me, but I don't know what to do with it other than display it through unconscious behaviors in a place that doesn't understand how they are immersed in the cultural practices that gave rise to what I became."

"You're on the right track." Somberly, she said, "Millions of Post Traumatic Distress victims are poised to embrace a new position—literally—that reflects their understanding of the true nature of the events that shifted their assemblage points away from what others consider normal. I'm not just talking about the military. The police, fire and rescue workers, ambulance attendants, the able but chronically unemployed, and a massive reserve of the physically and emotionally abused, all have a voice that will unite and be heard over the din of nationalistic propaganda."

"Will unite, not might unite?"

"Will unite." She gathered a short breath, and counted on her fingers. "Oppressive systems cannot help but breed rebellion, because all things inherently strive; courage is also contagious, and unification completes the energetic cycle. For now," she inhaled deeply, "they are silent because they've been taught that they are not quite right when, with a little help, they'll learn that it's the other way around." She tapped her temple as we topped the boat ramp and turned left.

"It's the relentless draw of 'the way things are' in the world they left behind that's killing so many of them, because their continuity has been shattered, and the cultural glue of common assumptions is no longer filling the gaps in their reason. Like you, they have not been set back in the world—they have transcended a critical aspect of aberrant reasoning, and been left hanging."

"You're saying that helping veterans reintegrate into the society that shaped them, hurts them?"

"Psychologically, it is an attempt to reverse the process of their personal evolution. If they were instead helped by those with the same experience to embrace what they've seen and done, as is, and why they participated without reasoning justifications, they would clinch the lesson as-it-was-meant-to-be," she ran on, "because that is the design of the experience."

"What was the lesson?" I said as Jeanette stopped to look at an engineering monument to momentum outside of the Emily Carr University: a ball bearing rolls down a ramp into a cup, the cup tilts, the ball strikes a bell, the swing of the bell actuates a lever etc.

Looking at the glass-encased device, she said, "The same as it was for you. They were supposed to be screwed up to make a developmental point they had not learned in lesser ways, and now they have succeeded. These ways could be of many lifetimes of trying different approaches, but they definitely include the culture they came from this time around." She turned to face me. "I'm not saying there aren't some positive ways they're being reintegrated, like learning how to trust, and coming out of their emotional shells. It's the patriot thingy I'm talking about." She turned to walk away.

"The true courage of their journey," she said as I caught up, "lies in making this discovery. Honoring the journey is their duty to themselves, their children, and their culture, by speaking out and making a stand. Moving on, let's look at conditioning from a Stalk..."

"Sorry. Just to cover all bases, some people I know said they're not affected by regularly working in dangerous places. How do you explain that?"

"How do you explain that?"

"I'm biased, but I don't see how it's possible unless there's a level of courage I don't know about."

"Or their courage has been infected, deflected, or assimilated."

"They're displacing fear to embrace a cause?"

"They've dealt with it in other ways, but one way or another they'll leak when the pressure is on, and their button's are pushed. Follow up on their cause."

"That would be the public's right to know, as a belief entrenched during their formal training, and evolved into a conviction by way of being shot at, both of which they use to define themselves. They have also learned how to function publicly," I carried on, "but as you said, I've seen them leak through scorn, intellectual rants, and in a bottle, when the truth stood too close."

"Or in painting by numbers—there is always something to hang onto when the floor disappears from beneath your reason, and it takes a while to find a good camouflage hand-hold."

"The floor disappearing is from having witnessed the insanity?"

"You would know—you walked away from massacres." She cleared her throat. "It's also possible that the brighter one's realized they were contributing to the carnage, by sanitizing heinous acts, be that a secret they are keeping from themselves or an issue they cannot resolve and remain employed. Moving on—we're going to look at conditioning from an energetic perspective," she said, becoming the academician.

"Can I ask you a stupid question?" I said.

"Why not take a moment and ask me an intelligent one?" Jeanette said, looking up to search for the broad yellow building that was Bridges Restaurant, bar, grill, meeting place, and general single's hangout on the weekends. Spotting a corner of the building, she led us in that direction.

"The question is this," I said, having dismissed an inappropriate remark, "you seem to define true courage as doing the right thing. This includes knowing what that is, either by facing yourself or already having done this, so that you have no secrets to blur the assessment of the underlying nature of an act. Is this accurate?"

"It is as far as it goes, but you might recall an early Kha-lib channel: he said everyone on a physical cycle of development is courageous. This is not only because of the intensity and the hazards involved in this means of self-exploration, but because every incarnation is an investment in a blind trust." She looked my way. "You're not seeing the big deal, are you?"

"Not really."

"Meaning that you are seeing it through an alternate reality?"

"Sorry—no I can't see the big deal."

"In that case, I've got another zipper-like story."

"Ready when you are."

She spoke efficiently, as if presenting symptoms for a medical review while we walked around, between, and through gaggles of tourists.

"An entity returning near the end of her physical cycle is displeased with her last performance, and she decides to design an irrefutable lesson. It was supposed to go like this: the first third of his journey—she had chosen the male perspective—included a persona, friends, and cultural influences that would focus him on manipulating the way things are to his advantage. The second third was to be formally educated in these ways, and to become wealthy as a master marketer. The third phase was to lose it all, because the fog of self-deception would cause him to believe he deserved his advantages—the phenomenon of focusing tightly on *self* that he had wanted to correct. However, he became so caught up in the modality of his exploration of mankind's weaknesses that he failed to see the awakening omens he had designed into this phase. So far?" she said, seeing a question in my eyes.

"Fog of self-deception?"

Holding up a finger, she said, "Even from his narrowing perspective, he intellectually knew better than to judge others for any reason, let alone for small things like appearances, physical circumstances, and social skills. However, his quick wit, comfortable lifestyle, and easy adaptation to a wide range of mostly affluent circumstances had slowly changed him."

I nodded my understanding of the tug of social influence.

"I am not saying he became mean; he remained generally benign when not occasionally benevolent, because that much of his heart still ruled. But in the final stage of his journey, he felt inconvenienced by the average person: they were uninteresting because he could manipulate them, and so felt no special need to help anyone. Overall, insincerity became the hallmark of his exploration, and appreciation for his circumstances all-but disappeared in that which he had almost effortlessly achieved." She raised a questioning brow.

"The change over point would be from remaining unaware of his growing sense of superiority?"

"Correct."

"The redo should be good."

"It is very good." First taking a thoughtful breath, Jeanette said, "The entity decided to return amid equal but opposite circumstances to his former advantages, by designing a superb confluence of minimally odd behaviors that would act like a social snare all of her life. But she will not know why she had essentially been shunned until her life review."

"Sorry—couple of things: she wasn't like a megalomaniac; she just secretly believed her internal press as she accumulated the things that represented success?"

"And her social status being the most influential of these things, but as we've discussed there are no small flaws in Mastery lessons."

"Okay, and how could she not know that she was different if she was shunned?"

"Two points: I said shunned because even the people who will know her well, and care about her, will learn to ignore these strange aspects of her behavior. Doing this inevitably leads to generally ignoring her presence in the same way others pay attention to their friends, and the effect is a relaxed, unconscious shunning." Jeanette motioned that point aside. "Her plan was to be conformed from birth to the ways of the world, like everyone else, but with a masterstroke of cognitive distortion: I use this term to distinguish it from ours, but there is nothing inherently wrong with her intellectual processes. It's simply different."

"Understood."

"She will put a minuscule crimp in the Fine Waves of her interpretive centers, which will result in a slightly skewed way of seeing things, as well as how she communicates."

"Fine Waves?"

"Everything is energy—imagine a wobbly wheel of energy-perception creating occasional gaps at imprecise moments. You'll see... because these specialized waves also touch the *orientation* waves of her entire Identity, she will not be aware that there is anything different about her until, and unless, the outside world informs her directly of what they see as peculiarities." Jeanette shrugged. "But they won't, because they will see them as mental or genetic defects. She will also have a personal camouflage to help her not notice many of people's tiny negative responses; she will be endlessly optimistic, naturally kind, selfless, and smile until *your* face hurts—and all of it sincere."

"Are her peculiarities defects?"

"Maybe to you optimism, kindness, and selfless smiling are abnormalities?"

"You know what I mean."

Jeanette looked at me as if I must be joking. Seeing that I wasn't, she said, "The Down's Syndrome child?" prompting me to connect to my own answer.

I still missed the point.

"You are energy," she explained patiently. "You design your mental, physical, and emotional circumstances as energetic pulses and frequencies that, when slowed to appropriate levels, function as they should in a physical context. Your DNA represents these ideas, so where science can locate a so-called defect that causes Down's syndrome they are identifying the physical manifestation of a purposefully designed, less mobile intellect, which the entity wanted so that they can fully explore their world from an emotional perspective."

"Got it, the judgment will be of *apparent* defects. What will they look like?"

"She will have a superior, but more fluid intellect than ours, but it will lack the ability of refined verbal expression that usually comes with it." Jeanette paused for an organizational moment. "Internally," she said, satisfied with where she was going, "she will organize her thoughts, and so her expressions, based on a continuity of personalized connections—think of these connections as symbols her crimp will generate in place of the language-based, shared assumptions you and I make when we chat. In effect, where we make presumptive connections, her processing of context will sometimes only graze the same organizational standards we use."

"In English, what would her contextual processing be like?"

"Her internal cognition of continuity is more figurative than ours—fine nuance is inherent to her visually oriented thinking, so she will excel at things like design, painting, and photography. The trade-off will be that this internal gift will impinge on her exterior world, where nuance and context are based on the common assumptions contained within the otherwise literal descriptions of language. The effect will be that she sometimes uses language in peculiar ways, like saying going and coming instead of the other way around, and mixing metaphors like 'out of the fire and into

the black pot.' However, for the most part she'll think she's saying coming and going, because this is entirely consistent with her intentions—intentions activate the connections between the fine waves."

"She hears her internal translation, not what she actually said?"

"Correct. Simplistically, she might intend to say, 'That's a very nice red dress,' but it comes out as 'That's a red dress,' because the crimp filled a portion of the thought with a pleasant symbol. Of course the recipient can't know this, and will assume the blunt comment is a criticism: our entity will do this only often enough to be an oddity."

"And she can't joke her way out, because she doesn't know what she did. Tough spot."

"She's also one of those people who can't tell a joke."

"I knew a girl who always started telling them with the punch line," I snickered, "which became the joke."

"Her unique way of organizing thoughts skewed contexts according to your standard means of interpretation," Jeanette said, with a slow shake of her head. "This caused your friend to miscomprehend jokes, because perceiving the nuance of language that comedy depends on was lacking, correct?"

"Now that you mention it."

"I'd also bet that satire confused her, and she perceived teasing and sarcasm as critical judgments, but she understood slapstick—not that it was always funny, or maybe funny only to her?"

"You'd win that bet," I said awkwardly. "But it was kind of cute," I added to mitigate my judgments of her.

"Not feeling foolish?"

"Beginning about ten seconds ago... so this entity set-up a double-blind journey?"

"It was a doubly blindsided journey so that people like you would assume she is strange, if not oddly endearing, but always intellectually less than them."

"I can see how that would be."

"At worst," Jeanette said, looking my way, "she will occasionally make people feel uncomfortable, but few of them will risk befriending a quirky misfit who might embarrass them. This will include her equally educated peers avoiding other than professional relationships."

"She will have no learning disabilities?"

"I thought you understood: she has no disabilities whatsoever." Jeanette tilted her head in afterthought. "But she can be clumsy when her internal processing overlooks what is to us a standard continuity of perception and action."

"Translated into John-speak, that would mean what?"

"Her figurative thinking tends to simultaneously encompass the big picture of here and there, with little thought of transitions, because her contexts are fuller than ours. Just as she sometimes leaves words out of a sentence, she can overlook what's physically in between here and there. Reaching for a coffee mug, for example, her brain might have her lifting it before she has fully grasped the handle, which would look like she swiped it off the counter. But unless you had coffee with her on a regular basis you wouldn't notice that she breaks more than her share of cups."

"Would people perceive her as being dangerous?"

"Someone like Rashaef would, but with an upside."

"Pardon me?"

"If such a person were to throw a fish net from a pitching deck into rolling seas, and overlook people standing in between to two?" she grinned.

"Ahhh... Teyo—and Aleena's mispronunciations, and the glib stranger's humor," I said catching on. "They were all personal development lessons."

"Lessons that applied to everyone who looked down at them, as well: our entity..."

"Sorry, how do explain Teyo's dexterity with sleight-of-hand?"

"Teyo learned, as will our entity, that his literal view of the exterior world could be highly focused on specific tasks for hours on end. In Rashaef's world, when he learned that Teyo was born to talk it also meant that he was born to teach." She took my arm as we made our through a swarm of people exiting a store. "As I was saying, our entity will be intermittently, surreptitiously, and unconsciously judged only enough to exclude her socially, for no reason she will fathom. This will cause her to go through life with the simmering frustration of not really being heard, punctuated by the occasional stark bout of disappointment exploding out of the mystery of other's constant underestimation of her, when she's alone. Only her endless optimism and massive energy will keep crippling self-doubt at bay. The bottom line," Jeanette took an earned breath, "is that her diabolically delicate approach, even though meticulously conceived, is also impetuous and risky."

"All of this is just to explore the consequences of judging others?"

"It is to master, in the finest detail, how our socialization processes can highlight *self* to the degree that we are blind to what is really important, until it is time to remove our own behavioral masks and see the damage we have done. Reciprocally, the impact of constant contact with our entity will be to scrape, when not gouge, people's sense of self-importance. All lessons are always two-way streets."

"Helluva ride: so your definition of courage is facing yourself?"

"It is one definition that perfectly applies to everyone on a physical journey."

"There's more," I deadpanned.

"The entity," Jeanette scuttled a grin, "became overwhelmed by the futility of trying to recognize the fine distinctions that the world was inherently wired to make, but which only tangentially included her methods of perception. Her guides anticipated this probability, and they had prepared for it: a graduate of earth-time development—meaning one who did not have to go back—volunteered to take on nearly the identical traits. Paired with another old soul with whom she had shared many lifetimes, and so would let her be the way she was, came back to help bring her sister home."

"Nearly?"

"She will also be a metaphor—an artist born to teach others about image, under the banner of images and imagination. By applying her life's experiences to a specialized focus she will become an intuitively astute therapist when she reaches the third stage of her rescue preparations. So to answer your quasi-question, I also define courage as a selfless act taken on behalf of another who needs help, for as long as they need it, and for no reason other than they can do it."

"It's a good definition."

"Then we're on the same page about courage," she said with finality.

"Almost: why would the rescuer risk taking the same route, plus having to formally learn how to apply its consequences to others? Wouldn't there be a safer—an easier way?"

"To paraphrase a tenet of teaching, 'Because she's been there, and she knows the way out.' Maybe you can better appreciate how I view you now."

"Courageous? We've been over that."

"Did you not say it was all about doing what you had to do?"

"Ya—so?"

"Taking on a physical life aside, which is all about learning what you have to do," she opened her palms to me, "you volunteered to become deranged, counting on me to show you how to heal. That was hardly a wimpy choice... moving on," she said, "we're going to look at human conditioning in terms of context and perspective from an energetic point of view."

"Go for it; you can translate it later."

With a quick chuckle, she said, "There are two psychological cores of orientation for exploration of the human experience. These are the stalkers' perspective—small 's'—and the dreamers' perspective—small 'd'. In simple terms," she continued, as I rolled my eyes, "stalkers consider the means and consequences of their decisions less before acting, so they can find themselves less prepared for the consequences. Dreamers look further ahead. In the final analysis, the stalker may have more scars than the dreamer when they finally do their life recapitulations, but the dreamer may have taken longer to discover the answers required to master the same arena of experience. One approach is not better than the other," she answered my unasked question. "They are different approaches to discovering knowledge, and everyone uses both techniques. The average person would say it's a matter of circumstance and proportion. A Stalker, capital 'S', would say it's a matter of how one prefers to move their assemblage point most of the time: one prefers the control and utilization of their Dreaming awareness, capital 'D', and the other prefers controlling their behavior through Stalking, capital 'S'. Without a doubt, you are a stalker, small 's', whom we are orienting toward understanding the Stalker's world, capital 'S'."

"I get that," I said as if I were not proud of my scars. "Just to clarify, what's the difference between capital 'D' and small 'd'?"

"Capital 'D' is to consciously access and control Dreaming. Small 'd' is more like exploring one's imagination."

"You also said dreamers were talkers who did nothing more than create the illusion that they have great things waiting for them?"

"That characterization was part of the three most practiced flaws of mankind's behavior. We are now talking about the energetic orientation of consciousness, as it perceives and prefers to approach physical reality."

"You'd think Stalkers—capital 'S'—could come up with a better term than one they've already used," I quipped.

"You would, wouldn't you," Jeanette mused seriously.

"Why then?" I took the bait.

"It wouldn't make sense to you right now, and I don't want to rob you of your delight when you do understand." Without further explanation, she shifted her body into me as if a wave had pushed her over. "By practicing saving energy over the past months," she said, "you were able to perceive information about people while they were carrying on what was to them a normal, unconsciously guarded conversation, correct?"

"I saw through the personality image they were offering, but I don't know how or why it happened."

"I told you, it happened because you intended it to happen, and knowing now that you can do it is the forerunner to practicing it."

"Practicing something that seems to happen spontaneously?"

"Practicing something that cannot be reasonably explained does not mean it has no explanation." We turned onto Duranleau Street, where we had to contend with heavier tourist traffic. Oddly, because she always gave her undivided attention to the task at hand, and I was paying strict attention to her, Jeanette began window-gawking at the Raven and the Bear, a native art store.

"In some cultures," she said, spontaneously, "the raven is a symbol of knowledge and divine providence, and the bear is symbolic of strength and wisdom."

"Uh huh."

Jeanette looked at me as if I had missed something.

I was about to ask her what this might be, when the nature of our exchange came starkly into focus: I was a student who did not treat a teacher's observation as relevant, when I had no idea how it might apply. I was still acting like an average person after I had experienced the concept of the Minimal Chance, *knowing*, *intending to know*, and I knew that I had been taught in my dreams. Then I had secondary realization: I understood this because, in that moment, I wasn't acting like an average person.

Shaking my head at this twist, I said, "Knowledge, providence, strength, and wisdom," filing the terms away for an unknowable moment.

Grinning as though she knew what had happened, Jeanette said, "Between the lines of Rachel's conversation, you understood the path she has taken with men; you knew her core story without words or specific incident, correct?"

"Yes."

"For now, we are going to call that *seeing*." She raised her hand to prevent me from interrupting, which I was about to do. "Seeing does have something to do with your eyes, but it is not the obvious and it's not something we are going to get into right now. Sufficient to say that *seeing* occurs outside of thought, so it includes understanding without the need for language and without necessarily directing, or wanting to know what you saw."

"What could I know without trying to know anything?"

"Knowledge is available everywhere, to everyone, all of the time, if they have the energy to access and assess it." She peered into me. "Everything is media, because everything is an interpretation, and because everything is conscious everything communicates. Who or what is listening is another issue." Briefly gathering her thoughts, she said, "As a teacher, you are media to me: everything you say and do is a metaphor about you and your perspectives. I am now teaching you how to locate the metaphors you create, specifically the behavioral aberrations that infect you. Of necessity, these essences lie outside of the reasoning you use to maintain the continuity of your existence, which is why they are so difficult for the average person to merely locate, let alone change. It follows that you cannot act like an average person to hunt them."

"Which I was at the store, then I wasn't to have realized where I was... did I cross the bridge of concern again?"

"Excellent, you're seeing how things work. Important to note that achieving this kind of clarity doesn't do a thing to change your poor behaviors: there's nothing stopping you from becoming an idiot with power other than heart and discipline, one of which you've lost and the other you've never had. We are on the hunt for both, and we will find them within the three cores of knowledge required to become..." she hesitated, and said instead, "As your ability to know through any means grows you must guard against your penchant for piety, and become smitten with your presumed power and treat people like servants. Now, what word did I ask you to remember?"

"Zipper."

"This is how your ability to *know* becomes incorporated into ever larger assumptions: There was a young boy who knocked things off shelves," she said, "too often touched hot stoves with his elbow while making peanut butter and jam sandwiches, and skinned his knees and knuckles so regularly that his mother put Band-Aids on her shopping list every week. As he grew so too did the scars, which evolved into mini awards for the battles of life he had fought. In time, his parents bought him a new winter coat, not a jacket design, but the kind that went down almost to his knees. He hated the fashion, but it was a warm coat and getting snow down the back of his pants while sliding down hills on the way to school was no fun in class. On balance, the only real problem he had with the coat was zipping it up.

"Half the time," she explained mysteriously, as if to this child, "he couldn't get it to close beyond getting the tongue and the teeth in line, and pulling up about a quarter of an inch before it became stuck. He got used to tugging and sometimes succeeding, so he eventually wore away a section of stitching and bent some teeth; his parents had to replace the zipper. He secretly hoped this might correct the problem, or get rid of the coat, so he didn't have to decide what to wear, but it did neither. He still wore his old jacket, and endured the occasional wet butt that a less frustrating exit from the house offered."

She paused to have me voice that I knew she was speaking about me. I nodded for her to continue.

"Finally, the day came when fatigue from arguing with his mother about playing with his friends versus doing homework overcame his exasperation; looking down, while trying to think of a way to avoid homework, he held the tongue of the zipper in place and pulled slowly. For the first time, he noticed that on the first tug he habitually turned the bottom of the zipper slightly upwards. This crimped the teeth just ahead of the joiner causing the tug of war with the zipper. By holding the tongue even in the slot, which meant pulling down slightly with one hand—a counter intuitive move—the zipper worked perfectly every time.

"He didn't tell his mother that his frustration had been all her fault, be it for having a child with short arms or for buying a long coat, and he wore the garment comfortably after that." Jeanette stopped walking and looked my way.

"The lesson is that through impatience he blamed the wrong person?" I guessed.

"His lesson was that the world didn't require his concern; it was all about him and his wants, so assessment of his actions wouldn't cross his mind until enough scars got his attention, and he realized he'd been like this all of his life. His free-spirit, damn-the-torpedoes attitude was a camouflage for his youthful sense of invincible self-worth, which superseded all else to the extent that his moods were created and controlled by clothing and weather."

"I was just a kid."

"You don't see the grander implications. To recapitulate everything he could possibly recall about breaking dishes, burning elbows, falling off bicycles—everything you can imagine about being in too much of a hurry to be careful," she opened her arms to encompass the world, "would be to capture the essence of his problem—self-importance. To later witness any of those behaviors, and hear the same excuses he used as he ran out the door with no apology for putting his hand through the screen again, is to comprehensively see that continuity." She snapped her fingers. "As he equated these behaviors with their adult versions, he would claim as his own knowledge the entire spectrum of this aspect of self-importance. With it, he would see the incalculable losses his neglect, disinterest, and utter lack of concern for anything other than himself had created." She stared at me.

"I can see the benefit of getting a lot of information all at once."

"It's not a lot of information; it is a massive comprehension that almost supersedes language." She took a considered breath. "The more comprehensive the exploration of your behavior, the more comprehensive is the zipper you will have closed around a massive data bank of indicators about everyone who uses the same excuses and practices the same essential behaviors."

"No offence, but we've been over all of this."

"And you have yet to incorporate its principles into your daily way of life, so we're going over it again."

"Incorporate what?"

"Being cheap is one tug on a zipper of your behavior. It is a sign of a greater continuity in play, so when you understand its impact on all else that you do, you will have subdued an enormous amount of your personality. In fact," she corrected herself, "as the core influence that blinds you to seeing the rest of your harmful beliefs, it's probably the only influence we need to deal with. I think I mentioned, the rest will fall like dominos without its support."

"What is it?"

"I told you, fear."

"And I told you, I'm prudent because I can't pull twenty dollar bills out of my ass."

A digression—

The moment I left the world of news video editing, where my days passed in one-thirtieth of a second frames progressively compressed against a six o'clock deadline, I literally threw my watch away. It is for this reason that I do not know precisely how long Jeanette howled in laughter, indelicately sniffing back snot so that she could gulp a decent breath, only to continue choking to the brink of purple. As a measure of sorts, her attempts to regain a modicum of dignity reached five before she managed to slurp her mirth into submission and say, "That's why it's called the Minimal Chance."

Chapter 56 - Belief and Conviction

I surveyed the busy street casually, as if a woman laughing and crying so hard as to put her life at risk was a common sight, until Jeanette recovered... kind of: her stilted sobs were infectious as we walked to Bridges.

It was not threatening to rain, so I led us to Bridge's massive waterfront patio area where we ordered wine. When we thought we could handle speaking intelligibly, Jeanette said Saa-ra wanted her to take our regular Saturday gathering on a field trip up Cypress Mountain—not the Lookout, but up a trail. We thereafter speculated about what Intent might do with us on that trek. After paying our bill, we headed back to the ferry where Jeanette turned to me for a second time and said, "I want you to voice thoughts that seem to just come to your mind."

"That's a bit much," I said, amid the loitering passengers who would soon be sitting shoulder to shoulder with us.

"Do you remember how I stopped many of our conversations to ask you why you said something?"

"Sure... you asked me to explore why I felt the way I did."

"Then you flashed-back through apparently unrelated events, which coalesced at your current emotional state. Correct?"

"Yes, they explained why I was feeling the way I did."

"Do you accept that Phillip prompted these memories to have you see why you are the way you are?"

"It makes sense."

"Voicing your thoughts will continue doing that and... hold on."

"To what?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Thought of what?" I said, perplexed

"Sorry—not you, I was speaking to Saa-ra. She said you need an experience with Phillip to put some quandaries to rest. One of these is that you secretly embrace scientific explanations of mystical events to avoid religious connotations. Another is fearing for your mental health in general, because you've been told you're not quite right."

"Because of my out-of-body flight? We've covered that."

"I'm just the messenger: I can tell you that if you learn specifically how religions became what they are, you'll have nothing standing in your way mystically."

"I'll accept religions?" I said, incredulously.

"God, no!" Jeanette laughed. "You'll dismiss their structures entirely."

Sheepishly, I said, "I already know Intent isn't—aren't religious."

"Intellectually, but your predisposition is a much stronger force than you realize," she said as we began boarding the ferry. "A core inner awareness of our true form of existence unavoidably manifests in our religions. How these operate symbolize mass beliefs of a particular bent, each one trying out various interpretations from different vantage points. It follows that religious convictions are based on the fact of this awareness, but our physical interpretation of this awareness has been skewed by self-interest over the ages. We'll deal with that later. Phillip wants to deal with the mental health issue now."

"How?"

"I don't... we're going for a drive. That's all I know."

We boarded the ferry and took our seats.

On the crossing of False Creek, we again reviewed the principles and concepts that were becoming assumptions of our chats. Many of these were metaphysical premises widely held by millions of people, which Saa-ra corrected for accuracy throughout their historical development. For example, rituals were originally about altering focus to shift the assemblage point. They had nothing to do with metaphor, memorial, or worship.

When we reached her car, Jeanette handed me the keys and walked to the passenger door.

"Just start driving," she said when we were seated; I headed into the West End along Pacific Avenue.

"Go where you feel like going," she said.

I turned right on Broughton with the intention of taking it all the way to West Georgia, then turn left into Stanley Park, a motorcycle drive I never tired of.

"Phillip is going to direct you from here," Jeanette said as we crossed Nelson Street.

"Okay," I said, having no idea what that meant.

In the next moment, I heard a male voice say, "Turn left here," as clearly as if I was wearing studio quality headphones.

I looked at the car radio—no tuning dial light—then at Jeanette; she was concentrating deeply, her lips tight, head bowed.

I looked back at the road.

"Turn left on Bidwell and go to Beach," the voice said.

I turned the radio power switch—first on, then off.

"Can you hear him?" Jeanette said casually.

"Perfectly," I replied.

I followed Phillip's directions for another few minutes, until he directed me to park beside a church. He ended his monologue by saying, "We will speak later."

My complete acceptance that Spirit spoke to Jeanette changed everything and nothing; I had believed her, but without the experience it was a second-hand conviction.

Jeanette subsequently explained that Phillip had wanted me to drive to demonstrate, to myself, that I was not hallucinating, dreaming, or in an altered state of awareness that would allow me to think I had made up the event. My out-of-body experience had also been preceded by similarly designed events to make sure that I knew I was wide-awake.

From here on, she said that Phillip would speak to me in this way only if and as I worked on my energy gathering practices, because words were an incalculably inefficient use of energy. In time, our conversations would take place through visions, *knowings*, and pure understandings that encompassed enormous blocks of knowledge, with one caveat; I had to be familiar with the elements of the whole lest the message-landscape be skewed.

I understood this to mean that the better I understood essences the larger the scope of knowledge Phillip could offer in his communications.

"I'll take you home," Jeanette said, getting out of the car.

I said nothing as we switched seats...the idea that she could literally know anything in the Universe, and beyond, if that's what Saa-ra wanted her to know, was too much to grasp.

The day had been beyond tiring; as soon as Jeanette dropped me off I arranged to meet Ed at a pub for a pick-me up, which of course is an oxymoron. The evening was brief, because our pub dinner was heavy, and we were home earlier than a Friday night out in Vancouver usually warranted: Ed's newest girlfriend, Jayne, an acquaintance of my helicopter pilot friend, Paul, was also not available. This worked out for the better, because a phone message from his brother in Winnipeg had him packing his bags.

I drove him to the airport in the morning, before my class with Jeanette.

[Chapter 57 - Ten More Minutes](#)

Saturday's weather was crystal clear and warm, excellent for hiking up Cypress Mountain: Jeanette maintained that she didn't know what the lesson was going to be, as she led nine of us up a root-crossed trail, often stopping to point out aspects of the flora that represented energy concentrations of a specific type.

Rachel eventually commented on these stops, saying that she had mentally begun to separate areas of the terrain into various patchworks, like a quilt of nature. Difficult to articulate though it was, she said this gave her a sense of being a part of the fabric of the mountain—her sense of its enormity did not make her feel diminished. Instead, she began walking more carefully so as not to disturb anything.

With Ed's father on my mind, I initially paid no heed to the time or distance we were covering while Jeanette took us up ever-steeper inclines. However, beginning with those who were in the worst physical shape, members of the group began to ask, "How much further?" with varying degrees of irritation.

At first, Jeanette said, "It's been years since I walked this trail, so I'm not sure, but I think it's close—maybe ten minutes to clear that ridge."

Ten minutes later, and past the ridge we thought she had pointed to, someone raised the question again.

"I remember now," Jeanette replied confidently, "It's just over that one."

When it wasn't, tongue in cheek I suggested, "Maybe it wasn't this mountain?"

"Hmm," Jeanette seemed to contemplate the possibility. "Let's give it another ten minutes," she said. "I'm almost sure it wasn't Grouse Mountain."

Had I not been focused on other matters, I would have heard a declaration: she now understood what the lesson was about, because there was no such thing as 'almost' or 'sure' in her world. To get away with saying "almost sure," must have tickled her pink.

We trekked for another ten minutes, as a chorus grumbled, and Jeanette again said it couldn't be much farther.

We were not quite at an altitude where oxygen is required when we came to a huffing, sweaty halt, and Jeanette brightly declared that we had arrived. All of us, already peeved, were deeply dissatisfied at finding that we were in a small clearing in the forest that did not offer so much as a glimpse of the ocean. We might as well have been in Rachel's back yard.

"This is it—this is the lesson?" Georgio said.

Jeanette sat on a fallen tree. Wiping her brow, channeling Kha-lib she explained into the charged silence that we had been led to heights we would not have climbed had we known beforehand how high 'up' was going to be. We were willing to continue the climb, in spite of the increasing evidence that Jeanette did not know where she was going, which she had made apparent every ten minutes, while distracting us with repetitive comments about energy's manifestations.

That we had empowered her through our choice to follow, only to be increasingly peeved by Jeanette utilizing this power, demonstrated our predisposition toward victimization: we regularly agreed to live by the manipulations of others, because people who liked us told us we were likeable. We wanted to be polite, not rock the boat, and now we blamed her because we had not taken responsibility for our decision to come along. If we had, we could no more blame her for teaching an important lesson than we could blame the mountain for being high.

Kha-lib said that our relative silence was a requirement of mass victimization; we were constantly being subjected to ill-defined promises, and then distracted by apparently valid contrivances that had us fail to question other's alleged knowledge, because it meant risking affronting them. This was in spite of the fact that taking this responsible action could only affront those who were manipulating us. We had become so lazy through acts of convenience that we did not think to see what we could do to better our understanding of circumstances. Apathy had become our standard of living, and a terminal condition.

I protested that this lesson had a gaping hole; we had to put our trust in Jeanette to teach these lessons; we had no reason to question her actions. Additionally, she was just as subject to human limitations, so it wasn't as if we were lemmings taking the leap alone.

Our concepts of reasonableness and fairness, Kha-lib replied, are what made the lesson poignant. We easily gave into a 'nice person', such as Jeanette, who demonstrated no more competence in mountain navigation than we allowed others to lead us in ways just as foreign to them. How else would the lesson have worked without causing real harm and still make the point that we had presumed our freedom away and took no responsibility for it? The world was full of people who believed the summit was just over there, ten minutes away. They climbed toward imaginary rewards, on the behest of other's dreams, until they perished or were discarded when their leader's ulterior purpose was fulfilled. If we took responsibility for our every action we

would be vigilant enough not to climb other's mountains on promises, or become angered into acts of retribution for going however far we went. In time, others could not trick us because we no longer practiced the personal acts of neglect they required of us.

At this point, two people stood, brushed themselves free of debris, and in silence headed for home before the rest of the group had rested. This unexpected, but understandable, event prompted me to question the logic of administering lessons of such magnitude that people stopped learning. It had happened a lot.

Kha-lib stated that these two people had not been discarded, as I had implied. They had chosen of their own free will to participate, and then to stop because they did not agree that Kha-lib was serving their purposes. Jeanette had given us the experience of victimization instead of a lecture about it, because it was only through experience that we learned anything worthwhile.

"Lessons on personal behavior are difficult because they deal with your deepest beliefs," he said, as we began our descent. "It is premature to judge to what effect these so called failures might have; consider that the likelihood of anyone selling our two friends a bucket of wishes has now been greatly reduced. That they do not yet appreciate this gift is of no consequence, for the lesson was conceived and delivered with impeccable intentions."

He said this circumstance also applied to those who came for a quick fix of self-fulfillment at Jeanette's home. Some of them will find a wind-chime garden and sit cross-legged basking in the golden light of dusk, awaiting enlightenment by osmosis to avoid another wound. Others will seek another teacher, and not stop until they find one who agrees with their vision of themselves. The rare one will try to reconstruct their self-image, find it lacking, and continue tearing it down.

The effectiveness of any lesson aside, I argued that Jeanette had abused our trust, and trickery seemed so... un-universal.

"It is because mankind does not appreciate the pervasiveness of their victimization that there exists no subtle way to make our point. At this time, you have climbed a gorgeous mountain on a beautiful day, been subject to the wondrous nature of life itself, and been presented with an invaluable lesson by a source that loves you beyond words. Will you allow your affront to pillage the value of this day?"

"The world might not appreciate your tactics."

"They may appreciate that the lesson was for you."

After this exchange, we moved down the mountain in relative silence, discovering that the muscles we used to climb were not the ones used to descend.

We did not get back to Jeanette's house until late afternoon; there was no mail or messenger notice of an attempted delivery by any means; a renewed hostility set in. It was clear to us, as we consumed copious amounts of lemonade, that our financial status had not changed, nor would it.

Tired, grimy, and doubly irritable, we sat silently in our usual places while Jeanette refocused. When it appeared that she ready, Rachel preemptively said, "There's nothing in the mail."

Looking at each of us in turn, Kha-lib said, "During the entire time of your legacy's impending arrival you all have been warm, well fed, and safe. Yet you were disappointed by not having received more?"

"Meaning what?" Meaghan said.

"Meaning he lied," Rachel said tightly. "He had us waiting ten more minutes from day one." She was really ticked off.

"It is you who put your lives on hold instead of taking responsibility for each moment. Nevertheless, we have delivered on our promise, for we are not those who would hold out the hand of hope and take it away."

"It's still coming?" Meaghan said hopefully.

"From this day forward," Kha-lib replied, "you will listen more closely to what others say, question that which is unclear, and take action on your own behalf instead of waiting on other's promises to relieve you of perceived burdens. This single change in your daily lives will cause you to scale other barrier ideas that currently stand in the way of achieving your dreams."

Turning crimson, Rachel declared, "I didn't need to learn anything more about bullshit." To everyone's surprise, she stormed out of the house; the sound of the pneumatic door closing settled over our meeting like the metaphor it was. We were all out of gas.

"Why do you let people think they're ready for you, if they're not?" Meaghan said.

"We do not tell you what to think. We offer a perspective from which you can form better ideas."

"You created the expectation. That's why she left," Meaghan said, undaunted.

"Your friend was distraught because the fulfillment of our promise did not agree with her desires." Kha-lib paused to allow Meaghan to argue the point. She thought about the recent sermon on the mount, and declined.

"To you, our delightfully gentle soul, we also say that prejudice is integral to mankind's attractions, for you first embrace your own reflection. This narcissism undermines the potential of a lasting relationship, because true love does not insist that one agree with you. Take that forward from today and love will find you."

He looked around the room.

"Your friend is far from alone. There are many among mankind who wish to participate in the coming changes, but losing their physical assumptions is a demanding challenge most of them will be unable to fulfill, just as it was in your Biblical times."

"They weren't," Meaghan hesitated, "sent by God?"

"The characters in your religious works were men and women of extraordinary energy, who designed their lives to reflect the principles of how to live productively. There were many others of whom you are unaware. In your terms some of these people made the cut and some did not, but they all struggled similarly to how most of you quietly fulfill extraordinary challenges every day. They were not religious people, but over time religion became the context for their journeys, and their messages were skewed by the politics of self-interest."

"What was your relationship to them?" Josh said.

"The principals were Portions of Identities sent into your reality to adopt the roles of which you are aware. In your terms, they were the sons and daughters, and their sons and daughters of the creator of your world."

"Of God?"

"Originally, All That Is created of Himself two explorer entities that in turn created of themselves other explorer entities. The first of these entities is the creator of your world. She (Jeanette) will tell you of these events when it is time."

"I don't see how ordinary people, regardless of their energy level, can do anything for you," Jenny said, looking at the space where Rachel had been sitting: it was clear that the group's interest in any other topic was about avoidance, because we all felt like walking out.

"We are here to open your eyes," Kha-lib replied. "She has a story."

Still formal to the extent of not using contractions, Jeanette told us that Josh had taken her to an establishment widely known for the semi-permanent aftertaste of its draft beer, the premature aging of its patrons, and Dolores, the bar's resident hooker addict.

At his appointed time, a man whose face seemed suspended like a loose-fitting mask from a pot of thin, gray hair extricated himself from a group of regulars. Shuffling to a low-rise stage, he picked up an immaculate twelve-string guitar, caressed each wire intimately, then buckled on a fret cheater with fingers that shot out of his palms at congenitally odd angles. The audience quieted as this weary puppet prodded notes reminiscent of an arduous climb then, nearing the summit, he slipped a split-fingered slide that a normal hand would have trouble duplicating. The crowd gasped as if their chairs had dropped an inch.

The minstrel next palpitated a progression of chords, through pathos toward hope, before stopping to tweak the tension of a string.

The crowd applauded his warm-up routine.

Blushing, the little man opened his set with a less stressful sequence of empathetic riffs; upon these he layered penetrating insights aimed at resurrecting sanguine dreams from amid the haze and spittle that was his audience's life. In time, not for the last time, a drifting note took their imaginations into the warmth of better times... and gently left them floating there.

Belatedly, the audience erupted in unabashed appreciation.

"I asked Kha-lib who this special man was," Jeanette said to us. "He told me that the musician had finished his lessons in physical life, but seeing the nature of the times ahead he chose to return and contribute in his own way. He chose his appearance because, in spite of the talent he intended to bring with him and further develop, a world of cosmetic values would never aggrandize him. He would also have to trust that the Silent Knowledge of his entire history would carry him through a task he would not remember was his challenge."

"What was it?" Jenny said.

"It was his desire to bestow upon others moments of peace, free from the social stigmas he would understand from his own life. His approach was to offer quality entertainment to those whose circumstances did not allow them access to the elite, and to display his kind of unassuming beauty to people whom society had thrown away. In this way, his audiences felt better about themselves, and for those moments the world was better off."

This ended the double lesson, and my second week of training in which Kha-lib did not overtly deny the existence of the legacy check...

I was physically exhausted, emotionally distraught, and bearing the weight of a secret that I dared not tell anyone: the out-of-body experience had been looked at with reserve by the few whom I had told, but a hearing a voice? Nope.

Chapter 58 - Dreaming

The first of the formal teaching dreams⁽¹²⁾ about my alleged quest began that night. Upon reflection, this made perfect sense because I had just 'met' my Higher Self \ teacher on the physical plane, so finding myself in his classroom was not a surprise... which later worried Jeanette.

The first thing I noticed upon becoming aware that I was dreaming—an observation that created a psychological separation between the waking and dreaming me—was that the dreaming version was calmly accepting of events: I recollected my dreaming experiences through this secondary point of view—somewhat detached, as if I had a foot in both camps of here and there. Having been here before, I also knew that he—that is I, was smarter than when I was awake,

because I always understood more complicated principles in this state of being than I otherwise should. My dream-state companions over the years had always treated me this way, as well.

Zzzz: We stood unseen beside a fountain in a square, as the world passed us by in slow motion. I somehow understood that, from within the fabric of this psychological timeframe, all locomotion appeared this way due to the difference in vibratory speed between physical existence and the true speed of my energy consciousness. I knew that millions of physically focused beings were having experiences such as mine; they called it dreaming and they may or may not remember them, or necessarily know that they were being taught in them.

A man of indeterminate age stood comfortably next to me: I knew that I knew him—had met him countless times this way—only then that it was Phillip. He glanced at me casually: I knew was important to him in ways I could not fathom, yet I was unable to reciprocate. The best I could do was to feel secure.

He allowed a moment for me to finish orienting to my circumstance.

"They don't know what they are doing," I finally said, signaling that I had accepted where I was.

Ignoring the comment, because it required no response, he said, "Politics is one of the two basic translations of man's inner awareness of his origins," he began formally. "The other is religion, both of which manifest in your cellular programming."

"They would be politics and religion," I chuckled at the irony of harboring a deep distaste for both.

"Does it make sense that you have studied them?"

"A bit of politics, but I haven't studied religion."

"You have been immersed in their failures, as well. We will revisit that knowledge; for this session we are opening your mind to the scope of your journey."

"Ready when you are."

"From various platforms of existence, the We that is Us assemble our choices to be endeavored in an order that is subsequently perceived as continuous. In fact, we choose these experiences from any number of probabilities, then force upon them a personal continuity drawn from the well of man's root assumptions—your current assumptions," he said, meaning not his, although he understood them to perfection.

"In practical terms, root assumptions replace the inner awareness of one's spiritual source from where anything is possible, though in physical life, too, anything is possible. But as your perceptive mechanisms are not tuned toward this realization, and your ideas do not allow for it, you do not see how this can be."

"Do Stalkers see it? I mean, haven't they tuned their perceptive mechanisms toward accepting any possibility?"

"They have, and this takes them beyond the leading edge of the mass consciousness," he replied. "To be touching it is considered genius, to build on it is to be ahead of your time, but to leave it behind is considered lunacy. Now, as a mass consciousness man agrees to these assumptions at the most basic level of understanding. This is to say that up is not sideways even when it is viewed with a turned head; there is always an agreement beforehand on which direction is the base. Man also agrees to various translations of vocal sounds, calls them language, and immediately agrees that it's only a symbolic tool that represents, most accurately, the current expressions of the inner self who is uttering them. But these words are not the experience. They are the basis of assumptions about experiences in a two dimensional reality."

"Two dimensions?"

"You create a two dimensional reality of length and height, and are then forced by the nature of survival itself to experience, thereby creating the third dimension of depth."

As I gave this statement some thought, Phillip explained, "In physical life, an object sits in a tree. It is black and it caws. The object, by its own movement, demonstrates to the observer that there is life. The observer, compiling the input of his or her perceptual mechanisms into coherency and continuity—or logic—can still choose to think it is an inanimate object with electronic couplings, or he can move to a different point to view and examine the object to determine if it is what it seems. This movement is experience. By way of the experience providing a different point of view, the observer has provided depth to the object they could not have perceived in any other way. Having done this once as a child, one needs only to hear the caw to assume the rest—though now there is no contact—no animation attributed to the source. It is assumed. As all children learn to assume the same thing, it becomes a root assumption of their existence. This is the basis of not having to fall from great heights to see if they are as painful as falling from lower heights. One fall usually does it."

"Got it—I mean, I understand."

"Events and Time are strung together in the same manner—by assumption and agreement. So depth, as the experience of physical life, becomes a root assumption. This applies to all things in your system. You find the depth of a friend's character and learn to trust, which is an assumption based on your experience with him or her. In actuality, one is trusting in what one cannot see or touch, derived from their private perceptions of previous experiences. Do you see?"

"Yes."

"Is not the following of spiritual practices the same—trusting in what you cannot see, yet experience bears out the truth?"

"It is, but it's often not deemed reasonable to have faith in—in very much."

"Saa-ra's portion will lead you beyond reasoning to specifically experience how focus, as faith, creates worlds. You shall see."

"I don't doubt it."

"I meant that literally—you will see how projected energy shapes events."

"Cool."

"At the level of creation, this mass consciousness also agrees on a timeframe and a distance representation, which is a psychological adjustment to a decrease in their vibratory speed. Each timeframe has its own speed and an historical momentum of cultural influences that constitute the modality of that time."

"Jeanette familiarized me with that idea."

"Now you can use it as a psychological backdrop for all that you experience here," he said, with a slim grin.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You may."

"What's the difference between understanding and awareness? I meant to ask Jeanette, but..." I shrugged a 'when you've got the author, why ask the messenger?' movement.

"For now, it is enough to say that you can experience pure understanding as a grand deposit of knowledge drawn from a simultaneous thought. In its essence, this understanding is restricted by language, and possibilities you do not yet allow for. In other words, the limited view of the self that you believe yourself to be is present in the event. Awareness excludes you,

and so it excludes the barriers of the unthought-of, or the dismissed. It is also simultaneous and encompassing, but if you sense your presence, it is as a distant observer—a manifestation of the perspective of your entire Self—my perspective. There is no judgment, no emotion, and no kind of investment. The awareness IS, just as you Are."

"So far so good," I said.

"This IS-ness encompasses multiple concepts which, as before, are altered when manifest in the slowness of physical reality. For example, the relationship between instinct and your inner awareness of your immortality is maintained by a balancing mechanism that translates the validity of life into the awareness of purpose. It, too, is an unavoidable knowledge programmed into the cells. In effect, this is how one comes to their knowledge, and to recognize it as such as their lessons present it to them. Without such programming, the individual has no basis from which to translate physically related experiences."

"Like common cultural assumptions provide a basis for behaving in a particular way?"

"Yes, and part of the knowledge inherent in the entity before they translate into physicality is that of immortality. However, when it is slowed to the speed of physical life it is read as instinct, which is the awareness of purpose."

"Ahhhhh."

"This inter-conductive memory also stores the knowledge that a specific purpose is achieved through survival of the focus until such a time as one's challenges have been faced. Knowledge of the entities projected return home, as a death, is stored in this same way."

"Why do so many people fear it?"

"Through social programming they are mistranslating the knowledge. They often use it not as a motivation to learn a meticulously designed lesson for a given lifetime, but as a reason they do not have to learn because they see no point. Their cellular programming has been overshadowed by the intense focus of physical life."

"I think there's a contradiction in there, but I can't put my finger on it."

"Mankind often translates this inner knowledge of death as fear, as their link with us is weak, and so their understanding of instinct itself is often misconstrued by placing false value on the importance of a single lifetime. In doing so, there may appear to be a paradox between the knowledge of surviving forever while fearing death as an end."

"That unravels my quandary. Thanks."

"There are no paradoxes in any universe that are not fabricated through incorrect assumptions: Saa-ra's portion may present such fabrications for you to unravel, and in the doing understand the subject in its entirety. It is the design of her teaching method." He carried on without pause, as Jeanette often did. "The inter-conductive memory between the source entity and the physical body brings with it the inherent understanding of evolution at its most profound levels, beyond word description. It knows conceptual realities such as time, and so the importance of choosing specific times to enter into a quest. In this way, instinct affects one's day-to-day decision making processes, as it relentlessly urges one to recognize that a moment once past is irretrievable. Therefore, one should make the best use of it. Ending the focus—dying, is as much a part of instinct as is the will to survive, for there is an equally valid time to die as there is to be born."

"Makes sense; when you're finished what you came to do, why not die?"

"Your familiarity with death makes this easier to see, with the correction that dying always serves a purpose."

"Nothing wasted... got it."

"This programming also recognizes that immortality, as it is understood at this level and not as mankind thinks of it, is achievable only through experience and specifically the treatment of experience in responsible and efficient ways. To die before one's purpose is fulfilled may or may not be through an irresponsible act, but it is never efficient to have to repeat one's lessons. Immortal awareness, therefore, brings with it the responsibility of the moment, not the irresponsibility of having all the time in the world."

"Understood." And I did in that moment.

"It follows that the sense of immortality brings with it an indefinable push to achieve - it is the natural state of all things to achieve - and so it is the knowledge behind natural aggression, not violence as you so often view nature. This natural drive to achieve is too often mistranslated, and in your time intentionally used to conform the masses to highly inefficient goals—harmful goals, by those whose quest for power belies their insanity."

"Jeanette has—that is, Saa-ra's portion," I corrected myself, "has taken me down that road, but this is great stuff for our screenplay... where everything literally begins."

"It is not a disservice to call her by the name she uses in your time."

"Okay. Thanks."

"The cellular programming of immortality awareness is the impetus of a blade of grass pushing through a concrete sidewalk, though as viewed by a fearful man is seen as damaging. Were you to eliminate fear from your motives for only one moment of your unique time, you would see clearly, as a revelation, that aggression-violence is the means of achievement of all things. But that it is destructive only through the eyes of fear."

"We've been talking about that a lot."

"As all things have determined their own quest, when to begin and when to end them, the violent interaction between man and nature, and nature and all species, are part of their agreements to further each other's quest, be this as the food for another or as the survivor. With this understanding, you would realize that the silent knowledge of your immortality could manifest as it was originally intended to act before, by adding fear to your choices of free will, you altered your perceptions. You would recognize that your instincts and your knowledge of your true timeless existence find purpose and application in an apparently limited time frame, through listening to the echoes of your heart. Your heart, which is what you feel at the core of your being when you know yourself, will always tell you the knowledge of the ages, and so what is necessary to be done. Your mind, which holds the ideas of its unique time, will tell you how to apply what you know. Acted upon together, they create a life of acts of heart. This is the most powerful of experiences. You will encounter this lesson shortly."

I knew better than to ask him how this would be. Instead, I said, "I have a basic question: doesn't an experience, any experience, have to be recognized for what it is to be of any use? I mean, what if a child doesn't become aware of their inherent power to create their reality, because they are in the care of those who don't share that belief? More than that," my mouth ran on as the actual point of asking this question emerged, "understanding the true nature of our actions isn't simple. Jeanette is spending a lot of time on that, and I'm trying to get it." I shrugged a "but" to indicate that I was falling short.

"Those who are unaware of their true power have chosen that path to discover the validity of faith in another way. There is always a reason. Those who otherwise remained tethered to the social conformations of their time and place do not, as of yet, have the energy to embrace a new way of thinking. But they will. The Universe is pro-active, never more so than at this time of convergence when a centuries-long lesson may be faced in one life."

"Were we always like this? You know, stupid."

"At another time we will speak of our explorations of your development."

"Mine or mankind's?"

"We will deal with both, for it is your quest to reveal such knowledge."

"You're sending me back now?"

"It is time for school."

I woke up with this phrase, in my mother's voice, cycling in my mind.

⁽¹²⁾I began having teaching dreams before I met Jeanette, but I had no context within which to take them as anything other than stories I made up. Shortly after I met her some of these dreams recurred, and began to make more sense within the contexts she was providing regardless of my initial reluctance to accept any of her metaphysical ideas. They also helped to keep me going in the face her absurd claims...

One series of dreams had me awaken in a wild field of foot-high uncultivated grasses near an undersized industrial harbor. Fixed cranes alongside railway tracks, with grain silos across from them, dotted the shoreline; the ships at the jetty were like the smaller Great Lakes carriers. The weather was always moderate—shirt sleeve stuff—with scattered clouds and a slight breeze that carried the moistened scent of coal soot from the single funnel of a ship at idle. Oriented in this way, I wandered toward the loading docks until a man about my age approached and directed me to follow him.

The dream seemed to be about keeping my focus on the entirety of the scene, for every time I looked away to glimpse my surroundings he disappeared, leaving me standing alone wondering where I should go. Although I met others along the way, all seemingly caught in the same circumstance, our expressions conveyed that we were of no help to one another. My feeling was that I needed to hold my focus while going into the unknown, and that I was not alone.

Feel free to insert this dream a few times anywhere you desire in this work.

⁽¹³⁾When I later asked Jeanette about the split perception of here and there, she said I was in the lessons of Four— a Kabala designation that vibrated to mystery. Those engaged in the four challenge, she said, are seldom known by anyone, even themselves. It is blossoming destiny and wisdom born of trial and it encompasses the unusual, such as double man / double woman experiences she would explain later. The overt evidence of this, she said, was that I saw myself in my dreams. Less obvious indications were signs for her own lessons, such as the woman with the double stroller, the elderly couple, exactly \$20, and the panhandler humming the Trooper song, "Two for the Show."

⁽¹⁴⁾When I awakened, the idea of "achieving" immortality was not at all clear.

Chapter 59 - Greed

I arrived at Jeanette's house the next morning excited to tell her about my dream, but she greeted me with a tearfully warm smile, and a hot cup of coffee on the table. Lipstick on the rim of a second cup told me that Jeanette's coffee was barely touched, as we sat in her two-place kitchen nook. Sliding her cup aside, while I sipped from mine, she told me what had happened.

As usual on weekend mornings, she was pouring a second cup of coffee while having a chat with Kha-lib, and he asked her if she needed it. She said she did not, but she wanted it. Kha-lib asked her why this was, to which she replied with the same reasons any of us would—habit, and the desire to more quickly awaken to the light of day. Kha-lib said she was greedy.

Baffled, Jeanette said there was ample coffee, no schedule delayed, or any act of neglect caused by her having another cup. It was more or less a day in which she could catch up on menial, but necessary tasks.

I was baffled, as well, which wasn't nearly as unsettling as it used to be: to anyone who knew her, Jeanette was anything but greedy. All of her resources had always gone toward her son and daughter first, and from personal experience she regularly chose to buy me (and others) coffee and a pastry ahead of buying anything for herself. If she was a collector of anything, it was ideas.

Jeanette said, "He told me that any practice of want over need was a practice of greed, and that quantity, availability, timing, and the lack of demands of others had nothing to do with it. These are the reasons we use to camouflage the true nature of our actions."

"I don't take things other people need." I said, beginning my defense.

"Perceiving a victim is not a requirement of greed, it is a consequence that doesn't have to be apparent in the moment." She stood up and took her nearly full coffee to the sink. Pouring it down the drain, she said, "The world thinks greed refers to grasping excess. You should think of it as energy spent on the unnecessary when there are only so many moments in a lifetime, and only so much space you really need." She nodded at the cup in my hand: she knew I always had at least one cup before I came over.

I brought it to the sink.

Taking it from my playfully reluctant grasp, she said, "Do the math and you'll see that greedy people also end up throwing something away to make room for their other self-interests." She drained my cup and added it to the dishes she was washing. "The same principle can be applied to cruelty, now that I think about it."

"How so?"

"Define cruelty."

"Taking pleasure in harming something," I said innocently.

"Did you take pleasure in cheating on your wife?" she said casually, rinsing cutlery.

"Of course not. I... I mean, I didn't intentionally create pain for my pleasure," I stuttered.

"Think again; that is precisely what you did. It just wasn't your focus in the moment."

"I was winging it, like most idiots."

Jeanette turned to face me. "If I'm hearing you correctly," she said blandly, leaning against the counter, "hoping you wouldn't get caught in your excess made it a no harm, no foul event, and when you did get caught taking more than you needed, a random act of your penis reduced the transgression to what—an unplanned indiscretion?"

"Yes," I said, stoically.

"The harm you are overlooking came when she learned that you took her trust and stuck it inside someone else. As for winging it, you clipped the wings we all need to fly with someone else—fidelity to shared beliefs."

The allusion was not lost on me: salivating as if I was eating wasabi on rye, I meekly said, "So was I greedy or cruel?"

"Yes," she said. "Let's call Jenny and have lunch at the Greek Palace... on me," she added belatedly.

Off guard, and hearing a literal cheap shot, I peevishly said, "Thanks, but I'm good for it. Ed cut me a check for a thousand before he left."

We picked up Jenny, and on the way to the restaurant for no apparent reason both of the women said they were happy to pay my way; I insisted on stopping at a cash machine. By insisted, I mean that I was driving Jeanette's car so I ignored them.

As I turned into a tight space in front of the bank, I discovered too late that the city was modifying the sidewalk for wheelchair access; concrete forms and assorted construction debris extended eighteen inches from the curb.

Still tired from climbing Cypress, I was pondering whether to leave Jeanette's car partially exposed to traffic when we all noticed an elderly man shuffle to an awkward stop nearby. His walker had become stuck in a crevice between the old cement and the wooden curb form.

In the instant of thinking that I should get out and help him, Jeanette, channeling Kha-lib in his distinctive accent, said, "Are you not going to help him?"

With flagrant emphasis, I said, "I was just going to do that!" Feeling foolish, I leapt out of the car to offer the man a hand, nearly losing Jeanette's door to oncoming traffic in the process. The fellow beamed without inhibition at my risky rush to his aid.

Holding him steady with one hand, I pulled his walker out of the crevice. He thanked me with a brief nod, then without complaint began an in-depth explanation of his plight: recently released from a hospital after a hip operation, he was taking his daily walk of therapy. Looking at the excavation debris on the other side of the road, he said, "I need help going around all of that, as well."

I held nearly his full weight, which wasn't much, while he gingerly stepped off the sidewalk to road level. Making our way past Jeanette's car and across the construction zone at a snail's pace, he continued his monologue like a child revealing a secret so precious that I thought we'd have to prick our fingers to seal a vow of silence before we parted ways...

"My wife doesn't know how far I go," he said, conspiratorially. "She thinks I'm taking sun in front of our apartment, so my rapid recovery is an act of God to her." He looked sideways and winked up at me. "I haven't told her about the help I've been giving God. She'd be frightened I might fall, which is why she isn't with me now."

His conniving charm might have suggested that his chuckles were of triumph, had his eyes not misted in appreciation for the love of a woman who had shared his life for fifty-one years, come October fifteenth.

When I finally let him go, he thanked me and joked that he would have to find another route home, one also out of sight of his apartment window. He chuckled one last time for me, though I dare say not for the last time on a day that he refused to measure a few painful inches at a time. If someone else was lucky, I thought as I trotted back, he would go home the same way.

I used the bank machine and returned to the car.

Barely seated, with my door still ajar, Kha-lib blandly said, "How do you feel?"

"It was great to meet such a gentle man," I said as I put the key into the ignition.

"Do you regret helping him?"

"Of course not," I said, turning to face Jeanette in the back seat.

"Did he mind you helping him?" Kha-lib said.

"Hell no," I said, chuckling. "It was a social occasion for him. He told me about his convalesc—"

"There are times when one needs help," Kha-lib cut me off. "If that man had acted as you have been behaving, he would have been embarrassed and slighted you. This would have robbed you of your joy in helping him, while cheating himself out reliving the memories that sustain him. This is what you do when others offer you their knowledge, friendship, and generosity."

"But I can cover my end today," I said confused.

"That man could have chosen to sit in the sun."

We drove the short distance to the restaurant in silence.

Reaching our usual table at the front window, Jeanette said, under her breath, "Just get over it," as the co-owner, Helena, raised her hand in greeting.

"A large carafe of house red," I said curtly, erasing her warm smile as she was about to greet us from the kitchen doorway.

We took our seats and engaged in small talk until Jeanette made a humorous comment. Jenny laughed from her gut, as was her way, while I chuckled loudly in competition with raised voices at another table. Seizing the opportunity, Jeanette raised her brow, and with a subtle nod said, "That man is stalking himself into realizing how self-importance drives people away."

"How is he doing that?" I dutifully said.

"Helena was not impressed by the customer's attitude, so she hasn't been rushing to his every beck and call. This caused him to be more abrupt about insignificant matters, such as asking to have his water glass filled after he had taken only a sip or two. Based on his date's cringing, I doubt that she is contemplating a lifetime with a man who somehow thinks his purchasing power translates into personal power over a young, Greek woman. She probably knows that imposing a social contract on anyone would translate into imposing one on everyone."

The fun in watching this scene unfold, Jeanette subsequently noted, was that we knew Helena was a personality powerhouse, regularly attested to by her hulking husband's immediate obedience whenever he somehow faltered in his duties as cook. In a musing manner, Jeanette offered that Helena was usually the epitome of decorum in an honestly affable way, and that only a lightning strike or her husband could change that.

Having not seen either dare appear during dinner, I said that regularly running upstairs to help her mother take care of Helena's infant daughter was probably taking its toll on her today.

"I don't think so—a mother knows the look. Helena comes back refreshed from those visits. It was the infant in the restaurant that made her crazy."

"That guy really was a pain in the ass," I chortled.

"No more than I'm sure she's handled many times."

"So what's her problem?"

"Your lightning strike from across the room hit her in the heart."

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Jenny, you, and I enjoyed a growing friendship with her until you effectively stated that you are a customer, and she is your waitress. In that moment, she understood that the considerable time you spent chatting about sailing in Greece, and oohing over her child, whom she regularly brings to us, was a sham. It was all about you."

Perplexed, I said, "We are customers, and she is our waitress."

"Which matters how?" Jeanette's stare opened my mind, and in a dampening moment I understood that I had imposed a social contract on Helena. I did not bother to assess whether I based it on gender or job, or because she was an immigrant. I had presumed I was her superior and unwittingly treated Helena like an indentured servant, not an equal who happened to work in the service industry.

"Shit, I didn't mean it that way. I'm going to straighten things out." I said, sliding my chair out.

Jeanette stopped me with a tap on my hand. "Don't bother. She won't be fooled a second time."

I started to protest, but it lost momentum in my throat: I was embarrassed, and confused that I felt sad; losing a waitress was hardly catastrophic.

"It doesn't take much to lose a great deal," Jeanette said.

My thoughts raced in search of a more meaningful loss, and I thought I found it. "I've ruined your relationship with her."

"That's not your concern," Jeanette said in an offhanded manner. "That's between us."

I knew that such statements were not concluding remarks, but that they were aimed at having me discover what my concern should be; I didn't have far to look. With a queasy feeling, I mentally tallied the number of women I had treated like my servant, before dismissing them. The count was not remotely complete before it struck me that I was slated to be crushed by a relationship when these events came back to me.

"No, it doesn't take much," I said.

When dinner was over and Helena brought the bill, I complimented the meal, which she accepted graciously. I next told Jeanette and Jenny that I would be grateful if they would allow me to pay for all of us.

Jeanette shot me her sketch artist's look, then with a breath of resignation I did not understand, she slid the tab over to me.

"It's not a contrivance about being cheap," I said.

"No it's not," Jeanette agreed, but sadly.

She drove us back to her house, where I declined a coffee and went home to brood over what more I had done incorrectly.

Chapter 60 - Loyalty

Minutes after I arrived, Ed phoned from Winnipeg to tell me that, after one heroic measure resuscitation over which Paul Koenig was thoroughly pissed, he died again, this time for good. I left a message with Jeanette's daughter that I was going out of town, and the next morning I flew to Winnipeg at a cost of about \$750.

We buried Paul and returned to Vancouver a few days later, having said all that could be said to my second family.

The next day, Jeanette and I settled in her upstairs living room where our conversation soon touched on Paul's annoyance at being 'brought back'. Shortly afterwards, I found myself criticizing Ed's lack of interest in esoteric matters, considering his personal experiences and background exposure to it. The fervor with which I presented my views surprised me.

Jeanette was equally surprised at my lack of loyalty to such a good friend, and she wondered aloud if this was how I spoke of her behind her back. Shocked that she could think there was meanness in my observations, I said that it was because of my loyalty that I wanted him to continue learning.

"You want him to learn for selfish reasons," she said. "You need someone to agree with you when you take your stands for ignorance."

"Selfish? I spent nearly all I had going there."

"That was entirely self-indulgent."

"Ya—a party," I scoffed, then forgetting who I was talking to, "You have no way of knowing this, but when we first became friends and I told Ed about my father dying, he said he couldn't imagine what it would be like to lose his dad. I promised then that I would be there for him when

that time came in his life, and I was," I said, missing only the adolescent foot stomp for emphasis.

"Our death practices ritualize morbidity," she said calmly. "You should have recognized at least this much by now, because you know that no one actually dies, and everyone chooses their moment to move on. Our cultural indulgences in grief have burdened the earth with near impenetrable boxes filled with toxic remains rendering plots useless as other than memorials to our self-worth. Our rituals are religious contrivances that gouge the pockets of the living by exploiting their feelings of guilt and remorse."

"Ya, I get that—but I kept my promise."

"It was a promise that could only serve to stand you in a good light." With a shake of her head, she said, "You should be forever grateful that you have a friend who can tolerate you, let alone love you."

"Tolerate?"

"That you live under the graces of a giving friend, then have the audacity to bad mouth him when he doesn't do what you think he should do, is example enough of your misguided sense of loyalty. That you think so highly of yourself that your presence was required at his father's funeral is incredible, and your inconsideration monumental."

"In-con-sid-er-ation?" I sputtered.

"You were self-importantly spending his money under the guise of practicing generosity days before you placed a further financial burden on him, at a time when he had burdens enough. Is he not faced with keeping you in money again, probably at the expense of getting away in his time of need?"

My stomach fell to my knees, and I said I had to leave. The day was already too full for me. "I'll see you when you're ready."

I had no idea how I was going to face Ed when I got home. I felt that I must, but as neither he nor I ever apologized for our lives to anyone, let alone to each other, I had no idea where to begin. Then I realized he didn't see things the way Jeanette had explained them. It took me two years to deliver my apology.

Chapter 61 - Nantucket Sleigh Ride

Two days later, Jeanette could still see the accumulative self-pity and sadness within me, but she did not interfere with my grieving over multiple circumstances. I was attentive, did not interject my version of humor, and for lack of a better word was generally uninspired in my relatively uncluttered thinking. I also noticed, but did not comment on, her subdued demeanor.

After hours of observing my sterile mood through her own, over late afternoon coffee Nolan's, Jeanette said, "Your assemblage point is becoming accustomed to a new position. We need to push it now that it's on the move."

"Go ahead," I said, expecting to be smacked by a comment about fixing my assemblage point in wallowing.

"Not here," she said.

We drove to her house in a delicate silence: Jeanette looked like she was 'working' as a welcome calm came over me. Without consciously focusing in this way, her lessons about my personal experiences, and the beliefs and behaviors they gave rise to, began lining up to mankind's four core personalities and three basic flawed habits. Her "essence" lessons on entitlement, generosity, greed, cruelty, and bigotry found hovering spots: I recognized these as elements of mankind's misery, but their bonding stimuli was not apparent.

As we pulled into her driveway, these patterns of behavior faded into the scents and sounds of summer's song, and I understood as an observation that my grief and self-pity had been put in their place. I felt empty—not as a heavy loss, but lighter—in preparation for filling the space newly available. Jeanette had often said, "Talking ruins it," when I was having unusual experiences, so I remained silent as we entered the house, poured two glasses of lemonade, and settled in the living room. She stretched out on the couch, and I sank into the overstuffed chair with that f 'n green pillow behind my back.

Taking a small sip, around the rim of her glass Jeanette said, "I've often told you not to be concerned, because things will fall into place when it's time. Now is that time... define fear."

As I had hoped, the light-headedness that sometimes accompanied heightened awareness was again in play, and trusting it allowed me to answer without hesitation.

"It is a natural emotion that's meant to be used as positive impetus, but when our self-image becomes involved all bets are off; the camouflage of reasoning allows us to hide the true nature of what we might do from ourselves."

"Its manifestations?"

"You can't be angry unless you're afraid; fear turned inward is depression, outward is rage, lingering creates confusion, craving it creates apprehension, wallowing becomes obsession, and adjusting to it makes poor choices seem reasonable under the circumstance. In the modality of our times," I grinned, "we are less the originators than we are targets."

"Does it make sense that you went back to warfare to reclaim the losses your self-image interpreted as cowardice in El Salvador?" she said without inflection.

"Perfect sense," I replied blandly.

"Does it make sense that you went back because you fit in there, and not here?"

"Also perfect."

"Does it make sense that most combatants glimpsed the true nature of courage?"

"I don't... shit—" I said, caught off guard by this idea. "That might be a huge part of what secretly silences them when they come home," I said as an epiphany.

"Set aside your personal places of concern; where is fear for warrior societies?"

With another of my secrets spoken as if I was reading washing instructions, and Salvador, Beirut, and Argentina out of play, my Hunter's landscape was clear: words flowed like arrows, without caveat or consideration.

"Subtly and contagiously, fear covers the entire spectrum of their lives. From digesting their first parental threats as a way to live, to their last plea for forgiveness as they die, they are told what to think and why to think it. In between, they are continually made wary by innocuous commercials about potentially deadly symptoms, weather reports sponsored by cancer protection creams, and allergy medicines sparing us from the hazards of our natural world. We can't see how our indoctrinations have us accepting illogical circumstances by way of a fine weave of culturally contrived expectations." I took a deep breath, but not to ponder: "Our vigilance has no borders: our days are filled with so many fabricated concerns that we are unable to focus beyond them. To cope, some people camouflage their angst in faux acts of selflessness, deep bottles, or retail therapy, while others overtly maintain the continuity of fear by beating their wives, kids, and dogs. A warrior nation's history is haunted by endless bureaucratically contrived dares they have taken, and subsequently conjured into memorials to the imitation courage they required to justify the horrors their institutions paid homage to, all for later use. If they, or we, try to break the cycle, we face losing our jobs and friends... our fit in the continuity of our culture is lost."

Surprised at my lucidity, but not indulging in it this one time, I effortlessly pictured how the underlying elements of fear had caused entire cultures to confuse what they wanted with what they thought was necessary. Then they took what they were told they were entitled to, or had to defend—especially rights and freedom—which is precisely what they were destroying. I knew this because substituting piety for patriotism equaled me: these were the behavioral bonding strands I had experienced.

"We are blind to how recklessly irresponsible we can be. Shit..." I whispered.

"Go with it all the way. It's time," she said softly.

"My world is a consequence of all of these things."

"Deeper," she said quietly.

I knew exactly what she wanted.

"When I came back from the wars, everything and nothing had changed. My friends looked ahead, I looked around corners. Girlfriends heard birds singing, I was listening for them to go quiet. I couldn't walk in a park unless it was on paved walkways. Strangers speaking in the corner of the bar were talking about me. I saw people ducking into doorways, not shopping."

"Crush it."

"Without fear, generosity of spirit shines through in all of us. We are wired to act properly. It's our quest."

"And with fear?"

"You can't appreciate anything—always grasping at illusions. At best, you can only pay it the lip service of a second-hand conviction."

"How do you know this?"

"I don't appreciate a thing you've ever done for me," I said surprisingly, but unapologetically. It just was.

"Does wired to act properly mean we are inherently good?"

"It means we want to be."

"The distinction?"

"Lies in that action."

"Other personal manifestations of fear that may apply everywhere?"

I felt a surge in my thoughts, as if I was surfing a Boston Whaler down a sweeping swell, leaving me hanging onto the gunwales of outdated beliefs as the truth dragged me into its depths.

"Go with it," Jeanette prompted me, which I did lest I lose contact with the elements of the vast Stalker's understanding the word fear would forever after trigger in my thoughts.

"If an act of generosity requires acknowledgement, it's a bribe; if you're annoyed at personal probing, you're hiding a secret about yourself from yourself, which makes your sincerity seem real to you, and in turn justifies your anger. Deviousness inexorably aligns with only your goals, regardless of how cleverly your distractions construct an easier future for others, and pettiness is always about insecurity. We've covered cruelty."

"Hold the garden in your mind." Jeanette allowed me half a second before she said, "You saw the end, and you became it, because there was no other way for you to recognize the elements and progression of self-destruction. You now intimately know how and why good people can do remarkably stupid things."

"I've been working at it..."

"Of course." Her gesture waived my comment aside. "You still have too much concern stored in this room. Let's sit in the sun."

"I'm not sure I should move," I said blandly. My ears had begun buzzing, my focus had become shallow, and I had to think about moving my legs.

"You have no choice," Jeanette said, helping me up.

Shuffling outside to her aluminum deck chairs, I offhandedly said, "This is great stuff for our screenplay. I've had a teaching dream that will work, as well."

Jeanette lined me up with the chair, and with a nudge allowed gravity to seat me. Leaning low on the armrests to look directly into my eyes, she said, "There is no screenplay."

"Pardon me?"

"You don't need that incentive anymore." She sat next to me. "That was your old life. We're not writing it." She gazed out over the water.

I was thoroughly confused, a grave anomaly in my current state of mind, as she said, "She also asked me to destroy my book."

"But you've finished it."

"It has served its purpose for me."

"Did you do it?"

"Of course."

"Then you have nothing left," I said blankly.

"I have everything, as do you," she said, looking at me as if I was out of my mind... which I was, but in a good way.

"What am I supposed to do now?" I said ambiguously, as the world became a curiously crisper place.

"The answer is about to come to you," Jeanette said, quietly.

I watched as the water, then the entire vista, began to ride a subtle rhythm with a pleasant precision.

"I haven't a clue where to focus," I said feeling as if I had inhaled a cubic yard of nitrous oxide in preparation for dental work.

"I'll get you started," a hollow voice said beside me. "When you defeat your personality, pure understandings become the assumptions behind your every action. This is the point at which you become."

Feeling the strongest urge to face her, I turned and said, "Become what?" and my intriguing world froze: Jeanette was glowing translucently, her features vague within a crystalline shimmer out of which came the word, "Whole."

In that moment I saw her as an inseparable aspect of everything, but infinitely more powerful than anything, because uncountable lifetimes of self-stalking were the stuff of her glow. I closed my eyes against the vastness of the abstraction she had become within my first pure moment of suspended disbelief... a trap door opened beneath my expanding awareness plunging me between atrocious cataclysms and splendid achievements.

Looking between these choices—I knew they were choices—I understood that my energetic vision of Jeanette had stopped my internal dialogue, and the bridge of reason I had stood on all my life had collapsed. Everything the world of average people had told me to believe began to disintegrate as elements of "the" Stalker's assumption that Jeanette had been leading me to embrace coalesced...

I *saw* energy, and *knew* that the earth was alive, inconceivably wondrous, and that we were guests. A pulsing stream of energy emerged from the shimmering forest of Stanley Park: transitioning into a human form, it absorbed the secondary energy of a new personality that then embraced dimensional root assumptions, mass translations of iconic symbols, and adopted

reason as the filter that allowed it to explore the metaphors of its new existence. Masterful and mandatory, they were illusions all.

The structure became transparent.

Beneath these indoctrinations, I saw a fine weave of specialized expectations and focused uncertainties upon which we nurtured our cultures. Between these threads lay the meticulously shaped silences that had delicately directed me to believe only what others had made apparent—insisted upon, while other options were hushed. I understood how my continuity of reason had been hijacked, and my conscience compromised by a relentless pressure to conform to the subtleties of insidious commands. I also knew that I had never made a deliberate decision, because they could only be made from outside of the conformity of here, where self-interest was integral to all of my interpretations. They had to be made from where my fall was taking me... from there, where the concept of "self" was irrelevant.

My first real decision was at hand. I was no longer a man having an acute spiritual experience. I was a spirit engaging the cores of being human. I always had been.

"Fuck me," slipped out from between lips that felt like mine.

"No thanks," a voice replied.

The unexpected wit refocused me, and in flash-focus I glimpsed why Stalkers might have twice used the word Dreamer to define opposite conditions of human behavior... it wasn't reasonable; they had a sense of humor. And they needed it to exist in a living dilemma where to fall through the cracks of custom, and break the artificial continuity of reason, was to banish the source of unpublished fears to the world of delusion. But they also knew people had to be ready for that journey, and what made so many of us ready was to be badly broken. It was our rule, not theirs. A sense of fulfillment washed through me—not completion—more like Act 1, because I was broken...

To my left, the image of a black bird gliding into an upright stance resolved into an elderly version of me watching his life play back in metaphor. His stance was solid, but not defiant; there was extraordinary depth to the weathered eyes that had excommunicated the wraith who had stolen people's light until they saw him for what he was.

As a simultaneous thought, I knew he had embraced his journey and mastered the cornerstones of personal evolution in the physical arena: moving his assemblage point had freed him from his conditioning, allowing him to embrace his Minimal Chances and distil his behavior into essential acts, then the Conditional Death of his personality had opened the floodgates to unimaginable knowledge. His aura exuded mystery and beckoned challenge. He couldn't get enough. His heart was full. His spirit soared.

He was whole.

The vision melted into a massive, golden-brown bear placidly lumbering into the translucent forest across from me: knowledge was following the path of providence to wisdom that power designed with every stride... my focus was irresistibly pulled to the decision on my right.

A frail version of me was wasting away in an alcoholic haze, communicating by obscene codes familiar only to those who had been present at the inception of his torments: he had become a reflection of his experiences, not a product of their assessment. So immersed in self was he that no offer of help could penetrate its depths. He had continued to abuse himself, and his increasingly tiny world, to such a degree that his recovery had passed the point of change. Only his death would stem the damage. It was nearby; rheumy eyes pleaded for this mercy. His heart was broken—the spirit voiceless.

He was empty.

Myriad manifestations of the devastations that had felled him swirled into a timeless view where they were transformed into enlightened explorations by those who had not fallen, for all of those who had. The cycle was complete. Nothing was wasted. The free-will design of our inevitable recovery stunned me with its immaculate efficiency.

In this peculiar moment of... pending, I knew that I was ignorant beyond expression, and yet I felt wise because my view embraced the duality of a reasonable man losing his mind to a pure understanding: a piercing humility washed through me. I was *seeing* what emissaries simply know as their root assumptions about mankind's every condition, attribute, and foible. There were no words to express the awesome scope of instantaneous perception and comprehension available within the cognition of the Stalker. It is the view of Spirit looking upon us, from among us.

With little more than a few words, or an ultra-comprehensive glance, they will *know* the sons and daughters of affluence and poverty, and *see* which became generous and which miserly. And though the wizened cautious will not stand out as much as the idiotically certain, the manipulators of commerce, who trade on empty promises at artificial premiums, will easily be found sitting in their steel and glass high-chairs complacently gazing down upon their prey. Even the slipperiest merchants of death and mega-manufacturers of treachery will be effortlessly tracked into their luxury caves, because slithering through the public's trust leaves a wide trail.

Our violations of other species will also be an unspeakable torment to the emissaries, and now to me, as I claimed as my own knowledge how mankind had reasoned idiocy into a way of life. We were barely touching the trailing edge of rationality. We were functionally insane.

Triggered into action, my ever-vigilant ego searched for a personal exemption, and the accumulated fears I had just so intimately identified manufactured a vague anomaly in my journey: Jeanette's personality was a necessary ruse, but not because her story was too fantastic to be embraced by a rational person. In reality, she was manipulating my crappy assumptions to align me to the catalytic momentum of a Universal intervention—an unthinking force that did precisely what it was told, according to the nature of acts I had barely begun to grasp. More than this, I knew that Phillip could not intervene, complacency was not possible, and I could not subvert or pervert the space I shared with everyone and everything, because the unseen hand that guided me knew all there was to know about me.

A bolt of terror seized my chest. I knew what she was up to...

The elastics of my conditioned life accelerated me away from a future of cowering in the presence of a teaching emissary, lest she impeccably decide that I was no longer the hunter of knowledge, but its prey. There was no reason why she couldn't relearn How to Teach to the point of taking my life, while making her ready to teach the real emissaries. She had said as much—three times. In her terms, this would be an impeccably impressive evolutionary lesson about me learning how to learn. I was expendable, still and again.

As the most lucid moment of my life became fixed in an elite position of awareness, my assemblage point returned me to the fog of a cumbersome world with my *seeing* experience intact, but only the tailings of my fear-fuelled realization lingered; my focus on "self" had sabotaged the bridge back to reason.

At a complete loss for what to do, I tittered as if from embarrassment at my recent utterance... whenever that was.

Jeanette continued to gaze placidly across the water.

"This journey of m-mine," I cleared my throat, "it was designed so that I would be the last person on the face of the earth to believe you, and then that I'd have no choice, wasn't it?"

"Not quite the last person." She turned to face me. "You do understand that it could be no other way?"

"I do now."

Turning away, she casually said, "Did you *see*?"

"I did, so I know why you couldn't explain it. I also know where I am, in your terms."

Leaning away to imply disbelief, she said, "And that has not shaken you?"

"It suited my expectations."

Jeanette examined my expression for cynicism. Finding none, she sat silently. If I didn't know better, I would have thought she was holding back tears.

The silence stretched.

Finally, I said, "There was something scary at the end."

"You must have focused on yourself—on your doubt and suspicion."

"I guess. I mean, I'm feeling stranded somehow. Maybe threatened is a better word."

"There is no going back to being ignorant, and you don't know enough to act independently," she said succinctly, then she chirped a sudden sentiment, and quickly sniffled the moment into an awkward breath she did not explain.

Had I eliminated self from the moment, I may have pieced together the underlying nature of our exchange, as in retrospect I believe Jeanette had: my failure to be moved by a profound awareness meant I was still a part of its contents. Somehow, I had *seen* and still clung to the crumbling bridge of reason. As it was, I guessed that her chirp was of appreciation for Spirit having thrown me into the deep end with her, now that we were both alone. Kind of.

Chapter 62 Volume 2 Epilogue

Zzzz... I was standing inside a log cabin of modern construction, when I became aware that I was dreaming. A man was sitting at a writing desk with his back to me; he closed the book he was reading as I approached, turned sideways, and said, "Look."

I knew that I had met him countless times, and that I was important to him: I trusted him implicitly, but felt little else.

I followed his gaze.

On the far wall were two projections. In one, Jeanette was weeping silently in the darkness of her bedroom. In the other, I was sleeping on my futon.

I wished I didn't drool.

"It has been an excellent start," the man said with satisfaction. "You have seen the ways in which you are a cheap, petty, devious, greedy, cruel, unappreciative, dangerous, and piously egocentric bigot. All you are missing is the recognition, and acceptance, that if you were you patient and wealthy you would be a despot masquerading as an affable man. You have met many such people."

"You seem pleased about it."

"It was your design. The line is remarkably thin when you can't assess the true nature of an event, is it not?"

"I don't know what it is about doing that; my brain cramps at the mention of assessing essences. I know this means I'm nuts, but..."

"We will deal with that aspect of your training in your dreaming lessons. The point is that you represent the many who struggle through reason to express their hearts; it is beyond their grasp how poorly they can behave. Now you know what this is like, and you can free yourself because you can recognize fear in its infancy and dismiss it."

The man pointed toward Jeanette, as she settled into a dream state. "Yesterday, she learned that you will enter the third core of your training on perpetual guard, and afraid of what she might say, because on the best of nights you will go to bed baffled to the bone."

"And on the worst?"

"That is up to you. She is not without empathy for your plight, for she has endured your lessons as well as her own," he pointed at Jeanette, "and has now wept the last of her personal concern for you. She will no longer barter with the truth. None of us do, not with anyone, not ever. It will be the way things are in her waking world, and a lesson you cannot avoid now that you have begun losing the human form." He glanced my way. "She will pursue your freedom with unwavering intent."

"She bartered? I know something happened... with Josh?"

"She will tell you when it is time."

"I hear that a lot from you guys. Who are you, by the way?"

"Another portion of you, a personality that is now part of you, knew me as Joshua. This inner knowledge will sustain you for a while longer, and rise when it is time." He nodded toward the images. "We will also show you to yourself directly, when it is required, and offer what help we can without interfering with your chosen path of progression."

I followed his gaze as the images swirled gently into a single depiction of Jeanette and me driving in a small red car. A road sign passed through the passenger side window.

Salida, 3 kilómetros.

I awakened thinking pleasant thoughts about my time in Spain, but they were fouled by a sense of apprehension; I remembered most of my dream, just not why I should be on edge about it. I got up and steeled myself for another verbal beating while showering, flippantly concluding, as I dried myself, that the worst that could happen was what—maybe dying? Been there, done that. I had the T-shirt.

I cackled: somehow, it wasn't as funny as it once was.

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Volume 3: The Fifth Intercession

Chapter 63 - Hearing

I went for a run in Stanley Park, with the additional intention of trying to hear Phillip as well as to become more fit: by this time in my apprenticeship, I jogged almost every morning before seeing Jeanette.

During these runs, I developed a pattern of thought utilizing the isolation experienced by distance runners to narrow my focus to the sound of my footfalls. It usually took half a kilometer for my thoughts to thoroughly merge with the rhythm, and another half to split that rhythm into two aspects. On my left stride, I tried to soften my focus on the individual thumps, and hear them more as a pair of bookends. On the right stride, I nudged my focus into the silence between footfalls. After a short while, this regularly created a third point of view that listened, like an overseer, to my two thoughts. I imagined this was Phillip's point of view, but he didn't feel like saying anything until I had earned it.

On this day, when I reached the overview stage my footfall thumps became more distant than usual, and my visual perception expanded into a kind of broad stare. When a chuckling jogger passed by, I realized I had slowed to a crawl and was verbalizing the idea that there were

degrees of silence, just as there were degrees of volume. Laughing at myself, not the idea—I liked that—I decided to bring earphones in the future, so that onlookers would have an explanation for my behavior.

I turned around, only then noticing that I had shuffled past my usual mark by a considerable distance, and I headed home at a leisurely pace imagining that Phillip's "voice" had leaked the levels of silence idea to me.

I took my time showering, felt refreshed as I towed off, and damned near perky by the time I drove to Jeanette's; I told her about my morning jog, the separation of focus, and the redefining of silence.

"The next logical step toward hearing Phillip," she said, as if this was logical, "is to ask a question of the observer. Did you feel like there was something pending?"

"I did, but I thought it was about something I was supposed to do."

"It was," she said, laughing.

"Why can't Phillip just say what he wants to say," I said, chagrined, "without running me into the ground? He's already done that."

Slowly shaking her head, Jeanette said, "I warned you that being given an experience to prove the existence of Intent could only lead you to make more demands of them. I also told you that they determine what's required of you, and when, and at—," she closed her eyes. A short pause later, she said, "You are demanding proof of abilities in advance of developing them, in the same way that the average person demands proof of their aberrations without putting out effort to find them. The preparatory work is required."

The tone and formality of her remark informed me that she had channeled this answer, but not from whom: it sounded like Saa-ra.

Leaning slightly toward me, she said, "Your efforts are not about hearing him, per se. They're about controlling your thoughts, and to eventually stop them. We'll deal with what that means soon. For now," she settled back, "it's enough to know that control aids in your general awareness of who, what, and where you really."

"Uh huh."

"Do you not care about clarity?"

"I forgot—what's with the edge today; not feeling well?"

"I'm feeling fine. You are in a new phase of learning, and I am in a new phase of learning how to teach," she said pointedly.

"By alienating me?" I quipped... kind of.

"That would be your choice. What's to come is complex enough without either of us being concerned with how we feel about it."

I thought better of commenting on menstrual cycles.

The next day was a rare sunny and windless manifestation for Vancouver, and we sat on her balcony chatting about nothing serious. After ten minutes, we fell silent. By now I was comfortable with this circumstance—Jeanette was doing something internally—so I thought I would experiment with splitting the sounds of the day into separate thoughts.

I had barely finished having this thought when Jeanette said, "You must try to hear."

"Hear what?" I said, thinking I was missing something.

"No—try to Hear, with a capital H. Now," she commanded me.

"I was just... never mind."

I cleared throat, and then my mind, as if I was beginning to jog; without the focusing motion of running I soon self-consciously sought direction by telling her what thoughts persisted.

"Quiet," she said, curtly cutting me off in mid-sentence.

Annoyed by the return of her officious demeanor, I reluctantly did what I was about to do anyway...

First focusing on the sounds of water lapping on the shore, fifty feet away, I isolated it from the discordant shrills of seagulls. More easily than when I was jogging, I quickly found the dead air between the two...

The sloshing of remnant waves shredding on the rocky beach took me into their embrace, and I began to ride a small crest as it broke, then curled underneath itself. I held my breath. Tumbling within the backwash, my perception of the sound's source changed to beneath me, then it encompassed me; I became part of the current making its way back to open sea.

An instant later, I was in the middle of a huge expanse of water—a ripple beginning a journey to shore. I began to hear words softly interwoven within the molecules of the water. As they became more distinct, I focused on an uncoiling articulation that seemed as innocuous as a mid-ocean swell, yet as unstoppable as an evolving tsunami. The sensation of motion was part of the voice that was telling me a story about the continuity of all things, beginning with the emergence of an idea traveling toward fulfillment, which was a conclusion of sorts but not an ending, because it became the basis of another journey.

I understood that the outbound wave I had ridden was changed by its journey, but it had not lost its identity, nor would it as we rolled toward another experience, gaining strength in an undisclosed purpose. I knew there was one, but I had difficulty grasping that it was the journey itself, because the abstract tale did not wait for me to comprehend it.

Slowly, because I was still listening, I told Jeanette that I was hearing a story about the birth of an experience-idea, and the route of an event. I paused to organize my thoughts: the water-words moved in concentric circles, as if a pebble had been thrown into a pond, then my perceptions ascended to a lofty height, before accelerating toward a distant shore. In the next few seconds, the flat monotone monologue adopted the characteristics of a personality. I recognized the voice as the pragmatist I had "argued with" in my mind most of my life, when I was silently rehearsing speeches or excuses.

With precise English elocution, the voice continued its allegorical tale about the omnidirectional and circuitous nature of evolution. Incoming events overlapped and folded into each other, to share experiences during the outbound, restorative journey.

In a near comatose calm by the time the voice stopped, I cleared my throat to tell Jeanette everything I had heard, but she interrupted me to say, "I don't think they meant to torture you." She touched my forehead, and I felt the sting of a burn.

I am fair-skinned, so without an SPF cream rated in the mid-three thousands it takes little time for me to look like a boiled lobster: between walking through deserts and ocean sailing, skin cancer was certainly in my future.

In the minutes to follow, we discussed the ideas I had heard in practical terms... how my employment history demonstrated that I had evolved ideas through experience until I understood an arena of thought, then I moved on using this arena as a new foundation. It was an unusually succinct exchange, filled with the nuance of the assumptions we now shared—Stalker's and metaphysical—as were triggered by the precision of our articulation. Like shouting "fire" to a firefighter, or "gun" to a cop, the words Intent and momentum, for example, were much larger concepts than they might sound to other people.

I commented on this perception-filled chat, to which Jeanette said I had received a huge gift; the way I had learned about the progression of momentum, based on the free will design of

continuity, had included experiencing it. This had saved us both days, if not weeks, of speaking far less efficiently *about* evolutionary journeys. She added that I would experience other forms of Hearing, which would not be imbued with the same qualities of depth I had experienced today. She could not say whether they would be deeper, only different.

I asked her why there were other ways of Hearing.

"Think of your experience as a mid-plane between the simple voice that gave you driving directions, and a vision of such vibrational complexity that if it were translatable into three dimensional terms it would take years to teach what you had known in an instant. Loosely speaking," she said as a thought passed behind her eyes, "the physical translation of this kind of communications rests on a principle we discussed about energy efficiency—the Economy of Action."

"Try tightening that up a bit."

Flashing a grin, she said, "Everything you experience in the physical plane is an energetic manifestation of an idea. You have translated these ideas through the root assumptions of physical reality, your experiences, and personal store of knowledge. It follows that the more bountiful your experiences and knowledge, the more accurately you can bring complex ideas into three-dimensional expression. This is why you are going to experience the gamut of what the emissaries will be able to know, and how they *know* it. Phillip is telling me this right now, by the way." She nodded to herself. "You still need to put out the effort to achieve these experiences... he says Hearing and Channeling are not one way streets. They are aspects of the emissary's mystical arts and practices, and necessary steps to ultimately receiving little formal directions, in terms the average person would recognize as such."

"Meaning omens?"

"And *knowing*, *seeing*, the Art of Dreaming, and by following the momentum of their own intentions."

"What does that mean?"

"My first lesson in following the momentum of my intentions came when I was shopping. Saa-ra explained that because we were already of the same energy—like one person—without thinking in the traditional sense I could precisely do what I needed to do. The demonstration was that she told me to go shopping right away, to take only what I normally would when I left the house, and to buy whatever I needed until I felt that I had enough for the time being. I had no idea how much money I had, but I followed her directions and the bill came to exactly what I had in my purse. She said this wasn't a trick. The part of my awareness that is firmly attached to Saa-ra knew I would be shopping, and what I would buy when I went to the cash machine the day before. I was following the momentum of my greater intentions, in this case to learn this lesson, without consciously having to do anything. It was my first lesson in an exercise she called 'Walk and be Led' to show me how easily it could work."

"What happened to free will and the potential of outside forces interfering with the demonstration?"

"The lesson was purposefully constructed to be as inevitable as anything can be. If something had interfered, it would have happened at another time. In the same way," she said, thoughtfully, "your greater intentions to learn about warfare from the inside out took you to places where other's free will would have interfered, and you *knew* you should stop or turn away."

"How did that work when we had lunch—when you asked me to take whatever money of yours I thought we'd need?"

"It was a demonstration that showed both of us that you are connected to Phillip in the same way I connected to Saa-ra."

"But I didn't know that?"

"And now you do—there is much more evidence, and practical lessons to come about intentions and momentum."

"I did all of that traveling in dangerous places specifically because...?"

"Kha-lib told you; you are on a journey to complete Phillip's physical cycle."

"What has learning the details of the emissaries' talents got to do with that?"

"He also said you would introduce the emissaries?"

"That made no sense. I haven't met any... except you."

"I don't think he meant who they are." She smiled slyly.

"What then?"

"Precisely; what they are, is more the point," she said, enigmatically.

"Huh?"

"I'll give you a hint: If you know the how of things," she said into my dull expression, "you can also know the what of things."

Having no idea what she was getting at, I said, "Does this mean you're going to explain how Hearing works?"

She hesitated, then said, "You're almost at the point where we can deal with the mechanics of Hearing and Channeling, but there's an experience you need to have first. From it, you will be able to claim a broader lesson as your own knowledge—the Economy of Action again," she grinned.

"Cool."

"That's it... cool?"

Confused, I said, "It *is* cool," as if she thought I was kidding.

"And your experience with Hearing today?"

"Very cool."

Jeanette lowered her head; I thought she was topping up on information.

Chapter 64 - The Economy of Action

Moments later, Jeanette said, "Apprentices benefit immeasurably from what the Essenes called the Economy of Action their mystical abilities allowed, and these abilities are based on learning to let go."

"Let go of what this time?" I said, fighting off the urge to laugh at a memory.

"Let go of everything average people think matters, to focus outside of the influences of self. This includes reading the continuity of events, identifying omens, embracing *knowings*, and ascertaining the nature of other's beliefs from their words and actions."

"An example of this economy would be what?"

"I'm surprised you don't remember," she said dubiously.

"I remember it was part of how a commune in your book taught their children: I guess I was really asking for an example that would be relevant to me now." I shrugged. "It didn't seem important then."

"Whatever just came to your mind will likely do the trick... it's in the timing," she explained, as I opened my mouth to defer. "Trust me, and don't leave anything out; considerate it a lesson that has found its place in the designs of your intentions, and the timing of my abilities

to deliver it. I'm still learning, as – you - can - see," she said intentionally stumbling, as if she was new to channeling.

Acquiescing, I told her that Ed had moved to Toronto in 1978, leaving behind a new house and home province of Manitoba to a brief marriage. I was recently separated and itching for adventure, as well. After spending \$100 a day each, for two months on entertainment, late night television movies became the norm... the kind with low budget commercials for small businesses like parachuting schools.

After watching one of these, I declared that I was going to make the two-hour journey the next morning, and jump out of a plane. Ed knew that I meant it, and without hesitation said. "If I don't go, you'll never let me forget it."

Driving onto the jump site, we saw an instructor "land" on a barn roof, and double-time down its steep slope before his chute collapsed.

We thought it was a neat trick.

Ground training took three exhausting hours before four of us went for lunch in a nearby town. Going down the long driveway, we saw a student jumper hanging in a tree at the edge of the jump zone. Looking up, we saw another student on his way to join him.

"Tricky winds," Ed said.

Lunch was light, our conversation consisting mostly of one-liners about short legs and falsetto voices. When we returned, we were outfitted amid light-natured banter that entertained the jumpmaster with wedding night remarks of anticipation. By the time we were ready, we were barely able to walk to the plane; our muscles trembled from the rigorous landing practice of jumping off a high platform into straw, in the noonday heat.

Cramping, but grinning like fools as we gathered around the plane, the instructor said, "Who wants to be first?"

"Me," I said evenly.

"Good—you're last in," he said, "Now, I want you all to remember this," he said with authority.

The other trainees took their eyes off me.

"After talking yourselves into driving out here, and punishing yourselves in the practice barn, when you're battling seventy mile-an-hour winds to get into position on the strut, and your feet fly out from under you, try to remember why you are up there . . . let go!"

Jeanette laughed a polite spurt, then she asked me what happened next.

"The point's been made," I said.

"Yours has," she replied. So I carried on.

With no door to block my view, I could see that the trainees in the trees had been rescued, and I reveled in the knowledge that I had claimed the top spot in an unspoken challenge with Ed: only one of us could jump first.

At altitude, the instructor signaled for me to get ready; I inched into the air blast, assumed the proper position, and went over what was about to happen. Over the jump zone, the instructor would tap me on the thigh, I would simultaneously spring slightly upwards, using my ankles only, and let go of the strut. "Arch thousand," I would say aloud to remind me to spread myself out in the cosmos. "Two thousand" would cause me to anticipate the tug of the static line. "Three thousand" would lead to a sudden jerk, which was supposed to be followed by "check thousand," to remind me to look up and make sure my canopy was fully deployed with no twisted lines. After a breath-taking, silent ride down, I would turn into the wind to slow my ground speed, put my feet together, bend my knees, and gracefully crumple into a shock-absorbing roll.

Having done all of this perfectly, (I was a good gymnast when I was a kid) I would use the momentum of my roll to bring me lightly back to my feet, then I would smoothly haul on a single shroud to collapse the chute, lest a gust of wind tug... the bastard smacked me so hard that I leapt off the strut like I was snake bit.

"Arch thousand!" I shouted loud enough to be heard in the next county, or so Ed said later.

Immediately, and to my surprise, I heard the crack of a mainsail snapping an unintentional jibe, and my head snapped back as though I was in a fifty mile-an-hour ass-ender.

"Fuck thousand," I groaned from a mixture of pain and gratitude, because the chute had deployed properly.

Realizing I would better appreciate my slow descent to earth without a searing pain ripping at my groin, I reached down to reposition the cradle straps. As I did this, the pressure on the edges that were threatening to squeeze my genitals into a fiery brew increased dramatically; I exclaimed my displeasure with my last full breath, as I began doing a chin-up from the main canopy straps.

"Pull left!" I heard from the tiny speaker in my helmet.

From the ground, it probably looked as though I was overwhelmed by the vista that instructors knew first timers felt. Confirmation of this, to my ground instructor's view, would have been my county-wide squeal of delight, which would also explain why I was deaf to his radioed instructions.

"Turn into the wind; you're going too fast over the ground," he said into his microphone.

Looking up, because this had a minor effect of relieving the pressure on my nuts, I saw Ed plummet from the plane. It was a gorgeously unique perspective, and I watched until his chute opened and he started drifting.

"Turn into the wind!"

Ya, ya—hold by balls for me buddy.

Floating in unusual freedom, my arms began to sear more harshly than my legs still burned from landing practice.

"Can you hear me—turn. Relax and pull the left shroud!"

The straps were cutting off blood to my legs even as they sawed away at my groin, but I dared not stop reaching upwards—I convinced myself that I would fall through the butt straps if I moved them.

An interesting diversion occurred about this time: Ed's chute came into view without me having to look up. Then he passed me. I despaired to think I was actually going up on a thermal, such was the difference in our rates of descent.

"Stop gawking and pull the left shroud!" brought my focus back to the instructor, whom I only then realized had sized us for our chutes at a time when Ed and I were on a symbiotic roll. Distracted, the instructor had mixed them up. I was more than thirty pounds lighter than Ed, which explained why I was coming down like a cotton ball suspended over a candle, while he fell like pigeon dung toward a quarry: to be a little short of the drop zone was to land in the trees. To be very short was to land in a farmer's stony field.

I looked down to see what my long landing would be like.

"Turn left, turn left—no... shit. Tuck! Tuck! Tuck!"

Nearing and crossing the ground at surprising speeds, I performed a final, monumental chin-up, barely managing to tuck my legs into my chest to clear the barbed-wire fence that surrounded a cornfield. As I had anticipated, but could do nothing about, there was no shock-absorbing

spring left in my legs. I pretty much landed squarely on my ass doing about ten miles per hour vertically, but twenty miles per hour laterally: tricky winds, indeed. Gusty too...

Angular momentum pitched my head backwards onto the hard ground between the shock-absorbing rows of high corn, where the sun burst into a thousand pinpoints of light.

I wasn't unhappy about being dead.

"Pull your left—pull any shroud. Collapse the chute!" the distant voice of God said in my head, as my full chute dragged me backwards across mother earth toward what I presumed would be into the receiving area for the misguided. My concern still lying elsewhere, I finally let go of both main straps, to place the leather cradle strapping where it belonged. The relief was exquisite...

Only then did I think that, "Collapse the chute! Collapse the chute! was a strange thing for God to be saying: with leaden arms, I lay back to marvel at the rabbit's-eye view of the stalks passing by at jogging speed.

"Pull – on – a – fucking – shroud!"

Okay—not God.

Not dead.

Pull me, Fred. I'm resting.

After an indeterminate distance, I tried to reach up to grasp a line but neither arm had enough strength. Hitting a rock for incentive, about twenty yards farther I lifted one arm with the other, grabbed a line with both hands, and began pulling toward my chest. Three tugs later, I had nothing left, but I had also slowed to a crawl.

"Keep pulling! Keep pulling!"

The chute snagged and I came to a stop.

"Well done! Welcome back!"

I lay there admiring the intricacies of the underside of a corn stalk until the blood returned to my limbs. Eventually, I stood up and painstakingly dragged on the lines to ball my chute. That done, I walked the eighty yards or so I had traveled on my back outside of the jump zone, crouched under the barbed-wire fence, and stood triumphantly in the closely shorn drop zone grass.

Ed was just then climbing a three rail wood fence, on the far side of the drop zone, so I took a heading that split the difference between the barn and us.

I watched him swing his legs over gingerly, and with a pronounced hobble take a similar angle. When we were a few feet apart, he beamed and said, "How'd it go man?"

"Terrific!" I replied.

"You're walking like you shit yourself riding a horse."

"Straps gave me some trouble. You?" I said, with a nod at his leg.

"Hit a rock—two if you count the bounce. You're wearing my chute," he said accusingly.

"Whose do you think you're holding?" I nodded at the bundle in his hands.

"You got the better of the deal. Longer canopy ride, softer landing."

"True," I said, turning toward the barn. "What a rush when you let go eh!" I exclaimed, meaning, *'I went out first.'*

"Nothing like it, except maybe watching you go over the fence," he replied, meaning, *'I landed first.'*

With him lurching from one foot to the other, and me straddling an imaginary stream of fire, we held our heads high to convey to the next group of jumpers, "*Though we stride delicately, we have endured,*" I told Jeanette.

Chuckling, she said, "Each of you believed you were slightly more equal than the other. That said, you've been doing a chin-up for thirty-five years to protect or project your manhood."

Sniffing back pleasure at my antics, she said, "There's often pain involved in repositioning one's ideas. When you feel the first pinch of challenge, and have the most strength and resolve to act, you should take responsibility for your circumstances. Otherwise, one could end up dangling a precious millimeter away from anguish until outside forces resolve the problem. For the price of a brief jolt, your legs will be underneath you when the crisis comes to a head, and the winds of change can't blow you whimsically through inapplicable fields of endeavor. You had to let go long enough to discover this miraculous solution—and you have to do so again."

"You're good at this metaphor stuff," I schmoozed her, "so what is the Economy of Action all about?"

Cocking her head to signal that she believed I knew full well what it was, but I was being lazy, she said, "How much time did your divorce take to complete?"

"About six months."

"Would that be about twenty expensive evenings at the bar?"

180 days divided by 7 Fridays ++

"Something like that."

"How much time did you spend occupied with the formal process?"

"Maybe three hours."

"Your job was secure and you could replace your losses?"

"Yes."

"So you knew what was coming, but you couldn't let go of your sense of failure, or anger over your losses. If you had, you could have experienced your entire divorce in less time than you experienced your wedding reception, and cut short the damage to your brain, liver, and wallet, by a huge factor. That's an example of the Economy of Action for an average person. Less obvious was your parachuting experience: the universe twice shouted that it would not go as planned, but you went ahead anyway. As an apprentice, you would have taken note of what was happening around you, and if that failed you would have taken care of what was truly needed on the way down. Anything else?"

"You've about covered it," I said, getting up to go to the bathroom.

"Good. By the way," she said to my back, "if you're going to the store today, will you pick up some tomatoes?"

"Sure, if I get a chance," I said, leaving the room.

When I came back but before I sat down again, she said, "Hey, do you want to get a movie for tonight? I'm making a huge salad with..." Jeanette stood as she listed my favorite ingredients, and then offered to make a dessert that could generate a diabetic coma... also on my list of things to come.

"Sounds good."

"Oh—hell," she muttered, reaching for her purse. "Kris said the new releases are out today, so you should go before they're all rented." She took out two ten dollar bills, and offered them to me.

"Okay," I said standing, "why are you giving me so much money. Movies are four dollars at most?"

"To pick up the tomatoes, and carrots while you're at it; they're right across the street from the video store."

Jeanette had the good graces not to smile as I took the money

I also came back with a bottle of wine, helped to chop vegetables, and set the table for three... her son or daughter might be home for dinner, but never the two of them together. It seemed that this was their rule.

We ate, did the dishes, and with glasses of wine in hand surveyed the kitchen for any sign that we had been there, before going to the downstairs living room VCR.

I had only gotten the tape out of the box when Jeanette said, "One of them is here now."

"And?" I said.

Grinning at my annoyance over postponing the screening, she said, "He wants to talk to you, not me. Take a seat."

I did this without comment.

I can't explain the sensation that came upon me, other than to equate it with the urge to speak, but it was the urge to listen: I was within an inner silence that had density.

After a short while, I heard a hollow voice speaking as if from a distinct area the size of a nickel in the middle of my brain. It was formal, clipped, and without inflection, yet somehow imbued with "meaning" beyond the symbolism of the words. I heard the following:

"The topic is Catalytic Momentum, Fine Waves, and the Third Platform.

"The Third Platform, or Third Attention, renders a perspective of the personality in the present, past, and future. This view encompasses the root assumptions of physical reality, and is untainted by egotistical self-awareness; what is viewed simply is. Observers, when properly guided, may enter this platform to effect changes in their direction within the scope of impeccable actions, and reverence for the choices of others.

"Access is gained by way of a Willed shift in that which you call the assemblage point, or at the behest of Spirit. Emissaries accessing this platform will experience a shift in focus to a higher frequency as a physical cold descending to the body, and a sense of duality will allow them to see themselves, and their future-past in a relationship that forms a trinity of focus. Without these simultaneous touchstones, there is no cohesive point of reference, and the default position of your waking perception, which is pinned between the intuitive and the physical senses, prevails. All of you regularly access this level during that which you consider the dream state. However, not all knowledge found here is directly translatable through the assemblage point position of the First Attention. It is therefore missing the third point of reference, and is not consciously recalled. It is instead carried within your energy field.

"As emissaries become integrated with their Source, they will have free access to view routes open to them, as well as traps that may befall them, by viewing other's momentum intersecting their choices. This is the overview of the Third Platform—literally. We speak now to the middle view.

"There exists around and within your physical form Fine Waves of perception, knowledge, and orientation. Fine Waves are made of highly charged sub-atomic particles that are expandable, but may never be reduced. However, to read the information of a particular portion of a wave the observer may have to reduce the speed of their focus to match the speed of the information sought. This idea will become clearer.

"There are Fine Waves between all forms of consciousness, such as your lungs, heart, hands, and feet, which provide the framework within which their particular form knows where it is, and how to function. Without these waves interacting there are no reference points from which to act, react, or to learn. The interactions between the lungs and the body, for example, are automatic in your terms, but they are *experiencing* within the parameters of their specific design

and according to your Will: the body is of your design, and maintained by you to serve you. Your earth-bound Identity is similarly designed and maintained.

"The interactions between the waves of your Identity are intention driven: we speak now to the focus of your Intentions, which is the Will behind the manifestation of all actions.

"There are three primary reference points that constitute the Fine Waves of Identity. Each primary wave has three sub-frequency categories that make up the whole. The range of their rate of vibration distinguishes these waves and sub-waves, and the sequencing of concomitant pulses that link them as needed. All of them are interactively tunable; information in one wave can draw upon information in another when directed to do so by the Will of the consciousness desiring such connections. Will is required, as Fine Waves have no momentum of their own.

"The Fine Waves of Identity are Who, Where, and When. There is no lesser or better wave. They are inseparably integral to the whole, just as your brain would function poorly without your head. It follows that their positioning is also of no real consequence.

"Of the major distinctions, 'Who' is the innermost Fine Wave. Its outer ring contains *Immediate Ideas*, which are alterable and tied to the *Now* wave of immediacy, with autonomic mental response influenced by the third component, *Past Life Experience*, as the core identity, or spiritual personality. It has the highest vibrational frequency of the three, which means it carries the most information.

"'Where' is the outermost ring through which all others must pass. Therefore, it is the single-most important grounding force of orientation—a reference point from which all else must be viewed to be valid. *Experience and Expectations* is the first sub-wave mode that tells you, through past reference points, where you are according to your evolution. This is to say that a child expects little more than surprises as he attempts new things, yet as he grows older his past experience tells him what to expect in his next attempt. It also contains the *knowings*—as root assumptions—of up, down solidity, and gravity.

"*Cultural Orientation* is the second ring of the Where wave of Identity. It entails learned behavior, and is of the lowest vibrational significance at birth.

"*Sexual Role* is the third aspect, which is derived from the original Intent of the Source Soul. The male role encompasses demonstrative passion, while the female role focuses on form, freedom, and procreation. Stereotypical behavior develops from these.

"The third wave, When, is positioned in the middle: after all thought and ideas are formed, and put through the filters of Where you are and Who you are, you reference them through When you are. Of the three aspects of this wave, the outermost filter is of the *past*, and the reference point from which you learn. The first response you have to an experience is from this wave. Although it appears to contain the most information, by virtue of its proximity to knowledge (hindsight) it is in actuality a conglomeration of opinions most of which are not in the higher vibrational sequences of Knowledge, as they have not been applied. They exist as random ideas awaiting application. They are in the slowest vibrational rate in the When Fine Wave.

"The middle wave is of the *Present*, and acts as the temperance force that adjusts previous circumstance to the Now. The relevance of immediacy excites this knowledge of the present and therefore vibrates, moment to moment, faster than the apparent "facts" of the past. In this way, the slower ideas of the past are assimilated to the more important Now, as they are found to apply.

"*Probable Future*, the third vibration sequence, is much higher and is on the spiritual plane. It contains the knowledge of the outcomes of your actions, as you reach and pass points of

change. It is the *knowing* of the moment, the feeling in the heart that says, 'I should have turned left. I just knew it.'

"When an idea is forced through these filters of Identity, the idea focuses on the waves according to the Will intended. If one lives in the past, because it is a safe refuge, though it be uncomfortable the individual will always emphasize the first wave—the outermost ring of his or her decisions. Past experiences will dictate the action. Conversely, those who "look" forward to what is possible are activating the vibratory sequence of the future, regardless of their apparent present, and they act on it.

"Your mystics can access such knowledge as exists within their own range of vibrational sequencing, past and future, as accurately as the realm of probabilities can make apparent. The momentum of events that are past a point of change will manifest. Others, as always, are subject to the free will of all involved in shaping the decision of the individual who has come to be informed of probable events."

I asked a question in my mind: "Why are some psychics better at it than others?"

"The Third Platforms of other's are *somewhat* accessible for those of sufficient energy, and concomitant focus-frequencies. Their draw of information may be deeper based on their own level of energy, because the momentum of focusing through the three vibrational positions increases the level of information available. Focusing is in itself catalytic. Our emissaries have the speed to focus on the entire range of Third Platform frequencies, therefore of all whom they meet. This extreme focus also brings a depth of certainty and clarity, beyond communications, from which the momentum of events yet to manifest can more accurately be determined. This focus of Will utilizes the inner senses you all have, but to a refined degree. In other words, the emissaries have no abilities that are not present in all of mankind. Theirs are more highly developed, based on their extreme universal age and demonstrated understanding of the responsibilities that come with this knowledge. In your specific case, we have accelerated the process of self-discovery concomitant to your ability to assimilate this knowledge. The effect is to allow you to observe, without risk, when you require access to the Third Platform for your training."

The voice stopped.

I looked at Jeanette in an entirely different light.

As did she with me when I repeated the contents of this event as if my memory was this good, and Hearing was otherwise an everyday occurrence.

I also said that I was not able to explain what I actually understood. In part, this was because some information seemed to be "tuned" to address my personal experiences, and because I had struggled with pulses, frequencies, and compatibility ranges: I had spent all but three weeks of my grade twelve math class in the pool hall across the street.⁽²⁾ All things considered, I told Jeanette, the event was an excellent demonstration of Spirit channeling new information to a novice apprentice.

"Was it *cool*?" she said dryly.

Missing the sarcasm, I said, "It was a way-cool reward for getting tomatoes."

⁽²⁾Mr. Day kicked me out of class for being disruptive, saying on my way out the door that I was not to come back until I was ready to learn. This feeling never came upon me. Without his class, I did not graduate from grade twelve, but my estimation of angles and angular momentum became acute, from which I made a tidy sum hustling in my teen years.

Chapter 65 - The Origins of All That Is

For the third time in a dozen such strolls toward the West Vancouver seawall, Jeanette stopped at John Lawson Park, thereby indicating to me that our chat would be lengthy.

The sun beat down on my black jacket, as we sat on a bench facing English Bay, and her breathing became deep and rhythmic. After a short while, she looked up to slowly take in our surroundings, as though tasting the vista her serene gaze was sampling.

I took off my jacket, and leaned back into the cool shade of a tree.

Waiting for her to begin, I looked between the leaves to follow the contrail of a plane moving over the mountain peaks, thousands of feet below it; my gaze soon fell on the large cargo carriers sitting motionless at anchor. Coincidental to a small sailboat puttering out of False Creek, across the inlet, my perceptions began to absorb the sights, sounds, and smells of where ocean, met forest, met mountain, met sky. No longer fully focused on the starkness of my world, I felt a twinge of appreciation for nothing in particular, in spite of feeling... small.

"Beautiful," Jeanette spoke as Kha-lib, in his distinctive accent.

"Most of it," I replied without thinking. I couldn't help it.

"It all will be when you are ready."

I said nothing because the state of being ready for anything had become a mythical condition for me.

"She," Kha-lib said (meaning Jeanette), "is concerned that you find no sense of awe in your experiences, or majesty in the surroundings you have also *seen* in their essence. As it always has been," he continued without allowing me to comment, "the direction of your lessons is dictated by your actions—all be it this time as a conscious choice. Do you wish to receive material you may find inspirational? It is due, and she would benefit from a new effort in the translation of new knowledge."

"And she'd be happier for your efforts to inspire me... the economy of action thing again." I said. "Go ahead. I'm not unappreciative," I quickly added. "It's just that I'm always in the receiving chair, and I don't know what I'm supposed to do with what you say to me."

"You are as a passenger; her goal is to awaken the captain."

"Thought that's what I said," I joked.

"In this session," he continued, "we will deal with the linear context of mankind's development as a backdrop to our overt presence in your world today. There is much simplification in this narrative aimed at causing you to build a bridge of intimacy between your experiences and your purpose."

"I understand."

"We will primarily deal with the procession of your perceived probability—your now." Glancing away, he said, "In time, you will discover that you have delved into other probable lines of progression, and returned to the one most commonly accepted by the mass conscious of this time. Many of you do this so it would be helpful to mentally capitalize the words Time and Now, to remind you of the fluidity of events."

"Will do," I said, thinking this was going to be a *very* long morning; none of Jeanette's channels had ever required a preamble.

"In what you would perceive as the beginning," Kha-lib began the lesson, "All That Is became aware of Being, and He set out on a quest to discover His own source and nature."

I settled back, stretching out my legs; one sentence and I already had a question. *Aware of Being?*

"Initially, He saw that the sub-atomic particles of His construction instantly responded to His thoughts. Upon closer examination of these miniscule, conscious life-forces, He saw that His thoughts caused the receiving particle to spring into action to notify the next one: a brilliant spark of white-gold light burst forth from it, acting as a projectile deliberately aimed at its neighbor. Upon reaching it, the energy projectile was absorbed creating another spark, and so on. He also saw that His thoughts created a wave of motion, and at a particular point, this wave carried its own momentum after the thought had ceased. This was the process by which He discovered the Law of Catalytic Momentum, which existed long before Him, and that it was a universal condition with which He must work. Therefore it became absolutely necessary to determine, and carefully, what it was that He intended to do, in order to avoid catastrophic results due to ignorance on His part."

Jeanette cocked her head, apparently considering an additional thought.

"Viewing the larger effect," Kha-lib continued, "He saw His entire being light up as a luminous ball of fire, pulsating with brilliant emanations stretching into the continuum. He then saw that these emanations flashed His thoughts onto the blank screen of clouds of random particles as yet untouched by Him. As He scanned these visions, All That Is saw that they were not only His thoughts, but even dreams of His past had developed patterns of evolution. They also had momentum; circles within evolving circles moving not just outward, but inward, recreating themselves repeatedly as translations of his Original Intent to explore His own nature. Yet He could affect them with His Will, if He so desired."

Briefly closing her eyes, Jeanette as Kha-lib said, "All That Is also noted that these vibrational activities carried a quality of sound within His own field, composed of different mixtures of frequency, and that these sounds evoked colors. Upon focusing in this way, He saw that colors also permeated His visions and thoughts, and when He began to call up colors without waiting for sounds to evoke them, He found that they reflected new visions at Him: for each color, another vision came before His senses. In this way He knew that He could store each nuance of universal action within the spectrum of primary colors, and that the deeper and paler colors were sub-classifications of these actions."

"Uh huh."

"So it was that inside His energy construction were infinite melodic patterns," Kha-lib attempted to bring me up to speed, "constantly moving and evolving in complexity. Outside of His construction were varying vibratory frequencies manipulating without specific direction through a pulsating in and out motion, until He touched them with His thoughts. He subsequently discovered that these pulsations were the common thread between all energy forms, as He followed them until He became disoriented within their infinite manifestations. Upon finding a position from which to cease creating, but observing His former thoughts and acts, He realized that within the apparent random energies around him there was unity, yet individually their formations had no volition of their own. They all required an impetus to act—but now, because of His experience, inherent to this impetus was to seek a moment of assessment to give on-going events meaning.

"As He better understood the nature of varying sub-atomic particles to have an inviolate function awaiting direction, He also realized that the cohesive union of like-directed particles had a multi-dimensional quality. This quality allowed for complete movement between infinite points of random universal power concentrations. As these particles were deeply desirous of a union with their Source, All That Is determined that they had Will—the Will to be One with him. He recognized this as the Quality of Choice, and that individuality was born of His actions creating

their particular form of self-awareness. This energy thereafter propelled itself toward experiences specific to its energetic construction."

My struggle to follow the progression of All That Is becoming aware of his own nature deepened as Kha-lib said, "By examining His own visions closely, All That Is saw that they reflected all things past, and their attendant result, while the sub-classifications of color indicated the beginning of an idea and the framework in which to develop it. He also discovered that various frequencies of this "visual material" could be superimposed over other events using various formations of random clouds, and employing their inherent characteristics in a specific manner directly proportionate to their nature. This also meant that He was capable of activating portions of His own knowledge, to accommodate the enterprise of creation currently intended.

The original question, itself, was then realized to be the answer. He would explore the recesses of space in order to determine His own origins, using the Act of Creation as his medium and the Law of Catalytic Momentum as propulsion." Kha-lib looked my way.

"I'm not quite with ... hang on," I said.

I experienced Kha-lib's words as a vision of colorful, multi-layered transparent silk cloths, electrically linked, pulsing across each other's surface according to the Will of a breath of Intention from All That Is, which rolled endlessly onwards according to the next design, and the next.

"All That Is," Kha-lib continued as I (better) grasped the concept of evolution by an unknowable, but not random design, "devised a means by which He could project His knowledge, as Portions of Himself, through the infinite layers of these visions, thereby allowing them to explore and create directly from His own thoughts. In the doing, He observed that all creations are inherently endowed with the qualities of their life-source—they were not aspects of Him, but complete Portions of Him. Even the smallest consciousness unit contained all elements of the whole. Free Will also meant that He was no longer alone." Kha-lib paused for my reaction to this statement.

"Got it," I said as if I had a clue what this would mean to All That Is.

"The first of these explorers were Kha-li and Kai-tahr." (Pronounced kay-lee and kay-tar.) To project these Portions into different layers," he continued nonplussed, "or universes, as you might think of them, All That Is attached a lifeline of the maximum energy sustainable directly to them. This allowed his Portions extreme latitude of movement, a means to transmit their knowledge to Him, and provided a corridor for them to return home at the completion of an exploration. It also allowed for an energy adjustment, in terms of vibration levels, for the Portions' rate to be compatible with their surroundings. In all cases this meant lowering their speed.

"All That Is subsequently noted that Kha-li and Kai-tahr, thriving on their freedom, attained the ability to create other constructions, and isolate their own Portions utilizing the inherent qualities of their Intent to program their sub-atomic particles. It made perfect sense that they should, for they were constructed of the same quality of consciousness as He, and they were therefore free to create without interference. So it was that if Acts of Choice applied to the greatest of His constructions, they must apply to the least.' He looked my way.

I hesitated then said, "The origins of free will, got it."

"All That Is found great pleasure in his communions with these other creators of His own hand, who had made His worlds limitless and given Him the gift of Wholeness."

I nodded as if I understood what this meant.

"The first Portion of Kha-li, to which he gave independent life, was Saa-ra. (pronounced saw-raw). Her gratitude for her life was so great that they explored universes together, she as his love, his messenger, and his willing servant. Many independent Portions of both Identities followed."

Kha-lib paused; I thought I understood what he wanted.

"All That Is discovered, "I said, dissecting my vision, "that the smallest possible particle of anything was conscious, magnetic, and without self-direction. By experimenting with levels of sounds, colors, pulsations, and frequencies, his intentions could create events that carried on without him. He could also layer these in what I see as time and distance entwined to form infinity, various levels of which were accessible at any point from any other point. So when He understood how things worked," my mouth motored on, "He created explorers to help discover His own source and send back their findings."

I gathered my thoughts, then hesitantly said, "All That Is awakened as if in a dream, not from a dream, and decided to see what he was like when he was awake—who had tucked him in so to speak. These thoughts sparked an intention into other energy constructions that did as He had programmed them, but they also took on a life of their own. Essentially they also discovered that they could imagine a new reality, as a translation of their own nature and desires, then that this translation also took on a life of its own intentions."

I paused for approval of my findings.

After a brief silence, I said, "Having studied His own nature, and discovered the basic nature of all events, All That Is created explorers to follow his original dream of discovering His own source."

"You have understood the basics."

"You could have just said that."

"In deed, we did. Hold in your mind this distinction: You have said, 'as if dreaming', and that His energy constructions subsequently 'imagined' their own realities. For the purposes of your current level of training only, it will better serve you to view dreaming as an intentional, directional awareness that can be manipulated, manifest, and interacted with by the dreamer. Imaginings are less intentional, one-way experiments that are the forerunners to dreams. This loose distinction in no way undermines the potential of each act, for as consciousness is activated it inherently becomes an event."

"I imagine you're making this distinction because I'll be learning about the Art of Dreaming?" I quipped.

"You imagine correctly."

Chapter 66 - The Origins of Man

Kha-lib continued explaining the creation, and evolutionary progression of literally everything, to have me understand my place within the grand scheme of things. However, his "simplified" version referenced some events in gradations I could not fully untangle, but did not admit to remaining vague in my mind. This caused me to interrupt him for clarifications⁽³⁾ that I have translated into John-speak for ease of consumption...

"As the explorers ventured into unknown realities," Kha-lib said, picking up with the original explorer's history, "they transmitted their discoveries back to All That Is. In this way, He discovered that the speed of their individual energy-essences rose as they accumulated knowledge. From this and other experiences, He understood that as free will is the essence of evolution and catalytic momentum magnetically circled the source of the act, even an ill-thought-out action essentially explored itself until it was understood /energetically rectified. Because energy cannot be destroyed, death did not

exist as other than a transition/migration of energy. Conceptually, therefore, destruction did not exist; the explorers saw it as a method of investigation. Damage was another issue.

Kha-lib said he was talking about billions of years of discovery, which meant the explorers were gathering immeasurable knowledge and unimaginable speed. Even so, they were dealing with unknowns that required experimentation; this always included altering their personal speeds to match the version of reality they were exploring.

Universes are defined by the speed of pulsating gateways that separate them. Kha-lib likened these to heart valves, because they are the means through which energy between universes is exchanged and renewed.

Past these gateways, the explorers fine-tuned their speed to inspect sub-set universes, and their sub-sets, and so on. In this way, the explorers experienced how every aspect of a given reality is connected to all other aspects, regardless of any appearance to the contrary. The key to recognizing this rapport, they discovered, was dependent on the speed of subjectivity; the slower the observer's energetic speed, the less they could perceive the more disconnected things appeared to be. And yet, because all active consciousness is part of the essence-energy of All That Is, the explorers detected an awareness—a "sense" of the connectivity between all things. This applied from the slowest, minutest consciousness possible in the most distant and ever-expanding universe, to the greatest speeds of consciousness attained by the explorers, who knew of this circumstance so intimately as to be One with their source, yet still independent of Him...

While on their quests, these explorers could know nothing about what lay on the other side of these gateways, or to what effect passing through them would have on either themselves or the universe they were entering. Each transition was literally a shot in the dark, so their surveys were not without incident: Kai-tahr became trapped at the moment energy was exchanged between universes, before a pulse spit him into a reality so fantastically slow that his energy-consciousness was catastrophically fragmented into aspects of his entire identity.

Disoriented, adrift, and without the driving force of Will integral to self-awareness, he became indistinguishable from the energy clouds that filled this new place. All That Is felt His link to Kai-tahr break, Kha-li volunteered to retrieve him, but Saa-ra insisted that she risk the journey in his stead.

Her study of the pulsating gateway was exhaustive before, with a greatly strengthened connection to All That Is, Saa-ra slipped between the pulses at the precise moment they reversed direction, emerging unharmed amid a universe rife with consciousness that had naturally grouped according to their vibratory speeds. These groupings indicated to her that even the smallest and slowest clouds had similar intentions, but they lacked the energy to refine /define themselves through self-directed experience. Concluding that if she provided the raw impetus for the clouds to engage whatever developmental experiences their speed might allow, she could detect the unique vibratory signature of Kai-tahr's origins, Saa-ra willed the clouds to become whatever they might.

She subsequently observed a place of such mass that it was, of itself, capable within its energy construction of creating life from its own resources. And her first born, Earth, did so in miraculous ways...

Using the properties of momentum that All That Is had taught Kha-li, and Kha-li had taught Saa-ra, she noted the endless layers of energy whose vibrations corresponded to the developing potential of events to manifest in this new place. This applied to all consciousness that had begun experimenting /experiencing in this matter-oriented universe; she could watch the energy of their independent choices, first projected as potential, manifest according to the impetus of their Free

Will. These manifestations—the first translations of their pulses and vibrations from when they were effectively inert, but aware—were essentially dreams of themselves exploring physical experience, by projecting part of their consciousness into forms that matched the frequency ranges of earth...

I thought of ghosts gradually acclimatizing to a denser reality, but these explorations applied to all things: atoms, rocks, water, and the first "human" form, all as part and parcel of Earths' creations taking on a life of their own design. As they did, they learned how to manifest ever-more of their consciousness in a physical form, finally to the extent that it was all the speed of physical reality could accommodate.

With this development came an increasingly important, ever-narrower focus on "where" they were: for purposes of illustration, the dream-consciousness vibrated hundreds of thousands of times faster than their physical manifestation, which was an extreme condensing of *some* of their energy. This physical translation of their entire Identity had to be maintained, so the lifeline of energy between them was literal.

Initially, their lack of experience in physical form also made the projection more acutely aware of their source reality than where they were: the nature of other physical manifestations of energy-consciousness upon them was unknown until they experienced them directly. Being "impressed" with the perceptions and actions available to them within the new rules of physical reality took time. This "testing" circumstance applied to the first single-celled organism dipping their metaphorical toes into the primordial soup, and discovering it was too hot, to mankind incorporating the discoveries a single celled had made, into their own manifestations. "Imagining" what might work better in their next physical state both the cell and the human projected their next appearance as something else, until they got it right so to speak.

I thought of their experiences as the reverse of us becoming aware that we are dreaming, where apparently impossible events happen according to rules we don't understand... but we can learn them.

Billions of forms of consciousness honed and adjusted their rhythms and pulses to best suit their nature and desired experiences. In this way, to one extent or another they shared the essential knowledge of their true reality and source, as all projections inherently contained knowledge of their entire 'evolution'...

Back to Saa-ra's rescue mission:

The physical forms of consciousness Saa-ra came to focus on, amid the endless array of life hosted by Earth, were seven variations of humankind. Refocusing beyond the molecular level, she eventually identified the basic energy packets that delineated one consciousness from another within a given species. From here, she discovered a vibratory sequence foreign to this base ten universe—anomalies that allowed her to locate Kai-tahr as two hundred Aspect-Personalities that collectively comprised his entire Identity. The next problem she faced was how to combine these individuals into a core consciousness: in Universal terms, this meant dramatically increasing their speed.

Saa-ra first tried influencing their physical affairs, but they were unable to comprehend the omens as a 'tap on the shoulder' that said they were not alone. She then tried attaching an energy chord through which she could transmit knowledge, but the Aspect-Personalities' were far too slow to make a solid connection. She next infused them with energy directly, but their capacity remained too limited for direct communications, although her efforts did provide them with greater potential. Finally, she concluded that the only way to communicate with them was on their terms; it became necessary for her to devise a method of entry into the earth's atmosphere,

because her vibrational level was not compatible with the sub-atomic particles that constructed this new life form.

Saa-ra determined that to enter earth by projecting Portions of her entire Identity into this new world, encapsulation would be the means, and a physical body the medium of operations. Encapsulation in the physical form automatically reduced the vibrational spectrum of her energy field, the body acted as a tempering factor, while her core essence (spirit) conditioned and tuned it in every increasing doses to conduct the vast amounts of energy the body required to be maintained.

These Portions would be purposefully endowed with the inclinations and characteristics that could best deal with Kai-tahr's Aspects. In this way, she could literally bring them up to a speed where the other methods she had tried would be effective. Kha-li then joined Saa-ra to provide the connection through which he would direct her activities.

Well aware that her Portions would develop free will, the first challenge for Saa-ra was to teach them to hold certain principles as sacred, even though they may not be immediately applied. Foremost among these was mastery of the Law of Catalytic Momentum, by working with it, because without safe and harmonious applications the Portion's actions could create a momentum that would sweep over them, destroying all that they intended to do.

It was critical, therefore, for them to understand the underlying nature of their own beliefs: Saa-ra had determined from her observations that beliefs were the physical translation of energetic intentions. In her reality, intentions manifest instantly, but in this extremely slow place they passed through actions—as behaviors that were direct translations of beliefs. These actions activated the event in the layers of probability relative to the level of physical, intellectual, and emotional intensities behind them. Along with the psychological adjustments required by the physical senses to perceive this world according its rules, this meant that what manifest to the physical consciousness, as a consequence of their beliefs, appeared to happen "later." Often so much later that the source of the event may not be recognized, whereas upon its conception the energy-event immediately began going through the stages required to physically manifest.

First clarifying the difference between an Aspect and a Portion for me—Aspect Personalities are fragments of an Identity, whereas Portions are endowed with the entire knowledge of its source, Kha-lib said that Saa-ra manifest two hundred Portions within the layers of times and locations they had seen would provide the best opportunities to influence Kai-tahr. His beliefs/behaviors made certain events inevitable. In time-oriented terms, the Lemurian culture was born of this first translation of Universal Intent into flesh. The first intercession into humankind's development was underway.

It was here that Saa-ra's Portions began to devise teaching methods that corresponded with those of All That Is, even as she transmitted her/their experiences back to Kha-li, and one by one they were killed. The Portions did not fully understand their environment, particularly a behavioral choice of mankind they had encountered nowhere else in any universe—malice.

Kha-li healed and reviewed these Portion's activities, and when they were again ready to try to retrieve Kai-tahr's Aspects they relentlessly returned to the physical plane with an ever-more applicable base of physically oriented energy-knowledge.

Faster and faster the Portions became.

In time, many entity-Identities from Kha-li, Saa-ra, and their own ancient Portions, came through the gateway to send *their* Portions into physical reality: the Universe had understood their responsibility. Their quest to retrieve Kai-tahr included turning over the care of mankind's progress to mankind. Self-determination being the core of all development, they needed to make mankind ready for this responsibility, so Kai-tahr's aspects were not alone in receiving Saa-ra's lessons.

Along with her Portions, these latter-arriving entities also increased the Aspects' speed through procreation to more quickly reach the stage where they could learn without the need for a physical intermediary. (As it was with Jeanette) At this point, Kha-lib said my source soul—Phillip—was born of a union between one of Saa-ra's Portions and one of Kai-tahr's Aspects. I accurately interpreted this to mean that my source-soul was equal parts divine and deranged, and whose birthplace had been Lemuria.

Thinking we were finally getting to the good part—me—I asked Kha-lib about Phillip's personal development. This request caused him to defer to Saa-ra, to continue revealing more about the first dynasty of man.

Lemuria

With customary formality, Saa-ra said that in esoteric circles the Lemurian culture hosted the first Universal teaching order, known as Speakers. They lived in organized communities socially evolving through verbal communications using symbols as a teaching medium, and applied mysticism that involved releasing the spiritual consciousness at sleep times. This practice enabled them to engage in cosmic travel, thought in its purest form, and the exercising of love as a creative resource without the limiting aspects of physical form. The harmony achieved because of this finely tuned focus allowed the individual to build a bridge to knowledge and freedom in tremendous intimacy with all life, and with the source of all life, as they knew it.

It was also in this culture that the ego awareness was perfectly adapted to maintaining the individual's health and safety: mankind knew what to do and how to do it instinctively, but consciousness is not static. Mankind soon performed so well that he developed a sense of self in the moment of acting—a pause of retrospection that evaluated the present choice in terms of experience, and applied it to a predicted future. Thus was developed the ability to reason options, and through imagination arrive at the choice they would act upon: reason without imagination soon runs its course. They require each other; it is the particular mix of the two that stands one person apart from another, and humanity apart from other species.

"Are we at the top end of developed consciousness?" I said.

"You neither lead nor follow, you are unique. In terms of a pecking order, we will say only that some species *know* directly."

As this thought repositioned my thinking on our "advanced" state, Saa-ra said that humanity refined the reasoning process to the point where they diminished their trust in their link, thereby limiting access to silent knowledge, and instead put trust in their ego in the form of a self-image. Their reason next bestowed a secondary fiction upon this image—the ego had the ability to reason its own usefulness, which was a direct mistranslation of their former unquestioned trust in instinct. The proverbial cat was out of the bag: reason, finely tuned through the proper assessment of experience led to logic, from which further experience became evermore enlightening, and less harmful. However, left to its own devices, or the influence of aberrant thought, it could justify anything. Free Will was mandatory, but learning about responsibility was optional...

Upon setting their first waves of students on a positive course of development, the Speakers left the physical plane to allow their work to evolve according to their student's Will. Over time, young members of the culture learned the illusion of their ego's independent power through observing, and being subject to the nature of the acts experienced with their elders. Instead of directing their activities safely, the ego began responding to the secrets its masters began to hold about themselves, from themselves—secrets generated by their failure to understand the full

scope of their responsibilities. As they unwittingly acted against their best interests, they muted their inner knowledge of proper conduct and altered their beliefs to suit their poor behaviors. Clear contradictions were subsequently obscured by entanglements of similar alterations, which took on a momentum of their own.

(Jeanette had defined this process as "entangled beliefs' when we first met.)

Overall, mankind's flow of energy /silent knowledge was highly diminished by this new focus on the physical self, as sole decision maker and ultimate arbiter of events perceived only by the outer senses required to survive. Eventually, this left mankind with only a residue knowledge that informed him of his ancient connection to his source, and they began expressing their sense of loss in despair, and acts of self-destruction: many experiments in social development followed, all of which failed as mankind annihilated two of their races, and a dynasty that had lasted nearly two million years faded into disarray.

But by this time, many students had become Masters of the art of teaching.

"Is this why your teachings are all about erasing the idea of self from a student's thoughts?" I asked her.

"One must be careful with this idea: the idea of self, as integrity, is integral to personal development. Without it, you would feel adrift, but with a sense of purpose you could not fulfill you would go insane. The sense of self we discuss is to develop an awareness of, and reverence for, the validity of all creature hood, and the experiences they choose for the purpose of learning. That self is aware of their entire Identity, but they do not impose any aspect of it upon another's path. They know that path is sacred."

"Got it."

Atlantia

"Upon their return to the world as Atlanteans," Saa-ra continued, "the Speakers, and former Lemurian students who were ready, evolved a philosophy based in the concept of each individual's divinity by birthright, as an aspect of All That Is. Within this doctrine, they strove to incorporate dignity, peace, discipline, and harmony, to the structures of their world in recognition of their connection to the earth as a sentient being that experienced existence through sensory perceptions of its own. This was obvious to them from the many forms of life to which the earth played host."

Jeanette closed her eyes, shook her head slowly, then she said in her normal voice, "There was a devout reverence for the great cooperation of wills they found in all that they surveyed, and they acted in harmony with its natural processes and cycles, while exploring Earth's gifts and wealth."

She opened her eyes and glanced my way; looking away in apparent concentration she said, "One of their discoveries was that crystals contained the keys to power beyond their wildest dreams. Each cut and color contained different elements of power some of which promoted agricultural development while others could raise buildings through a union of applications between sound and light. In this way, they constructed great temples of crystal formations to channel the endless source of power that the sun projected into the atmosphere."

A short pause...

"The development of these techniques also revealed a conduit that enhanced the individual's connection to the Universal Source; their knowledge potential was limited only by their ability to properly handle abstractions about energy and momentum. To this end," she slipped into a formal mode of narration, "the Atlantean guests further evolved their general philosophy on life

for the people into a more specific way to live for those who had the energy to handle power directly. Overall, the discoveries made during this second intercession into mankind's evolution, when used in accordance with the philosophy of non-interference with the earth's life force, preserved and strengthened the individual, and the earth's capacity for abundance.

"Again, when the teachers withdrew to allow mankind to set their own course, the world became afraid. As anger, greed, and political manipulations distorted their knowledge this teaching society separated from a united whole, engaged in the pursuit of challenge, into varying sects and schools of thought wherein like-personalities banded together under the impetus of undisciplined free will. Competition without direction became the order of their evolution, and greed and hatred caused their power to be ill-used. The death of a culture, even a continent, had begun."

I couldn't help myself. "Are you slipping between focuses—Saa-ra then Jeanette and back again?"

"Yes. It's a lesson for me. You'll probably find a... " she hesitated, "a lack of fluidity at some points, because I'm supposed to not try—to just allow my words to flow. The difficulty I have is that I'm not feeling the neck or shoulder pressure I just realized I lean on for confidence." She shook her head. "That's not entirely accurate— up until now, my usual sense of self has been set aside when I channel. Saa-ra is lessening that influence, or I am," she shrugged, "which is making me grasp at some words, and stall between thoughts where I would usually make a casual connection."

"Cool. Go for it."

"In the final years of Atlantia," she began again, slowly, "the Speakers, and those who had remained true to the philosophy and mastered the arts of living by successfully avoiding human aberrations, came back into the world. Their purpose," she said, increasing her cadence, "was to retrieve their knowledge of power, and restore it in a new culture when the end came. From the Universal vantage point, it was seen that mankind would virtually annihilate themselves, and the earth would cleanse itself of a guest who had become nothing more than a parasitic influence. The first End of the World Cycle was underway. It was too late to change the flow of events."

I interrupted to clarify a point I thought paradoxical, and asked her how a human avoids human aberrations.

Without nuance, she said, "The sum of your physical conformations, social conditioning, personal beliefs and assumptions, is your personality. To be more precise, the energy-essence of John, as compiled by your entire Identity before your birth, contains endless personality traits. Some are more dominant than others. Your choice of time and place to be born, and to whom, stimulates these predilections while exterior events all-but demand that you piece together the personality you desired as you grow, and require to design your daily destiny efficiently. You manage these traits like an addiction to beliefs you constantly evolve. When it is your time, and with the aid of a teacher, you assess your personality for errant and aberrant influences aimed at leaving human conditioning behind. The culmination of this occurs when impeccable intentions replace all beliefs."

"Is that what people call a state of grace?"

"We all live within an eternal, developmental state of grace. Historically, however, influential people have used this inherent *condition* of your being," she emphasized, "to wrap Holy attributes on favored peoples, sites, and rites, and by aligning themselves with their gods in less strenuous ways than behaving properly engage in the depravities of their assumed power."

"Just an aside: how will you convince people of any of this?"

"Prior to the first destruction of the Temple of Solomon, the original Covenant of The Arc was secretly hidden in a place of safety. It will be returned at the end of the cycle that has entrapped every culture before it. Scientists will authenticate it, and its contents will provide the proof of our existence and presence in your time."

"Again, very cool. Carry on."

"In the final hours of Atlantia," Jeanette continued formally, "these emissaries of the Universal Source stole the secrets of power and took them to the area now known as the Gold Coast, where the Osirian culture heralded the beginning of a great and luminous world that would eventually migrate to the land of Egypt."

Egypt

"In this culture, as channels of the Universal Source their physical manipulations were a translation of earth-time disciplines, based in artistic and scientific discoveries that celebrated their spiritual life. Stories, then pictures taught the people, and when the pictures became inadequate, they developed symbols to illustrate the larger, more abstract qualities of time and space. Mysticism, as the catalyst for their achievements, was a state of being from which one could jubilantly explore life's mysteries."

"At this time, the great mystics Djoser, and his companions, Imhotep, Amen-ka-ra, and his catalyst and counterpart, Saa-ra, entered into a consuming effort to learn from Kha-li all that was within their earthly purpose. A great creative impetus blossomed as they began a scientific study to create a usable translation of universal forces concomitant with the natural resources of the planetary systems." She paused.

"The scholars of the disciplines known as Astronomy and Astrology knew that the universe had provided a road map for the personal use of all beings aspiring to knowledge. Astronomical knowledge applied to physical affairs is astrology. As two sides of the same coin, they are inseparable." She paused again.

"As the scope of their abstract findings clarified into knowledge, the culture also used scientific discoveries to create beauty. To them, this was a direct translation, in earthly terms, of that knowledge. In other words, they chose to celebrate creation within the realm of Art."

"Hmm." They would, I thought... if there was a topic about which I knew less, and cared less than I did about mathematics, Art was it.

"As lovers of beauty, the Egyptians also realized that sterility of form was not a prerequisite to scientific proficiency. One could attain knowledge, skill, and great aesthetic harmony with one's surroundings, while simultaneously achieving one's goal. This creative atmosphere heightened the spirit of discovery, and acted as a catalyst for the assumption of yet greater knowledge." She looked my way.

I looked back in silence.... she had left me behind at "translations of universal forces concomitant with the natural resources," but I was determined to remember "sterility of form not being a prerequisite to scientific proficiency."

"The Egyptians," she continued as I refocused, "discovered that form was an integral part of channeling both increased awareness and knowledge from the recesses of space. A case in point was the harmonic placement of the pyramids in positions that directly corresponded to the known energy concentrations. Today, we refer to these as ley-lines, which crisscross the earth encapsulating its atmosphere."

"I'll tell you a dream ⁽⁴⁾ I had about that."

"In light of the mystical disciplines the Ancients practiced," she said with a quick nod, "they were aware of the earth as a sentient being, and that this encapsulation composed the outer shell of what is termed the astral body. The peaks of the pyramids were capped to one-third of their mass with gold, as a conductive medium, and constructed to pierce this body in the exact position of the major power points. The smaller constructions pierced the intersecting lines. They also knew that, when properly harnessed, the powerful concentrations of energy where these lines converged acted as a regenerating force. Thus within the concept of form, the pyramid became the medium for the channeling, capturing, and storing of cosmic power." She cleared her throat.

"In conjunction with charting the star systems and planetary movements, they also detected a particular pattern in mathematical terms. Based on the knowledge that the pulsating action of energy emanations was a restorative measure on the part of the earth's consciousness, they determined that the answers to their explorations could be found within the pulse. Deeply cognizant of their responsibility to enhance, in whatever way possible, the earths' capacity to sustain life, they used this knowledge as a basis upon which to build their culture.

"Inherent to this was the application of abstract mystical practices and procedures to everyday affairs. To this end, Kha-li guided them to become accustomed to ever increasing amounts of recirculated and regenerated energy, for the purpose of acquiring knowledge."

Looking across the bay, she said, "He began to teach them the science of numerology. Combined with astrology, Kha-li led them to discover the frequencies of the pulsating emanations. Using the colors of the spectrum as reference, they also discovered that the universe had coded and stored information within a system of symbols."

Jeanette paused, as was her habit when she was going into a deeper channel, giving me the opportunity to flatten this bulky information into a simpler tale of social progression. Kind of.

"Due to their ever-increasing knowledge," she continued, "Kha-li found it necessary to teach these great mystics how to direct the way they think. Through a process centered within the greater concept of catalytic momentum, the mind became the connection between the body and the spirit, enabling it to order only the appropriate information pertinent to the quest at hand. Additionally, it became capable of directing not only the body's physiological processes, but controlled as automatically as breathing the movement of that which in some esoteric teaching is termed the assemblage point. In this way, the Masters who had conquered their arts maintained absolute control over their levels of awareness, while the ego functioned at full capacity in the areas it was originally intended to handle. Overall, this meant that the individual utilized his entire brain capacity, and moved with tremendous ease from one level of knowledge attainment to the other. At this point, Kha-li gave the Masters the translations of the coded symbols for the development of their world."

"Why do it one step at a time, if they were integrated with their Source?"

"One experiment at a time: wholly integrated does not mean all-knowing. Over many years," she said, "as they mastered these universal codes, the Ancients found that the speed of each vibratory sequence determined the probable outcome of any situation; the higher the rate of speed the greater the density of field within the pulsation, thus the higher the form of knowledge. To tap into this resource fully, each of the governing and teaching bodies of the culture had to be taught the arts and the disciplines of how to gather, store, and handle energy. "

I nodded: this is where Jeanette had begun with me.

"At this time it was a grand endeavor to excel, to challenge, to build, to discover, and to create without losing control of their connection to All That Is. Art, Science, Architecture, and

Mysticism, based upon the ancient knowledge, were hallmarks of the third intercession into mankind's ways."

"Then we did it again."

"When the ancient teachers left the world, struggles for power and hypocrisy began to consume their society, and the beautiful, powerful State of Being became a religion practiced by the elite, and forbidden to the people. By this means, fear consumed the culture of All That Is, and a philosophy of life based on dignity, peace, and harmony, was lost to an empire that was swept away with little trace in the desert sands. Yet, it was in this culture that the ancient ones again learned How To Teach. There were..."

"May I interrupt?"

"You have."

"Sorry, I have a question. Two actually."

Jeanette waited passively.

"The Speakers have to relearn their knowledge every time?"

"Reacquaint—maybe activate is more appropriate: it is not related to memory, as you think of it, but accessing the position of the assemblage point where the knowledge is stored. We have given you such an experience. "

"Fine Waves? Of course, sorry. I thought it was too easy."

"Now you know that it is possible."

"What are the basics of How To Teach? I ask because if I understand the techniques I might better connect with what you're teaching—especially essences."

"You have created your own disconnects based on how you think," she said, placidly. "The first order of the teaching scheme was to present you with your way of thinking in such a way as to interrupt its momentum. As you will recall, I dealt with your every question, unsolicited expression, and claim of misunderstanding as you presented them, until you had no more objections. This process took you through months of bewilderment, many aspects of which you will have to paste together in a fashion that makes perfect sense to you in the years to come."

"Years?"

"You will do this through your writing, and thereby claim as your own knowledge the means, purpose, and effectiveness of the teaching scheme. How else could you write about it?"

"Hang on: I'm supposed to write about it to discover how to write about it?"

"You do this with your every written creation." She looked away in thought. Finding what she was after, she said, "During this process, control of what you know about yourself is paramount, because it is the discipline of controlling the known that unlocks the doors to the unknown. Moreover, understanding without control tends to unleash tyrants, because as understanding deepens so too does the momentum of knowledge increase, and realizations better not understood until a full picture can be seen may be acted upon prematurely from the momentum of gathering the knowledge."

She shifted her position on the bench. "This is to say that momentum could take you from one plateau of knowledge to another without the break of momentum provided by climbing the overhang of application. This is a real danger, because knowledge is unlimited while the experience of the application is required for true understanding. It was from knowing of this necessary balance that the philosophies of How to Teach were developed, and the pitfall you're heading for when you begin giving readings."

"Why?"

"Because you're ego is so easily assaulted and massaged," she said, standing to stretch. "One minute you'll be a conduit for Universal knowledge, the next your audience will treat you as the source of it, then I'll come into room and see a green pillow lying on the floor."

⁽³⁾ Clarifications: Jeanette said it's not possible to "factually" present many of Spirit's concepts, because physical facts are simply points people agree with, and the mere existence of Spirit was not something mankind could agree upon, let alone that they spoke to man. In addition, as our ability to comprehend some elements of the whole truth is limited, simplification is the rule. Even then, some of Spirit's simplifications left me staring as if at an empty toilet roll.

⁽⁴⁾ I subsequently told her that dreamed I was floating high above a beautiful, white sand beach, with a teacher guide explaining how and why we were moving energy lines, like steel beams and support struts, into specific positions to construct the physical beach down below. The sea around it seemed to be "stabilized" in place.

Chapter 67 - The Fourth Intercession

"Okaaayy...." she said, straightening her clothing. "I guess we're doing the entire history of the world. Let's walk—it might do us both good."

"End of the seawall and back down Marine Drive?"

"Let's see where it takes us."

As one, we headed toward the seawall.

"We're still building a bridge of intimacy between my experiences and purpose?"

"By awakening knowledge seeded in you throughout your personal history, yes. In time, you will *know* all of this as a single thought, then you will appreciate not what an emissary might know, but how much can be simultaneously available to them. Even then..."

A few strides on, Jeanette said, "We're continuing where we left off- after the Egyptian intercession; we talked about some of this during a Saturday class."

"You know that now?"

"I feel it sitting there."

"They are thorough," I deadpanned.

Jeanette glanced my way in agreement, before saying, "So... these ancient teachers left the world, but because they had again learned How To Teach there were many who followed their practices until Abraham and his followers acted as catalysts for another beginning. In this timeframe," she continued at a slower pace, "these Speakers and their accomplished students entered into a cycle of development aimed at building a world that would be a mid-plane of activity between two points. The hallmark of the Universe's fourth intercession into mankind's development would be a world of mechanisms rather than mediums, purposefully designed to limit man's ability for destruction as his nations spread across the earth. To this end, the secrets of solar power were hidden, for it was now clearly understood that mankind had chosen violence as his specialized focus. Fear again pervaded the world, and suspicion bloomed even in the face of the new prophets, David, Saul, and Solomon, all of whom were as one with their entire consciousness—with their Source."

She paused.

"At this time, these Masters and their students comprised one mass conscious, mystically focused, forming one family from a level of evolution that involved millions of years of

experience. In the time of your—our Christ entity, they were known as the Essenes—as in, essence."

"Ah..."

"As passionate students of knowledge, they were mystified that man's outward focus contained great clarity, but within their own lives man was unable to see that which was directly in front of them. The vast evidence attesting to the lack of wisdom in specializing in violence as an evolutionary vehicle was everywhere. The Masters also saw that it was useless to blame the powers that governed society, for without the public's support devastating doctrines could never have evolved. Again, the truth became startling clear: each person is an aspect of their society, so culture is something to be practiced with the discipline to do what is right regardless of whether it is convenient."

"I remember you saying that."

"During this time, the Masters devised lessons corresponding to growth-oriented vibrational frequencies, wherein the momentum of one's acts would enhance future acts, and spark more such acts. As seen by those participating, the Hellenic philosophy was designed to hold each individual completely responsible for his or her own behavior. Judgment or prejudice against others was tantamount to declaring war on yourself and your family, since whatever it was that you gave to the world would be acted upon with the design of that momentum." She looked my way. "There is no judgment attached to the momentum of your evolutionary development by any source other than that which you program with your choices."

"Kha-lib alrea... got it," I said, recognizing this is how Kha-ib and Saa-ra had me integrate new knowledge into existing understandings; I was always supposed to be thinking, not just listening.

"It followed that to seed the future with hope," Jeanette said, "the young had to be taught and cared for in an atmosphere of love and responsibility, wherein no actions would be engaged that threatened the independence of any child or individual. So it was that the Masters developed disciplines centered on personal dignity, empathy for the conditions of the less fortunate, and a cooperative effort to hold their shared culture in reverence."

She took a deep breath, exhaled, and took my forearm to keep us in step: Jeanette sometimes slowed her pace in keeping with her efforts to draw and translate knowledge from Saa-ra. Finally, she said, "These lessons were extremely hard to teach. It took continuity and a psychological process that required the child to live up to his or her share of responsibility, not down to it. Likewise, he or she learned how to discern which responsibility belonged to them, and which rested upon the shoulders of another. Relieving anyone of their responsibility was considered to be Lessons in Debilitation, yet in the spirit of love and co-operation those in need found help and care, even to personal sacrifice, but for the right reasons. Guilt, as a weapon to facilitate one's own desires, was deeply frowned upon, and any attempt at emotional blackmail was immediately dealt with by that which they called Miserable Lessons. This is where one's responsibilities were compounded.

"They also developed an Attitude of Poverty, which is not impoverishment. It is to require little of substance, desire much, and know the difference. The reason behind this precept was that if you can be made to act for any other reason than for the right one, you are not responsible. So it was fine to acquire beautiful things—they knew these things represented their appreciation for the art of creation, and the arts of living."

She went silent for a few steps: "Through administering these lessons, teachers realized that every individual was a window to the world, with a slightly different perspective; therefore there

was something to be learned from each member of the society. With the acceptance of this truth, the Lessons of Scope were added to the disciplines, and each member became both student and teacher."

"Can I ask something?"

"You may."

"You use the word disciplines a lot. I mean, I get that practicing anything can be a discipline, but when you talk about evolving mankind's ways it's always about correct behavior?"

"And gathering and applying knowledge."

"One other thing: this was all done to the bring Kai-tahr's aspects up to speed, as well—meaning Phillip in his various incarnations?"

"It was."

"Thanks, carry on."

"As each member became both student and teacher, the precept of Adopting the Standard of the student's behavior was incorporated within the Lessons of Choice. In effect, the nature of the student's behavior became the means through which they were taught: teachers knew through their own experiences that feelings of being betrayed by their teachers often led to poignant realizations, and yet they ruthlessly pursued the student's freedom, by their own design, because the real betrayal was the student's self-deceit. The teacher simply agreed with it."

I didn't understand what she meant by adopting the standard of deceit, but it seemed that Jeanette was in up to her eyeballs in effort, and my brain was already cramping, so I let it go.

"These lessons required considerable evolutionary history, or tremendous natural ability to gather energy and store it without wasteful movements or actions. The latter type of student is very rare. The former are imbued with the catalytic energy of the moment of their birth, tuned like a tuning fork to the frequency containing their evolutionary experience in past and present terms, and orchestrated to accommodate a future intent born of their personal design. This circumstance readies them for the continuing onslaught of the unseen, which will force them into shattering self-examinations, only after which can they deal with others impeccably."

"Onslaught?"

"The cosmic orchestration of even seemingly minor events, to have you see what you are like, is relentless. This applies with or without a physical teacher present, and with or without overt signs of the design of their destiny unfolding. That said, the basis of the teachings is unconditional love, so students are never given more than their capacity. However, they are given all that they can take—to the very edge of their being. The result is one of complete spiritual dexterity, ruthlessness to apply needed lessons, and total impeccability of movement and action while living within the framework of a beautiful philosophy."

"This is what you, I mean Jeanette, is becoming?"

"It is."

"Are these the stalker's disciplines in Castaneda's work?"

"Adjusted for the culture in which he participated, yes. Overall, the lessons of The Arts and the Disciplines became known to the Essenes as the Kabala, and as Kha-li taught these lessons his students again learned the arts of How to Teach in a new cultural arena."

"Sorry—these lessons must be written somewhere?"

"Historically, it was dangerous to put universal lessons into print for all to see," Saa-ra replied, "so many of the ancient teachings appear in coded writings some of which have already been recovered. A message may be read in one context, and yet for those who knew what the

essential numerological reference points were, these writings conveyed another message. Deciphering what some of your scholars have called doodles, which appear in the margins of the Dead Sea scrolls, are codes that alter the context of the stories they appear to be telling. There are another one hundred and fifty scrolls yet to be discovered; these will shed light on the times of Christ. Some of these manuscripts were written by his own hand."

"Can you tell me something about who he was really—you know, beyond the perfection stuff?" I said.

"Perfection implies completeness, and therefore stagnation. Consciousness is ever evolving by its very nature. We will speak to that circumstance soon."

"I meant leaving out the religious stuff."

"His name was Joshua Dustani, and he was born in Bethlehem in the year 1975, by the Essene calendar. His mother was Asha, his father Levi, all of the House of Dustani—all of the House of David," she said, surprising me with these details. I had expected something vague.

"Joshua was a great scholar of his time, a teacher, and a mystic who taught among his people the Arts and Disciplines of the Mysteries. He was, to say the least, psychic, and a great healer using the energy of his being to create health among those who were afflicted. He was also a revolutionary, and no friend to religion or politics, for he saw within them greed and hypocrisy. This required him to become a skilled warrior, for such was needed in a time when their culture was occupied by a military presence governed by a leader focused in insanity; he fought if attacked."

"Not going to be an easy sell to Christians," I interjected.

She did not respond.

"May I ask another question?"

"You may."

"Jesus was said to have appeared in two places at once," I began, dancing around the 'rising from the dead' issue. "Was that true, or was it because people couldn't identify him—you know, everybody had a beard and there were no pictures?"

"His ability to appear in two places was valid." Jeanette /Saa-ra paused. I thought I caught a glimpse of her stealing herself for an effort, as she said, "You have a double that simply 'is', as it exists in all humans. Becoming aware of it is a function of repositioning the assemblage point by stopping what you call the internal dialogue that maintains your physical focus. This also applies to the arts of *Dreaming*."

"So is it a dream—being dreamed by his waking self?"

"It is no less real than you, when you dreamed lessons and saw yourself in them. The double is the self."

"But not the self I know as me?"

"You cannot reason the phenomenon of the double; it is not comprehensible within this mode of cognition. That said, it is every bit the person you know as you, but the vibration of *the other* exists in a moment that you would perceive as sooner than the moment you believe yourself to be experiencing."

"Huh?"

"Your view of the world is a translation enabled through perceptive mechanisms tuned to your time, and couched in relating assumptions; your world does not reveal itself directly to you. The nervous system also perceives time in a linear manner; all stimuli are required to jump a gap before you translate them into a sensation or action. Simplistically, this is how you—how we separate simultaneous events into a perceived order."

"I can see how that works."

"It follows that your view is a description that stands between you and the reality of your existence. In fact, your experiences are memories of an instant that has passed. It follows that *knowing* the double is the act of remembering one's self, which can recollect every memory your body has stored from the moment of birth. This act of remembering is also within the realm of every human being, as was every miracle ascribed to Joshua. One difference of many, however, was that he could recollect two instants because, as a seer, he was not tied to the descriptions of the world you are bound by. We will pursue this within your own lessons on the dreamer and the dreamed. In the meantime, do not become fixated with the solution residing in the concept of time, for all times are simultaneous, and reason has a penchant for creating that which it does not grasp."

She didn't smile, but I felt it.

"You once said this information is tuned to suit my predisposition for an accurate interpretation?"

"We did."

"You wanna turn the dial a bit closer to my station?"

Chapter 68 - The Christ Personalities

"I have another question." Without waiting, I said, "It makes perfect sense that if we don't understand ourselves, or where we really are in terms of being conformed to accept crappy circumstances, we will make huge mistakes because our actions are not tuned to the underlying nature of our circumstances. But what about the mystical knowledge they had?"

"What about it?"

"I'm not sure where I'm going with this," I admitted.

"All of their mystical knowledge applied directly to practical circumstances in a physical reality. There was no disconnect for them; they knew they were conscious energy making a brief, but critical foray literally into the physical manifestation of mankind's ideas, as represented by the metaphors of their existence."

"So they were alone in ways no one could understand, except others who were like them?"

"They were surrounded my miracles and mysteries in ways no one outside of their group could possibly understand, but we will leave the majesty of your, and their existence aside for the moment. These Masters interacted on a level that would have been incomprehensible to others had they not practiced an art called Controlled Folly." She grinned. "This is likely to become a requirement for you, because you've glimpsed the underlying nature of this place, and know that it's a profoundly broader view.... but we're getting too far ahead."

"You always are," I said.

"Let's catch you up," Jeanette said, seizing the moment. "The first entities to manifest Portions were not acting as emissaries, as you would think of them; they were first students of physical life. All of this," Jeanette waved her arm slowly over the vista in front of us, "was new to them. They evolved through trial and error, while being taught to respect their decisions as the critical point of power from which momentum raced outwards to shape their future. This meant that, regardless of which mystical experience they were acting out, the Now of what these Portions viewed as their own was an equally critical moment point that affected events beyond their view."

"What do you mean by acting out mystical experiences?"

"They were aware that any event is acted out upon its conception, in one probability or another, although its manifestation is dramatically slowed. To them this," Jeanette motioned with her hand, "is a mystical event unfolding according to the rules of physical perception. No disconnect."

"And what they viewed was a critical moment point because?"

"Their Now affected momentum across the entire continuum."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"Their interactions applied to Portions of their Identities living in times that exist simultaneously to theirs." She paused to allow me a moment to set up this picture in my mind, before she said, "Let's say that one Portion is an ancient Egyptian seer who chooses to exhibit restraint on her self-importance, whereas another Portion, a psychic in modern day New Orleans, desires to exhibit his assumed power and wields it unwisely. Their interactions affect each other. By force of the Egyptian having understood control, her influence would create a momentum that had a taming effect on her counterpart in his Now."

"Control over what?"

"She could not fear that a poor momentum was washing over her circumstances, and decide to wait it out, because she understood that these events were a consequence of all of her personalities, positioned in their Now, creating experiences for the benefit of their entire Identity. A poor momentum, for her, was likely something to be engaged positively for the benefit of someone in another time."

"Meaning she could be putting herself in the line of fire so to speak?"

Jeanette lowered her head, and pursed her lips in thought. Turning to me, she said, "I mean acting impeccably, which would be acting in conjunction with her other Portion's circumstances to both of their benefits. The key to understanding this, which I think is the point you're having difficulty with, lies in knowing where they are."

"Are you saying there is an unusual depth to their sense of positioning?"

"I am. You could say that they lived on the edge of inspirational moments of discovery, because they were aware that they were not alone—that other selves, in another times, were essentially gifting them with their insights, and their consternation, as it were." She grinned. "You look confused."

"I'm trying to imagine that kind of awareness. Wouldn't it be confusing?"

"Think of it this way: artists have inspirational moments by regularly asking themselves 'What will this say?' or 'How will this look?' and allowing their imaginations to seek out answers. In an unconscious moment, when they have beaten the impetus to opine into submission, they have effectively stopped the world they know and their intentions can grasp knowledge that their other selves know."

"So when I have an inspirational moment, another self of me is helping out?"

"That too—you could also be accessing knowledge from other sources."

"Carry on."

"This core understanding of multidimensionality provided each newly manifest Portion, or personality, with a basis from which Time, itself a new concept in terms of physical matters, was understood to heighten the importance of a moment-point that involved the quest of all personalities. From here, teachers simplified the principle for the masses, as they developed The Way to Live, by saying that one should treat others as you would have them treat you. Unsaid was that you may be doing exactly that. Give us a moment."

Saa-ra soon continued. "As these Portions learned to be responsible with and for their thoughts, and so their experience-creations, it was seen by the entire Identity to be expedient to insert more personalities into the continuum, under circumstances that would best provide a balanced view of the overall challenge at hand. This mattered greatly in that unforeseeable events might provide an unwanted impetus that could lead them away from that challenge."

"So they anchored each other?"

"Much more than that: when the Identity inserted multiple portions in the same relative place and time, their individual influences were highly energetic and complimentary. Do you need an example?"

"An example is always helpful."

"From the universal perspective," she said, "let's say that the challenge at hand for the Identity is to better understand the application of sound through the manipulation of other energies placed within the physical structure. By monitoring, and acting on specific-purpose energies..."

"Sorry—other energies in the physical structure?"

"The mechanisms through which to perceive, interpret, and create sound. Are you not a soundman?"

"Apparently not a sound man, though."

"By monitoring specific energies as guideposts, such as emotions, the Identity knows it can receive an immediate response from which to gauge the effect of any sound, or combination thereof. It then creates two Portions which, when they return, will remain distinct personalities with a purpose of their own, as the impetus of their experience offers them."

"I understand that we all are inviolate."

"They both enter into the physical plane at the same relative time and place, which will support their efforts—one into a family of musicians, and the other into a family of singers and actors. If chance does not intervene—an unforeseen probability, not a random event—they would feel propelled toward the opera or the theatre as they grew and honed their talents. If the most auspicious evolution of the quest did not occur their desire to be close to their art would accomplish the task; we will assume perfect conditions did not prevail."

"Granted," I quipped.

"Our musician finds that he cannot make enough money playing professionally, and so he stays in the family business of making string instruments, but he frequents the venues that use them. The other personality finds the rigors of opera too taxing, but finds popularity on the stage as an actor. The poor musician can afford only the back row, but his appreciation of the event does not dampen his enthusiasm at curtain call. In turn, the novice plays small parts and responds to the audience's approval, and thusly the notice of critics who would affect his future.

"The musician, stirred by the performance, takes home with him the desire to manufacture instruments that compliment the quality of the production he witnessed, thereby contributing to its future success. His instruments eventually become known among the elite for their discerning nature, and they begin to sell well; he can now afford seating closer to the stage. The actor, spurred on by increasingly good reviews, is offered larger parts with more fluidity of expression, such as a new musical that incorporates a large string section of the finest quality. The success of one contributes to the overall success of the other, until the day arrives that our tycoon instrument manufacturer is seated front row centre for a performance led by the most popular actor of his time.

"The last scene is performed solo, dimmed lights and in theatre silence, save for the haunting tones of a single stringed instrument. The actor becomes part of the emotion, and weeps freely to the beauty of words that somehow belong to the music, the music to the audience, and the audience to the world. When the last note drifts away and he stands alone, the only sound to be heard, only by the front row, is the drop of a final tear. A moment of unimaginable beauty is realized before the audience finds the presence of circumstance to stand and applaud the ineffability of the experience.

"Backstage, the wealthy manufacturer meets with the actor—there is a hesitant moment of recognition of some ill-defined debt, and then an embrace as both speak simultaneously, one saying, 'I would not have been so inspired were it not for your talents,' and the other replying, 'Without your talents I would not have been so inspired... we are as one.' And upon their return to their source Identity they find that this is exactly true."

"Cool."

"The Identity has then observed the affects of sound from points of view taken from the back row to the front, and as created from backstage to centre front. He has observed the relationship between quality to clarity, and the importance of *how* sound was spoken, or played, to what sound is emitted. He has discovered the combination of sounds that, although perceived as beautifully ineffable and impossible to capture, inspire creativity nevertheless. The Identity has therefore found another impetus with which to create, and understanding it at its most basic form can apply his knowledge to other situations.

"This information also adds depth to the personalities' perceptions of the ramifications of their own actions, and broadens their perspective on their relationship to everything around them. It also points out, in no uncertain terms, that not only are you your brother's keeper, as your Christ personalities proclaimed, you may just *be* your brother."

"Personalities, plural?"

"Yes. There were three, as there are again. It was additionally clear to Joshua that, by the formal esoteric philosophies spoken by the elders, he was of the Universal Source subject to the same laws as the Source, and he had been taught in the same representational manner that All That Is learned of His own nature and existence. He could then see that he was not only of His image in every respect but, in a Portion, *was* Him. The phrase 'We are all God's children,' though often spoken piously, is literally accurate, and Jesus understood this. As did his wife, their disciples, and their wives: all of them knew that the individual could affect all things, in all times, and in all places. They could also *see* that all things had a consciousness; therefore, a defilement of any form of life was an act against the self, especially when it literally may be so. This understanding provided them with additional and continuing impetus to teach others in the face of monumental ignorance, for this lessened ignorance everywhere, in every time." She paused.

"Big job," was all I could think to say.

"In this way," she continued, "the Essenes laid a foundation for students upon which other realizations would drop in over the course of their lifetimes, and endlessly reinforce the fact that the design of your physical school is primarily about assuming one's responsibilities. This translates into reverence for, and unconditional love of all consciousness. The Portions spread out across Time knew this, and when faced with the choice of leaving, learning, or teaching, they never ran unless it was a strategic move in their Now."

"The influence of which was felt... wholly shit," I said, pun not intended, "you can substitute the story of Christ for the musicians, John The Baptist—all of them exchanging influences to create the entire drama for the audience—the world."

"Indeed you can. This is an example of how a mass event can manifest one person at a time, in many Times, initiated in a Now that appears to be far in the past. We will explain mass events when we speak to the design of destiny as a mosaic of intentions. For now, it is enough to know that Joshua was not as widely known as you might think, nor was he anywhere near as influential as he became over time, which was precisely the point—to influence a long-term line of development until it was time to bring it to an end.

"Which is now... I see."

Jeanette, as Saa-ra, continued her story of Jesus as though we had not paused; it took me a moment to reorient myself in her storyline.

"Joshua was taken into the area now called the Sudan," she said awkwardly, as an actor might peruse a script ahead of reading for an audition, "where he lived with two brothers and one sister among the camps of Achmed-Abu-Ap. Over a twelve-year period," Jeanette said, picking up her pace, "Asha taught the arts of healing and prophecy and Levi the arts of healing and *seeing*. Having become an Essene Scholar, Achmed took the Essene philosophies and adapted them to the nomadic Arab way of life. In other words, the principles did not change, only the cultural arena. In the course of time, this adaptation became the Koran."

"There goes the Muslim audience."

"Upon their return to the Essene culture of Judea, Joshua became both student and teacher, and adopted on his thirteenth birthday the Hellenic name Jesus. Asha and Levi had long been known among the Essenes, of which they were a part, by the Hellenic names Mary and Joseph. They were both teachers and healers, but in day-to-day affairs, Joseph was a carpenter, Mary a weaver of cloth, and in his time, Jesus became an orange grower. This vocation permitted him to travel throughout the lands occupied by Rome, for even in that time the army travelled on its stomach."

Jeanette paused, took another one of those information-digesting poses, breathed deeply, and continued speaking more or less as herself.

She said that Jesus was married at the age of twenty, according to the philosophies of the Essene culture, and that he was the father of seven children: in his time, it was believed that the *Master* embodies life in its most profound terms, and radiates its purpose throughout the act of love and procreation. He was only fit to teach if he understood the subject, and as he spoke of man to man he lived as men live—warrior, scholar, teacher, mystic, and orange grower. His wife was his spiritual counterpart, the female principle to his male.

Their acceptance of their power and responsibility for it were whole. Together they created leaders among their nation, and gave history its next great impetus at a time when the earth stood still in the face of its own destruction—a needless destruction wrought upon itself for the purpose of greed, political power, and the enslavement of humanity at large.

"What about the apostles—how did they help?" I asked her.

"They were fragments of their entire Christ Identity, sent to adopt the roles of which you are aware. There were many about whom your world knows nothing—all struggled to become whole."

"In what ways?"

"One of Phillip's Portions was known to you as John the Baptist. He was a superior type, not a superior man, who deeply resented the guidance he received from women. This was particularly true about the most powerful woman, the wife of Joshua. He thought that because he stood amid the

crowds who gathered in the dry riverbeds to hear his powerful voice resonate off the hardened banks that he knew the ways of the world. In reality, the ways of a world that treated women as chattels caused him to assume women were somehow less than he, in spite of his rigorous upbringing learning the ways of impeccable acts and non-judgment. Consequently, the day came when he failed to heed a warning from a woman—a Master in her own right—to not denounce the sexual activities of a political figure's wife. She told him this could serve no purpose for his statements were male judgments. John disregarded her advice, denounced the woman, and was arrested.

"At this time, he was widely known and his mystical abilities feared, so he was not incarcerated in a prison. Unbeknownst to the public, he was locked in a room at Pilate's residence. Even so, he knew his fate. This caused him to review his life's choices, to gain perspective on what he had done and why. In this way, he realized that self-importance had caused him to lose his wife and children, who came daily to the walls of the prison to draw attention to his plight: in no small measure, this increased public unrest. He also realized he had accomplished his earthly mission, within which he saw the inevitability of the design of Intent at work. This is to say that even his errors taught him about himself, and helped to fulfill his quest.

"Knowing only that his actions would serve his cause, he employed his powers of persuasion to begin teaching Pilate and his guards The Way To Live. By the time Herod decided that he should die, he had made an arrangement with one of his students, and subsequently took the poison brought for him. When the guards had to drag his body to his "execution," the masses assumed his incarceration had been brutal; his martyr's death doubly enraged them. This strategy to further his quest transcended his mortal end, for unrest over Roman rule would generate an inescapable momentum for change."

"Pilate was a student?"

"Pilate was not the man your history has portrayed him to be. His actions forestalled the Romans capturing Jesus, before the actions of the most notorious man in Christian history brought his time to an end. This event also did not unfold as you have it written."

"I'm shocked," I said.

Again, without comment, Saa-ra said that Jesus foresaw the end of his ministry, and he set in motion a strategy of closure. ..

"He took one individual into his confidence, for there was too much at stake to risk telling his plan to others. He chose the one disciple who had exhibited the greatest courage and loyalty, both of which would be required of Judas. Jesus made his request. In denial, Judas argued desperately against the plan, clinging to the unlikelihood that Jesus was wrong. Jesus assured him that his time was at an end, and that the plan was sound. Judas agonized for days before agreeing to help him.

"Over the following weeks, Jesus continued his routine of teaching, going from place to place based on his foreknowledge that it was safe to do so. Apart from his ability to *know*, he did not tempt chance; he had no schedule to become known to the Romans, while his disciples often went ahead of him to see if they had set a trap.

"Speaking in widely divergent locations, the disciples sometimes allowed the crowds to assume they were listening to Jesus, and not one of his followers. This added to his divine mystique for, as we have discussed, he had the ability to manifest his presence in places distant from the one in which he had just spoken. Importantly, many descriptions of him added to the confusion over his whereabouts, until he promised to share a dinner with a friend at a specific time and place. Judas then fulfilled his bargain by giving away that location to Pilate's men.

"As a result of John's teachings, by this time Pilate was in union with the Essenes. However, there was no purpose in him knowing about the Master's plans; he had no choice but to arrest him. He then met with Barabbas, and together they formulated a plan of their own: Pilate ensured its success by assigning few guards who would be neither courageous nor stupid when Barabbas's men arrived with a large rescue party.

"When his men challenged the guards, the guards retreated until they realized there was no real pursuit. From the periphery of the crowd, they saw one of Jesus' followers fall to the ground, and engulfed in grief at what he thought was about to happen, proclaimed himself to be Christ. The guards seized this moment to save themselves from the cross; Pilate would want to believe they had carried out his orders, and the guards believed they could convince him that the right man had died, should a conspiracy about a switch having taken place get back to him. They quickly "recaptured" Christ before many people realized anything was amiss.

"When Jesus saw what was happening to the stranger, he turned on his rescuers and declared that no one should take his place. Barabbas's men had to overpower him, explaining to the curious crowd that the man was so grief-stricken he wanted to take Christ's place on the cross, as they wrestled him away. There was nothing Jesus could do. The few who knew what was going on grieved for the stranger, while those who did not know validated Christ's identity through their anguish."

Saa-ra said the returning twenty-six emissaries, and the three core Personalities that comprise the Christ consciousness, will have marked themselves in that man's honor. All of them have a scar on one foot.

She added that these events were not revealed to anyone not directly involved in the scheme, for the Essenes did not take unnecessary chances. So it was that the courage of Barabbas, the complicity of Pilate, and the personal torment of Judas remained unknown even among their own community. Nevertheless, all might have been for nothing had it not been for the wife⁽⁵⁾ of Jesus....

Learning of his resistance to the stranger's fate, and aware there was doubt about the identity of the body on the cross, she realized that anonymity was not the solution to keeping the secret of his survival. Jesus had often been away from his home, sometimes to the point of neglect, but he was a devoted husband and father of six. In her heart, she knew that he would not stay away, nor could his family go into hiding with him. This could only confirm the rumor that the wrong man had been killed.

Leaving nothing to chance, she decided to remove the most compelling motive Jesus had for risking everything, now that he had accomplished his primary mission in physical life. She took into her confidence the one individual whom Jesus trusted to the core of his being, both as a teacher from his youth and as the grieving mother of his beloved cousin John. When Elizabeth was brought to him in his place of hiding, and she told him that his wife had died giving birth to their seventh child, he lost his will to stay in Judea.

With the rest of his family well taken care of, as was the way of the Essene community, and the prophecy of his ministry ending fulfilled, he and a small band of followers left for the country now known as Tibet. He died there in his eighty-third year, leaving behind as his legacy the knowledge of the existence of a loving Universe, and the principles upon which mankind could find their freedom.

Saa-ra said, "The misunderstood actions of six Roman guards became your first version of history, and great sacrifices taken on behalf of mankind's future went unknown. The politics of the times declared that it could be no other way."

Jeanette regarded me almost painstakingly, as she formally said, "Mankind looks out upon a world with infinite potential and staggering mysteries to be explored, but in his quest for power he has again lost his connection to Spirit; the Minimal Chances that you struggle to grasp escape mankind's grasp in their grandest forms. Now, in the earth's decline, he must make one final choice to determine the course of his lessons in future time evolution. Choose unwisely, and you will return into the circumstance of your own making. Chose the strength of love and kindness, and the myriad worlds of opportunity await you. Here and Now is the mid-plane where mankind has thus far declared war upon the earth that gave him life, created an enemy of womankind, forsaken his own children, and threatened to leave them a legacy of despair and hopelessness. He calls himself the master of his fate, when the cumulative effects of his reign have brought him to the edge of destruction. His demands supersede his gifts, his violence supersedes his love, his destruction is without boundary. Even in the western world, he raises his children in the shadow of war and domestic abuse to a degree that has horrified the source Himself. There are a handful of the wise that guard the barriers between humanity and total destruction, but their numbers are increasing, for Joshua has returned to the world and lives today as three portions, embodied in three individuals, that comprise a trinity of action. Earth, Heaven, and Spirit. One of the men and the woman will be pared. Together they will create an opening of the universal consciousness through the last days of the twentieth century, and seed a new beginning for the twenty-first."

"Uh huh—couple of things: how far along are you with retrieving Kha-tahr?" I said, hoping to snap her out of proselytizing.

"It is done."

"Cool, did All That Is discover his own source?"

"Yes."

I knew better than to ask.

⁽⁵⁾ I have scoured my notes and memories, and not been able to recall the name of Joshua's wife.

Chapter 69 - The Magic of Mankind: Part 2

Meeting outside Ed's apartment on Pendrell Street the next day, we began walking toward Beach Avenue and the bicycle path that encircles the entire peninsula. We had not gone far before Jeanette said we should head back; she suddenly felt "heavy" so we turned around.

Once settled in the apartment, Jeanette said, "In this next section of your training, we're going to deal with the inherent magic of mankind."

"Because you are still concerned that I'm not excited about everything?"

"You are who you are, and I sometimes fail to appreciate the damage your journey has caused, but I won't stop trying. Do you recall our first conversation about magic?"

"Not much beyond the idea that we're conscious energy having experience in a physically oriented world."

"That's the short version: we're filling it out today. I've also said the truth is relentless, and that we cannot help but learn. It follows that we cannot help but learn the *truth* when we are ready for it, correct?"

"The *one truth* Kha-lib refused to explain, because he said we weren't ready to learn what it is?"

"I think you are ready now. It's you," Jeanette deadpanned.

"What's me?"

"You are the *truth*, and the *truth* is magical." She held up a hand for me to be patient, but I was ill-prepared for what followed...

"In the story of the awakening of All That Is, Kha-lib did not focus on His agony of self-awareness without resolution. By this I mean that All That Is was in a state of non-being—aware, but unable to experience—to move, so to speak, while this awareness relentlessly stirred in anticipation of..." she hesitated then said, "in constant unresolved anticipation of knowing Himself."

"Believe it or not, I understood that."

"It follows that every effort to examine His reality was a jubilant exploration of self-discovery beneath which the *acts* of creation and exploration gave Him Identity: He was no longer non-being," she explained into my blank expression, "and as His explorations created Portions of His entire being, He was no longer alone. As these Portions explored," she circled her finger in the air, "they created other Identities, and so on."

"I'm not clear on what you mean by Identities."

Portions are endowed with all the attributes of their Source, but they have no independent experience. The *acts* of creation and exploration form an independent Identity. In essence, this is to also explore the nature of All That Is, as the source of all Sources." She lifted a brow.

"I can see the progression," was all I committed to.

"An Identity, with a capital 'I', is an action that is conscious of itself, and from which other actions become individually aware, and so on."

"Got it."

"We'll see. The acts and self-awareness exist in a seemingly paradoxical state, because the awareness always seeks stability while the Identity demands expression: without action, it would become agonizingly immobile—in a state of non-being. In the realm of an infinite existence, of which all consciousness is aware at their level, you can see why it has to experience everything it possibly can. What did I say?"

Jeanette's last sentence had snagged a deep thought. Focusing on it, a specific aspect of my dreaming lesson came back to me, as if I was recalling my postal code; the first digit was distant, but it soon unfolded the rest. Phillip had said that immortality, as understood at his level, is achievable only through experience, and specifically the treatment of experience in responsible and efficient ways. I ~~got~~ understood it now.

"Part of a dreaming lesson fell into place," I said.

"I love when that happens," she said. "I feel smart."

"I have a question," I said, cutting short my self-congratulatory contemplation. "What keeps it stable?"

Swallowing hard, Jeanette said, "Stability comes from properly assimilating the experience-knowledge of its actions. In other words, there are periods of great pushing—like yearning itself into the next experience, which overpowers the tug of relative stability acquired while assimilating experience." She raised her brow again. "Do you need a moment to process that with your new understanding?"

"You're saying there's a constant tension."

Nodding, she said, "Your Identity is therefore not a thing; it is a dimension of action—energy that is constantly changing by way of the experiences that change you, through an exquisite imbalance between the elements of the whole. Literally, you are an ongoing event."

"I'm a verb?"

"Mankind has known this from times before recorded history," she said, struggling with a smile, "wherein educators recognized an inherent unrest in mankind that forces us to act. This force was thought to be destructively representative of demonic influences, when an explanation was needed for otherwise inexplicable motivation. However, when others acted without obvious direction—also because they felt like it—and their actions resulted in what were perceived as beneficial developments, the demon became a spirit that inexorably drove us toward knowledge. This force," she concluded, "is the manifestation of the constant tug of stability and pull of creativity inherent to all consciousness."

With a shrug, I surmised, "I can't help but do things, which means learning, and with you I'm learning not only what I'm really like, but what I really am?"

"Hold that idea." She paused for a moment then said, "One of the most profound things All That Is realized, was that His thoughts and actions activated everything in every universe they touched, and everything impinges on everything else through some means of energy transference or translation. In more immediate terms, the Christ character's awareness of this circumstance meant that God, by any name, was not *in* all of us; He *is* us. Can you make that leap?"

"I'm a consequence of multiple translations of His activated consciousness, sure. We all are."

Jeanette waited for more... not for long.

"The processes of creation," she continued, "included the discovery of independent will, and so the immutable granting of free will to all creations. All That Is called this process love." Jeanette briefly closed her eyes. "I say 'process' because love is not static, nor is it contained or containable: a rapturous explosion of literally endless creativity was unleashed as the epiphany of the full nature of His Being became evident to Him."

"Sounds like the Big Bang was about All That Is having a realization," I joked.

"Doesn't it just," she said, shifting a micron my way. With exaggerated concern, as if she was creeping up on a revelation, Jeanette said, "Let me ask you something I asked when we first met; is mankind inherently good?"

"Not magic?"

"Baby steps; I'm trying to get you there," she said, with a weary grin.

Fidgeting with a cushion, I said, "I get the implication that we were literally born of a process called love, but free will came with a price; even John the Baptist screwed the pooch with it. I mean," I inched back, "by your own words, we've declared war on the earth, and we're at the edge of our own destruction."

"And?"

"I think we want to be good—that we really have no choice but to eventually become good, because the nature of reality brings the shit we create back to us until it becomes fertilizer."

"In less colorful terms, what is the essential act I've been talking about all along?"

"The inevitability of becoming better beings goes through the exploration of our own nature?"

"Exactly, which is what everybody does all of the time in this physical school, correct?" She stared as if there was something in her words that should set fire to my imagination.

"Ya... so?"

Leaning back in a "this might take a while" gesture, Jeanette said, "I'm going to explain the magic trick."

"Wouldn't that gut it?" I quipped.

"Awe and surprise are yours to discover, or not. Your earliest Identity," Jeanette said, exhaling, "knew itself in ways that could not be fully expressed within the constraints of a physically oriented universe, because this kind of universe encapsulates energy for limited and specific experiences. Using this circumstance to its advantage it became very creative in its explorations, by separating its self-awareness from the actions it took—stability and action being the whole—so the stability phase could objectify the actions through an earthbound projection of its own consciousness. This projection evolved an ego, designed to filter out the conscious awareness of its greater reality, to keep you safe in a place where you could die before you accomplished your purpose. It would be accurate to say that the slower speed of the physical self created subjectivity." She paused so that I could order this information to my way of thinking.

In a moment, I understood that an objective awareness of our natural energetic state would have us subjectively fail to appreciate the degree of protection we needed to survive physical journeys. "With you on that," I said, to prove it, "We create events that represent some aspect of self-exploration, then we look at them as if they happened in some other way."

"Exactly!" she exclaimed as if I were on the verge of a breakthrough.

A moment of staring into my blank expression passed before, with precise enunciation, she said, "We express ourselves as fully as we think is required to research a particular focus, then we decide not to continue if further exploration is not..." she hesitated, "not fundamentally contributory to the established elements of the whole. Then we move on." She cocked her head. "We *have to* move on?" she said in a rising tone.

"Seth calls that value fulfillment, so what's the problem?"

"Problem? I'm describing your inherent magic."

"And doing an excellent job of it."

"Apparently not," she mused wryly. "When you write," she forged onwards, "you chose words to suit the impression you are after in the moment. That impression is altered by your recognition of other possibilities as you follow your original intentions. You then want to stress some of these emerging ideas, and conceal others for a later time. Doing this further alters the tenor, cadence, and vocabulary of the voice expressing them. In other words," she said with anticipation, "moment by moment, you are forming something more than what you had originally planned, and yet from your writing experiences you planned on this happening, just not what 'more' would turn out to be." She insinuated a forward lean. "You are constantly reaching to pull a rabbit out of the hat, knowing that it will be a hybrid by the time you do. Correct?"

"I hadn't thought about it like that, but yes."

"Here's the trick: you are looking for a creative solution to a never clearly stated challenge of story development, other than it must be unified, hopefully clever, and inspiring, if not surprising in the end. But the anticipation of generating allusions brings both the surprise and the satisfaction at having created the illusion that you knew what you were doing... which you did, but not in a cohesive way."

"With you on that."

"Extend it: everyone is essentially looking for a creative solution to a never clearly stated challenge—the meaning and purpose of life. This challenge is always vague, because no one can definitively say where he or she is going; if they could, they would be translating an established idea directly into form. Think about writing a story without ever having any of those unexpected twists and turns?"

"Boring... see Spot run. Run Spot run."

"Exactly. In effect, you would be plagiarizing an existing life-idea, not creating a new chapter of adventures. As it is, the average person examines the inner workings of self-expression as they manifest in their daily circumstances, no different from your inner manifestations appearing in print, but with an exception. The average person acts as if they are in the audience, constantly surprised at what goes on around them, when they *are* the magicians creating their own experiences."

"Okay, I can see that."

Expelling a short breath of frustration, Jeanette said, "Experience generates knowledge, which generates a new synthesis of thought that becomes the basis for the next level of exploration. You also know that an Identity has an infinite number of traits from which to manifest any new personality configuration it desires. As the knowledge it gains becomes a part of each personality it is changed in ways not foreseeable, so you see it is not telling the story of exploration—it *is* the story unfolding," she said with intensity.

Not seeing what the big deal was, I said, "So I'm the magician, the audience, and the rabbit?"

She pitched forward. Somehow managing to corral the swirl of wine in her glass, she said, "You are unstoppable energy perpetuating and synthesizing knowledge to the degree that you can imagine any illusion you want, become mesmerized by experiencing it as a reality that's devoid of any conflicts you do not want, and have what is essentially a pure experience within it. But maybe the best trick," she said, again capturing her wine without looking, "is that examining your experiences creates a pause at the intersection of infinity and eternity. You can contemplate the minutiae of your every thought and act, even as they continue on their own path—forever yearning, forever learning, and forever loved, because you are not surrounded by it—you are *made* of it. More than this," she said in a rush, "the self that is you, has been meticulously designed to play a difficult role in an unfathomably intricate play, in a constantly evolving Now. That," she pointed at my chest with her empty hand, "is the *truth!* If that's not magical..." she said, surrendering the remainder of the thought to an open-palm.

"I see your point, but all of those circumstances also make mine."

"Pardon me?"

"With all of that going for us, wouldn't mankind's best trick be repeatedly destroying everything?"

And pop went that balloon. Well kind of...

Jeanette started to speak, chuckled, and said, "Only...." but her chuckling took hold.

"Only a..." was all she managed to say before acquiescing to thought, which caused me join in, which in turn made it funnier for her because I had no idea what we were laughing about. Finally taking deep breaths, and said, "Only a verb could have come up with that reasoning." A deep double-snort let loose the crazy woman I have previously described...

That night /early morning, I awakened from a dream I could not remember, and lay there trying to pinpoint whatever thoughts had ruined my sleep. In a short while, I became aware that an area of my room was beginning to glow a sparkling green. As I stared at it, an energy shape took form. The dimensions were that of the comic book character, the Hulk—too disproportionately large to be human, and squarish, not contoured. There were no features in its Star Trek-like "transporter" mode of energy manifestation; I could see the back wall through it.

The intensity of its glow brightened, and the lines of energy that formed the indistinct shape became sharply defined within it, then the entire glow faded into the relative darkness of my room. Over coffee the next morning, I told Jeanette about this literal manifestation of spirit, and

asked her what relevance this event had to my training. First staring opened-mouthed, she then managed to communicate that it had demonstrated the inherent magic of mankind.

I said I could see that, and it was very cool, but nothing else?

Chapter 70 - Dreaming Lessons

Late that night, I awakened in a dream I recognized as such by the familiar geographical location, and my aloof acceptance of my circumstance: I knew that I was not in a physical world, and felt no particular attachment to it, or anything for that matter; no anxiety, curiosity, or even disorientation. I was almost immediately an observer.

Zzzz: We stood unseen beside a fountain in a square; the world passed us by in slow motion. It crossed my mind that I wouldn't be experiencing this opening sequence again unless we were going to deal with levels of actualization—of probabilities and inevitabilities, because free will had a way of skewing things, and I was the poster child for why it should require a license. I do not know how I knew this—what cues there may have been—only that knowing things not otherwise apparent in the dream state was standard fare.

As he had done the last time a dream began this way, Phillip allowed a moment for me to orient myself before saying, "We shall speak of your developmental choices."

"I'm having no fun when it comes to changing my behavior, if that's what you mean."

"Why do you think you struggle?"

"Jeanette..." I paused to find the proper word, "challenges me more often now, and with more edge, as if that'll help. At other times, she will agree with my reasoning and difficulties, as if we hadn't argued about them."

"What do you believe she is doing?"

"I think she's keeping issues in the forefront of my mind but, like I said, it doesn't help resolve them."

"It will when you discern the essence of why you struggle." Phillip turned to face a vision of a slowly rotating earth that was the size of a Miami moon. "Today's lesson is a foundation upon which you may strengthen your efforts to discover why you struggle." Pointing, he said, "You have seen the unfortunate circumstances that encompass your world; circumstances you could not have appreciated from outside of their grasp. From this knowledge, you have accepted the history of your world and understood the choices of development that have embedded humankind within their current insanity. That was the overview. We are here now to explore how and why you chose your particular path within this insanity." He looked my way. "We understand this path was difficult; there is nothing to feel badly about. There is also nothing we won't do to bring you back to health."

"Like Kai-tahr?"

"Just so." Gesturing, he said, "We, as in the collective We that includes the independent self you believe yourself to be, required these final lessons in physical reality. But as a Portion of the collective We, you have engaged a physical journey that you must complete."

"After this current quest is over?"

"No exceptions."

"Before you go on, I'm confused about what it is I'm supposed to do for the collective Us. Kha-lib said one thing, Jeanette said another, and I can see where they might be kind of the same thing..." I left it there.

"We will show you what Our lessons needed to be, for your personal sense of history and purpose need awakening."

"Ready when you are."

He turned away. "Hold in your thoughts the mechanisms of creation, probable selves, and the placement of Portions in the continuum," he said, waving his arm in an 180° arc.

The square and the ghost-like people dissolved into a scene of Saa-ra and another me, (John²) passing through the wisps of time that separated chronological events. They merged into a layer slightly faster in vibratory speed than the one they left, but slightly slower than the one I (John¹) was sharing with Phillip in what I considered my 'Now'.

The levels of time, as I perceived them, were not confusing. I understood they could just as easily have been displayed as endless reflections, mirrors facing mirrors, each one representing a different 'time' by way of the apparent distance between the progressively smaller reflections. I also thought of this separation as here and there, but I was comfortably aware that there existed an infinite number of heres and theres: John² perceived only one 'here' from his 'Now', but he knew, as did I, that there were probable Johns who considered themselves the only John in their here and Now. To me, they would be 'there' and 'then'.

The speed increase John² experienced in the transition from his original 'here' represented a more developed time—a future time when compared to the classroom they had just left. But I could see there were many faster times in the past. I knew this because, within the vista that belonged to their Now, I could see highly developed cultures that still existed if viewed from a when 'before' these cultures had killed themselves.

All of this would have seemed unfathomably complex, had the scenes been explained in words, but meaning was somehow inherent in the multi-dimensional aspect of what I was witnessing... except why we always destroyed our cultures was not blatantly evident. That is, I knew why this was, but seeing an overview helped to explain why it was invisible when viewed from within a particular time... Phillip looked my way apparently pleased with my internal dialogue: I focused on the progression of my choices again.

The layer Saa-ra and John² had entered was in the vibratory medium of what humanity called the years of 1981, 1982, when I was working through my "developmental lessons" in Central America. I could also see that they were screening—for lack of a better word—a version of events that was universally 'beneath' their current classroom level—the second level of the lesson I was viewing was in the form of probable outcomes. These events had a particular hue and translucence that seemed less solid: they existed as energy-thoughts that did not yet have the momentum to become physically manifest.

Then-snap! They entered into what was for John², the third realm of his lesson experience, and for a moment, I lost sight of them.

Phillip told me this form of traveling was not for everyone. To be able to travel through time unescorted was to be cognizant of the effects of one's very presence, the minutiae of which was indescribable when restricted to symbolic communications such as language: it wasn't a matter of "dropping in" while deciding not to change things. The subtle rhythm's of pulses and subsequent changing of colors made it abundantly clear to me that there existed endless critical times and places where one does not want to hear the word "Oops."

I realized that Phillip was not speaking, but I could hear him more than physically clearly due to the added depth of sharing symbolic assumptions I was familiar with in the dream state.

I looked toward the lesson John² was getting from within what he viewed as probable events to come, and from which I had chosen events that were now in my past.

From inside this version of unmanifest reality, Saa-ra and John² were looking intensely at the entire probable framework, which now came into my full view. I also saw a third entity—a

shimmer around his form—watching the two of them from a time/distance I didn't understand, nor did I feel the need to. With this thought, I sensed that he saw me in the same way—then a gathering of about twenty entities materialized around this central figure.

"Are they the emissaries?" I said, pointing as if Phillip could possibly have missed them.

"That is Michael and our core group of intermediaries. They were present at the design stage of your journey to evaluate and custom fit their role in your choices, as these suited their own journeys. There were many others who wanted to participate, but they were not able for a number of reasons. Many of them are watching your progress with great interest, even as we speak to you now." Phillip turned away to focus me on the scene.

Saa-ra and John² came to focus on what seemed to be an inevitable scenario, with an initialization point yet to be determined: John² saw that the path he had chosen—to work in El Salvador—had irreversibly led him to view his exterior lessons—the ways of the world in general—from the standpoint of destruction. He would pursue this focus in a dogmatic manner.

He also saw that there had been, before El Salvador, the option of a more academic approach; there existed a probable university graduation ceremony with a journalism degree. In that probability, he would work for the same television companies he had eventually chosen, but in producing and editorial occupations. He had also gone to war so that he could speak about it from experience, but he had no more authority on the subject than those who had gone before him. If anything, because he was a reactionary, he had less credibility.

His first war in that probability, appalling though they all were, was considered by his mentors, and so the public, to be a relatively tame affair. Something in the modality of that time/probability did not stimulate the masses to abhor atrocity. It was as if they did not recognize it.

I suspected this was because the population was only generically aware of warfare's ways, as it was in my time, because they also had cultural restrictions on "taste." They were otherwise forced to focus on the illusions of patriotism and political necessity behind the events, and not be "distracted" by the facts of culturally constructed fear, corporategreed, and grasps for power.

In a related probable destiny, after his first (common) war, John² chose to return to University for a graduate degree, then he went back to work in television news where his opinions—based on how warfare spoke to the ability of the few to manipulate the many, whereas the few fell far short of being geniuses—remained ignored. His hypothesis flew in the face of ratings and revenue.

I saw that John² also learned that he would have become a writer in either probability, but through a different path. He would have become disenchanted with the ways of the media and, ironically, teach these same ways to undergrads with the added spin of his wizened experience and jaded wit. I chuckled because I had done this with college freshmen in the version of events "I" had chosen.

Watching the original scenario unfold, John² understood that the academic approach was not to be. His personality, once subjected to the forces of mankind's insanity, would no longer be suited to its now seemingly pointless rigors. Paradoxically, he required just such a driving force—making relevant the senselessness of warfare to those who might participate—to engage academia's demands with the discipline of true knowledge behind him.

This force, he then saw, would have to be based on something equal to the terrors that would haunt him—destroy him—and it became clear. It would have to be himself: survival on his terms only, in what he would know to be an irrational world would become his narrow goal.

Looking for a suitable probable line of events, Saa-ra made it clear to John² that he would choose to react to his first mass deaths by focusing too closely on himself, as if to guard against losing something more. He would become so hugely focused on his moment to moment circumstances, burning energy in the form of fear like a nuclear meltdown, that Phillip could take him to the edge of endurance quickly, and influence him directly without resistance—as if that would change anything—but energy efficiency was everything.

John² also saw that to first chose the El Salvador experience would position him to view all manner of carnage thereafter. Having been numbed by the unexpected ferocity, and maliciousness he would witness, he could witness anything without compassion for it would be dead. And through the recognition of his callous reactions to a multiplicity of deprivations to come, he would remain there until he chose to focus on his gifts.

Or until Phillip made him focus on them.

John² was well aware that Phillip was quite prepared to do this to him—to Himself—and he was not concerned.

I looked at Phillip. Without rancor, I said, "You can be harsh," but I knew he had heard me think "harsh bastard."

"As you can see, we agreed to everything," he replied easily. "We always do; there is only taking responsibility for one's choices."

I knew he was right; I placidly returned to the scene.

Still from within, Saa-ra viewed the probable continuum with John², stopping to exaggerate an event that was highly likely to come about... a devastating blow to his self-image, which she casually saw as, "A place where you can change direction."

John² saw the ramifications of this choice; it was brilliant as always. Unpleasant, but brilliant.

They continued to scan, watching for points of change they could use when they saw, in one probable outcome, events culminate drastically to curtail his purpose: he had been killed. As he was not intended to die there, other intersections were needed. The succession of events immediately after his drastic change in direction was given a nudge, and the continuity that followed led him to where he needed to be. The core lesson of illusions—the distortion and manipulation of perception through fear—was in place.

In the end, Saa-ra moved his working in El Salvador to the front of what were now inevitable events, and shuffled my potential for an official "higher education" into another mode of accomplishment. Saa-ra and John² then left that layer of probability, moving directly back to her original teaching platform, no different from mine in vibration, just in a different Now. I saw her send me home.

I knew that soon after, from my current view, I would go to El Salvador... Phillip pointed to the right of the scene, and in what amounted to a vivid flash he played back what had actually happened. It was true to the design, with many little variations.

I did not so much see as I sensed Phillip's historical presence in my decision making, and to my surprise not all of it in critical moments in my terms, but certainly in his—ours: forgetting my wallet made me late for a horrific winter accident on the Don Valley Parkway; a gust of wind blew a grain of sand into a sniper's eye, Tunisian pirates took on contaminated fuel.⁽⁶⁾

It was humbling to have been watched over this closely... a thought that triggered a display of myriad moments of being influenced throughout my life: I thoroughly understood what Jeanette had meant by "following the momentum of my intentions." They not only designed my journey, they were a real force of influence in physical matters for everyone. If they only knew...

I saw, as a single event, how this design ensured that I had never been destitute even though I handled money poorly. I also had a sense of timing—tick-tock, not diplomacy, which served me in countless professional ways. An offshoot of this was navigating at sea, although I had no talent for the mathematics behind it.⁽⁷⁾ This sense also served me throughout my time in areas of conflict; when it was time to go, I went.

There was also a time when I had become far too loose with my profanity, sometimes embarrassing even myself by uttering a creative string of expletives. Then one morning, in late 1981, I woke up feeling different, lighter somehow. When I was at work, and the opportunity to pronounce the first memo of the day "fuckin stoo-pid" was at hand, I said nothing. This definitive moment somehow made me aware that I was routinely obscene. During a lengthy discussion about upcoming travels, wherein I would usually rant about unfair per diems, I did not do that either. In fact, I became more aware that I was choosing words to avoid gratuitous sexual analogies. By the end of the day, I felt cleaner – maybe clearer of mind, as well.

I saw/knew that Phillip had intervened at this time, because he was not pleased with my endless expressions of fear. These would influence other's decisions about my path, and I still had a ways to go in this phase of my journey.

As swiftly as these displays of influence, and their subsequent momentum appeared, they were gone leaving me with the indelible impression that the emissaries were aware of their own designs to the degree that a momentary sensitivity was an alert they should focus on. A "feeling" was pretty much of a command.

Phillip refocused me on the original script.

After she had sent me home, Saa-ra joined Phillip, who in turn was joined by Michael and the other intermediaries, a term I had not asked him to define, but which became clear moments later.

"He will need your help now," Saa-ra said to Michael.

"I will be there for him," Michael replied.

As he faded from the group, I could make out an iconically Roman face morphing into a youthfully handsome man who began looking like Ed as it disappeared. In the same way, faces of the others momentarily resolved into people I knew, and some I hadn't yet met: with the former, I didn't need to ask what role they played. That information was available as I gazed upon their image—as was my influence on them...

Friends from a single year in college had stabilized me—Elaine Loring, Linda George, Rick Dade, and Jim Stockley brought me joy and laughter, as did Jim Shutsa, who also gave me work that propelled me into national network employment.

Lovers were all on their own quest, but there was an additional twist with Graciela Sorribes—had she not dumped me, I would have taken an editing job that kept me in Toronto, and I would have destroyed her innocent good nature in those early years. She was a brief, pivotal encounter, who had played her role of decimating my perception of how others saw me then she escaped unscathed.

The principals of huge influence were my parents, Ed, and [Michael Monty](#). To a lesser extent, but critical nevertheless, were cameramen Robert Whyte, David Wilson, Sean Bobbit, and Manny Alvarez. On the side of clandestine, critical-to-my-path guides into the carnage stood correspondent Brian Stewart and producer Tony Burman. Offering me excessive comfort were Barbara Perry and Susan Saint.

Then came the betrayers and tyrants who would position themselves to "do me wrong" thereby propelling me to decisions that kept me on course, if and as they were needed. I

understood that they were also guardians of my quest, but I felt no burning desire to thank them. Possibly, this was because I was shocked to discover that I was a betrayer to some of them... to all of my lovers.

"A beautiful design, is it not?" Phillip said.

"Ya. I..."

"This is what happened next."

Phillip replayed a portion of a pivotal lesson-dream I had soon after I came home from El Salvador: my memory of it was fairly accurate—good enough to make the impression intended, but nowhere as detailed as what I saw now.

I had become "aware" while I was standing on a dirt roadway that bisected two rolling fields of calf high grass through which masses of translucent people were slowly walking. A short distance in front of me stood an elderly, longhaired, white-bearded man, dressed in a plain off-white and tan, broad-stripped robe. Holding a gnarled staff in his right hand, he quietly said, "Come with me," but there was no mistaking his authority.

As I joined him, he said, "I am Kha-lib. There is a part of you that knows this and me very well. You, as you know yourself at this moment, are a partial representative of all that you really are and will become, such as all children are to destiny. You are the Portion who is to endeavor a work on our behalf, and yours, and this you have begun. However, it is that few things are fixed in time, none more so than for one such as you: it was always seen that you would need to know us before your formal introduction to your guides, your source, and your teachers. I am a part of all of them. I am a source of your source."

Idiotically, but understandable at the time, I had said, "Okay."

"You have been injured by your viewings, and isolated first by your knowledge, and now by your disappointment in others. You wish to hide and to forget. You cannot. Your quest is one of remembering—to piece together the remnants of your life, as you think of it, and to see it as a cohesive thrust. In so doing, you will see why others do not see. You are to continue along this path until you know it is time to find us—you will do this by your actions, if not in your heart, for you will begin a search." He looked toward the masses of people.

"There is great change upon them, and they will see you who know of this as the insane, which in truth they represent. You cannot be angry, for you will not represent the truth through this view. That is not who we are. You are here now to meet others of our quest, so that you may take with you the memory that you are not alone, and that seeds of your knowledge will blossom into understanding; your lessons in power have overwhelmed you, and you need to know there is more in the universe than the ravages of man's imagination."

We walked a short distance over the crest of a low rise, stopping on a tree-lined roadside where I met the core group of the most serenely pleasant and supremely wise anarchists, who casually told me that I was one of them, yet not with them. They told me what it was I had chosen to do this time around in physical life—the larger purpose of going to war—a conversation I was not meant to recall at that time, but knowledge of it was stored at a cellular level. I recalled only that we had a meeting. Now, in my current dream-lesson, (John¹) Phillip replayed the missing aspects.

I listened in complete fascination to the details of a rescue plan of such broad scope, audacity, and imagination as to take my breath away—if I had been breathing. Although Jeanette had told me all about it, in the John Lawson Park, it was also new because their "chat" evoked visions of the scheme underway. This comprehensive view included Phillip's historical journey through time: I understood the requirement for this view, because he was not entirely of

this place. He was a forerunner in many ways, one of which involved a secondary potential goal of mine...

In an early channel, Kha-lib had told me what my purpose was in general terms. However, as I considered him a figment of Jeanette's imagination I dismissed her claims as lures to conscript me into her church of whatever crap she was bowing to. Now, it made perfect sense that my jagged journeys across so many cultural landscapes had brought me to where I stood today—literally and figuratively.

Again, I saw the superbly orchestrated symbiosis of event-probabilities that Kha-li, Saa-ra, and the rest of the gang had designed, which were nevertheless not a done deal. Free Will could alter it as the grip of physical reality tightened around my lack of discipline.

Seeing this replay made me feel accomplished, but conflicted: I seemed to be able to comprehend the near incomprehensible, but I sucked badly at altering my own behavior. With this thought, the layered images dissolved into a familiar fountain in a square.

"You're about to send me back?" I said.

"Soon," Phillip said, "after we deal with a critical aspect of the emissaries return to physical reality. You have thus far focused on the how of the event in terms of the cognitive and mystical tools they will have at their command."

"Jeanette covered that—a lot."

"We also wish you to offer to your world, in terms they can understand, the processes by which the emissaries become whole—not holy, but wholly integrated with their Source—a misnomer that has caused much strife in your world. As such, their vast knowledge is as one intention with a single momentum, therefore your ultimate disclosure is not about whom they are, as a collective consciousness, but what they are."

"They are energy."

"Are they the energy of their source-soul's idealized purpose—their beliefs, if you will?"

"Yes, I can see that."

"What is your personality?"

"A combination of beliefs."

"What means of assessment are beliefs created and maintained?"

"Through reason."

"Is this the barrier that stands between confusion, clarity, and gaining access to mastering the mystical arts?"

"It is."

"You can intend to know the rest... you have learned how to learn."

"The rest of what they are? I need a starting point."

"The starting point is this: your present personality structure."

Without thinking about it, I crushed the elements of Phillip's preamble through the conformation process. To my surprise and delight, I clearly understood that my personality was an amalgam of codified energy—beliefs that were directions to explore in a life designed for a specific purpose. With this thought, I understood Jeanette's comments about Phillip drawing from a vast storehouse of traits, both earned and designed from past incarnations, and applying them to my current energy structure. It made perfect sense: you can't destroy energy, so personality traits—as direct knowledge of specific approaches to self-discovery—were precise packets of frequencies and pulses that were part of his entire energetic Identity.

The idea that he could create a new Portion from his energy, and pick and choose what he wanted it—me—to be like was no more complex than choosing to be male, or to have blue eyes: I

found it comical to realize that my personality was essentially used, as did Phillip when, with an amused expression, he said, "There is a step you are missing."

Understanding his point, I said, "A Conditional Death removes what has essentially become an energetic blockage of poor beliefs, only after which can they achieve a full integration."

"With additional training about handling energy, correct: are they not then conscious energy devoid of human aberrations?"

I inferred from his tone that I was to continue this idea: it took me a moment to comprehend the issue, and as the underlying nature of all activated conscious unexpectedly filled my mind, I said, "Shit—the integrated emissaries look like us, but they are an event."

Pleased with my aided conclusion, Phillip said, "They are literally living events that will propel your world into a new line of development, as were those who came before them. And as purveyors of pure intentions, the outcome is all-but a given."

"Free Will just makes it interesting," I managed to mutter, as a complete picture of the so-called Second Coming saga rolled over me like the unstoppable wave of energetic intentions that it was. "Je-zuss!" I would have whooshed, but the breath thing still applied.

"You know He is already manifest," Phillip said, amused.

"Yes, Jeanette told me who He is."

"When it is time, you will tell them." He pointed at the people in the square.

"Who he is?"

"Only that he is there now. She will tell you when it is time to give him a name."

"Will I remember all of this?" I said, worried that I might lose something by having to translate this session into my waking state.

"Recalling your lessons is the point in this phase of your training. You have begun your formal Dreaming lessons, as these pertain to teaching you what our emissaries can do."

"Will Jeanette know this has happened?"

"Saa-ra's Portion has seen all of this from her perspective; she is taking you the rest of the way so she will know everything she needs to know."

"Why not you?"

"It is We who are on the journey." With reverence, he added, "As you now know, Saa-ra was there at the beginning. To be precise, she 'was' the beginning, therefore our journey is part of hers to complete. We will speak again soon. Continue to try to Hear us on your runs; this is important when learning How to Dream."

Phillip motioned with his hand, as a demonstration model would reveal a new appliance to a game show contestant, and books appeared at his fingertips. The titles of the first three were legible, but all of them had a similar hue to the vibratory sequencing of John²'s probable reality—i.e. not a done deal.

⁽⁶⁾ Sailing at night, to Sardinia from Sicily through historical Tunisian tuna grounds, a series of not-so-distant distress flares snapped me out of my one-eyed nap, like a wet towel cracking on my bare ass. The radio was filled with the chatter of a single voice I did not understand, other than the repetition of the word "pirata" sounded ominous. After a while, all went silent but I could see the running lights of the other boat taking a straight-line course—probably not adrift. An hour later, a bright spotlight shone from directly aft, and followed me. Without thinking, I grabbed my powerful lantern and shone it back at them, so neither of us could see anything but light—no clue as to whether I was armed.

They held their distance at no more than fifty yards. I held my course while preparing flares, and pouring fuel from a proper reserve can into a bucket, to throw on their deck if they came that close; I naively assumed they wouldn't shoot out my spotlight—meaning me. After twenty tense minutes of sliding slightly abeam of me then falling back, their light went out. After a short minute, I went to idle to listen for their engine: nothing.

⁽⁷⁾ One of many examples occurred in 1985, when I was forced to run with a gale force wind while I was crossing the southern Adriatic, from Greece to Sicily: the line on my trail log became impossibly tangled in close and steep seas, so I had no idea about what distance I was making good. With no definitive way of determining my speed, I steered a lightning-bolt pattern down and across one roller after another. I knew only that I often exceeded eight knots on the way down, because my rudder rooster-tailed uselessly; I guessed that I slowed to two knots in the troughs before turning to face the next wall of water. After two days and nights, I knew only that I had been heading for Malta while slashing across the rollers, Tunisia when I was in the valleys, and Sicily when I was riding the elevator to the crests.

When it was finally safe to head toward Italy full time, I chose a course based on intuition and wine. This horrified my crew, a very experienced woman who had just sailed from India, up the Red Sea through the Suez Canal, to Cyprus then on to Greece on a large schooner. She calculated, with flawless logic, where she thought we were, which I ignored to steer a heading that felt right—a full ten degrees north of her math. Three days later, we spotted the navigation lights of a harbor entrance. The flash pattern declared it to be Saracusa, exactly where we had planned our first stop.

At the time, I thought that having a sense of direction was not a mystical ability—Sicily is a big target—but I now saw that I was as consistent throughout the entire voyage, logging over 1000 miles in some 38 landfalls. Later, when I sailed in familiar Spanish waters with my friends, I was as error prone as anyone.

Chapter 71 - Channeling

Throughout my training, I had questioned Jeanette about her ability to channel spirit-entities, especially after she ~~threaten~~ advised me that I was to become a channel as part of my alleged quest. Initially, my intention was to catch her in an incongruity, but she regularly said that it was not time to explain the full process to me; I did not have enough background information to grasp her response.

Believing that my time had now come, because she told me shortly after my Hearing experiences that I would begin channeling soon, I pointed out a dilemma derived from our discussion about the tug and pull of mankind's consciousness manifesting only part of its capabilities in physical reality. I asked her if the earth-bound aspect of consciousness (ego) blocks out the absolute knowledge of our true essence and capabilities, how is it that we can speak with, or for, a source of knowledge that exists in the dimension of perception we are blocking?

As was customary when she, Saa-ra, or Kha-lib, explained anything, Jeanette's comprehensive reply assumed my understanding of basic concepts, but she otherwise took little for granted.

In a monotone, she said, "The inner senses ⁽⁸⁾ know what to do and when to do it, as part of the ego operating at a level designed to not disturb its primary function." She paused, apparently gathering knowledge.

"Emotional experience in physical reality, for example," she continued, "is shaped and formed to reflect that reality, and is therefore limited by the outer senses. The inner senses from which emotions are translated, are by far more influential—packed with simultaneous knowledge

that emerges as a single word outside. If this weren't the case, you would be like a cardiac cripple so intensely focused on monitoring your efforts that it's all you would do. That said, the silent influences of these senses can be enhanced to a different level of awareness, by teaching the ego to sit back and observe what you can really do."

"So the answer to the dilemma is that we teach the ego to sit back?"

"Which I told you the first time I channeled."

"So you did. Can you tell me how channeling works now—maybe my ego will be more comfortable if it knows what's going on?"

"You'll also be giving straight psychic readings, so we'll cover those as well." She held up her hand to forestall what would have been my projectile vomit-like objection into physical matter: I was so occupied by the processes that I had overlooked the purpose.

When Jeanette stopped laughing, a considerable time later, she said, "Giving readings and channeling directly involves interrelated elements. To recap, these are that we are energy conformed to perceive our world and ourselves in a particular way. We do not know the purpose of our journey into physical life, so that we can have pure experiences that teach us what it is we need to learn. Within this arrangement we are not, nor could we ever be, separate from nature or from our source souls; there is a constant interplay of energy consciousness between all things. That we are unaware of this does not negate its reality, and eventually we do become aware of it."

I nodded to acknowledge she had not lost me yet.

"One such awareness is of our unbreakable energetic connection to our immediate source. For now, I will call this our soul-self, because not all entities are at the same level of evolution, or necessarily able to communicate proficiently with their physical counterparts."

"Understood."

"To be consciously in contact with our soul-self, not as a prayer, wish, or dream, but to channel them requires focused energy, and a platform of suspended beliefs upon which their knowledge may land."

"How do you suspend beliefs?"

"The short answer is you ignore them." She stretched her legs to straighten her jeans, and said, "Beliefs are the energetic engines of our creations, but they are not us; they are conveniences that lead us to knowledge. Maybe a conveyance is a better word, because we evolve them to eventually discover the truth. This is to no longer believe anything, a position from which one can act without the need to defend what they know."

"Also understood."

"At some point in their evolutionary history all channels of the Universal Source have learned of their purpose, and altered their beliefs to the degree that they become the knowledge through which Spirit can speak to man. If the soul-self's purpose is to teach this person, the result will be the destruction of all their beliefs as they know them. The person will instead *know*, part of which is to assume they know next to nothing. This makes them available to transmit knowledge less tainted by their physical translations of it. I'll come back to that."

"Please do."

"Knowledge exists as energy expressed in frequencies specific to that knowledge; the higher the knowledge the faster it vibrates. As like attracts like, any person accessing profound knowledge in a moment of inspiration must necessarily have the energy to match the speed required to comprehend it. The soul-self is often the source of these moments, but the earth-bound self must choose to act upon it, which is not a given. This circumstance applies to the soul-self channeling information of a foreign nature to a consciously aware earth-bound spirit, who is initially unable to

bring some information into physical reality because they are not, in some way, consciously familiar with it. But that can change rapidly, as it has with you... at least you," she said ruefully.

I understood that Josh was dragging his ass, still objecting to her efforts to teach him.

I nodded sympathetically.

"In the deeper states of channeling, where the ego-consciousness is completely set aside, one can bring *faster* information into the physical realm. However, there is always a degree of distortion because no knowledge exists independent of those who have understood it. In addition, we all apprehend knowledge in our unique way because it must..." she paused, "must be referenced to the Fine Waves of one's unique Identity."

"This is all making perfect sense."

With a nod of her own, Jeanette said, "It follows that any information you channel will be *part* of the source soul-entity offering it. It follows that the best source of knowledge for you is Phillip, because you share your entire history with him; this enables the cleanest possible translation of his *fast* knowledge into the slowness of a physical world. After Phillip is Kha-lib, as Phillip is a portion of him, then Saa-ra as Kha-lib is a portion of her.

"As this circumstance relates to the integration process that emissaries undergo," she carried on, "this is a literal event wherein the soul-self is in direct communication with the earth-bound self at all times, each of them clearly understanding the principles involved in the communication, and the responsibilities these communications may generate. For practical purposes, there is no difference between them. In fact, we are all a portion of our source spirit manifest in a physical body. The difference is that the earth-bound consciousness of an emissary has been taught and so sped-up, so as to join the soul-self in a union of core assumptions and intentions that are impeccably represented by the physical self's actions."

"I understand. Do you know this was in my last teaching dream?"

"I am aware that you know the intricacies of spirit using the body to manifest its intentions. I am not aware of how you pieced together what you know."

"Understood, what happens to the earth-bound personality?"

"You know this as well: self-assessment leads to the Conditional Death of the personality one wore as a ruse, in order to have experiences unadulterated by knowledge of their quest."

"I meant that, without a personality, who does the earth-bound consciousness think they are?"

"It's the other way around; they *know* who they no longer need to be."

"That still leaves me staring at a shadow."

Chuckling, Jeanette said, "You'll *know* when it is your turn. What's important now is for you to experience the inner senses, or rather, experience their relative absence as a composite awareness, so that you can appreciate their role in your overall orientation. At some point," she said, after a short pause, "Phillip will also dull his link to demonstrate the intimate rapport that exists between you, which is the rapport most of mankind could enjoy if they stopped wasting energy."

Wryly, Jeanette said there was a tricky part to this event: I had always believed myself to be alone, making independent decisions, when I had often accessed and acted upon a higher order of intuition than that which is generally available to everyone. In part, this was due to the higher energy of my evolutionary history, and that Phillip could initiate these influences without polluting the pure experience I required before meeting Jeanette—other than as needed to keep me alive.

I told her that my dream lesson showed me these influences, so I didn't see the tricky part.

"You still secretly think you're so smart that you did not need prodding to stop or to turnaround. She raised her stop-sign hand. "This also applies to becoming a sage during the many

times when, after a few beers, you were loose enough to proselytize and prophesy⁽⁹⁾ with unusual elocution and insight."

"Are you saying the tricky part is realizing I'm an imbecile?"

"You'll have to tell me."

Soon after this conversation, Phillip's demonstration of lessening the effectiveness of my inner senses was like a surreal trip into the examination of the noisy spaces between my ears, and he cut it short because my ego's disorientation was immediately fearful and severe: he said my reaction demonstrated a death-grip like reliance on my ego that I had rightfully developed while working in conflicts, but which no longer served me.

Days later, the second demonstration began with Phillip manifesting more of his presence and influences on me over the course of an hour, so that I could become accustomed to what this was like without having to drink beer. Jeanette took advantage of this time by reviewing the core lessons I had learned from the day we met; this was a fluid, concise conversation that would stay with me for ten months—when I desperately needed to recall all that I could about my time with her. But I am ahead of myself...

To explain this enhanced awareness, if I had been an expert horticulturist walking through the park at the Chateau of Versailles, I would have noted at a glance the endless variety of plants, trees, and flowers, their genus and life-cycle, the provinces they came from, appreciated the many tons of earth that had to be shifted, the over-all design of the garden, its history, and the decades of work required to construct it.

When my usual level of attentiveness settled back in, it was like a lens of clarity being removed from an optometrist's refraction machine: to walk in the same park, I would have said, "Big garden. Nice though. What's that red one over there?"

A few minutes passed before Jeanette said Phillip was about to withdraw his daily influence—the link to my unconscious-to-the-ego awareness's that I took for granted. Then he did: sufficient to say that I survived about half-an-hour in a thoroughly uninspired existence, as though I was trying to wake up. To carry the park analogy forward, I was trying to scrap mud off my shoes after having stumbled into a flowerbed at an old castle.

This is when I understood the tricky part.

Completely on my own I felt as thick as a brick, as the Brits would say. On the other hand, to now fully realize I had a pipeline to knowledge that was legitimately a part of me was dumbfounding. This is not to say that people who ignore their connection to Spirit are thick. It is to say that there is so much more for the asking.

Sheepishly, I told Jeanette how I felt, and that I appreciated her lesson.

We had a brief exchange in which she further established that the average person's awareness / perceptions fell somewhere in-between my exaggerated experiences. Those who believed there was "something more" to life, and maybe the next one, spontaneously accessed and exercised their link to their source; intuitive insights and moments of inspiration were more common to them. Parenting exercised the link as a matter of course, but nowhere near what's possible to achieve by simply being aware of its existence: as it is with Fine Waves the link has no momentum of its own, so knowledge of it is to intend to use it is to activate it.

Ironically, Jeanette said that those who actively disbelieved in higher powers were acknowledging these powers. In this way, they maintained (all be it poorly) a link they would be profoundly embarrassed to discover was often the co-author of their deepest insights and airy proclamations. Dryly, she added that to agitate these people was doing them a great service, but to

engage them in debate was a waste of energy. They would learn as we all did—the hard way, in their own time.

The middle ground—the intuitive barren lands—were the home of those who held such restrictive beliefs as to blunt or distort what was otherwise possible to know and sense. This had the effect of restricting the full potential of their chosen quest, because beliefs are the activating force of experience.

All things considered, I thought it would be wise to practice energy-gathering techniques, and *intending to know*, because they strengthened my connection to... well, to intelligence.

The next weekend, Jeanette announced to a small gathering in her living room that becoming a channel is to become a teacher, and that learning *How to Teach* put one's ego in a precarious position, thereby stalking one out of their self-importance. In effect, channeling was to adopt a conscious role in one's own development, which reaped rewards less painfully than if unforeseen events intervened in one's life, based on them having the energy to do so. She then said that I would now channel a lesson.

Her instructions were for me to relax, clear my mind, and to ask whom I was about to channel. This question, she stressed, was crucial. I was not to channel any entity other than Phillip, or the senior teachers I already knew. This was because free will reigned, and other entities—particularly the newly "dead"—might want to communicate with those they had recently left behind; apparently, finding a willing channel through which to do this was not a simple matter. If their intent to communicate electro-magnetically brought them to me, I could mistakenly facilitate this exchange, whereas their death did not make them instantly wise.

I asked Jeanette to clarify this last statement, explaining this was not because I somehow thought I would become god-like upon my demise, but because I was familiar with heightened awareness, and I assumed this state of being, at the least, would manifest after death.

Chuckling at my seriousness, she said, "If you were an idiot one second before the bus ran your over, you'd still be an idiot one second later."

She next said that when I felt the strong urge to speak to just go ahead and speak. Chuckling to herself, Jeanette said she had found this difficult to do at first, which is why she had preceded her earliest channels by saying out loud, "I don't know what I'm going to say, but..."

She looked my way and waited, as did my audience.

I went through an abbreviated version of what Jeanette had to go through when she first channeled to me: I felt pressure on my shoulders, and I twisted my head as if to relieve a kink in my neck. I also felt a cold spot, left center of my forehead, like an ice cream headache, but not severe. When I felt the pressure to speak, this sensation faded to the feeling of me wearing a bandana.

Awkwardly, I spoke one halting word after the other, as if trying to line them up. Eventually I tired of this, and used Jeanette's trick to get past the barrier of my self-involvement. I mean, if you think about it, we rarely have a clue what we're about to say anyway.

I subsequently survived an hour of a talk about expectations, though had the flow been at a normal pace my talk would have lasted about forty minutes. At the end of it, and after everyone had gone home, Jeanette dissected my experience.

Essentially, she said that my fears had been focused on how I would look, and not offending people, as if the words were mine. I also spoke haltingly because I wanted to "hear" the words beforehand, which interrupted what would have been an easier flow to maintain, given that the subject matter was familiar to me... this time.

I cannot elaborate on the subjective aspects of my first channeling experience other than to say it was the most natural thing in the world when I did manage to slip into short flows, for a few sentences each time. So natural, that I twice stopped to question out loud whether I was making it up.

From this day forward, Jeanette could stop her lessons and say that Phillip, Kha-lib, or another of their family had something to add, and soon thereafter I'd be saying, "I don't know what I'm going to say, but...."

After ten or so of these experiences, none shorter than an hour, I was able to slip in and out of channeling mode, cued by the cold spot on my forehead. That said, the information I imparted was not deep to me—often adjuncts to the lessons I had gone through, prognostications notwithstanding, but always creeping toward unfamiliar material.

Within a month, Jeanette booked me to take one of her clients, and as succeeding months passed giving psychic readings became a thrice-weekly adventure, as the depth of my spoken material exceeded anything I could have possibly known. This included speaking foreign languages:

A Japanese couple came to Jeanette's house for a reading, expressing concern that they may not be able to properly communicate what it was they wanted to know. My cold spot was intense, as I let them in, so I deferred to it as a lesson in trust and told the couple we had been put together for a reason, so let's see what happens.

We took our seats in the downstairs living room, them holding hands tightly, and me using focusing techniques Jeanette had taught me. After a short while, I felt a cone over my head—then nothing more. Apparently, I talked for half an hour, again felt the cone, the cold spot, and the bandana, then I opened my eyes to find the couple crying. Looking bewildered seemed to be the cue to the husband that I was myself again, and he stood to take my hand in both of his. With a shallow bow, he thanked me.

His diminutive wife gave me a brief, powerful hug, as her husband took out his wallet and put two hundred dollars on the coffee table. I thought there had been a miscommunication because Jeanette charged, and "highly recommended" that I also charge fifty dollars, no matter how long a reading.

I separated a fifty-dollar bill, and tried handing the rest back to him; he quickly raised both of his hands, palms open so that I could not do this. He explained that he wished he had more to offer, his gratitude was so great for the help I had given him.

Holding the money out to him with both hands, no further than half way between us, a cultural gesture I had learned when I was in Tokyo, I said I did not help him; I just worked here, and I was more than adequately compensated because I learned something every time I acted as a channel.

I presumed that in his culture, to not accept his money back was akin to not accepting my explanation, and he took it from me in a delicate manner. Later that morning Jeanette found \$150 in her mailbox, which made its way to a battered women's shelter that afternoon.

Other kinds of readings /channeling I came to experience included internally seeing full color pictures in response to a client's question, which I then described in my own words. For example, a young woman from Central America asked me about her father's health, to which I saw a crystal clear picture of him awkwardly, as if painfully, leaning on a stationary donkey cart holding the right side of his back at the belt line. The incongruity of the image was his sly smile, making it clear to me that his back pain wasn't real, though it had been at one time.

I said that her father was not in as much pain as he made himself out to be, and she was relieved. In this reading, I also spontaneously spoke a few sentences in Spanish, and though many of the words were familiar, the sentence structure and ease of flow were not.

In a short time, I was being sought as a psychic reader, in no small part due to Jeanette deferring many of her clients to me. One of these clients was Mrs Smyth-Fletcher, who did not realize we had previously spoken on the phone. Successfully dealing with the likes of her, and the needy, was like a slow-acting drug to my ego. I began to weave the web of my demise...

By this time, Ed and I had moved out of 1738 Pendrell Street: Ed was with Jayne⁽¹⁰⁾ in Richmond, and I was living in the basement suite of Jeanette's house on Argyle Street. Soon after this move, I was cohabitating with Jenny, a relationship that quickly came to include a Cocker Spaniel puppy, "Bear," by way of a lesson/opportunity not taken by another of Jeanette's students.

These developments had little bearing on my lessons other than they were now physically inescapable, so the pressure to act appropriately came with every breath—even more so as readings took up additional time and Bear needed training and regular attention. As Jenny pushed for more of my time, as well, I finally reached the stage where, when she urgently wanted a word with me, I snappily told her to make an appointment. I was serious.

At the same time, another attractive woman was making it clear that she had a biblical interest in me. I didn't do anything about it, but it was only a matter of time that I would, such was the catnip influence of my presumed power that channeling had resurrected from the debris of Jeanette's regular pummeling of my self-image.

She warned me, and more than a few times, that I was handling my apparent power over others very poorly, and that cruelty would soon show through. For now, it was camouflaged by my legitimately busy schedule, which included giving seminars in hotel conference rooms with her, so I also had a public face to maintain. Otherwise, she said I had become far too serious, insensitive, and self-involved. I needed to loosen up, a lot, and quickly.

"Telling Jenny to make an appointment?" she said, bewildered. "You're lucky she didn't leave you on the spot. I would have."

As my presumed power continued to grow, but my personal control did not, I fell into a series of fitful sleeps to finally awaken within a dream. I knew right away that I was dreaming, but there seemed to be nothing to do: I was standing on a huge Broadway stage in an empty theatre, with a woman and two men. We stood in a box shape, outside of each other's personal space by the width of a hair. The house lights were on, but dim.

The woman directly across from me turned her head forty-five degrees to her left, to face the man who had turned his head forty-five degrees to his right to face her head on. She said, "There's no more to it." The man then turned his head through ninety degrees to his left, and waited for me to turn mine forty-five degrees to my right, and face him directly. He said, "There's no more to it."

I turned mine ninety degrees to face my person, and said, "There's no more to it." Then I faced forward, as did the others after having spoken to await the moment when their "giver" turned their head to face them, and they again turned to squarely "receive."

On round two, there was a change: when the man to my left turned to face the woman, he repeated the line with less of a break between the turn and speaking the line. This also happened between the others, and I followed suit. In a short time, the pace became as fast as we could tag the previous speaker's last word to our first at the same volume, only after turning to properly deliver our lines precisely facing our partners. The words quickly became meaningless sounds, and the concentration required was all-consuming when I turned... and went blank.

The silence was too much, and we all laughed hysterically, rolling about the stage like children, no one bothering to articulate the obvious ludicrousness of my balk.

This is what woke me up... laughing so hard that I was tearing.

Jeanette said nothing the next morning though there was no conceivable way she could have slept through it.

I patched things up with Jenny, and got on with my lessons feeling little pressure.

⁽⁸⁾ Inner Senses: The pertinent senses we later discussed are Psychological Time, which is a focus that basically ignores our physical sensory input to become a gateway to another Time sense that knows about the past, present, and future. Through it, we have the ability of Instant Cognition, which is to perceive that which we focus on as if we were that object, or within it. There is then a Conceptual sense that allows us to experience a concept completely: feeling that we are inside of the idea looking out. We also have Cognition of Knowledgeable Essence, which operates like an extension of Instant Cognition, but deeper and more intense. Finally, we have an Innate Knowledge of Basic Reality, without which we might look at another person and literally wonder what it is. As is it with Fine Waves, these senses are functionally inseparable. They are also not all of our inner senses.

⁽⁹⁾ I must have had enough to drink to prophesize in the early days with Jeanette, because I had not told her about a number of such incidents having been brought to my attention by colleagues over the years.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Months later, Ed and Jayne moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia. After expropriation and redevelopment in the 1990's, Jeanette's Argyle street address became 1564—an Arts Studio.

Chapter 72 - Learning to Dream

"Your interaction with the lucid dreams you have experienced about your journey," Jeanette said, as we walked along the seaside bicycle route in Vancouver's West End, "has been limited to observation. You have also had thousands of dreams in which you were unaware that you were dreaming until you awakened and recalled them. Recently, your teachers have shown you that you are the creator of most of your dreams, and that in the world of average people these are how you refresh yourself, heal from traumatic events, work out problems, and make or change your choice of direction. But dreaming does many other things." She continued formally. "You can read about this in the Seth works, but there is another level of Dreaming, with a capital D, in which you are as fully conscious, and in control of your experiences, as you are when you are awake. You've read about this in Castaneda's works."

"I have," I confirmed.

"Our goal is to not necessarily make you able to do this as a matter of course, although it's not impossible. It is to have you create enough of an experience to know that control is possible, which is to describe the emissaries' abilities."

"Got it."

"We have discussed the concepts of the First and Second Attentions, the First being anything and everything we have come to know, imagine, and are able to describe through our conformation to physical experience. Simplistically, it is how we view reality and, to a certain extent, our versions of it rest on our ability to share descriptions. In fact, we maintain our descriptions through a ceaseless internal dialogue that effectively shuts out the endless stimuli of our exterior reality, as it is supposed to do. All of this," she motioned 360 degrees over her head, "is in our inventory."

"And knowing our way around a specific inventory is what makes us an expert... you've covered this."

"We're taking it deeper. When an average person experiences an event that falls outside of his inventory, he has to enlarge it to encompass that event, or the world he thinks he knows stops. By this I mean the cognition of the average person is not equipped to maintain its world view when what don Juan calls a dissonant element is suddenly introduced." She leaned my way and nudged my arm. "You have seen this in the stunned gawking of soldiers and victims, seconds after an unimaginable event took place."

"Done it myself."

"For the most part," she leaned away, "the average person is willing to incorporate new items that don't contradict the underlying order of their inventory. In other words, the moment of shock and surprise passes as you assimilate what happened into your world view, which is more complex than you might think." She cleared her throat.

"For example, it includes knowledge of basic anatomy so that a severed arm lying ten feet away from its former owner makes some sense. It includes basic physics, which accounts for the means by which an explosion can rip the aforementioned arm from where you were used to seeing arms, and it includes core cultural identification wherein you grasp that you are in a war zone, and not in a downtown Toronto bar. Still with me?"

"Completely. I have a story about that part⁽¹¹⁾, but let's keep going while things are still clear," I said with irony, because sharing a connection with Jeanette was usually short-lived.

Nodding in agreement, she said, "The inventory of the Second Attention goes far beyond the scope of what we're dealing with today. Sufficient to say that it is where we dream in the conventional sense and that for our purposes the root form of communication in controlled Dreaming is the metaphor, or the essence of the act. The Third Attention deals with... you are already aware that there is much more, and more after that."

"Endless probabilities... got it."

"For now, the kind of Dreaming I am talking about is lucid and interactive, and it begins with a unique state of awareness you achieve by focusing the residue of your waking consciousness on the elements of your dreams. To do this, you have to shut off your internal dialogue, stop the world, and harness that residue."

"Stop thinking? I've come close to that." Realizing what I said, I chuckled and added, "in the metaphysical sense, as well."

"There are two dialogues for you to consider," she said without comment. "The description of the world that has been drilled into you from birth is the one we'll deal with."

"Go for it."

"Think of the entire process of being conformed to this reality as learning the *doings* of everything physical. As you..."

"The doings?"

"Let me finish: as you become aware that you are Dreaming in the Second Attention, meaning you have already stopped the world you think you know, the habits of *doing* in your First Attention will impose on your new circumstance if you let it. Look at the bridge," she said, pointing.

I looked at the Burrard Street Bridge.

"Now look at me," she said, which I did.

"Did you see the elephant?"

I double-checked the bridge, saw nothing unusual, and I said so.

"Look again."

"Still just the bridge," I shrugged.

"In the physical focus of the First Attention you see what you expect to see, because whatever that is has been previously drilled into you. The internal dialogue shouts *bridge*, and you agree because everybody agrees that's *how* to interpret that particular energy construct: you are all *doing* the same thing with a particular form of energy manifestation. Making sense?"

"We'll see."

"When you dream, your thoughts immediately create what you will experience. So if you came awake in a lucid dream and found yourself looking at the bridge, its trapezoidal elements could remind you of the circus, and you could instantly see its iconic representation—the elephant. Shocked, you'd double-check where you were, and because you could not help but be thinking about a familiar and safe place, you'd instantly find yourself in that place, sans elephant. This would go on until you either woke up, or figured out how you were moving around."

"I've had a lot of dreams like that."

"It follows that when you find yourself aware that you are in a dream, and want to practice control in Dreaming, you have to stop thinking as if you are in the First Attention— stop *doing*. I'll give you some exercises before the day is over."

"I don't always become aware that I'm dreaming."

"Before you go to sleep, you can remind yourself that your subjective experiences are so involved with word thinking that it is almost impossible to conceive of any experience that is not thought-word oriented. And yet you in particular have had many experiences of *knowing* and *visions* that communicated information perfectly well without the need for language. In fact, you've discovered that trying to put words to some of these experiences wasn't possible. Correct?"

"Yes."

"The initial mind-set you're after is to become aware that you in a non-physically oriented experience, which you can control if you discard descriptions, and keep your thoughts focused in and on the new circumstance." She shrugged a minute affair. "You can create and walk through walls as the *not-doing* of the First Attention." Tugging my sleeve to slow our pace, she said, "Here's the good part: it's possible to stop your First Attention inventory from swirling around your head while you're awake, by practicing other *not-doings*."

"Huh?"

"Stopping the internal dialogue creates a state of mental quietness, which is the *not-doing* of maintaining the internal dialogue."

"Every word sounded reasonable," I quipped.

"I'll try it this way," she said as if to herself. "You cannot examine your true circumstance from a moving platform; this is the train of time you ride alongside the memory of your experiences, which manifest in the momentum of your thoughts. Do you recall when we were discussing the phenomenon of the double, or the self, that I said we experience a memory of the events we perceive?"

"I do."

"In other words," she said smoothly, "your thoughts move all of the time, and you are so used to allowing this that you have forgotten how to stop them." She looked away. "Problematic to stopping our thoughts is that their speed-of-light momentum provides our world of reason with a linear framework within which to interact with physical reality. Without this recognizable pattern of thought, apparent randomness would result... like being subject to events in a dream."

This means that stopping the world is to find a neutral psychological position—the world you know has no influence. Do you see?"

"Kind of."

"Meaning no?" With a shake of her head, Jeanette said, "Time is simultaneous. This means all events are happening in the grand present of Now. What you perceive is a consequence of your senses being conformed to focus strictly on an infinitesimally small bandwidth of events that are in part isolated by the speed at which you can process what you sense. Compared to simultaneity, the speed of light is laughably slow, but our vibratory speed and synaptic response allows us to perceive only physically manifest events. So far?"

"So good."

"In effect, your moment to moment circumstances are a blurred vision until you twist your head to match the rate of speed at which the station names are whizzing by. At the precise moment when the station sign is readable, there is no relative motion between the question of "Where am I?" and the sign; the world of *doing* has stopped, and you can read the sign correctly. It says *not doing*."

Pointing toward Granville Island, she said, "*Doing* is a result of our entire perceptual conformation to physical experience being engaged like a carrier wave from which we recognize and order our perceptions into events. *Doing* is what makes you perceive the way you do, and me perceive you the way I do."

"With you on that."

Swinging her arm a few degrees, she said, "*Doing* is what makes that bridge a bridge; to just look at the bridge is *doing*." She lowered her aim to point at the water of False Creek.

"To look at its shadow on the water, not as a consequence of light being blocked by the physical object—that's the *doing* of light—but as an independent image is the *not-doing* of the bridge's physical existence."

"Hmm," I shrugged.

Grinning at her own first contact with the concept, she said, "The world is the world to you because you know the *doing* involved in making it a world. However, by breaking free from those rules of conformity, like you did through acts of *seeing* and *knowing*, you now know that the world is far more than what it appears to be. Correct?"

"A lot more."

"Is there any reason to think that a shadow is an exception?"

"There's more to the shadow... hmm," I mused.

"Your entire inventory exists as you perceive it because you know what to *do* with it. A chair is a chair because of all the things you know about chairs. If you didn't know the *doing* of your world, there would be nothing familiar in your surroundings; you would be awake in a dream without apparent control or direction, thereby alternately creating elephants and safe places. If you were to gaze at that shadow with the same focus of intention you give to the bridge you would be introducing a dissonant element in your inventory, because you have no idea what "more" there might be to a shadow."

"Why didn't you just say that? 'More'," I parenthesized with my fingers, "lies outside of my inventory."

Sighing, Jeanette explained some of the practices of *not-doing* to help me become aware when I was dreaming, so that I could Dream. She also gave me specific exercises aimed at maintaining my focus within an initial dreamscape, so this circumstance would not take on an apparent life of its own—following my thoughts into their physically oriented metaphors.

During this discussion, I told her that I had often become aware I was dreaming inside a London cityscape, but the roads and buildings were not where they should be. I interacted with this circumstance to the extent of searching for my former girlfriend's apartment on Eton Road, off Haverstock Hill, only to find myself standing outside the Washington Pub, on England's Lane. When I walked through the open door, I found myself in Trafalgar Square. Turning north to go back, I bumped into a Victoria Embankment sign. The saying, "You can't get there from here," defined my experience.

Jeanette said these dreams reflected my feelings of being lost, and my determination to find my way, but not back to the world I once knew.

⁽¹¹⁾ I told Jeanette of an extended job that ended in a hotel room when I awoke to voices speaking a language I did not understand. Instant panic swept through my pores, because I was sure we had left the final country of torment, and I was in Paris. With this thought, I recognized that the chambermaids in the hallway were speaking French, and I almost passed out with relief.

An all-day flight later, I unlocked my apartment door on Carlton Street, in Toronto, and stood there looking around the unfamiliar place. I had been away for months, the only comfort being the knowledge that a thoroughly professional crew was sleeping in their own temporary sanctuaries down the hall. It was an illusion of safety, to be sure, but you grab what you can.

I felt so displaced that I checked into the Ramada Hotel, across the street.

Chapter 73 - The Debacle of Truth

At our next meeting in her house, Jeanette again formally defined the influences of self-image I was supposed to be on the lookout for. I.e. self-importance causes us to think we are the center of the universe, and we are therefore affronted at every turn that challenges our majesty, or perceived subservience. This drain on our energy can cause us to fall into the warming arms of self-absorption where everything is about us, and we grasp for the illusionary prizes dictated by our cultural agreements to aggrandize functionally useless things. This is exhausting because the prizes are ever changing according to the fads of culture, and we end up indulging our fears about not having what others have.

With these categories firmly reestablished she equated common behaviors, such as pride to self-importance, gluttony to self-absorption, and jealousy to self-indulgence, so that I could better recognize similar circumstances in my behavior earlier than I might otherwise see them. All of this was old news, but I did not ask why she felt the need to go over it; I was feeling "delicate" about my apparent lack of progress with her evolving stalking scenarios, and my morning jogs had some times become painful... my hip was acting up. The totality of my days seemed to be about enduring one kind of pain or another, my only refuse from which was Bear, and the praise I received from giving readings.

About stalking lessons: as it had been with buying tomatoes after renting a video, for the past month she had regularly presented me with a choice between doing something for us, for her, or for another person, disguised in casual conversations. As I spontaneously found excuses to do nothing I did not benefit from, she offered more drastic suggestions than she had begun with when she first brought a poor behavior to my attention. To combat my penchant for cheapness hidden under the banner of prudence, for example, Jeanette tasked me with giving away everything I did not need. I found this difficult to do, because I had no basis upon which to determine what I might need down the road. To this she said I could not distinguish between need and want, the remedy to which was to practice random generosity until giving freely

replaced "prudence" as the way things were for me: to undo a crappy habit, one had to practice its opposite action until that new act became their spontaneous way of living.

Having little to give made my every journey into the world with her a trial: if I gave \$1 to a homeless man, it was not enough. If I gave \$5.00 to serving staff, why didn't I give \$5 to the homeless man? The most difficult lesson I had to deal with was Jeanette's claim that I was cruel: she said my inner rage was constantly at the edge of explosion because I had not come to terms with the deep-seeded fears that fuelled it. It was all I could do to accept that I was secretly angry, let alone cruel: so deep was my disguise as an affable man that I ignored her assertion.

Overall, as she got better at applying the principles of How to Teach she instigated second and third lessons into her original scenarios just when I seemed to be catching on. The effect was like walking up the down escalator blindfolded. Then when I reached the peak of my frustration, she'd bond with me by telling me about her difficulties with teaching—difficulties that were the other side of the coin apprentices had with learning.

Joking, but not, she said I had to get my self-importance in check, and she had to kick-start her ruthlessness because she was robbing me of learning opportunities. Also joking, but not, I said I couldn't imagine how she could be more "ever-present" in my days. Suddenly more intimate, she said she could have been more efficient. For example, although the second phase of my apprenticeship was ninety-percent about eliminating self-image from my decision making, it also served to ready me to attempt to Hear and Channel Phillip. For this reason she had often asked me what was on my mind or, "Where were you just then?" when I had drifted and created a break in our conversation. She knew that Phillip was working with me at these times, and she was trying to have me make that connection. What she only later realized, poignantly as I began learning how to channel, was that letting go of my awareness of self was far more difficult than she had expected from someone who had experienced the virtual absence of it on a number of occasions while covering conflicts. In retrospect, she said she should have made a game of my drifting—a relentless game—to cause me to focus on those moments without inhibition; she had not applied the Economy of Action principle to those lessons. There was more she seemed to regret—all petty things to my way of thinking—that she tried to make up for by drilling the minutiae of her teaching errors into me as if I would ever need to know them.

Now, as we sat on her couch reviewing her efforts to help me see myself, she reiterated that she was teaching a condensed version of my evolutionary lessons in behavior, so all I really needed to do was "let go." I had nothing to hide from her, and she was worried about me. I was not performing as well as I could because I still did not appreciate the potential damage I was programming for myself down the road. I was embracing, as second hand convictions only, that I needed to change, which would eventually lead me to the same place that making no effort at all would take me—a deep, dark hole.

Thusly refocused, and with my sincere promise to pay closer attention to my behavior, for days on end Jeanette returned to pointing out my simple verbal slips, and incongruous acts of neglect. Predictably, this led to her explaining how frustration, as a manifestation of self-importance, turns people into lunatics; I redoubled my efforts to not say things like "Uh huh," and to put my lemonade glass in the sink, not on the kitchen counter next to it. But she always found something to comment on... until she didn't: wary during a joking exchange, it crossed my mind that I was anticipating events that were not happening. Jeanette had stopped saying anything about my behavior, not a word for three or four days. This felt so strange that I began mentioning my own slip-ups, to which she said she appreciated that I was trying.

A week of this relative quiet passed, and I was much less on edge about everything when we went food shopping in a large chain store. Normally, this was the single most irritating circumstance in my life, and she knew it because I had said so during our first meeting to smooth over a bump in our conversation. My point was that people stopped to chat, side by side in the middle of the aisle, while loners parked their carts kitty-corner at intersections thereby restricting access to all-but the thinnest pedestrian, whereas moving someone's cart was akin to attempted theft.

I told Jeanette that not ranting about our circumstance being one of commerce was a trial that sometimes leaked out in a toneless explanation about how ten items or less did not mean fifteen items. Yes, Lilith—five cans of the same soup counts as five—use your fingers as an example—while having to listen to customers ahead of us exchange bitterness through Solomon-like pronouncements about their husbands and kids. Then came the checkout clerk; transparently disinterested in whether I was really feeling well, or if I had found everything I was looking for, I often said that my eyesight was failing but it didn't matter because I had only a few months to live... have a nice day."

On this day, Jeanette joined a conversation in the middle of a blocked aisle about the weather we had all experienced in the parking lot. Then she did it again in the milk aisle with a pair of fertile women whom had each borne hockey teams, members of which were 'shopping' independently of their mother's wishes. At the check-out, Jeanette preemptively declared herself to be healthy enough to have found even more than what she came for.

The queue enjoyed her immensely; the confused clerk maybe not so much.

The entire ordeal took about twenty-minutes, and I was murderously speechless as we left the store.

Tittering through her explanation, she said that although food shopping is a necessity, it was often the only form of social contact stay-at-home mothers had during the day. Without the respite, and therapy from endlessly expressing their monosyllabic desires to the disinterested, their lives would be far more difficult whereas mine would be only slightly more convenient. She then drew threads to my judgmental nature, intolerance, and impatient self-importance, tying that bundle of observations neatly into a package of eventual cruelty I had yet to recognize, but all of the elements were there for me to view. All I needed was a catalyst.

I didn't see it.

I also didn't see Jeanette the next day: my old CBC cameraman, Dave Wilson, now semi-retired and living on Bowen Island, had called to ask for help moving his cousin and his wife from North Vancouver to Bowen Island. He didn't warn me that it would be a hard move until I arrived the next morning; there were over one hundred stairs to climb from the bottom of his cousin's driveway to the hilltop house.

Loading the cube van, I tweaked my hip as badly as I ever did nowadays—two days on medication, and no running for at least a week. Holding the sidewall of the van for support, as a wave of pain passed, I said out loud, "Not now," dejectedly thinking about how it would look. I really did want to help, because Dave and Leone had taken me in after my British work visa debacle.

I looked up and thought, as a legitimate request, "If you guys can fix this for the day, I'll never question you, or fight Jeanette again. I'll find the apprentice's point of view. Just get me through this."

The pain immediately passed. I tentatively shifted a few heavy boxes—nothing.

"Thanks.... really, thank you," I said out loud.

The move went smoothly, the four of us each making between fifteen and twenty sweat-soaked trips up and down the stairs. I was stiff and sore in the morning, but my hip did not hurt; nor did it ever again.

A week later, during which Jeanette gleefully pummeled me with lessons about my continuing poor behavior, Ski me to work with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in the interior of British Columbia. Prompted by a pile of beer while flying back from that shoot, I casually mentioned to our producer what I was up to with Jeanette, in an unconscious effort to repair my damaged self-image. What I did not see coming was being summarily dismissed with a sneer he did not know had slipped out before his polite, "Really?" masked it.

This caused me to escalate my claims, from experiencing simple *knowings* to include the experiences I had with seeing how people gave themselves away. When the producer condescendingly dismissed these ideas through his unguarded expressions, I escalated my grand 'insights' to giving away what Jeanette's channels had said about this time in mankind's history. To be fair, the producer controlled his disbelief well, possibly from fear for my sanity as I continued to freely speak about manifestations of Spirit.

As it happened, I had learned more than I appreciated about reading people, so I was not fooled by a simple sniffle portending a prelude to a cold. Nor was his measured look of deep interest about an unusual intellectual foray with a soundman, as the next days would corroborate...

Dave didn't take my call the next day, or the next, the immediate circumstance meaning he would not work with me again. As he was well known and highly regarded, the producer aside, this effectively meant the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation would not hire me either. In the weeks to come, not surprisingly but painfully all the same, no one at the CBC would speak with me without trepidation washing through their voices before they blew me off. In little time, I learned that this banishment of my own making applied nationwide; it was the nature of the business to spread the word, regardless of who actually knew me, and so ended my association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

My only source of potential income from television news was now CTV, and they rarely used me. The commercial film and industrial video market were awash with freelancers who had experience on movie sets in Hollywood North, so a lot of people would have to die before a news tech got a shot at their work.

It happened that I was spending hours reading the books Jeanette had recommended, trying to piece together how specific stalking practices made one better off, notwithstanding that only an idiot would talk about them. Of these, and from early on, I was interested in exploring the one that had become the bane of my life within layers of exquisitely refined personal camouflages—it was called Losing Self-importance. Officially, to tackle this task apprentices employed three disciplines, Erasing Personal History, using Death as an Adviser, and Assuming Responsibility.

Erasing Personal History appealed greatly to me now, because I had experienced its positive effects in what became my last year as a staffer at the CBC: I had been severely embarrassed by my fiancé leaving me, my own inexplicable (to me) penchant for unremitting profanity, and utter hubris in thinking that I was a shoe-in for a job I was not qualified for.

When the unlikely opportunity to move to England appeared, (I now knew) my version of erasing my history had been a full-out retreat from my tattered self-image, which is why I loved my time in England. No one knew me; I had cash coming out the whazoo, and my first freelance stints were borderline heroic through no effort of my own. I was as free as I had ever been.

Smarting from the loss of all my CBC relationships and income, not to mention that Jeanette had warned me to lay low on a number of occasions, I decided that I should erase myself by the numbers this time, and for the right reason.

Following the official guidelines for Erasing Personal History included not revealing what I'm really doing to anyone—no more talking about Jeanette, or my experiences in warfare. Instead, I would tell people only what I wanted them to know, which would be nothing of consequence because it would have nothing to do with self-aggrandizement. What don Juan called "the boring repetition of one's self-esteem, as the core of all human interactions," would cease to exist for me.

Moreover, knowing the core behaviors that gave away what people are really like opened the vast playground of their self-interests, within which I could easily pass unnoticed. In this way, people would have no real reason to be a friend or an enemy, because I would not be stacking my opinions or accomplishments against theirs. Unchallenged and uninterested, they would be polite and leave me alone because I wouldn't matter to them.

Reciprocally, as self-importance is the primary bane to mankind's happiness I might claim as my own knowledge how personally expensive is any sense of 'self' that requires constant feeding. Hell, I might even experience a moment of happiness... stranger things had happened.

The second technique of undermining self-importance is to adopt a stark philosophy called using Death as an Advisor. In this practice, one is constantly aware that death is the only active force that matters—life is the arena in which it constantly stalks us, and because our time is limited we have none to spend on manipulations, regret—anything to do with self-esteem. In other words, I had to be willing to commit to that which I deemed to be worthy of effort to its full and proper completion, or not do it. The advisor makes one's decisions appear to be stark, if not sometimes arbitrary, and so they can baffle people.

According to Kha-lib's channels and don Juan's teachings, I could think of death as a constant companion that stood close by, always within reach. Anytime I felt like something was so important as to suck up any part of my limited time on earth, by reacting to it as if it somehow mattered, I should look to my left and say, "Is today the day?" If I didn't drop dead on the spot, I had spent a golden moment of precious time wisely by not reacting, and thereby making the better choice—usually doing nothing.

The third technique to Losing Self-Importance, Assuming Responsibility, is to both physically and metaphorically look back whenever you leave any circumstance to see if there is any trace of you having been there. This includes leaving an unmade bed, trash on the ground, or having personally trashed someone, thereby leaving a trail for someone to potentially follow into my world and disrupt it.

I was confident about this one, because I had learned from that bloody green pillow to keep a sharp lookout for any evidence of my uncaring or neglect. Because of this, I also better understood how a specific effort—be it sincere or just acting until it becomes sincere—becomes a discipline, a habit, and finally an assumption of everyday living. The trick, as Jeanette had relentlessly pointed out to me, was in the early recognition of slovenly practices before one created a crappy momentum that was more difficult to stop.

So far so good, I thought, but there were things I needed to work out before I dove headlong into another vat of stupid.

In practice, these are not independent disciplines; they need to be integrated as one becomes better at any aspect of them. If, for example, I erased my personal history without losing my sense of self-importance, I would not be calculating in my actions so much as evasive with others. The

momentum of this would lead me to doubting my actions, and self-aggrandizing would become more difficult to keep at bay. More than this, what I could already deduce from people's words—primarily sucking the life out of each other as they designed the accolades they wanted to hear—all-but demanded that I bless them with my wisdom: I needed to ask Jeanette how she dealt with this inclination.

Or was it as simple and difficult as shutting the hell up, again?

Then there was the present: I had a personal history with a few people.

At first, I considered redefining them—changing the old agreements upon which we had become, and maintained our relationships. Then I realized this would be like trying to resolve the geometry problem of squaring the circle. It looked possible only because we had conceived of the problem, but circles don't change into squares; most people don't allow peers to change unless they can seem them as worse off.

The answer seemed to be to let them drift—certainly my brothers—we didn't know each other anyway. They'd assume my growing lapses in communication were a consequence of my traumatic life, which they never asked about anyway.

I dearly wanted my mother to know that I was not nuts; to the contrary, I was in the best hands possible. But telling a nurse who had done rotations in mental health institutions about spirit-guides and voices in my head? Maybe not.

This left Ed, a friend I loved—my only real friend. I couldn't just quit him.

Clever bugger that I am, I reasoned that although he knew my past intimately we could continue being friends under the condition that I never again mentioned it, or what I was doing with Jeanette. If he came to think my current life embarrassed me, and the past had scared me so deeply that I was hiding from both, he would not mention either. That was who he was.

The plan to let him know I was no longer interested in speaking about my past was simple: I was an accomplished bar-talker, and he was good-looking with a razor sharp mind. Together, we were an excellent hunter-gatherer team of shallow relationships, the rewards of which he no longer cared about, because he was with Jayne. But he would play for the fun of it.

I decided to "redefine" these agreements at our next beer outing when, out of habit, Ed would try to lead me into telling an intriguing war tale to a cutie with a limited vocabulary, and I would leave him flat-footed by saying, "I don't want to talk about that anymore."

This is precisely what happened. I never did and he never asked.

As it worked out, the metaphysical issue took care of itself. I simply never mentioned Jeanette, other than as my destination when that was the case, and he never asked what I was up to...

When Jeanette and I next met, I explained what had happened after the CBC assignment, adding that I knew the momentum of my blunder would never stop; I was doing what I thought was not just best, but the most efficient action as an opportunity to further my developmental disciplines. I was going AWOL from the general population of earth.

After a moment of looking into my eyes, she formally said, "It is time to embrace the reality of your situation."

"I thought I just explained that."

"You cannot truly appreciate that which you have not loved and lost, correct?"

"Without loss, appreciation is a second hand conviction," I said.

With a nod, she said, "Think of this as your graduate lesson in appreciation, but it's not what you think." Jeanette dipped her head in a thought-gathering pose.

Briefly pursing her lips, she looked up and said, "You have lost all but one friend, your source of income, the world you thought you knew, and if you speak about the one you're getting to know no one will want to know you. The worst that can happen to an average man has happened to you." Incongruously, she grinned. "But you are no longer average: events have perfectly poised you to challenge yourself to death, because you have nothing left to live for."

"I'm not sure that's comforting."

"Meaning you're going to wallow for a while longer?"

I hesitated, then said, "Maybe the ramifications of erasing my history are more stark than I realized. You know—no man is an island?"

"Coupla-things you need to embrace," Jeanette said, mimicking my poor grammar to loosen me up. "You grew up ignoring death, and it was happy to tag along just in case. In El Salvador, death was a foggy shroud from which you could not escape, and it chilled terror into your bones. In [Argentina](#), it sat comfortably in a hammock nearby, and you came to terms with its presence. In Beirut, when you were not staring it down you actually chased it; but death has a schedule, and it always went to where it was needed. As a consequence of these experiences, you failed to appreciate its true power. So in [Ethiopia](#) it became bored babysitting you, and it showed you what it looks like in ways you had yet to fathom from your other massacres, because it did it without perceivable pursuit, intent, or weapons. Death became a way of the world; it just *was*." She took a needed breath.

As did I. I understood her perfectly.

"You and death have a rare rapport," she ruminated, as if this was mystifying. "You are buddies like few have known, so be happy that you can consciously share your most intimate journey with it now. Unlike the average person who might seek out its comfort at this point, you can lean on it as the truest guide that it is to everyone who embraces its presence. When it really is your time, it will tap you on the shoulder and you will not be surprised, or ask anything of it. You will *know*, and you will say thank you for your guidance, because it will mean you have fulfilled your purpose." She looked proud, as if I might actually do this.

"With a caveat," I said after a moment.

Jeanette cocked her head.

"I will ask it to check the spelling on its list of appointments."

She snorted at the image, then laughing at her snort said, "As for the island reference," she swallowed, and started anew, "don't let the idea of leaving everyone behind scare you. The thing that should have scared the crap out of you is an option you no longer have—not having anything to look forward to but more of the same." She gently waved my past life into retirement; it had done its job.

Jeanette leaned in cozily. "The appreciation you will come to feel is that nothing is standing in your way, and what other people fear most is your advisor." She leaned back. "It's perfect."

"The theory is sound."

"To help you move into this way of thinking," she said cheerfully, "you already intellectually know another crucial guiding factor. You just haven't embraced it, but when you do..." she motioned wiping her hands clean of dirt.

"Go for it."

"Filling you mind with anticipation of the day's challenges requires that you work at it until it becomes your default position when your expectations go down the crapper. You get what you focus on."

"Understood."

"Right now you feel frightened and dejected. To feel this, and every other energy-sucking mood you adopt," she said wryly, "you had to practice it until it became your default position when you were disillusioned." She paused. "Do you see where I'm going?"

"They take the same amount of energy. It's a choice."

"Exactly, and to help make yours easier, when you wake up tomorrow you might want to remember that the world doesn't ever do anything to you. It couldn't care less, so why pretend that any circumstance is personal when you could be spending that energy recalculating a new avenue to the goal that eluded your grasp yesterday?"

"Which reminds me: by force of what I've learned so far, erasing myself, and cozying up to Death, I really won't belong to the world of *average people*," I said, deriding this categorization, "so how do I deal with living in it? We haven't covered that."

"You will have to learn to act as if you have not suffered losses beyond comprehension, nor had experiences of such depth and magnificence as to render them unspeakable, and most assuredly disbelieved if you tried." She cocked her head. "You will have to learn how to act as an average man."

"Huh?"

"All you have to be is your former self, but without the damaging aspects. It's the perfect disguise," she said, opening her palms. "You've practiced it all of your life, so no one will suspect what you're really doing—and what you're becoming."

Nodding to herself, into the silence she said, "You used to be warm and artfully endearing to gain acceptance, sweet when you wanted something, neglectful when you didn't, and deceitful so that no one could see the fear in you. Part of the strategy of becoming all that you are capable of is to interact impeccably with a world you are no longer a part of. This is to be warm yet aloof—giving nothing of importance away in your de facto approval of other's ways. It is to be sweet but not insincere, because you want neither for things, nor support, only harmony when crossing their paths. You also need to be patient instead of neglectful, because reacting irresponsibly will leave a trail you will cross again; and you need to be cunning but not deceitful, which means you can help others in ways they can accept—or will accept after you're gone—and not schmooze them for your own gain. If some of them have energy, and sometimes when they don't, you will need to be ruthless but not cruel, be this to teach them appropriately or to separate yourself from a poor circumstance. So you see," she winked, "you're already half-way there."

"Sure—the wrong half."

"If that's the way you want it, that's what you'll get," she admonished me. "By the way, those are the core attributes of Controlled Folly; they are the only way to be involved in the world you have left behind, and still separate from it without deception."

"It is *entirely* deceiving."

"Not in any way. Listen," she said, leaning forward earnestly. "You can't help what you know, and you can't tell anyone what you know and remain part of that group." She shrugged. "As we discussed, the deception will be theirs because they do not know they are acting the part of the audience, when they are really the magicians. You do—you can see their trickery clearly, which in no way makes you responsible to educate them. Their time will come, so your behavior is a strategy to deal with circumstances others have yet to encounter." She leaned back. "Besides which, I know you won't use your knowledge for personal gain, or even for entertainment, although you will certainly be entertained by what *you* used to be like. You'll see it everywhere."

"Why do you think I won't use it for personal gain?"

"Because one of your core foibles is intolerance." She chuckled. "You won't want to have anything to do with average people, let alone voluntarily engage them in any kind of subterfuge."

"Okay, so you think my plan is timely?" I said, moving along.

"I have some things to add, if you're up for it?"

"Go ahead," I said stoically.

"One of the fastest ways of slaying self-importance ⁽¹²⁾ is through a profound life recapitulation, to determine the reasons you did what you did, find the essence of those actions, and follow the disciplines that cause you to stop making those choices by practicing the *not-doings* of the self. You already have a strong start on that, so keep it up...

"*Not-doings* of the self?" I mumbled.

"You know them; you just want me to confirm it." She sat there, placidly awaiting my view.

Stumbling through the placement of the pieces, I eventually concluded that maintaining a self-image consists of constantly expanding and espousing upon one's personal history, thereby upholding and enhancing their sense of self-importance, while living as if someone else should clean up after them, and as if they will never die. The *not-doings* of the self—or self-image—are their opposites, and one can more easily practice these after a recapitulation that informs them of their relative idiocy.

"I told you so," Jeanette said, mimicking the childlike manipulation I had tried on her without realizing it.

In retrospect, I can see that the timing of the dream I had that night was calculated to impact a man who had no reason to live, other than to better himself, which on this night was not exactly like winning a lottery...

I came fully aware within a dream, walking Bear in front of the house. In my waking state, I was training him to do the basic stuff, including stopping and waiting at intersections and our back gate, which he cleverly applied to all gates on our walk. He was an enthusiastic and quick learner, save for one annoying tendency that should have been simple for him to do—walk at the heel. Sure, he *could* do it, but it seemed to be his singular point of rebellion, and I did not need to be having a difficult day in order to smack his ass to get his attention, particularly after a difficult-to-my ego lesson with Jeanette.

In the dream, he fought not to heel, and I shouted "No!" as I hit him. Then I hit him again, and again, until he cowered at my feet.

Speaking of coward...

I awakened in a full sweat, feeling sick to my stomach for ever having smacked him; I sat on the side of the bed and wept freely at my cruelty. I was too ashamed to tell Jeanette of this experience, because I understood that to have hit Bear at all was... an abomination.

Never thought that I'd ever use that word.

Never thought I was still afraid.

⁽¹²⁾ The single most effective method of losing self-importance did not apply to me, but I could use it as a motivator. This is to have to take care of someone who can't do so for themselves. So whenever anyone got my knickers in a knot, I could imagine being responsible for their total welfare, like the infant some of them were acting like. In this circumstance, I could not risk my health, income, or freedom, because they did not belong to me. They belonged to my responsibilities.

Chapter 74 - A Master's Lesson

On a particularly candid day, Jeanette sat next to me on her plush green couch—closer than was our standard—and quietly said she had grasped the key element in learning How To Teach.

I thought it strange that she would devote more time to this, in other than as her by-the-way manner, before I realized she was indulging her own difficulties. Ironically, not having to learn any of this caused me to pay closer attention to whatever epic event had clearly taken the wind out of her sails.

She began her quiet discourse by saying that learning responsibility at the level of a teacher's impeccability was a brutal road, for within it she had discovered that the love she had showered on her children included short-term solutions, and an inconsistency of applications that enabled their flaws. The result was that they had learned to manipulate people through verbal combat, followed by the starvation of their affections as a weapon against her love. Jeanette immediately addressed what I was about to say—that all children did this.

I interrupted anyway, and said that all parents did this.

To my surprise, she asked me to remain quiet; the lesson she was delivering was personally difficult, and it required much organization.

Like reading a Cole's Notes summary, she said that Saa-ra had put this life-lesson in perspective, first reminding her that Jeanette's children had to become a product of their times no different than everyone else, and that they chose their path. Jeanette's path included being the unwitting perpetrator of misapplied love in order for her to understand how most of us are conformed to manipulate others, under the guise of our daily negotiations through life: everything is political, and honesty is habitually framed by self-interest. As a self-directing species, we are lax as far as teaching our children the underlying nature of our actions is concerned.

Saa-ra repeated that Jeanette could not teach what she did not know.

Jeanette said this conversation was the basis of an excruciating lesson that Saa-ra had said few were ready to learn—ruthlessness as the stuff of mastery of the human condition, for Masters only, because there was no compromise in the ways of the emissaries. This was the new phase of learning How to Teach she had been working on since I had briefly crossed the bridge of reason. Hearing this explained the rise in the intensity of my lessons.

Ruthlessness for teachers of The Way to Live, she explained, was not cruelty, although persons of lesser energy would certainly see it this way. It was to teach as efficiently as possible, which meant without regard for ramifications within the (timely) progression of events: there is an escalation in how a teacher approaches lessons, based on the student's progression in all areas of learning. The student is an entire "project," so their comprehension of ancillary matters was critical to elevating any single matter.

Metaphorically, learning to read had to progress at the same speed as learning to write, beginning both with comfortable conversations about each, to becoming whatever the student's behavior dictated was necessary as the tasks became more difficult. This is why, she explained, that she had regularly reviewed and revised my earliest lessons on issues of self-confusion—poor grammar—greed, need, and neglect, when my biggest hurdle remained self-importance.

She next reminded me that the key to comprehending any of her lessons on behavior, in the swiftest time, was to supplant reason with logic. This entailed removing "self" from the circumstance.

"The murder room," I said, clearly recalling Jeanette's formal execution scenario; everyone present was necessary to the act, therefore a participant, therefore a murderer, but my reason had obfuscated the facts.

She leaned forward. "If that example had no values attached to the issue, such as the premise of justice or the ethics of killing people, your reason wouldn't have had a place to stand in judgment of the circumstance. Correct?"

"Yes. Values are attached to the presence of self, but can you give me an example where "self" isn't present—to be sure I understand you before you go on?"

"I can," she said with a micro-nod. "Imagine a room with two chairs, but one of them is lying on its side. How many chairs are in the room?"

"Two."

"There are two people in the room. One is a blue Frenchman, the other a green Irishman. One of them is lying down, and the other is standing. How many men are in the room?"

"Two."

"Would your answer be two if you did not know what purple, green, standing, French, or Irish were?"

"Yes—all that matters is the noun, be it men or chairs."

"The chair on its side has both arms and the backrest broken off, but the legs and seat are intact. How many chairs are in the room?"

"Two—only the design of one has changed."

"One chair is missing a leg. How many chairs are in the room?"

"One. Without the stabilizing leg, the chair is something else, regardless of how close it appears to being a chair.

"Your logic being?"

"How many pieces of wood would have to be removed before it was obviously a pile of sticks."

"Exactly. Do you have any questions about the effects of self in assessing a circumstance?"

"It's actually pretty straight forward."

"Good, now as we..."

"You're not going to ask me which man fell and broke the chair?"

Chuckling a brief respite from her somberness, she said, "As we have discussed at length, this circumstance applies to truth; it either is or it isn't. Resembling the truth is the trap of reason—the camouflage."

"Got it: how many misspoken promises would have to be tallied before it was obviously a pile of ~~sh~~... sticks?"

"Exactly, so you must be willing to make definitive assessments the moment something seems," she paused, "not quite right, and take appropriate actions."

"This is still about your lesson?"

"It is," she said tonelessly, "but I'm expanding its application so that my circumstance doesn't trap your attention. The lesson is universal," she said with a wave of her hand in a listless illustration of "everywhere."

"You have learned to view 'what is' well, but you need to view 'what is not' as easily."

"I have a question when you're finished."

"Recap how you maneuvered through your childhood," she replied, with a quick bow of her head.

"In what way?"

"You were an obstinate free spirit; how did you make your way through the pitfalls?"

I sat back, lined up my ducks, and in keeping with her frank experience as a parent, I came clean as a kid. I told her that I used my parent's guilt from having spanked me, as infrequent as that was, to manipulate them because immediately after being punished I was pardoned. I presumed this was because none of us understood the relationship between being stupid and being hit in the ass. I also became so used to how things worked between my parents that I could manipulate a pardon by a well-timed admission. If not, when my punishments evolved into restrictions on my movements, I quickly discovered that I could drive my mother nuts by saying "There's nothing to do?" This made the punishment more hers than mine, and she soon commuted my sentence because she did not want me in the house. If all else failed, I would not communicate with either parent, and I could hold out longer than they could, because they began to think they had gone too far, and I was traumatized.

Jeanette pointed out, and I agreed, that I had carried this pattern of manipulation into adulthood, particularly withdrawing my approval of her if I didn't like her ideas. If I otherwise I didn't have anything to defend, I wasn't exactly a sycophant, but it did not dawn on me that I might be good company without any manipulations.

"Can you appreciate those events from your parent's point of view?" she said.

"I can now... because of your teachings."

"Go ahead."

"Oh—okay. I know they loved me with all of their heart, which I tested and almost broke a number of times. They probably knew what I was doing all along, but they decided to keep me close to keep me safe, as best they could, and let nature teach me when I could better defend myself. I suspect they hoped for some kind of miracle before that time came." I shrugged, "I didn't know it at the time, but I was an asshole disguised as a child."

"I have great empathy for your struggles now," she said, addressing my discomfort at suddenly realizing the asshole was now disguised as an adult.

"I know you do—in a hard-ball kind of way," I replied evenly.

"Empathy recognizes the difficulties of another's path, but as a friend I have no sympathy for yours. This would give you permission to continue your manipulations, which is the point I'm getting to."

"What happened?"

As always, her explanation was comprehensive...

Jeanette recalled that, in our beginnings, she was "herself" more often than not, and we spent our days as normal people—as if spirits were not speaking to us. She spoke to John the man, not the apprentice, about her daily life, informed me of the trials of learning How To Teach as she encountered them, and when she was upset she allowed me to assist her in dissecting issues with Josh. In other words, we shared our time more or less as equally ignorant apprentices, relative to our respective positions, whereas the most frequent basis upon which we had causal chats came from a single belief: she thought that both Josh and I were emissaries being awakened to our tasks.

The only difference between us was that mine was a probable future, whereas Josh was absolutely destined to be her partner: Saa-ra had said as much when Josh was still acting less than maturely about her metaphysical leanings, and Jeanette had asked Saa-ra if maybe they had made a mistake. Saa-ra told her that they were meant to be together—and the mystery of her great attraction to someone so much different was solved for me.

Jeanette continued to explain her lesson: as time passed and Josh's attitude seemed to evolve, he still did not put out any great effort. As a consequence, Jeanette asked Saa-ra if this might be because he had not experienced Spirit as directly as I had...yet.

Saa-ra pointed to Jeanette's lessons, saying that these should have made it abundantly clear that the learning curve could be sharp. After hearing this, Jeanette told me she had no reason to doubt that Josh would soon experience whatever miracle he needed to begin learning in leaps and bounds.

More frustrating time passed, and no miracle occurred.

Jeanette said she did not ask Saa-ra why they (Spirit) were holding back. Instead, she grappled with the tenets of the teaching scheme to see what a novice teacher might be missing. It had to be her, not him. In the doing, she began absorbing the minutiae of the art of stalking, parts of which she shared as I grasped lessons relevant to a given attribute of the art, and as a way to follow the first rule of stalking...

Pausing to indicate a section break in her story, Jeanette reminded me of the procedures involved in stalking anyone into recognizing what they are really like. It wasn't as simple as finding their buttons and pushing them into the light of day—not right away. It always begins with the teacher telling the apprentice what they are going to do, at every stage, but they tell them in a surreptitious way. As I understood this, the intention was to awaken the student's silent knowledge from which they may arrive at convictions more quickly than going through the lengthier, faith-based route alone. Sharing her screenplay scenes, discussing the parables in her book, and her lessons on How to Teach, had regularly informed me, and Josh, of her intentions.

The faith-based route came next regardless, which was to allow extraordinary events to eventually capture the apprentice's full attention, after which faith in the teacher's credibility is intellectually encompassing. However, the student's inevitable failure to accept any one of the teacher's claims, such as I did with cruelty, made it clear that my fidelity to her knowledge was a second-hand conviction. I could agree with her assessments of my behavior, but I did not know what to do about constantly forgetting to act differently, because I did not recognize the (seemingly minor) elements that constituted the camouflage of cruelty. Ergo, I didn't really believe they were camouflage attributes of the core flaw. It followed that I was not a cruel man—my ego had seemingly reasoned its own usefulness.

This circumstance served up another point about stalking, which was the near impossibility of chaperoning one's own behavior into the clarity of its essence. The difficult stuff always required the insights and timing of an outside force that was relentlessly consistent in the pursuit of the student's freedom until, and unless, the student had a Conditional Death. That was the rule at this level of development. No other impetus would suffice, because a Conditional Death was necessary to practicing impeccability as a way of life. Only then could a student be allowed access to knowledge about handling true power. Emissary level stuff.

Still speaking about teaching me, Jeanette said that when she had done all that she knew how to do to get me past the second-hand conviction stage, she had asked Saa-ra what was next. Saa-ra then taught her one of the two most misunderstood, and objectionable of all stalking techniques. She told Jeanette to switch sides—to agree with whatever excuses I made for failing to perform.

This procedure, she explained, would allow the truth to emerge, like a leg-trap snapping shut in an unguarded moment, because after a while I would stop trying to assess my behavior, even to defend it. Off guard, the flaw would emerge full force as Jeanette found a moment to push that specific button.

Understanding that she had been playing me for quite a while, and specifically when we had gone shopping, I strenuously objected claiming that the loss of trust was devastating to future lessons. Sedately, Jeanette said that if I cared to recall our most agreeable conversations, which I had demonstrated I could do almost verbatim, I would discover that she had never instigated an untruth. The apparent contradiction in her methods merely revealed the truth from an angle I could not refute—my own actions. This had been my choice by way of not apprehending the lesson in any other way. She also reminded me that all acts of stalking are about highlighting circumstances that would have happened in the course of time, with or without her influence.

"And Josh?" I said, still simmering.

"He stalled at denying having unusual experiences, like you did."

"But they became undeniable?"

"Not to him, the significance of which I failed to grasp. I'll come back to this. You have learned that the focus of mankind throughout millions of years of development has always degenerated into destruction, violence, and greed. You also know that it has taken four Universal intercessions to keep us from harming ourselves to the degree that our momentum could take the earth beyond its ability to recover. Correct?"

"Yes."

Apparently waiting for me to see a grander point, she said in clipped tones, "The world keeps its population in check through poverty, wars, disease, and famine, when simple protection would do nicely. We have far passed the point of change where niceties matter. The most ancient among mankind's first manifestations are now ready to oversee our ways—their ways. They know their personal histories of ruin intimately, so ruthlessness will be the basis of their teaching. This is the way we learn—by our own standards—and the massive energetic Identities who came through the gateway to help Saa-ra retrieve Kai-tahr agree. Their time is over, and they are going home. So if you're pissed at me beneath that uncaring exterior, consider how you've learned so far... which brings me to a final approach that we've not talked about."

"Going home, as in leaving us?"

"Yes."

"You're going back?"

"No," she said straight-faced, but tears leaked. She did not wipe them off her cheek as she said, "All of the Portions born to this reality are far too slow to go hom... back."

I could not fathom what that meant to Jeanette, but her expression told me not to investigate.

"You were talking about a final approach," I said evenly, silently concluding that Kai-tahr's frequencies and pulses had originated from the source Himself, so compatibility had to have something to do with it.

Jeanette bowed her head to organize her preamble.

She said that because one cannot teach what they do not know, meaning directly experienced in our kind of lessons, and one cannot learn from experiences not assessed, she speculated that she had not gone through Josh's lessons ahead of him. Or maybe she had, and she was missing the point. In a rare moment of despair, she had looked toward the heavens and said, "Are you sure it's him?" to which Saa-ra had surprisingly replied, "Are you?"

As I digested the news that Jeanette could despair, she said Saa-ra's unexpected comment had come two weeks ago, after which Saa-ra advised Jeanette on how to continue. The bottom line of this advice was for Jeanette to attack the source of the blockage in her students' thinking, which is invariably self-importance. No more pussy-footing around.

Jeanette understood that this drastic method belied the importance of Josh grasping core lessons, because Power (Spirit teachers) does not wait. In the stalker's world, this means there are no limits to which a teacher will go, including endangering students to the degree that the teacher is capable of keeping them safe. Pissing them off is a given.

"If it doesn't work?" I said, calming.

"The student goes their own way: the laws of inevitability will bring the lesson back to them when they are ready again."

"So Spirit *does* let students go?"

"You could say there are two lines I needed to be aware of. The first crossing was of you learning, without reservation, that what I said was true regardless of your ability to do anything about it. Until this point, you could have walked away, no harm no foul. After this point, which in your case included the Descent of Spirit, life could have become difficult by way of not being able to do anything with what you knew. The second crossing is less definable." She gave it some thought. "You now have the mystical experiences and tools, if not the discipline, to continue on your own. Or not, if that's your choice, but Phillip won't let you go; one way or another you're going to get whatever lessons you signed up for."

"Even without a Conditional Death?"

"To earn it."

Jeanette continued her story: having informed Jeanette of this teaching option, which was not to be attempted until all else failed, Saa-ra said they weren't there yet. Under the auspices of readying Josh to make the leaps I had, Saa-ra guided Jeanette to set up stalking scenarios similar to my own. Within these, he had revealed himself to be no more or less a fool than I, and she had reasoned this was a good thing because I was now willingly learning disciplines to change my ways. In particular, my progress in Dreaming was dramatic, so she thought that Josh's turn was just ten minutes away.

Then ten more, but it didn't matter because an emissary's learning curve could be vertical: less than a week ago, Saa-ra had agreed that teaching through symbols that contained catalogues of knowledge in a single sitting was very powerful, and highly efficient.

But nothing changed.

Despondent over this circumstance, and with no end in sight, Jeanette had asked Saa-ra for help discerning what she could do... the universe never told us anything outright, if we could experience it first... and Jeanette finally had.

Yesterday morning, Saa-ra led Jeanette to uncovering the nature of the events that had accurately foretold of both the development and dissolution of her past relationships. These baby-steps included teenage boyfriends, her ex-husband, subsequent adult boyfriends, her children, and friendships in general. Jeanette also well knew the four core personality types that Stalkers dealt with, so she quickly arrived at insincerity as the hallmark of Josh's side of their relationship. Her end was... she finally saw it, not unlike dealing with her children when they were small. Josh was using her love against her.

Saa-ra asked Jeanette to dissect their relationship in this sterile context, from the Place of No Pity.

In review, Jeanette saw that Josh had displayed the elements of deceit and insincerity from their first meeting, in perfectly acceptable, even expected ways for a man in our times. He had deflected Jeanette's potentially revealing personal probes by complimenting her, later offering reasonable justifications for being late for dates, then procrastinating about other plans that too often became "unforeseen" circumstances in their failure to materialize. At these times, Jeanette

had talked with Josh, but nothing changed other than the places where he could retreat became fewer with each chat, until she found the resolve to cut them out entirely. Josh could go only one of two ways. He had to realize his words stood naked in the face of his actions, and commit to his promises or stop making them.

Knowing what was coming, I said, "And then?" to help her begin that fateful sentence.

She said, "An incomplete event, regardless of how closely it appears to be functional, or is just ten more minutes away, must be something else. Josh's constant, convincing verbal dances had looked like effort and commitment, but his lack of performance revealed the focus of his efforts to be on contriving verbal dances. His words were colorful but meaningless, and when they finally fell apart for me, I saw that they had always been something else—mostly lies, like yours, regardless that you both believed much of what you said."

Quietly, Jeanette said that she had offered Josh a final chance to make a real effort to learn, just last night. He correctly saw this as a relationship deal-breaker, construed it to be a breach of free will, and justifiably declined the offer as an assault on the very nature of evolutionary development. And that was that: the teacher had relentlessly confronted the student, and the woman had been used as far as her love could blind her. Both were finished with him.

Hoping to slide her out of her "third person" degree of misery, I said, "He knew you loved him, which he tested, and I know you knew what he was doing, but you kept him close to allow Spirit to teach him through you, all-the-while hoping for a miracle that would jump start him." I shrugged. "He's an asshole disguised as an adult; I would know. I don't see where you could have done anything more... but," I added, "I wouldn't be happy with Saa-ra."

With a "thanks for the effort" smirk, Jeanette said she had protested the deceptive ways of Spirit; they had kept her clinging to hope for over a year, while she was totally dependent on Saa-ra for guidance. To this, Saa-ra explained that Jeanette had wished her own deceptions into place. She (Saa-ra) had never definitively said that Josh would make it—"meant to be" and "destiny" were not fixed concepts, as Jeanette well knew, and it was Jeanette who had introduced the elements of doubt in their chats. She also knew that nothing comes from nothing, but she had ignored her own emerging *knowing*. Instead, she had relentlessly presumed that Josh's lack of progress was her fault, so she had never asked Saa-ra directly why he hadn't experienced Spirit as directly as I had, nor forced an issue with Josh.

In fact, the lack of a fundamental experience in the progression⁽¹³⁾ of Spirit designating a new student was the giveaway omen of Josh's precarious position. He had endless reservations about everything, while dismissing his direct experiences with *knowing*, and his own (few) successful attempts at channeling; he speculated that Jeanette's teachings and general influences confused the issue—he was probably making up his experiences.

She further explained that to have lifted him out of his body, for example, would not have convinced him of all that I had subsequently embraced about the end-of-times cycle, and his potential roll in it. He would always need "more," and Spirit saw that if he refused to give his end of "more" as was his established way, they would have to let him go. This could create an unbearable existence; almost like non-being by force of possessing crucial knowledge that most of mankind would kill to learn, and being unable to do anything with it. More than this, it was imperative for Jeanette to learn to boldly take the lead, and not put other's progression into her basket of responsibilities. This included her relationship with Saa-ra, in terms of fully integrating and trusting her senses and feelings. Jeanette was not to be a puppet reliant on verbal communication with her. In fact, this could be dangerous. She could be playing into Chance...

At this point, Jeanette acknowledged that for all of her efforts to meticulously train the "self" out of my thinking, she had "self" involved in her own thinking the entire time. It had cost her dearly, but no more.

I was certain that her moment of acceptance of this lesson was the glimpse of the dream Phillip had shown me of her weeping into her pillow. I didn't say anything about this because it felt intrusive. I only later realized that Phillip had shown it to me so that I understood Jeanette was viewing aspects of my life only as she needed to know them, as well.

"I appreciate you letting me know all of this," I said, mustering a modicum of sympathy for the woman had been breaking my balls for months, "but can I ask why you took such a... a," I searched for the proper word; lengthy and meandering came to mind...

"Circuitous route?"

"Ya, circuitous."

In her academic voice, Jeanette said, "Part of learning How to Teach is to recognize opportunities and pounce on them as if they will never come again."

"But now?" I interrupted her.

"Do you mean while I'm hurting?"

"Yes."

"Because this circumstance may one day be the deciding factor in your own judgment of whether to seize an opportunity to teach, or go for a beer."

"Hmm."

"If you decide to teach," she carried on with this benign thread, "you will need to go for a long walk and have a heart-to-heart chat with yourself, because none of your relationships will survive. I know this is old news, but it needs to be stressed. The fact is, the CBC issue aside your relationships have already changed, but you are not focused on them like you used to be; you've not noticed to what degree they're different."

She was correct. I had noticed a distance between Ed and me before he left for Nova Scotia. This was not from disapproval so much as his general bewilderment over my behavior having settled on the old explanation—the effects of my travels still lingered. He was also otherwise engaged in wooing Jayne, which made the distance I felt seem reasonable.

I had no other friendships, ergo nothing else to notice.

With this thought completed in my mind, she said, "You need to know there is no loss in this transformation. It's the way we navigate—must navigate our way through life, because everyone has their own path. Rare friends will allow others to change to some degree, and they simply drop those aspects of their former agreements to ride the coattails of the remainder. This is not likely in your case, because all of their agreements are made from within the cognition of the average person, and you'll not bet wearing that coat anymore.

"Regardless of how you word it," she said, raising her hand because she knew I found the term 'average person' objectionable, "your path has taken you across the threshold of the cognition of the Stalker. This does not mean you are one, only that you understand enough of their point of view to appreciate that it's not a condition from which you can choose your relationships. Power chooses them."

"Pardon me?"

"Your consensus conformations to culture, and to reason itself, no longer apply. You've been so immersed in learning *about* people's camouflages that you've not been listening *to* what has become mostly crap to you." She took a thoughtful breath; I imagined ideas beyond my grasp whirling into a simpler form. "For you, there is no longer a need to anoint facts with your

experiences, or bless the world with your extended points of view, let alone attempt to explain concepts like stalking to those who will insist on rehearsing their self-image in every possible circumstance. Your growing ability to sterilize your observations, and reduce them to their underlying natures, came by way of highly damaging experiences and arduous retraining utilizing your enormous energy to access and accept 'what is'. None of these circumstances can be credibly explained to a person of reason; they will hear a tale of delusional superiority, which means you have no basis upon which to form any kind of real relationship. They can't step up, and you can't step down. We've talked about your options."

"Specifically... for review, please?" I said, feeling like she was practicing letting me go.

"You can consign yourself to the metaphorical monastery, or you can choose Controlled Folly to appear to be participating in your former world at their level. If you do this, you will also have to stalk yourself in other ways—like teaching without regard for appearances or reservation. I would highly recommend that path," she said seriously.

"That's callous ~~shi~~—stuff."

"You are failing to appreciate that people have agreed to be whatever they are to you, and as cruelty is your natural bent, it would be easier to modify that into ruthlessness than to learn it from scratch."

I looked for a hint of a smile. Finding none, I said, "I get it intellectually—part of a dream explained that to me, but the dishonesty is unsettling."

"Dishonesty?"

"I'm talking about trying to get past my own dishonesty as an ~~average~~ ordinary guy, and you're talking about practicing it as a stalker."

She leaned toward me. Well into my discomfort zone in two ways, she said, "This is the critical point of taking my raw lesson, dissecting it, and offering it to you now. These lessons are in no way callous. At this moment, you are on the receiving end of the ruthlessness of stalking, and you'll find that you have no other choice if you become the giver, because the view from across the threshold of cognitions leaves you with none. It is a gorge filled with the harsh foibles of reasonable people, and you have literally walked through their gore."

"Good metaphor," I said, not having explained that this is what I *saw* when my bridge of reason collapsed. "What's the impeccable choice?"

"You will have to attempt to do for another, what I've done for you. The trick will be finding someone with the energy to discover themselves." She leaned back. "In all likelihood," she said softly, "you will attempt to have normal relationships, but they will fail, and as they do you will recall this conversation and realize the dishonesty was yours. You always knew better. Eventually, you will have understood enough to commit to a fuller transition." She shrugged.

I opened my mouth to speak.

"Yes, you may be alone," she said, addressing my thoughts, "but not lonely, no matter which path you take: Controlled Folly is exhausting, because you are fighting self-importance every step of the way. This means you will need to be able to laugh at yourself like a crazy man, and you can't do that and feel lonely. If you choose the monastic path, you won't have to pretend to put up with..." she shrugged, "average people at all. Either way, Spirit will never abandon you."

"Do you want to be alone?" I said, taking her comments as a cue that might be timely for both of us.

"I've a client coming a little later on," Jeanette said noncommittally.

I stood to leave. "I'll talk to you later then."

As I turned toward the mid-house stairway, the hall light went out. Swiveling to point this out to Jeanette, because the narrow north-facing stairway required it at all but the best of times, I saw that the accent lamp beside the rocker was out, as well. Then I noticed the silence in the house; no compressor noises or the ticking of clocks.

Jeanette lowered her head, but not from embarrassment. I otherwise couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"How much?" I said.

"Eight hundred," she replied evenly.

"I'll be right back," I said, not surprised by the large amount. I had seen unopened "urgent" utility bills in her kitchen mail basket, but it was none of my business.

My rush was not about getting out of that awkward situation, or about her food going bad. Jeanette's concern for her kid's well-being included not making them any more fearful than they already were about what they considered a mystical dalliance gone way too far. The power going out would not reassure them, and Kris would be back from school in a few hours.

I went to a branch of my bank and withdrew all but \$50 from my last relatively large freelance check—probably literally now, and returned just as Jeanette was exiting the side door. I handed her the envelope.

"Thank you," she said.

"Any time," I said and I meant it, though it was unlikely to matter considering I had nuked my career.

"I know this is none of my business," I said as she got into her car, but I'm guessing that you thought Josh would help?"

"How could he know?" she said, confused.

It hadn't crossed my mind that she wouldn't tell him about a financial crunch.

"You let it go this long because...?"

"Because Saa-ra said I needed to trust that I would have what I need when I needed it. It's difficult to argue with that now. With anything," she said, starting the car. "It all makes perfect sense. Even stalking is easy."

Staring without comprehension, I said, "No offense, but that didn't work out so well."

Looking as if I was the one who had lost my mind, Jeanette drove off to pay the robber barons at BC Hydro.

If I had been paying attention to the underlying nature of this day, I would have heard Jeanette saying she was coming after me, no holds barred. If doing this meant I would quit, she had prepared me to deal with life after her, but I was dwelling on my generosity.

⁽¹³⁾ Spirit first reveals itself to prospective students through coincidences and omens, which seers call The Manifestation of Spirit. This is followed by The Knock of Spirit, which is essentially the same as a manifestation, but the event is witnessed by a teacher. Spirit next resorts to Trickery, by arranging unusual events or manipulating a person's awareness to bring the inexplicable into their field of vision. Josh and I had experienced all of these steps, but only I had experienced final one, The Descent of Spirit, which is an undeniable encounter / event / contact with Spirit.

[Chapter 75 - Mexico](#)

Jeanette / Saa-ra determined that the only way to move me on was to force a final behavioral decision—to appreciate where I really was and with whom. All I really had to do was put my ego in neutral and do nothing, because the act of acquiescence would open the door to all else.

Jeanette's direct approach to teaching began immediately, and resulted in us barely speaking socially. I was brief, if not curt, possibly overly polite when we were together, and if I didn't have to be with her, I wasn't.

I easily dismissed the idea that I had withdrawn my affections to punish her, because this was not about disapproval of her views, just methods that seemed not to include the awareness that there was a person at the receiving end of them. More than unnecessary, she was being a class "A" bitch for no reason I could fathom. When we crossed paths in the hallway, I thought of the pot and kettle analogy, because she nodded with what my disposition interpreted as a smarmy grin.

Under these conditions, during a Saturday class Jeanette announced that a newer student, Fran, and Jeanette were driving to Mexico for a lesson. After all I had been through, and now Fran's flight to the top of the pecking order, made me more than indignant. I pouted the entire time they were gone—ten days—making Jenny pay for trying to cheer me up, while Fran's close friend made bedroom eyes at our every meeting.

When they arrived home in a different car—a red cabriolet convertible—neither Jeanette nor Fran said a word about what they had done, beyond buying the car. My own lessons continued that same day as usual... cool, efficient, and impersonal. I even had Jeanette state when it was officially over, and I immediately left the room because I thought she was trying to force me out—an apprentice had taken too long to come around.

Two days later, Fran had a blow up with Jeanette, and she quit.

Shortly after this, Jeanette announced that she and I were driving to Mexico the following week. I believed that whatever I had done to be slighted the first time was moot—I was number one again, and I happily packed for the trip. I also participated, if not exactly joyfully then with stoic humor, in the continuing destruction of my self-image—with a reprieve of sorts: Jeanette said it was necessary for me to have a lesson about chance, now that we were going on the road in a different country...

"I'm going to bring together some of the elements of the designs of intent so that the lessons of Walk and be Led can be applied to minimizing acts of chance," she said. "The principle is simple; if the chances of a meteorite hitting you are perceived to be one in a trillion, and it happens to you, that number is instantly reduced to one hundred per cent."

"Sure but..."

She held up her hand to silence me. "The principle is about perception minimizing chance, not arguing the numbers game. You can tie all of what I'm about to say to the existence of the momentum inherent in the design of your destiny, and your awareness of it enhancing it immeasurably."

"Will do—I had a teaching dream about that."

"Draw on it now: it's imperative that free will prevails, otherwise emissaries would be robots who could not discern their own circumstances, and possibly play into the hands of chance events. Chance, as I've mentioned, is the unforeseen, not random."

"Got it."

"To a great degree, the energetic momentum of impeccable choices can metaphorically move aside lesser intruding events, but sometimes people just snap. To deal with this possibility, and its equivalents, emissaries learn to minimize Chance by reading the signs about where they are and taking precautions. Simplistically, if you see someone slip on ice you have been told it's slippery outside; if you have a close call at a four-way stop, you have been told to pay attention

to other's so-called discretionary circumstances. If you hang around with angry people, the consequences of anger are nearby, which may or may not actually harm you. The point is, they will create probable events that you would otherwise not need to deal with."

"So it's about discretion?"

"It's about honing discretion to suit situational awareness. By force of the average person having a personality," she continued, "their behavior, based in reason, does not logically assess the moment. They skew it to in effect volunteer for chance events to happen according to the blind spots in their self-image."

She dropped her head, then looked up. "Continuing that theme, imagine driving on a warm sunny day in the cruising lane at the speed limit, which quickly becomes the speed of the traffic around you—typically five to eight miles an hour over the limit. We all do it."

I nodded in agreement.

"You soon catch up with a car doing the speed limit, so you signal a lane change and look for an opportunity to pass, but there is a car passing you in the left lane and you have to wait. As this car gets ahead of you, but not the man in your lane, you are in a box of chance that wouldn't exist if you just took your foot off the gas. Now, another car in the fast lane might get past you as well, and keep you there for a while longer, so you make it worse: you check your rear view mirror, and shoulder-check the blind spot for the first opportunity to join the fast lane. Ironically, all you've done is switch blind-spots because, at these moments of indecision, you were still much too close to stop without hitting the car in your lane if for any reason the driver in front had to suddenly stop. The cumulative effect is that, had you been forward looking and maintaining the proper spacing, regardless of other cars passing you then cutting in, you would have time to stop."

"You're talking about situational awareness taking into account the unlikelyhood of a dog, deer, or bicyclist hitting a stone and crossing into my lane?"

"No—that's the numbers game. I'm talking about situational awareness advising me of the *possibility* of hitting the car in front of me, period. That's my responsibility; nothing I can do about the deer." She leaned my way. "The best way to be in contact with your programmed momentum is to control your behavior. This is ninety-eight percent self-importance related, which is why people speed, tailgate, don't signal, honk, and pass dangerously. You can also minimize chance events by listening to the world; it talks to you all of the time."

"Still..."

"Still what?"

"The chances of hitting the guy..."

"You're not listening," she cut me off. "Out of ego, impatience, habit, or whatever your reason could justify, you would be inadvertently focusing on the *doing* of accidents. I'm saying you need to intentionally focus on the *not-doing* of chance."

Her statement caused me to pause. "Strangely," I said, "you're making perfect sense."

"Good—you're beginning to think reason is strange," she said standing. "You need to do a Walk and be Led to know that it works—we've discussed the way to make it better; do you need to buy anything?"

"Dog food, treats, stuff like that."

"Let's go."

On the way to a pet store, a few blocks away on Marine Drive, without thinking I reached into my pocket to count my money. Jeanette stopped me before I could, saying only that I should buy what I need. I did this and my tab was \$51.76.

Emptying my pockets, I had \$51.76.

On the way back, she said now that I had a direct and deliberate experience with the idea of influential momentum, it was up to me to practice it as a conscious, not forced, guidance mechanism. In her case, this meant believing that everything would be all right—positive energy thoughts as the basis from which she began her assessments of anything. That's why, after many Walk and be Led lessons, she simply stopped shopping when it felt right.

Because I was habitually focused on the negative, she joked—kind of—she said this feeling of "enough" would probably manifest as something being wrong for me.

We practiced Walk and be Led once a day, every day, for the next week. This included setting up meetings with other students in our group at a designated time, but not at a specific place. Unfailingly, I found them by not trying to find them.

Thusly prepared for the "unforeseen," Jeanette and I hit the road.

The distance to Puerto Vallarta is 4500kms. With stops to briefly sleep, eat, and get gas, it takes between fifty-five and sixty hours to get there by way of Nogales Arizona. During this time, Jeanette became increasingly uncommunicative—she also wouldn't tell me directly what the purpose of the trip was. Strongly insinuated in our brief, awkward conversations was that we were looking for don Juan Matus, and/or Carlos Castaneda.

After we crossed the US/Mexican border, Jeanette became testy, then completely unreasonable: my driving was suddenly not safe, and otherwise sub-standard in ways I could not anticipate. Apparently, I also had some involvement in the historical development of Mexico's highways, and the placement of its northern towns: Jeanette had to go to the bathroom, informed me of same, and I offered to pull over... years on the road had taught me to pack toilet paper. She all but swore at me in disgust, and told me to hurry to the next town.

When I put the pedal to the medal I was driving too fast—then too slow, then too cautiously, and in the wrong lane, until a road sign finally declared the existence of a town three kilometers ahead. Jeanette was holding herself tightly, rocking in her seat and moaning when I slid to a halt in front of a fruit stand to ask the proprietor where the nearest toilet was. She pointed toward it, Jeanette got out of the car, and I took my first deep breath in many minutes. To my surprise, not twenty seconds later Jeanette emerged from the side of a shack, and limped back to the car.

"I can't go there; it's filthy," she said with revulsion.

Incredulous, I made the mistake of pointing out that we were in smack in between Nowhere and You Can't Get There From here.

She hissed at me to get started.

Annoyed like I had never before been at her, I said something about her divine shit not being distinguishable from that of the great unwashed.

She told me to stop wasting time.

Jeanette apparently suffered greatly until, at exactly the speed limit, we exited at a place where the shitter was to her liking immediately after which I learned that my driving had been inconsiderate all the way there... whatever that meant.

Eventually, we checked into the Holiday Inn, slept, showered, and ate in an almost friendly atmosphere until she said I need not have a second vodka and tonic, which I hadn't ordered. When she said I was about to order it the distance she had established between us on the drive was back in play. We sat at different tables for the rest of the evening.

That night I wakened in a dream, immediately knew I was dreaming, and I took in my surroundings: it did not strike me as odd that the path to lucid, controlled dreaming had been described as a process that takes years to embrace, because I was aware that my goal was to

grasp the elements of what the emissaries would master. To this end, all I seemed to need to be mobile in the Second Attention was the awareness that I was dreaming, and all else followed...

Zzzzz - I was standing on a mown lawn that ran to the horizon, bordered by rows of trees that narrowed the strip to about twenty yards. I felt a weight on my head—a hat—which I took off and examined. It was a bowl-shaped beanie cap with a small propeller on top.

I recognized that I was on a runway, which I took literally: with one hand, I began twirling the small propeller and running as fast as I could, as if this combination would provide lift. Given my awareness that this was a dream, the idea didn't seem ludicrous.

I ran and twirled and ran and twirled until it crossed my mind to jump up, as if I had reached the velocity at which I should fly. It worked, and I continued going forward slowly, three feet off the ground.

My surprise was so great that I stopped spinning the propeller, realized I had stopped spinning it, and gently settled back on the grass running so as not to fall on my face. I thought of, but found that I didn't need to catch my breath, so I tried trotting without spinning the propeller. When I felt like it, I jumped up chest first with my arms stretched out and upwards in front of me. It's called a Max Alpha configuration—as slow as a plane can fly with maxim pitch-up attitude. At proper altitudes, student pilots call it practicing stalls and spin recovery. At inappropriate altitudes, the NTSB investigates the crash.

In a short time, it crossed my mind that I was not so much flying as I was floating; I decided to straighten up, and I settled back on the grass on my feet. I took off the beanie.

I was feeling better the next morning, when Jeanette said she was going alone to an interior town, and she needed a ride to the airport.

That was it. She was gone for two days.

On her first night away, I again awakened on the runway and immediately went flying around a farming countryside I did not recognize, practicing maneuvers I had wanted to do during my real flight training. On the second night, I again awakened on the runway, went flying, and played with willing my direction without leaning my body, or using my arms or legs as rudders or ailerons. When I got the hang of that, I willed my speed to increase to the point where the landscape below me became a blur, and I lost sense of where I was.

I paused to evaluate the experience.

I subsequently discovered that any place in a dream was attainable by willing it. For no particular reason, I willed New York City and almost instantly found myself cruising above the Empire State Building. There were five or six "people" like me, standing on the outside of the observation deck practicing half-gainers toward Fifth Avenue. I stopped to do a few with them, relishing the feeling of falling and swooping up just short of the pavement...

Upon her arrival back at the hotel, Jeanette said we were going home the next day, nothing more.

The drive back was hellacious in every respect; eating in the car without dribbling a crumb, sleeping on benches at rest stops for a few hours between being berated for... for what I was no longer sure, nor did I care. We hadn't made it back to Nogales before I understood, accepted, and was relieved that my apprenticeship was over. Only later in California did I realize that the end had actually come a month earlier, but she had needed a driver for this trip—I had done nothing else, had been asked to do nothing but not order a drink I had not ordered, and as her chauffeur I was told nothing: she never breathed a word about her side trip.

This realization enraged me to the point that I would have driven off the coastal cliffs had not the angels locked my wrists.

When we got back to Vancouver, and a stony silence informed Jenny that things had gone very badly, she directed and deflected our awkward reunion by introducing me to a stray cat that had sought shelter on our stoop. I grunted; I couldn't deal with it that day, but I did the next morning. That Bear had fundamental disagreements with this new critter, I was allergic enough to Fluffy that I would have to take medication every day, so I told Jenny that it could not stay. Life was miserable enough avoiding a now cheerful Jeanette.

Jenny said the cat needed a home, and we talked no more about it.

Clear to me only later, I did not appreciate what a beast-jerk I had become over the months I had been with her: the tyrant had emerged with the momentum of acquiring knowledge from channeling, and without control I had increasingly enjoyed my adoring public in direct proportion to Jeanette making me feel like shit. All things considered, I was more than ass for the next week while I searched for work, and Jenny looked for a home for Fluffy.

On a particularly snotty day in many respects, I again broached the problem and Jenny said she had decided that the cat was staying. Missing the significance of the moment, I retold a story about seeking shelter from a mortar attack in an abandoned apartment, emphasizing that my sensitivity to some cats, even those who were long gone, was such that I had to leave that space to breathe. Literally, my chances of survival were better under fire, such was my extreme reaction to the dander. I could not live in the house.

Jenny said that was fine; she preferred to live with the cat.

With that said, there was nothing left for me in Vancouver. I called Ed in Halifax, and a few days later packed my things, cried like a baby hugging Bear goodbye, and left for the airport. The only upside was that the flight was free: Jenny was a flight attendant, and I was listed as a dependent.

Otherwise, at thirty-eight years old I was broke, heart-broken, and only possibly employable in the television news business on the east coast. My idea of an uplifting thought was that I could always work in customer service; I had extreme training in the field.

Careful what you think.

Chapter 76 - The Designs of Destiny

The End

Eight months later, I was doing minimal freelancing while writing a "How To" handbook for news crews going to cover the bang-bang. Neither of these activities stimulated me: I had tried to dismiss my mystical experiences, and the views and values Jeanette had taught me, but my old ways seemed infantile. Increasingly dejected, I began walking aimlessly in Point Pleasant Park, the easternmost reaches of the Halifax peninsula...

Leaving Ed and Jayne's South Bland Street apartment, I walked up Inglis, turned left on Young Avenue, and about half way to the Point Pleasant Drive entrance crossed a bridge above railway tracks, thirty-five feet below. I began pausing in the middle, and without forethought imagined the tracks racing up to fill my myopic view at the precise intersection of where my time on earth would wind down to zero at 32 feet/sec⁽²⁾.

Just not far enough.

For the most part, I stayed on the well-travelled Prince of Wales / Cambridge Road, with the occasional jaunt on trails leading to Fort Ogilvie, or the Northwest Arm Battery. There were a number of lesser trails, from narrow dog runs to dense underbrush and forest, but being around people I didn't have to communicate with gave me a false sense of belonging.

Finally, the day came when I awakened on my air mattress in the dining room, and the mantra I had chanted to myself every morning since my arrival was lost to an encompassing despair. It used to be, "I am warm. I am dry. I am not hungry," but on this day it sounded stupid. I thought, "I am virtually unemployable, a failed writer, I have a drinking problem, which is the only problem I have when I drink. I do not belong here; there is no place on earth that would change this." And the solution became starkly clear—logic dictated that I do not remain on earth.

I realized my bridge "musings" were preparation, and I felt relieved.

I took a day to think about how I would do it, secretly hoping my circumstance would miraculously change. It didn't, and I finally accepted that it wouldn't.

On my next walk, I found myself on an obscured path winding my way through dense underbrush. I didn't plan this, nor did I question that I had not chosen it; my dejection had reached the sub-atomic level. I knew only that I couldn't take another pointless day.

Sardonically, I thought this is my last dance on earth... Jeanette had used don Juan's term to focus me on the moment, joking that everybody's last dance was the headline of the Astral Banner when we arrived at the Pearly Gates, so we should make it worthwhile reading.

Shuffling through decaying leaves, I imagined celestial typesetters working on the Arrivals / Departures section for the morning edition: The Banner is a great rag. All you have to do is read a name and you know their essential history. Good, bad, indifferent, outrageously creative, unimaginably despicable, the inspiring and the insipid—there were no secrets. You could say that The Banner is a warm-up to learning this is the way of every face-to-face encounter between lives. Greeters at the end of The Path, mostly ex Costco and Wal-Mart people, welcome every new Arrival by warmly handing them a copy so they know that lying is literally a joke.

I will take mine in hand with a cursory nod, as I did in life, and have a quick look around. I will know that I've been here before, because I will recognize some of the actors who are calming people by carefully explaining the ways of their new existence...

I leave the congestion of the Arrivals hall to find a seat in the IPD lounge, and watch the newly dead trying to be casual while thumbing through the pages to see if their demise was a divine error. Instead, everyone will discover that they were explorers of unblazed trails of personal trials, while some had been the architects and alchemists of more progressive civilizations than their last one. This knowledge should generate some dribble.

They will also find that there exists a grand cooperation between all things, at levels of awareness that transcends man's focus on physical reality. So they are not in the Arrivals Hall because the wind's rage forced tumultuous seas through barren lowlands, or that land long poisoned and saturated from decades of denuding lasciviously swallowed enslaved creatures. These were cooperative events in the cleansing and rejuvenating of a host that had endured such a monumental onslaught, in a Universal second, as to stun its perceptions. In their transitory stupefaction newbies will understand that the errors were theirs, and that their 'transition' to spirit wasn't personal. Mother Earth had defended herself in direct proportion to that which impinged on her welfare. This should dry their mouths considerably.

I will know all of this because being physically dead won't change what I had learned, but I will say bugger-all. This is not because I enjoyed the priceless expressions around me, but because I had wasted two harsh years learning it only to be summarily dismissed, so what was the point in saying anything? Besides, everyone knew I had fucked up in the worst way possible.

Looking under the daily Departures section, aka Shipping among the Guides, I will find about 370,000 names of people returning to a physical existence. Among them will be ancient Masters, their names updated for their new times. Shakespeare, now Bill, is coming back as a

charmingly pompous, pipe-smoking chairperson of a small community college English department, where he is needed: two Pulitzers are slated to come from minority dyslexics who would otherwise be affirmatively passed through the system until they were finally failed into frustrating lives of judgment and slim opportunity.

Reading this will call for another beer. Cheers Billy.

On the names will scroll as my glance falls upon them: Ghandi and Khan, Einstein and Curie, Evans, Tanquey, and Monty, Roberts, Keller and Sullivan, Columbus, Cayce, Parks, Smith, Swartz, King, Williams, Chang, Nguyen, and Patel. Some of them will appear in the Arrivals column the next day, because free will reigns—but that list will not include names that within two generations will make their way into everyone's life: ***They*** are the *event* that will complete the transition in our ways, as an existing Portion rises to his challenge: his energy is specifically tuned to play the lead, and bring the curtain slowly down on the last scene of our 2000-year-old drama. It is the way mankind wants it—the only way they will accept what will be happening. It's not as if they—we, haven't been told outright by activists, and spirit whispering in our dreams for years. But the derision with which those who sell air on paper then withdraw cash from hope have infected our conscience to the degree that irrational need is the basis of common sense.

I will smirk—my self-importance again—as I imagine one of them trying to cop a deal at the gate: "You can't do this to me!" he'll say. "Do you know who I am?"

Bet on it bubba.

I was deeply sorry that I couldn't tell Mom all that I knew.

The crowd is suddenly thin; my mind had wandered.

I will soon be alone, still and again.

I dare to look up my name.

Worldwide, someone dies every 1.7 seconds, so the list is long. I wonder if I will be missed by anybody. I wonder if anyone will meet... ah-shit," I mutter simultaneous to an end-of-days bookkeeper saying, "Stippy, I'm missing one."

Saint Peter points to the loner sitting on a stool with a ~~six~~-two-pack at his feet. "Maybe he didn't hear you, Gabe?"

He somehow says this sagely.

Pete raises his voice to me: "You seem to know where you are; do you know if it was your time?" He holds up a copy of the Banner, pointing to the Arrivals column.

"Maybe a bit early," I say, setting my beer down.

"Name please?"

I hold up a page of my own copy; tapping the 'A' column, I say, "a-x-**E**-l-s-o-n."

"I don't... damn," says Pete, spotting the problem. "We've got you down as a-**E**-x-l." Blushing angelically, he says, "We copied it from the Halifax Herald."

"You guys really gotta make a note about that," I say, getting off the stool. "It was the bane of my last life—that and food shopping," I mumble, making my way toward the gate: it's not as ornate as you might think.

Quizzically, the Archangel Gabriel leans over his ledger. Examining my shriveled face closely, he says, "John? Sorry buddy, I didn't recognize you through the sea-weed—or your self-pity. Welcome back."

"Thanks Gabby," I say, rubbing my lazy left eye as I pass him by. "You should dim that a bit, as well." I thumb over my shoulder toward the exit of The Pathway.

"Pardon me?" Peter says, bewildered.

I slow my lethargic shuffle, turn, and say, "If the earth was twenty-four hours old, man has been there for fifteen seconds." I nod toward the tunnel. "Not much illumination going on. Have you guys seen Phillip?" I ask, hoping to get both apologies out of the way—the failure with Jeanette and the suicide thingy.

"He's with "Do you know who I am," Gabe deadpans.

"Great," I mutter. "He gets two assholes in a row."

Focused within these maudlin musings, I found myself sitting on a tree stump weeping, slowly at first, and apologizing to the universe for returning their gift of my life. I was not bitter at them for taking me down a path I could not walk; they had done their best.

Maybe I wasn't supposed to make the cut? They'd explain it soon enough; only five minutes to the harbor, ten more to go hypothermic—did that in the Navy, so no biggie; a short out-of-body flight—been there, done that—then the bright light thing. I'd squint—and finally Pete blaming a typo, like everyone did when I was breathing.

All familiar stuff. Shit, it barely qualified as an adventure: "Glub Glub, Axelson Returns." Some fucking headline.

I tried to stand, but I couldn't.

I wept torrents, rocking back and forth hugging myself and blubbering, "I can't even get this right. I'm sorry—so sorry. At least take me now. I tried. I can't stay here. It's not fair."

You get the idea.

[The Beginning](#)

This brings me to the point I have dreaded writing for years, including the days when I first drafted my tales of personal cowardice, and raw descriptions of the wasteland where my character should have been. At least that was definitive stuff. I dreaded this time because I deemed it impossible to articulate the moment that followed with a degree of accuracy that even vaguely resembled the experience. That said...

Jeanette described a Conditional Death as the moment when one embraces, as their own knowledge, the full concoction of beliefs and conditions upon which they constructed their personality. This event occurs at the behest of Spirit moving one's assemblage point to the position where the truth of what one is really like descends as a rapturous moment of spectacular awareness, based on their knowledge of personal flaws from which they are suddenly and spectacularly freed—the bonds to those beliefs evaporate.

She said that, if I was religious, I would say that God had embraced me. Being anything but religious... I suddenly existed in the moment point where infinite space and eternity saturated me with a piercing love. I felt no trace of guilt or shame concerning my crappy behavior in particular, or my unfathomable ignorance in general—which remained. The difference was that every fiber of my being *knew* that I knew next to nothing, and because I had no beliefs to sustain the fiction that I knew anything important I had no barriers to embracing the full experience. The floodgates to the unimaginable flashed open, my heart filled, my spirit soared, and without a personality to screw things up I was inexpressibly whole and unimaginably cherished. Exultation, jubilation, and delirium all work, but inadequately.

My every atom wept from joy.

Eventually, I found myself lying on the damp ground stunned by the experience Jeanette had ingeniously explained, so that I would understand what had to come next. It works like this:

A Conditional Death does nothing to change what one is like; it profoundly provides one with the unalterable conviction that they are like this. In conjunction with having examined and

experienced my beliefs as self-fulfilling prophecies I was only now ready to reprogram my conditioned responses directly. Without doing this, she said, the elastics of my former conditioning would inexorably resurrect my old personality. So in spite of having a clean slate—a spanking-new life to do with whatever I wished—living completely within the world of average people, as Jeanette had defined such things, was not a consideration.

After an indeterminate amount of time, probably twenty minutes, I made my way home. For the most part, I managed not to cry but my joy must have been leaking out of every orifice. The feeling of settling euphoria lasted two days during which I imagined that Ed and Jayne were thinking my next stop was at the institution in Dartmouth.

When I was finally rational enough to make any decisions, I listed my options on how to avoid the aberrations I had practiced. There were two: I needed a teacher to guide me, or I had to teach, because having a student would force me to adhere to the practices of the Arts of the Disciplines. A third option, attempting self-directed stalking without an outside force to keep me on track, was pure fantasy.

I had used up option one—probably didn't have the heart to continue at their level anyway. Option two was doable, in spite of the rule that says teachers never sought a student, because I wasn't a real teacher. It followed that there was no reason why an omen designating a potential student couldn't manifest when I, as a psychic, was giving readings: Spirit said they'd never take away anything I had earned or learned, and I had taught others through channeling, so I had nothing to lose.

I could follow the path Jeanette had taken with me, beginning with "I don't know what I'm going to say, but..." until I knew enough about my student to create a path of his or her own design. Phillip should direct me, just as Saa-ra had directed Jeanette—except she was meant to teach. With this last thought, I realized Jeanette had armed me with all that she knew about teaching, so just maybe...

Right then, I would need to recall everything Jeanette had taught me, not lord anything over anyone, and if I found a student I couldn't quit them; not ever, and not because it was Spirit's rule of love, or that teachers go to the ends of the earth for a student. Mexico had been far enough for Jeanette to offer her final acts of love—to have me get me over myself—even prepped me with a week of miraculous lessons about letting go of everything in the world of reason. That there was nothing else I could do with what I knew aside, it was because my life depended on it; do it all again? Nope.

There was a final consideration: I closed my eyes and mentally looked to my left. My old advisor buddy, Death, was snoozing like a Schnauzer after a tug-of-war with a Coors mare.

I had time.

I sought out a local psychic, not as a potential student or for the information I might receive, but to open that door and see where it led. A few days later I met the psychic's roommate, Britta, who playfully asked me for a body scan. I had never done one, but from my perspective using her body as a focusing mechanism was no different than tarot cards or Ouija board.

The procedure progressed interestingly for both of us as I mentioned moles on her back, and fatty deposits in a breast, affirmed them to be benign, but added that it wouldn't hurt to check with her GP. Then I reached an area that held my focus: innocently, I said there was much damage and internal scarring, as if she had to be aware of this. Instead, she turned pale as her assemblage point centered her awareness amid decades of nightmarish dreams vividly played back in micro bursts that confirmed their reality. Seconds later, her focus returned her to a world in which she no longer belonged, but she did not know why she felt this way. The outrage and

shame from having unwittingly lived the textbook life of aberrant behaviors born of horrific abuse—not just as a child, but as an infant—was locked in a different position of awareness, awaiting permission to enter her First Attention and set her free.

She was ready to leave her distorted world behind. Her eyes pleaded for this mercy.

I knew the look, even if she didn't.

That was my omen.

Within hours, Phillip began teaching me directly, and then Britta through me.

Within days, Britta physically heard and then saw her source Identity, Tah-mas.

Within weeks, we were living under one roof: Tah-mas taught Britta in *Dreaming*, Phillip and Britta together established the specific focus of her lessons, and Phillip and Tah-mas directed me in their application for the next seventeen years as we rescued each other.

The Rest

During this time I worked as a psychic, dishwasher, convenience store clerk, call center agent, and I managed Ed's chocolate store all the while mimicking Jeanette's teaching techniques in my home life: I kept the two worlds apart, living a double life but not a deceptive one because I had no need to explain what I was up to, other than for an unavoidable circumstance.

A quick preamble: To date, the behavioral disciplines in this work all deal with the internal struggles of conquering some aspect of self-importance. The one technique I have not spoken about is the only external condition that Stalkers call a great gift... a petty tyrant. This is a tormentor who either holds the power of life and death over you, or can annoy you to the point that your life isn't your own. Willingly dealing with them teaches detachment—involving "self" of any kind is cataclysmic because a petty tyrant will use everything they possibly can against you, and forever. A true tyrant is not teachable. Life, and often death, has to do that.

So it was that four years into my work with Britta I was "gifted" with a petty tyrant, which is a story that belongs to him. Sufficient to say that Phillip was keeping his word; he would teach me until I could take no more. This was that time... again.

Dealing with my tormentor was my choice, but when I had to deal with him was his. Overall, he could put me under great pressure, add to my financial burdens, and sometimes present a very real physical danger. In terms of my on-going self-stalking path this was an ideal circumstance for "shining the spirit" – maintaining personal control to the extent of becoming a disinterested observer of our exchanges, but not to the degree of becoming his victim if my calmness enraged him further. This is where I had to trust in the impeccability of Phillip to warn me off, if necessary. Reciprocally, although teaching was never my goal I was aware that my relative indifference to his grievances against all things not immediately beneficial had the potential of causing him to question whether his volatility put him in charge of anything, and to ultimately fear his self-reflection as a literal dead-end path. This is what he would ultimately learn in one life or another.

Back to leading a double life, Ed was aware of this circumstance because my tyrant's destructive rampages bled into my time at work, but he had no idea about my other life. Consequently, it baffled him when he asked me why I didn't just walk away from a situation that I clearly had no obligation to continue, and I replied, "I can't."

Between my tyrant and working in a world I didn't care about in the way it thought I did, I kept my worst flaws in check by trying to take the high road at all times. Not that I did, nor did I avoid making mistakes when I thought I was on that road, but I was constantly aware of the need

to battle the “self” elements creeping into my decisions. This was no truer than when I was giving readings and teaching, because these activities attached Jeanette’s lessons to direct applications with other people’s circumstances, thereby expanding my understanding of them... to a point.

I didn’t realize this at the time, but I had difficulty connecting the threads of topics because I had regularly interrupted Jeanette to focus her on my immediate concerns. As part of the initial seduction /introduction process in the *How to Teach* handbook, she dealt with these concerns no matter how far afield they took us. This meant she might not complete a planned lesson in one sitting, or speak to one topic’s relationship to the next for weeks, if at all—hence my manuscript read like bullet points in a blender. That she had cryptically told me this was her way notwithstanding, her manner of presentation was integral to a diabolically clever teaching scheme that required the student to label topics, their sub-subsections, and their minutiae after that, according to the way they think. Doing this caused them to reorder the teachings into ever-grander relevant relationships, until they suddenly claimed the whole as their own knowledge. From here they could connect any one point, (or question), to any other point (or answer) through an effortless progression of events. The musical equivalent of this would be Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, or Erik Clapton *owning* the relative placement of every note possible on a guitar, thereby leaving the timing and order of playing of them up to their imaginations.

Keeping the metaphor going, the downside of this teaching method was that the knowledge I acquired was initially isolated within a particular category /circumstance of experience, such as Rock and Roll, so I was not confident offering Britta advice in a “related” circumstance, such as the Blues, lest it prove misplaced. The upside was that I received my lessons in *The Way to Live* and *How to Teach* as I needed them, because information offered alongside direct application quickly becomes knowledge, and part of this knowledge was that there comes a time for definitive actions... after years of effort on both our parts, I reached the point where only an act of abject ruthlessness, such as Jeanette had delivered to me in Mexico, could impart a lesson so critical to Britta’s progression that for her to ignore it was to quit—which is what she did.

Within weeks of this finale, I became fatigued more easily and subsequently began having difficulty concentrating. Thankfully, my petty tyrant was spending so much time in jail as to render him an uncomfortable afterthought, although trying to write my story filled that gap until I finally set my work aside with no plan to pick it up again.

By this time, a former client had become a student in the more traditional sense, and my approach to teaching Lia was more precise, if not exactly orderly, than circuitously leading her to experiencing metaphysical principles. This is to say that I did try a few simple exercises, but she was either impatient with minor results, or reluctant to participate in exercises without foreknowledge of their purpose, which would have tainted the results. As I had received no omen designating a student, I did not push it. Besides, there was no rule about her earning an omen.

As it had been with Britta, teaching Lia helped me to dissect my own experiences from a different angle, and I occasionally dared to pen thoughts in the margins of a hard copy of my manuscript. It was all I had the heart to do, and all my ability to focus would allow, until an insatiable thirst began hounding me and my diabetic brother tested my blood sugars. With numbers shouting that I should be in a coma, the mystery of my growing fatigue and inability to concentrate was resolved. Medication worked well right away, but it did not instill inspiration; I continued to teach Lia about behavior—according to *Stalkers*—along with the general metaphysical acts *Stalker*’s employed while I puttered with the manuscript as if I might trip over an epiphany. Two years passed in this way.

Not long after my first skin cancer treatment, diabetes related issues forced me to cut back on work; two hours a day at first, then three, which is about the time Lia left for reasons unrelated to me. I was twice devastated by the personal loss of her sharp wit and crisp thinking, and of my last touchstone to the remote possibility of fulfilling any part of my alleged quest: I had secretly hung onto this idea because the universe had gifted me with a real student, a petty tyrant, and a Conditional Death, none of which pointed to my destiny lying in retail.

Only now did I realized these gifts were opportunities, not guarantees, and the totality of my failures with a convict, Britta, Lia, an unreadable manuscript, giving my only friend in the world less time at work than he was paying me for, and finally my ailing body wiped out the last vestiges of this veiled hope. I was still and again an average man living within the consequences of his decisions—not entirely self-reliant because finances demanded that I share my space, not entirely alone because I had a dog, and not completely disinterested in the mundane world because my metaphysical days had come to screeching... whimper: without even a pseudo student to engage, practicing self-stalking would be a farce unless I could willfully engage the world through Controlled Folly. I am not speaking about the cosmetic practices of customer care, the finer points of which I had practiced all my life through faux sincerity. I am speaking about engaging public self-image performances without one iota of talent, such as karaoke or open microphone night at a comedy club would be for me, as if I really thought I was good. These acts would challenge self-importance directly, but I had no heart for any challenges.

In the following months I reluctantly fell into a relationship with Geri, whose almost unbearable optimism could alternately breathe life into my days and make me want to end them. After a while, the latter view overcame the former when my workdays evolved into an overt theft of wages—only four hours of work, and when I went home early I still couldn't walk my dog until I had rested for at least an hour and a half. I finally had an overdue chat with Ed, and he had to let me go.

Virtually unemployable, socialized for a new civilization I would not live to see, and with only pain and progressive debilitation to look forward to, I was screwed to the ^{nth} degree; I secretly decided to move back to British Columbia to die in a beautiful place. The math was simple, when I ran out of money...

Unbeknownst to me, as Geri's husband had journeyed toward his inevitable death, three years earlier, Ted encouraged her to follow her heart after he was gone. With her heart breaking, and then broken, it whispered that she could do more good in the world as a therapist than she could teaching photography at an elite arts university. I thought it likely that a palliative care nurse-practitioner, Bev Lyttle, and Printhe from the Victoria Order of Nurses, whom together had shepherded Ted and Geri through the processes of living with dying, had influenced this new career choice. Still, grieving stood in her way until she put it in its place—not easy after twenty-seven years with a musician, no less—and she investigated training in British Columbia: she had hitch-hiked throughout the province thirty years earlier and, like me, had sworn she would return.

And so came the day when Geri came back from walking my dog, to tentatively mention her secret desire as an "I wonder" kind of fancy, because it meant leaving me if she followed through. With little more preamble than saying I was thinking about moving to B.C. as well, I said, "I'll come with you." In relatively short order, we sold everything and moved to Nelson, British Columbia, where she began training at the Kootenay Art Therapy Institute.

Physical labor no longer possible, or even on my irrelevant resume through technology and ageism anyway, boredom soon caused me to reopen my manuscript. To my surprise, time had

dulled my too-finely focused efforts—head up my ass is an apt description—and I saw that I wasn't far from "flattening" a large section of notes into a cohesive thrust; the first volume of however many I needed to tell my tale began to take shape.

Four months further on, I unexpectedly saw the entire evolution of my encounters with Jeanette as a logical progression, and after two decades of writing *about* specific lessons from the outside, the essence of stalking became mine from an inside view. All I had to do was draw down the elements from my mind to the page, reorganizing them according to protocols that were now clear to me: Jeanette had disarmed and forewarned, labeled and illustrated, isolated and exacerbated, shredded justification, categorized and pressurized blinding self-interests, and then she did nothing when the procedures stalled at my tantrums. This left me facing the mirror of my irrational defenses.

At the same time she had directed the way I thought, which caused me to spend less energy fretting over social and cultural manipulations, and curtailed my penchant to have to be right, and to react in general. Collectively, this starved my impulse to perform my daily one-act play for all who cared to observe "The Boring Repetition of John's Self-esteem," which increasingly left room in my mind to perform, perceive, and receive magical acts of consciousness, including recognizing how my ego had supported irrationalities. Metaphysical interplay, Jeanette's silent gift and prerogative, was the glue that "explained" the otherwise inexplicable events that had stumped my reason until I experienced her gifts myself. And now I had... again.

"It's finished!" I declared to Geri eight months before the book was actually in the physical world.

As an artist, she understood completely, but it did not diminish her laughter.

A year later, with what I called *Stalking the Average Man: Volume One* behind me, and *Stalking the Bridge of Reason* well on its way, unbeknownst to me Lia began having teaching dreams: she is a vivid dreamer, typically experiencing full-color trilogy presentations, and we had talked often about their potential interpretations. Now, after two years apart, she e-mailed me for advice, we discovered that we both lived in British Columbia, and we resumed a distance teaching relationship. Soon after our electronic reunion, I experienced a mental block regarding a lesson in *Bridge*, and I took a break to visit Lia in Vancouver, nine hours drive away.

A few days after I arrived, she declined to participate in a simple interactive lesson. In my world this effectively tendered her resignation (again), which abruptly caused me to realize the nature of my blockage: I was writings as a teacher, to portray Jeanette properly, but I had not claimed the lessons of How to Teach as my own knowledge. I was merely stacking information for Lia to reorder with no regard for the critical elements of properly assessed experiences, or the silent knowledge / metaphysical influences she tended to not pursue, making the information personally applicable. I realized here that I had needed teaching experience, when I was with Jeanette, to better appreciate the emissaries' journey—not to become a stalker of proper behavior, or necessarily a teacher of the minimal mystical arts that I was familiar with. In fact, I knew only enough to pursue self-stalking related lessons, so I had no business trying to engage Lia in any metaphysically related event we had not properly prepared for.

Her failure to participate was entirely on me.

Hoping she was better off than when we first met, and that her dreaming lessons would carry her to a breakthrough, I left for Nelson a day early without explanation or expectation of having further contact.

Shortly after resuming writing volume two, as a student working through lessons, topics began connecting along the path my understandings of stalking had blazed, ushering me into the

far as I was concerned—I had no choice but to look closer at my life for Spirit’s continuing influence; having failed to fulfill my alleged quest, I believed that Philip had finished with me.

By this time I regularly opted for an information gathering technique I called “fishing” whenever Geri thought I was sleeping in the middle of the day. This is a light *Dreaming* state Jeanette had taught me, and I used to establish an overview perspective from which flaws floated into view, if that was what I was after. So after a short while, events lined up according to my intentions and I fluidly saw that Britta had become my student mere days after my Conditional Death, whereas Jeanette had said that Stalkers could wait their entire lives for a student. Teaching Britta had then forced me to reassess my own lessons to suit her circumstances, while the petty tyrant’s endless testing of my flaws honed my control to the degree that little in the exterior world could make me react poorly, thereby keeping me on my path. When she left, Lia arrived to keep me focused on assimilating my lessons into larger assumptions through yet another set of eyes, and when she left me without a meaningful purpose and soon thereafter I was unable to work, Geri put me in a circumstance where I had no choice but to write. And more...

From examining topics foreign to her experience, Geri became a challenging inquisitor constantly forcing me to simplify bulky paragraphs into succinct statements, if only to better argue against some of them: she was accepting of many so-called New Age ideas, but as a therapist-in-training she asked pointed questions that required me to build intellectual bridges between all of the stalker’s disciplines and the psychoanalytical approaches she was learning.

Finally in this flow of evidence, I saw how Lia had come back long enough to deliver a badly needed gift to move me on: I decided to stay in touch, if she would have me.

Hmmm... maybe the guidance thingy was still in play, but I wasn’t going to acquiesce just because it was past my bedtime...

Focused in this irresolute way, I experienced a thoroughly annoying dream about a compass; no matter which way I turned the needle jogged past north to point west. Floating in the early a.m.—not quite awake but aware as if I was ‘fishing’—I realized that when I had lived in England all of my clients were in London's West End. When I was deported, my ambassador buddy took me to the Hotel West End (#7 Rue Clement-Marot) Paris. When I moved to western Canada, it was into Vancouver’s West End. Jeanette lived in West Vancouver, and I soon moved there. In her screenplay, Jeanette wrote that Phillip was the angel of the West... a thought that whisked me back to Kha-lib’s first channel, wherein he said my initial purpose was to fulfill Phillip’s final developmental lesson in physical reality. This happened to coincide with a Universal quest he said I had volunteered for; and an old lesson inserted itself into my thoughts. When a student glimpses the underlying construction of an event, they may be satisfied with their new-found wisdom and become complacent, but their “discovery” is always a transition point to a broader view.

I got the point; there was more to my exploration and dream, so I refocused my fishing.

Assessing relevant experiences as if they weren’t mine, I next understood Phillip’s final lesson to include understanding fear as a tool for focusing our sense of purpose, and for personal safety. But it was also a tool of manipulation, and the source of the kind of insanity our world practices as a matter of the way things are. Inconsequentially, it crossed my mind that I had needed to learn how to heal from those deviations of its original purpose, because fear was no longer a part of me. My comprehensive study had put it back in its evolutionary saddle, whereas my Conditional Death, and pursuing self-stalking lessons, had sealed the deal.

So far I thought, recovering some sense of self, because taming self-importance would be a lifetime struggle. Lifetime struggle....

In an incandescent moment my every corpuscle suddenly *knew* that Phillip had not ceased his pursuit of the additional task, because the universe wasted nothing.

My simultaneous thought encompassed the following: Kha-lib said the general insanity that pervades our world has generated our end-of-times cycle of events, hence the so-called second coming scenario—both circumstances of which required that proof of Spirit's existence and intentions be offered within a strategic process, otherwise no one would know them. He had subsequently explained how I became part of the madness, and when I did not believe in Spirit's presence or wisdom they introduced themselves by giving me metaphysical experiences that undermined my myths about the afterlife, and life as I knew it. My formal apprenticeship subsequently reduced the Universe's outrageous quest to a series of manageable steps - for emissaries. I was also writing a journal that would include why the emissaries were here—my crappy behavior making that a personal proficiency—who they were in historical terms, what they were in energetic terms, and what they would *know* and be able to *see*. Learning the mystical arts, specifically willing access to the assemblage point, was not something I could personally attest to. However, in the context of all my experiences with Jeanette people would either have to accept what she said about it, or reject everything she had taught me.

Better late than never—twenty-five years since I had left Jeanette—I *knew* that I had traveled from the cognition of the average person to sample the stalker's view, and on to *see* what Spirit in the flesh would simply *know* so that I could write about it, if only to take advantage of the head start I had been offered in my personal evolution: in that blinding wink of a Universal eye my journey of self-discovery fused the magical elements of our existence with the poetically layered designs of destiny, and the complexity of the final intercession into mankind's ways became a single event in my mind; Phillip's job was done. All I had to do was chronicle everything I knew about the rescue of an average man, and all else would follow.

So that's what I did.

A personal note:

One of the many crimes we commit against ourselves, and nature as a whole, is the manner in which we treat our animals as property and commodities, not creatures on their own journeys. Some of my lessons addressed this issue, including killing for sport as an abhorrent deviation from what was considered a necessity centuries ago. Otherwise, Universal Sources viewed our casual cruelty as something incomprehensible—even to the animals who are aware they are food for other forms of consciousness, as are we. Spirit calls this awareness part of the agreement all species in our version of reality share. However, mankind violates this bond by enslaving animals in a unnatural subsistence of relative non-experience, other than of fear and pain, before we summarily dispatch them without their having explored the purpose of their innate design.

It is irrelevant that we understand this purpose or design; our treatment is a desecration of their sanctity and sacredness in the eyes of All That Is. Only the grandest hubris, enabled by the loss of our link to the shared conscience of all species, could have us think otherwise. And in failing to see how everything is connected our segregation of 'better' and 'lesser' species has inevitably led us to hunting ourselves with equally insipid justifications.

Assuming I die when Kha-lib said I will, the second thing I will do is apologize to all animal consciousness. My dogs, and those who have shared their spontaneous joy and warmth with me—Jingles, Dutchess, Maya, Yugan, Simon, Vista, Zoot, Holly, Harley, Pia, Tigger, Tasha, T.J, and Bear—might forgive my earlier choices in life, if not exactly thank me for not eating them.

Please watch Netflix documentaries of factory farming and slaughter house procedures, and Philip Wollen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1wAsjuqEho>. At a minimum, you will lose your appetite. Preferably, you will support an organization that seeks a just existence for all animals. Most importantly, it will be one that does not insult one kind of bond in an attempt to preserve another. It doesn't work like that, but it doesn't work at all without you.



I am forever grateful for the handful of friendships that sustained me through my darker days, and for relentlessly being pushed by Jeanette and our masterful life-forces, all of whom I will happily meet again when it is my time.

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