

A man with a beard, wearing a blue cap, a dark t-shirt, and dark pants, is mowing a lawn in a garden. The garden is filled with various plants, including large yellow flowers in the foreground and purple flowers in a red watering can on the right. A black metal post stands in the middle ground. The background is a dense thicket of trees and bushes.

30,000 Days

an autobiography in yarns

Barry Rosenberg
author of *The Kickass Guide*

Curiously, much of my life – thirty thousand days and counting – has transpired despite a marked inability to plan anything and see it actually eventuate, as though I'm a chess piece manipulated into fascinating emplacements by an other-worldly force.

Whenever I found myself dropped into the middle of an extremely unlikely situation, whether 'good' or 'bad', there would come a moment where everything stopped and I'd think:

1. how the hell did I get here?
followed immediately by:
2. this is gonna make a bloody good yarn one day!

That day is here.

WARNING! There exist two types of beings on planet earth. One type loves yarns – telling, listening, viewing. These are true humans. The other will angrily interrupt an amusing or gripping yarn-telling, cry, 'Did that really happen?!' or, 'I have it on excellent authority this didn't take place as you say, rather originated in ancient –!' These latter beings are yarn-queerers, a species of boring, other-worldly androids. It is strongly suggested they be avoided as detrimental to your spiritual health.

BR

For

the 'gang of 20'

*Alexa (USA/NZ); Alison (Scot/NZ); Kathy (USA);
Lomé (Fiji/Aus); Maggie (NZ); Monika (Netherlands/
Kenya); Robyn (NZ) – sisters.*

*Cathy (China/NZ); Fi (Aus); Jacqui (NZ); Jessie (NZ/
Aus); Jo (NZ); Kajal (NZ); Myo Myo (Myanmar);
Wayan (Bali/USA) – daughters.*

*Anna (Russia); Anusha (Nepal); Claudia (Austria);
Lu (China/NZ); Stanzin (India) – granddaughters*

women I love



30,000 Days

an autobiography in yarns

Barry Rosenberg

Copyright © Barry Rosenberg 2022

The right of Barry Rosenberg to be identified as the author of this work in terms of Section 96 of the Copyright Act of 1994 is hereby asserted. All rights associated with this publication are reserved.

The characters, organizations and events in this book are real and actual.

Any similarities to fictional persons, living or dead, are coincidental and not intended by the author.

First published by TookusBookus 2022
Ohope, New Zealand

www.barryrosenberg.net

ISBN: 978-0-473-59593-7



table of contents

pre-word	7
Meyer Cutlov grandpa's remarkable journey.....	9
America: Days 0 - 15,000	13
Numbers game A genius? Nah, just a precocious numbers obsession	15
Uncle Willie The gift that's lasted a lifetime	19
Dippy Best seat in the house	23
The four of us So maybe No. 4 wasn't a loser after all	27
Dudley DoRight The man who would be president	31
Hitting back Turn the other cheek? Not always.....	37
Purple reign The color of depression.....	43
Petulia The siege of Chicago	47
Janis How a rock star got me to drop my knickers.....	53
Confessions of a half-naked magazine writer	
Blame the Bhagavad Gita	57
Rock n roll Pranked by a couple of headline performers	61
The beard A signature ego symbol gets caught long.....	65
Joni A brief but oh so glorious encounter.....	71
Allen The making of a master gatecrasher.....	75
Health resort A rather shitty experience, actually	79
Bette Batshit crazy, but OMG what a talent.....	85
Christmas dinner for loners and losers	
A dollar or a joint gets you in.....	89
The baker A short story.....	93
Keep on truckin Splish-splash	101
Doctor Hu Who needs a tardis when you have magic needles	109

New Zealand: Days 15,000 - 30,000+ 115

When the haka saved my life On a dark desert highway	117
History's biggest crook He made me a rich man. Sort of.....	121
Who's afraid of the big bad scalpel? Me.....	127
Orange egg I know how it got <i>there</i> . But how did it <i>get there</i> ?.....	139
That Canadian bastard Looking back, the greatest favor ever.....	145
Monk and the professor Beauty is only skin deep. Or is it	149
Butterfly Losing something precious can turn into something found	153
Wheeled into America An ex-pat's scary first trip back	159
Talking dirty is good for your health Just substitute 'illegal' for 'unlawful'	165
So I said to the prime minister Of Bhutan, that is	169
Elisabeth Truly, the most remarkable person I've ever met	173
One day a year A short story	179
Muse of the road She appears only when you're ready for her	189
Ramblin A journey through the South Island with Ben.....	195
Why I love living in New Zealand Where else could this happen	203
Indian momma meets the intrepid food dropper A single grain of rice	207
A dedicated blackbird Really, who's the birdbrain here	213
Lost in the desert They're all out to get you.....	217
Visit to an American cathedral All you need is a flag in hand	223
Lakshmi An affair of the heart.....	227

after-word 231

The minister of silly yarns Just do it.....	233
----------------------------------------------------	-----

pre-word

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



Meyer (left, rear); next to him, my father Robert (known as Ruby); Pauline (right, rear). I'm the grinning tyke front left.

meyer cutlov

ONCE AGAIN, JEWS were being targeted for the worst. For those living in ghettos spread across Russia, called 'shtetls', frequent middle of the night incursions by marauders on horseback – the Cossacks – meant it was time to begin looking for a new home.

Families took to pooling their meager resources and selecting the most intelligent, resourceful teenage male from their midst to lead the exodus.

At fourteen, lanky Meyer Cutlov was trustworthy, sensible and wholly willing to undertake the task ahead.

Armed with sacks of edibles, he arrived following days on trains at the Gulf of Finland. He boarded there a rickety old ship packed solid with humanity. Like Meyer, these travelers were charged with settling in America and working nearly as many hours as were in the day in order to bring their families to the New World.

Six weeks in steerage without toilet or washing facilities: you staggered to the rail and stretched as much of yourself as necessary over the side to void. Sickness and death were the norm; the ill suffered without treatment and the dead were tossed into the cold dark sea.

His food long exhausted, Meyer Cutlov was barely more than a skeleton when the ship docked at New York harbor. The promised land! Or was it. Why was no one allowed off the ship? For two days, no explanation was forthcoming.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

Then word spread that America's immigration laws had recently changed. Now, one had to be claimed by a party on shore, with all others returned to their port of origin. The young man had no party, no person to vouch for him.

But Meyer Cutlov was resourceful. He knew many had died during the arduous journey, and he reasoned that parties were likely to possess only a vague idea of appearance of those they were there to claim.

Names were called out from the wharf. One by one, people filed down the gangplank. Another name was called: 'Rosenberg.'

No movement aboard the ship.

Again, 'Rosenberg'. Nothing. A third time: 'ROSENBERG!'

'Here, Russenberk!' a skinny fourteen year old cried out, and Meyer Cutlov grabbed his cardboard suitcase wrapped with twine and hustled down the narrow wooden bridgeway to America.

Somehow this youth with ever so limited English made the appropriate replies and displayed the necessary smiles and head nods to secure the documentation needed. Once on the street, he did not waste a moment. He mixed in with the crowd, leaving behind the befuddled man who was there to secure a male named Rosenberg, and darted off to safety.

Convinced his transgression would be discovered should he remain in New York, over several days Meyer walked ninety miles to Philadelphia, the nearest big city. There he slept in alleys, avoided the gangs of young toughs and ate whatever he could get his hands on.

Then he made a momentous discovery: Americans threw away the most remarkable things! What to them was rubbish, to a penniless teen was gold in the streets. He spent his days combing those streets collecting these prizes and turning them in at junkyards, where he was rewarded with copper and nickel coins.

In time the young man who sixty years hence was to become my *Zeida* (grandfather) amassed enough money to bargain for an old pushcart, enabling him to collect more, and thus increase his earnings.

He secured a roof over his head, a windowless room with filthy old mattresses on the floor, shared with other streetwise young men. Within a year he was able to send money back home to bring across the first family member.

Midway through his third year he purchased a run-down grain mill, which he worked day and night to restore and make profitable enough to one by one send for remaining family. Mission accomplished? Not quite: he still had two things he needed to do.

Barry Rosenberg

Ever paranoid his fraudulent entry into the USA would be discovered, he had his name legally changed. Months later, Meyer Rosenberg became an American citizen.

The second necessity bore the name Pauline. She had been his girlfriend since they were age ten. When she arrived on the ship from Europe, an ecstatic eighteen year old wearing brand new suit and beaming smile was there to claim the overjoyed young woman who was to become my *Bubba* (grandmother).

Over the next fifteen years Bubba Pauline gave birth to nine children; miraculously for the times, eight survived. To this day, Meyer and Pauline Rosenberg-nee-Cutlov were the happiest couple I have known.

Their offspring, however, that was another story. How these two gentle, gracious, loving people produced such a pack of clowns I shall never understand.

Once a month the collective family would assemble for lunch at Zeida and Bubba's three story brick house on Catharine Street. Seven pairs of grownups, not a one over five foot two, and a flock of kids. We young ones immediately dashed off to the parlor where Uncle Hymie, who never married and lived to ninety-nine, would entertain by playing piano and leading us in singing popular songs.

Then we would engage in a little game. Each of us, Uncle included, put a penny into a bowl, and chose a specific time on the clock. Whereupon we sat back and waited. The one who got closest to the precise minute the first fight broke out amongst the adults won the pot.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

America

Days 0 - 15,000

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



numbers game

A YEAR AGO I celebrated my thirty thousandth day on earth.

You think that's not a major accomplishment? With all the people in two different hemispheres who have wanted to wipe me off the planet's surface due to my, shall we say, sonorous promulgation of iconoclastic postulates?

Look, a fuss is made whenever some fossil hits my age in equivalence of years, right? Probably kept alive with a daily cocktail of quack-prescribed chemicals. Kith and kin throw a bash and all gather round secretly hoping he/she keels face-first into the overly-sugared birthday cake so they can finally split her/his booty and buy themselves a container of useless toys.

But...thirty thousand days: just the sound of it reflects a singular achievement.

You see, I take proper care of this funny old body that carries me around. Eat vegan, week-long fasts a few times each year, lots of aerobic exercise. Every morning I depart the sack an hour before sunrise, meditate twenty minutes, then jog out to the dunes to do kicks and stretches while I watch a far older fella rise and shine over the East Cape mountains. After all this, I hop on the ancient twelve speed and hard-pedal to the West End and back. Top that, you money-hungry boomers, materialistic-beyond-good-sense gen Xers and social media numb-brain millennials!

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

I'm still as jovial at times, and, yes, crabby at times, as I was twenty thousand days ago when I was a young pup. And I can still do it (though truth be told I do it far less often), without need of those horrid little blue pills that leave you with headache and nausea long after.

Thirty thou days, and nary a one have I not accomplished something of note, even if it's only pissing off a few old grumps who feel the need to write snarky rebuttals to my genial published prose.

All that aside, why the day count? At the age of four and barely able to read, in order to escape the family's incessant carping at one another, I would duck into the bog, bolt the door and blindly open the Information Please almanac, which I kept stashed there. Whichever page came up, whatever the statistical content, I would store in my head the fascinating numbers.

Time I started kindergarten I could tell you the population and area size of every state in America. Babe Ruth's home run total each season of his illustrious career. The height of the twenty tallest mountains of the world. Distance from the sun and respective diameters of every planet in the solar system, plus their moons.

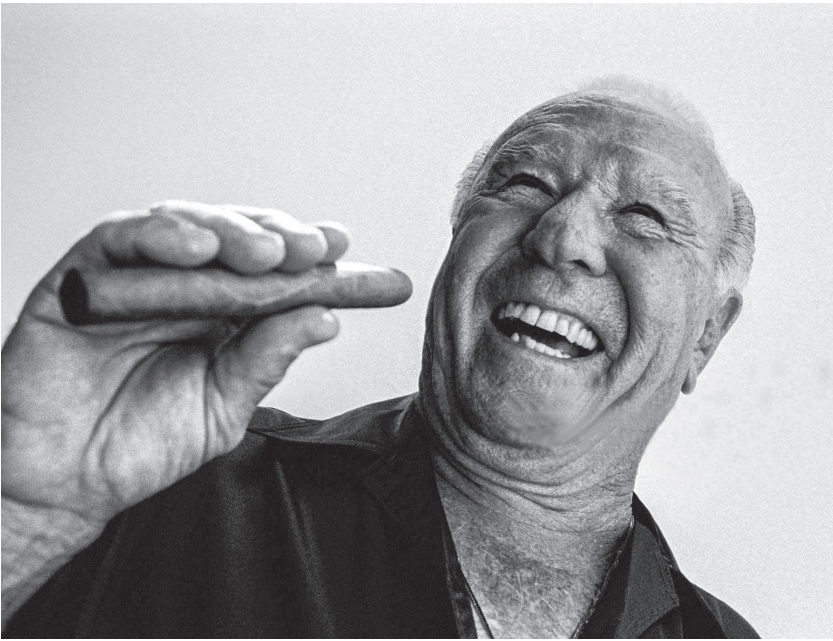
You know what this got me? Attention. Which to a kid growing up in a household of hyenas was replacement for the love that didn't exist. Thirty thousand – minus those initial fifteen hundred – days later I still wallow in a sea of numbers.

Early-on, though, all the quoting of stats threatened to transform that sea into a lake of molten lava. Because of my rapid-fire recitation of those numbers, the bigs figured me for a major smarty. I knew better, but enjoyed the spotlight so didn't refute their erroneous surmise.

When I was in first grade (age six), the school's toffs figured I was so advanced for my years they wanted to up me to grade three or four, which scared the bejeezus out of me. Those third and fourth graders were huuuge; I'd be a pygmy among giants.

They sent me to the board of education for testing. It's now twenty-eight thousand days later, yet I recall with clarity performing such brilliant feats of erudition as answering questions with blank open-mouth stares and trying to pound round pegs into square holes. Alas, it worked: the testing administrators failed me.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



uncle willie

EVERYBODY LOVED Uncle Willie. He was my personal favorite of several uncles, and not only because of the presents he always brought.

He would show up from New York three or four times a year, always a different top-down Cadillac convertible, huge cigar planted between his lips, a buxom blonde curled up next to him, back seat piled high with gifts for everyone.

The third of my mother's four older brothers (the other three were super-straight family men, as different from Willie as midday from midnight), he just adored his baby sister, and by extension her only son.

'Kid, lemme tell you where I been. You still got that world globe I brought you last year? Go grab it and I'll show you.' He'd spin the globe on its axis, point at a tiny spot. 'Whatsat say? Can you read it?' At age four, I could read as well as he could, which wasn't saying much. I'd lean in close, squint and call out 'Bo-liv-ee-uh' or 'An-go-luh.' And with cigar in one hand, glass of port in the other, the yarn would begin.

Uncle Willie was chased up a tree by a grizzly while panning for gold in the upper Yukon, crawled half a mile inside a tsetse fly infested South African mine where he found the second biggest diamond on record. ('Show 'em the rock I gave you, Doll-baby,' he announced to his ladyfriend.)

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

He was attacked by a tiger in Thailand, forced to fight off highwaymen in Haiti, barely escaped with his pride in a Pakistani riot. I'd sit there enthralled, while the bigs would bite their tongues and roll their eyes. Yet they too sat captivated.

I must admit the presents he brought for me were a little, uh, strange. 'Souvenirs of where I been,' he would tell me. So I'd get a bear's paw, shrunken head, voodoo doll, poisoned dart, a carved ivory figure with huge erect penis. Oddly, a day or two after Uncle Willie left us, these gifts would mysteriously disappear from my room.

The only thing I didn't like all that much about his visits were Uncle Willie's woman friends. Oh, they were jolly and pleasant enough. But they always wanted to pinch my cheek and hug me to their immense bosoms. I would come close to suffocating in the mountainous cleavage, cosmetic smell lingering in my nostrils for days.

I learned to keep my mouth shut around them because of an early-on embarrassment. Uncle Willie came in April for Passover *seder* with his blond friend, whom he introduced to us as Mabel. When he arrived that September for Rosh Hashanna, and the blonde approached with arms out, I said meekly, 'Hi, Mabel.' She stopped cold. Turning to Uncle Willie: 'Who's Mabel!?' she demanded, fists on extremely wide hips.

'Kid, this here's Doris.' Sly wink. 'Say hello to my beautiful companion, why doncha.' She sure looked like Mabel.

Whenever Uncle Willie showed up in his shiny Cadillac convertible, he would haul out a big fat roll of money, hand notes around to my protesting mom and two older sisters. (My father steadfastly refused to accept the proffered bills, though for sure we could've used them, as this was during the War and we were dirt poor.)

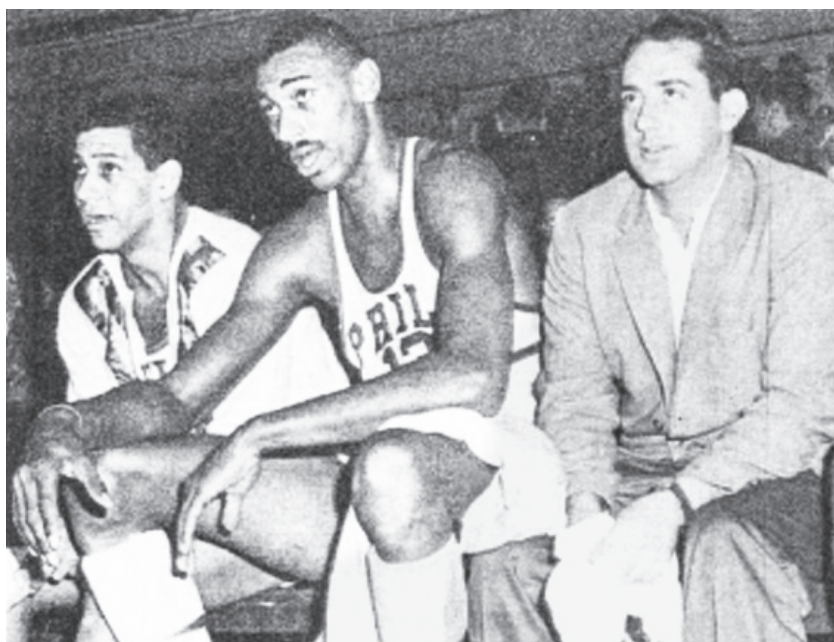
But now and again Uncle Willie would come to us not in a glistening Caddy with a woman friend, rather alone in a dusty old clunker. He'd be red-eyed and dead tired, his clothes rumped, several days growth of facial hair, smelling of body odor and cheap whisky. He'd say little to any of us, just lie on the couch staring at the ceiling, or sit stooped over, my mother alongside holding his hand. In a few days he'd be gone. Six months later he'd show up in a different color Cadillac, blonde named Trixie, loads of presents and a roll of dollar notes, which he proceeded to pass out freely. And tales of his latest experiences, of course. So vivid and mesmerizing you felt you had been right there with him.

Barry Rosenberg

One time when I was about eight or nine he said to me: 'Kid (he never could remember my name), y'know the secret of life? Here it is in a nutshell: Live a good story and learn to tell it well. You'll always have friends, and you'll never go broke.'

He might've had something there.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



Left to right: Guy Rodgers, Dippy and some freeloader.

best seat in the house

'YOU COMING, or what?'

'You realize I don't have a ticket, right?'

'Walk in with me. What's the problem?'

'It's sold out, man. Every seat. You promised me a ticket, and –'

'Was you or Barbara's best girlfriend. You know Barbara (his sister). Imagine the noise I turned her down.'

'Look, I'm not standing, okay? I wanna see it, Christ, how long I've been looking forward, but I'm just not standing two damn hours.'

Silence.

'You still there? Dip?'

'Thinkin'. Look, just meet me outside the players entrance, six thirty.'

'Then what?'

'Six thirty. And wear a sports jacket, ok? Try to look like a mensch.'

A telephone conversation with an old high school bud a few years following graduation. Wilton Norman Chamberlain.

At The Brook, only the media referred to him as Wilt. With us, he was Dippy (coz he had to dip his head whenever he entered a room), or Dip face-to-face. He was the first seven foot player with real skills. And he was strong. Good lord, he was strong.

Our senior class had been extremely close. 'Let's keep it going,' we said, looking at Dippy, our focal point. Because of him, we had won

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

the Philly high school championship, were rated the top basketball team in America. He united us. He was the maypole we all danced around.

All the universities wanted the guy, and where he went, we'd go.

'Hey Dip, UCLA, bro. All those gorgeous babes.'

'Nah, Miami. World's number one partying college!'

'Have a little class, dude. Michigan or Mich State is where it's at.'

And then one day...

'You're going where!?' A lot of head shaking when he announced he'd chosen Kansas. And we all went our separate ways. Me, I got a scholarship to Drexel, stayed in Philly.

The rules had him ineligible his freshman year at Kansas U. There was a lot of speculation as to how he'd fare facing guys almost his own size. Then came his very first varsity game. Fifty-one points. He was a force, and no one defender could reckon with him. Dippy carried a mediocre team to the college championship game (they lost).

We wrote a few letters back and forth early on. Then nothing.

Four years later, the Philly NBA team, then known as the Warriors, drafted him, and he returned home. I saw a heck of a lot more of him. Just as he had done in high school and college, he was top scorer in the pros. Within a few seasons he would break every record then known to man. The big one, the one that will never be touched: a hundred points in a single game.

The game this particular evening was the hated Celtics. They were good, Boston; so awfully good. It promised to be a classic, and had been sold out for months. And here Dippy was going to not only get me in, but find me a place to sit. I had my doubts.

There was the usual crowd at the players entrance. Lots of security too. When Dippy came along I called out to him, but it looked like he'd stride right on by.

'Yo, Dip. It's me, Barry.'

Without pausing, he made a motion with his head, then bent down and spoke to a security guy. I weaved my way through the mob. He reached out and grabbed my lapels, dragged me with him.

'Nice,' he said, running jacket material between his fingers. 'Drunk you took it off be pissed, having to sleep in that cold alley without it.'

'Yeah, yeah.' Dippy had always been a clothes horse, and now that he had real money...

Barry Rosenberg

I followed him through the corridors to the Warriors locker room. Lots of people. I stood awkwardly off by myself as a fuss was made over him by reporters and hangers-on. Then the players, now in uniform, left to make their way down to the playing floor. Again, I followed.

At the team bench, Chamberlain had a word with the coach, himself a former player named Neil Johnston. Pre-occupied, Johnston never gave me a glance.

‘Grab a towel and keep it with you,’ Dippy told me. ‘Make like you belong.’

Which is how I had the best seat in the house – the team bench – as the Philadelphia Warriors beat the Boston Celtics in a heart-thumpingly thrilling game.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



the four of us

WE WERE BARELY into our twenties. Joe was already a well-read newspaper columnist; Joel, a jazz DJ, was a wannabe record producer and Bill, a hopeful standup comic. And there was me, beginning to make my name as a freelance magazine writer.

We'd meet up for lunch once a month in our home town of Philadelphia. We didn't talk sports, or politics, or women. Our one and only topic of conversation was always the same: success, and how it was out there just waiting for us.

The others claimed the only way to achieve respect and prominence in our chosen fields was to head ninety miles north to New York and spend some years eating kaka while waiting for a break. I reckoned otherwise. I hated the New York scene, refused to waste my formative ladder-climbing years kissing Big Apple backsides. My talent, I declared, would get me there on its own.

Words of a fool.

Irish-American Joe's hope was to become a big name novelist, but New York laughed in his face. So he smartly ingratiated himself with the clique of hard drinking Irish NY authors, which got him in the door with their publishers. He scored a non-fiction book deal – which all the bigger names had turned down – to embed himself in Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey's 1968 presidential campaign and report the finer details. Dejected when the candidate refused him private access, Joe put on a suit, flag pin in his lapel, and cozied up to

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

Republican Nixon, whom he despised. Tricky Dick liked and trusted him right off, and gave Joe total access throughout his campaign. The man won and Joe's book, *Selling of the President*, which ripped Nixon to shreds, was the NY Times number one bestseller for a year.

Joel spent ten years at Atlantic records before catching a break by talking the brass into letting him produce a couple of unknown female vocalists, this more a reward for a decade of faithful kaka consumption than their faith in the records making money. Roberta Flack won four Grammys, Bette Midler became an overnight sensation and Joel soon was surfing the crest of recording biz prominence.

Bill found moderate success as a standup playing small clubs in major east coast cities, as Black comics were just beginning to catch white America's fancy. Then he was offered a second fiddle role to has-been actor Robert Culp in what appeared to be a must-fail TV series. But the series, called *I Spy*, became super popular, running for three years and gave Bill unrestricted leverage to climb higher.

Me, I couldn't beg, buy or steal a break.

And so what eventually happened to the four of us?

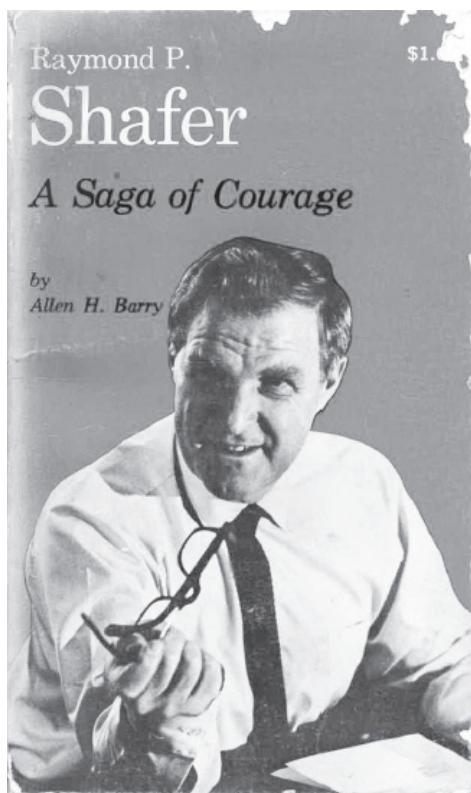
Following the remarkable success of his first publishing venture, Joe wrote a dozen subsequent non-fiction books, only one of which was quality, and he was sued – and lost – big-time over that. A succession of his later books received devastating reviews leaving him morose and bitter. Always a drinker, he now began boozing excessively, causing his marriage to fall apart. Financially, he'd made millions but lost it all on bad investments. Joe died broke and broken at seventy-one.

When Joel had major ego hassles with the honchos at Atlantic, he struck out on his own. He never had another hit record, and died of a heart attack at sixty-five.

After *I Spy*, Bill went on to become the world's top-rated TV star. Now in his mid-eighties, *Cosby* is still making headlines. In 2018 following a long, ugly, drawn-out court case, he was found guilty of perhaps Hollywood's most heinous sex scandal ever, and was set to spend the rest of his life in prison. After three years' incarceration he was set free on a legal technicality.

The flop of the four, at thirty thousand days and counting, Barry spends his time tending his garden, doing a little writing and contentedly walking the beautiful seven mile Pacific Ocean beach just beyond his tree-filled New Zealand property.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



dudley dought

JULY, 1968. WEEKS from now I would be in Chicago for the Democratic Party convention and find myself right smack in the middle of a full-scale civil war, where the police would run amuck and beat the daylights out of thousands of people protesting the –

But wait. That’s another yarn. This one involved no violence, no intimidation, and yet, for me, no less an absurdity than the horror shortly to come.

Six months before, I’d finally sold a freelance article after years of trying, and was now barely eking out a living doing a monthly piece for the same high quality but lousy paying magazine.

Phone call. Top dog of a major public relations firm. Got my name from the magazine’s editor. The PR guy had been retained to produce a book on a certain candidate in time for the coming political convention. I sat up straight.

‘Gene McCarthy?’ I asked, excitedly. ‘George McGovern?’

‘Um, actually, it’s not a Democrat.’ Dead silence. ‘Hello? You still there?’

‘You do know I’m a very strong lefty.’

‘Yes, well. To be perfectly honest, all the writers I know are also of that bent and every one I approached turned me down flat. I was kinda hoping you might –’

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

‘Never. All the Republicans running are trash. I wouldn’t be caught dead doing a book on any –. Who is it anyway? Nixon? Rockefeller?’

He cleared his throat. ‘Dudley DoRight.’

I threw my head back and let out a shriek. Dudley DoRight was the cartoon character nickname tagged on Raymond P. Shafer, the current governor of the state of Pennsylvania. A former football player and low-grade war hero who was your classic god, flag, mother and apple pie store-window dummy. And here the fella’s ego was telling him he could become leader of the developed world.

‘Look,’ I laughed, ‘Shafer’s a joke, and I’d become the same writing a book on him. So you can just forget –’

‘Two thousand dollars. Yours as soon as I get the finished book in hand.’

Now, would I, a destitute writer of high ethical and moral standards, sacrifice my integrity for the present NZ dollar equivalent of \$24,000? Is the pope a gentile?

Shafer’s people wanted a biography to hand out to the five hundred-plus delegates, their families, plus media and hangers-on. The convention, in Miami, was less than three weeks off. It sounded a formidable task.

‘Not to worry,’ the PR man assured me. ‘You’ll have all kinds of help from Shafer’s team, and you’ll meet with the governor when he comes to Philly. He’s promised to give you as much time as you need.’

A week passed with not a word from ‘the team’. I was beginning to fret. Second week, the PR guy handed me a large envelope. I opened it and removed five stapled pages of straight info. Dates and names of schools, family members, bare bones CV and medals garnered during WWII. I peered into the otherwise empty envelope, over to the PR. He gave a shrug and weak smile.

Another week was almost over when I borrowed a sports jacket and tie, scrubbed my trainers, best pair of jeans. I waited at the hotel two hours before being ushered into a suite.

Shafer was huge, six-three or thereabouts, shoulders that could barely fit through a door and a jaw so prominent his mouth might’ve been receptacle for a ping-pong paddle.

‘Barry!’ he bellowed, swallowing my extended hand in a giant paw, squashing it so fiercely I had to use my left to extract a notebook from my briefcase. I needn’t have bothered. ‘I know you’ll do a great job on the book! A great job! Now if you’ll excuse me...’ And next thing I knew I was out in the corridor, door closed in my face.

It was then arranged I should meet with an old auntie of the gov's. She'd fill me in on all the details. So I drove forty miles, sat down with a dour ancient who might well have been line dancing through stage three of dementia. She repeated insignificant details two or three times, so sprinkled with racial and elitist epithets it set my teeth on edge. All attempts to have the old dear focus on my questions went beyond her hearing. An hour of this, she suddenly went quiet, chin dropping to her chest. Then came the snores. I turned off the tape recorder and tiptoed out.

Forty-eight hours before the convention's opening, totally panicked, I rang up a friend. He came over, lighted a joint, which we passed back and forth.

'Quit worrying, man' he said, sucking in smoke. 'Here's what we do: we totally fake it. Sit Dudley on his white charger and turn him into the ultimate superhero. Winning the war single-handed, saving damsels in distress, leaping tall buildings. We make it so obvious anybody with half a brain will see him as the gung-ho doofus we know him to be.'

'But he's gotta realize we're hanging him out to dry.'

'Maybe, but not till it's all over. You said there's not enough time for him to read it before it goes to press, right? Just make sure you cash the cheque before he heads down to Florida.'

We took turns at the old Remington typewriter. Stoned to the gills, our bare feet immersed in huge tubs of ice water to contend with ninety-five degree heat and equal percent humidity, over the next two days we concocted scene after scene of heart-thumping valor and heart-wrenching patriotism.

As a kid, Shafer rescued stray puppies and mended broken sparrow wings. In school, he defended an invalid Jewish boy from a large bully, asked the most buck-toothed uncomely girl to dance with him at the class ball. On the football field he singlehandedly led his team to victory after victory.

During the war, he carried not one, not two, but three wounded members of his Navy PT boat crew at a single go to safety through enemy waters. Sat on the beach through a hail of Japanese fire with a dying Black sailor cradled in his arms. Shed giant tears of pride saluting the stars and stripes fluttering in the wind at the war's end memorial service.

And so on.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

Late afternoon on deadline day I delivered the finished manuscript to the PR man, my hands itching for the cheque.

‘Soon as the governor approves this,’ he said.

‘What!’ I cried. ‘But-but it’s supposed to go to press first thing in the morning. There’s not enough time!’

‘Shafer said he’d read it if he had to stay up all night.’

He wasn’t the only one stayed up all night. The man might be a bit thick, sure, but no one was that thick. He had to see through our ploy. Not a wink did I sleep.

The call came at 8am. ‘Hold for Governor Shafer,’ a woman’s voice commanded. She sounded angry.

‘Barry!’ came a familiar booming voice. ‘What an amazing job! Absolutely amazing!’ I remember holding the phone in front of me, staring at it. Just...staring.

The arrangement I’d made with the PR man was my name was never to be revealed to a soul living or dead. My friend who worked on it with me (plus it was his dope kept us going) was named Allen. My cat at the time was called Harry. So ‘A Saga of Courage’ was authored by none other than that brilliant political analyst Allen H. Barry.

The books were printed and flown to Miami to coincide with the Republican convention’s opening night. Following morning one newspaper reported it just as Shafer’s team had written the handout, a commendable review. A second paper saw the book in a slightly different light.

‘It reads like the author despises the governor and painted him as the quintessential Dudley DoRight character his detractors depict him,’ their article claimed. Which created a stir, as well as a sudden hot demand for books. But it seems that after being abundantly available all over the city on day one, not a copy could be found thereafter.

In fact, my personal fifty-four year old first edition, home to untold generations of well-fed silverfish, may well be the only one left in captivity.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



hitting back

JESUS SAID TURN the other cheek, and since I was in Jesus country I complied and turned the other cheek. And the bastard slapped that one as well. So I did a very un-Jesus thing.

You might not believe it to look at me (unless you're focusing on my nose, which was broken half a dozen times by the time I was eighteen), but I was a bit of a battler way back. Never started a fracas, and mostly I'd just run like hell, but sometimes, y'know, sometimes...

Lancaster Avenue was the great divide in those days. On one side, ninety percent Italian. On the other, ninety percent Jewish. (Now, of course, both sides one hundred percent Black.) If you need a reason to fight, might as well be ethnicity as anything, right?

At the time, my closest friend was James Ranieri, whose parents hailed from Stromboli. Came time for one of the periodic ethnic stoushes, James and I would seek each other out and whale away at one another. Or so it appeared. But like an old Western movie barroom brawl, our punches never really made contact. So why even show up? To save face with our guys, of course.

One battle, I accidentally pounded him in the chest. We stood there stunned, while all around us for-real mayhem was going on. Growling quietly, he accused me of not pulling the punch. I sneered back that of course I pulled it, he'd damn well stepped into it. Nearly came to blows, we did. Somehow the tense moment passed and we got back into our pre-arranged charade.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

In time, I gave up nonsensical physical violence (motivated by my doctor issuing a final warning concerning the state of my oft-deviated septum). And when I became a hippie and adopted love and peace, I realized the fine art of bullshit was far superior a tool of resolving disagreements.

So fifty years back such aggression was put aside for the duration. But there have been two exceptions.

My sister had gone to the Holy Land in her forties, and claimed to have found god at the Wailing Wall. She'd been an agnostic (e.g. wussy atheist) for years. After the big moment she came home all giddy and glory-filled. Not a very happy fella at the time, I thought, hmm...

Two years later I'm standing at the Wall. What I hadn't realized was that a great length of rope bisected the area in front: men on the left side of the praying area, women on the right.

Ten minutes went by as I stood by the Wall; twenty. What, I wondered, is the standard wait-time for a miracle here? Bored, I reckoned I should just apply what I know, and proceeded to sit cross-legged on the ground and close my eyes. No more than a minute went by when came a painful whack on my shoulder. My eyes flew open and I twisted around. One of them.

They are the supremely chosen: dressed completely in black, skullcap to shoes, with angry hairy faces and sideburns so long they curl up on themselves. They're Hasidics, and a more narrow mob of religious nutters you'd be pressed to find.

I tried explaining to this chap, a few years older than me, that meditation is my way of communing with the universe, and sitting cross-legged –.

His eyes ferociously wide, he frantically motioned me to stand. Stuff this, I thought, as by Jewish law my blood and ancestry made me as much a citizen of the state of Israel as this high-strung contemptible character. Turned back to continue my med when came another, more severe shoulder thump.

Sighing, I stood up. I knew he understood English, they all do here, so again I tried a bit of logic. Whereupon he smacked me on the cheek. Hard. I quickly gathered my wits, remembered Jesus's directive, and again undertook a rational explanation as to the benefits of meditation.

SMACK! The other cheek. Sorry, JC, I thought, as reflex action had my fist plowing into my antagonist's soft midsection. He coughed and sputtered and fell to his knees, groaning loudly. I apologetically

reached down to help him up when I heard a nearby commotion. A clot of his black-garmented, bushy-faced brethren were headed my way, fists waving and hollering loudly.

I'd heard tell these crazies were not to be messed with, and that identifying myself as a Jew would've made them even more enraged. I turned heel and sprinted off.

Now, my next move might've have been deliberate, I honestly don't recall, but instead of simply hightailing it out of there, I hurdled the rope divide, thus committing the worst blasphemy since Moses tumbled down the mount toting an armload of thou-shalt-nots.

I continued to skedaddle, causing a low-grade riot as I raced through the women's sector, far more involved in saving my skin than worrying about being cold-shouldered by the deity I did not believe in.

The second punch? Ten years later, in the Thai city of Pattaya. This is where the gold standard of European scumbags go to exercise the most vile of humankind's depravities. Welcome to the world capital of pedophilia.

The city is run by Thai mafia. They send 'buyers' north to the area known as the Golden Triangle to purchase children from dirt-poor hill tribe parents who can't afford to feed their large families. The kids – lads as young as five – are brought to Pattaya and housed in conditions slightly above livestock standard. They're semi-starved and taught to be compliant accomplices to the Euro sickos who wing in on charter flights for the sole purpose.

I was there along with a photographer on an investigative magazine piece. We were sitting in a restaurant notorious for the assemblage of pervs and their pathetic rent-by-the-hour boys. The photographer's wide angle Hasselblad was installed inside a daypack with the lens winking out a peep hole, external shutter button on a flexible steel cord snuggled in his hand.

Of the couple dozen or so creeps in attendance, one especially stood out: a German business sort, comically obese, rosy red cheeks and cascading jowls. He sat at a table just a few meters removed.

On his lap was a beautiful boy who might have been six, might have been ten. It was impossible to judge. The man was fondling the boy as he fed him by hand and spoon. The kid appeared happy, smiling and giggling. It was not wholly an act. He was eating quality food, as much as he wanted. This occurred solely on those occasions he was performing his trained-for duties.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

I was having a difficult time handling the scene, as was the photographer, who'd done shooting in war zones and the aftermath of devastating natural disasters. Finally, unable to stomach a minute more, we dropped a pile of baht notes on the table and headed out.

As we passed the fat German's table, no forethought, my hand already clenched into an angry fist, my arm swung back, then quickly forward, my knuckles smashing into the German's bloated face. His chair tumbled back, the pedo performing a classic ass-over-head worthy of Cirque du Soleil, the child cushioned in the spill by Herr Schwein's corpulence.

We ran. Out the door and down the darkened street. Pedophilia being a major local tourist attraction, my impulsive behavior was not exactly the stuff worthy of travel brochure inclusion, and getting nicked would mean extended accommodation at one of those wonderful Thai resorts which do not specialize in pilates.

Rubbing my sore knuckles, I apologized to my photographer mate for creating a potential nightmare for the both of us. He laughed and confessed he'd been strongly considering the very same move, I just beat him to it.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



Sandy (Mrs R) and a beardless Barry.

purple reign

I STUMBLED OUT OF BED, staggered down the hall. Stood before the commode not fully awake. Finished my morning purge, peered down and – wha?? I stared with incredulity for several seconds. ‘Darling,’ I called out quite loudly, ‘would you come here a moment?’

My then-wife showed up at the door, puzzled. ‘What’s the –. Omigawd!’ She gawked. ‘Your, your –! It’s purple!’

Which it was. Not a pretty purple either. Dark splotchy purple.

The wife backed away. ‘Don’t come near me with that, that, whatever it is!’ And darted off.

Ah well, at least I hadn’t suddenly gone color blind, my initial fear.

I was in my mid-twenties. Things should have been going splendidly for me. And, for anybody looking in from outside, they were. Beautiful wife, great job, lots of gelt. Why then was I was so miserable all the time?

Actually, misery has been my name most of this life. I was an unhappy kid, unhappier teen, and there in my twenties I was sliding even further down the slippery slope of moroseness. It didn’t make sense. So when I went to see the GP for my annual stem-to-stern and he asked how things were, for the first time I spoke some truth about what was going on which stethoscopes, finger-thumping on my back and gagging on a tongue depressor wouldn’t reveal.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

'I have just the ticket,' the doc, a wise man twice my age, announced. He scribbled some illegible wording on his scrip pad, tore off the sheet, handed it over. 'Have you shipshape in no time.'

That was four days prior. Three tabs a day and, in all honesty, I did feel better. Now this. Couldn't be anything other than those damn pills.

I went to see him before heading to work. Pleaded with the receptionist/dragon, who snapped: Doctor! Is! Fully! Booked!

Just one minute is all I need, I implored. It's absolutely urgent.

I must have had on my urgent face because, exasperated, she marched into his office, emerged moments later, directed me to a seat. He appeared not long after, apologized to a waiting patient, ushered me in and issued a look that said this better be good.

'Those pills you prescribed?' I said. 'See, I'm not really a purple fella. You got anything in aqua maybe? Chartreuse would probably work too.'

I zipped down, displayed my business. His eyes grew large. Mouth dropped open. 'Oh my god!' he cried. 'This is -. This is -.' And ran out of the room. I thought: the plague?

No more than twenty seconds later the door flew open and he came bounding back in, followed by two more docs from the practice, one with a camera. All three gaped liked they'd just rounded a bend in the highway and caught their first-ever glimpse of Mount Rushmore. The doc with the camera began snapping away.

'Never seen anything like it!' My doc.

'Definitely one for the journals!' Doc number two.

'Mind shifting it a little to the left?' Doc with the Nikon.

'Um, reckon I can grab a dozen wallet sizes?' I wondered. They stared at me.

'Y'know,' I shrugged. 'Christmas cards.'

I went home after work, tossed the pills, waited a couple days to make sure the purple reign had ended, and for the past twenty-five thousand days have not taken so much as a single head med beyond the occasional aspirin.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



she said her name was petulia

MORE LIKELY IT WAS Cyndii or Soozee or Sharda. This was late Monday afternoon and as she sat there under the tree in Lincoln Park and the sun set at its low angle cast harsh white light upon her face she did look like Julie Christy, or like what Julie might have looked when she was sixteen. Clean, smooth, milk-white skin, straight blond hair, lovely features, great body. The body was clothed in an official hippie uniform, \$149.50 at Lord and Taylor, but Petulia, or whoever, was not really a hippie. Nor was she a yippie. Nor a commie agitator. Nor even a radical.

What she was was a lovely not-quite-woman there for the ride. It was a groovy place to be for a teenager who looked like Julie Christy. Of course, her mother didn't know she was there. Her mother thought she was in the Catskills. The Catskills, Petulia repeated with a face. Yicch.

See, Petulia's mother was Very Middle Class. So was her father, a manufacturing executive. Thus it was inevitable that she too would join that great sterile fold in the not too distant future. Petulia spoke of this matter of factly; it was fate, and she had geared herself to accept it.

But this week was the storm before the lull. This week she was Petulia, and she was doing her thing here in Chicago, where it was happening. Before the week was over she'd have worn a Free Huey button, smoked some pot, taunted the cops, taken in their gas, padded with a guy or two, maybe even a Black, providing she could find one

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

who looked like Poitier, and when the following week she reverted back to Marsee or Zani and the great white way of middleclassdom, she'd at least hold a memory of the bitchin' week that was.

There were a host of Petulias in Chi that last week in August. Middleclass kids taking in the scene. A short-lived cut-out from parentally nurtured Establishmentism. Petulia stands out in my mind because of what happened the following night.

Tuesday night the cops struck a little after eleven. They gassed the Lincoln Park area, as they had the night before, and herded everyone off the green and across Clark Street. Then the cops regrouped, the kids took their places across the street and yelled over nasty things at them, and that's the way it remained, an impasse.

When it appeared pretty much as though the action were finished for the night, I started back to my car, which I'd left in the metered parking area between Clark and Stockton Drive. As I reached the edge of the lot, a cop called out to me. Better not go in there, buddy, he warned. No malice. Just trying to be helpful.

I took his advice and walked back across the street, behind the lineup of broad-bottomed police standing at ease, their ever-present blue crash helmets in place, protective plastic face masks down in combat-ready position. I got halfway through the rank when out the corner of my eye I saw it coming.

One of the cops had unbuckled his Mace holster, and now grasped the black can hip high in the palm of his hand. A press of the thumb and a thin stream of liquid darted out like an anteater's tongue across the ten feet of space between us. Two days before I might have stood there and taken the shot flush in the face. But this was Tuesday, third night of festivities, and my reactions by now were programmed to anticipate the unreal. I turned my head and jumped aside, robbing the cop of his solid hit; still, I wasn't quick enough to escape all the way. The stuff caught me on the tissue of the ear and on the neck just below it, and as I broke into full sprint I could feel the stuff working its way across my cheek. It burned bloody awful. Shit, did it burn.

I knew where to go. The Theater at 1848 N. Wells, which a year ago served as home base for the Second City comedy theater and now functioned as an underground playhouse for anti-war works, had been converted for the week into a first aid station and shelter. The Medical Committee for Human Rights, an anti-AMA physicians' fraternity with predominantly New York membership, was working with the Student Health Organization, a body of with-it medical, dental and nursing students and interns, in treating people harmed by the police. The

medical station was located in the basement. Upstairs in the theater itself – a sort of truncated playhouse in the round – slept nightly hundreds of hippie-yippie types with otherwise no source of shelter.

Damage to my skin was minimal and the medication erased all pain within short order. I decided to hang around and spent my time chatting with staff, headed up by a miniskirted MD from Boston and a former Navy corpsman from Alabama. The casualties that were brought in were largely severe gassings, macings and clubbing-kickings. Those who really had been worked over were given first aid at The Theater, then taken by volunteer-driven ambulance to one of the hospitals which had consented to tend to the kids. These hospitals were few. Most declined outright to treat the cops' victims (claiming they had been ordered not to do so). At others, only a single or perhaps two ballsy doctors were attending the cases. They were doing so on their own and falsifying records.

About one a.m. an excessive case was brought in. A young guy who accompanied the victim said he had witnessed her and a second girl walking by themselves down a side street when an unmarked car cruised by. The car stopped and without warning the front doors flew open and out jumped a couple of helmeted police. The other girl broke away and ran down an alley, the young guy related, but this one seemed to freeze. The cops went to work on her, he said, his voice breaking intermittently, clubs crashing down on her face and head like hammers on an anvil. What could I do? the young guy asked, his eyes red and moist. I mean, what the hell could I do?

Nothing. He could do nothing.

The girl was placed on a mat and two young interns began to wash away the blood crusted on her face and hair. From across the small room I watched the backs of the kneeling interns, and as they moved about I would get glimpses of exposed parts of her face. There was a curved gash near the hairline at least six inches long, fresh blood spilling down her forehead like red paint on an animated Sherwin-Williams sign. Her eyes were slits in a pair of puffed-out muffins. Her nose was bubbled, broken most likely, and her lips cracked at several places. She was a mess.

One of the interns then stood up and for the first time I got a good look at the girl. A sudden chill swept me. Quickly I stepped across the floor and planted myself directly behind the remaining attendant intern. I stared down at the face on the mat. I must have held the stare an entire minute.

The girl on the mat was Petulia.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

I HAD ARRIVED IN Chicago Sunday afternoon and that evening went out to Lincoln Park to observe. And that's all I went there to do. I liked what the kids were doing and I was with them all the way, but I wasn't a kid, not anymore, my own kid and the mortgage awaiting for me back home attesting to this.

To satisfy my craving for safety I looked around for a couple of good, secure people to flank myself with. I found them. Not that these guys were very large. Or obviously strong, or learned in the various forms of oriental hand combat. None of these. They were, in fact, somewhat unimpressive looking – stoop-shouldered, mushy-bellied. The safety I saw in their numbers stemmed strictly from their hand-held cameras and the small, laminated badges affixed to their respective lapels. One laminated badge read NBC. The other read CBS. I couldn't have felt more secure had I been standing amongst the LA Rams linebackers.

The NBC man and the CBS man, as well as several other veteran members of the Establishment press, talked among themselves recalling past civil wars they had been witness to – old Russians rehashing the Battle of Leningrad. It was a very calm scene.

Eleven p.m. was curfew time and the first attempts were made shortly thereafter to clear Lincoln Park. The cop on the bullhorn was drowned out with boos and catcalls. A squad of police came on with their clubs; the crowd scattered and then, like air seeking and finding a vacuum, quickly refilled the area. Another and yet another such charge dispersed the crowd, each with a little more efficiency than the last, until some of the kids remained in the park while others had crossed over to Clark Street. When the number of those in the park had become small enough to suit the purpose, the head cop blew his whistle and from the foot of South Lagoon came the charge in full dress and scale.

Lincoln Park became a veritable Gettysburg, the kids retreating, the police pursuing. And in the middle of all this was the press, shutters clicking, lenses recording, eyes and ears observing, minds already composing leads for tomorrow's story that would be deleted, diluted, revised, revamped and finally rejected by two-fisted, hard-hitting city editors and network vice presidents. I admired the guts of the men I was standing amidst, all the while working to convince myself that their continued presence was prompted by past experience and not reckless abandon.

Barry Rosenberg

The police were getting closer, their stocky bodies and legs unused to great exercise carrying them up the low embankment to the crest of the park area, and then down.

Then an odd thing happened. A photographer didn't get out of the way quickly enough. Got his Strobe busted by a stick. A few feet away, a telephoto lens was knocked clear off a camera housing. A man some distance to my left was motioning frantically to the laminated badge on his chest. A cop brought his club accommodatingly down THUK! upon it, sending the man reeling comically on his backside.

Now, photographers and cameramen constitute a strange breed. Comes a crisis and the thing that concerns them most are those Japanese lenses bouncing off their bellies. It looks odd as hell to see a man cradle both arms around his Nikons and bow his bared head to the assailant. But that's the way it was happening. And the heads were getting cracked.

The NBC and CBS men were now visibly ruffled by the strangeness of it all, which did little to calm my anxieties. They each took a step back, then another, then two. Me, I turned and broke barrel-ass into full gallop and none too soon, as a shiny wooden nightstick, no doubt intended for other areas of my anatomy, made contact with the rear of my left thigh. And as I was moving – faster than I've moved in years – I heard from behind me a network man's familiar voice, strained and emotion-filled:

Hey, don't you know who I...look, you just can't do that to,,,wait a minute here, what do you think you're...MOTHERFUCKER!!'

When I returned home a week or so later and told my wife about my experiences, she wouldn't believe me. 'What you're describing just doesn't happen in America,' said my decidedly liberal life partner.

Nor would any of my friends.

The editor of the magazine that had given me the assignment – to use my attuned sense of humor and observation to provide 'color' to the week's events – rejected my submitted article, terming the piece a 'vastly exaggerated lefty extravaganza'. (I wound up giving it to an underground weekly newspaper.)

Perhaps the great change in America as a democracy was born that week. For me, it was the initial step of a wholesale change of life.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



janis

THIRTY THOUSAND PEOPLE in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park that beautiful summer's afternoon. Twenty-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine were naked. Guess who wasn't.

Late 1960s. Scant weeks back I was sitting in a posh office in Philadelphia, business suit, secretary, stress, deep depression. Of a moment cried, I've had it! Kissed the wife ('back in a couple weeks,' I said), got in the fire engine red a/c T-Bird and headed west.

The SF motel manager told me about the Be-In Sunday. 'Gotta experience it,' she implored.

So there I was, stranger in a very strange land. All those naked bodies, faces painted, bands playing, people dancing. Everybody happy. Well, almost everybody.

'Hey, man!'

I look up. A woman. Naked, of course. Kind of dumpy, pendulous breasts, zits.

'Why not take your threads off, enjoy yourself, y'dig?' she wonders in a Texas twang.

'Um, um, um...'

'It's okay,' she says with a screechy laugh. 'Keep 'em on, take 'em off. Whatever. But sure is nice to let it all hang out, y'know?'

Peer pressure. Slowly, verry slowly, I remove my jersey, fold it neatly, place it on the ground. Shoes, socks, trousers. I glance over. 'All right, I'll turn around,' she cackles.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

Then in a move I never thought possible, I peel off my underpants.

'Great! I'm Janis, by the way, dude. Capricorn.' She waits.

'Oh. Um, Barry. I'm, er, August. A Leo?'

'Terrific. I groove Leos.'

She takes me by the hand, leads me into the throng of fleshy humanity, introduces me to a number of friendly people. Names like Sunshine, Taurus, Star. Feel embarrassed to reveal I'm only a Barry.

'Gotta split,' she then announces to us all. To me, in explanation: 'I'm on next.' And off she goes.

That's the last I see of her. I do, though, spot her a few days later. On a billboard outside the Fillmore Theatre. 'Biggest star on the rock scene!' the headline screams.

Tell the truth, I hardly recognize Janis with clothes on.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



confessions of a half-naked magazine writer

YEARS BACK, CRAVING to be recognized for my cleverness, I entered any number of American literary competitions. Submitting my published works, I would silently plead: Tell me I'm a good boy! Reward me with a plaque or cheque!

Nope.

And then I went to India. There I was given a copy of the Bhagavad-Gita, the Hindu holy book. I never actually read it through; what I did, I placed it on the floor next to my bed (a foam rubber mat on a dirt floor). Upon waking I'd blindly open the book and read whatever two pages appeared. Always did the good book provide an erudite message.

One fine morning the facing pages informed me thus: The wise person performs an act for the rewards of the act itself, not those she/he hopes will appear after. Had the passage included my name, it could not have been any more suited to my basic sense of inadequacy.

Following year, unbeknownst to me, a magazine article of mine was entered for an award. It got shortlisted and, I was whisperingly informed, slated to win. (Publications lobby long and hard for these things; deals are made.) The publisher said I was to attend the awards dinner, a posh affair at a five star New York hotel. I replied I no longer

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

believed in such frivolous fare. Upon which I was informed that should I not, thus causing the publisher to lose precious face, my freelance submissions would never again grace his book.

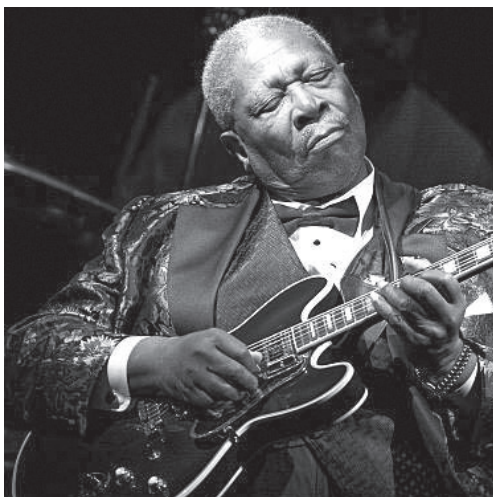
‘And dress up!’ he admonished, pointing to my present – and standard – attire. ‘None of this hippie crap you wear.’

All the big names in American magazine publishing were present. I sat at the end of a long table in my rented tux, toying with a drink and listening to banal, increasingly drunken conversations all round me. And then, empowered by a cocktail of boredom and anger at myself for having capitulated to this overblown farce, I did a curious thing. No prior thought, I loosened my belt and began wiggling. Took quite a bit of fidgeting but somehow, undetected, I got my trousers down to my ankles, then over my shoes and off entirely.

A category was announced and my name called. I rose off my chair to automatic obligatory applause. At this point only my top half was visible. But as I began striding through crammed-together tables to the stage the applause quickly turned to stifled cries and then dead silence. On stage, I collected a decidedly ugly statuette from the stunned MC, tucked it under my arm and without a word walked, not back to my table, rather out of the ballroom, through the lobby and to the street, where I deposited my precious honor in the nearest rubbish receptacle.

Two things: I never wrote for that magazine again, and for all I know there may yet be a pair of unclaimed tux trousers in a five star New York hotel storage room.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



rock n roll

To me, save for Janis Joplin, whom I had met briefly the year before and enjoyed her passionate wailing, it was all loud, cacophonous noise and young people run amuck. But close friends had converted an old tire warehouse into a music venue called The Electric Factory and invited me to come have a look.

I walked in warily, was immediately hit by total darkness and the ear-piercing, sonorous, crashing sound that now passed for music. There was a pulsating light show behind four bobbing, prancing ‘musicians’ on a small stage, and a strong aroma of what I knew for a fact was marijuana. (It was incense.)

I stood stock still and tried to find some semblance of sanity. Suddenly in a distance I could not gauge, a pair of waist-high glowing orange eyes headed slowly my way through the dark. Some sort of large feline? I took a step back; another. Then the creature came into focus: a young woman, no more than a girl, really, naked from the waist up. The glowing eyes were her nipples, painted Day-Glo orange.

The next sound heard was Rosenberg’s brain making like a tattered old rag being ripped to shreds.

Welcome to rock n roll.

A few months later I’d stopped getting my hair cut, began growing a beard, wore flared trousers and carried a penchant for the music which now filled my soul. I attended each new group’s playing the Factory. Had total access to the place, so would wander back to

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

the dressing rooms, stop in and share talk and maybe a joint with the talent. Bought all the albums. Despite being unable to carry a tune in a donkey cart, I would sing along with every number.

I had my favorites. The Stones, of course. Ten Years After. The Who. But my top performer was Eric Clapton. Loved that man's voice, loved his songs.

His three-man band, Cream, had broken up, but Clapton seemed to forever be joining new groups, and of an evening one such named Delaney & Bonnie and Friends came to the Factory.

Now, this was a few years prior to Clapton's drunkenly and publicly revealing himself as a rightwing, bigoted racist with an outrageous post-gig rant in England. And several years before he became a loudmouth anti-vaxxer asshole. I mean, you listen to the man's music, even now, and you think: how can he possibly -? No easy trick separating the art from the artist, believe me. Still...

Anyway, back then at the Electric Factory, the secondary group went on first. The act preceding Delaney this night wasn't a rock band, as was tradition, rather a middleage Black man on his own. He sang and he played electric guitar (which he called Lucille), but oddly, never both at the same time. When he sang/played *The Thrill is Gone*, it near knocked me out.

Each act at the Factory played two shows. When one was on, I'd often be backstage hanging out with the other. The middleage Black man was on for the second time when I was in with Delaney & Bonnie.

'Have you guys caught his act?' I wondered. 'He's really great.'

'That right?' Clapton.

'No lie. Hey, why don't you guys, y'know, jam with the man when your second set is over. That would really be amazing.'

Clapton looked at Bonnie. Who looked at Delaney. Who looked back at Clapton. 'Mate,' Eric said to me, 'he goes back to the very beginning of the music we do. He's an original. Why would he want to jam with a bunch of hippies like us?'

When they left to go on for their second set, I sat with the man in his dressing room. Unlike just about every other performer to play the Factory, he didn't partake in weed. Rather, he produced from a pocket an ornate silver flask, took a giant swallow, passed it on to me. I fought the urge to wipe the top with my hand before I put it to my mouth. One swig and I thought flames would leap from my throat and my head would explode. Taste like horse piss and the kick of a deranged mule. It was many moments before I regained any sort of voice to ask my question.

'Me jam with those dudes?' he laughed. 'I'm lucky just to be opening for them big name kids. Why they wanna jam with an ol' nigga like me?'

When Delaney's set was over, I followed them into their room in begging mode.

'I don't know,' Clapton said. 'I'd be embarrassed to even ask him.'

'Stay right here.' I darted over to the man's room. After a few minutes' pleading, I trotted back to the others.

And back once more. This time, out of breath, I ran into my old school chum who owned the Factory.

'Hell are you up to buzzing back and forth like a fly on coke?' When I told him, he roared.

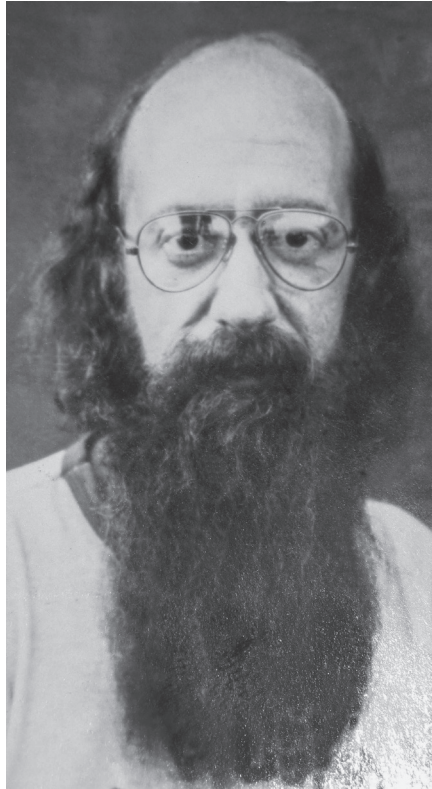
'Hey genius, Clapton and him are buddies. Thought everybody knew that. I bet they've jammed half a dozen times over the past couple years. They've already arranged to hang around and have a go tonight. We'll wait till the place empties out, then set up for a jam.'

Pranked, I stood there sighing loudly, then dragged myself back to Delaney's room. The Black man was there, flask in hand, the four of them breaking into giggles when I stepped in.

'Man, you sure have a way with words,' Bonnie said. 'Talked us right into it.' Giggles became guffaws. Feeling like a dick, I threw up my hands and slowly joined them.

And that's how I got the racist, anti-vaxxer Eric Clapton, along with his friends Delaney & Bonnie, to jam with the great B.B. King at The Electric Factory.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



the beard

IT ALL BEGAN because I wanted to be accepted by my new extended family.

I was creeping up on my big three-oh, and back then there was a saying amongst the tribe: don't trust anyone over thirty.

So, what to do to gain acceptance. To be trusted. To be a bonafide hippie. (Except hippies never used that word to define ourselves; we were freaks, taking the term from the straight media's sneering explication.)

Most obvious thing: change the uniform. I had over the past couple years gone from the suit and tie costume of rising young executive to sweatshirt and jeans of the fired-from-job-and-just-hanging-out cruiser. But the kids had their own uniform: mainly body shirts and flares. So I went off to a clothing store and bought me a set. Next day I showed up at the crisis center in Philadelphia where my new family had established as a drop-in house for those in need as well as their own personal hangout. The young ones took one look at my new attire and cried, Happy Hallowe-en!

Sounds a bit mean but in truth they were really nice about it.

'Barry, really, brother,' a sixteen year old named Lep said, taking me aside and talking to me gently. 'We know you mean well, and you're sincerely trying to change, but in all honesty you look like a doofus. That body shirt? Give it away to a golfer. And, well, your bells are so short they barely reach you ankles. We love ya, man. You're a

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

good soul and you want to blend in, but just let it happen and don't force it, okay?'

So I went back to the casual look. But if not in clothes, I realized soon enough there was another area I might apply to myself to closer conform to club rules.

At the time I had short hair, result of a barber's visit every couple of weeks, and the nearest thing I'd ever had so far as facial hair was the shadow that appeared late every afternoon.

The beginning was strange. Following years of snipping and shaving, the early stages of growth had me looking goofy. Initially, my hair – very little remained on top at this point – began growing sideways instead of downward, like my ears were sprouting wings. And the beard? A week along the hair on my cheeks extended practically up to the bottom of my eyes, creating paranoia of the approaching full moon. So I compromised. I would shave every morning, yes, but only the cheeks. I thought I'd get razzed, but the young males, most of whom could barely raise a sparse garden of fluff, took no notice.

By week two it was thick all right, but oh god, did it itch. Keeping my fingernails out of the muff when amongst my new people proved a trial.

Couple months along, hair down to my shoulders, a funny thing happened. It stopped growing. It just...stopped. And save for snipping split ends and cutting away the occasional tangle, this peculiar growth termination has lasted, in defiance of science, till this day.

The beard though: ah, here's where I made my mark in the community. Before long the wiry outpouring from the south pole of my face became the prime symbol of who I had become, what I was. Not only was my beard now my badge, my personal shield, it had delightfully obliterated a body part I had forever reviled, my weak recessive chin.

It grew and grew and grew, this beard of mine. And the attention it was bringing was beyond my highest hopes. Especially from women. When I see pics of myself during the period just before The Beard, I honestly think I didn't look all that bad. But back then I believed myself to be, not ugly exactly, just the guy chosen last (if at all) to the dance floor.

I'd begun traveling, as all proper hippie/freaks were doing back then. Pack on back, song in my heart and away I'd go. A bit scary at first, and it could be lonely at times, but in short order I developed the hang of it, and thus became a genuine roadie.

My beard had descended to within a few inches of my belt when I boarded a plane for Europe. It was early May, and the overnight flight on which I had got very little sleep left me groggy and staggering upon landing in Frankfurt during the earliest hours of daylight. Grabbed a shuttle into town, moseyed around some, then wandered into a park in the city's heart. Selected a tree, laid out my ground cloth and soon fell sound asleep.

I don't think I slept all that long because next thing I knew I was propelled out of my slumber by a vision. And when I opened my eyes the vision was kneeling by my side, eyes wide, delicious smile upon her absolutely heavenly face. She tried Deutsch, then getting no response switched to English.

'May I – may I touch it?' she inquired in a soft breathless voice.

I sat up quickly. 'What? Touch what?'

She laughed. 'Why, that beautiful, beautiful beard of yours!'

My first thought was, Hell no, lady, keep your hands –. Then I realized this was opportunity being dropped upon me. What I've always wanted. This was acceptance on the grandest scale.

She was in the city accompanying her doctor boyfriend, who was attending a medical seminar, leaving her to amuse herself in the city. At the five star hotel where they had a suite, the lady and I amused each other the rest of the morning. And I owed it all to The Beard.

It was actually in Amsterdam a few years later that something even more eventful took place involving the new symbol of my being. Until now, I had never trimmed the thing. Altering the hem on the shroud of Turin would've been a blasphemy of a far lesser proportion.

On this magnificent Sunday afternoon in summer, Vondelpark was full of happy people. I was sitting on my own at a tiny outdoor table finishing a contracted magazine article. After a few cold Heinekens, I got up, made my way to a nearby toilet. I stood in front of the trough and performed the necessary business. Once done, I tucked myself inside, bent my head down to gain a better perspective of an action I had performed several thousand times prior.

The zipper's tiny handle enclosed between thumb and index finger, I began to pull. Slowly, up came the zipper. Halfway, the zip stopped cold. Refused to budge. I tugged. I wiggled back and forth. No movement. None.

The Beard. Was stuck. In the zipper.

I tried to pull up. I tried to pull down. I yanked. I jiggled. Attempted to pluck out the offending principle strand by strand.

Nothing I did, whether aggressive or gentle or a alternation of the two, could separate these two unlikely wedded elements.

Men came in, men went out, other men entered. I dared not ask for help.

Mortified, hands surreptitiously placed one atop the other over the unwanted window to disguise the offending area, I finally stepped outside. Back into the park. On a magnificent Sunday afternoon in summer. People were looking at me, at my head so bowed, hands placed judiciously before my lower person.

They obviously thought I was humble. A man of god.

I left Vondelpark and walked slowly to the backpackers where I was staying. Maintaining my strange posture, I asked the manager might I borrow a scissors. She didn't even wonder the purpose for which I sought them. Uttered not a word as she handed a pair over. Perhaps such was a common predicament amongst hippie backpackers.

In my room I stood before the mirror. Took a few very deep breaths. Placed the scissors around the hairs. Closed my eyes tight. Opened them again. Cut an inch off my beard just above the metal entrapment. My beard came free. Then, following a lengthy hesitation, I snipped off another inch. Then another. Then I reached up and cut six inches more.

Looking in the mirror, I calmly shaped my truncated brush, which, now reaching just shy of my sternum, was no longer what it was. Its significance as my signature hallmark was gone.

A beard, yes. But no longer The Beard.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



joni

FOR SURE I WASN'T the only one madly in love with her at the time of our brief encounter. Nor would I call it an exaggeration to say there were a few million of us males in that heart-stopping condition.

Was it her remarkable face: the blonder than blond hair, those lips, the amazing cheekbones? Of course, her voice had so much to do with our ardor. She wrote all her own stuff, sang it (along with her own guitar accompaniment) as though you knew, you just knew, she meant it solely for you.

So there we were, tooling around the States in the old VW camper, me and my doggie, a hippie mutt ever there was one, with the highly appropriate name of Farout. Everybody loved the dude. I just trailed along, him setting the way with his great grin, the tail that never quit wagging, his playfulness.

'He's really called Farout?' the ladies would coo. And at the sound of his name he'd run over, stretch high up on their thighs, encouraging strokes and scratches.

With this in mind I steered the VeeDub along the dirt road to where I'd heard the musicians hung out, and she sometimes visited. I hoped she might be there, and that she liked lovable dogs, especially those with cute names like Farout.

Soon as I parked the van and opened the door, he jumped out and following several minutes of getting-to-know-ya sniffs of the countless other dogs hanging out, he went up to each person sitting outside smoking and holding beers, endearing himself to all.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

But no, she wasn't there.

I stayed a little over a week. In conversation I let it be known that it would be kinda nice if she would, ah, put in an appearance, know what I mean? They laughed. I suppose they'd heard it all before.

'Yeah, she shows up now and again,' a fella noted. 'Especially when she's written a new piece and wants our take on it. Lady's pretty shy though. I'd take it slow with her if you've got that on your mind.' More laughter.

It was an enjoyable several days. To be there while these guys, whom I had known solely through their records, were working through new numbers in their converted studio was a treat. But the lady never made an appearance.

One day a neighbor brought around some psychedelics, and we all indulged. I enjoyed a wonderful several hours traipsing around the lovely woods, communing with the universe. It was close to midnight when, exhausted from the day's labors, I crawled into the ratty old sleeping bag laid out on a squab of foam on the floor, zipped up and crashed.

During the wee hours, I thought I heard people talking in the main room, one of those a woman with a melodious voice. But it probably was weaved into my post-trip dreams.

Hours later, very late morning, I heard the same voice: 'Barry? Barry.'

I opened my eyes. My face was pressed against the wall.

'Are you awake, Barry?'

I turned around, twisting the bag awkwardly around myself. This is what I saw:

She, sitting cross-legged just alongside me, a grinning Farout curled in her lap.

I sat up. She leaned over, her face – that face – mere inches from my own. Then she reached out and gently splayed her fingers around my long beard, stroking it, giving a gentle yank.

'Hi, Barry,' she smiled. 'I hear you've been looking for me.'

Substance hangover wrapped around my brain, I sat there staring groggily. Half a minute? A minute? No more words; none. Then:

'Nah! I'm still tripping. Go away!'

Flopped back in my bag, twisted around and again pushed my face against the wall. From behind me, laughter. Gales. A bunch of them crowded around the doorway, gawking, guffawing.

I got up a couple hours later, fully awake now. Nobody around. No Farout.

Barry Rosenberg

I scrambled out of the bag, stumbled to my feet, dashed out the door and stood happily behind some bushes. Bladder emptied, made my way back to the house.

A few people began kidding me. 'She left and Farout ran after her. You'll probably never see either again.'

Well, I did see them, an hour later. I felt stupid, humbled, a damn fool as we sat on the grass talking for several minutes. Then she got up, kissed me on the cheek, squeezed Farout till he whimpered, got in her car, drove off. Both of us, man and beast, staring sadly at the retreating vehicle.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



allen

MY STANDING AS ONE of the world's premiere gatecrashers began by accident.

Age thirteen, I had a hero, a professional basketball player by the name of Joe Fulks. Hopeful of getting his autograph, one evening I went to the Philadelphia Arena, where Fulks's team was to play a game. I stood in the lobby as the crowd made their way inside.

Game time approaching, no Joe Fulks, I was about to go home when a man I knew trotted past carrying a bundle of newspapers on each shoulder. He went right by the ticket taker, then a few moments later came out again.

He noticed me standing there. 'Ain't you Bob Rosenberg's kid? Whatta you doing standing here?' When I told him, he chuckled.

'Players have their own entrance, don't you know that? Besides, the game's just about to start, so better go on in.'

I looked down at the floor, scuffed my toe along it.

'Ah,' he said. 'No ticket. And where's a kid gonna get the money for even the cheapest seat?' He squinted, deep in thought. 'Young Rosey, follow me.'

We went out to the street, where his Inquirer truck was parked. He pulled a bundle off the rear deck, placed it on my shoulder. I staggered under the weight, got my balance, and followed him, again carrying two, back inside. Past the ticket taker to the newsstand in the main corridor, where we dropped the papers.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

‘Okay, you’re in’ he smiled. ‘Now go grab an empty seat somewhere. Just make like you belong.’

Gatecrashing – getting in someplace you’re not supposed to be, at least not without proper authorization – is an art, a skill, of which there exists an infinite variety of ploys. Generally it requires deception: you pretend to be what you’re not, and you do so convincingly. Fail and quite possibly you find yourself in a situation not to your liking.

Over the years of plying my trade, I made my way into numerous events and facilities through some sort of contrivance. I’ve attended pricey educational and spiritual seminars free, gained entrance to music festivals and hoity-toity events like art gallery openings, copped long distance train rides and once even a trans-Atlantic flight.

Now, don’t get all sanctimonious on me: I do have a creed. Am I causing anybody duress? Taking money out of someone’s pocket? No? Fair go.

Tricks and gimmicks need to be worked out and practiced, sure, but there is one essential element a gatecrasher absolutely cannot do without: belief. You have to KNOW without doubt or question you are going to get in because, as my newspaper delivery friend put it, you BELONG.

Late 1960s. I was in San Francisco, and the Stones were coming to town.

I followed the throng to the Oakland Coliseum, found the appropriate gate for crashing, stood a ways off mentally detailing a plan. I soon took note of a major obstacle to my endeavor.

Two huge, mean-looking security guys. Seemed to be extremely clued in as to the ins and outs of my avocation. Anybody attempting to BS their way in was summarily tossed out. Literally. When one such soul flew through the air, landing belly-and-chin-down and bouncing not far from where I was standing, I reckoned I’d take in a movie.

Just then the larger of the two centurions looked my way, craned his head forward till he was peering directly at me. He took a few steps and pointed a finger. I held out my palms, planted a stupid grin/grimace on my face as I turned to take off.

‘Yo, Allen,’ he called out, ‘hell’re you standing out there for? C’mon in.’ I stood stock still, perplexed. He moved closer. ‘What, no ticket? Sheeut.’ He jammed a huge meaty paw into his pocket, pulled out a cardboard strip.

‘Take it, man. I mean, I’ve read everything you ever wrote. You’re the best, dude.’

Barry Rosenberg

‘Uh, uh, uh, I think maybe you...’

He winked and thrust the ticket into my hand. ‘Okay, in you go, bru.’ Placed a hand on my back and propelled me through the gate.

Inside the huge stadium now, people swirling around me, I stopped to process what had just taken place. He’d of course thought I was...

Allen Ginsberg, a San Francisco icon, was the most celebrated poet in America. King of the beatniks, as he was called, Ginsberg looked Jewish, was bald, had a bushy beard, wore black horn-rim glasses. Guess who else looked Jewish, was bald, bushy-bearded and at the time wore black horn rims? I’d met the guy at a number of public readings and parties, and we were damn near brothers in appearance. More than once had I been mistaken for him.

Further along en route to my seat, a thought suddenly hits. I look back to where my kindly ticket donor is about to rip a hopeful crasher’s arms off. What if the real Allen Ginsberg shows up? ‘You’re not him, you phony, he’s already in there!’ Whack!

I shrugged, found my way to the assigned seat and thoroughly enjoyed the concert.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



why I will never go to a(nother) health resort

THE HIPPOCRATES HEALTH Institute was a huge, old, spooky-looking five story mansion in downtown Boston when I stopped off early one morning en route to a planned peaceful trawl through New England. I had agreed to deliver luggage for a friend from Philadelphia who'd recently become Hippocrates' new manager. I'd never been to a health resort, nor did I care to be now for more than the few minutes required.

I carried several suitcases and a steamer trunk into a large empty lobby with giant green sprouts painted on the walls and replicas of grass eerily creeping up from the baseboard. Not a soul in sight, I stacked the luggage in a corner and made to leave when I heard a sound from the far side of double sliding doors. I stepped over and peered through the narrow vertical slit between them. This is what I saw:

A long table, around which maybe twenty-five people were seated. In front of each rested a glass of green liquid and slice of watermelon. At the head of the table sat my friend Margaret. None of this was in any way odd. What was odd was that every one of these people – male, female, young, old, Black, white, brown – every single one was...glowing. Margaret was glowing. Those immediately next to her were glowing. The people next to them were glowing. And so on.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

Suddenly the doors flew open and twenty-five sets of eyes focused upon me. I was mortified: me, a non-glower. To make matters worse, Margaret stood up, tapped her glass several times with a spoon and introduced me in schoolmarmish manner.

‘Say hello to Barry Rosenberg, everybody!’

‘Hello, Barry Rosenberg!!!’

She dragged me in, sat me down and plunked before me a cut of watermelon and glass of the green stuff, which she identified as juiced melon rind. I ate and drank, working to wipe away thoughts of a huge stack of pancakes doused with maple syrup, four or five slices of jammed cinnamon toast, coffee.

After breakfast – that’s what they called it – Margaret showed me around the house and introduced me to a number of people. Their breaths smelled like freshly mowed lawn. Mine smelled like old gorilla.

Margaret said: Why not stay. I replied: Thank you, no. Margaret said: I can let you have a week’s free residence in return for delivering my luggage. I replied: Um. She moved in close. ‘You need to be here,’ she said softly. ‘Really, you’re all stressed out and look awful.’ Which I knew. Which is why I was about to cruise the old VW bus through New England hoping to chill out. I considered the offer. I wanted my breath to smell like freshly mowed lawn. I wanted to glow.

I stayed.

Workshops were conducted throughout the day. I learned that everything I ate was bad for me, that my combinations of foods were wrong, that I ate too fast, chewed too little, brushed my hair with the wrong kind of bristles, even, god knows, had the wrong sort of posture on the wrong type of toilet. It was a testimony to man’s indomitable will to survive that I had remained alive this long.

Scores of trays of spiky green things were situated all around the place. This, I learned, was wheatgrass, the resort’s prime elixir, claiming the most nutrients of any foodstuff on earth. What one did was juice the grass.

‘You don’t just drink it,’ Margaret declared enthusiastically. ‘It’s good everywhere!’ I had no idea what she was on about.

She made me a cocktail. I observed closely as she harvested the grass from a large tray, cutting it close to the dirt as possible, then stuffed it into a special juicer, a standard hand grinder which had been hooked up to a small motor. As I held the glass before me, the wheatgrass juice possessed roughly the color and consistency of Siberian goose plop.

I brought the glass to my lips. The smell was abominable; how could this gunk produce those freshly mowed lawns everybody was exhaling?

I took a tiny sip. My face corkscrewed. Little by little, I forced it all down. Without question, it was the most vile substance that had ever passed my palate.

Lunch was oranges, as many as you wanted. I gobbled down a dozen. Hunger unabated, I considered eating the rinds.

Dinner? Weeds. Swear to Moses. The kind one normally uprooted, dumped into a pile and set fire to. Here they ate them.

Hungry as a starving moose, I heaped my plate with a smorgasbord of bunny grub. In a flash it was gone. I refilled the plate, noting I was by far the fastest eater at the table.

Across from me a young Jesus clone sat staring unblinkingly at no particular thing or place. He had green lines emerging from the corners of his eyes, from his nostrils, from his ears. I hated to think where else might be green. I counted as he chewed. Thirty...forty...fifty... Each mouthful.

I began to chew slowly, but by the fifteenth chomp my gob no longer was receptacle for solids. Try as I might I could never get past twenty before the alleged food liquefied and dribbled down my throat. Young Jesus, his green-lined mind contemplating galaxies the good ship Enterprise would never reach, munched away steadily, fifty to sixty per.

Following morning I woke feeling unusually relaxed. I grabbed towel and toothbrush, opened the door – and stopped dead in my tracks. In the hall outside my room stood a woman. The woman standing outside my room held in her hand one very large, very round and very naked breast. She was studying it as one might examine a world globe unable to find Uganda. Except she was poking and prodding her round mound as if a not-quite-ripe-enough honeydew.

I cleared my throat. She glanced up and smiled elegantly.

‘Look! Look!’ she called, aiming it towards me. I backed off a step, as though it might spew wheatgrass juice. ‘It’s – it’s – gone!’ she exclaimed.

‘Gone.’

‘It was there last night when I went to bed, and now – now it’s gone!’

‘Now, gone.’

‘The tumor. It’s...disappeared!!’

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

I was about to inquire whether she had the right one. Actually, she HAD the right one, maybe she should've had the left one. But before I could ask she dashed off, squealing with delight, the extended pink-eyed beacon guiding her way.

Wheatgrass juice? For real?

The same day I began my first-ever fast. I would eat only a breakfast of watermelon and thereafter consume nothing but pure juice or broth or distilled water. Day one was agony, but each day that followed got easier.

'I know you don't like the taste of wheatgrass juice,' Margaret said to me on day four (after exclaiming how much better I looked and, indeed, I felt). 'But you can always implant it, you know.'

'Implant. In the garden?'

'In the bathroom.'

'Ah.'

Under Margaret's watchful eye, I juiced a tumbler of wheatgrass strands. Then I trudged upstairs, entered a long, narrow bathroom, locked the door and, as instructed, poured most of the tumbler into a transparent enema bag hanging from a nail a meter off the floor. Also as advised, the rest I tipped into an eyeglass, placed the glass snugly to my right eye, tilted back my head – and let out a howl. The damn stuff burned like hell! Looking in the mirror, I was confronted by a contorted face, one eye standard, the other splotched with dark green goo as though bombarded by a sharpshooting waterfowl. I should have, at this point, realized the consequences of my next act. Right. And I should've bought a million shares of Microsoft when it first hit the Dow Jones.

I didn't bother to remove my jeans, merely dropped them to my ankles. Following directions, I got down on the floor, forehead touching carpet, knees drawn to chest, afterdeck elevated. Took hold the enema bag's skinny hose, forced the lubricated tip into position, reached up and released the stopper. Looking at it upside down, I watched the green slop begin ever so slowly to drain out of the bag. For a proper implant, I had been informed, one was to leave the wheatgrass juice in the colon for twenty minutes. I reckoned, first time, fifteen would do. Or ten. Maybe even five.

The juice felt cold as it entered my person. More and more of it snaked inside until finally the bag on the wall hung slack.

And then it happened. And then I knew.

Barry Rosenberg

I've heard it said that in moments of utmost crisis the mind adopts a whole new attitude. Time is distorted. Thoughts become crystal clear. From my own personal experience in that bathroom at the Hippocrates Health Institute, I can vouch this is precisely the case.

My brain now issued forth data as though in the form of amplified directive from ship's captain to crew. NOW HEAR THIS STUPID YOU HAVE EXACTLY THREE SECONDS GET THAT THREE SECONDS TO EVACUATE THE AREA BEFORE DETONATION!!!

My immediate actions were outlined before me. I had to pull out the hose, stand and, because the jeans were binding my ankles, hop to the toilet situated across the long narrow bathroom. All in three seconds. I reached back, yanked out the hose with its lubricated tip, stood up.

ONE!

Hopped three steps towards the toilet.

TWO!!

And because the commode was facing me directly, on my next and positively last hop I had to pirouette a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn in mid-air. I now leapt bogwards and using my arms as rudders spun a perfect semi-circle, landing square on top the toilet just as a volcano of green slime erupted from my fundament with devastating force.

There was just one tiny problem.

The toilet lid was down.

THREEEEEEE!!!!!!

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



bette

I'D HEARD SHE WAS batshit crazy. That she could be sweet as pecan pie one moment and Wanda the wicked witch the next. Tirades and a mouth like a Mexico City sewer. I also heard she was the most talented female vocalist to come down the pike since Lady Day.

I was doing a magazine piece on her producer, fella named Joel, whom I had known at university. He'd originally produced jazz for some years, then had had surprising success with an unknown singer named Roberta Flack. Shortly after, having been tipped off about yet another undiscovered vocalist, he talked his bosses at Atlantic Records into letting him do an album with her.

A year prior, Joel found a deserted old studio in an unfashionable Manhattan neighborhood. The ancient studio, he claimed, produced far better sound than Atlantic's fancy new facilities. Plus, he worked strictly at night when 'Atlantic's pencil heads are out partying or snuggled up in bed with their teenage mistresses and I can record without interference.'

After hearing so much about her, finally meeting the woman was a mite disappointing. Late twenties, tiny, barely five-foot-one, reddish hair, eyes that twinkled when she smiled. And could she ever jabber. She was funny and swore like a sailor, craving attention, needing to impress the males around her, who were not at all impressed. Then the girl shut off the banter and began to sing.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

Oh.

My.

God.

When she was belting out a ballad like 'Friends', her voice and passion crept through the layers of your skin and shot up the spine, exploding in your brain. And when she was doing a jazzy number like 'Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy', the whole world wanted to stop what they were doing and get up and dance.

She'd finish a take and we'd stand there stark still listening to the playback, shaking our heads in wonder as her vocal power resounded through the studio.

Joel had her repeat takes several times. A lot of work, but she attacked each new go with total zest and energy.

Once during a break, she came up to me – quite likely because I was the only one who paid attention to her when she wasn't singing – and began touching me, putting her hands on my chest and shoulders, stroking my arms. It was sexual energy, but had nothing to do with sex; more the avalanche of performance emotion spilling over.

They worked for hours before Joel called it quits around 2am. We piled into taxis and headed for the hotel suite where we all wrote down our orders for coffee and Danish, and they were phoned in to a nearby all-night deli.

As we waited, the mood slowly relaxed - ours, that is. For sure not hers. She became a one-person drama ensemble, speed-talking, laughing, crying. I looked over at Joel. He patted the air with his hand at waist level as if to say, Let her get it out of her system.

The doorbell rang and a young Puerto Rican guy came in carrying an enormous carton of food and drink. Each wrapped package bore a name. The kid called them out in a thick accent, and in turn we claimed our feast. Suddenly there was an ear-splitting scream.

'There's fucking sugar in this!' our diva cried. 'Don't they know I can't have sugar? And cream! Not milk like I ordered, fucking cream!' Whereupon she threw the steaming hot contents of her container in the young guy's face.

He let out a howl. Clapping hands to his face, he fell back against the door. She continued to berate him, and for a second it looked like she would begin pummeling the kid.

People reacted swiftly. Someone got a wet towel and gently applied it to the young man's face. A few of us guided him to a chair, sat him down. Everyone was obviously embarrassed and sympathetic.

Well, not everyone.

Still screaming about his fucking stupidity – and no one was about to risk stating the obvious by telling her the kid was delivery, not the barista – she stormed into the bathroom and slammed the door.

After some minutes, the scrum around the kid eased back, the towel was removed. There appeared to be no real damage. He blinked a number of times, nodded his head. Joel knelt down before him, talking softly. He took out his wallet, removed several notes and stuffed them in the guy's hand, which got him to smile. He rose up and began collecting used cups and plastic plates, but Joel said that's okay, don't worry, and kindly escorted him to the door and out.

It was several minutes before the bathroom door opened and she reappeared. All smiles and twinkle-eyes. Reapplied makeup. Not a word about what had just taken place.

The party carried on till just before dawn.



the loners and losers christmas dinner

YOU COULD SAY I was a street person back then.

These were the hippie days, late '60s, San Francisco. Fun times? Love and peace? Sex, drugs and whatever?

Yeah, right. I was already going bald, veteran of a failed marriage, military service, corporate indentured servitude. Suddenly here I was, long beard (it was growing back), dead broke, living in a VW bus, scrounging meals from supermarket dumpsters. Bundle of laughs, you bet.

Christmas was coming. Oh joy. The put-on pomp and fake cheer, incessant bad-art music everywhere, unbridled consumerism, family, family, family. Christmas: number one suicide day of the year, especially for solos. I decided to do something about it.

I got some mates together. Planned and plotted. We would call it The Loners and Losers Christmas Dinner.

Rented a hall for peanuts, got the hippie radio station to promote us, drummed up donations of food and winter clothing. Begged a few local bands to play for free. Jefferson Airplane. The Mommas and the Poppas. Price of admission: a dollar or a joint. A few hundred people turned up. Very few paid cash.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

I made several gallons of eggnog. My first time; what I didn't know, you're supposed to let it settle for a week. Like getting kicked in the head by a camel.

It's all going well. Everybody happy. Good food, live music. Lovely Bay Area babes dolled up in scanty red and white, Santa hats, fake antlers.

Not all the L&Ls in attendance were hippies. Any number of straights. 'Okay if I come in?' Sheepishly, like one of us crashing the annual mayor's ball.

Then I notice a crowd by the door. Some celeb coming in? I hurry over, make my way through the gawkers. A long black limo has pulled up at the curb. Livered chauffeur opens the back door. Slowly, very slowly...

She emerges. Thin as a rake, complexion of dirty snow. Had to be ninety. Looked older. Furs and pearls. Elegant walking stick.

Not a word, eyeballs no one as the sea of jaw-slung L&Ls parts and she slow-steps in. Up to the food line, silk-gloved hands shaking, delicately takes a tray. Forget the free plastic cutlery, she opens her exquisitely-tooled leather bag, brings out silver. Good silver.

Moving at crawl pace, surveying every heaped container, she takes a little of this, a bit of that. Cup of chamomile tea. Oat bran biscuit.

Toddles over to an empty table. Sits perfectly erect, daintily dabbing emaciated lips with a monogrammed silk handkerchief following each tiny mouthful. Not a glance at anyone.

Finished, she rises slowly, places tray on the dirty dishes trolley, back out, into the limo, away.

I can only wonder who she might be, what kind of life she's led. She might be a loner, yeah, but I had serious doubts as to the loser bit.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



the baker

(a short story)

SHE PEDALED INTO TOWN on a dusty old mountain bike.

Through the window, I watched as she got off the bike, piled higher with packs and tied-down parcels than I'd ever seen, and leaned it carefully against the sign pole across the street. Somehow, I knew she'd be coming into the shop.

'Better not leave it there,' I said as she came through the door. 'Kids in this town, they'd nick the gold out of your molars, give 'em half the chance.'

She smiled. 'It's fine, thanks,' she said in so soft a voice. 'It's protected.'

I checked back outside, thinking maybe she'd been riding with a friend I hadn't seen. But no, the bike stood by itself under the sixty minute parking sign. This was before I knew her, of course. I mean, what else was I to think?

I eyed her as she walked around the shop, taking in the available goods. Little thing, she was. On the stumpy side. Hair dark and short, crystals of sweat dotted her forehead. She wore a T-shirt and those black lycra shorts your touring cyclists wear. Not pretty, but...

I glanced over at Jenny, my shop assistant. Now there, with all that powder and lip paint and tight slacks, there was a piece of pastry!

This one was nothing like that. But something. It was the smile, I reckon. That and the eyes, dark and sparkly. I admit I took to her right off.

‘Would you have a job?’ she then asked. ‘I’m a good baker.’

Now, here’s a funny thing: just that morning I’d decided to sack one of the assistants. Hadn’t told a soul. But it was almost like she’d known, the way she asked.

Normally, I don’t do this. Normally, I take my time, weigh things. But before I could even think, I heard myself say yes. Jenny, eyeing her up and down, did a double-take over at me.

Jude, she said her name was, did not begin baking straight away. I figured to see how sincere a young person she was. (So few are nowadays.) I mean, what could she be – twenty? Twenty-one? Comes into town on a dusty old bicycle, walks right into the shop and tells you she’ll hang around six months or a year and work hard. Uh-huh. I figured she’d maybe last the week, so loaded her down with all sorts of menial chores. But whatever I asked she did, and with a calm, quiet zeal, an eye toward perfection. And never a word of complaint: never.

The others took to her straight away. Kevin, the school leaver I had driving the van, oh my, did he fall on his face over her. Jude was very cordial with him, very kind, like a big sister. And that seemed to satisfy the young buck. Matter of fact, the whole time she was here, she didn’t have so much as a single fling. And this town, gossip capital of the galaxy, believe you me I’d’ve heard.

I let her room in the shed behind the bakery. At first, I charged her a day’s wage, which would’ve made anyone else balk. Not Jude. She just smiled.

She immediately tidied the place up, made it livable. Livable? Listen, I want to tell you. I could never stand going into that shed, it was so dark and dingy. But once she shifted in, what she did to the space, the feel she gave it, every time I’d set foot in there I felt like a babe being stroked by its mom, swear.

Anyway, when she began baking, I dropped the rental. She didn’t say a word. I don’t know was she appreciative or not. (I never did. She was the same no matter what you said or did, or didn’t say or do. I spent a lot of time around her sighing and shrugging, let me tell you.)

When she watched me bake – and she was always watching, except when she had work that kept her away from the ovens – she never said a word. I could feel her eyes on me, could sense that pleasant smile, but I never knew what was going on behind those sparkle-eyes.

I'd explain something, then ask, 'Did you get that, Jude?' The smile might grow a fraction, perhaps a vaguely perceptible nod, but always I had the feeling she was somewhere else, seeing something other eyes didn't.

One morning I asked would she care to have a go on some bread. It was as though she'd been expecting it. She moved to the bench and began sprinkling flour and kneading the dough like she'd been born into it. I was watching her hands – they were good hands, the fingers long, the wrists powerful, which surprised me plenty – when, for a reason I can't give you, I glanced up to her face. If there's a word to describe what I saw there, what I felt from her, I suppose euphoria is as close as I can come.

Jude baked six loaves that morning. Were they good? Look, I've been baking thirty years. I have a reputation as a master baker that goes beyond the town. I know my craft, all right. Jude's bread. It was good bread, yes; perhaps very good bread. But there was something else. I cannot begin to tell you what it was, none of us can – still. But something, uh, happened to you when you ate it.

Now look here: I don't mean to tell you that with the very first bite you had a religious experience. You had, as a matter of fact, a somewhat difficult time deciding whether you actually liked it or not, at first. This I find very odd indeed. Normally you know, right off: you like it, you don't like it. Not Jude's bread.

What did happen, you felt compelled to eat more, just to let yourself know. And more. And more. Before you knew it, you'd gone through half a loaf. And still you weren't sure. You just had to have another slice. Or, as almost everybody did after a while, another chunk ripped out by hand.

That was one thing. The other was what happened after you ate the bread. In fact, it was what happened after that made me start going into her room more and more – when she wasn't there.

Right here, I wish to say this: I am not some old fart lost half a century back. I read the papers, I watch TV, I surf the web. I have a smartphone chocka with apps. (Downloaded by my grandson; be darned if I know how to use more than a few of them.) I bloody well know what's going on in the world. I know, even if I've never tried any, all about the drugs your kids do nowadays. When it became sort of evident what was happening as a result of Jude's bread, I watched that girl like a hawk. And started going into her room.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

Jude's room. I soon realized why all those packs and parcels on her bike. She carried her living space with her. First time I ventured in there on my own, I felt like I'd stepped through some time-space warp and come out somewhere near Kublai Khan. All kinds of Indian and Tibetan and Oriental tapestries on the walls, on the windows, hanging from the ceiling. Not gaudy. Not showy. Just right. And so soft and comforting. On the walls too were posters and prints that also came from those places, and others. One was a picture of a man, blue from head to feet, playing a wooden flute. Another of a woman with six arms. (What a baker she'd make, eh!) The fat bald dude who's always grinning. And the Dalai Lama, of course.

First I reckoned she was into some weird cult thing. That had me worried. One shows up, they all begin coming round. But no, there was old JC, and then there was this Jewish star carved out of teakwood...I mean, she truly played the field.

The place smelled so nice, too. Half a minute that first time in there, I was another person; for sure a far calmer one. Jude had made that ratty old shed a very lovely living space.

One time I went in there, I got the shock of my life. I knocked on the door like I always did. 'You there, Jude?' I called out quietly. Nothing. So I opened the door (which she never locked) and took a step in. And stopped dead in my tracks. She was sitting on the floor, her back ramrod straight and legs twisted up funny in front of her. There was a candle lit next to her on the floor and one of those incense sticks made the place smell so good. All of which was, em, normal. What wasn't normal were her eyes. They were closed; well, almost. Open just a bit, they were. And nothing showed but the whites. And they didn't flicker, not even when I made what I guess was somewhere between a snort and a gasp. Like, the motor's running, but nobody's behind the wheel.

I stayed out of there for a time, but still I had to know, and began going in again when I was sure she was off walking along the river or cycling over the hill to the beach, as she often did. And I snooped everywhere. Nothing, nil, nope. No powders, no potions, no pills.

But I had to be certain. And did what I now consider a very, oh, not a very nice thing. See, I sent a loaf of her bread up to the city, to a lab there to be analyzed. And do you know what they found? Flour. Yeast. Salt. Water. Sometimes molasses. (Jude never used sugar.) I hate to tell you what that bit of folly set me back.

So what, exactly, was happening to people who ate this strange young lady's bread? Well, the first sign came some minutes after you'd begun eating. You started to feel, ah, good. Not great, not kick-your-heels and whoop-de-do. Good.

Then you began to feel like giggling. That's the most honest way of putting it. You just wanted to giggle. (And mostly you did.) Why? Because it seemed as though somebody, somehow, had come along and very gently lifted from atop your head a blanket of gloom you didn't even know was sitting there. It was very, very subtle, mind, and none of us associated it with the bread during those first few weeks of Jude's baking. And yet (we all agreed later), we did know. Inside, each and every one of us, we knew.

After a while, people began coming into the shop and right there, or on their way out, pulling off great gobs and shoving them into their mouths. Not in all my years had I ever seen that. Cake, yeah, sure. Bread? Never.

And they could tell the difference, whether it was her bread or not. They didn't know it was her bread, of course; they didn't know anything about her, or that someone other than myself or my apprentices were doing the baking. Yet they knew it was Jude's bread and when it wasn't.

'Hey Miss, this doesn't taste the same as the bread I got here day before yesterday. You don't have anymore of that stuff, eh?' Poor Jenny the shop assistant, she didn't know what the heck to do.

I did a load of wrestling with my ego those first weeks. For there was never a shade of doubt my bread was better. It was made better, it had better body, a more distinct, yet delicate, flavor. But it sure as hell didn't make you want to giggle!

I'll tell you what made me stuff my ego in a drawer. I have a pretty good notion of this business. I can – or could before, and again now – tell you practically to the loaf how much bread we're going to sell on any given day. This began to change, radically.

'Jude, what in the world are you doing?' I'd ask. Well, I wouldn't ask, exactly. More I'd bellow at her. Her reply? Yep: that damn smile.

Look, it wasn't just the giggling, all right? People began feeling better. Becoming healthier. Getting along with one another. Good Holy Jesus, the crime rate in this burg fell practically to nothing!

Yeah, yeah, I know precisely what you're thinking. How can that blathering idiot stand there and tell me all this came from bread

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

made by a five-foot-nothing girl barely out of her teens? And you're absolutely right-on to think it preposterous. Except for one thing. I'm right.

When she told me she was leaving, I thought I'd cry. Oh, it wasn't the money. It wasn't we were now virtually putting out of business those upstart Cambodians who'd opened up three doors down and undercharged me sometimes by twenty-five percent. (Though I must admit to an extremely satisfying glee over that one!) Nor was it the remarkable, eh, coincidence that saw the town become a healthier, safer, more pleasant place to live, all on account of her bread. There was just something very special about this young woman.

Did I plead with her? Hell, yes! Offered her more money, even a share in the bakery, if you can believe that. I knew before I did, though, it would all be for naught.

Where will you go? I asked her. Another town? Another bakery?

'No,' she replied. 'I do believe I've done all the baking I care to do this lifetime.'

She pedaled out of town on a dusty mountain bike.

It didn't take long for business to return to normal. Practically as soon as she left, they stopped even asking. It was as though, without knowing, they knew. People began getting sick again, they walk right by you on the street without so much as a glance, the hoods and thugs are back doing the dirty.

The local bread? It's bread. You toast it, put butter on, or margarine or peanut butter or jam. Stuff ham between two slices, or chicken, or tuna, or cheese or eggs. Gets a little hard, you toss it out for the blackbirds and sparrows.

It does not make you giggle anymore.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



Keep on truckin’ (splish-splash)

I’D BEEN GROWING SOFT, and it disturbed me greatly. For some years I had watched myself, time after time, take the easy way out, and I hated it.

Mostly, this had to do with Third World travel, a pastime – no, an occupation; my prime thrust in life – I had engaged in now for over a decade. Where once I journeyed exclusively native, more and more I was going semi-tourist: air-con rooms with bath instead of four walls and fan, flights between continental destinations rather than risk the rigors of local bus or train. I told myself: you’re losing it, fella! Your comfort zone is gonna suffocate you! Bust out!! And my response? I’d wimp. Every time.

What got me to finally step out of my increasingly narrow, self-imposed road-prison? Fierce determination? Resolve? True grit?

I wish.

What happened, I’d booked a flight from Bangkok, my central hang-out spot in Asia back then, to Siem Reap in Cambodia. I was sitting there in the tiny Khao San Road agency with my Visa card in hand (Visa card! My god, how far I’d fallen!) when a young female came in and requested a bus ticket to the same place I was intending to fly.

‘Two hundred and eighty baht,’ said the Thai agent.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

I sat up straight. Two eighty? Less than eight US dollars? My flight was costing twenty times that!

And without further thought, I stuffed the Visa back in my wallet, canceled the booked flight and purchased a bus pass. Little did I realize, of course, I was setting myself up for the most terrifying travel ordeal since those ancient times when I first set foot and backpack on the road.

THE JOURNEY, THEY SAID, would take nine or ten hours. During which I would get to see the beautiful countryside of these two picturesque lands, to say nothing of avoiding sterile, regimented airports and that insidious blackmail known as departure tax. The only catch, a small one, would be the need to change buses at the border.

Twenty of us Western backpackers (including a few Japanese-Westerners) boarded the coach shortly after 8am. I was, I noted, the oldest by around twenty years.

It took a good hour to pass through the ugly urban sprawl of Bangkok. But soon as we did, we hit...the ugly rural sprawl of eastern Thailand. And why it was the driver stopped halfway along to the border, got out without a word, and left us roasting in the bus for forty-five minutes remains a mystery.

The Bangkok bus company had promised the two hundred and eighty baht fee would not only cover the Cambodian bus, but as well their rep at the border taking care of the tedious visa application details. Which she did. And the fact that we each paid one thousand, two hundred baht, when the visa as it appeared in our passports clearly stated US\$20 (around seven fifty baht), was, I suppose, just one of those quirks of traveling. Still, I was saving a packet over flying.

Border crossings. I've often wondered: do alien species, spying on us with perplexed curiosity from distant worlds, actually see dotted and dashed lines criss-crossing our wee blue globe? And is this separation of land masses into little oddly-shaped box-states peculiar solely to our terran form of insanity?

In a straggly line, we were led, bearing packs of varying size, shape and color, first through Thai immigration, where men in ill-fitting uniforms armed with rubber stamps and thoroughly bored expressions took an age to pass us through. Then we were marched across an open space that at once became five degrees hotter, ten degrees filthier and peopled with hawkers offering limp, fly-infested alleged foodstuffs and old-for-their-age child beggars. More slow-

motion passport stamping by tired, unhappy men seated behind tiny windows, and we officially entered the Kingdom of Cambodia. Where we were greeted by Central Casting character #4063.

HE IS IN EVERY country in Asia. He is early twenties, handsome behind wraparound sunglasses, wears a perpetual smile and speaks excellent English. He is street savvy to the nth. Western women tend to swoon over him, while the Western male slides between jealousy and awe.

His name is Asia Slick and he exudes sincerity – even when you know he’s lying through those gleaming teeth.

Cambodia, Slick informed us, no longer accepted Thai baht (lie), and the US dollar had recently tumbled to three thousand six hundred riel (it was actually just over four thousand). We were therefore strongly advised to change money right there at the border, actually a hundred meters distant, at a place which did not take commission (as they would in greedy Siem Reap), and just happened to be owned by his brother-cousin. Also, the bus that was to pick us up? Well, normally there would be a bus, sure, but due to severe road flooding buses could not get through, so instead there would be a spanking new, very comfortable pickup truck to carry us across the high waters safely as Noah’s ark.

It was at this moment, as if on cue, that a sweaty, bedraggled French backpacking couple appeared. They were irate.

‘Don’t trust him!’ cried the male, pointing at the handsome Khmer. ‘He is mafia! They are all mafia! Especially the police! They stopped us half an hour out, demanding money! They will do the same to you!’ With each charge, his female partner provided punctuation by poking a finger in Asia Slick’s face.

‘Merde!!’ she shrieked. ‘Merde!!’

The twenty of us glanced sheepishly at one another, then at Asia Slick. Cool as ever, wholly unflappable: ‘Please, I am man of my word. And of course I am not mafia!’ Very wide smile. ‘You will get though to Siem Reap, no more money paid. I am not lie to you.’

For some reason, he looked straight at me. ‘And you, Papa, you will sit up in the front!’

The pickup when it arrived was ancient, caked with mud, and bore hardly a square inch of fender that wasn’t crushed or wrinkled. The dirty open bed was loaded with our packs, whereupon in climbed the majority of our group’s young travelers plus two teenage locals. I went to change money – despite the obvious shafting, I wanted some

Khmer currency – then stepped over to the truck. The passenger space indeed was mine. Just behind, squashed cheek to cheek in the narrow rear seat, were four lovely young women packers from (l. to r.) Poland, UK, Norway and Japan.

‘Everything okay, Papa?’ inquired a grinning AS.

‘Okay? Hey, I’m in heaven!’ I cried.

Remember those words.

THE DRIVER GOT IN. He was small, wiry, heavily tattooed, a wisp of a goatee. He was not an Asia Slick. What he was, was hung over, grumpy and obviously not relishing what he soon would be doing. As a matter of fact, he looked as though a misplaced word, an innocent sidelong glance, might well result in a lightning-quick throat slashing.

From the onset, the unpaved road was a moonscape. That the truck had right-side drive in a country with right-side drive roads presented little hassle, as the driver occupied whichever part of the road appeared to offer the least offensive refrigerator-size potholes. Within minutes, body parts I had not been in touch with in ages revealed themselves by screaming out in punishment. Behind me, the women used one another as crash-dummies. I hated to think of the poor souls in the pickup’s bed.

And then it got bad.

The first inland sea appeared. It extended for hundreds of meters of road. It looked deep.

The driver lowered the window and yelled out. At once the two teenage locals jumped down off the bed and began wading through the water, ankle-deep, shin-deep, knee-deep, searching for a navigable pathway. But the driver didn’t trust them; he, too, got out and semi-immersed. Then back in the truck and away we went, streaming through water that rose up to, and now and then above, the headlights.

This scenario was repeated dozens of times, the journey painstakingly slow, slow-stakingly painful. And then it grew dark. Black-dark. No road lighting whatever, save for our own headlamps. Soon it began to rain. Hard. I dared not look through the cab’s rear window to the assemblage huddled back there.

First time the driver and his young scouts were swept off their feet, and then off the road completely, by the swiftly moving flood waters, I was horrified. But they recovered quickly, reappeared in the vehicle’s lights, and somehow the driver navigated us through. This scene was repeated several times, and we grew to accept it. What was

somewhat more harrowing was the first time, and third and fifth and tenth times, the pickup itself was swept off its tire-bottoms and sideways sailing we did go. I don't recall ever before using the word *lurch*. But that's what I experienced every time the truck was swept off its moorings. Lurching. As in my stomach. What made these escapades especially terrifying were the several vehicles we passed, barely visible in the night, which lay on their sides just off the road like beached whale carcasses.

AND THEN IT GOT really scary. The motor conked out, quickly followed by the extinguishing of all the lights. Suddenly, it was totally dark, eerily silent.

Now, I am not one of those males who have knowledge or need to lend a hand when a vehicle is in disrepair. And those few of our team who felt so endowed and climbed down from the rear deck to help were quickly shooed away by the driver. Face-saving time.

It took over an hour. From my front row observation point I marveled as the driver used such hi-tech tools as a steak knife, packing tape and plastic bags, working off the light of flaming cigarette lighters held by his assistants, in several not quite successful attempts to get the truck mobile. At some point he even removed the hood, stashing it in the back, to provide room for his mounting concoction. While all this was happening, it suddenly got really, really scary.

Out the corner of my eye, I noted movement at the side of the vehicle. Dark figures silently, stealthily, appeared alongside. Not speaking. Not moving. Watching. Waiting. There were, I reckoned, a dozen men, more. Wherever had they come from, here in the middle of nowhere? From what glimpses I got in the dim available light, they looked hard, these men, and tough. I thought: among us, we were carrying more money than these men most likely earned in their lifetimes. I thought: who knows, exactly, where we are? I thought: we could so easily disappear, not a trace. Later I learned that nineteen others owned notions perfectly matching my own.

The truck's lights finally went on and stayed on. The vehicle still refused to start by key, but our visitors obliged by getting behind and pushing until the motor kicked over. And off we went, a snail's pace in the perfect snail's environment: sometimes the wheels staying on the ground, sometimes being swept drunkenly off course, twisting the truck around and listing it heavily before regaining equilibrium.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

Twice we had to be tractor-towed across especially deep lagoons, the ancient farm vehicles stationed at the side of the road, our driver signaling with horn toots and slipping some notes to the suddenly appearing drivers.

Muddy water sloshed in from under the doors as we chugged through the pond-size puddles, filling the foot wells. Behind me, the four young women were chalk white, and the young Japanese was either battling severe bouts of hyperventilation or suffering asthma attacks, so gaspingly loud was her breathing. And then it got really, really...

THE TRUCK STOPPED. We were ordered out. The water here was so deep, even tractors couldn't do the deed. Instead, the truck had to be winch-towed without us in it. Some of us reached in for our packs. No, leave them in the truck, we were sternly ordered. Which I suppose was the moment of peak paranoia.

For a backpacker to be separated from his/her backpack is akin to a heart patient removed from a pacemaker. For there is something about the presence of a roadie's personal rucksack, filled as it well may be with old books and dirty laundry, that provides a sense of security, of well-being. It's bad enough trusting airport baggage handlers. This?

A boat appeared, long and low and mud-encrusted. With tiny motor, kerosene lantern and a man who announced he required three hundred baht to carry each of us over this particular sea. Trapped, little recourse, we began counting out our money. Nine of us went on the first fifty meter sail, nine more on the second. Two young French guys, however, followed the truck on foot. I watched as they sloshed through water up to their chests, holding their packs above their heads, obviously having even less faith in their packs reappearing than the rest of us.

We made it to the other side, where sloppy mud to the shoe tops replaced the temporary lake. Then back in the truck and off we went.

Now I shall tell you the really, really, REALLY – aw, you get the picture. Here's what happened:

I must have fallen asleep because suddenly, groggily, I was sitting up bolt straight. I let out a yelp, reached across and swatted a shoulder. The driver, his dream rudely shattered, muttered loudly, shook his head a few times, stopped. Got out of the truck, splashed water on his face. Back inside, he stuck in a tape. Khmer hip-hop. Top volume. Nerve-shatteringly awful.

'No prob-rum!' he grinned for the very first time.

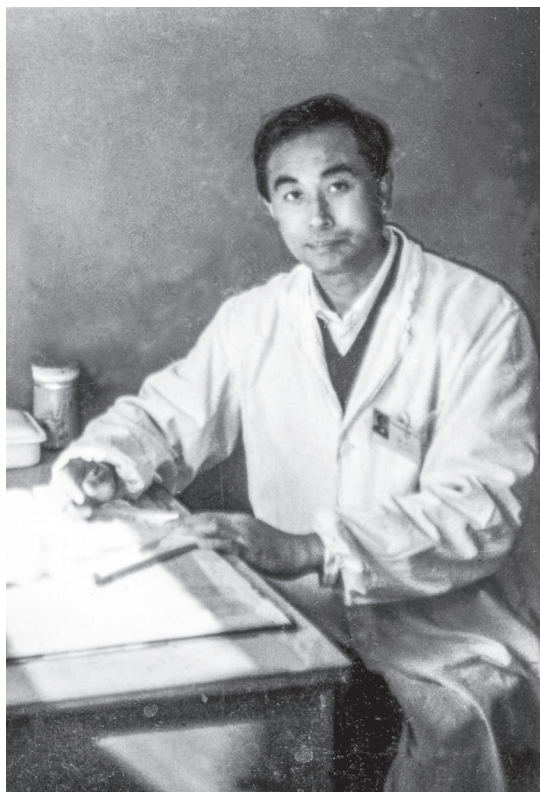
It was past 1.30am when the road finally cleared of water, and half an hour later that light appeared faintly in the distance.

"Siem Reap!" announced the driver. The promised city.

After eighteen hours on the road we were deposited at a guest house where the driver would receive a well-deserved commission. The twenty of us touched ground, joyfully stretching and creaking and groaning. Nineteen immediately made for the illuminated outdoor dining area demanding cold beers. The other was led to a room, an air-con room with bath, you'd best believe, where, covered in mud and grime, not a bone, muscle or joint untouched by fatigue and ache, he set down his pack and crawled into bed, asleep in seconds.

Somewhere on the trail just traveled, a comfort zone lay quietly submerged under brown rushing water.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



doctor hu

I TOSSED OFF THE covers, stretched a leg out until it reached the floor, levered myself upright...and fell flat on my chin.

I was in pain. I grabbed the right knee, source of my sudden malady, and was shocked to note it was twice normal size. For sure it wasn't like that when I went to bed, and I had no recollection of an event which might have created the condition.

The toilet was way down the hall, and it took me forever to get there, nor any less time limping back to my rented room.

I was in Suzhou, China back when the People's Republic had only just opened to the world at large. Suzhou then was a lovely, picturesque small city, a mere village by China standards with its population of just over half million. (Today it's a metropolis of mega millions, and I can now only wonder how, with their longtime one-child policy, China has been able to pull this off.)

As I sat on the edge of my lumpy single bed in the tiny, stuffy room, I contemplated my lot. The news was not at all good. Preferably, I would book a quick flight back home, receive adequate medical attention, relax and take it easy until problem solved. But such was not possible back in the day, certainly not in China. It occurred I was in a bit of a fix.

Fortunately, I had a visitor that morning. A young woman who, like so many back then, was looking to get out of China, and I had promised to investigate a possible university position upon my return. (She was a talented music teacher.)

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

When Wei Lu appeared, all four foot eleven of her, she took one glance at my knee, nodded, and helped me out to where my bicycle was parked. She got upon her own bike and led me slowly through the city to Number One hospital, where, she told me, she knew just the right person to help me.

I admit to being put off by the external appearance of the medical building. The grounds were filthy, littered with bloody bandages and trash. Then we went inside. Inside was worse.

At this time in history, very few visitors from the outside world, a Westerner was a sight to attract what were known as 'staring squads', people who stood stock still and fixed their eyes upon you as though you had just alighted from an other-worldly spacecraft. A white man with long beard being supported by a local female a foot smaller was a sight to tell the grandchildren.

Slowly, Wei Lu close at my side and holding tightly onto me, we made our way up a set of squalid steps. Followed by another staircase. Then a third. On the way, I tried to visualize the esteemed physician we were about to see in his well-appointed office. One more stairway, where I paused to catch my breath, and she led me to a huge open area. There must have been forty or fifty, not beds, exactly. More, massage tables. Every single one was occupied. On the one closest to our entrance lay a woman on her back. The woman's face was hard to see clearly because there were perhaps two dozen needles poking out.

We had come to the acupuncture clinic.

In the West at this time, acupuncture was little more than a mystical Eastern practice, talked about but rarely experienced by those familiar with nothing beyond conventional allopathic medicine techniques of chemicals and scalpels. I could not take my eyes off the woman with the two dozen needles pointed ceiling-ward. I choked back a desire to throw up, then turned to leave the large room.

'No-no,' Wei Lu cried, grabbing my arm and yanking me back into the clinic with surprising strength. 'It's perfectly okay. Look, here comes my dear friend who is chief nurse here.'

She introduced me to the nurse, who was pleasant and spoke English with little trouble. She asked me to roll up my trouser leg, took a long look, probed the area of the knee with a most delicate touch.

'We are very fortunate here,' she said with a smile. 'Doctor Hu is the best acupuncture doctor in all of China.'

She led me to a vacant table, where she and Wei Lu maneuvered me onto my back. When the nurse disappeared, I said quietly to my friend: 'Did she really say Doctor Who?'

‘Oh yes. China’s number one acupuncture doctor at Number One hospital,’ she laughed. I laughed along with her, but for a far different reason. Would he appear in the shape of a Darlek, crying *Exterminate! Exterminate!*

Indeed, Doctor Hu was a handsome man in his fifties. He smiled graciously, a small bow, and began to examine my knee with even gentler probing than had the nurse. Finally he gave her orders, she disappeared and returned less than a minute later with a full case of needles.

As he worked, poking his needles into the area of my right mid-leg, he asked repeated questions with what I was to learn was the only word in English he knew.

‘Pain?’ he would wonder as he slid a needle into my skin. ‘Pain?’

Actually, there was pain, not a lot, or was it just my wussy reaction to the visual association of the prick of each inserted needle.

I figured, okay, I can handle this. But then came the frightening part. He took cones and sticks of what looked like ground leaves stuck together. Which is precisely what they were.

‘Moxa,’ explained the nurse, as Doctor Hu stuck a clump onto the top of each needle. ‘They are ground mugwort leaves, which invigorate the flow of Qi (chi) in the body’s meridians and (her words now) dispel pathogenic influences.’ I wondered how these clumps would perform such a miracle. I did not have to wonder long. Doctor Hu lit each moxa stick. The aroma was powerful, and not at all unpleasant. My up-tilted head watched and my knee grew hot.

The procedure lasted several minutes, during which time the good doctor left to treat others. When all the burning was concluded, I felt slightly dizzy with a bit of nausea. Doctor Hu returned and handed the nurse a form. He said something to me in Mandarin, bowed and returned to his other tasks. The nurse translated: Doctor Hu had apologized profusely for having to charge me for the medicine I was to procure with the form he had given the nurse. Such was hospital policy which he sadly could not bypass. The acupuncture procedure, he had claimed, was of course free.

The ‘medicine’ Wei Lu and I picked up at the ground floor dispensary was herbal tea of a sort. I was to take the tea every four hours. Cost was the equivalent of eighty-three cents.

Somehow, through increasing dizziness and worsening nausea, my friend got me back to the hotel. She brewed me a cup of the tea (ghastly), then left me on my own. My head was such I lay down on the bed to have me a nap. The nap lasted eighteen hours.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

I tossed off the covers, stretch a leg out until it reached the floor, levered myself upright, walked across the room, out the door, down the hall, performed my urgent business and was halfway back to the room before I became fully conscious.

There was no pain. The knee was same size as its partner. Same strength.

All that was missing was a blue police box to step into.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

New Zealand

Days 15,000 - 30,000+

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



when the haka saved my life

EVERY MORNING I'd grab a rental bicycle and pedal out of the village onto the desert road. This was in Pushkar, a burg of twelve thousand permanent souls in the Rajasthan desert of India.

Due to strict Brahman religious law, the town was vegetarian and alcohol free, which suited me fine. It was also, back then, cheap, cruisy and laid back. I had been there nearly two months when it happened.

The Rajasthan desert was totally unlike the Sahara and others cinematically-favored for their endless white sands and sweeping dunes. Rather, the desert outside Pushkar was flat and offered lovely subtle colors and tiny pockets of residents. As I pushed the single-speed black bike along the skinny road that traversed it, I'd smile and call out the local greeting, '*Ram-ram, Ji!*' To which I got in return waves and cries of 'One rupee!' 'Choc-o-late!' 'School pen!'

The road was long and straight and not the hint of a hill; nonetheless, my daily venture had improved my lung power and leg muscles to the point where my half hour-out, half hour-back journeys were taking me further and further from town.

One morning I passed a tiny outdoor tea house maybe thirty meters off the road and on a slight rise. My Ram-ram Ji's were met here with sneers and mean looks by the half dozen males sitting there.

Ah well, can't please everyone.

On subsequent mornings I would pass the lads, call out my

greeting, be ignored and think nothing of it. Then one morning that all changed.

On my way out, one of the men was standing in the middle of the road. He motioned for me to stop, but I merely smiled, offered the standard greeting, and swerved past. I figured he'd be gone by the time of my return a few minutes later. I figured wrong.

Not only hadn't he left the road, but now upon catching sight of me all his mates rose off their benches and raced down to join him. One wheeled a bicycle which he placed sideways across the road, preventing my further access. Another, his face covered by a bandanna, grabbed hold of my bike's carrier and dragged me off the road onto soft sand.

Because I didn't trust my hotel's staff and an always-open office safe, in a money belt tucked inside my shorts were my passport, airline tickets and around two thousand dollars in American and Kiwi notes.

Other than these thugs, not a soul in sight.

My initial thought: I'm a dead man. And then something happened. Something totally beyond rational explanation.

I slid off the seat until I was straddling the bar. Stretched my eyelids wide as they would go. Hung out my tongue full length. Began slapping hard my upper arms, my chest, my thighs. And loud as possible screamed:

'KA MATE! KA MATE! KA ORA KA ORA!'

As though touched by electricity, the bandits all took an involuntary step back.

Louder: *'KA MATE! KA MATE! KA ORA KA ORA!!!'*

My lids were extended so wide I thought my eyeballs would drop out. My tongue felt like it could touch the ground. Still whacking hell out of myself:

'KA MATE!! KA MATE!! KA ORA KA ORA!!!!'

Look, I'm a Jewish boy from Philadelphia. Had emigrated to New Zealand just a few years prior. What did I know about the haka except I loved watching it performed by the All Blacks before a match. I had no idea what came after the opening line and beg forgiveness from my Maori friends for any disrespect committed, but I was in a bit of a pickle here, and besides, as stated, what came out my mouth and the accompanying physical actions were as much a surprise to me as to my assailants.

'KA MATE!!! KA MATE!!! KA ORA KA ORA!!!!'

At this point, also free of forethought, I hopped back onto the seat, planted my sandals on the pedals and began pumping. But the bike was on sand and traction was nil. So I pumped harder. And harder.

And the bike began to move. Pumping. The masked bastard holding the carrier tried to pull the bike back. He had as much chance of that as stopping a runaway Mack truck by holding out his hands. My teeth ground together, veins on my neck out to here, my thighs steel pistons.

The bike was ripped out of bandanna man's grasp. But before me was the other bicycle, at ninety degrees. I wheel-butted my bike into his front wheel and knocked it sideways, providing the narrowest of access. Recovering their senses, the men all made grabs at me. Fists pummeled my person, hands held me. I broke through them all.

I was moving now, slowly, back on the road. Still pumping, suddenly I was going nowhere. One of the men, the one who had first stood middle of the road, had hold of the back of my seat. I reached around and chopped full-strength at his wrist. He groaned and let go.

And I was away.

Adrenalin be they name as I gained more and more speed. Looking over my shoulder, I saw the bicycle guy take off in chase. I pumped harder. As did he. Fifty meters behind, then forty. He was young and fit, and he was gaining. And then –

And then a simultaneous realization hit us both: One of he. One of me.

I stopped. He stopped. I swung a leg over and holding onto the bike stepped onto the road. Stared. No, glared.

I thought about walking back and kicking the shit out of him. What stopped me was a sudden infusion of good sense. Chances were decent he'd kick the shit out of me.

Instead I took the only option available. I lay down the bicycle, turned my back to the man. Loosened my belt and dropped my shorts. Bent over. Spread 'em wide. Held the pose.

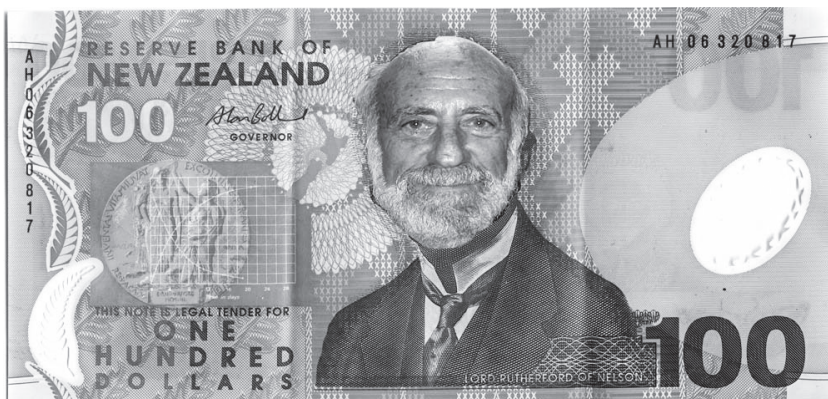
Pulling shorts back up, I picked the bike off the ground, swung my leg over in deliberate slow motion and settled on the seat.

Facing straight ahead, not even a peek behind me, I leisurely rode off back to Pushkar. Where I parked the bike at the rental shop. Walked to the hotel. Stepped into my room.

For a minute or two I just stood there. Then it began. First the knees. Rubber. Had to hold the wall to remain upright. Then my torso joined the dance. Until all of me was performing like a jackhammer operator.

Barely making it to the bed, I collapsed face down. Laughing and crying, both. Hysterically.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



how history's biggest ponzi scheme villain made me a 'rich' man today

He was number one robber baron of the last century, yet hardly a day goes by I fail to thank and bless his departed rotten soul for the gift he gave me.

I'm not by any stretch here to defend this scurrilous miscreant. But I do have two points to make which may sound slightly in the late Bernie Madoff's favor. First, can you really feel pity for those he did in with his Ponzi scheme? A Jewish charity loses over a hundred million dollars. Excuse me, but what is a charity, Jewish or gentile, doing with a hundred million bucks? Isn't the purpose of charities to do things, well, charitable? Like, spend money to aid those in need?

And that rich old babe in England Madoff gouged for even more: your heart breaks for the sweet dear, right? (Actually, the only victims I felt for were Steven Spielberg, who's made some wonderfully entertaining movies, and Sandy Koufax, the greatest lefthanded baseball pitcher of all-time and hero of my youth. That alone merited stringing the bastard up by his cojones.)

The second point is my own personal bottom line. Right here, I wish to make it known that Bernie Madoff may not have made me wealthy, but for sure he kept me from going to the poor house.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

The New Zealand housing market being what it has become, I can claim assets that place me comfortably in the millionaire bracket. But so far as liquid assets, every single time in my thirty thousand days (and counting) I have tried to make money, no matter how or where, I have failed, to the point of occasionally affecting those businesses and institutions I'd wagered my money on. Hell, I once damn near disabled an entire country!

Thirty years back, maybe more, I found myself with a slight excess of capital. This is not a difficult situation for one such as I. For though I was raised by a traditional pushy mother, forever urging young Barry to STUDY HARDER! CLIMB HIGHER! BECOME RICH!, at the age of thirty (e.g. eleven thousand days), I tossed in momma's my-son-the-achiever dream for one more suited to my basic inclinations. I became a hippie.

I learned to live, as they say, on the smell of an oily rag. And while my hippie days are long behind me, and the price of oil has since skyrocketed, the aroma remains basically the same. I am pretty much an avowed minimalist (aka Luddite, according to my son). I grow most of my own food, prior to covid traveled the world for months every year with a pack on my back, and have no mod-cons. I just favor the simple life.

So thirty years back looking around for some sort of way to have my money work for me, I decided to play the currency game. At the time, pre-euro, the most obvious choices were the Deutschemark and Swiss franc. But a Jewish boy who lived through WWII owning Deutschemarks? So I plunged into Swiss francs. No more than a week – okay, maybe a fortnight – later, the Swiss devalued their franc for the first and only time in history. Singlehandedly, Rosenberg brought the gnomes of Zurich to their knees.

And that's the way it's been across the board. You'd think, law of averages, once, just once, I'd hit. Not for much. A smidgeon. Nup.

So how have I come by seven figures when you add up my assets, a fiscal oaf like me? When I don't try to make money, I make money.

Example. I've owned but two houses in my life. The first I bought in Philadelphia in behalf of a new age-type center I helped start in the mid-'70s. The house, in a blue collar neighborhood, cost \$12,000. I put up \$4000 of my own money. The title was in the center's name.

Upon leaving the States and not long thereafter being granted New Zealand residence, on a whim I arranged to take out a second mortgage on the property. Couple years later the center folded. I now

had a house still worth \$12,000, plus a mortgage I had to pay off. I tried to give the place away. A number of charitable and community service groups expressed interest. But that's all they expressed. Finally I had an agent let the place let out. When I returned to Philly for a visit two years later, the blue collar neighborhood no longer was blue. It had 'gentrified', and eventual sale of the property made me five times the initial cost. Added to my good fortune, on the very day the sale went through, the Kiwi dollar was devalued twenty-five percent.

I then bought a lovely old timber dwelling on a beautiful Bay of Plenty beach. New Zealanders had not yet discovered the worldwide craving for ocean beach property (I suppose having so much of it), but that wasn't what motivated me to buy. I simply wanted a patch by the sea where I could live out my remaining years.

Even when you take into account currency inflation, the property has since increased in value something like a dozen times. Except it's only 'worth' such if I choose to sell. Which I won't. Ever. At any price. Because my lovely patch of paradise is priceless, and I intend my ashes to be buried here.

Not long after I had personally caused great hardship to the good burghers of Switzerland, I was sitting by myself in a local café, sipping a latte and reading my book. Suddenly my attention was drawn to a conversation at a nearby table. Actually, it was hearing an American accent that pricked my ears.

'Guy's an absolute genius,' I overheard the fella boasting to his table mate. 'Fifteen percent interest a year minimum. And I have it on good authority this year it'll be twenty-two!'

I couldn't keep quiet. 'Drugs or gun-running?' I joked.

The man turned my way and laughed. 'Nope, completely legit. Every dollar accounted for.'

The conversation soon became three-way, and finally I was invited to join them.

The man lived in New York, and went on a name-dropping spree listing the people and organizations who'd invested heavily with his money man. Was it the angel or the devil sitting on my shoulder making my eyes water and tongue flop out like Wile E. Coyote? My money, what little there was of it, was pretty much in term deposit accounts making bugger-all interest.

I pleaded with my new acquaintance to get me aboard. I figured to invest all my currently banked money, maybe even take out a reverse mortgage on my home. In other words, the whole shebang. My

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

new acquaintance told me the genius didn't take on just anybody, but he would do his best to get the man to accept my NZ dollars.

Not having heard from the guy in over a month, I rang. He reported that the genius had flat-out rejected me.

'I didn't reckon he would take you on board,' he said, somewhat snidely. 'You're too small change for a big-time operator like Bernie Madoff.'

Small change. Yeah, that's me, all right. Looking back, I don't recall ever being so crestfallen. Once again, an attempt to make money from my money had gone nowhere.

A year later, Bernie Madoff made international headlines. A chance government investigation revealed he had been running the biggest Ponzi scheme of all time. Jewish charities, super-rich UK dowagers, Hollywood big names and a few thousand others (including my New York acquaintance) lost every cent they had 'invested' with the guy.

Meanwhile, my fistful of dollars sits snugly in the bank gaining a laughable rate of interest.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



who's afraid of the big bad scalpel?

(me)

I TRIED TO CATCH his eye. He was the only other male in the waiting room. In jacket and tie he sat stiffly in his chair and stared straight ahead. Around us were eight or ten women in their twenties and half as many toddlers. On the walls Dick Frizzell cartoon posters urged us to Listen To Your Child. Talk to Your Child. Enjoy Your Child. He looked a stranger in a strange clinic, this other chap, and in a wordless glance I wanted to say: It's okay, mate – me too.

From off-stage a name was called and the man rose at once. Without expression he marched smartly out of the room, following his vision's tunnel. I reached over and picked a fossiled Reader's Digest off a table and began blindly leafing through it.

I COULDN'T HAVE BEEN three the summer afternoon I woke up from my nap with a bursting bladder. Hearing my mother downstairs talking with the next door neighbor, I called out for her. I'd recently been toilet trained and could not climb out of the crib to go make wees.

My mother ignored me.
I called again. Louder.
And again.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

She yelled up for me to be quiet, she'd come when she was good and ready. This went on for a while, my situation growing desperate. Finally, no other recourse, I removed the water spout from my pajamas, poked him through the bars of the crib and let go onto the bare floor.

When she came up several minutes later, my mother was furious. She tore the pajama tops from my back, wiped the pee off the floor and rubbed it in my face, hard.

'Maybe this'll teach you to keep your dirty little thing where it belongs!'

I was ten or eleven when, new to the two-wheeler, I ran my bike smack into a telephone pole. They rushed me to the doctor, who did whatever he had to do. Later, at home, it began. First to my two older sisters, then the neighbors, then anyone who would listen.

'The doctor says he's got the balls of a five-year-old!' laughed my mother, uproariously.

I was taught that the only thing dirtier than a penis was what it did. For me, growing up, this meant sound. When I went to the toilet I had to pee around the sides of the bowl, and run the water in the hand basin to muffle the gurgling. I remember once being with her in the doctor's waiting room. Another patient went into the WC and had the ignorance, or audacity, to piss directly into the bowl, the terrible sound leaking out to where we were sitting.

'Disgusting,' my mother cried with a face. I felt ashamed for the man.

There was no love in the house, no affection. How often did I observe my father, himself sadly beaten down by the outside world, approach my mother and try for a hug. She'd shrug him off fiercely. 'Don't touch me!' she'd yell. 'You know I don't like to be touched.'

During those early years I heard over and over my mother telling my older sisters (one of whom would claim to be a lifelong virgin) how my father forever wanted to hurt her with his dirty thing. How? I would wonder, curious as to the manner such a small personal implement could inflict pain.

'Don't worry, you'll learn. Boy, you'll learn fast enough.'

I was thirteen when I learned. Oh, I'd been using the word for some time. Then one of my friends went and defined it.

I couldn't believe it.

I had to ask.

After dinner I approached my father, as always with his face buried in the newspaper. I got his normal response to questions of any kind: ask your mother.

I sat down next to where she was sitting in front of the ten-inch black and white, knitting. I waited till the ads came on.

‘Ma, what’s it mean?’ I asked softly.

‘What, it?’ Her attention fully on the TV.

‘You know.’ Practically in a whisper. ‘It. Eff you see kay.’

Her head swiveled from the television to me, eyes wide. Then past me to my father.

‘Ru, you heard what he said!’

My father, ages ago stricken with husband deafness, poked his head out from behind the paper.

‘Well, just don’t sit there. Do something. He said it!’

Protests of innocence were in vain. The swearing, the chase, the catch, the beating with the heavy strap, the crying. If I remember correctly, it was the last time he would beat me. The next time he tried, I grabbed the thick leather strap as it whistled through the air and held onto it. He tried to yank it back, but he couldn’t. I held tight and he could not pull it away.

When I was old enough to drive I would go out at night, alone. Normally I’d go to the movies, or a ball game, stop off for a hoagie or cheesesteak on the way home.

‘You stink,’ my mother would cry soon as I’d come in. ‘You’ve been out with some dirty shiksa (gentile girl), haven’t you? You’ll get us all diseased.’

So my true education came on the streets. There, I learned to effect the right stance, the proper walk. Chest puffed out, shoulders up near the earlobes, stiff as a plank. And swagger. Girls obviously adored a swagger. I’m convinced the back pain I’ve had these past seventy years stems directly from my posture and carriage those teenage years.

Language was just as stilted. Those of us unable to prove ourselves with manly activities had to resort to words. I actually began to believe my own lies.

RIGHT DURING THIS TIME a phenomenon hit America. Playboy, with those airbrushed pubeless centerspreads. For a kid scared to death of girls, yet craving them, it was the answer. For me, for countless millions of adolescent males, the map became the territory, and it was the answer.

I did carry a condom. Who didn’t? In time it imbedded a permanent oval in my imitation leather wallet, and when after a couple years I opened the packet out of curiosity, the hardened and dry rubber flaked into a hundred pieces.

I used a condom for the first time at twenty-three. Contraceptively speaking, it was not a success.

She became pregnant. I wanted her to have an abortion, but she was afraid. I couldn't understand of what.

We gave the baby up for adoption. It was not so easy back then. I can vividly recall some of the details, the sleazy lawyer, the dispassionate agency woman, the phony names we were forced to use. Even getting on the same elevator at the hospital with the adopting father (who had no idea I was the real father).

One night when I was twenty-five and married, I got a call to come to the hospital where my mother lay dying of cancer. When she went, I totally lost control. Bawled for an hour. She had died without forgiving me.

My wife used a diaphragm. Claimed she was wearing it the night she got pregnant for the second time.

If women scared me, kids had me petrified. My self-hatred attaining Everest heights, my state of constant panic growing closer and closer to suicidal reality, I moved out and got my own place, a depressing one-room flat, when my son was six months old.

I HAD BECOME SO much like my mother. I rarely showed my body to anyone, could not stand being touched. I was cynical and negative and bitter.

Then in my early thirties a change began to happen. Bored, lonely, no energy at all, I began hanging around the hippies. These kids, half my age, had a spark, had life. At first I stayed clear of their constant cuddling and touching and kissing – same sex, opposite sex, made no difference to them. But oh, how I wanted – needed – expression like this.

Then an astonishing turn of events took place.

Between 1972 and 1976 I had no less than sixty-seven female lovers. (Who was counting? Certainly not me. Those sixty-seven, actually. I was a mere footnote on their sexual scoreboard.)

What happened was I began teaching Alpha Mind Control at the University of Pennsylvania. Without knowing it, certainly not from design, I'd set myself up as a guru. And a target for spiritually aspiring (and randy) women.

Many of these women were absolutely gorgeous. And they sought me out! (Or rather, the role I was happily playing.)

Not once during those years, during all those women, did I concern myself with personal contraception. (I did, though, talk a number of them off the pill, this after one of my lovers nearly went blind because of it.) Condoms, of course, following my hellish experiences, were out. What else was there that I could do? I could make sure my partner was using hers. That I could do.

In 1977 I quit playing guru and took to the road. My love life, thank heavens, altered radically. One or two relationships a year. I was even celibate for a two year term.

I met Chris on Auckland's Cheltenham Beach in 1983. The relationship began slowly, but soon it became obvious we would be spending a lot of time together. A single mother, Chris used a diaphragm. Neither of us liked it. So she volunteered to get an IUD, which she had worn in two prior relationships.

I accompanied her to the gynecologist's office, sat in the waiting room while she was fitted. Afterwards she told me the procedure. Her details were graphic. I felt her pain in my genitals.

For a year Chris wore her IUD, and for a year she experienced irregular periods and frequently recurring thrush. As well, her overall health was affected. Normally one to go a decade between colds, she'd had several, a really bad flu, throat infection where her temperature was over a hundred and five, and several bouts of nausea. The parallels simply were too strong to be coincidence.

It was only recently that I had begun to enjoy children. In my travels about New Zealand since arriving here in 1980 I must have played uncle to a score of kids – wholly a new role. A close woman friend, observing me relating to her young son, wondered whether I had any intention of fathering any more of my own. My negative response was more reflexive than reflective.

'I think you should,' she said. 'Look at all the insensitive dicks who have kids, and turn them into more next-generation dicks. You'd be a caring and loving father. Your kids would be emotionally healthy.'

Thank you. But no thank you.

'MR. ROSENBERG?'

The nurse, forties and pleasant, guided me down a hall to a room, closing the door behind us. As she instructed me to remove my jeans, I jokingly wondered whether it were she who was to perform the surgery. A bit of light banter ensued. My voice came back to me strained, trying too hard.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

She offered Valium; I refused. For sure I was not into pain, but I was then, as now, as anti-drugs as you can be, and besides, I didn't believe the notorious vitamin V could possibly anaesthetize my system in the few minutes before surgery.

Instead, I searched frantically through my bag for my Bach flower rescue remedy – to be taken before to calm me down – and homeopathic arnica, to reduce shock after. I'd put them out on the dresser that morning, remembered dropping them in my bag on the way out. They weren't there.

Naked from the waist down, I now climbed onto the operating table. The nurse moved to one side of the table and peered down at my genitalia as if looking for a message. For the longest time did she stand there, staring.

I WAS THERE in the clinic not because I wanted to be. I was there because there just was no other way. Oh, there are lots of other ways, several I know of. In truth, though, this was the only way. Call it fear of responsibility. Call it cowardice. I couldn't take the chance; I simply could not become the father my father was.

I began to check out other males who'd had it done. I found five. I asked each about his philosophy for having done so, and about the procedure, the pain. From each I got: 1) I don't want any more kids; 2) a piece of cake, mate; no worse than having a tooth pulled. (In reality it's like getting kicked in the nuts by a horse. For a solid week.)

Sometimes I really envy women. You talk to one another, you confide, you cry together. You feel pain and there's another woman around who will listen, who's been there, who understands. In this regard males were fucking useless.

The doctor at that initial appointment was sixties, thinning white hair, rimless specs. He had a high, raspy voice. Sitting at a desk he asked me a few pertinent questions to make sure I knew what I was letting myself in for, noting that the procedure for reversing a vasectomy was difficult and dear.

With the aid of a cartoony cross-section illustration labeled The Male Pelvic Organs, he proceeded to explain the actual operation. I've heard of speed reading, but this was the first I'd encountered speed talking. He spoke so quickly, pointing with his pen to body parts on the card, I simply gave up after the first few sentences. When he asked if I understood I nodded dumbly, whereupon he presented me a release to sign and out the door.

Two weeks before the appointment I began having reservations, and a week before I was positive I would not go through with it. Why? What was I really afraid of?

Night before the operation I put off shaving my balls till nearly midnight. For a guy who hadn't shaved his chin since 1968, this was a major undertaking. Gently, gingerly, I ran the razor across the skin of the scrotum. I did it twice, a third time, and still, when the suds were rinsed free, there among the nicks and cuts was hair. I mean, how were you expected to see way down there? When finally I had finished they were as bald as paw paw, sad as hound dog eyes.

BY THE TIME the doctor made his entrance, my balls had shriveled to where a single pink prune was peeking out from beneath my organ.

Doctor and nurse both got into their masks and rubber gloves. Again I tried a bit of levity; again it came out forced and foolish. The doctor, to show the human side of his nature, told a little story ('my greatest faux pas'). It was as funny as I felt.

'Would you care to watch?' he asked. It was the last thing in the world I wanted. Nonetheless, I rose up onto my elbows, but all I could see was a gloved hand.

He pinched the skin around the right side vas and poked in a needle.

'Uhhhhh!' I heard myself cry.

I began using Alpha Mind Control. I am quite proficient with this stuff, had taught myself to withstand a lot of pain, even drugless tooth extractions, by focusing the mind elsewhere.

Forget it.

He cut a narrow slit into the scrotum with a small scalpel.

'Nyahhhhh!!'

I tried rhythmic breathing: long, slow, connected.

The breath got stuck at the top of an inhale and adamantly refused to come down.

He reached through the incision with towel clamps and pulled out the first vas.

'Yaaaaaaffffff!!!'

I switched to mantra.

The spaghetti-like vas sprung off the clamp. He dipped in again, dropped it again. Dug in once more, clamped it tight.

'Om mani padme hooooooooooooo!!!!'

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

My teeth were clenched so hard I swore I heard enamel crack. My toes were bent at ninety degree angle, pointed straight back. My right shoulder felt like it had popped from its socket.

Three more needles, three more vas severings, three more knots tied. There might've been Coca Cola in that syringe for all the good it was doing me.

The procedure lasted nearly an hour. I'll say this for the doctor; he was efficient; he knew his business.

I'll say for this for me: ever the Taliban, or whatever the KGB is called now, or some thick-spectacled Nazi shouting, 'Ve haf wayss, Herr Rosenberg!' wants to extract state security secrets, I know precisely how they can go about it. I'll tell them shit they never thought to ask.

The nurse applied a sterile bandage and large cotton swab over my bloodied and battered gonads. I swung my legs slowly off the table and sat up, dazed. I had to keep down an impending vomit. My face, I'm certain, was the color of porridge.

The nurse walked over, holding my jeans before her and staring curiously inside.

'Where - where are your underpants? she wondered.

'Don't wear any,' I mumbled. Hadn't since my hippie days. One less garment to wash.

She looked at me, blinked, then over at the doctor, now peeling off his gloves, back to me.

'How are you going to hold the dressing on when you leave?' Certainly not the way I was doing now, with my right hand.

The doctor shrugged and left the room. His job was done. The nurse shortly followed, re-entering a minute later with what looked to be a small table cloth and giant safety pin.

'Okay, sonny boy, back on the table,' she giggled, enjoying this enormously. 'I've put on many a nappy,' she said as she folded the cloth around me, 'but this is the first on anyone with a beard.'

I PAID THE BILL and slowly, cautiously, feeling like I'd just got off the horse following the Joplin to Cheyenne Pony Express run, made my way out onto heavily trafficked Queen Street. I seemed to have passed through a time warp. Everything around me was going so fast.

The pain shot up into my head and for a moment I thought I might pass out. But that wasn't my biggest of worries. The diaper had slid off. I truly had a load in my pants. At a snail's pace I shuffled into a

nearly department store, sought out the underwear section. I selected the cheapest pair of knickers I could find and stepped uncertainly to the cashier.

‘Um, might I try these on now?’ I asked stupidly, upon paying.

‘Sure,’ the cashier replied, without a flinch. No doubt she gets such requests on a regular basis.

She unlocked a door and I passed into the tiny cubicle. Stepping daintily out of my jeans, the useless cloth and now fully-bloodied dressing and bandage fell to the floor. Somehow the bandage skidded under the knee-length door and outside the booth. Carefully, I reached out a leg and used my toe to bring it back in. How it looked from outside did not concern me. More, I was wondering just how sterile was my sterile dressing now that it sported a size nine-and-a-half footprint.

I made it home. Somehow, bus, ferry, waiting car, I made it home and collapsed in a heap. The worst was over. Or so I told myself.

Never have I known such agony as the week that followed. Pain, yes; oh my yes. Every step, every movement, the least exertion. Interesting shapes and colors, too. Eggplants, with side stitching.

I fasted for three days, did tons of vitamin C and garlic, threw away the pain killers and antibiotics they’d given me at the clinic. The body would heal itself, given time. But it was not my body that created that week’s havoc.

I had grown up with an angry, bitter mother and had inherited many of those negative emotional traits. Over the years, though, I had learnt how to deal with my anger, how to diffuse it. Mainly, I separated myself from it, observed it from across the room, played with it. When it ran its course, I let it go: finito.

The week following the vasectomy I could not do that. That week I experienced anger I could not detach from, in no way diffuse.

I had patches of red, absolute red. Largely these were directed at Chris, but really, they weren’t. They went far, far deeper.

Stuff I had thought long dead and buried resurrected and saturated me. I was wholly at its mercy. It was during this time, for example, that I recalled the vignette with the pajama tops. I had not played that one back for fifty years.

It had me worried. A sister in America recently had a hysterectomy, and wrote of the battle she was having, and losing, to control her emotions. Somewhere, I remembered hearing, a similar though lower-scaled hormonal imbalance can follow a vasectomy.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

Ten days following the op I revisited the clinic to have the stitches removed. I wondered whether the problem I'd been having, the pain and extensive mental anguish, were normal.

The doc poo-pooed the pain.

'Scrotal tissue is hardly that sensitive. Now your fingertips – they're sensitive.'

He then informed me I needed thirty to forty ejaculations over the next three months to empty the sacs.

'One chap did it in ten days!' he noted jovially.

A new Olympic event, perhaps.



orange egg

I OPENED MY EYES and first thing I saw was a huge orange egg. I lay there on my right side, cheek to the pillow, trying to work it out. I knew I was in Pushkar, in Rajasthan, in India, in a hotel room. That was it. As the moments passed and my mind slowly cleared of sleep, surely the mystery would be solved without need to move my head. Thirty seconds went by, a minute. I was no more enlightened. A huge orange egg. Inches from my face.

Finally I gave in. Arched back my shoulders to provide a broader view. I blinked. I gaped. This wasn't my room. Too well appointed. Pricey. Not me at all. Half a meter off now, the orange egg was revealed: the back of a sleeping ginger haired woman's head.

I tried to collate my memories. We'd met yesterday, late afternoon. I was on my way to the holy lake to view the sunset and listen to the drummers, as I'd been doing daily for a couple months. She came out of a side street just as I walked past. Pretty. I guessed late thirties. (Turned out to be forty-four.) French. Her name -. Hang on. Letter S. Sonya? No, wait. Sylvia. That's it.

She wondered where was the best spot to watch the sunset. I said I was headed there now. She asked might she tag along as this was her first day in the beautiful tiny town in the middle of the desert.

I wasn't really interested in her. She looked too upmarket. Plus she was a gabber. In five minutes I learned she was traveling on her own, her husband was a big money man back in Paris and a bastard.

Liked them young. Very young. Like, seventeen-young. So following a spat she pinched his credit card and flew off to India.

As we approached the area of the lake I stopped and turned to her.

‘Look, I come here every evening. It’s a special time for me. A meditation. You wanna talk, please find somebody else.’

‘Sorry. I just got here after a whole day of traveling and I’m –’ She cupped a hand over her mouth, giggled, then nodded.

The sunset was, as always, magnificent; the drummers too were special. We sat on the steps just off the lake several minutes, soaking it in, until the sun was gone and the sky began changing colors. She hadn’t said a word.

Finally, we got up. I put out my hand, ready to shake hers and go off to my guesthouse. She said, quietly: ‘That was so wonderful. Please let me buy you dinner.’

I looked at her. She really was pretty, amazing skin for mid-forties, as French women so often have. So I led the way to the most expensive restaurant in Pushkar, one I had never been to in three lengthy visits there. What the hell, husband’s rich and he’s a bastard, right?

And that’s the last I could remember of the night’s proceedings as I lay there on the bed in her hotel room staring at her orange egg.

Silently I leaned over, gazed at her face. Cheeks puffy near the eyes, mouth slung open like a guppy. But nice. Gently I lifted the blanket. Took in a perfectly sculpted back. Lifted it a little higher. Real nice. I lay back on the pillow. Did we do the deed? I had no recall. Could I be this fog-brained on my standard single glass of wine? Maybe she slipped me roofies.

I was, at the time, approaching sixty. I’d been a roadie most of my adult existence. In the beginning it was a means to escape a lifelong depression, result of a conventional upbringing, conventional career, conventional suffocation. In time I came to enjoy the road more, far more, than when I was at home. Moving to New Zealand changed that. Traveling wasn’t running away anymore. It became my modus operandi.

Thoughts barreled through my mind as I lay there. Then suddenly came a thought that made me sit bolt upright. I placed my fingers in my mouth, then twisted around and looked at the bedside table. Except for a lamp, nothing. Quietly opened the drawer. Empty. Goose-necked my head over the side of the bed, swept my hand under.

Where the hell was my denture?

Normally, overnight I place the partial in a small jewelry box I carry in my pack. I didn't do that last night; I hadn't wanted her to see me with a lower set of teeth like a picket fence following a tornado. Vanity.

I ran my hand carefully under her body, up and down the sheet. Panicking now that she might wake up to a man of fifty-eight who looked forty-eight but whose dentition was more like eighty-eight.

I lifted the blanket high as I could, leaned over. Looked left, looked right. Then, oh my god, there they were: grinning up at me from her V of orange forestry. (Women sported such back then, older readers may recall.)

I thought: How did they get there? Well, I could venture a damn good guess how they got *there*, but why...?

Did she do that? Found them during the night, stuck them there? For what, safekeeping? So they wouldn't get crushed during the night? Or maybe she's now faking sleep, having a big fat silent laugh at the old bastard's expense.

I stretched my body until my face was right up to hers. I expected any minute now she'd opened her eyes and give out with a shriek of laughter. I studied her face, her breathing. No, she's asleep all right. No woman would be able to let a man, especially a man she'd never slept with before, get wind of her morning breath.

I moved my face back down to the business at hand, reached over and daintily made to pluck them free. But the metal clasps were seriously ensnared, and as I attempted to render their emancipation, the thicket was adamant on holding on to its prize. I pulled a bit harder, which only served to cause my bed-mate to jerk a bit and issue forth a sleep noise, somewhere between a snore and a snort. But she didn't waken, which in my current state of mortification was the last thing I needed.

So I gently twisted them this way and that, all the time keeping an eye peeled to her face. She blinked rapidly a few times, whereupon I'd quick take my hand away, then soon as she settled I began again. No dentist ever had a bigger hassle extracting teeth than did I that early Indian morning.

Finally, I worked them free. After carefully detaching a number of short wiry strands, I inserted the denture in place, then slithered out my side of the bed. I quickly dressed, except for my shoes, and strapped on my daypack.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

One hand holding my shoes, the other on the doorknob, I paused before opening. Looked back over my shoulder. She definitely was quite lovely. I took my hand off the doorknob, reached into a pocket and took out my key ring. Silently put down the shoes and disengaged from the ring a solid silver charm of Ganesh, the Hindu elephant-headed god and patron of bankers (not me), intellectuals (for sure not me) and authors (got it), and placed it atop the dresser alongside her handbag.

Then I picked up my shoes and slipped silently out of the room.



that canadian bastard

That cold winter's day, Kent fire going, snug as, the thought comes to mind of the string of fascinating occurrences and people which first brought me to New Zealand in 1980, and convinced me to settle here.

The travel writing assignment from the NZ Tourist office in San Francisco offering free return transport; the upgrade to first class on the Air New Zealand flight from LA because economy was booked solid; all the people here who provided kindness and, so often, accommodation to a stranger as I hitched the country top to bottom.

Then suddenly out of the mental ether emerges the image of a man who was most instrumental of all for my being here today: That Canadian Bastard.

Having completed my compulsory US military service in 1961, I was assigned to inactive reserve duty. Later that year my unit was placed on standby alert due to the Berlin crisis. In 1962 my unit was placed on standby alert due to the Cuba missile crisis. Neither occasion were we actually called to duty, although we were next on the list both times.

Then came 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin crisis, and my unit indeed was called up. As the military is wont to do, without explanation we were disbanded and sent home just prior to being shipped off to Vietnam.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

At this point, the wife and I sat down and had a long talk. In America, a new war seemed to be popping up every year. My unit's mission was the partaking of such pleasant duties as stuffing eighteen year old kids' intestines back through gaping abdominal wounds, and when necessary zipping them up in body bags for the final journey home.

It was she who suggested that, as dedicated anti-war people, we follow the lead of thousands of young Yanks currently taking off for Canada. To live there, we learned, one needed to apply for landed emigrant status, which, according to what we read, was a cinch to obtain.

In Canada, we registered to sit a two-part test: up to fifty points were awarded for education, work experience and proven good behavior; another fifty max was based on an interview. A total of sixty was passing. My wife scored forty-eight in the first part, three points higher than did I.

We then took seats in a waiting room. A smiling, gracious female appeared, introduced herself to the wife and together they moved off to an adjoining cubicle. Several minutes later the wife returned, revealing she had again scored a forty-eight. I assumed I would get the same interviewer, but that was not to be.

Enter That Canadian Bastard. His expression hard as nails. Stiff carriage. No introduction, he simply crooked a finger and marched me into a cubicle. He did not introduce himself, merely noted that he was a retired career NCO in the Canadian army. I began to sense there might be a problem.

At the time I had short hair and was clean shaven. Wearing my best suit and tie. On my primo behavior. I was humble. I did not joke. Called him sir. Held my composure through a series of questions that appeared solely to provoke me. Mister Nice Guy, me. Proud to be a Canadian. Maybe I'd join the Mounties.

In the end, it just didn't matter. The guy flat-out didn't like me. He awarded me fourteen points out of a possible fifty. Do the sums.

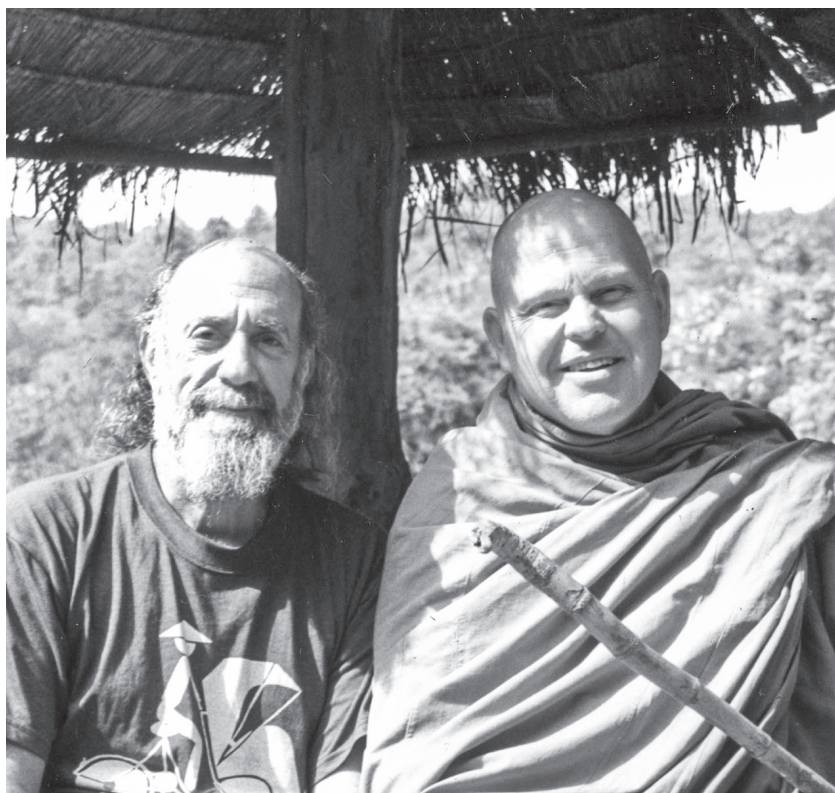
It was only on a cold winter's day more than half a century later and half a world distant that an understanding hit home.

Had he not ensured my failing the landed emigration test in 1964, had the wife and I thus become Canadian citizens, I never would have been in position to get the writing assignment and first class upgrade, never would have met all those people here whose kindness convinced me to apply for residence.

Barry Rosenberg

So if you are still alive, That Canadian Bastard, I thank you from bottom of my heart for your fabulous gift. And if you are no longer on the planet's surface, I do hope that as a native of a very cold country you are enjoying the sweltering heat of your current and eternal home for which you undoubtedly achieved a perfect score to gain entry.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



monk and the professor

CALL YOURSELF A TRAVELER? Nah, you're not a traveler. Admit it, you're a tourist!

What, leave home without planning every minute of your trip? Choose accommodation by gut feel, or walk cold into an overseas restaurant without checking its star count on Trip Advisor? Yo, why do you think the baby Jesus created smartphones!

Okay, I shall now let you in on the secret of my generally sound current state of health. Meditation? Vegan diet? Exercise? Sure, they've all helped. But what has done me the most good is strapping on a medium-size, fifteen pound backpack two, three times a year, then, minimum of planning, shooting off on a journey. Can you do it? Would you? Or do you break out in hives just contemplating the what-ifs? Well, shame on you coz I reckon backpacking the world freestyle is the absolute best thing a person can do for mind, body and spirit. And, worry not, one day covid will be a past-tense horror and the opportunity for free overseas travel will again be available.

Quicky quiz: Name the first backpacker on record. Give up? Why, the Buddha of course!

Young Siddhartha Gautama left the comforts of home – wealthy loving family, brilliant tutors, security – and hit the road to discover what life was about. And for sure he did just that.

A couple millennia later I, too, abandoned the comforts of home – sofa, TV, junk food – to cut a similar path of discovery. Did I succeed?

Oh, no question. I discovered bed bugs in Afghanistan, blocked-up crappers in India, apathetic guest house staff, surly border officials and intestinal parasites everywhere. Many a time did I hear myself uttering the Buddha's legendary line:

All life is suffering!

But it wasn't always like that, and for this I had the Buddha himself to thank. Because by the time I first hit the road in Asia there already existed numerous temples and monasteries on the backpackers circuit. These were laid-back oases where you could hang out for a week or six, do some meditation, scoff down primo veg food, and listen to clued-in bald bods called bhikkus and venerables, lamas and rinpoches, talk up the Buddha's choicest words. All on the cheap.

Best thing, to me, was the easy-going camaraderie amongst the 'packers. There was little we didn't share: food, music, dope, stories. And boy, did we ever take to the Buddha. To our way of thinking, he was the sharpest cat ever. (As example: the supposed sharpest-ever whitey broke down the mind into three primary components. The Buddha, eighty-five *thousand*.) Even more important to us roadies was his scoring of heart over head: the Buddha's main theme, first, last and always, was...compassion.

My most memorable venue during those years was a two-month hang at a Theravada wat (monastery) in the northwest Thailand forest. Memorable for something truly good, and as well for something so ghastly I'd prefer to forget it, but for the life of me I cannot.

The good was meeting my brother-in-heart, a huge German monk a couple years my junior in age but light years senior in wisdom. We hit it off from the get-go. He called me Professor, and I referred to him, simply, as Monk.

The Theravada order exists mainly in the steamy tropics, and long ago adapted their dietary habits accordingly. They eat their main meal at midday (all foodstuffs donated by adherents on the monks' morning alms round), then consume only liquids until the following morning.

To provide his post-noon liquids a bit more oomph, I went out and bought Monk an electric blender. He quickly thrilled to the new toy, and every evening would create work-of-art smoothies, mixing condensed milk and ice with the fresh tropical fruit plentiful on campus. Reflective of his two hundred eighty pound predilection for food (gluttony as substitute for his Buddhistic vow of celibacy?), as time

went on the smoothies became thicker and denser, until a spoon could stand straight up in the glop. Still, it passed as liquid, because that's the very definition of smoothies, and we enjoyed them every night.

The not-so-terrific experience was instigated by Monk himself.

'Hey, Professor, care to join a group of teenage novices at a dhamma teaching event?' he wondered early one evening as we were forking our drinks. When I tried to extract details, he made like a garden Buddha. Still, always willing to take on new spiritual experiences, I agreed, and an hour later joined ten monklets as we piled into tuk-tuks and clamored off. Curiously, our destination turned out to be a hospital, where we were escorted inside, through corridors and down a dimly-lit staircase into a large, bare, air-conditioned room where we stood around waiting – for what, we had no idea.

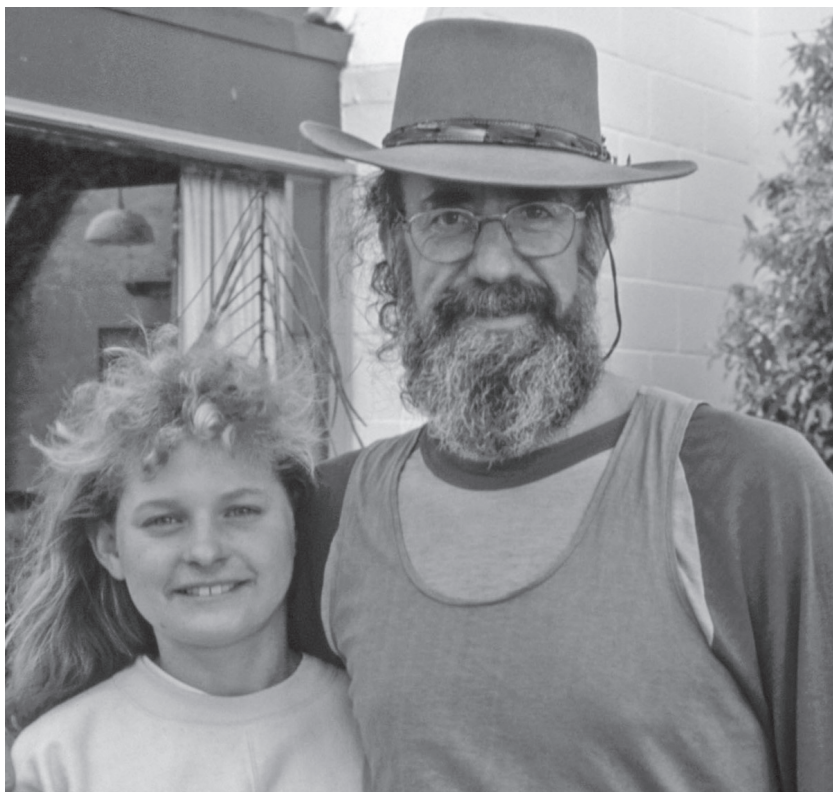
Two men in full-bodied aprons and face masks then entered wheeling before them a gurney. On the gurney was a body which, when the sheet was removed, revealed a beautiful young woman. We were informed (in Thai, with English subtitles for my benefit) the woman had recently died of heart failure. There was nary a blemish on her lovely face and body, prompting heartfelt sighs and groans from the robed young bucks around me.

We were instructed to approach and stand alongside a high, narrow table onto which the body now was placed. The next some minutes, we were told, would provide concrete evidence that physical beauty was no more than illusion, underscoring the Buddha's concept of impermanence. Whereupon one of the men flicked on a small electric skilsaw and went to work.

Like tenpins at a bowling alley upon a perfectly placed roll, one after another of the teenage monks began to spin around and collapse to the floor. Before the path of the saw reached the breastbone, only one of the visitors besides myself was still standing, and he was leaning precariously at a forty-five degree angle against a pillar before gradually folding like a beach chair.

I suppose only my brief experience as a military medic kept me vertical, and even then it took effort to keep the smoothie from making a comeback.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



Hitching days with Jessie.

butterfly

I STOOD UNDER THE EAVES, just out of the rain. Behind me, in the house, my life was being taken apart.

They were packing up, mother and daughter. I'd sat in the house making like I wasn't aware, didn't really care, the two of them moving back and forth, stacking, lifting, removing.

'Do you want these?' Every now and then. Certain books. The Dylan tapes. Mutually acquired commodities. Say yes and there was a fuss. No, and I was a wimp.

Two and a half years. An eternity. A mid-forties traveling man with a backpack, fifteen years on the road, passport with extra pages pasted in, stamps of fifty countries. How many relationships had there been along the way? Fifteen years I never once completely emptied that scarred and scuffed yellow pack. A chest of drawers was a foreign element in my life.

A CHANCE MEETING on Cheltenham Beach in Auckland. Single mother with a single kid, number nine oh nine.

We saw a lot of each other. The perfect setup, she with her place, me with a long term house-sit a block away. Why then did I move in with her?

Two things happened, almost simultaneously. One, I fell in love with Jessie.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

She was nine then, a kid with a lifetime of horrors. Eczema, asthma, scratching, bleeding, coughing. Torture every single day of her life. I tried to ignore her, but couldn't. I tried not to get involved and in no time was over my head.

Neither of us had experienced much in the way of touch till then, and it seemed we tried to make up for our personal neglect every chance we got. We cuddled and kissed and massaged and wrestled and tickled. We lay in bed making up stories and reading Tolkien to one another. The mom was my woman, but the kid was my love.

And Jessie got better. She grew, she blossomed, she became healthy.

Second thing that happened was I unpacked Ol' Yeller. I think that's when the relationship began to teeter.

We gave up the house and tooled around the country in the ancient converted VW bus. House-sat a modest mansion on the beach back in Cheltenham. Then, most unexpectedly, virtually inexplicably, I bought us a house on a long, beautiful beach well away from the city.

We worked at fixing it up just like couples are supposed to. And like couples do we argued, we fought, we made up, we made love. A rollercoaster.

I can still remember

Packed together

Like a can of sardines.

Push and shovin

That's when lovin

Starts to come apart at the seams.

Yes we all need a room of our own.

I used to laugh at other people's relationships. The bickering over infinitesimal bullshit, the constant friction, the paranoid anticipation of the other's conflicting moves and lines. That it was happening to us was far too subtle to pick up right away. When it became evident I reckoned that, like zits, we'd outgrow it.

Yeah, right. Every conversation became the Gaza Strip. Nobody's wrong, everybody's right, yet we battled. You said -. But you said -. He said she said we said. Our pattern became entrenched: I yelled, she wept. We became living cliches of ourselves. Once, just once, I'd have given anything that she yell and I would weep.

And through it all Jessie and I grew stronger; our love had no limits.

ONE COLD WINTER'S morning I went into her room just as she was beginning the agonizing routine of starting a student's day.

'Pssst, kiddo. Whatta you say you wag school and we hitch to Auckland for a Swenson's ice cream (her number one treat in the world). She broke a ten year old's record for getting dressed.

We got eleven rides. We'd stand together on the side of the road, thumbs out, Jessie with her eyes closed homing in on the perfect ride, as the Supreme Hitchie (me) had taught her. After a minute or two she would call out the color of the vehicle that would stop for us as well as sex and approximate age of the driver...before such a car/driver even appeared. From memory, she hit perfectly on six that morning, was damn close on the rest.

The eleventh ride, however, took us not into the city, rather dropped us off way the hell out in Papatotoe. I saw a bus at a stop that was heading into town center. I grabbed Jessie's hand and we made a dash, just missing out as it pulled away. Then as we were waiting for another, a woman walked past, paused, looked us up and down.

'Father and daughter?' she wondered. We nodded curiously. 'Well, I'm going to Parnell,' she said. 'If you're headed that way you're welcome to join me.'

She let us off twenty meters from Swensons.

I GOT THE NEWS. Chris and Jessie were moving out.

As though the situation were too overwhelming to process, I found myself focusing on trivia. Who would feed the cats when I went to Auckland to teach my seminars at the university? How best to plant a winter garden for one?

Next day we were involved in a garage sale with some friends. We showed up with our wares like your happy suburban family. There was a marked reluctance to tell people – why? She's leaving me, I'm a failure? I pushed her out, I'm an asshole? The Town Weird makes (more) back-fence headlines? Nah, the biggest dread was the barrage of sympathy I'd get. Mournful faces and shoulder-clapping condolences from professional couples who'd been stuck together like yellowed Sellotape to mildewed wallpaper since the year dot. 'Is there anything we can do?' Yeah. Fuck off.

The morning weather had been lovely, it was only when we returned home the rain began. I don't particularly like walking in the rain, but what was the alternative? Sit there and die a little?

Mister Futties came in and checked out the situation. He began following Jessie back and forth through the house and out to the loaded car. Then the big ginger climbed into an empty drawer on her bed, curled up and refused to budge.

I went for a walk. In the rain. Half an hour out there I realized how insane this was. Came back, got in the car, took off. For hours did I drive. I couldn't tell you where if my life depended on it. Which, way I felt, pretty much summed up my story.

I arrived home around eleven, unprepared for what greeted me inside. The house was dark, yes, but there was a void I felt soon as I opened the door. I walked through and once more reached out for something small to hold on to. My favorite muesli bowl was gone. The spot on the living room floor where normally rested the oversize pillow I liked to sit on to read was vacant, a gaping cavity.

I stepped into Jessie's room, turned on the light. The room I referred to as the Piggery, a ten-year-old's expression of independence-cum-sloppiness, was barren. Open drawers stuck out of the desk and dresser, empty as starving mouths. Except one. Mister Futties, an intrepid nocturnal prowler, still lay curled up in the drawer on the bed. Refused to budge when I called over. Would not open an eye.

I sat on the floor and tried to meditate, but it was impossible to focus, to keep thoughts out. Indeed, they flew through my head with unreal rapidity.

And then it happened. Somewhere in the wood shavings of my brain a worm I long had thought dead began wriggling to the surface. I tried to shove it back down, plug up the hole.

'You're all alone!' it screamed. 'You're all alone and there'll be nobody to take care of you when you're old and feeble, alone Alone ALONE!!'

Oh shit, I thought, not now, not tonight. But I couldn't stop it: the worm was rising, growing larger, shouting louder: ALO-O-ONE!!! And I was freaking out of my skull, and my skull was set to explode

and then

it stopped

and from somewhere within came a different voice, softer, gentler: Alone? Fool, you've been alone all your life! You like being alone, remember? Remember?

and suddenly

Barry Rosenberg

the cocoon that I had long believed was protecting me, nurturing me, ensuring my security but in truth had been holding me captive, squeezing me like a giant fist, in slow motion exploded a million flecks and shards into the air all around me

and I became

a butterfly

a magnificent butterfly, spectacular in color and form, expanding, growing larger with each passing moment

until I filled the room

and I filled the house

and I filled the garden and the beach outside

and the sea

and the sky and

tears streamed down my face and

there were no more words and

no more thoughts

just tears and silence

and I was

Free.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



wheeled into america

MY FIRST TRIP BACK to America in twenty-five years was nearly sidetracked by the actions of an idiot.

The idiot was me.

With barely ninety minutes between the twelve-hour trans-Pacific flight and the connecting domestic to Philadelphia, I was worried about those never ending immigration/customs lines at LA International. I'd heard all kinds of horrific tales how, since 9/11, security agents were searching, scrutinizing, even stripping people coming into the country. My luck, surely they'd pick on me. Packs turned inside out, my smelly shoes examined, the dreaded bend-over-and-spread-'em ordeal as my scheduled flight to Philly took off without me.

But in truth this wasn't the fear which prompted my damn-fool action. I was afraid America would not let me in. Stop me before I'd set first foot back on Yankee soil.

Having abandoned the land of my birth, emigrating to New Zealand a quarter century before, plus all those terrible things I'd been saying and writing about the inane bullying tactics of America's megalomaniacal leaders (and this well before the Trump era!), I knew with absolute certainty I'd be denied entry.

Lately I'd been having these dreams; nightmares, actually: as I handed over my passport – my New Zealand passport – I'd get this icy glare, a siren would go off, a platoon of huge, thick-necked

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

marines would suddenly materialize, and I'd be frog-marched back onto the plane. Or worse, whisked off to that delightful resort with its guard dogs and razor wire and ninety-seven modes of torture called Guantanamo.

Then I discovered this brilliant diversionary tactic. A way to have them take pity on me. 'Yeah, right, he's done all these rotten things, but he's a pathetic old fart now, look at him. Okay, you! Get in here!'

It was my friend Ernie, another American expat living in NZ, who unwittingly planted the seed. In his mid-eighties and only semi-ambulatory, Ernie had gone back for a visit a couple years prior. I questioned him on procedure at LAX.

'Not a problem,' replied Ernie, who now has his own wings and therefore need of neither airport nor passport. 'I simply requested wheelchair assistance. Got pushed right to the front of the line.'

Ding!

Checking in at Auckland International, I put in my request. The clerk typed it into her computer. I was set. Wheel me in, Scotty!

I AWOKE AS THE PLANE was descending over the Southern California coastline. Not just from a fitful long-distance airliner sleep; as well I was aroused out of my hibernation from good sense. Wheeled into America? After twenty-five years??

But they were waiting for me. As I slow-stepped towards the exit amongst the shuffle of tired humanity and clumsy carry-on bags, the cabin crew pulled me aside. I protested weakly. All I received in return were courteous, we-know-best smiles. The small uniformed woman – Latina? Philippina? – standing behind the well-used wheelchair was anything but smiling. Serious business, this. Together, grinning attendants and somber airport worker stuffed me into the chair. And away we went.

The worst thing, as I sat slumped in the wheelchair, daypack on lap, tooling along at a rapid pace past the walkers, worst thing was the humiliation. On long distance flights passengers tend to become a sort of loose, we're-all-in-this-together community. You see the same faces, get to know idiosyncrasies. And here I was, picture of perfect health, being wheeled past the gang looking like Riff Raff in The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Passing the lovely French university student who'd sat next to me for a dozen hours, her mouth now slung open at the sight of me, I avoided eye contact.

I was pushed, as my friend Ernie had noted, directly to the front of the long snaking line. Where I was promptly mugshot, electronically fingerprinted, questioned why as an American citizen I was traveling on an alien passport. (See, my brother was dying and the US embassy said it'd take ninety days for a new document to be issued, therefore...). And that was it. I could've been toting a WMD on either shoulder, all the security precautions I encountered.

My ancient, scuffed red backpack arrived at the baggage carousel moments after I did. I stepped off the wheelchair, dragged bag from belt, strapped it on.

'Thanks very much,' I said with gleaming grin to my pusher-woman. 'I can walk from here. It's not far. I'll just take it slow. Tiny steps.'

'I've been directed to take you through customs, then outside to a special shuttle bus for people like you,' she announced in an emphatic staccato tone.

Oh.

'But I have a problem. There's a small ramp between here and customs. With your heavy bag it's too much for me to push you up the ramp.'

'Right. That settles it. Thanks ever so much. Well, bye now.'

The stern-faced little woman, late fifties, barely five feet tall, reached up and placed a hand on my shoulder and with the force of Thor's hammer flung me back into the chair.

'You wait right here. I'll get someone to help.' And made off through the crowd.

I waited. Sat in that wheelchair and waited. A minute. Two. Five. No sign of her. I looked around. Made to get up just as the woman reappeared, towing behind a very unhappy man in porter's garb.

'I'm gonna miss out carryin' bags!' The porter.

'Your contract says you have to do this!' Pusher.

'Hell with the contract. Y'all takin' away my livin'!' Porter.

'Look, I'm really sorry about this.' Wheelchair sitter.

'Ain't you, man. It's this bee-utch!'

'I'm putting you on report!'

'Look, I'm happy to walk. Honest.'

'You stay in that chair!'

'But -'

'But -!'

'But !!'

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

The porter positioned himself behind the chair and began pushing at close to warp speed.

‘Omigod! Omigod! Omigodomigodomi –!!’ Me, knowing with total certainty I’m headed *ker-splat!* into a wall.

Somehow, God Bless America, we made it to customs in record time without mishap. The porter stalked off, swearing loudly. The cursory inspection of my bags took less than a minute.

I wanted in the worst way to get off the chair and walk out to the street.

I didn’t dare.

Outside the terminal, the Latina/Philippina navigated me to the curb, where another wheelchair was already placed. Japanese woman in her sixties. Alongside her, standing tall, a man in uniform. And that’s when it hit me. The reason for the pusher-woman’s insistence on my remaining in the chair.

I’d been away twenty-five years. I had forgotten what it was that made America the great power she is, the most sought-after country on earth for refugees the world over. Freedom? Liberty? Democracy? Like hell.

Tipping.

I had no American money. Wait, I tell a lie. I did have American money. Two dozen hundred-dollar bills. Plus a crumpled piece of tan paper bearing the washed-out likeness of a very young Ed Hilary. I certainly wasn’t going to hand over one of the former. And I could just imagine the reaction should I give her a Kiwi fiver.

The special shuttle bus for ‘people like me’, destination the domestic terminal where I would catch my flight to Philly, pulled to the curb. The door opened. Backpack in one hand, daypack in the other, I cannon-balled myself off the wheelchair.

‘Thankyousomuch,’ I spit out in a groveling broken voice to the small woman standing behind my chair. ‘Really. Thank you. Thank you.’ And like an Olympic high hurdler I leaped onto the shuttle. I glanced back briefly; two things did I note: the Japanese woman handing some banknotes to her pusher, at least one of which was a green twenty. And the look of shock, horror and utter dismay on the face of the tiny woman who had, yes, with a little help, pushed me through that entire city of insanity called LA International.

I flopped down heavily, slackly, in the furthest seat from the door, my eyes cast solidly on the floor. Not a muscle did I move, nor breath take, until the Japanese woman had been settled in her seat and the shuttle started up and moved off, taking me into America.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



talking dirty is good for your health

MY LAST PARTNER could not say the F word. My last partner died of ovarian cancer. Is there a correlation? Probably not. Still...

This beautiful, super-fit woman, a champion triathlete, was prime product of a highly repressive English culture. Lots of rules. Heaps of things one shouldn't do. Or say. That she hooked up with a Yank Jewboy, offspring of a culture where, like the early 3D movies, everything not nailed down gets thrown at you, might seem enigmatic, but let's dig a little deeper.

The gorgeous Anita subconsciously wanted to break out of her cultural mummification, so chose me as the mate who might help her do so. (For sure I'd never have the chutzpah to seek out a woman who looked like she just stepped out of a Playboy centerfold.)

To her I was a free soul who spoke, wrote and did whatever was on his mind. But no way could I penetrate that stifling upbringing, nor, in truth, did I care to. I loved the woman for who and what she was – though it was often teeth-gnashingly frustrating. I'd bray at her, 'Damn it, woman, just go for it!' Which worked absolute wonders in alleviating her timidity, right?

To me, her condition was personified by the F word. 'Nobody around, only you and me,' I would plead. 'You love Billy Connolly and he uses it all the time. Go on, say it. Place your two front teeth on the lower lip and –' Sigh.

Late one night we went skinny-dipping in the sea just beyond my patch on New Zealand's 'most loved beach'. That is, I went skinny-dipping. Funny old dude with a bod looks like it was assembled out of disparate parts acquired from bins at the recycling station. She, a virtual parody of sculptured womanhood the sight of whose framework made me weak-kneed even after a couple years together, needed to cover up.

Following our nocturnal plunge, we stood dripping on the beach, and again I exhorted her to say the forbidden word. 'Yell it out,' I beseeched her. 'After which we'll pretend we're terrorists, wrap towels around our faces and run like hell for the house.' I even offered to provide the *fff* sound, all she'd have to do was a follow-up *uck*. Nup.

Of course, it wasn't limited to that word. This single syllable simply was symptomatic of how she lived her life: repression, denial, abnegation.

You might have worked out that sheilas and blokes are somewhat different. Sure, there's been a softening of these differences in recent years. Still, us fellas continue to physiologically accrue our stresses in the general area from neck to mid-chest, females in the lower abdominal/genital region. And nothing – nothing – is more stressful than a lifetime of self-repression, which manifests as layers of ugly until one day the blood cells just throw in the sponge and go berserk. Heart attacks for us males, malignant tumors for the ladies.

Historically, the British have an awful lot to answer for. Indiscriminately invade a country, set up their own government, steal the natural resources, subjugate the natives. Bad enough, but the very worst number the Brits ever pulled had to do with language.

Back during the days of good Queen Vic, the authorities in England imprisoned untold citizens they deemed undesirable. Because there were many who had broken no laws, the Brits created one with sweeping effect. They termed this 'For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge'. Since everybody over the age of, say, ten has some carnal knowledge, a host of people were affected.

In time, the acronym of this highly questionable legislation became a buzzword in the worst sense. Thus the F word, the true definition of which means the act of making love, as well as – good lord! – creating babies. Yet over the years it has become an appalling expression, not merely in English, but virtually every language worldwide. People, good people like my beloved Anita, became unable even to state it aloud.

And you know something? I can understand this overwhelming reluctance. The sound, the very vibration, of the word is dark, heavy, foreboding. One thinks immediately of a male, large and brutish, covered with tats. His name might be Buck, or Chuck. Drives a battered old truck. He's stuck, down on his luck, up to his neck in muck. Yuk!

The English back then might easily have avoided generations of verbal oppression simply by substituting a synonym in the law's name.

For Illegal Carnal Knowledge.

'Fick' is light, gentle, open...cheerful. Chap's name might be Mick, or Nick, or Rick. He's a good old stick. Doesn't miss a trick. Help you out in a tick.

A dear sweet gran stubs her toe getting out of bed, cries, 'Oh, fick!' No one bats an eye.

Mom kisses her kiddies at the door. 'Have a fucking good day at school, darlings!' Not a problem.

The PM herself uses it in Parliament. Nobody shrinks back in horror. No bleeps on prime time TV. Priggish editors needn't deplete their supply of silly asterisks.

For sure, it would lift the dark veil of self-repression to feel free to say the word out loud without fear of societal tut-tutting. And possibly, just possibly, such alleviating of rigid self-control might prevent a case or two of the devastatingly awful Big C.

I'll tell you this: ever I'm elected the first Jewish pope, my first papal decree will be encouraging citizens to engage in a little dirty talk. Because it's fucking good for your soul.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



so I said to the prime minister

LUNCH WITH THE prime minister was over. Great food, wonderful exchange of yarns, lots of laughs. The PM's top staffers all were there, sitting around a large table, while a pair of honored guests sat close by on either side of the head of state: one was the prominent Japanese architect Takehiko Nagakura; the other honored guest was a former schoolyard basketball player from Philadelphia. Me.

As we said our good-bys, I reached out for a farewell handshake. Instead, the prime minister, an athletic six footer then around fifty, brushed aside my hand, stepped closer, reached around and gave me a bear hug that squeezed the air out of my lungs, actually lifting me a few inches off the floor.

I HAD WANTED TO VISIT Bhutan for ever-so-many years. The tiny landlocked Himalayan country had lowered its drawbridge of isolation a mere generation back, upon which time the then-king, disdaining monetary value as a domestic measure, instead claimed his country's standard to be 'gross national happiness'. How could I possibly not want to travel to such a place?

Only trouble, to keep out the riff-raff the government invoked a policy whereby you need to pay US\$250 a day just to get in. (Includes hotels, meals and all touring; still...) Plus they don't welcome solo travelers. Two strikes against me.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

But when in 2013 I read a most positive appraisal of their newly elected prime minister, Tshering Tobgay, in the New York Times, I sat up and took note. And when the article claimed that Tobgay, who had gone to university in America (Pittsburgh, then later Harvard), loved basketball and had jokingly challenged US president Barack Obama, also a basketball nut, to a match of one-on-one but had yet to hear back, I couldn't help myself.

Dear Prime Minister

In my youth I played a lot of top-level schoolyard basketball in Philadelphia, and though now seventy-five with a couple wonky knees, I'm betting I can still give you a darn good scrap one-on-one. Perhaps it's been a while since you've seen a can't-miss high arcing two-hand set shot. It is, I assure you, a remarkable sight. So may I request that should you not hear back from Barry O that you consider a match with Barry R?

Hoping to hear from you on this matter of great urgency.

I slipped the letter into an envelope, addressed it 'Prime Minister, Bhutan', stuck on sufficient postage, dropped it in a postbox and promptly forgot about it.

Three weeks later I got an email purportedly from someone on the tourism council of Bhutan.

'The Prime Minister has instructed me to invite you here,' the email read, 'waiving the standard daily fee and providing free accommodation at some of our finest resorts for two weeks of your stay. Please select dates and email a copy of your passport.'

Initial gut feeling? Scam, obviously. Even a cyber dummy like me knows strange things go on in the digital universe. Probably some thirteen year old kid with spots, sitting in his mother's basement in Uruguay, had somehow got word of my appeal and was tempting me with this offer. Respond to it and my laptop would instantly be infested with worms the size of Dune's. Still, how could I resist. I simply couldn't.

. Which is why, some weeks later, I was seated in an aircraft as it made what appeared an impossible descent into the peak-ringed donut of Bhutanese mountains.

I was met at the airport by a smiling man who draped the white silk scarf of Buddhist welcome around my neck. And from there things got better and better.

I spent just shy of three weeks in the country. The land knocked me out. As did the people. As did my assigned tour guides, one of whom was the most beautiful woman I have to this day ever laid eyes on.

Except for my last five days, I was lodged free at multi-star resorts, as promised. Those final five days? Spent, would you believe, as guest of the beautiful tour guide at her apartment.

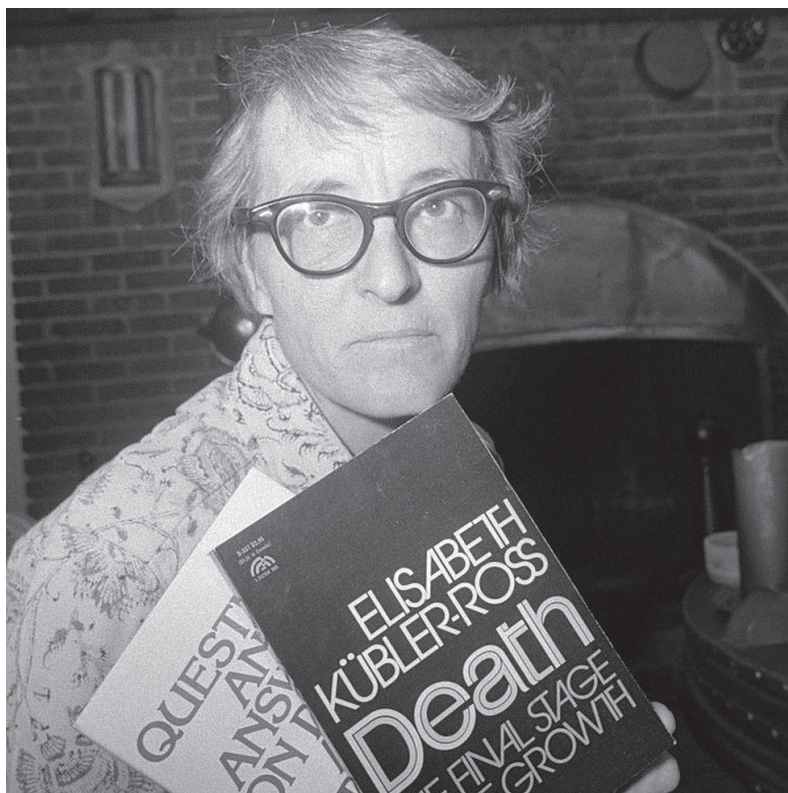
When my time in this magnificent Camelot-like country was over, the tour guide/accommodation hostess drove me to the airport in Paro, an hour from the capital of Thimphu. (Paro airport is located in such a precarious mountainous position that only trained Bhutanese pilots are permitted arrival/departure access.)

In the waiting area we had us a major hug: the still-dazzled hairy-faced then-septuagenarian in jeans and sweat shirt, the comely late-twenties tour guide in her lovely traditional *kira* robe which all Bhutanese women wear. We earned more than a few curious looks from locals.

It was only when the craft lifted over the snow-topped peaks (barely!) and the seat belt sign was turned off that it dawned on me the prime minister and I had never got around to the one-on-one match of basketball which brought me to his magnificent country in the first place.

And here I'd practiced for several minutes, actually one time working up a sweat, and on another occasion even got both feet off the ground attempting a jump shot.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



elisabeth

I'D ONLY LEARNED a couple days before that the most remarkable person I was to meet this lifetime would be making but a single New Zealand public appearance, and the five hundred-plus seat Bay Court venue had been sold out for weeks.

No worries. I got there an hour and a half before the scheduled start of events and, being a world class gatecrasher, I simply walked in like I belonged. Nobody about, so I began nosing around backstage.

Tried a door: broom closet. Another led to a set of stairs going up. I opened one more door and was immediately set upon by a wall of tobacco stink. I was about to close it when a voice called out: 'Come in, come in.'

Holding my breath, I took half a step in. A woman in her thirties stood in a windowless room not much larger than the broom closet. Seated in a chair behind her was a tiny person in her sixties, short silver-white hair combed over the forehead of a lined, androgynous face. Rumpled green blouse, baggy jeans and sandals. Only the blouse, which might've been slept in, gave hint to the wearer's sex. She was doing an ample portrayal of a chimney in a blizzard.

'I'm Joan,' announced the younger woman. 'And this is...'

DENVER, MID-1960s. A sprawling, first class medical facility. The prominent visiting Swiss psychiatrist was asked to deliver a lecture to a group of smug, bored med students.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross decided on a topic which had long been on her mind but never addressed: death and dying. Not only did this break a major medical establishment taboo – the subject was verboten, especially with patients – but she had the audacity to bring along a beautiful teenage leukemia patient, who was only too happy to discuss her imminent death.

Together they blew a theater full of minds.

The lecture became so well known that requests for printed copies poured in. Soon after, Kubler-Ross, buoyed by her one-off success, began lecturing on the subject of how to administer to the dying with understanding and compassion. (Lesson one: do not be afraid of the patient. Lesson two: do not lie to them.)

She soon became a star in the field she herself had created, conducting workshops and setting up programs and hospices for the terminally ill as well as for grieving next of kin. Her 1969 book *On Death and Dying* at once became the bible in the field. It still is.

Then she became involved in what happened after death. An entire planet's population, force-fed heaven/hell fear bullshit for eons, seemed to be awaiting her newest revelations with open ears and hearts. The star emerged into a Milky Way.

NOW IN THE TINY room, Kubler-Ross lit up another fag, blew the smoke above our heads. 'Yes, I smoke,' she said, answering a question I'd never have had the nerve to ask. 'And drink lots of coffee. I live a very unhealthy life. I don't eat brown rice and vegetables three times a day. I don't meditate twenty-three hours a day. Those who do don't get much accomplished, do they? My life is my work. Sitting talking to some beautiful, open person who soon is to die, who knows it and is so very much at peace about it – that is my meditation. Do you understand?'

She used her thick Germanic accent like a spatula working a stir-fry.

'It takes a Swiss workaholic to do this. I've had four weeks of non-stop workshops in this country. And people grabbing at me all the time. But I'm learning to say no.' To Joan: 'Didn't I say no to that lady tonight?'

Joan smiled, nodded, then stepped out, leaving me alone with, save perhaps only for the Dalai Lama, the most famous person in the world there in 1987.

'Are you still getting flak in your work?' I wondered.

'Oh my god!' she replied. 'A lot of what I do now has to do with AIDS victims. It's the new social scourge. If you support AIDS patients you're equally guilty, you're promiscuous, homosexual.'

'We tried to start an AIDS hospice in Virginia where I live. We were very nearly lynched. I mean that literally. If the police hadn't come to our rescue they would have killed us. It's incredible!'

I asked what she had experienced here in New Zealand.

'Mostly wonderful acceptance – although the site of the workshop I just finished in Christchurch had to be changed because a fundamentalist group there refused to lease us their center once they realized what we were telling people.'

'And, of course, the medical profession is very slow to change, do you understand? But the few doctors and nurses I've met working in the field here are marvelous people, top-notch, not the usual at all.'

Had the press been treating her well lately?

'They blow hot and cold. In the beginning they spit in my face. I mean, a doctor in a hospital talking honestly to a dying patient! Ten years later they put me on a pedestal. When I started talking about life after death, again down came the axe. I didn't mind what they said, really I didn't.'

'Then one day I open the paper and read: Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has venereal disease. I was so angered: how can they say this? I was determined to sue for libel.'

'Right at this time I was taking a plane with my son Kenneth, who was off to university. As we sat in our seats, I dropped a number of newspapers in his lap, all with bad things about me. I put the VD story on the bottom.'

'I watched as he quickly flipped through, then handed them back to me. I said, "What do you think?" He just shrugged. "But what about that last one?" He said, "Aw, Ma." As if to say, how can you let such rubbish bother you? And suddenly I was hit with the truth. If it didn't bother him, why should it bother me? If I sue, it's only fighting negativity with negativity, which begets more negativity.'

Kubler-Ross was a born yarn-meister, every one fascinating. You got the feeling she'd told each tale a thousand times, and it got better with each telling. The good, the bad, the adulation, the condemnation, she enjoyed it all, and you could not help but enjoy it with her.

'Have you had any contact with Maori here?'

'I've had Maori people talk to me when I visited their marae.'

They talk about their dying relatives, and they talk about their spiritual beliefs. They tell me absolutely everything they're trying to tell the white man in the white man's own language but nobody listens. We totally connect.

'Same thing with the aboriginals. At the end of the workshop I recently did in Alice Springs a group came out of the bush – literally – and presented me with the hardwood snake, which is same as the peace pipe with the American Indians, the traditional acceptance. I said to them: How do you people know who I am? And they looked at me as if to say, White woman, what a stupid question! Then they turned and disappeared back into the bush. And I thought: I have three MD degrees and compared to this they're just crap.'

At this point, more than an hour gone by, Joan returned and announced the lecture was about to begin. When she stood, Kubler-Ross came up just shy of my shoulder.

The two left the room; I did not. I sat there in that smoky, smelly cell digesting the understanding that for a tiny space in time I'd been gifted with being in the presence of the most fascinating person I'd ever encountered. This understanding has remained unchanged to this day.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



One day a year

(a short story)

I HOISTED THE HEAVY pack's strap onto the right shoulder and slowly jogged to where the Holden sat idling. Approaching on the left, I bent low and peeked in the window. There was only the driver, an older male, sixties, white hair, craggy, leathery, pleasant face.

As this was an older vehicle, hand-rolled windows, I opened the door wide enough the man might get a look at me. This was always a bit of a dance. I'd tell the driver where I was heading, driver'd reply where he was going, I'd hop in or I wouldn't. Here, it didn't matter just so long as I got out of this place, lovely as it was, else I might be stuck in Godknows, Otago forever.

An agreement in place, I opened the back door to drop the pack onto the seat. The driver suggested the boot might be easier, but I just smiled and said thanks, back seat'll be fine. It had never happened, but I'd heard of instances where the hitchee places bag in the boot, slams down the lid, and immediately the driver speeds off. And though I always carried everything of value on my person, to lose your pack in the middle of nowhere is not a terribly joyful experience.

Once seated, I offered my name and a hand to shake. The driver, name Morrie, then shifted gears and away we went. The next phase generally was your obligatory feeling-out process: where're you from, what do you do, is it safe to be hitching alone.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

Morrie didn't seem to care where I was from, what I did. Refreshing. Only thing the man did ask, was I a reader, and when I said yes, wondered what I read.

'Anything that's well written and not beyond my mental capacity.' I considered revealing I was a writer, but was weary from coming off several hours on the track then waiting around ages for a ride and didn't care to handle the obligatory follow-up questions. Anyway, my response appeared to satisfy his curiosity.

'I only ask because not many people these days are readers. Not real readers. Me, I'm old school. Like to get my nose in a good book, bigger the book the better. Love to get lost in a story. Biographies mostly, but give me a good thriller, I'm in heaven.

'I'm lucky, I suppose. Grew up before telly got a foothold, so as a kid I listened to radio drama. Had to form your own pictures, create the characters' faces and the environment around them just from the sound of actors' voices. For me, it was like going to an imagery gym, really developed the mental picture-making muscles. I can remember lying in bed at night listening to those voices, spellbound, not a thought in my head besides being right there with the characters and their situations. Don't like to sound as though the good old days were better than now, but I do believe all this new technology gives people too much information, cuts down on folks creating their own pictures.'

We rode along several minutes without a word. Then: 'Are you able to, as they say, think outside the box? What I mean, if somebody brought up, oh, say, UFOs, do you immediately jump in and either cry rubbish! or say yes, and the US government is hiding captive aliens at Roswell?'

'Neither, really. I generally require data before I form an opinion. Sometimes I think I ought to take more of a gut stand on certain things. But I just don't know enough to even be halfway certain.'

'And life after death?'

I felt myself suddenly grow wary, that this might be the jumping off point for a sermon, and in a minute Morrie would reach over and pull a few pamphlets out of the glove box. But neither happened. Instead, he looked over, was silent for several seconds.

'You in a big hurry?' he then asked.

O-kay, I thought. Where's this going?

'What I was wondering, if you have the time, I'd like to take you a bit out of your way, over to a village not far from here, meet some people you might find interesting.' I had a moment of concern. No, a bit more than concern. I call it Barrynoia.

‘This isn’t a prayer meeting, something like that?’

‘Nope. Just a delightful old couple I believe you’d be interested to meet.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘This is kind of a special day for them; you just might find it, uh, enlightening to share it with them.’

I thought about it. At this point in my life, mid-forties, I’d gone from conventional middleclass human – urban upbringing, university educated, rising young executive, hup-two-three-four – my early existence a combination of depression and boredom, one feeding off the other, and a dozen years back had switched lifestyle gears. I’d pledged myself early-on in the metamorphosis period to tackle my fears head-on and explore whatever new experiences came my way.

‘Yeah, sure,’ I said finally. ‘Let’s drop in on your old friends.’

‘Fine,’ he smiled. ‘Now, without getting all mysterious about it, may I ask that you simply observe without asking questions? Eyes and ears open, and whatever questions might arise you save till we get back on the road?’

‘Wow, sounds, I don’t know, am I going to be given a glass of dosed wine, wake to find myself hanging upside down in the basement next to the others come before me?’

‘Arsenic and Old Lace, eh. Teddy Roosevelt charging up the stairs while the two old sisters sweet-talk Cary Grant. Loved that movie. But no, this is New Zealand. Backyard sheds, that’s us. Never got around to basements, so no worries there.’

A few miles along, Morrie made a left onto a dirt road that was even narrower than the paved one we’d been on. I took out my much-folded South Island map but the new road must have been pretty insignificant because it didn’t even show.

We drove maybe twenty more minutes when a village seemed to appear out of nowhere. Small, nicely-looked-after homes, well cared-for gardens. Your prototype NZ dairy which stocked everything, the petrol station, butchery. A car passed slowly and Morrie and the other driver exchanged a wave.

‘Someone you know?’

‘Not really. It’s just sort of tradition in small places to say giddyay to another driver. I often wonder just where the line is drawn, where a road becomes sparsely frequented enough for this to happen. But you don’t really think about it. The other driver waves, you wave back. Here’s our place, just up ahead.’ He pulled up and parked on the verge.

When we got out I eyed my bag in the back, then over to where Morrie was standing. ‘Look, I’ll lock if you want,’ he said, ‘but I can assure you –’

‘Nah, it’s okay. Really. Force of habit when you’re traveling.’ Following a moment’s hesitation, Morrie did lock the car. Didn’t make a big thing out of doing so, still, I felt a bit stupid.

We walked up the pebbled drive. There was a screen door and behind it the front door was wide open. Morrie knocked lightly, waited, then again. Through the screen I could see a small older woman approach. She seemed hesitant, her hand to her mouth. But when Morrie softly said, ‘Afternoon, Fiona,’ she immediately took her hand away and smiled.

‘Well hello, Morrie. What brings you around today?’ She opened the screen door, allowed us to step around it and enter.

‘I wasn’t far off, and reckoned you might like to meet my young friend here who’s touring our fair land. And for him to meet you and Graham. He’s here, I take it.’

‘Yes, of course. Please.’ We paused to take off our footwear. Mine no doubt still carried evidence of a recent four day tramp, so I didn’t mind all the untying and tugging off. We followed Fiona into a lounge area that might have been decorated just after WWII, but was clean and uncluttered and had the warmest feel to it. An older man set aside the newspaper he was reading, removed his glasses and got up, a hand extended. Morrie introduced me by name, but said nothing about having picked me up by the side of the road.

‘I imagine you’re both waiting,’ he said, ‘and I hope our showing up isn’t a bother.’

‘When he comes, he comes,’ Graham replied affably. Nothing to do but wait patiently.’

Fiona disappeared, and a short while later I could hear sounds of a jug boiling and cups and dishes being laid out from the nearby kitchen.

Morrie and Graham engaged in small talk for a time: the weather, rising prices, frustration with some recent government decisions. Fiona returned with a tray containing a large steaming teapot, four cups and matching saucers, a small pitcher of milk, bowl of sugar, a plate of still warm home-baked cookies.

As I sat there holding on my lap a tea-filled cup on its saucer, a cookie nearby upon my thigh, feeling the old-fashioned goodness of the place, the gentleness of the old couple, I couldn’t help sense a nervousness in Fiona. I hoped my presence wasn’t the reason. Usually in situations like this I feel a responsibility to say something to break the ice, ease any awkwardness, and was all set to start in with

conversation when I remembered Morrie's gentle admonition to look, listen and keep mum. So I simply took some deep breaths and tried to listen to the surface chatter taking place.

And then something changed, quite dramatically. Fiona suddenly looked past me, her eyes growing wide. She placed her cup and saucer gently on a tiny table alongside her chair and rose up to full height. The two older males did likewise. I twisted around to see a young man standing in the doorway, which I thought a tad odd in that I hadn't heard anyone enter the house. The man appeared to be late twenties or early thirties and wore a military combat uniform, spotlessly clean and perfectly pressed. His head was bare, revealing thick, darkish hair. He was a handsome sort, almost a glow about him.

'Mum, Dad. You're both looking well.'

As I stood and faced the new arrival, both parents moved slowly across to where their son stood. I figured they'd give him hugs, as it was apparent they hadn't seen one another for a time. Fiona, especially, made like there was nothing in the world she wanted more than to reach out and touch her boy. Instead, they stopped a few feet off, peering up at his face with shining eyes.

I happened to glance over at Morrie, and noted the man was trying to catch my eye. He nodded; time to go and leave the family to their reunion.

We set our cups and saucers on a table and stepped around the trio. Morrie smiled at the soldier, who smiled back. Me, I might've been invisible. Just by the screen door I picked my boots off the floor; Morrie did the same with his shoes. Outside, we sat on the step and slipped on footwear without a word. Walked down the drive to the accompaniment of soles and heels scraping pebbles. Just a single vehicle, Morrie's, was parked on the verge. How did the old couple's son get here if not by vehicle, and I hadn't heard one pull up. Out of habit I checked to see my pack resting safely on the back seat prior to setting hand on the front door handle, forgetting Morrie had locked it.

Once we were settled inside the car, he started the motor, drove a short distance then made a U turn and proceeded past the house and away from the village back the way we'd come. It wasn't until we returned to the main road, made a left and continued on that words were spoken.

'So, my friend, what did you make of the scene back there?'

'What do you mean? Parents welcoming a son they apparently haven't seen in a time.'

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

'Uh huh.' We drove a few miles further, again in silence. 'And if I told you their son, Stanford's his name, was in the Vietnam thing?'

'Okay.'

'In the earliest days of the Vietnam thing.'

'Wait. That was -' I paused to do the math '- middle sixties, right? Nearly twenty years ago. But he - Stanford - looks far too young to have been, um...'

'That's right, he does appear too young to have been in the military at that time. However, I can assure you he was.'

We drove a while longer, complete silence.

'Er, Morrie...there's definitely something you're not telling me.'

'Yup. Now, were your eyes and ears working, as I'd suggested?'

'I believe so. Why?'

'All right, tell me what you observed.'

'You mean things out of the ordinary.'

'Mm.'

I took a breath, let it out slowly. 'Like, his sudden appearance without any sound?' Morrie nodded. 'He didn't take off his shoes.'

'Good.'

I looked over to the driver. 'No touching, though Fiona certainly wanted to.'

'Yep.'

'Mate, you're spooking me out a little.'

'Sorry. Not meaning to. It's just, you recall what we were talking about before? And I wondered can you think outside the box?'

'Sure.'

'Okay. Put together everything you've just told me about what you observed.'

'Guy's too young to have been in Nam.'

'Right.'

'Suddenly appears without any sound.'

'Go on.'

'They don't touch.'

'Anything else?'

'Yeah, I got chills up my spine. Look, this has gone from spooky to creepy. Hell are you saying here?'

'My bad, sorry. You're the first outsider I've ever exposed to this, forgot you're not nearly as used to it as I am. Again, apologies. But you saw with your eyes and heard with your ears, and it strikes me you indeed are able to think outside the box. So take a guess. Or, I should say, as many guesses as you'd like.'

‘He’s some sort of hologram.’

The man paused. ‘Now, that’s a fascinating thought! But no, not a hologram. Stanford was real, all right.’

‘Didn’t think so. I mean, he sure looked sturdy, real flesh and blood.’

Morrie nodded slightly. Then a bit harder, as though coming to an understanding with himself. ‘Stanford may well be flesh and blood. But he was killed in action on 15 February, 1965. Battle of Hue.’

The chill up my spine turned into an icicle. ‘Today’s the 15th of February,’ I said in a whisper.

‘He appears every year this date. Just for a few minutes. In that wee village, and so far as I know, the only place in the world this happens, dead children come back on the anniversary of their deaths to visit the parents. Problem is, the parents age but the child doesn’t.’

‘And that’s the only problem you can think of?’ I gulped. ‘Jesus Christ! Look, just for the hell of it, let’s assume this whole number wasn’t staged for my benefit. Which, were I considering this from a, um, normal state of mind, it would have to be. But right, I’ll play along here. What the fuck, man? Excuse the language.’

‘Oh,’ Morrie laughed, ‘I think in your position I’d use worse. See, you’ve just asked the unanswerable question. Even more remarkable than the fact that it happens, is nobody really remembers exactly the first time it happened. Very few outside the village have the slightest idea this takes place.’

‘But you don’t live there, and you know.’

Morrie looked over with a touch of sadness, then back out the windscreen. ‘I used to live there. I was the vicar. When I first got word this was going on, of course I doubted what I heard. Doubted what I saw with my own eyes. Then I made a mistake.’ He sighed. ‘I was invited to observe a meeting by a lovely family whose fourteen year old daughter, whom I had known well, was killed in a car crash. When on her anniversary she appeared in their house, just as Stanford did back there, I freaked. This can’t be! To prove it – maybe I too had the notion of a hologram – I reached out to touch her. I had been warned, mind you, but my doubts, oh my doubts. I just had to do it. The whole situation was against everything I had been taught, you see; what I believed in. She was flesh and blood, all right. But moments after I touched her, she slowly vanished. And the look on her face! I had caused her, and her loving parents, as well a brother and sister who were there, to lose the most cherished moments they might experience.’

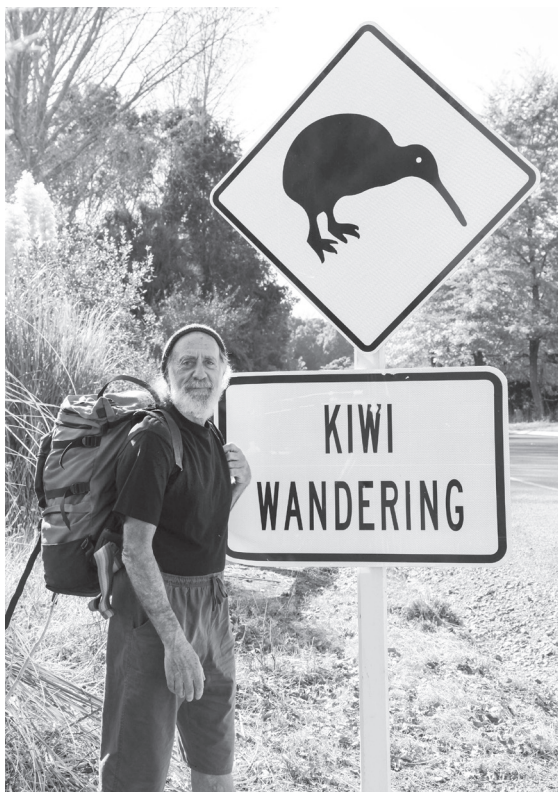
30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

‘Word got round the village what I had done, this sacred taboo that everyone seemed to know about, and respect. Not only was I mortified, I, well, I guess you can say I lost my faith. That’s when I took off the collar. I traveled overseas some years. I think I was drunk most of that time. Well, I cleaned myself up, recovered some of my belief. When I returned to this area the people in the village were quick to state their forgiveness, even pleaded with me to again be their spiritual leader. I couldn’t. Just could not.’

We drove on another half hour, until we reached the town I’d originally been headed. I stepped out of the car, retrieved my pack from the back seat, strapped it on.

Morrie reached out and shook my hand. The car slowly pulled away, and I walked into the town to find accommodation for the night.

Note: This experience took place during my earliest days in New Zealand, before even I decided to immigrate here. Although the few people spoken of may well be dead by now, I have changed their names to keep on the safe side. I’ve also disguised the location of the village. And, to save doubters the nuisance of their minds being blown, have called it a short story.



muse of the road

THE IRONY IS THAT for my first twenty-two years I slept in the same room in the same house every single night except for the few weeks every summer when I would accompany family to the nearby seashore. A team of mules couldn't budge me from the security blanket known as home; in all that time I never ventured more than sixty miles from my base. Then I ran afoul of The Law.

The Law said you must put on an ill-fitting uniform and serve your country else we'll throw your sorry ass in jail. So I stepped aboard an aircraft for the first time, and hours later I was lining up with fifty other sorry ass Law afoulers, wearing an ugly green garment designed for a pregnant giraffe, sleeves and trouser cuffs rolled up several times, waiting to have my head shaved. ('Don't worry, son, the hair will grow back.') (Yeah, right.)

The experience was the first seed that took root in what would become a great forest of travel. Twenty-six thousand, six hundred-plus days later I am still applying the prime lesson of life the US Air Force taught me: how to roll clothing so small, so tight, you can stuff a rucksack with double, even triple, the number of wearables a civilian can manage. Bless you, Uncle Sam.

By the time I turned fifty I'd had an equal number of different countries' entry stamps in passports which due to so many added pages resembled concertinas. The bug had bit and I was a lifetime junkie.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

In the old days it was easier. Just show up at the airport in my home city of Philadelphia, hang around the special section set aside for international charter flights, use my savvy understanding of human nature to pick out a bribable clerk and for fifty bucks I had me a seat on a flight going, well, I didn't care where it was going so long as it landed on the opposite side of the Atlantic.

In Europe I got around mostly by thumb and other people's vehicles. If I planned on going to X, and a kindly driver was heading all the way to Y, then Y it was. I met people. Locals. Fellow travelers. Strangers. Who quickly became unstrangers. I'm sure that if I had passed the same people on the streets of Philly we wouldn't even exchange glances.

Then an amazing thing happened. People who owned magazines wanted to pay me to write about my experiences on the road. Unreal! I did this for years. Then one day I got a free ticket to fly to a place called – what was it again? – ah yes, New Zealand, to write about that quaint, far-off place for the American public. I checked a world map and there it was, down and to the right of Australia.

I GOT TO NEW ZEALAND IN 1980. Hitched from top to bottom, back up again. I never wrote about my NZ travels for the American public. No way did I want them coming and blanketing the beautiful shoreline with thirty story condos. Instead, I applied for residence. They informed me straight away I had no real skills the country was looking for, and besides, fewer than one percent of applicants currently were being accepted. But applying was free back then (boy, have they since learned!) and I could hang around till they officially told me to scram. So I requested they put my application through the mill. Eight months later they informed me I had been accepted. Somehow I had the presence of mind not to cry out, You're shitting me, right!?

All those years on the road I had no fixed abode. Told myself who needs a home? After all, the road was my home. Lying through my teeth, I was. 1985 I bought a property on a seven mile NZ beach. Actually, what I bought was a patch of paradise which happened to have a house on it. Though constructed thirty-six years prior, the native timber three bedroom single-story felt as if it had grown up around me. Living there, I realized you could do all sorts of things to a house to fit your personal specs and needs. As well, I learned that if you plant little things in the ground, often they grow big and you can eat them, or simply look at their shapes and colors and feel good. Having so settled,

I reckoned my roading days were now behind me. Another lie. I did go a couple years as a homebody. But then I began to feel curiously scratchy. Caught myself standing on tiptoes and peering through the trees on my patch, past the seven mile beach and magnificent ocean, to unseen lands far, far beyond. The road, alas, was calling.

Behind me as I type is a built-in bookcase, an entire shelf containing dozens of school notebooks which have served as annual journals since first I moved into my beachfront patch. (The yarn following this one, entitled Ramblin, is reproduced word for word from such a journal.) On each journal cover are scribbled the names of countries I had resided that year. Not just passed through, a day here, a few nights there. Resided. There is no set number of days or weeks to reach this sense. Instead, it is the time it takes to meet up with a certain magical presence.

What I have to say now I suppose can be listed under extra-sensible perception. You can't see her, or hug her or even have a decent conversation. But she's there all right, and every veteran traveler I've spoken with has agreed one hundred percent as to her presence. We know her as the Muse of the Road. And you'll forgive me (or not) that I refer to her as a her. Because all who speak from experience know for certain the Muse is female.

The Muse is always there for true roadies. It simply takes a while before you connect with her. You may have been a traveler since the beginning of time, and have delighted in her presence each journey you have taken. Then you return home to normal human existence and your memory gets stuffed in a drawer. So when next you take to the road again, even though you've done this innumerable times, there exists a period before you regrow your road legs. Then comes an unannounced moment when she's there for you. (Astute readers will be able to detect the precise moment in Ramblin when she revealed herself.)

A few years back I had spent several days in a new place feeling not completely comfortable. Couldn't for the life of me figure out why. The tiny city of Leh, in the district of Ladakh, in the nation known as India, had everything. Nice people, wonderfully laid-back atmosphere, plus the snow-peaked mountains that surrounded the town were nothing shy of breathtaking. But I was not there; I was just visiting there.

I was sitting on a bench in the busy market street one morning, and with no forethought or expectation, suddenly there she was. The

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

Muse, who had been waiting patiently for me to awaken, to regain the true sense of the traveler that I am, sat down alongside and laid a hand gently on top my head. Talk about a religious experience.

As I write this, I have gone two years without leaving my adopted country, heck, not even departing my home and beach for more than a couple days at a time. Covid.

At 30,000 days (plus some few hundred more since that anniversary), there's always the paranoiac notion the pandemic will outlast me, or decrepitude will suddenly hip-shove aside the required physical good health I am currently blessed with, or some old fart head condition will have me confusing Austria with Albania, or Tanzania with Tasmania, in which case return home immediately and join the local quilting club.

Except there's no way – none – I can imagine myself being denied the pleasure of hitting the road and meeting up with Her Majesty the magical Muse once again.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



ramblin

BOOMBOOM. Not a blade of green grass anywhere everything brown the cows are dry sheep starving miles and miles and miles of parched withering life forms becoming nonlife forms. And then the West Coast. Green again. And then the rain. At first the sound on the metal roof is welcome. I thrill to the wealth it brings to the earth beneath me. But on and on harder more columns of water pillars. Ben the VeeDub van begins to leak. First one spot. Then another. Shit look there another. Plink plop. Rags and cups and pots everywhere. I step outside totally encapsulated in plastic and rubber to make my own water return in two minutes drenched. I move on a ways but visibility is limited to the windscreen. So I park by a lake. Scenic wonderment three asterisks says the guide book. But not today. That night come the mosquitoes. How the hell do they get in – follow the raindrops? A platoon a battalion a goddamn regiment. Okay here you bastards take your blood just don't sing to me of your conquests! But no. Sonatas in A-positive. I learn the roads are washed out above and beyond. Imprisoned in a metal coffin on wheels one that smells of wet dog. Three days. Not just rain: RAIN. As only Noah could love. Enough already! HELP!!! And then just like that it stops. I step out with wet clothes bedding name it. Lord of the Wring. Back on the road everything crisp clear fresh. On my left the Southern Alps to the right the sea. Finally peace. Boomboom.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

BOOMBOOM. Margaret is a tiny beautiful woman of 74. Her husband is a year older and an alcoholic. Margaret's husband is a retired seaman and a bully. She tells me over a delightful lunch that she had left him for three years but returned a year ago. Nothing changed. He won't stop drinking won't stop bullying. So she spends most of her time in the garden. The garden is immaculate. I ask her if she's afraid to be on her own is this why she came back. She says no those three years apart were her finest in over a half century of marriage. What then? I felt so guilty she says softly. I talk to her about reincarnation and karma the little I know about such things. Don't you think you've worked off whatever debt you may have owed this being? Margaret's clear blue eyes light up. So few people think like that she says. Do you? I wonder. Oh yes! And it's so encouraging to hear someone else say what I feel so strongly to be true. I finish my lunch wondering whether Margaret will ever leave for good her drunken bully. Boomboom.

BOOMBOOM. I am a cosmic flea. I flit from here to there place to place one temporary shelter to the next. Here on the road strangers are opening their doors to me. A short week ago this seemed so bizarre and I felt strange about the imbalance of payments. No longer for now I understand. Now when a door is held open I walk in. If it doesn't feel right I don't hang around. If it does I put down my bag. No sooner I do than the unloading begins. I am taken into immediate and total confidence. Father McRosenberg with his collapsible confessionals on wheels. 'I don't know why I'm telling you all this': the inevitable interjection. I do. It is my lot. I get a bed and a meal you get a sympathetic ear. (All I ask is you tell your yarn well. All yarns are pretty much the same it's the telling that sets them apart.) I guess they think I'm safe. A cosmic flea is not apt to hang around very long and when I go I take your woes and dump them beyond everybody's sight. Boomboom.

BOOMBOOM. The sea is angry this morning lifting and dropping the ferry like a piece of pumice. I know it's only a matter of time. That time arrives. I fight through the crowd standing under the canopy. Over the rail but into the wind and breakfast is now on my jacket. Swerving and stumbling I make it to the other side sit on a bench besides two yobbo types. The sea doesn't bother them in the least. One reaches into a soiled paper bag and removes two greasy meat 'poiz' handing one to his mate. I lurch for the rail. I am doubled in half my nose nearly level with the top of the passing swells. Behind me come

the chortles of the dimwit yobbos. As I hang there the wooden rail both supporting me and digging into my waist issuing forth ghosts of dinners past I lift my head in time to see an albatross majestic in full wing-spread soaring barely an inch above the water not a feather in movement. I am now two the hassled tourist and the marveling traveler half of me in agony half enraptured by this wondrous creature before me. Boomboom.

BOOMBOOM. The German hitchhiker has a Madonna's face and trim curvaceous body. She's been thumbing on her own for three months she informs me. We swap yarns and laughs and delight one another with tales of the road. At dusk I drive her into a campground where she rents a cabin. We go for a walk then return to Ben where I set up the cooker and prepare a feast. As we eat I silently thank the gods of the road for sending her my way. After dinner as we sit quietly sipping herbal tea she begins. A rave becomes a rant. About her non-understanding boyfriend. About his kid brother who became her lover. About her jealous sister and bitchy mother and about the time she swallowed 25 capsules to rid herself of her lot and even failed at that. She lights up a joint to help her sift through the memory bank. Pungent gray smoke fills poor old Ben. I open all the windows and battle for fresh air. When it's late she thanks me for a wonderful evening and sits with her hand on the door handle waiting for a word. The one I give her is goodnight. Boomboom.

BOOMBOOM. 'You're lucky' says my host a family man with a steady job. 'I could never live alone like you do. I'd be far too lonely.' How many times have I heard this in my travels. I smile and say nothing. Let him think what he thinks. Lonely? Let me tell you. I don't get lonely very often. Whether home or here on the road I generally manage to occupy my thoughts and time. I read I write I walk I listen to music. What else is there when you're not busy worrying about the mortgage or changing diapers? HOWEVER...when loneliness comes it does not come slowly and subtly taunting me like a dull ache. It shoots out of the sky like the hammer of Thor and strikes dead center in the heart. It comes at no specific time or set situation and its moment of duration can be an hour or a day or two or three. It overpowers me consumes me like the whale did Jonah. I am its slave. Whatever rational sense I might otherwise be afflicted with is gone. I watch myself eating far beyond any sensible point of satiation. I compose in

my head long heartfelt letters to people I have neither been in touch with nor thought about for ages. I rave to anyone unfortunate enough to come within earshot. I seriously read the jobs available ads and might even answer one or two just to be doing something. I ask myself a million unanswerable questions the main one being what the hell is wrong with me that I am alone? And then at some moment just like the West Coast rain it's gone. I know it was there was real but for the life of me can't figure out why. Like a dog that's taken a fall I get up shake it off and continue on my way. Boomboom.

BOOMBOOM. From "Death of a Scavenger" a detective book picked up at a charity shop written by some dude named Keith Spores I never heard of: '...half of life is happy the other half is melancholy. One is as natural and necessary as the other. The purpose of life is not as most people think to be happy. The purpose is merely to be – and be gone. You float with the current from the headwaters to the end and the strokes you take along the way have little effect on your course. The banks of the river determine that.' These words are read by candlelight late at night in a hut on the Routeburn track. The truth finds me in the most unlikely places and from the most unexpected sources. Boomboom.

BOOMBOOM. The mountains and lakes and seas and plains have become a continuous stretch of form and shape and color and earthly plasma. Days and dates and places and facts have lost their hard edge grow soft softer dissolve into uneventful memory. I try to recall the business I'm on and forget I'm trying to recall the business I'm on. It is on this day at this moment I realize I have once again found my road legs found the flow. A second ago I was just traveling. Now I'm ramblin. Shit hot! Boomboom.

BOOMBOOM. I call them Sadie and Max. They are paradise ducks but that's a name given them by men. I have a block against remembering men-assigned names for things. It took me two years to remember pohutukawa (is that the right spelling? Does the pohutukawa give a shit?) and only then because it sounds like bahut achchah which is Hindi for very good. One drizzly day I am walking with a young woman a born-again Christian through the bush around Lake Matheson. We stop at a clearing and look out to the distance. In one of those lovely little miracles of nature the clouds part momentarily

bringing to view the glorious peaks of Fox Glacier. Below the snow line a brilliant red tint is softly highlighted by the setting sun. Pohutukawa I say knowingly making sure I don't say bahut achchah which would mean nothing to a born-again Christian. No Pohutukawas are only in the North Island she replies. Those are rata (which I now remember only because it's the first syllables of a machine gun blast). Which brings me back to Sadie and Max. She's the whitehead he the blackhead. They are always found in a pair and not often do you see more than one pair at a time. I have grown very fond of Sadie whitehead and blackhead Max. They represent union as I have never known it. They converse in alternating staccato squawks hers a little higher than his. It seems that Sadie does most of the squawking – at Max of course who pays her no mind. It is when they take off and fly together that Sadie and Max present their truest harmony. Oh how they fly in such magnificent union. I wonder would I mind having a mate who squawked at me if we could fly together like that. Boomboom.

BOOMBOOM. In all my past ramblings this has never happened. Normally when I meet and stay with people who have kids the kids are a necessary nuisance. I tolerate them because after all it's their home too. But I have never been fond of their little mind games their attention-getting tactics. This trip for the first time the kids are coming to me with spittle-chins and knowing smiles and I am responding accordingly. I find myself playing with them taking walks with them eating together sitting by the side of their beds and reading to them of hairy brigands and grandfatherly pirates and goldfish that grow gigantic. And when they are softly asleep I stay and look at them and feel a melting of the heart. Suddenly and delightfully I am grandpa to kids from Marlborough Sound to Stewart Island. I wonder if this is growing up or just growing old. Boomboom.

BOOMBOOM. Ben the VeeDub van is my womb like me slow and sure and together we are one molded perfectly to each other's fabric. Three planned weeks have stretched to four and now five and I wonder can I go on forever. I come to a city a small city where I spent a few pleasant days at the start of the journey. But now something is wrong. I walk the streets and no one looks me in the eye. I catch a movie browse the second hand shops patronize a favorite bakery – all the standard things but something is very wrong. On the third day in the city I figure out what it is. It's gone it's no longer there:

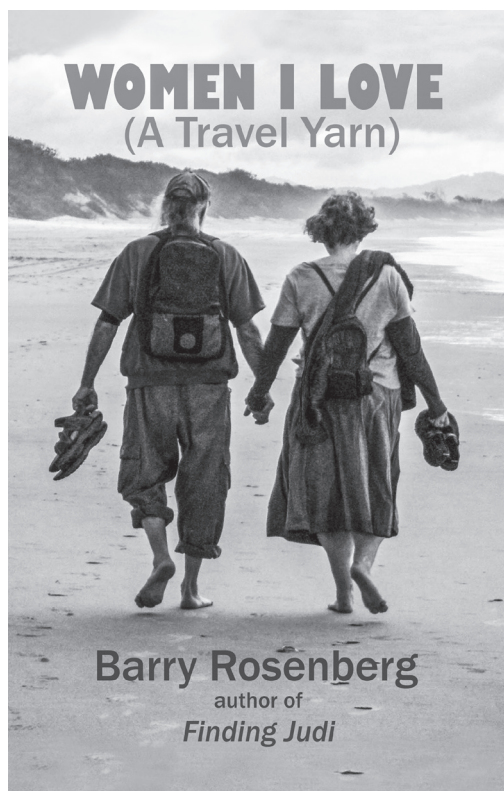
30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

boomboom. In a sweat and half-panic I jump in Ben and drive hell-bent out of the city streets and houses becoming roads and paddocks and hills with sheep. Then a lake then the sea then the mountains. Then I hear it faintly at first then gradually it grows louder. Boomboom. Boomboom. Boomboom.

BOOMBOOM. It is a heartbeat. It is THE heartbeat this magical land's and mine – one. Not even an echo – one. In the mountains or on the farmlands or by the sea it is loud. I hear it in my ears taste it in my mouth. I touch myself anywhere and I can feel it. Boomboom. Boomboom. Boomboom. I am its message bearing fool knowing not what the message is only that I bear it – boomboom. The words sound like the same old bullshit I've spoken and heard a million times over the past thousand centuries but something is behind them this time and they know it – the kids: Lucy and George and Ben and Wendy and Jenny and Jessica and Fiona and Joel and Daniel boy do they ever know it. Boomboom.

BOOMBOOM. So once again or is it ever yet comes time to move on. I am a silver needle a thousand meters high and single mm tall weaving through the garments of untold souls a pattern I don't understand with thread I cannot see. Hey what the fuck I'm a ramblin man! Boomboom.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



why I love living in new zealand

case no. 39674(b)

I WAS SITTING at my desk that sunny spring afternoon, rewriting for the umpteenth time a chapter of my new book. It just didn't want to emerge onto the laptop's screen with the fluency and pace I reckoned I'd worked it out in my head.

Knock at the door. I ignored it. My door is always unlocked and friends know to waltz right in, so must be someone hoping to sell me something.

A second knock. Maybe I needed a break from a work that refused to obey its author's commands. With a sigh, I got up and moved to the door. Nobody there. Peek around the corner, a woman walking away down the path.

'Can I help you?'

The woman turns. She's sixties, nice appearance, well dressed, an air of practicable self-confidence. She comes up to me, extends her hand. 'I'm Jacinda's mother-in-law,' she says with warm smile. 'I'd like to buy a copy of your Women I Love book.'

Immediate thought: This has to be the best opening line from a religious caller I've ever heard.

But no. She truly is the mother-in-law of my country's prime minister. She explains.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

She was recently visiting the PM and her own son, a noted fisherman and baby-minder, at their home. A copy of my recently published book, detailing the lives of eleven women I know and consider essential members of my heart family, happened to be on a table. The m-i-l sat down, opened the book and began to read. Couldn't put it down (her words).

As she was to be leaving shortly, she asked might she borrow the book. The prime minister claimed she hadn't finished, would let her have it soon as she was done. But mother-in-law (I won't use her name here to protect her privacy) claims to have been captivated by the real-life characters in my tome, didn't care to wait until daughter-in-law, who had one or two somewhat pressing matters on her plate, got round to the final page.

Now, had a close relative of the head of any other UN state cared to purchase from its author a certain book, it no doubt would have been the third PA to the fourth secretary delegated to do the deed. And should the m-i-l herself demand to seek out said author, might you imagine the queue of black Mercs pulling up outside my patch, the coterie of thick-necked black suits with shades and black curly wires poking out their ears pouring forth to form a walking scrum around the personage.

Here, Jacinda's momma-in-law rocks on up and raps on the door.

I told the m-i-l I would not sell her a copy, rather make her a present of one. She wouldn't hear of it.

'I've read that all money received from book sales goes to that friend of yours who's been crippled by a surfing accident, and I want to contribute.' Whereupon she placed on my desk a bit more than the cover price.

'And, oh, would you mind signing it for me?'

Not only did I scribble my signature within, I felt the experience at the very least called for a personal dedication. But what to write for someone I'd met for the first time just minutes before? What came out was: 'For a Wonderful Mother-in-Law.' Which, okay, a tad tacky, yet I have no doubt is the total truth.

When later I related the episode to a friend, a native to the two skinny islands which graciously and gratefully adopted me forty years prior, she laughed. 'Where else but New Zealand could this happen!'

Indeed.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



indian momma meets the intrepid food dropper

ONE OF THE MORE INTRIGUING facets of life on planet earth is eating. I've been to formal functions in the West where no fewer than a dozen knives, forks and spoons were laid out either side of three different plates. And don't you dare mix up the precise formation of these utensils. (First thing I'd do upon sitting? Start playing spoons on my thigh. Don't think I'm half bad, so why would the waiters all come running over to me? Did they somehow suspect I was considering a similar number with plates?)

Then there's the which-hand-do-you-hold-the-fork game. In America where I grew up, the hand you throw a baseball with has top billing for all events. If I have something on my plate that requires several cuts, I take the knife in right hand, hold down the foodstuff with the fork in my left, cut half dozen edible portions, lay down the knife, switch the fork to my right and dig in. That's the way I learned, that's the manner I'm familiar with. Having moved to an English country in mid-life, this is considered lower-class, wrong. The fork is always in the left hand, you cut with the knife in the right, shovel as much on the fork as it can possibly hold, open the piehole wide as it will stretch and stuff in the whole bloody mess. It is absolutely gross, but it's the way of the land, and on numerous occasions I've endured

typical British – or colonial – look-down-your-nose comments about Americans being so common that I promise myself the next time, the very next time, my so-common right-handed fork just may get planted in some smirking dolt's eye.

In China, of course, chopsticks are the norm. I can handle sticks pretty well, I just don't hold them the 'proper' way. Instead of lying flat against the web between thumb and forefinger, my sticks stick up. Plus I hold them pretty much in the middle instead of the fat end. My times in China I've observed people holding the food bowl just under the chin and rapid-flicking food into their mouths, accompanied by loud and long sucking sounds that send shivers up my spine. And they make fun of me.

The intelligent and hard working woman who runs my guesthouse in the Indian town of Leh, capital of the far north Himalayan province of Ladakh, cares for my twenty-five year old surrogate granddaughter and her eighteen year old sister when they are at home, which is infrequent, and worries about them the rest of the time when they are far off at their respective private educational institutions. She cares as well for the family dog, a fourteen year old character of curiously mixed breed, as well as a number of neighborhood ferals. Momma is also a full-time teacher at a school an hour's drive west, although she has taken off a couple months in order to be home with the family during this period.

Poppa is a physician. He is also a full colonel in the Indian army. He's stationed at a base far from here, where he is administrator of a large staff of medical personnel. I hadn't met him when I was here my first visit, and frankly was a little concerned when prior to my coming granddaughter wrote that poppa would be home for most of my stay. What would he be like, this full bird colonel/doctor. Would he be barking out orders to us all? My medical/military experience was in the US Air Force sixty years ago. I was listed as a medic, but the extent of my medical practice was poking needles in arms and butts of personnel about to depart on overseas duty. The rest of the time my prime function seemed to be falling afoul of by-the-book senior non-coms. I had two stripes, but these were ripped off and sewn back on so many times I thought seriously of attaching them with Velcro.

But poppa proved to be a regular guy who loves with big heart the three females, all different, who constitute his family. Me he treated like, well, like a grandpa to his elder daughter. When I'm with them all, the family, and ninety percent of that time is at meals, I

feel as comfortable as if I were in my own home with those closest to me. When you consider the basic differences in race, religion, nationality, culture and language (to say nothing of my being a vegan in a household where meat is at the top of the menu every meal), I'd venture that's a fair indication of acceptance.

There is no dining table we all sit around. This, to my experience in several parts of the subcontinent, simply is not the Indian way. Eating is undertaken in a mid-size room off the kitchen. There are a couple of low tables, a small settee, numerous large colorfully covered cushions, a pair of beanbag chairs. Oh, and three huge portraits of the Dalai Lama at various stages of his current incarnation. The younger daughter appears to be the only one with a set position in the room, which is also the place she does her school work. For the rest of us, it's wherever.

I have had enough experience in this country to feel completely normal eating the Indian way: the first three fingers plus thumb of your right hand. You kind of mush everything together in a copper dish with low sides, tear off a hunk of chapatti, wrap it around a clump of food, lean forward until your face is inches from the plate and chuck in the roll of edibles, aiding passage with a light slurping.

With all the positive elements here, I still have two minor dining problems. In typical Indian manner, the lovely momma does not understand the words no more. (Convince me Indian and Jewish mothers don't originate from the same seed.) To keep from turning into the Michelin Man during my month here, I needed to be strong. I am not strong.

The second problem is one of my own making. I'm an intrepid food dropper.

I don't think there's been a meal this lifetime I haven't dropped something on myself. And I try so hard not to. I do everything right. I don't put too much on the fork, or spoon, or chopsticks, or in the claw made by my fingers. I make certain all of it is deposited within the proper orifice, then immediately close the gates behind. I chew with mouth closed, never talk while mastication is in process. Often I will finish a meal with the proud understanding that not a single morsel could conceivably have been dropped, then look down and spy a spot or smudge on my shirt or trousers. How did it get there?

I will tuck a napkin into the collar of my shirt. Frequently place a second napkin on my lap. When I am flying, conscious of the cramped space in economy seating and jostling of the aircraft, I'll tuck in the

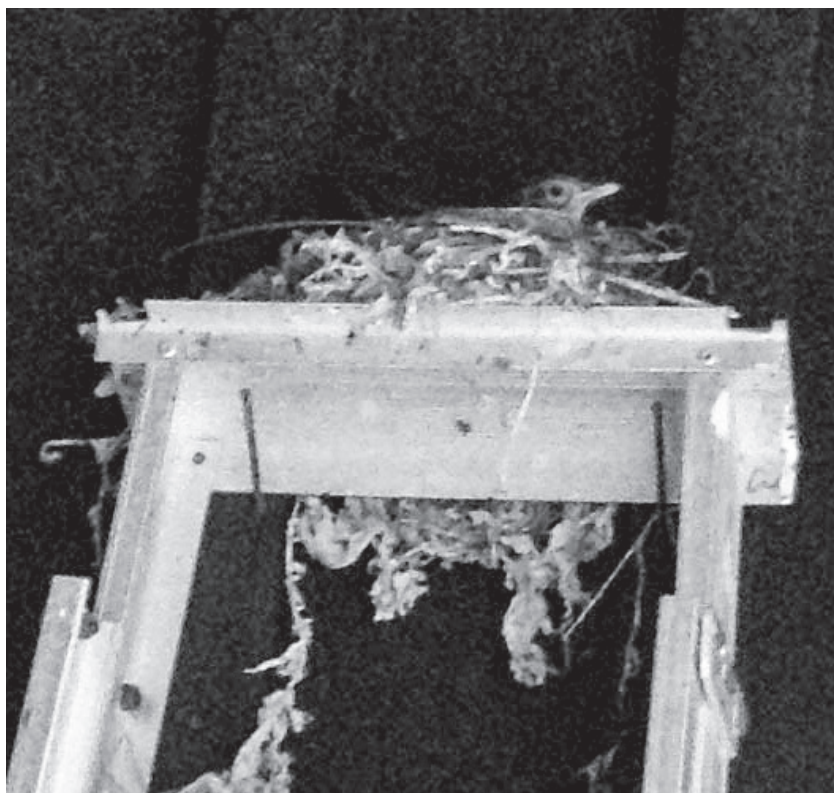
30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

blanket that's provided for warmth, spread it out so every last bit of clothing down to my shoes is covered...and still there will emerge a spot, a stain, a blemish on my clothes. How is this possible?

And not only on my apparel. I cannot possibly eat, say, rice without a grain depositing itself in my beard. One grain, no more, as though signature of my digestive artistry. Is it not contrary to the laws of physics that a single grain of rice teleports away from the others and plants itself in my muff? Yet it happens. Constantly. Since I am living with a family who feed me (and feed me, and feed me) three meals daily, approximately eighty percent of which contains rice, I am the prime object of their pleasant and kindly attention. They won't actually say anything, but to enlighten me as to my discretion will fake-brush their own chins as they focus intently on the real grain's presence upon mine. Losing facial detritus without losing face.

I estimate that had I saved every single escaped grain of rice, buckwheat, quinoa, barley and couscous over the half century I've had a beard, I could feed the whole of starving minions...well, wherever it is they're starving these days.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



a dedicated bird and a birdbrain

WHETHER PROMPTED by the first light pouring through the ceiling-to-floor window of my bedroom or the sweet sounds of the earliest birds, my eyes flip open just past five this spring equinox morning. I lie there a few minutes listening to the wonderful orchestration of birdsong and ocean surf before forcing myself vertical.

A twenty minute meditation, stretches on the floor, out to feed a hundred feathered friends their biscuits and poultry wheat. One such, a female blackbird, has fashioned a nest on the very top of the aluminum ladder hanging high on the wall of the veranda. She's completely unfazed by my comings and goings, peering down at me from her lofty perch as if wondering what fool thing is the big bearded bird up to now. She has a mate, a young fella who calls in with a worm now and then, but you get the sense she figures he's done his duty, take a hike, bru, not trusting him to share the sit on her precious eggs.

Out to the dunes for my second round of stretches and a series of kicks. A couple weeks before I learned via one of those lovely MRI sessions that my right knee now serves as repository for thirty thousand days' worth of accumulated arthritis, and certain moves now bring about indelicate stabs of pain. Still, it's hard to feel sorry for myself with the picture that lies before me. It's one of those magical mornings, not a cloud in the sky, the pre-sunrise burst of color over the Pacific Ocean and East Coast mountains little shy of breathtaking,

and where else on earth at this moment – and every moment of every day – would I rather call home.

Then I see her. Mid-twenties, pretty – very pretty – smiling as she passes by, headed down the track to the beach. She has emerged from one of the caravans and motor homes clustered like glued-together giant cubes on the area earmarked for freedom campers.

It's rare for the camping community to produce a spectator for my village's premier tourist attraction, the glorious amalgam of white sand, blue ocean and golden rising sun. Generally the only reason anyone ever stumbles out of those pricey white boxes this time of day is to stagger sleepily to the nearby toilet block.

Which is why the emergence of this attractive young woman provides a scintilla of hope. I think: a sensitive human being? A freedom camper with heart and soul? And then she contorts into a ritualistic pose which brings my hope crashing to earth.

Parking her curvaceous bottom on a log facing not to the east, rather away from it, she leans forward, back curved and head sloping to the right. Right arm bent so her hand is waist-high directly before her, she is performing the religious rite of her kind: the young person's digital slouch. Eyes fixed on her hand-held altar, she begins paying homage to the great god Zuckerberg.

The sun chooses this very moment to expose the glowing topmost arc of its being, like a great single day-glo orange eyebrow, followed quickly by the all-seeing eye beneath it and, as it does every morning, filling my being with its luxurious presence. On this particular morning I can swear it's laughing, chiding a race of insensitives who place human-engineered toys before universal joys.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



lost in the desert

IT GETS UNCOMFORTABLY hot during the hours from 10am to 4pm in the southern Arizona desert, even with winter just weeks away, so I do an early morning walk and a pre-sunset tramp daily. It was yesterday's late afternoon amble that scared the living crap out of me.

I'd recently flown eight thousand miles to visit my heart daughter Wayan. I have known and enjoyed immense affection for this Balinese native for thirty years. Plus, upon his and my initial encounter a few years back, her American husband Mike instantly became a most welcome heart brother.

Together they run an upscale bed and breakfast in a magnificent setting, yet one as different from my beautiful seven mile New Zealand beach as might be conceived. The Crickethead Inn sits within Saguaro National Park, outside the city of Tucson.

What we're talking here, plain and simple, is desert. Not a blade of grass, nor any sort of growing thing that might construe as a tree. But things do sprout from the ground here, and wildlife, while infrequently encountered, is abundant.

Mike has owned the property since shortly after the beginning of time and bit by bit built the stunning accommodation that now exists. Wayan has now been here the sixteen years of their marriage.

She is – and I defy anyone to challenge me on this – the finest cook in this corner of the galaxy. Though the rooms are immaculately fashioned with furnishings and ornaments shipped back from their

annual visits to Bali and neighboring Java, and the tariff is considerably under that of rival hostels, the probability exists that word of her exquisite breakfast preparations is what keeps the inn packed through seasons high, low and in-between.

When Mike ran the b&b pre-Wayan, guests ate whatever he laid out on the table. But Wayan's mother taught her early on that feeding visitors was an act far greater than providing mere sustenance; you were performing god's work, meaning you do your best to please those you are feeding, and spare not substance nor quality.

When there are, say, a dozen guests sitting around the breakfast table, producing the sighs and purrs of gastronomic euphoria to accompany the astounding exterior performance of the gigantic saguaro cacti fronting the powerful multi shades of brown distant mountains, it is Wayan who must account for untold different feasts to accommodate various preferences, needs, allergies, intolerances and current dietary fashion. (She herself is, like her NZ poppa, vegan.)

Nor is it strictly the paying guests she caters for. Forget the renowned horse whisperer; Wayan is a premier coyote screamer. Every morning and early evening she will step outside, offer a top-volume, high-pitched *LALALALALA* wail which immediately brings in off the desert heretofore unseen critters like the ultra shy coyotes, colorful javelinas (*tayassu tajacu* to you fussy Googleheads), occasional deer, the odd bobcat, hares, cheeky squirrels and more: a real-life Disney production, to gobble up the proffered leftovers. There's only one breed of animal she resists with all her being: the long, slim, slithering kind, especially those that rattle.

Since Crickethead is well off the beaten path, my time is spent reading, writing and walking, the three activities I enjoy most in life. And therein lies the harrowing situation I created for myself here.

I admit to an abnormal fear of getting lost – this no matter where in the world I might be. I have no bias: since I own one of recorded history's worst senses of direction, over the years I've got myself lost on every known continent, in dozens of countries therein. I have been lost in cities, in villages; in the bush and on mountains.

I even get lost in my dreams, for rarely does a night pass I don't find myself starring in some bizarre quasi-nightmarish video of being on the move and suddenly realizing I'm unable to find my way back to wherever it is I'm calling home.

Late afternoon I left the premises for my standard thirty minute there-and-back stroll towards the mountains. Accompanied by a self-

fashioned walking stick, I made my way to what barely passes for a zigzag trail, trudged through sometimes soft, sometimes firm, desert sand dotted with a few trillion pebbles, stones, rocks and evidence of unseen animal life.

Understand that the desert has no obvious signs to follow. There are the amazing saguaros, of course, some twenty-five to thirty feet high, but to an intrepid beach bod they all look alike, thus presenting no traceable points of reference.

Unlike the sometimes soft, sometimes firm beaches at home, things grow in the sand here. Things that are not pretty. They are, in fact, other-worldly ghastly, grisly and gruesome: spindly, knurled, thorny, winding around themselves and sporting razor-sharp needles long and terrifying as witches' fingers. I am convinced they are of malevolent alien sentience, possessed of an abhorrence of human existence and react accordingly, reaching out to snag, dig deeply into, then detach and become part of their unassuming hosts. What's weird to a desert novice is how a place as stunning as Saguaro National Park is in landscape viewing can be so hideous when you get knee-deep right into it.

Conscious of the diminishing late afternoon light and a sudden slight chill, after quarter of an hour I turned about and followed the same dusty trail back the way I came. Within minutes I sensed something was wrong. A few more minutes and I became convinced of it. For I could not spot a single of the footprints I had left en route.

Somehow, though surely this could not be possible, somehow, I now found myself on another trail headed back in the basic direction I'd come. Except, according to the sun's emplacement in the sky, I'd got myself not only onto a different dusty trail, but one at a slight angle to the true pathway to Crickethead.

Without thought, I immediately engaged in two plays. Second of these plays was to quell my rising panic, which was the first play. Slow deep breaths. Affirmations. Had I been a believer, I might have prayed. But atheists do not pray. What we do is present demands to the universe and furnish a precise timeline for the desired results. This surely was such an occasion; however, in my current predicament I was somewhat reluctant to ruffle the cosmos's feathers. Shamefacedly, I admit even employing the hated word, please.

Somewhat composed, there was still the matter of what to do. Turn around and try to locate the original trail? Keep moving forward? The sun was dipping rapidly towards the western hills, and I well knew

that despite the temperature hovering around the mid-eighties when I'd left, within minutes it would get chilly, leading shortly to outright cold. I had on but a T-shirt and light trousers, carried no water nor iPhone, and even had I a phone, what directions might I present of my exact location?

There seemed no recourse but to proceed onward.

As I continued fighting off the dread during my self-enforced march, there existed not a single man-made construction – even a dilapidated shack might have provided a measure of solace – nor sign of humanity anywhere. And was I imagining it or were those stands of saguaros multiple middle fingers flashing insidiously my way?

Even as I used my walking stick to provide a rhythm of sorts, new and disturbing what-ifs arose. The impending cold: I could easily freeze out here. The dark: all kinds of animals, hiding during daylight, came out at night. Yes, they are mainly timid and avoid the human species best they can. But they do grow hungry and they will attack when frightened. Especially those long, slim, slithering things that rattle. Shall I enchant an attacking beast with a melodious mantra? Issue forth homilies about my basic love of all living things great and small? Inform it of the various animal protection and environment preserving organizations I donate to annually?

I must have stumbled or tripped a dozen times on half-embedded rocks and those snarly, yucky, needle-y things emerging from the ground. Had to stop repeatedly to yank out plant-based stilettos that had penetrated the soles and heels of my flimsy trainers, rendering my feet bottoms inverted pincushions.

It grew dark, then darker. Black as, well, night in the desert. Around me, little noises in the otherwise dead silence. Crunching sounds of unseen things moving about. Caws and hoots of large nocturnal birds. The occasional spine chilling cry or howl of a – what? Had a zombie jumped out from behind a saguaro, contorted face full of cactus needles, and begged a smoke I would've been shocked, yes, but hardly surprised.

Then half a moon kindly popped up above the eastern hills, providing enough light to keep me on the meandering trail I hadn't chosen. Except where, exactly, would the trail lead? And then it struck me: Why, of course: I was on the path to hell! Except my wayward wandering wouldn't end there. On and on it would go. This was to be my life forevermore, get used to it.

Stop griping, I told myself. Keep moving, I told myself. One day this will be a yarn, I told myself. If I survive, I told myself. After a further half hour's slog I thought I heard a different sort of sound. I stopped to listen. Silence. Moved on. There it was again. If it was what I thought, what I hoped, it was a sound ever-so-close to my heart: a motor. (Or might it be the growling of a bobcat's empty tummy?)

The sound grew steadily louder. Meaning I was getting closer. Then I saw through the saguaros a brief flash of distant moving light. A vehicle. I began to jog.

The road, when finally I arrived, was more than a mile from where you turned off onto the dirt path to Crickethead. Wearing the standard colors of the minimalist traveler, dark blue T and black trousers, I was anything but readily visible. Should I strip to my undies so at least I presented my lily-white person to whizzing-by headlights?

I was shivering, sure, but cold was nothing compared to getting whacked by a couple tons of speeding steel while gingerly treading the extremely narrow shoulder. Peeling off might have made sense, but I refrained. Modesty? Hell, no. The experience of the past couple hours made me feel such an idiot, did I really wish to look like one as well?

I arrived sweaty and dead tired back at Crickethead to find a small party of Wayan and Mike's friends. Following a quick wash in my quarters, I sat at table, engaged in conversation, near OD'd on my heart daughter's exquisite cuisine. Then fell into bed.

Indeed, the desert holds majestic beauty, amazing energy, fascinating mystery. But to tell the truth, I do prefer a long ocean beach.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



maiden voyage to an american cathedral

THE HUGE OLD battered black pickup truck ahead of us sports three large stickers plastered on back:

Thank a Cop

US Marines – part of the Navy family: the MALE part

I'm Christian and I vote!

The driver of my own vehicle is my Balinese heart daughter's American husband, himself a dear friend. He has promised on this day during my long-distance visit to the city of Tucson, Arizona, where he and Wayan reside, to take me on my maiden voyage to an edifice I've long heard about and dearly desire to visit.

We follow the pickup truck into the parking lot of an enormous shopping center. The driver parks, gets out; he is Central Casting classic: swaggering pseudo-cowboy to the max, huge, enormously fat, his face etched villainous by a timeless grimace of futility, topped off with an clenched mask of recent post-election exasperation.

Where he is headed is the cathedral of his kind; following, I am making my very first entry, hopeful I will not be barred as an outsider, one of 'them'. This particular Walmart is on the smallish side for its ilk, barely the length and breadth of half dozen football stadiums. Its pilgrim-shoppers, many with red baseball caps bearing

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

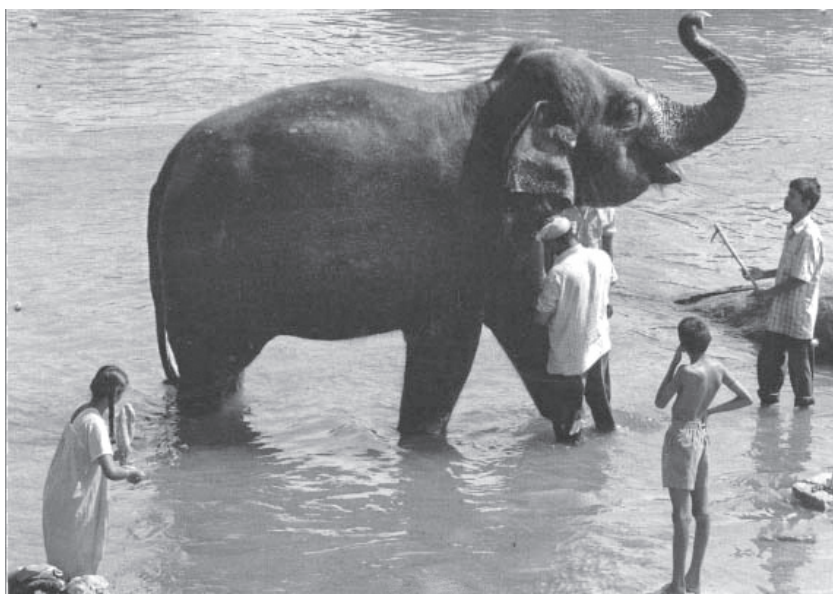
the holy message of His four uttered words, are a religious order unto themselves. Never have I witnessed such obeisant obesity, such determined expressions of anguish, as though each soul is plodding through Saturnian gravity and pushing against a wall of gelatinous air with each troubled step.

I feel childishly giddy; perhaps it is the number of droopy trousers and shorts, exposing enormous butt cracks, chasms of demarcation separating mountainous alabaster twin orbs and hinting at Grand Canyon depth.

Nearby, I spot a stand of hand-size ninety-nine cent American flags with skinny plastic stems. I look at the flags, look at the nearest butt crack, a mere meter away. I reach out, pluck a flag from the stand. My head swivels side to side. Flag. Butt crack. Flag. Butt crack.

I experience a slight shiver, breathe deeply and exhale resignedly. Replacing the flag in its stand, I move on to an adjoining aisle.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



lakshmi

IT WAS LOVE AT first sight. For me, that is. Lakshmi, aw, truth be told, she's a bit of a flirt. I mean, all those admirers, perfectly understandable.

I'm in India. My tenth or twelfth or fifteenth time: I've lost count. First was back in the early '70s. I spent the better part of a year. Upon leaving, I swore I'd never return. Just too many hassles in that craziest of countries.

And I kept to my word. Until every place else I visited, my boredom/loneliness quotient, that is, the time it took to stop feeling the place where I was and begin to crawl under my own skin, became briefer and briefer. It's the biggest dread I have as a traveler.

At the beginning of my journeying experience, fearing the out-there unknown, I would beg friends, relatives, strangers encountered at a bus stop, anybody, to strap on a backpack and join me on the dusty trail. Their response? 'Are you out of your -!!!'

Ironically, a few years of traveling by myself and I wouldn't even consider hitting the road with another person.

On your own, you simply feel so free, so flexible. Wake up one morning with a craving to check out Timbuktu, you don't have to convince anybody it makes sense. You do it. The down side is the boredom/loneliness which invariably creeps up on long-term travelers.

In the early days, this often led to my taking up with a fellow roadie. Now, here's a coincidence - on every single occasion that other

traveler was female. Two reasons for this: more women, believe it or not, journey solo than males. And, look, I just prefer female company to fellas.

Wait – it’s not what you think. There’s a road code, especially for more, um, mature travelers. Experience has taught that sharing cramped quarters in hostels and a seat (if you’re lucky to get one) on a twenty-hour local bus in Myanmar is hard enough without the fuss that can go with a relationship.

Still, living out of a rucksack takes its toll, and in time the good moments frequently became overlaid with the not so good. What would I do when the laughs faded? Welcome to the Barry two-step:

1. Pack the sack; 2. Skedaddle.

Where to? Where else? India, of course! Because in this craziest of countries chances of growing bored or lonely run from scant to nil.

India is a full-frontal assault on the senses. You are constantly bombarded with totally new sights, sounds, smells, tastes, situations. Initially, the place grabs you by the ankles, flips you upside down and shakes until all the preconceived notions regarding life tumble out of your head. Then, if you haven’t jumped on a plane and scooted back to the safety and reason of ‘civilization’ (many do), India sets you down gently, kisses you on both cheeks and says, ‘Welcome to the world’s greatest traveling land...have a lovely time. By the way, would you like to visit my cousin-brother’s jewelery shop?’

Insanity does exist, oh yeah. A country that ranges geographically from the high Himalayas to steamy tropics, has a billion-plus citizens who speak a myriad of languages, are born into untold castes and sub-castes, and follow an even greater array of religions, sects, cults and dogmas (and yet every single Indian wags his/her head side to side to indicate yes) is a mystery that confounded the British for four centuries.

Travel lesson 4063: don’t try to figure India. Just do it.

The moment I learned to unravel this great ball of tangles, to deal with the absurdities which form the norm there, was when I first truly experienced the sheer pleasure of traveling.

But India’s move to modernize isn’t the reason I recently took early leave from my once-favorite town: it’s my second gripe about the country that pushed me out.

According to statistics, there are now three hundred-plus million middleclass Indians, and lately every single one appears to be touring the country whenever I’m there. Hey, you think suburban families on summer vacation are bad? The middies from Delhi and Mumbai out-gauche, out-nuisance Western burbies any day.

Local hoteliers and merchants, quietly voicing disdain for these rude, pushy, boorish invaders (who often treat them like dirt), nonetheless seem to be upping their prices by the hour because the upwardly mobiles are too proud to engage in India's premier pastime – bargaining.

So I bailed out after a week. Jumped on a train. Forty hours later grabbed a bus. Finally a life-periling nocturnal trishaw ride through treacherously winding country roads until I came to the tourist-free village I'd heard about from a fellow roadie. And where scant hours later I caught sight of, and fell madly in love with, my Lakshmi.

My first glimpse of her, she was having her morning bath. There she was in all her naked splendor, reveling in the warm waters of the village's shallow river. My heart near leapt out of my chest. I couldn't help myself. Within minutes I was stroking her. Nuzzling. Cooing sweet nothings.

I admit we were not your typical set of lovers. At the time I was rapidly approaching my seventies. She was twenty. I'm Jewish, she's Hindu. I'm white, she's, well, kind of grey. I'm 5-10, 150 pounds; she's eight feet high and weighs two and a half tons.

Oh, have I neglected to mention Lakshmi's an elephant?

Every morning her carer would lead my darling from her home in the village temple slowly, ponderously, down a long set of steps to the river. Once in, upon his command she'd flop onto her side, whereupon he spent an hour scrubbing her. Sigh.

When the mood struck she'd be ever so playful, snorting water up her trunk then showering those around her. And when she stepped out of the river, you were encouraged to approach, offer up a coin to her extended trunk. After turning it over to her handler she'd place the trunk ever so softly on top of your head. I cannot express the unbridled joy I felt the first time this happened to me.

Over the next several weeks I must have gone through a mountain of coins getting her to trunk-bless me. But so many performed this act with her, how can I honestly report she favored me? It happened quite unexpectedly.

I approached one morning as usual, coin extended. Oddly, Lakshmi ignored it. Instead, she dipped her trunk past my extended hand down into my shoulder bag...and plucked out an opened pack of digestives. Wrapper and all, she made those digestives disappear quicker than Mandrake the magician. From then on, it was unbridled love. For I alone had discovered the true path to this elegant lady's heart.

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns

after-word

30,000 Days - an autobiography in yarns



the minister of silly yarns

IT BEGAN IN PREHISTORIC times. The clan would rise early in the day, disperse to wherever their individual duties might take them. Come early evening they'd return to the cave, dragging what food and nature's implements they had acquired to fashion tools, weaponry and clothing.

The clan would sit around on the dirt floor gnawing wildebeest haunch, slurping gruel...and sharing events of the day. Not just a step-by-step accounting: 'I went there, I did this'. No, they worked to create interest, perhaps excitement, maybe even a touch of humor to spice up their daily travails.

One evening, a member of the group was incurring a particularly rough time describing with standard grunts and hand gestures the image of a certain animal, or tree, or rock formation he/she had encountered. In frustration, she/he rose off the floor, picked up a chunk of charcoal or blood-dripping half-eaten gnu limb, strode to the cave wall and began to draw the object in question.

And thus the bases of language and art were established as ingredients for one of the prime essentials of life: *Yarns*.

Time progressed and over the next several millennia civilization enjoyed quantum advances such as Plato's Dialogues, Hamlet and Macbeth, and its most recent achievement: dead parrots, fish slapping dances and silly walks.

Live a good story and learn to tell it well, Uncle Willie instructed his young nephew thousands of days back, and you'll always have friends and never go broke. He was not wrong.

credits

Front cover photo: Steven Barnes

Visuals consultant: Carl Watson

Back cover photo: Baruch Montrose

Layout design: Jacqui Watson, Mann Print & Design

Printed in New Zealand

cost

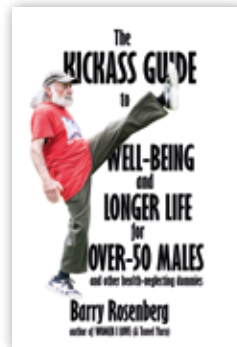
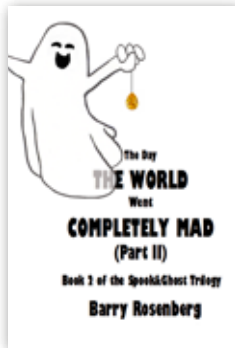
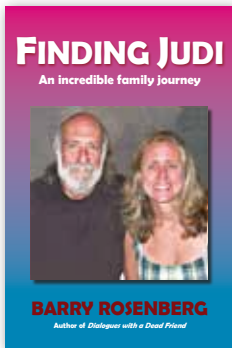
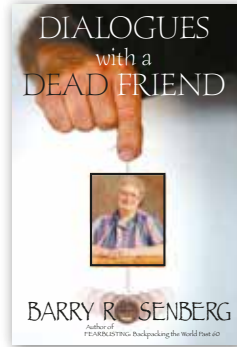
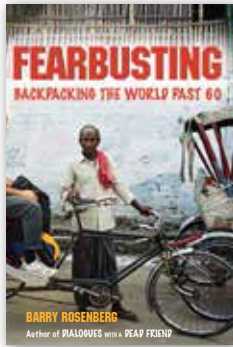
USA \$22* | NZ and Australia \$30*

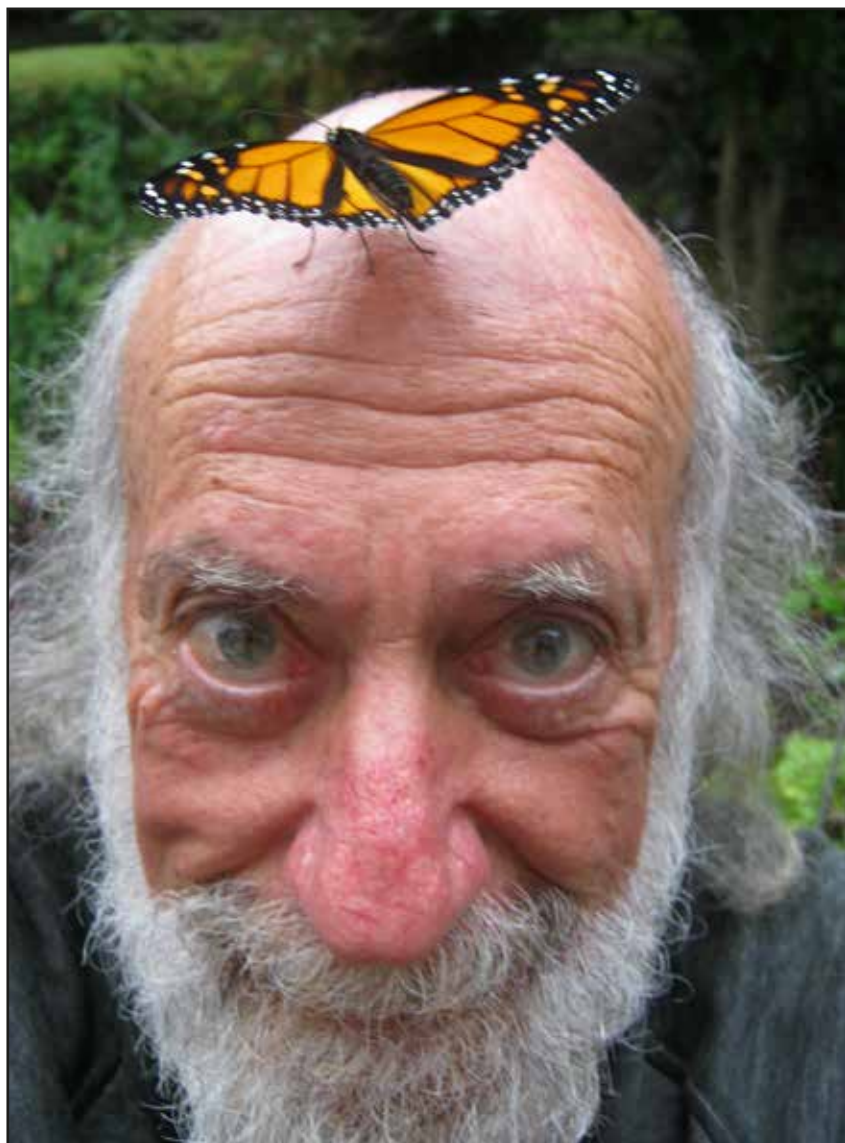
* All money received from sales of this edition donated to the Fred Hollows Foundation. Every book sold brings sight to a person made blind by cataracts.

www.barryrosenberg.net

email: 30000days@mail.com

Books by Barry Rosenberg





ISBN 9780473595937



9 780473 595937 >