

DIALOGUES with a DEAD FRIEND



BARRY ROSENBERG

Author of
FEARBUSTING: Backpacking the World Past 60

The Author

Barry Rosenberg overcame the trauma of being born in Philadelphia by finding a home on a seven mile beach in New Zealand at age 47. Between those two points in time, he did PR for establishments as diverse as the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System and the Philadelphia Eagles (he was fired from both) and wrote freelance feature articles for major magazines. In the 1970s he was America's most popular teacher of mindpower, a position he also held Down Under during the '80s. Author of the non-fiction book *FEARBUSTING Backpacking the World Past 60*, he still traipses around remote parts of the world every year.

*For Timothy,
who started the ball rolling;
for Peggy, of course,
who picked it up,
crossed the goal line,
and is still running with it;
and for Anita:
how could a woman
as beautiful as you
have loved
such a funny-looking galoot
as me?*

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BARRY
ROSENBERG

Tookus bookuS

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First published by *Tookus Bookus* 2005
Head Office

35 Irene Street Wynnum, Qld, 4178 Australia.

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Printed in New Zealand

ISBN: 0-476-10501-4

Second Printing: 2006

Pre-word

Ours was an odd-bod friendship for sure. Just look at our respective physicalities. Peggy claimed to be 47. She looked to be a hunched-over, white haired 60. Then her size. She weighed 270 pounds on a 5'4" frame. Me, I was late 30s at the time, 5'10", rolled in around 160. Bald, long hair back and sides, and a six-inch beard.

So okay. We looked funny together. But we were different in so many other ways. I was a world traveler, had lived in a zillion places. She'd spent every single day in the same South Philadelphia house – born there, grew up, got married and lived there with her husband, and continued to reside when the old man upped and left her with five kids. I don't think she'd been to downtown Philly more than a dozen times in her life.

The way we met? I'd been teaching a mindpower thing I called Alpha Mind Control since 1972. First at the University of Pennsylvania, where my classes drew huge throngs of people, not just students, but of all ages and from all walks of life. In '76 I left the campus and started a center called the Relax For Survival Foundation, which was wrapped around my courses. I taught Alpha wherever I could hire a venue: colleges, churches, social and lodge halls.

Peggy during this time (as I learned later) was sitting in a chair in her living room, looking out the window and waiting – hoping – to die. During the course of a standard day she smoked two packs of cigarettes and drank a fifth of gin. Times between puffing and sipping, she'd smoke dope. A lot of dope.

She had two means of making a living. First as an Avon lady. The image

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of this huge old babe going door to door selling cosmetics...

Second means was even more bizarre. She had two medical coverages, neither knowing about the other. Every year she'd have an operation, totally unnecessary. The first coverage paid the bill. Second put money in Peggy's pocket. With all her scars, that body must've looked like the map of downtown Delhi.

Peggy's daughter did my class in the fall of '76, went home and told Peggy all about it. Begged, urged, finally threatened Peggy to get off her huge bottom and attend the next one.

Because of her girth, we had to get a special chair, which was placed right in front. From the top, she beamed this magical, light-up-the-room smile. She affected everybody, me included.

When the course ended, the smile remained. She had quit smoking, drinking, and only the occasional toke of weed.

I invited her to attend the center's weekly graduates-only evening at the "Alpha House", a three-story brick row home in North Philly, where I lived. We'd do chanting, group healings, share food and wine and whatever else people had to offer. Peggy came, she saw, she conquered us all. Everybody loved her.

While Relax For Survival was successful in accomplishing its stated aims – an "adult re-education college" that offered, in addition to my own course, around 30 classes per semester on everything from airy-fairy stuff like astrology and tarot card reading to ultra-practical courses such as car maintenance for single mothers, all on a shoestring fee basis – in truth, the center was pounding me into the ground like a tent peg. I was the guru, the administrator, fund raiser, promotion person, and the role I liked least, playing poppa to a dozen volunteers who were supposed to be my support crew. What they were, really, were well-meaning but generally can't-get-it-together large children. To run the center I couldn't do without them. But neither could I do with them. They were driving me bananas.

One grad-session evening, my head full of projects, deadlines and unpaid bills, I homed in on Peggy. She had a cluster of the center's inner core people gathered around her. They were dotting on her. Basking in her glow.

"Peggy," I said, getting her attention. "I hereby appoint you director of

the Relax For Survival Foundation. By, oh, two weeks from today, you are to move in here and take over all administrative duties.”

She near shit a brick.

Two weeks later her two husky sons were carrying cartons up the stairs to Peggy’s new residence.

She was incredible. She actually got the people doing things. Not just promising, then disappearing: doing! She was great on the phone, terrific in person. The local CBS outlet, channel 10, did a half hour documentary on her entitled “From Avon to Alpha”.

When we were asked to participate in the Philly PBS channel’s periodic fund-raising telethon, a score of us manning phones, I sat Peggy at the most prominent position, stage front/center. Our ragtag group not only pulled in the biggest amount of pledged dollars ever, but the highest percentage of pledges fulfilled. We were invited back several times, each with similar results.

But to me, Peggy’s value was in our friendship. She had, we used to say, the wisdom of Solomon yet couldn’t find her way in out of the rain. Often we would talk far into the night. About everything. How could someone who’d never been anywhere, had never finished school, know so much about life?

She was real: that was the main thing. And those eyes saw everything. A *goya*, she knew more Yiddish than I did. And her asshole detector was even more finely tuned than mine. Except where I would simply brush off such people or treat them with disdain, Peggy looked right into their souls, smiled, and got the very best out of them.

“Raising five kids on my own with no money,” was how she put it when I one time asked.

She walked around the center’s blue collar Irish-Polish neighborhood in her colorful mumus, smiling, waving, stopping to chat with everyone. She would frequently venture over to Girard Avenue, the DMZ of Philly’s most violent ghetto, and do the same. Never a problem. Never a harsh word coming her way.

In late 1977 I left Relax For Survival. I’d had enough. Before slinging on the pack and hitting the road, I bequeathed the house (and its mortgage), the program, and a few thousand in the kitty to her and the gang. Six months

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later the center folded. Which I suppose I knew it would.

In 1980 I found my way to New Zealand. The idea was to stay a few months, move on. But I fell in love with the place, especially the South Island, truly the finest patch of real estate on the planet. I got permanent residence in 1982, and a year later became a citizen. I returned home twice, in '82 and again in '84, and we saw one another a few times. Peggy had bought a tiny, one bedroom house in another North Philadelphia nabe, and I would visit her there. But we never got into those from-the-heart talks. And since Peggy wasn't much of a writer, my attempt at trans-oceanic correspondence when I returned to NZ went nowhere.

And then, early in 2002, dialogues with her suddenly returned. Deeper, richer, more fascinating than ever.

There was just one small curiosity.

Peggy died 15 years before.

Prologue: 1972

I was sitting in my room at the Alpha House following my return from the hospital. The knee op, they said, was successful. The plaster cast ran from the bottom of my foot to the bottom of my buttock. Recuperation time: a month, if not more. I was bored out of my skull.

Call from a friend. He'd recently got into self-hypnosis and had stumbled upon the concept of the pendulum.

According to the occult textbooks, the pendulum was an ideo-motor function tool for determining true, or subconscious, thoughts and feelings. By holding the pendulum – any small, symmetrically weighted object such as a coin, washer or, as the New Ageys preferred, a crystal tied to a piece of thread or string – in front of you in a certain manner, you were supposed to be able to record impulses sent from the brain out to your fingers.

“Come awwwn!” I cried into the phone.

“You’re complaining of being bored, right? So give it a try.”

The only suitable object within reach was a small, Oriental-looking metal disc from a bamboo room divider, which I anchored to eight inches of flimsy twine. I hobbled over to my desk, seated myself on the edge of the chair (when you wore a leg cast than ran as far north as mine, you sat on edges of things) and, as instructed, held the string between thumb and index finger directly before me and waited until the disc became still. This might've taken ten or fifteen seconds had my hand not been shaking so. Disc looked like it was doing the hootchie-kootchie.

So I placed my elbow on the desk. Soon the disc became perfectly still.

Next thing was to determine my own personal set of directional responses

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for yes and no.

I sat there and asked: “Which direction is yes? Which direction is yes? Which —”

A minute. Two. Not a flicker of movement.

I put down the string, waited a few minutes. Picked it up again. “Which direction is yes? Which direction is yes?” I stared at the disc. Disc stared back at me.

I didn’t want to call my friend. I didn’t want to admit I had uncovered yet another personal inadequacy.

Once more I held the pendulum before me like some half-witted recluse toying with a miniature yo-yo. “Which direction is yes?” Pretty loud now. A minute passed. I repeated the plea, then echoed it every fifteen seconds until I was practically shouting. Ten minutes later the disc was moving, but only because my arm was so tired I couldn’t keep my hand from jiggling.

I put the thing down, took a deep breath. Took several. Started over.

I asked the question and mentally ordered the bloody thing to move.

And the bloody thing began to move.

My hand was steady, and there was not a whisper of a breeze in the room. The movement was just barely perceptible. But move it did. Back and forth.

I kept it up. “Which direction is yes?” The movement increased. Within a minute the disc was moving in a two-inch arc.

“Which direction is no? Which direction is no?” In just a few seconds, the disc went from the forward-and-back straight line into an ellipse and then flattened in a side-to-side straight line. Even more pronounced than the yes direction. Was this because I was such a negative person? I thought. The disc continued swinging side-to-side.

All this concentration wiped me out, and I put the pendulum down and rested a bit. But not for long. Already I was a candidate for rehab.

Okay. Have you ever asked questions of a piece of twine fastened to a small metal disc? Oh, I see: not in public you haven’t. Well, neither had I, and even though the public was me, I had a hard time pushing through my cynical barrier to get that first real question out.

“Um, is today Sunday?” See, I’d been instructed to keep them simple at first. No sweat, replied the pendulum, and it declared by swinging back and

forth in a four-inch line that indeed it was.

“Am I Mickey Mantle?” Side-to-side: of course not.

“Is my wife’s name Sarah?” Nope. “Do I have a wife?” Uh-uh. What a brain!

A dozen more questions, a dozen correct answers. Still, all of them were questions to which I consciously knew the answers. Now, I was a person who enjoyed discovering my unfavorable traits about as much as sliding down a splintered banister. Thus I tiptoed into my subconscious with the utmost of caution.

“Do I have any, eh, hang-ups?” You could almost hear the pendulum laughing. Do you ever, dude.

“All right, but has my progress as a human being been severely hampered due to these hang-ups? The disc indicated it had not. “Hampered at all?” Yes.

I learned that my inability to love constituted my greatest hang-up, that I felt safer loving than being loved, that I regretted not having been able to relate better to my father, that I was a ham with an extended ego who delighted in being in the limelight.

Most answers were as I had expected them to be, although others took me by surprise. I tried to rephrase these questions in hopes of getting more positive results, but the disc would not be fooled.

I happened to glance out the window and was startled to find darkness where daylight had been. Tired, I lay down and took a nap. But instead of going to sleep for the night, I woke, hobbled over to the desk and got right back into things.

By now I was communicating with the pendulum. Each question I put forth evoked an immediate response and each response brought about a new question. I abandoned all reluctance and plunged into the thick of myself. I asked questions I never before had the courage to verbalize, matters I long ago had submerged beyond my conscious reach with layers of intellectualized defenses. The layers were being peeled away.

I fell asleep at the desk, waking at 6, stiff and aching. I crashed out on the bed, woke at 10 and by 10.01 was back at the desk. Questions and answers, answers and questions.

The only trouble I experienced was that I just could not keep awake. An

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hour at the pendulum and I'd begin drifting off. I asked if perhaps I were sick. The pendulum indicated I was not. Is there a reason I can't keep awake? Yes. I eyed the pendulum, the flat metal disc with the slot in the middle. Am I hypnotizing myself? I wondered. The pendulum claimed that I was, and from then on whenever I began to feel drowsy I'd break off for a spell.

To this point everything I had asked was self-contained: either the questions had an answer that I knew consciously or it pertained to a personal emotion, and my subconscious took care of that. But what about questions that didn't relate to me?

In the classes I had shortly ago begun teaching at Penn, when we finished all the imagery exercises that constituted the main thrust of the Alpha Mind Control course, I had people break off into groups of three and do psychic readings for one another. This entailed being given no more than three pieces of information about an unknown (to the reader) human subject who could be anywhere in the world: name, age, and city or town of residence. A year before, this would've struck me as the most preposterous form of New Age bullshit imaginable. But I now could do them, and so could my students. Often I would get information about the subject that even the subject-giver had no knowledge of. (One woman, a dental tech, could make up dental charts of people she'd never heard of, who might live thousands of miles away. When I checked with their dentists, the woman's readings were 100%. If only she could do psychic root and canal.)

An explanation for this phenomenon, one that I strongly adhered to, was the concept of a universal mind bank. Composed of all the existing energies, the "Universal Bank of Infinite Knowledge and Wisdom" was a boundless ocean of data, with a branch office in the brain of every one of us. Psychics did their thing, I reasoned, by somehow opening the lines of communication between their minds and the all-knowing home office. If the pendulum were an extension of my own subconscious, which was a mini-universal energy force, could I perhaps get answers to questions totally beyond my personal realm?

Quickly I shlepped back to my edge-of-seat position. The first question I asked was about my love life, non-existent the past two months. According to the pendulum, I would be making love within two weeks to a woman I did

not then know. This seemed highly improbable considering the acrobatics involved bouncing on some woman's bones while wearing a 20 pound plaster buttock-stocking, and I immediately dismissed the answer. I shouldn't have. Two weeks later a new love entered my life. Cast and all.

I asked about my relationships with other people, about a lawsuit I was contemplating filing, about a manuscript I had just mailed to a publisher, about a million and one things, and for every question there came an answer. To get more specific, especially where numbers were concerned, I employed a simple process of elimination, narrowing down numerical possibilities until finally I'd hit one which met the approval of the disc.

Since I was at the time considering a change of residence (it never happened), I asked about the availability of living quarters and learned that one of my friends soon would be vacating. To find out who I began rattling off names. After a dozen noes, the pendulum furnished a yes to the name of Rita. I called her.

"When are you moving?" I casually asked. Rita was dumbfounded. "How did you know?" she demanded. "I only decided last night and I haven't told a soul!" Power of the pendulum.

Some friends came over and I put on an exhibition. They were highly skeptical, of course, and wanted to test me.

"What's my father's oldest brother's name?" someone asked, issuing a list of potential names. The pendulum picked the right one.

Someone else secretly wrote down a number from one to ten. The pendulum got it. What sign am I? inquired a woman I had never met before. Gemini, said the disc, after I'd narrowed it down from twelve to six to three to one. Gemini she was.

The pendulum was not infallible. Far from it. Still, from those responses I was able to check out, it certainly beat the law of averages. (The pendulum itself claimed a 70% accuracy rate. I didn't get it to explain further because I couldn't come up with the proper question.)

Within a week I had become a stoned-out pendulum junkie. Virtually all my waking time was spent with string between my fingers. I would find myself hypnotically nodding out, put down the pendulum and place myself in the Alpha state, emerging ten minutes later refreshed and raring to go. I

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was sleeping very little, four-five hours a night, and it seemed I was being forced awake by this overwhelming penchant to delve into the unknown.

I began keeping a diary, entering my questions and answers at the end of each session. But my questions, on every subject imaginable, were coming so fast I could not remember them all come time to make written entry, so I started using a tape recorder. I really became a fanatic. I could not recall anything in my life thus far in which I'd gotten so completely involved.

Even so, my life with the pendulum up till now was mere passing fancy compared to after my run-in with...them.

Coincidentally (perhaps, perhaps), I had just read a book called *The Seth Material*, an allegedly true account of a woman novelist who through her use of a Ouija board came in contact with a spirit named Seth. The Ouija was an ideo-motor function tool. The pendulum was an ideo-motor function tool.

Is this pendulum regulated by my subconscious? I asked. Yes. Are answers also provided by a source or sources apart from myself? Yes. Are these answers provided by disincarnate spirits? Yes. Am I presently communicating with such a spirit? Yes. I felt like I had just got a phone call from Mars.

Intriguing? Listen, I spent days conversing with these other-worldly characters. I'd begin each session by asking whether I was in communication with a spirit. When the reply came forth in a positive movement of the pendulum, I'd ask whether we had had prior contact. The answers would vary. More than once did I get strange reactions from the disc, and the vibrations I felt during these particular sessions were negative and downright eerie. Later on I would read various explanations of spiritual contact, all of them stating emphatically the dangers involved in such pastimes, but my ignorance and enthusiasm took me full steam ahead.

Since the spirits on the end of my string claimed to have access to all the knowledge in the universe (though why they could return no more than 70% accuracy I never did determine), I presented questions on every subject, past, present and future. Most of this was tell-me, tell-me, tell-me crap. I felt the spirits, or whatever, were being patient and tolerant, as with a child. The serious part came when I started probing into the nature of human existence.

I hadn't placed much faith in the notion of reincarnation until about a year before. To me, you were born and you died and that was that. Upon

discovery of my Alpha state, and then dazzling myself with psychic feats heretofore ascribed to the likes of Edgar Cayce, I began to wonder about the existence of some sort of universal order. The very idea that I had lived before, that I am who and what I am not only due to genes and environment but the fact that I am me, became absolutely entrancing.

I was, “they” informed me, in my 136th mortal existence. Immediately prior to being Barry, I was (in regressive order) a Hungarian émigré who lived in Boston, a minor French statesman and a Danish writer of fairy tales. (No, not *him*.) This last piece of information hit me with a jolt. On my first trip to Copenhagen some years prior I seemed to know the city as though I’d been there before. According to the pendulum, I had.

I went to see a woman I knew, name of Andi. She was heavily into astrology and the I Ching, and I figured she’d be impressed with the pendulum. She was.

“When I first met you I felt I knew you from a past life,” she said. “Why don’t you ask it?” I did, and according to the pendulum we did know one another, in Italy during the 16th century. I was a poor Renaissance painter, she a lady from a rich and noble family. Against their wishes we married, had five kids and a magnificent love affair that lasted a lifetime. Also, I was a lousy painter.

That evening, alone, I thought I’d try to determine Andi’s most recent incarnation. I got that she was born in 1887 to wealthy parents, became a singer and actress of considerable note, that the first letter of her last name was E, and she died on November 4th, 1947.

Sudden thought: a well-known performing artist just might have had her obit in the New York Times.

The following morning I dragged my stone limb to the public library and signed out the reel of Times microfilm for the month of November ’47. I placed it on the viewing machine and turned the crank quickly until I saw the front page of the 5th. Slowly I worked my way to the obituary page.

And there it was.

Eleanor Painter, Singer, Actress, the caption read. I let out a howl that brought the newspaper room custodian running over with a stern reminder of library rules.

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There were discrepancies. For one, the first name, not the last, began with E. The pendulum told me she had been in films; according to the obit she had not. But to me this was inconsequential. The core was there!

Seeking further information, I went first to the music department and, finding nothing, proceeded upstairs to the theatrical room. There I found a folder for a play entitled *Princess Pat*, written by Victor Herbert as a vehicle for Painter in 1915. The folder contained some old and yellowed daguerreotypes from the show. I leafed through them. The faces of the players were almost impossible to distinguish. Then I came upon one that showed clearly the seven women who were in the play. I looked closely at the picture, then dropped it back in the folder and ran, well, limped as quickly as I could to the nearest pay phone.

“Andi, I’m at the library, come over as fast as you can,” I cried breathlessly. She demanded to know why. Don’t ask, I said. Just come.

She got there 15 minutes later, moaning that this was cutting into her lunch hour, she had planned to go shopping and just what was going on anyway. I led her into the theatrical room, opened the folder and showed her the daguerreotype. “Take a look,” I grinned. She peered down, then pointed directly to one of the seven women in the picture.

“Is this supposed to be me?” she said, wholly dispassionate. The image beneath Andi’s fingertip bore a most remarkable resemblance in every aspect but hair style. Eleanor Painter.

And then she leveled the bomb: she was born in *October* ’47. Two weeks before Painter died.

I was a kid with a burst balloon. I went home and for the first time in more than a month did not touch the pendulum all day.

A coincidence? That damn perfect? And yet, something about this entire incident annoyed me, something I couldn’t quite... I reached for the photocopy of the obit I’d made, read it four, five, six times over. Then I saw it.

“...died at her home in suburban Bratenahl *after a four month illness.*”

“Is it possible that a person’s soul can leave the physical body before the person is dead?” The string between my thumb and index finger propelled the metal disc at its base back and forth over a two-inch span. “Did Eleanor Painter’s soul leave her body before she died?” Yes. “Was it reincarnated as

Andi _____?" Yes.

Proof? Hardly. Still...

I tried half a dozen other people's past lives, each time the pendulum, through alphabetical elimination process, spelling out a legitimately-sounding name. I would pass this information to those concerned, but no one showed more than a passing interest.

As a matter of fact, I was losing interest myself. In all of it. I mean, in truth, so what? My leg cast removed, it was now time to get back into the everyday drudgery called life. Oddly enough, as I grew more ho-hum about the pendulum, the answers became less and less reliable. Or maybe this wasn't so odd.

I did pass the word on to my current Alpha class at Penn, and a few of the students reported interesting results. One man claimed he had used his pendulum to pick every longshot at Liberty Bell racetrack for a solid week (something I had tried to do but with no success).

The man never showed up for class after that, and when I went looking for him was told by his landlady that he seemed to have come into a lot of money recently and just upped and disappeared.

2002

The book was finished. What had taken me 30 years to sit down and start, took me six weeks to actually write. And now it was finished.

It was the story of an ex-hippie Alpha Mind Control teacher at an Ivy League university who one day accidentally slips through that crack in the cosmic egg he's long been raving about in his classes. I had been working this book in my head, creating, adding onto, altering, eliminating, for three decades...but not a single word on paper.

Then, a year before, some events took place. In July, my partner of four and a half years dumped me. I was in Australia at the time, waiting for her to finish a work project and join me for a much-planned journey to India. One evening I got a phone call. I never saw it coming: blindsided.

I completely lost it. A solo traveler for years prior to teaming up with her, suddenly I was scared to death of venturing out alone.

I made up lies, I made up excuses. I had panic attacks. I did all the things I knew to do as one who'd been a stress and fear therapist since 1972. But all my confidence, as a traveler, as a person, had bailed out on me. I was afraid; afraid of everything.

I did finally move around a bit. In Australia. A very safe country to travel. I knew people in every city, and I stayed with them, even when it grew uncomfortable.

And then came September 11. Sure, everybody got knocked around by that, but me, I got flattened. If I thought I was down before...

Then a funny thing happened. After weeks where the least little thing would push the button for tears, suddenly I watched myself collect all my bits and pieces and re-form them into a human being. Fear? Of what: life? death? Hell. I had nothing to lose by venturing out – nothing at all.

Which I did. Four months in Asia, capped off by seven weeks in a small

town in India, where every day I felt myself grow stronger. Then I returned to New Zealand, where since 1985 I lived half the year in an old wooden house on a tree-filled property adjacent to the most beautiful beach on earth. I bought a computer. Somehow figured out how to work it. Sat down and every day for six weeks pumped out copy.

The entire drama was as much a purging of a lifetime of fears, hang-ups, lies and what-have-you as it was the writing of a book. With the final ., I felt totally exhausted, spent. My legs actually quivered as I walked out into the garden.

I saw Timothy under the avocado tree, squatting for a pee. Three years before, hours (it seemed) after I'd buried my 14 year old best friend and declared to the universe, "No more cats!", did Timothy appear. He crawled under the house and for three weeks we had us a standoff. "I'm not feeding you, man," I said. "I'm not going away," he replied, peering out at me. Guess who won.

Again, Timothy squatted. And again. Curious, I went over to look. No liquid on the ground. Same when he moved off and tried once more. And with each attempt a small mew of discomfort.

Next day I took him to the vet. Problems, she said. Major.

She operated. "He had crystals in his urine. I cleaned out the bladder, but this is a serious condition," she said over the phone. "I have to tell you, he may not make it."

When I visited him at the clinic following day, he was wearing one of those lampshade-looking things around the neck so he couldn't tear out the catheter. He looked up at me from his cage. Why? he asked me. What did I do?

I went home and lay on the sofa and died a little.

I'd finished my book, sure. And things were going well. It was summer at the beach and I was feeling terrific. But I had no one in my life at present, not a soul, and now they were going to take my cat?

Every day I'd visit. I'll say this for Sally the vet: she provided Timothy the very best service. She gave him his own room instead of a cage, looked in on him several times a day. I'd go in there, sit on the floor, pull him onto my lap. Talk to him. Perform psychic healings. And cry inside. For him. For me.

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Was he going to live, was he going to die. I had to know. But how can you know what is unknowing? If only...

I went to the room in my house where I keep things I can never throw out. Ransacked through an unbelievable assortment of useless rubbish. Boxes, dresser drawers, under the bed, walk-in closet. One of these days I'm just gonna have to —.

And then I found it. A ziplock clear plastic bag full of old coins from a dozen countries. Dumped them onto the bed. Closed my eyes and slowly waved my hand, palm down, over the spread-out lot. Nothing. Again. Same. Third time, my hand accidentally dipped down and made contact with the bed. My fingers touched a few coins. Still, no feeling. No...sign. Heck with it; I picked up the coin nearest my fingers. A New Zealand 1960 half penny, size of a quarter. (Rendered obsolete when NZ went dollars and cents in '67.) 1960, I thought. Year the Eagles last won the NFL. Beat the Packers 17-13 at Franklin Field for the championship. Major upset. Norm Van Brocklin. Tommy McDonald. Chuck Bednarik. And me, sitting second row, ten yard line, yelling myself hoarse.

I took the half penny into my workroom and committed a major crime. In my adopted country, it is an offense to deface a coin bearing the likeness of Queen Liz. Drill a hole through the top of her head? Probably hanging. I tore off eight inches of black thread, looped it through the hole, tied a knot. Sat down at the desk. Been what – 30 years? Would it work?

I put the pendulum through a warm-up drill. Took a while, but finally movement. “Yes” was still a straight line back and forth. “No”, from side to side. Like riding a bicycle.

--Will Timothy survive this current situation?

--Yes.

--You're sure.

--Yes.

--Absolutely sure.

--Yes.

--Will he recover completely?

--Yes.

--Is Sally the best possible vet to be attending to him?

--Yes.

--Am I doing all I can for him?

--Yes.

Did I believe this? Hard to know, but it did make me feel a little better.

I used the pendulum every day. And every day it told me the same thing: don't worry, be happy. But I am by nature a worrier. Try and change that at age 63.

I brought Timothy home after eight days. Keep an eye on him, Sally instructed. Which I surely did. On him and the pendulum both.

For a few weeks I had to give him a series of antibiotics and anti-inflammatory pills. During this time his appetite suffered, he was losing weight, and carried a general appearance of not very good health. But the pendulum kept telling me all was well. When the pills ran out he began eating again. And looking better. Could the pendulum, despite my inherent skepticism, be right after all?

One day, sitting at the desk, the half penny dangling before me, I took to wondering where the answers actually were coming from. Till now, I hadn't thought to ask. Following the establishment of direction-responses, I'd ask whether this were a good time and place to use the pendulum, and following the inevitable yes I'd plow right in.

--Are the answers to my questions coming from a source outside myself?

--Yes.

--True?

--Yes.

--Oh. Um, am I in touch with a, ah, spirit force or energy?

--Yes.

--No foolin!

--Yes.

I really hadn't expected this answer. In 30 years of mindpower work, thousands of graduates in the US and NZ, I'd formed any number of theories about what makes us tick. Unlike the Buddha, who claimed to have broken down the mind into 85,000 component parts, I had just three.

Most commonly used I call Base Mind. This is the workhorse that gets us through the day: driving the car, tying shoelaces, staying afloat in water.

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Base learns a trick through repetition and more repetition. Comes a point – I call it the *aha!* moment – the trick sinks in. You now can touch type, hit a golf ball straight, drive an axe through a log without slicing off toes. From that moment on you are a typist, Tiger Woods, a lumberjack.

When Tiger goes into a slump, it's not Base Mind that does it. Base still knows how to hit that little white ball with power and accuracy. It's Asshole Mind, that mischievous, and sometimes malicious, part of our makeup that just loves to mess us up.

I don't know about golf pros, but I had spent time as a magazine freelancer around baseball players, even did a bit of Alpha work with Mike Schmidt, the Hall of Fame third baseman for the Phillies. Schmitt was a classic hot/cold hitter, mainly because he was a "thinker". This is not good for a guy with a cylindrical bat trying to knock the crap out of a ball thrown up to 100 miles an hour from just 60 feet away. Mike made the Hall, yes, but he never had good numbers. Here's a guy should've hit .300 with 50 home runs every year, he was that talented. Only one year did he hit .300, and only once 40 home runs. Why no more? He let his Asshole get in the way. I'm convinced that had he done extensive mindpower work he would've been a Hank Aaron or Barry Bonds kind of hitter.

The final aspect of my mental triumvirate is High Mind. This is our truest mind, our highest potential. High Mind is there all the time, knows it all, but only now and then is able to elbow Base and Asshole out of the way and run the show. It was High Mind, I assumed, that was providing answers through the medium of my pendulum. But now I was being told differently.

--So you're a spirit, eh.

--Yes.

--Were you ever a person?

--Yes.

--On planet earth?

--Yes.

--Did you live during my lifetime?

--Yes.

--Any chance we may have met?

--Yes.

--We did?

--Yes.

--Did I know you well?

--Yes.

--From here in New Zealand?

--No.

--In America?

--Yes.

--Wow. Were we related? (I was thinking of my cousin Margy, who had died shortly before.)

--No.

I reeled off a few names of departed friends: Lou? No. Norman? No. I felt like one of the blindfolded panel in a What's My Line mystery guest segment.

--Were we close?

--Yes.

--Really close?

--Yes.

--Are you —. Were you female?

--Yes.

--Oh. A lover, then?

--No.

I was stumped. Put the string down, got up and paced around the room.

--Were you Jewish?

--No.

--White?

--Yes.

--One of my teachers, perhaps? Though for sure I was never “really close” with a teacher.

--No.

Then a comic book light bulb suddenly appeared over my head.

--Peggy!

--Yes.

--You're Peggy!!

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--*Yes.*

--Momma, is it really you!? (As a joke we'd call each other Momma and Poppa – of the Alpha House hangers-on children.)

--*Yes.*

I experienced a hit of pure joy. Over and over I kept asking: is it you, Peggy? Is this really you? All the time a thought peeking over my mental shoulder: are you out of your goddamn mind, boyo?? But that voice never emerged from the background. Peggy and I were back together.

For the first 30 years of my life I was as straight and narrow as a human being possibly could be. Negative, cynical, a doubter.

I was so tightly wound, the first time I smoked marijuana I didn't even catch a buzz. It was good stuff, I had been told, and I toked a fat joint all by myself. Nada.

Following this dry run, sure, fine. I was never a heavy smoker. Once or twice a week. Mainly, I loved listening to music. The things I could hear that I couldn't otherwise: good lord!

LSD catapulted me into a much deeper zone. Again, a dozen trips over three, four years hardly qualified me as an acidhead. What it did make me realize, the chemical was but a key into the mansion of my own mind. A mansion I had been residing in the damp and grungy basement of my entire life, not knowing there might be anything above.

Then I leaped off the surface right into orbit. Through a friend I met this woman who had done a course with the McDonald's of mindpower training. She had got friendly with the teacher, who gave her all his supposedly secret material. Using it, she began teaching on her own.

I did the course with her at her home. Me and one other guy. All through the course she emphasized the psychic element, assured me we were opening up our own latent abilities. Sure, sure, I thought. The course concluded and we now had to perform.

Each of us, the teacher, the other chap and me, wrote down the name, age and home city of someone we knew (and whom the other two didn't), plus a lengthy description of that person. The teacher went first. The other student

read off only the name, age and city of his subject. The teacher went into Alpha and began describing the subject. She might have been, as I was, reading off the guy's paper. I thought: *setup!*

Then I gave the chap my subject-person. And he did a pretty good job. He missed a couple things, but got it spot-on that my friend had a withered left arm.

Where before I figured the readings were a bunch of crap, the concept now seemed legit. Which bothered me even more than thinking the whole notion bogus. Because I knew, absolutely *knew*, there was no way in hell I could perform this kind of feat.

I closed my eyes and cleared all thoughts. I took several slow, deep breaths, then counted backwards ten-to-one, visualizing the numbers large and bold. Imagined opening a door and passing through to my "Alpha temple". The guy gave me his subject, a man in his 60s. The image of a man appeared. He looked like Ed Hogan, who used to be PR director for the Philly Eagles when I worked there. I tried to shoo Ed away, but he stayed right on the screen, glaring at me.

"What's wrong," the teacher asked.

"This guy I used to know. He won't go away."

"Well, just assume he's standing in for the subject. Read him."

"White hair, crew cut, small eyes, small ears, bit of a beak nose. Eddie, all right. Except he's got a week's growth of beard. Ed was always clean shaven."

On and on I prattled. And everything I said, the other dude went uh-huh, right, yep.

The teacher said go inside the guy. So I imagined myself the size of my thumbnail and projected inside Ed Hogan's head.

"Um, brain looks okay. Nothing out of the ordinary in the head. Missing a few teeth. I'm going down through his neck now. Chest fine, heart all right." Then I let out a yelp.

"What?" the teacher wondered.

"He's got cancer!" I cried. "Bad! But-but more than that, his stomach! It looks like there's been a fire in here. It's all burnt inside." I could hear the other two giggling.

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The Ed Hogan person indeed had big-time big C. Moreover, he'd been over-radiated so that his stomach in fact was a burnt-out mess. It was right there, written down on the other student's paper.

Part of me didn't believe it. But part of me did.

We did second and third readings. I was even better with the next, and the third more accurate and detailed than the first two.

In the weeks that followed I became a genuine psychic bore. Friends, acquaintances – hell, I'd accost total strangers: "Pssst! Yo, buddy. Give me somebody's name, age and city – quick!"

When I began teaching at Penn not long after, huge crowds of people, I performed readings regularly. And when each course finished, so did they.

At this point, the odd thing, to me, no longer was that we could do these amazing tricks, but that very few felt they were any kind of big deal. "Yeah, I always figured we have this ability built in, I just never knew how to access it." The average response. I suppose I equated it with walking on air because I had been such a tight-assed straight.

And now this. Communicating with Peggy. Who'd been dead more than 15 years. Come awwwn.

I stared at the dangling coin. I didn't know what to say. "Um, how's things?" I heard myself ask. Oh, brilliant.

--Peggy, are you well?

--Yes.

--Happy?

--Yes.

--Miss anything from down here?

--No.

Eloquent dialogue.

--Peggy, look. I mean, Jesus Christ! Is this really you, Momma?

--Yes.

--Have you done this sort of thing before? Contacting people?

--No.

--There's a reason you've done this now?

--Yes.

--To – what? Not because you're lonely?

--Yes.

--Yes, you're lonely?

--No.

Ah. When I ask a positive question in a negative fashion – Not because you're lonely – the answer comes yes, as in agreement. Tricky, that.

--Peggy, I know I'm sounding stupid. I'm just so, ah, surprised to hear from you! Tell me: do I believe this?

--No.

--Sorry. I'd really like to.

--Yes.

--Can I ask you...anything?

--Yes.

--And you'll answer?

--Yes.

--Well, shit! Okay, first about you. I'd love to know what it's like over there. But it's gonna be hard coming up with the right questions. Is there any sense of physicality? Like, do you have scenery?

--No.

--Do you miss that?

--No.

--Can you, um, use your mind to imagine scenery?

--Yes.

--If you have no physicality, are you just...mind?

--Yes.

--Total mind? Like, you know everything?

--Yes.

--Everything??

--Yes.

--Look, I've often read about people who've had near-death experiences. They say first they were hovering at an angle above their body, then there was this sound like an airplane engine, then they were moving along a semi-dark tunnel towards light. Was this how it was for you?

--Yes.

--Were you scared?

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--Yes.

--Because...you thought you might be going to hell?

--Yes.

--But once you got out of the tunnel, everything was all right?

--Yes.

--You were met by friends, like they say?

--Yes.

--And the fear just evaporated.

--Yes.

--And now – what? All life – or rather death – is bliss?

--Yes.

--All of it?

--Yes.

--Still have your sense of humor? Of absurdity?

--Yes.

--Can you see everything I do down here?

--Yes.

--Even when I jerk off?

--Yes.

--And you guys can all see me?

--Yes.

--You're all impressed by the size of my fishing tackle?

--No.

--Do I look goofy when I come?

--No.

--So it's okay to have a wank now and then?

--Yes.

That's a relief.

--Okay, can I ask you some serious stuff about me now?

--Yes.

--You've observed what I've been through the past several months, eh.

--Yes.

--I thought I'd lost it for good, babe.

--Yes. (Yes I thought I lost it, or yes I did lose it? Got to be more specific.)

BARRY ROSENBERG

--Listen, this is important, all right? When I was teaching Alpha all those years, I always felt that God, or the Universe, whatever, was guiding and protecting me.

--Yes.

--But when I quit teaching I sorta felt I'd been abandoned. I wasn't needed anymore. Have I? Been abandoned, I mean?

--No.

--Is there anything, uh, you guys have in store for me?

--Yes.

--I'm still part of The Plan then?

--Yes.

--Far out. Oh, listen. I have to take a crap. Real bad. I don't suppose that's something you have to worry about much.

--Yes. (Yes, that's something she doesn't, etc.)

--We'll talk again, right?

--Yes.

--Peggy, I don't know that I believe all this, or what. But it's lovely. It truly is.

--Yes.

Following morning jogging along the beach I thought: what a load of rubbish! I thought: then where the hell does it come from? I thought: it sure is fascinating, whatever. I thought: my God, what if it's real! I wish I could figure out some way of testing her.

That evening I got back on the line.

--Are the answers to my questions coming from outside myself?

--Yes.

--Is this Peggy?

--Yes.

--Darling, do you mind if I ask a few questions about your family?

--No.

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--Your daughter. The one I knew. I can't for the life of me remember her name. Can you spell it out for me?

--*Yes.*

--Okay. More than five letters?

--*No.*

--Five exactly?

--*Yes.*

--Is the first letter between A and M inclusive?

--*Yes.*

--A and G inclusive?

--*No.*

--H, I or J?

--*No.*

--K?

--*No.*

--L?

--*Yes.*

--Ah. I remember now. Laura, right?

--*Yes.*

--And your sons. One was Paul, yes?

--*Yes.*

--The chubby one?

--*No.*

--The slim one.

--*Yes.*

--And the chubby one. First letter. A to M inclusive?

--*Yes.*

I couldn't remember this one at all, not until I got the first two letters, then it clicked. But really, what kind of test was I giving her? Sure I couldn't remember, but the names were in my head somewhere. Maybe this whole pendulum thing was a process of digging stuff out of my own subconscious. I thought about blindly opening a book, asking Peggy to give me the page number. And then I thought: if I were a spirit and somebody pulled a stunt like that on me...

--Peggy, sorry about this. I want so bad to believe, you know that.

--Yes.

--I mean, nutcase that I am, I'm talking to you, and here I am wanting you to prove it's you I'm talking to. So, if you are really you, do forgive me.

--Yes.

--You virtually knew my entire Alpha gig by heart, back in the old days, right?

--Yes.

--I said some pretty outlandish things, stuff right off the top of my head. Was I pretty close to the truth?

--Yes.

--Very close?

--Yes.

--100%?

--No.

--Okay, you told me the Universe still has a gig for me. Does it have anything to do with the book I just finished?

--Yes.

--Is that it then? The book?

--No.

--So...was the book just a lead-in to what the Big Chiefs want me to do?

--Yes.

--Back to teaching?

--No.

I just couldn't think of the right questions to ask.

--Okay. Talk about you. You coming back here again?

--No.

--Really? Well, there is such a thing as reincarnation, yes?

--Yes.

--But you're not coming back.

--Yes. (She's not)

--You've graduated?

--Yes.

--Hey, *mazel tov!* So...you just hang out where you are for the rest of

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eternity?

--*Yes.*

--You don't think that'll get boring?

--*Yes.* (She doesn't think)

--Is there —. Do you —. *Oi vey.* I want to know what goes on your side, right? Is everything peaceful?

--*Yes.*

--So there's no bullshit?

--*No.*

--Wait. You mean there is bullshit?

--*Yes.*

--Schmucks?

--*Yes.*

--Reallly! So if somebody's a schmuck down here chances are they don't check it at the Gate? Do they give you trouble?

--*No.*

--You mean people – spirit folk – tolerate them?

--*Yes.*

--So everybody gets along honky-dorry.

--*Yes.*

--Aha. Look, are you in what we here call heaven?

--*No.*

--*Hell!?*

--*No.*

--Is there such a thing as heaven and hell?

--*No.*

--Then does everybody who goes over hang out where you are?

--*Yes.*

--Everybody? Good, bad and ugly go to the same party?

--*Yes.*

--Hitler and Richard Nixon and Donald Rumsfeld when it's his time?

--*Yes.*

--And it's cool?

--*Yes.*

--I don't know, love. Sounds pretty flat to me.

--No.

--Look, I'd love to continue on this, but I've got to make a run for the crapper again. Peggy, please? Next time? Even if you're not really Peggy, whoever you are, it's great talking to you.

Over the next two weeks I "talked" with Peggy every day. Sometimes more than once a day. I felt an exuberance, but as well there was something else. It was more than just the uncertainty. I've long felt there *has* to be reason and order in the universe; there just has to be. And if so, why not this? Other times it was like: Rosenberg – are you out of your boogerpickin' mind!!! Mainly, I wanted so strongly to believe, but because I did, was I creating my own reality?

My days were crazy. Okay, that's the way it's been most of my life. When you have nothing much to do, don't need to work, are lazy, a devoted shirkaholic, the days can be that way.

But now I couldn't seem to get anything together. I might decide to drive into town. No, I'll walk. No, I'll drive. Then I wouldn't go at all. Set out to go shopping. Never get there. Start reading a book, put it down, begin another, put it down, pick up the first one. Like that.

The only thing sure, as always, was my morning run. Out of the house before the sun, onto the beach, turn left and get into it. Two and a half miles to the West End hills, two and a half back. Not fast. But steady. Followed by a plunge in the ocean. With a beginning like that, normally it didn't matter what the rest of the day brought.

Running is therapeutic, curiously so. Often while on the jog I'll develop a heavy case of the angers. Somebody from my past will appear on the scope, and the hate will just pour out of me. This will go on for a while, then pffft, it's gone.

Lately, in addition to the angers I was getting a fairly common case of the dreads. Why so?

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I asked Peggy, and she agreed, but I couldn't figure out the necessary questions to pin it down. I knew I was in post-manuscript depression, feeling excessively lonely. So maybe I had invented Peggy as an imaginary friend. Isn't that why people invent their personalized versions of God? Why people go back to religion following years of coasting without? To me, all religion is bullshit: clubs that've survived the test of time and developed into business societies. And God? Sure, no question. A rather benign but incompetent, semi-senile Old Chap, well past his prime but still with connections, and so assigned to a planet that deserved no better. Good to curse out and place blame on, but thoroughly ineffective.

Since September 11, I had watched people, Americans most notably, flocking back to God and church or temple. Otherwise pretty well-balanced people, too. The born-again devout. And there was no talking to them. It was pure fear, no question. Hey folks, work through it, you know? Uh-uh, no way. A believer is an agnostic who's been mugged (via TV in this case).

My take is, has always been, I'll do it my way. But what the hell was my way? I've got no job, no work of any kind, really; no family, no mate. No focus. No complaints. Life ain't exactly horrible: half the year living on a magnificent beach in New Zealand, 4-6 months backpacking through Third World countries – a guy could do a lot worse. But I could not deny I was having moments of sheer screwiness lately, coated with a fat layer of boredom.

My conversations with Peggy were going nowhere. I knew this. I was afraid of hearing what a classic dickhead I was, and so I was indulging in cosmic chitchat. I *hate* chitchat. I have cut out relationships with any number of people the past several years because I felt they adamantly refused to move off safe perches. People with high IQs and well-above-average sensitivity had taken to sending me garbage, cutesy-poo emails, usually not even of their own invention, and often as part of a bulk sendout. Oh no. No no no *no*.

And here I was doing similar with Peggy. This can't be why suddenly she'd got in touch. And yet, it wasn't up to her to explore this ever-so-strange but remarkable relationship. It was up to me to form the questions to delve into her allegedly limitless knowledge. But all I seemed to come up with was...*drek*.

I asked her, time and again, about the manuscript I had just written. (It was good, the publisher I had sent it to – recommended by an author acquaintance in the US – will love it, it would be published this year and sell well.) About a gorgeous 30-something number who had moved in just down the road and who did yoga on the beach every morning. (She was single, had a kid, knew who I was and didn't think me at all repulsive. Also, it was in my highest good not to become involved with her.) About the journey I would be taking later in the year. (Contrary to my intention at the moment, I would not go to Philadelphia for my sister's 70th, nor to Hawaii to see my friend Bob, nor to Vietnam to visit the family in Hoi An whose son I was sponsoring through school. I would go back to India, and to one additional Asian country – which I couldn't figure out.)

About Peggy, I seemed to be repeating my questions of the first couple of days. Idiotically. Sounding to myself like a Pythonesque routine. (“What's it like?”)

Curious thing, during each sequence, I had to cut it short to jog to the toilet. I asked her about this. She said there was a definite reason for it. After a few no answers, I jokingly wondered,

--Is it because I'm so full of crap?

--Yes.

Thanks a lot.

One day I got on the line, was told that, yes, my answers were coming from a source outside myself, but not Peggy.

--Oh? Somebody I knew from this lifetime?

--Yes.

--From America?

--No.

--From New Zealand?

--Yes.

--Pat?

--Yes.

Pat had lived a mile down the road. A woman in her late 60s, she was perhaps the most spiritually attuned person I've known. She had palsy, her voice quavered, but her mind was so wonderfully sharp. I would stop in to

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see her every week. I did most of the talking; she just sat and listened. And then she would utter a few sentences that absolutely and perfectly sliced to the core of the matter.

Once I asked, “Pat, with all the ugly in the world, all the deceit and violence and power games, how can you maintain such a firm belief that good exists?”

She paused, said nothing for quite a while. Then: “If I wasn’t 100 percent certain that the world as we view and experience it is but a screen, and all the bad we see merely a projection on it, and that behind the screen exists the real world, the real universe, and it has infinite depth and love, I couldn’t believe in good either.”

Pat claimed she would be heading off to the other side when she was 70. “I’ve had enough here, Barry. I yearn to be where there’s only light and love.”

“Pat, you’ll live to a hundred,” I would reply, nervously.

“Oh no. Please don’t wish that on me. Seventy’s when I go.”

She contracted chest pains a few days before her 70th. They said it was nothing, but kept her in the hospital for observation. I was sitting with her on the afternoon of her birthday, holding her hand as she lay back in the hospital bed. Not much talk, just sharing the moment. She closed her eyes and dozed off. When I let go her hand, leaned over and kissed her forehead, then left the room (I didn’t learn till the following day), she already was dead.

“Pat!” I now exclaimed. “Oh, Pat, how wonderful to be talking with you!” I babbled on, asking rather inane questions, receiving polite (I felt) replies. Then a thought struck.

--Do you have some sort of message for me, Pat?

--Yes.

--About writing?

--No.

--Teaching?

--No.

--Traveling?

--No.

--Timothy?

--No.

--Um, relationships?

--No.

--Can you spell it out?

--Yes

I got a G. Then R. A. S. After that, it became fuzzy.

--GRAS-something?

--Yes.

What is she going on about? I need to mow the lawn? Smoke a little dope, get my head cleared out?

I grabbed the dictionary. Very few words begin GRAS. And then I saw it.

--GRASP?

--Yes.

In Buddhistic terms, grasp is a negative concept: path-obscuring attachment. I couldn't recall hearing it in a positive context. I read through the dictionary's definitions. *Comprehension or understanding. Possession or mastery.*

--You mean, like, *grasp* the meaning of life?

--Yes.

--As though, um, I'm avoiding that?

--Yes.

--With my judgments, negativity and cynicism?

--Yes.

--So, I should truly come to understand the meaning of life, not just know it, but practice it, live it, be it?

--Yes.

Pat, the most polite and genteel of women, who never could say a harsh or rude word, must be blushing now, I thought.

Grasp.

Oh Pat, I thought. How do you truly exorcize a lifetime, inherited from a momma such as mine, of anger and worry and cynicism? How do you not judge people who choose to be fools and exist nine-tenths asleep? I can deny and ignore them, sure, but that's numb and dumb – what *they* do. Yet I suppose if I can sit my ass down and write a book in six weeks, after putting it off 30

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years, I can make an effort, an extreme effort, at least to scale down my ungrasping reactions to people's foolishness. Every time I've tried, though, invoked a "should", it has always felt as if I'm playing a role that is not me. With women, when I'm trying to please, I invariably get squashed. When I try to accommodate people whose demonstrated intelligence and sensitivity don't come up to my anklebone, I get pounded down.

--Pat, I'm sorry, I truly am, but I just don't *like* people! As individuals they can be okay, but put 'em together, whether in pairs or assemblies called nations, religions, societies, families, they dumb down – always. Yuk! Okay, okay. *Grasp*. I'll try. I will try.

The next evening I got on the pendulum. I wanted to question Pat further. But Pat was not there. As a matter of fact, I never heard from her again.

Peggy was back, though.

--Momma, you feel a bit exasperated with me?

--*No*.

--You were never that patient when you had a body.

--*Yes*. (She was not)

--I've been a bit of an asshole?

--*Yes*.

--Apology accepted?

--*Yes*.

We continued our talk, but I didn't think I was going anywhere with it. I was ready to sign off when suddenly I had a strange feeling.

--You still there, Peggy?

--*No*.

--You're not Peggy?

--*No*.

--Oh. Are you also a spirit?

--*Yes*.

--Someone I've known as a person?

--*Yes*.

--Cousin Margy?

--*No*.

--Wilt?

--No.

--Uhh...Lou?

--Yes.

--Lou! Lou my man! Hey, what is this, old home week!

Lou was a soft, distinguished, silver haired man, a professor at Rutgers University. We were like father and son for quite a while, and, to my knowledge, I was the only supportive friend when he left his wife of many years and took up with, then married, a much younger woman.

We had a brief, uneventful chat, wishing each other well.

The following evening, I got another visitor. Uncle Nat, my very favorite relative, another father figure. A similar give and take of non-essentials. Some minutes along I heard myself say:

--Do you have a message for me, Nat?

--Yes.

I asked him to spell it out. I got PRACT before the pendulum seemed to go haywire. This was common; for some reason, spellings are difficult to get across.

--PRACTICE?

--No.

--PRACTICAL?

--Yes.

Then a second word: SOMEB, and then it quit.

--SOMEBODY?

--No.

What the hell was going on here?

--Hey, are you really Uncle Nat?

--No.

--I didn't think so. And was I really talking with Lou yesterday?

--No.

--You've pretended to be both?

--Yes.

--Have you been Pat and Peggy as well?

--No.

--Pat and Peggy are really Pat and Peggy, you mean.

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--*Yes.*

--Well, why're you doing this? Are you out to hurt me?

--*No.*

--Why then? Because you can?

--*Yes.*

--Oh, terrific. What are you, one of these mischievous earth-bound types who requires a ghostbuster to make the jump to the other side?

--*No.*

--And you're not here to hurt me.

--*Yes.* (It's not)

--Well, please yourself, then.

Oddly, I didn't feel the least threatened. But it was around this time that some strange things began to happen. (Strange? Man talks to dead folk via a 32 year old coin and strange things began to happen? Yes.)

The house suddenly had a virtual plague of rats. An occasional rat, sure. But in a two week span, between Timothy and the trap I set daily in the crawl space above the ceiling, we caught no less than ten of the critters. One wasn't dead, but got a leg caught in the trap and was squealing like mad. I didn't have the heart to bludgeon him, so I got a box and tried to sweep him in, thinking I'd set him free in the bush later on. But the little bastard bit me on the finger, hard, drawing blood, then somehow wriggled free, glanced back and, I swear, grinned.

One day I came in after some work in the garden and went to wash my hands. In the mirror, I saw a bloody gash on the front of my bald crown. Nearly two inches long, it was. And I had no recollection whatsoever of scratching it on anything.

A few nights following my encounter with the impersonating spirit, I got up at 4am to pee. I was naked. Standing in front of the commode, I happened to glance up from the business at hand. Directly in the middle of my chest was a small, round, red sticker, the kind used by galleries to denote a sale. I peeled it off, looked at it stuck to my fingertip. There was no way, none, that such a sticker (I've never had any in the house) could have made its way onto my chest.

"Because you can," I mumbled, flopping back into bed.

Just around this time, a Sunday morning, I was walking along the river when a Maori *waka*, the long, traditional, hand-carved canoe, came by, around 30 bare-chested males manning the paddles and chanting in perfect unison. Seated stiffly upright among them were two North American native chiefs in full dress. The scene was quietly breathtaking. They paddled past, turned around, went the other way.

They brought the *waka* ashore, then assembled and had an official welcoming for the chiefs (who, I learned, were from British Columbia). First one, then another, of the Maori warriors, large, well-fed men wearing nothing but *piupiu*, skirts made from rolled flax strips, danced forward to where the chiefs stood. Eyes bulging, tongues flapping, shaking a *taiaha* – a wooden club – menacingly before acknowledging the chiefs to be friends and placing the welcoming fern on the ground before them. I felt goose bumps.

Maori don't fare well in New Zealand's English society. Generally, they eat poorly, smoke, drink heavily and die early. The wife and kid-bashing rate is extraordinarily high. Many younger males are in gangs, sport facial tattoos, wear leather jackets with club patches and now and then beat the crap out of one another. Here, this day, not trying to conform to (or rebel against) an alien society but rather digging back into their own Pacific Island culture, they were strong, proud. This was who they were, truly. *Grasp*.

--Peggy, I want to go over this with you again. The passing-over bit. Just like it's been reported by many who have clinically died and come back to life: the hovering above the body, noise like an airplane engine, proceeding down the tunnel to the light. Okay so far?

--Yes.

--You said you were scared, right?

--Yes.

--Of going to hell.

--Yes.

--Because...you were bad as a person?

--Yes.

--Christ, Peggy. Everybody loved your big fat ass.

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

--Yes.

--Then bad – what, as a mother?

--Yes.

--Ahhh. If I remember, you had a daughter who wouldn't speak to you, an older son you rarely saw, Laura, and the two younger boys I knew, who always getting in trouble.

--Yes.

They had pulled into a gas station, ordered a dollar's worth of gas. Soon as the attendant took out the nozzle, the driver began pulling away. The attendant chased after, dove onto the hood. What happened next is in question. Did the son driving *mean* to accelerate? Blinded by the attendant on his hood, did he panic and step on the gas instead of the brake? No matter. The car crashed, the attendant flew off and was decapitated. Peggy's sons were sentenced to life. Three young lives ruined, all for a dollar's worth of gas.

--Are the boys still in jail?

--No.

--Are they doing all right?

--No.

--And the second daughter? Is she doing okay?

--No.

--So all this with your kids -- you felt it was your fault.

--Yes.

--And until you got through the tunnel, you were scared you'd land in hell for your sins.

--Yes.

--You said you were met by friends.

--Yes.

--And immediately felt terrific.

--Yes.

--Does this happen to everybody?

--Yes.

--Even if they were particularly bad down here?

--Yes.

--Are you judged Up There for your life down here?

--Yes.

--Sure. And punished if you're judged bad?

--No.

--Really?

--Yes.

--Wait a minute. Are you saying you can do anything at all down here and not be punished when you get to your side.

--Yes.

--Dude's a murderer, pedophile, rapist, CEO of Enron: no penalty?

--Yes. (No)

--You can lie, cheat, step on people's feet, and not even a sharp rap across the knuckles with a celestial ruler?

--Yes.

--Peggy, I'm finding this a bit hard to swallow.

--Yes.

--Does this judgment thing happen right off?

--No.

--You're given a period of grace.

--Yes.

--Then what: you're gently taken by the wing, asked to look back at your nasties, you lower your head, scuff the cloud with your foot and say, Gosh, what did I do!

--Yes.

--Unbelievable.

--No.

--Those of you who genuinely feel crummy about what you did, do you get some kind of counseling or therapy?

--Yes.

--A mentor of sorts?

--Yes.

--So, has your slate been cleared?

--No.

--Still feel guilty.

--Yes.

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

--But this doesn't interfere with your feeling great all the time.

--Yes. (It doesn't)

--Is the period of slate-clearing up to the individual?

--Yes.

--I suppose when you have all the time in the world – out of the world – there's no particular hurry.

--Yes. (There's no).

--Well, you were rather an intrepid procrastinator as a human, so that part of you doesn't seem to have changed.

--Yes. (It hasn't).

--On a scale of 1 to 10 – can you do a 1 to 10 thing?

--Yes.

--Okay, where do you place yourself up there? Five or better?

--No.

--Really?

--Yes.

--Four?

--No.

--Three?

--No.

--Jesus, babe! *Two*?

--Yes.

--As you clean up your guilt, will you move up the scale?

--Yes.

--Do you know any 10s?

--Yes.

--Pretty high folk?

--Yes.

--Privates and corporals mingle freely with the generals?

--Yes.

--What about the 19 terrorists who arrived on September 11: did you folks stand around booing and flipping them the finger?

--No.

--They were welcomed just like any normal decent soul?

--Yes.

--God, you dead folk are so blasé. But did you lot sort of consider them prime fools?

--Yes.

--And their reaction upon not being greeted by gorgeous black-eyed virgins with open thighs: were they pissed off?

--Yes.

--Extremely pissed off?

--Yes.

--Tell 'em tough shit for me, will you?

--No.

--Did they feel they'd been duped by their leaders?

--Yes.

--Is there such a being as Mohammed?

--Yes.

--How did he react to their entrance? Wanted nothing to do with them, I betcha.

--Yes.

--You got lots of religious idiots?

--Yes.

--Popes and high rabbis and ayatollahs still have their followers?

--Yes.

--As well as other late, great top guns in the God Squad?

--Yes.

--Krishna crazies?

--Yes.

--Do they recruit and generally behave like schmucks?

--No.

--Stay in their own circles, then.

--Yes.

--And nobody else gives a hoot.

--Yes. (They don't)

--Any politics of any kind?

--No.

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

--Totally non-existent.

--*Yes.*

--Well, one out of two ain't bad.

--*Yes.* (It isn't)

--If there was a Mohammed, was there also a Jesus?

--*Yes.*

--Son of God?

--*No.*

--Just a high dude.

--*Yes.*

--Moses?

--*Yes.*

--Buddha?

--*Yes.*

--And are they all 10s?

--*Yes.*

--Did any of them get it right while they were down here?

--*No.*

--None of them?

--*Yes.* (None)

--Anybody close?

--*Yes.*

--The Buddha?

--*Yes.*

--Tell me, is the Dali Lama really the fourteenth reincarnation of himself?

--*No.*

--Reincarnation of any of the other 13?

--*No.*

--But he's a cool dude?

--*Yes.*

--On a 1 to 10, how does he rate down here? Is he a 10?

--*No.*

--Nine?

--*Yes.*

--Um, how about me on a 1 to 10 down here? Can you tell me?

--Yes.

--Am I...am I... (meekly) higher than a 1?

--Yes.

--More than a 2?

--Yes.

Was I really sweating? Me? Oh yes, I was. This was what it all came down to. My rating. As a human being. Sixty-three years' worth.

--Ah, I'm at least a 3, right?

--Yes.

I couldn't believe this. You wuss, Rosenberg!

--Oh, look, Peggy. I've suddenly got to run to the toilet. You know how I get. Tomorrow. We'll definitely continue this tomorrow, okay?

--Yes.

That night a dream: I'm floating above my own dead body, laid out peacefully on a bed. There begins a noise, like the motor of a '52 Mack truck at full throttle and my head's inside it. Then the room morphs into the opening of a long tunnel. I peer in and see it's pretty well illuminated. Just as I begin to move inside the tunnel, I wake up.

I remember that just hours before I had this long, long discussion with a half penny bearing Queen Liz's face and my dead friend Peggy's voice. Well, not her *voice*, exactly.

I suspect quite strongly that my mind, held together for decades with now-yellowed Scotch tape, is rapidly coming unglued.

I decide to give it up. The whole thing is utterly absurd and I'm done with it. Enough. With conviction, I yank off the thread, toss the coin in a drawer. A few hours later I open the drawer, take out the coin, tie on a length of new thread.

--Do you mind my asking what must be a bunch of silly questions of what your side of the curtain's all about?

--No.

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--Okay. You live your life here, kick the bucket and arrive Up There.

--Yes.

--Greeted by friends, settle in.

--Yes.

--It must be weird at first having no body.

--Yes.

--Do new admissions generally require some appearance of physicality?
Especially landscape and such?

--Yes.

--Does it take a long time to divorce yourself from the existence you left
behind on earth?

--No.

--You're feeling aces in your new home, who needs the hassles of down
here.

--Yes.

--Does everybody who dies come back again?

--Yes.

--Many times?

--Yes.

--Only as human?

--Yes.

--Then none of this Buddhist scare stuff – kick a dog, come back as a
dog.

--Yes. (None)

--Do animals reincarnate?

--Yes.

--Only within their own species?

--Yes.

--Dogs don't come back as cats.

--Yes. (They don't)

--Look, you don't happen to know the whereabouts of my favorite all-
time living thing, a ginger tom named Mister Futties?

--No.

--Wait. I asked that wrong. You do know?

--Yes.

--Is he Up There?

--Yes.

--Coming back here?

--No.

--He's graduated, then.

--Yes.

--You talk about guilt. That dude is my sole source of it down here. He died of cancer when he was ten, and I feel – *I know* – I could've done something different, I don't know, feed him better, something.

--No.

--He should've lived five more years at least.

--No.

--What do you mean, no. You're saying he died when he did coz he knew it was his time to go?

--Yes.

--His "work" here was finished?

--Yes.

--Aw c'mon.

--Yes.

--Thanks, love. I'd truly like to believe that, but. By the way, do cats have 1 to 10 ratings?

--Yes.

--I bet he's a 10.

--Yes.

--Awriiight! Look, is there a set use-by date on reincarnation? You've got five thousand years to do your stuff or else?

--No.

--But you guys are Up There, right, you're feeling great, got a bunch of new friends...it must be hard having to come back.

--No.

--Oh? Is this because your concept of time is so different? Hey Fred, I'm going down to earth for 80 years, see you in a few minutes.

--Yes.

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--You're instructed – or it's suggested – whom you're going to be?
--No.
--You're free to choose.
--Yes.
--So you pick a place, a situation, a parent or two. And take the plunge.
--Yes.
--Like selecting a role in a play.
--Yes.
--So I picked me, and Saddam Hussein picked Saddam Hussein.
--Yes.
--And when the play's over, or at least your part in it, you wipe off the greasepaint and come back here till it's time to pick another role?
--Yes.
--Hey dude, you've had an audience with God, right?
--No.
--In 15 years? Must be a hell of a long queue.
--No.
--What, no? No queue?
--Yes. (No)
--But there is a God.
--No.
--Peggy! No God?
--Yes. (No God)
--Aw c'mon, Momma. The Lord? Absolute? Almighty?
--No.
--Deity. Divine. Oversoul. Infinite.
--No.
--Providence. First Cause. Prime Mover. Big Bopper. *Peggy!!*
--No.
--NO...GOD!!?
--Yes. (No God)
--Gods then? Like, plural. Some kind of Committee?
--No.
--Used to be?

--No.

--Never?

--Yes. (Never)

This took a time to sink in.

--How about the devil? Y'know, Satan? Ugly dude with horns, tail, cloven hoofs? Funky breath?

--No.

--So...so...the shop runs without a foreman? We're on our own? Completely?

--Yes.

Oh boy. Ohhhh boy. This ever gets out it's gonna put a shitload of people out of work.

Peggy – the human Peggy – got along with everyone. Before her and since, I've never known a person who could ingratiate herself so immediately and thoroughly as she. For a start, she *looked* like everybody's mother. Beyond that, she had two major talents: she listened, and she had patience. (Two qualities I thoroughly lacked.)

When she first arrived on the scene, Relax For Survival was still a party. So most of those who hung around were young. They wanted – needed – something: family, acceptance, belonging. I was the poppa, but I growled and scowled. Peggy provided the antithesis to my gruff and intolerant manner.

When I returned from a summer in Greece her first year as center director, I looked around at our scene and knew a change was in order. Partying is fine, but no one in our party was going anywhere. They'd taken the shape of their container. So for the first time, I posted rules: no tobacco, dope, alcohol and meat, at the house or any of our events. And whoa, did the kiddies ever scamper. In their place, older women began appearing. I remember our Christmas party that year. Where before I had been the oldest, we'd generally end up naked and the room would be a cloud of dope smoke, I was now the youngest, for sure everyone stayed clothed, and ginger ale was the strongest

drug available.

And the new crowd loved Peggy every bit as much as the old one had.

Mostly, my courses and those of “Survival College” attracted the bottom half of society’s socio-economic totem pole. It was the way I planned and wanted it. Everybody could afford us, and in the event someone couldn’t, hey, bake us a cake or come wash the windows. No elitist bullshit here.

The blue collar neighborhood women looked upon her with great respect. After all, she was obviously one of their kind, but here she was director of a center, and she’d been on TV! On more than a few occasions, though, there’d be a Caddy or Beamer or some other fancy wheels parked outside, and a fairly high roller, mostly but not always a woman, talking to Peggy. Pouring her/his heart out.

“Momma, you should be charging,” I’d tell her.

“How can I, Poppa? I’m not doing anything, just sitting and letting them talk.”

She came to me after such a meet, nonplussed. “They have all that money, how can they be so messed up?”

And could she ever spot a phony, a tight-ass. Once I was asked to be “guest therapist” at a monthly meeting of rebirthers. I took Peggy along with me. There were 25 of them at this fancy house in the suburbs. We walked in, she took one look around. “Poppa,” she whispered, “what are we doing here with all these *putzes!*” And were they ever.

A third person shared the house with us. Clarence. Six-six and, initially, 300 pounds. Long hair and beard. Looked like a Hell’s Angel.

He’d done my course and kept hanging around, like a big friendly Saint Bernard. He was smoking. We got him to stop. His diet was pure junk, we changed him to vegetarian. Within a few months he’d shed 75 pounds and could look people in the eye, talk to them.

“Clarence, are you handy? Do carpentry, mechanical stuff?”

“Yeah, sure. Anything.”

So I moved him in. When he hung the kitchen cabinets upside down, I had my first clue.

At the time, I’d been lobbying to get us into the Philadelphia prison system. This was hard work, mainly because of the prison psychiatrist, who was

worried we'd cut into his power base. At one of our Thursday sessions, where we always performed group psychic healings, I had us home in on the shrink. We visualized him accepting us, telling the warden we were good people and to let us come in. Next morning the warden called and said welcome.

Mainly because of his size and appearance, I asked Clarence did he want the gig. It was just once a week for two hours, but it had to be done right. He said he'd be happy to do so.

Every Tuesday morning he put on a clean shirt and tie, drove off to the brig. Following the first couple of sessions I no longer needed to question him. I was, in fact, relieved to finally have somebody accept some responsibility.

A month goes by and one Tuesday I get a call from the warden: where's your man Clarence? What do you mean? I ask. "Well, first three weeks he came, everything was great. The people here really liked the classes. But nobody from your group has shown up the past three Tuesdays."

"How was the gig this morning?" I casually asked when Clarence entered the house an hour later.

"Oh, great, yeah. They're really responding, yeah."

You could've heard me a block away. We were standing in the hall right outside Peggy's room, and she was in the doorway, watching, listening, to me dress down this mug eight inches taller and 70 pounds heavier. She let me wind down, then: "Clarence, would you mind stepping in here, please?"

He did, she closed the door. God (well, if there had been one) knows what she said to the guy, but he came out of there changed. Okay, it was only temporary. (A few months later he did an est training and became a right bastard.) But the point is, she had a way about her of getting things done in a soft, loving manner.

Only once did we have words, she and I. I'd written and designed the brochure listing the coming semester's Survival College courses, 30 of them. But I wanted a poster promoting the four main events, each featuring a star performer we were bringing in from out of town. Since Peggy kept nagging me to get others involved, I asked for a volunteer at the Thursday grad meeting. A young guy named Eric meekly put up his hand. This was in the

days before computer nerds, understand, but Eric was in every physical way the predecessor of the breed to come.

“Fine, Eric, thanks. Just understand this has to be done two weeks at the latest. If you don’t think you can manage, please let me know, okay?”

“I’ll do it, don’t worry.”

Two weeks go by, no poster. I come downstairs from my room, see Eric in with Peggy. My expression asks the question.

“Look, I’m sorry, but I couldn’t come up with any ideas,” he pleaded. “I’m really sorry.”

“Eric, Jesus!” I take a piece of paper off Peggy’s desk, a felt-tipped pen. I doodle on the paper, crumple it, take another. Quickly I scribbled down “Earth Wind Fire & Water: The Four Elements of Life.” Each class I somehow related to one of the four. Whole thing took me five minutes.

“See?” I showed it to him. “You’ve got the brains, man. All you gotta do is do it.”

I ran off to the printer. When I came back, I was walking up the stairs, passed her open door, waved. “Poppa!” she hollered. (For her it was hollering; she barely raised her voice.) “Get in here!” And she tore me stem to stern, then back again. How are these people going to learn unless I give them the chance? So what if it’s late for the printer? Of course, I know how to do it, this poor kid needs to have his confidence, his self-esteem bolstered. Didn’t I know he been severely abused by his father when he was younger? (I didn’t, of course. Peggy was the one they confided in.) And so on.

Tail between my legs, I slunk up the stairs to my room. Chastened.

The woman had unique powers beyond her diplomacy and extraordinary people skills. She was more switched on than those women, most of them of similar physical proportion, who played the role of psychic. There was not a class I did, swear, that some fat fem with stars in her eyes didn’t waddle up during a break to inform me that my spirit guide (either an Egyptian pharaoh or North American Indian medicine man) was now standing just over my left shoulder. We had clairvoyants and tarot card sharks and aura gazers and psychometrists coming out of the floorboards.

One Thursday evening there were around 20 of us seated in a circle on the carpet of the High Room. (Yeah, I know – I called it that as a joke once,

and the gang grabbed it and ran with it.) This was a large room, walls painted a pastel blue, shag carpeting, no furniture. Lots of colorful pillows. Incense sticks and candles. It did have a nice feel. Maz the doggie was lying just inside the circle, as usual. We'd just finished some healings, ended with a few minutes of chanting. Suddenly Maz sits up and begins staring at the ceiling. Staring hard.

"Don't worry, Maz, she won't hurt you." Peggy. "She just enjoys the chanting." I looked up, of course. Nothing but the ceiling fixture. Now, a lot of strange things happened in that house. Nothing bad, just goofy. Stuff would move from room to room, and nobody moved it. Things would disappear, return a few days or weeks later. An old woman had lived there earlier in the century (we were told by a neighbor). She was a virgin till death, a most devout Pape. We used to kid she was the house spook, and doing little things as a way of expressing being pissed off over the sex, drugs and rock n roll going on.

Maz continued to stare at the ceiling. Peggy was looking up there too, a beatific glow on her face. Me, I sat there shivering.

Then there was the complete other side of the woman. The human side. The flawed.

When Peggy moved into the Alpha House, I gave her just one directive: I didn't want her boys anywhere around the place.

The "boys" were 25 and 23. They'd been living off, sponging off, *sucking* off Momma all their lives, and she played into the role.

"They're not exactly constructed of the image we need around the place."

"Yes, Poppa."

"It's about time you cut the cord, anyway."

"Yes, Poppa."

Second or third day she was there, I left the house early to take Maz for her morning stroll through nearby Lemon Hill Park. A great old grunt of an Oldsmobile was parked right in front of the house. For some reason I looked inside. Turned right around, back into the house, raced up the steps, pounded on her door.

"They're sleeping in the goddamn car outside!" I yelled to the sleepy vision who peered through the barely open door.

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

“Yes, Poppa. I’ll get rid of them. Don’t you worry, they won’t come back here.”

Which they didn’t. For at least two or three days.

“I needed somebody to move the fridge, and there was nobody else around. They’ll leave soon as the job’s done and won’t be back.”

And so it went. I’m sure she was slipping them money. The center’s money. But what the hell. We all had our small vices. One of hers was these two galoots. Another? Well.

One day I told her: “Momma, you’ve just got to do something about your body. Your diet is awful, and your heart isn’t going to make it too much longer shlepping around that carcass.” She agreed, of course.

I came up with a plan. Every spring, when my teaching gig was over for the semester, I hopped a plane to Europe and hitched my way down to Greece, where I hung out on the island of Paros for a couple of months. A few of the younger hangers-on, upon hearing my stories, had gone there the year before. And as well relished the place.

“How I’d love to go there,” she said, dreamily. This the woman who only recently had made her longest venture from South Philly, ever. To North Philly.

“Serious?”

“Oh, yes. I want to see Greece before I die.”

“Okay, tell you what. The Relax For Survival Foundation will sponsor you, its director. Roundtrip ticket all the way to Athens (images of her hitching through Europe somehow didn’t cut it), plus some drachmas to get you by while there.”

Her eyes went round. “Really?”

“No foolin.” She waited for the kicker. “All you gotta do is lose 50 pounds. You got six months to do it. Game?”

I could see her mind doing the math.

“That’s only two pounds a week! Yes. Yes!”

I had one of our people, an artist (unemployed, of course) make a pretty chart (Peggy was very big on pretty and frilly: pictures of kittens with huge eyes, gondoliers on the Grand Canal) with 180 days sectioned off, a map and magazine pictures of the Greek islands pasted all around. We hung it on the

outside of her door.

She changed her diet totally. One hundred percent vegetarian, mostly raw, lots of water during the day. She dropped 20 pounds in three weeks.

Then it stopped. She would lose a pound, gain it back, gain another, lose it. Three, four weeks of this.

“You’re cheating, aren’t you,” I scolded.

“Poppa, I swear! I swear on my mother and father’s life. I want to go to Greece so bad. You know that.”

A couple months back, I’d done an Alpha course for all the employees of my friend Herb Spivak’s chain of restaurants. Peggy always accompanied me to the gigs. Often I’d stop in at one of the outlets for a fancy omelet, their specialty.

“Hi, Barry,” said the waitress. “Gosh, both you and Peggy in on the same day!”

“Ah? What did she order, you remember?”

“Oh, the lasagna, of course. She always has the lasagna.”

“Poppa, I cross my heart and hope to —”

“Peggy.”

“Well, I had just the teeniest bit. Only to test my resolve.”

A few days later I noticed as I passed her room the chart had been removed from the door.

There was at this time a fair amount of female traffic in my own third floor quarters. I’ve always figured my emotional development was arrested shortly following my bar mitzvah, because the female form I craved most has always been slim, nice little boobs, small round tush. Though the average age of these bed partners was probably around 25, in form they all were the prototype early teenager.

Peggy kept score.

“What are you doing with _____?” she’d wonder. “Why don’t you go to bed with _____? She really likes you, y’know.”

“Peggy, lay off, okay? I yam what I yam, and I like what I like.”

Of course, had I been a true sensitive New Age guy, I would’ve picked up on it – Peggy’s jealousy. What I was mostly back then was a late 30s lecher.

Like the time some folks were running a one-day alternative medicine

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

symposium at a motel just outside the city. Relax For Survival was invited to set up a booth. So we made this huge vat of fruit salad, tossed a carton of plastic cups and spoons in the van along with all the center's propaganda, and hightailed it out. Besides Peggy and me, two slim, attractive mid-20s women named Jenny and Karen went along to hear the speakers.

The first hour set the day's pace: dull, boring, dead. Quite like the establishment from which we all were engaged in breaking away, the herbal and organic folks could put you the sleep with the best.

Around three it was that I leaned over to Jenny, sitting in front of me on the carpeted floor to the rear of the banquet hall. These were the days when I was on top of my game as a bald, bearded, Buddha-bellied stud. I had nothing to lose. If not Jenny, there'd be another young lovely soon enough.

I whispered in Jenny's ear. She turned around, smiled and nodded. Score!

Several feet away, crashed out on the floor, Karen opened her eyes, looked over. "I get a ride with you guys?" The two shared an apartment.

I went over and told Peggy. One of her sons was coming to pick her up at 5 anyway.

Peggy looked at me, then over to Jenny, whom I knew was one of her favorites. For just a moment, her mask slipped. For just a moment I saw the hurt. Then just as quickly the smile returned. Sure, she said. You guys go on, she said. No problem, she said.

I searched in there, but no trace showed of what I'd caught the tiniest glimpse of.

The women lived in a fashionable suburb, in a large house owned by an achieving mid-30s couple. They had three rooms of a private upstairs section of the house, for which they paid no rent, rather were supposed to do chores, like clean the house, like take care of the couple's two kids when momma and poppa went off partying. Knowing these two space cases, the house never got cleaned, the kids taken care of.

This was the first I'd been here. Entering, I caught sight of Rob sitting in the living room watching the ball game. Roughly the same age as me. Jewish. His own business. Obviously doing well.

Rob did not acknowledge me as I walked by, trying to catch his eye.

On the way through the kitchen to the upstairs unit, we ran into Rob's

wife. Introductions. Three steps up I'd forgotten her name, her face. She was Rob's wife.

The upstairs was Contemporary Hippiechick. Sleeping bags on the bare floor, a bunch of Hesse books, Tolkien, Gurdjieff, guides to alternative medicine, psychic this, spiritual that, master-of-the-month-club posters, nuts, grains, sprouts, herbal teas, Phoenix electric juicer caked with dried carrot pulp, unclean dope, three cats.

We smoked some hash, downed some munchies, did a little more Afghan. I didn't know how to get into it. I'd never been very good at initiating.

The women took off their tops. After a while so did I. Then we were naked. Everybody seemed to be waiting.

We got it on in slow motion. My mind kept drifting, coming back, fading. I watched Jenny go down on Karen. One of them hummed a steady moan, Jenny I think.

Then Rob's voice, calling Jenny down to the phone.

"You're going down there like that?" I wondered. At the top of the steps Jenny looked down at herself, then back at me. She shrugged. Proceeded down the stairs.

"You walk around down there naked?" I asked Karen.

"Um, mostly we have our panties on."

"And Rob's wife – she doesn't mind?"

"Nah. See, Rob's been balling her so much more since we moved in. She says we're like aphrodisiacs."

Back in a minute, Jenny reported: "He won't bother us anymore. I told him we're busy meditating."

We did some more hash, scarfed down some dried fruit. After which we all got down to it once more.

Afterwards, the three of us sitting in the huge lion's-claw tub, warm water climbing up our bodies, I couldn't help thinking about Rob. By all rights, I should be him. Ten years back, I was. Rising young executive, gaining status, gaining possessions. Even five years before, working in a drug crisis center, busted once myself for possession, by appearance an integral part of the so-called counterculture, I still couldn't get any nookie to save my soul. Then for a year the little fella even refused to stand up. It was worse than when I'd

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been straight because it was a well-known fact you were a hippie you got all you wanted, when you wanted.

Truth was, all my life I'd been afraid of it, of females. The better looking the woman, the more scared I would be. I made lots of noises contrariwise, of course, but ninety percent of the action was in my head. And hand. From the point of discovery, age twelve, hardly a day went by that I didn't exercise my prerogative. Including a bunch of years of marriage.

My first sex, my first real sex, I reflected as the women lathered me in the tub, didn't happen till twenty-three. I married her. My second woman just on the high side of thirty. Traffic got a little heavier the four years that followed, but not by much. Then, thirty-four, a new age dawned. I became the guru.

I once figured that from October '72 through May '75 (the Alpha years at Penn), I made love to sixty-seven different women. Beautiful women. Beautiful young women. And the most amazing thing of it was, with few exceptions, they'd sought me!

I pondered this as Karen ran her soapy fingers through my long beard, soaking it, stroking it. I pondered too that that very morning I had made love to Anna at her place, in her bed. This evening I was scheduled to make love to Lisa, at my place, in my bed. Four absolutely beautiful females. In one day. Me.

A stone wave swept over me. *I don't deserve it!*

I suddenly owned a mountain-size guilt over Rob downstairs. I really should go down and join him. That's where I belonged! One of the women left a fart and we watched the bubble rise. I bent over and bit it: pop! We laughed. I laughed hardest. Cause I'd put in my time, served my sentence.

"I deserve it!" I cried.

"And you're getting it!" Karen reply-shouted, running a sudsy loofa over my face.

So tough titty, Rob old boy: it's just your karma why you're downstairs watching the Phillies and I'm up here with these, these, gorgeous darlings!

I gleefully splashed my tub partners, reveled in my good fortune. Life was beautiful!

Well, not all of life. For as we sat in the tub, our bodies free and our spirits high, a wee bitty form of life was swimming its way over from one of

these lovely damsels to where I sat. A microbe that in a few days' time would form a series of blisters on my John Thomas so bloody painful that for a week a mere pee would bring tears to my eyes. A tiny tiny organism that would stay with me the rest of my days, choosing the strangest of moments to peek its way out of my shaft and plot there a geometric course.

Ah well, every profession has its little hazards.

Somehow, word of this tryst got back to Peggy. She wanted to know "how it went", and asked in such a way I sensed she knew all about it. And, no doubt, my condition as well.

One early evening a couple weeks later, there's nobody in the house except Peggy and myself, a rare occurrence. I'm in my room, lying on the bed reading, the door open as always. I hear this tremendous noise, *thunk thunk thunk* – Peggy trudging up the steps, which she never does. At the door, huffing and puffing: would I like to share a joint? At this point in life, I have given up dope except in times of sex, but what the hell. Sure, I say.

She comes in, sits in a chair alongside the bed, lights up, tokes, tokes again, then once more, passes it over. Back and forth, her three to my one. When the number becomes a roach, she lumbers off the chair, lies down on the bed next to me. The springs groan. I move over to give her room. I'm in stoned rave mode. The next class, stuff at the printer's, blah blah blah. Peggy sidles closer. Again, I move over to give her space.

She begins to massage my nearest arm. Then my chest, her hand moving down to the belt. I'm still talking. When the hand passes the belt, I glance over. Her eyes are closed. I can smell spearmint gum on her breath. Her pelvis is gyrating.

I bounce off the bed, land on my feet. Her eyes remain closed. Still humping, though the rhythms are slowing. A smile on her lips, but it begins to fade.

I feel bad. I really do. But not that bad.

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I approached the God thing from every conceivable angle.

--There is no God.

--*Yes.* (No God)

--None whatsoever.

--*Yes.* (None)

--Is there another name you use? I mean, there's this Other Name chap who runs the show but he's not called God.

--*No.*

--Is there a God but he's on sabbatical?

--*No.*

--Did there used to be a God? Maybe he quit or retired or was given the golden handshake by *his* God?

--*No.*

The following day, ironically, there was a local craft market in my beach village. Father Michael, an Anglican priest in his 50s, moonlighted as a beekeeper, selling his own brand of delicious honey around the area. He was a lovely sort, soft yet cynical as can be. Often we had talks on matters social and political. This day, after doing in Dubya, Little Johnny Howard of Australia, and our own parliamentary controllers, he began talking about the politics that went on his own church.

"You know," he said, "it's a bloody good thing we have Jesus, else I sometimes think I couldn't stay in this job."

"So Jesus is the man," I offered.

"Oh, absolutely. There is God, there is Jesus, father and son, and they're perfect."

"Nice to have such faith," I said, thinking back to the past couple pendulum sessions.

"It's not faith. It is not faith. I *know!*"

I walked away sighing.

My other prime topics with Peggy had to do with far more important matters. Timothy. My book. The babe down the beach.

Timothy, she said, was fine. Everything was going well. No problems.

No need for concern.

The book also was proceeding as it should. According to Peggy, it had been read by several people at the publishing house, all of whom liked it. Why then hadn't they been in touch, told me so? The manuscript was now being read by the top dog there, she said. They'd be in touch soon with the happy news.

I'd had, till now in my life, no luck whatsoever with the New York publishing scene. I'd had stuff published from Philly to as far west as Bangkok, as far south as New Zealand. But never the Biggest Smoke.

The old days, a few friends from Philly had made it, had broken through, in publishing, in music. How? By going to New York frequently, getting to know people, schmoozing, lobbying for themselves. I had always felt that given time my art would sell itself, same as it did in Chicago and on the Coast. Thoughts of a fool.

Because of Peggy, I began to feel that finally, *finally*, my time had come. I began telling people about the book. Few civilians have the least understanding of publishing. That unless you're Clancy or Grisham, just getting a read takes months. Once your book is accepted, it may be out within a year. May be.

A friend in Hawaii had recently self-published a non-fiction work. In an exchange of emails he related how he'd been mucked around for three years. Sometimes four-five months would go by before he got a two-line rejection. When finally a publishing house accepted his book, the changes in copy were so drastic he pulled it back and put it on his website. Plus had a few hundred copies printed in Hong Kong.

"It's a matter of integrity," he wrote. "Didn't you used to tell me, over and over, be true to yourself? What's your real purpose with this book? You have something to offer people, in your own words, the way you want to say it? Or is it fame and glory. Be clear about it. I wish you luck, man, but it's a hard row."

Website? Self-publish? Not me, uh-uh.

I could feel myself growing cocky. Swaggering.

"Oh, is it in the bookstores?"

"Uh, not yet. Probably end of the year. In time for the Christmas sales."

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I'm saying this? Me? Growing up Jewish, we were taught never to admit things are well or project good and wonderful outcomes. *They'll hear!* And they've got all these sandbags full of the worst stuff imaginable, just looking for happy people to drop them on. *Kein ein hora!* Yet here I was, blabbing, boasting. *They're on my side this time!*

I was sitting on the dunes one afternoon, thinking about my good fortune to come. What I would wear on the Oprah Show. The screw-you letters to all those who had rejected me over the years. The scene before me, the colors of sky and sea, the exquisite light, was little shy of spectacular. But I wasn't registering. I was basking in my own glory-to-come.

The sun was low to my left. I glanced over and saw someone about 50 yards off, also dune sitting. With the sun in my eyes, I couldn't make out who. Short hair, lean – some guy. The dune sitter waved. I waved back. A few minutes later I heard the approach of someone from behind. The gorgeous babe from down the road.

She sat next to me. It was the closest I'd been to her. She was even more beautiful than when I'd seen her while jogging by, when she was doing her salutes to the sun.

She had a bit of an accent. Dutch, or Scandie. Swedish, she now said. I smelled cinnamon, or was it cloves, as she spoke.

And spoke she did. She was – get this – a non-smoker, non-drinker, vegetarian. And she liked older men! She'd come to New Zealand five years ago. Hitched around the country. Met a guy, got married. Had a kid. Now they were separated. And she was broke, living on welfare. And pregnant again.

“Your husband?”

“No. Someone else. But he wants nothing to do with the baby.”

She'd seen a doctor, who advised an abortion. “Doctors!” she snorted in disgust. “So I leave it up to the Universe, you know? The baby is supposed to come, then it will come. Whatever is right and proper.”

It began as a seed. Sprouted. Grew tall and strong as we sat there. Me. Parenting her kid. Kids. Hey, why not? Following September 11 I had promised myself change. Accepting challenge. Taking risks. I knew nothing about kids. Especially little kids. They scared hell out of me, to be honest. But I would

learn. And love the experience.

“Would you like to come see my house?” I asked.

“Yours is the one completely hidden by the pohutukawa trees. Oh yes, I’d love to see it.” She smiled. Oh God, she was gorgeous. Even if there was no God, she was still a knockout.

I showed her the grounds, took her inside. For the first time she seemed to relax. “It feels so peaceful in here!”

“Look,” I said, when we were sitting on the wooden bench outside. “I’m thinking of shooting down to the South Island for a couple months. Then later heading off for Asia. I’ll be looking for a house sitter.”

“Me? I can do that?” I nodded. “That would be wonderful! The place I have now is so small, like a box. I love the beach, I want to live here and have my baby here, but the place I have is all I can afford.”

My heart was thumping. I’d come back from the South Island, we’d be together, sharing the house, sharing life... Asia? There was always next year.

I went inside and grabbed a big panda bear I’d had for years.

“Would your little lad like this, d’you think?”

“Yes he would! Are you sure it’s all right? Maybe it means something to you.”

Sure does. Means a ticket into your astoundingly lovely body, is what it means.

She reached over, hugged me. Kissed me!

--Peggy, is she gorgeous or what?

--Yes.

--Would she go to bed with me, do you think?

--Yes.

--With an ugly old bastard like me?

--Yes.

--Would it be in her highest good to move in here?

--Yes.

--And have her baby here?

--Yes.

--And my highest good as well?

--No.

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--Aw. You think she's too young for me?

--No.

--Too unstable.

--Yes.

--And vulnerable?

--Yes.

--Beautiful, unstable and vulnerable: a deadly combination?

--Yes.

--But isn't it worth the risk?

--Yes. (It isn't)

--Awww.

She came back the following morning with her little boy in tow. He was carrying the panda. "Thank Barry for the lovely bear," she singsonged. The boy said nothing. His look said, So you're the new one! He turned away and wandered off.

She sat down on the grass right alongside me. Our bodies were practically touching. Then they were touching. She was wearing a halter-top and low-riding jeans, no shoes. A yard of her tanned, flat, hard midsection was on display, the navel smack in the middle like an all-seeing eye. I craved to become the size of an ant and crawl in there. Instead I rolled onto my back, tongue flopping out and arms and legs wriggling in the air, hoping for a tummy scratch.

"I just love trees," she said, breaking into my reverie. "Where I am now there is nothing. There is so much good energy here."

I saw myself at the book launch in New York, this amazing woman in gown and silver heels draped on my arm.

"Will it be okay to move my own refrigerator in here?" she asked. "Yours is rather old and not very big. And I'd like to have my own desk for my computer. I know you said you don't like TV, but the boy loves watching. We'll keep it turned down when you're here."

"Uh, uh —"

ReeeeEEEEOWWWWW!!!!

I spun around to the source of the sound. The boy had Timothy by the tail, yanking.

“Don’t, darling, be gentle with the pussycat. Make nice.”

The boy glowered at us. Timothy jerked free and ran for his life around the house.

As she twisted her body to face her son, I peeked down the back of her jeans. Perfect back. Perfect skin. Blond fuzz. I craned my neck and peeked further down. Red panties. She turned back and I quickly looked out to the trees.

“He really does love cats. It’ll be nice having Timothy here for him to play with.”

The boy came over with a tomato in his hand. Pink and unripe and most likely quite content to be, to have been, on its vine. He took one small bite, dropped it on the ground.

“He knows when the tomatoes are ready to be picked. He never touches the ones that are green.”

The boy grabbed hold of a small sapling and stood shaking it.

“You know, if I go to the South Island, and it’s not absolutely certain yet, maybe the best thing is that you keep the place where you are now. Move in here while I’m away and don’t worry about paying rent. When I come back, um, we’ll see what to do then, okay?”

“Oh. Yes, I guess that’s the best thing. I’ll go home and think about it, is that all right?”

“Sure. Fine. Whatever’s right and proper.”

--Peggy, I still don’t know what to think about all this. Sometimes I’m sure our dialogues are happening. Then I’ll think: are you absolutely daft, Rosenberg? You know what I mean?

--Yes.

--Look, this is sort of embarrassing, but is there some way I can check up on all this?

--Yes.

--Like, if you tell me your date of death, which I haven’t a clue when it

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was, then I can contact your daughter, or maybe that woman you were so close to. What was her name now? Brenda, right?

--*Yes.*

The death date was all screwy. First I got 1987. Then I said, Are you sure? I thought it was '85 or '86. I got a yes. Then I got a no.

Then I asked her to spell out Brenda's last name, which was in my head somewhere but I couldn't search it out. I got R-E-I-M, before the pendulum went whacko. On second try I was given F-O-G-V before I just gave up. Peggy'd always been a lousy speller, but this was ridiculous.

--Does L___ (her daughter) still live in Philly?

--*Yes.*

--Is she listed in the directory?

--*No.*

--Can you give me her number then?

--*No.*

--Are you not allowed to tell me these things?

--*Yes.* (She's not)

--Is it against the rules Up There?

--*Yes.*

--They don't want me checking up on you?

--*Yes.* (They don't)

Following morning, 5am, still in bed, half asleep, Brenda's name suddenly came to me. Later:

--Did you plant that in my head?

--*Yes.*

--You can do that sort of thing?

--*Yes.*

--You do that often?

--*No.*

--Did you do it when I was writing the book? (How many times, seemingly from nowhere, would an idea poke through; a good idea I hadn't considered prior.)

--*Yes.*

--Is this common with you guys?

--No.

--Is it, um, legal what you're doing here with me?

--Yes.

--But this sort of contact is rare.

--Yes.

I went for a walk on the beach. At some point I felt, either I accept that this, this *stuff* was for real, or I throw it out completely. Why am I questioning it, anyway? I'm afraid others will think I'm batty? Hell, most people assume I ran off the rails, ages back. Right, I go with it. Take it as far as it wants to take me.

My next pendulum try, the damn thing wouldn't budge. "Give me a yes. Give me a yes. Give me a goddamn yes, will you, bitch!"

Nothing.

Ten minutes later it's swinging back and forth. Coffee break?

--Are these answers coming from a source outside myself?

--Yes.

--From a spiritual force or entity I've been in touch with before?

--Yes.

--Peggy?

--No.

--No?

--Yes.

--Is this the spirit of somebody I've known in this lifetime?

--Yes.

I tossed out a bunch of names. Finally,

--Arthur?

--Yes.

--Arthur!

--Yes.

--Aw, man, it's so good to be talking with you again!

Arthur Young this was, easily the most brilliant person I've ever had personal touch with. The man who made the helicopter fly. Author of a handful of books, none of which could I understand. (I mean, this dude was deep!) Creator and director of the Institute for the Study of Consciousness. Not a

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dummy, Arthur.

One day, mid-70s, I got a call from a man whose name I knew well, though we'd never met. He said he was an associate of Arthur Young.

"Who?"

"Yeah, that's right," he laughed. "Guy's the biggest brain going, and nobody's ever heard of him. I was thinking you might like to meet him, do a piece for Philadelphia Magazine. Or maybe go national."

Ironic thing is, Arthur Young never did become a household name. But the guy calling me did. Ira Einhorn, who chopped up his girlfriend, a lovely, delightful woman named Holly, and stuffed her parts in a trunk, which he kept in his closet for a year. Ira, too, was a very bright lad. So bright, he outsmarted the cops, the courts, the Feebies, for a quarter century before he was done in.

Arthur was then mid-70s. A dear soul, truly. Warm and soft and humble for a guy with such a big brain (and big bank statement). He had this one tiny, er, quirk: he absolutely adored women. All women. Any shape, size, color, age.

"Poppa," Peggy whispered in my ear, moments after I'd introduced her to Arthur, and he rushed over and gave her a big wet smooch, "he pinched my titty!" Red-faced and giggling.

But when his wife was around, Arthur was the model of decorum. He always deferred to her. Once in Berkeley I arranged a lecture by the man at his home. Maybe 20 people attended, and we all were fascinated by what the guy had to offer.

It's a little past 10, and the lecture is going strong. I mean, genuine enthusiasm, back-and-forth questions and answers, and he's loving it. Suddenly Mrs. Young appears.

"Ahtuh! It's past 10 o'clock!"

"Oh. Oh yes, my dear. Yes, yes. All right, everybody. Thank you for coming. Good night."

See, Arthur Young was just a big kid, real and human, and I loved him for it. I wasn't concerned nearly so much for the guy's theories of evolution and consciousness as for his realness. That was the story here.

One day we were discussing astrology – he was the most steeped person

on the science of the subject I've ever known – and I happened to joke: “You're a true Scorpio, you realize that?”

“How so?”

“Well, this thing you have with women. You know, it's a Scorpio specialty.”

His whole demeanor changed. “I don't know what you mean.”

I looked at him. He'd gone vague! Truly vague or a mask? Did it matter? And I thought: smartest man in the world, and he hasn't a clue about himself! Which was when I decided not to write the article. Mention of his quirk would have to cause pain, and no way could I hurt this guy. Nor could I hold back from putting *him* in the story. Pity.

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about Young was his work with the Brunler scale. A Swedish physician working in London in the early '50s, Oscar Brunler unwittingly had done something quite curious. One day, for no established reason, he took a measurement using a pendulum and biometric scale off the thumb of a retarded newsboy. When another patient came in, he took a reading off him using the same method. Oddly, the reading was different to that of the newsboy. And so were all the other patients he took readings from: each different from the others. Brunler hadn't the slightest idea what the measurements he was recording off people meant. But upon hearing word of the phenomenon, Arthur Young knew. Instantly.

He and his wife flew to London, met Brunler, were taught the man's method, and proceeded to measure hundreds of famous living people. Then he went further. Through works of art, a signature, or a garment of the person's clothing, Young began getting measurement recordings of *dead* people. Only when three independent readings – Young's, his wife's, and an associate's – coincided exactly was the reading accepted.

So what was it Brunler, and then Young, were getting? Human consciousness.

Highest they recorded was Leonardo (the dead artist, not the other dude), a 720. Michelangelo scored 688, Napoleon 598, Elizabeth I 510, John F. Kennedy 421, and so on. Most people, by far, measured less than 300, and a majority under 200.

I've always been a numbers freak. From the time I was four and would sit

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on the toilet reading, and memorizing, statistics from the World Almanac, numbers have never failed to grab my interest. But whenever I asked Young what his own reading was, he refused to tell me. Nor would he perform a reading on me.

Now here he was, on the line. Following the normal courtesies upon running into a long-dead friend:

--Arthur, do you mind giving me some Brunler readings?

--No. (He didn't mind)

Through numerical manipulation of the pendulum – “Is it more than/less than —” I learned that his reading was just above 500. Mine fell between 400-450, with Einhorn somewhere between us. I quickly checked the list he had published years back. I was higher than Gurdieff! Carl Jung, for Chrissake!

And then a flash. I don't even know that Young is dead. I assume he is, he'd be near 100 if he were still alive. Still —

--Is this really Arthur?

--No.

Oi gevalt.

--Is it you again?

--Yes.

--Uh-huh. Was it you, by any chance, put that red sticker on my chest middle of the night not long ago?

--Yes.

--Because you could, right?

--Yes.

--And the big scratch on my head?

--No.

--One of your spiritual pals maybe?

--No.

--You're gonna tell me *I* did that?

--Yes.

--Oh man, I'm ready for the hatch. I really am. Look... what do you want from me? I mean, I'm sure teasing me like this, making me look like the goof I suppose I am before the zillions of you dead bods up there must be absolutely hilarious. The Truman Show II, starring Barry the Schmuck. Don't you have

soaps to watch? Bingo? Why don't you take up tennis or needlepoint and leave me alone, huh?

--Peggy, listen. (This the following day.) Can we do a deal? I'll do my damndest to believe all this is real, and I'll try hard to cut out the idiot questions about myself. In return, can you keep that one off the line? What do you say.

--Yes.

--Great. All right, I want to know about what goes on up there. Is it kosher to ask about it?

--Yes.

--You've said this kind of contact doesn't happen.

--Yes. (It doesn't)

--And here we are.

--Yes.

--So this must be some sort of special thing.

--Yes.

--Have you been, ah, assigned to have dialogues with me?

--Yes.

--By the higher ups?

--Yes.

--They said, Peggy, get Whatsisface on the line.

--Yes.

--Nobody else but me gets this sort of contact.

--Yes. (They don't)

--I'm one out of six billion.

--Yes.

--You know what this sounds like? It sounds like you guys want something from me.

--Yes.

--Run for Pope?

--No.

--Fly the ocean in a silver plane? See the jungle when it's wet with rain?

--No.

--No, of course not. You want a goddamn book!

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--Yes.

--Momma, sorry. I wrote my one book. My solo shot at the 15 minutes.

--No.

--Aw. Look, I write all this as a book, they come and fit me up for the starched jacket with very long sleeves.

--No.

--Aaaaah. Okay, a book. How about this for a title: The Fat Lady Finally Sings.

--No.

--Joking. Hey, this picture I have of you. (I reached into a desk drawer, rifled through several filled envelopes till I found it.) Remember?

--Yes.

--On the cover.

--No.

-- Oh, you don't like it, eh! Am I sniffing a little vanity here?

--Yes.

--I write some sort of book, you dead-and-dug-up types gonna edit me here?

--No.

--Tell me what NOT to put in?

--No.

--How about that scene on the bed – remember?

--Yes.

--You mind me using that?

--Yes.

--Momma, you say everybody up there knows everything. There are no secrets in La-La Land.

--Yes. (There are no)

--Ah, I get it. Your kids.

--Yes.

--Okay. I'll ask you, then. May I use the bed scene?

--Yes.

--Thank you. Some nuts and bolts stuff now about Up There?

--Yes.

--Life and death. I live, I die, I go over to your place.
--*Yes.*
--I'm judged by the big mahoffs.
--*Yes.*
--They tell me I need counseling.
--*Yes.*
--Then what? I attend classes?
--*No.*
--Counseling is one-to-one?
--*Yes.*
--I'm assigned a special counselor? Like a personal trainer?
--*Yes.*
--Sometimes more than one? Say, for example, J. Edgar Hoover. Someone with excessively strong needs.
--*Yes.*
--I have a certain time period to clean up my act?
--*No.*
--I can literally take forever, then.
--*Yes.*
--And what about reincarnation. We've established that this is a real thing?
--*Yes.*
--I go through yea many lifetimes, I get my diploma, then no more going back.
--*Yes.* (No more)
--What if I want to go back.
--*No.*
--I know you wouldn't want to, but let's say, um, Ralph Branca does. Can't forgive himself for giving up the home run, wants another shot. Can he?
--*No.*
--So after graduation I'm dead forever.
--*Yes.*
--And quite pleased about it.
--*Yes.*

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--What about those who go back. Who *have* to go back. They pick a situation, jump in. Then the momma-to-be decides to have an abortion. If you're not in there yet, you simply make another choice?

--*Yes.*

--And if you're in there, you just get recycled?

--*Yes.*

--Is abortion a bad thing, then?

--*No.*

--True? It's okay to do?

--*No.*

--Not bad but not okay either.

--*Yes.*

--How about ghosts. Are there such?

--*Yes.*

--There really are ghosts!

--*Yes.*

--I remember reading somewhere that these are people who've experienced very traumatic deaths and never get to your place, but become trapped in between.

--*No.*

--They do get to your side.

--*Yes.*

--But then what? They feel they've got unfinished business back here and return to haunt?

--*Yes.*

--Don't the counselors advise them not to?

--*Yes.*

--But they do it anyway.

--*Yes.*

--For revenge, mostly?

--*Yes.*

--Can they kill people?

--*No.*

--Physically harm them?

--No.
--Scare the piss out of them?
--Yes.
--Isn't there any kind of punishment for renegades like this?
--No. (There is)
--Do they lose rank? Slide down the "10" scale?
--Yes.
--Have to do an extra turn down here perhaps?
--Yes.
--Like being left back at school.
--Yes.
--But no punishment up there.
--Yes. (No punishment).
--Would you like there to be?
--Yes! (Emphatic swing of the pendulum. This happened now and then.
When it did, I could almost feel her shouting.)
--Some sort of cosmic law and order.
--Yes.
--Just you who feels this way?
--No.
--A bunch of you.
--Yes.
--But – what: the higher ups are molly-coddlers?
--Yes.
--And a lot of you lower-rankers would like sterner stuff in handling of
the troops.
--Yes.
--So, pretty much you can do whatever you want?
--Yes.
--But you do have rules.
--Yes.
--Like no getting in touch with us peons down here.
--Yes.
--Did you want to start this dialogue with me?

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--Yes.

--But you said they ordered you to.

--Yes.

--Ah, so they told you to but you wanted to anyway.

--Yes.

--Was there ever a time when there was freer mixing between you up there and us down here?

--Yes.

--Back in the olden days?

--Yes.

--Went on a lot, did it?

--Yes.

--Then what happened? I bet the dummies kept thinking you were gods, right? Bowing and scraping, erecting idols and temples and such?

--Yes.

--Your team told them you weren't gods, but they wouldn't listen.

--Yes.

--So the not-gods got pissed off then they pissed off for good.

--Yes.

--If there's no God, and no devil, is there good and evil?

--No.

--No evil, you mean.

--Yes. (No evil)

--There's bad?

--Yes.

--Would you consider Dubya as bad?

--Yes.

--Dick Cheney?

--Yes.

--Don Rumsfeld?

--Yes.

--Condoleezza?

--No.

--Really?

--Yes.

--She's just the dummy on Dummy's knee.

--Yes.

--What about Ariel Sharon?

--Yes.

--Blair?

--Yes.

--Little Johnny Howard?

--Yes.

--Helen Clark?

--No.

--Our Helen's okay?

--Yes.

--Even when she wears pants suits to lunch with the queen?

--Yes.

--Just the dudes – lot of badasses running the show down here.

--Yes.

--And you bods don't care?

--Yes. (They don't)

--We could blow ourselves to smithereens and you couldn't care less?

--No.

--No. You mean there *is* some concern.

--Yes.

--Which I suppose is why you want me to do a book.

--Yes.

(I found this fascinating but couldn't come up with an appropriate question to discover why.)

--Did Osama really organize September 11?

--Yes.

--How about the Yanks: were any of them involved in setting it up?

--No.

--No conspiracy? FBI? CIA? DAR?

--Yes. (No)

--C'mon. The White House? Helped set it up so they could cry terrorism

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and use the resultant fear and trembling as just cause to police the planet?

--*No.*

--You're sure about that?

--*Yes.*

--Just good ol' Yankee incompetence.

--*Yes.*

--Absolutely certain there was no collusion by the home team.

--*Yes.*

--Bummer. Oh, by the way. Would you mind —. I mean, y'know —. My place on the scale?

--*Yes.*

--Um, am I —. Aw, I can't. I really can't. Maybe tomorrow, okay?

--*Yes.*

Until now, I hadn't told a soul about the dialogues. But I was bursting. More than a month had passed since Peggy first made contact.

I had to share this with someone.

I was in town – the 15,000 pop. burg to which my beach is a satellite – walking aimlessly along the main shopping street when I found myself ducking into a café run by my friend Amanda.

Just 30, she'd owned and operated her establishment for 11 years. We had observed each other go through more than a few falls and busted relationships, and had always been there for the other. A few years back, stressed to the gills, she did one-to-one Alpha with me. She well understood my thinking on matters beyond the small-town New Zealand mundane.

Mandy now made me a hot chocolate and we sat down. I let loose. The whole nine meters (NZ is metric). Her eyes glossed over like a kid's on hearing tales of garden fairies and unicorns.

"I have to see this. Do you think Peggy'd let me observe?"

"Don't see why not. If 100 billion dead people can watch us..."

She came over and sat quietly nearby as I got out the thread and coin.

Normally I do my talking subvocally, in my head. But for Mandy's sake I spoke aloud.

--Peggy, you know Amanda, right?

--Yes.

--Pretty good soul, yes? (I could feel Amanda draw back...)

--Yes. (...and blow out a sigh.)

--Can you say whether she's going to travel this year? (Mandy had been talking about it for ages, could never give herself the time off.)

--Yes.

--To Asia?

--Yes.

--For more than a month?

--Yes.

--More than two months?

--No.

--Everything will work out fine?

--Yes.

I asked Amanda whether she had anything she wanted to ask. Like a shy kid, she shook her head no.

"Would you care to have her tell you your 1 to 10 rating?"

"Uh – yes. I guess."

The pendulum yessed on 6. Another big outlet of air.

"That was...just amazing!"

"You believe it?"

"Oh yes!"

"A hundred percent? It's fair dinkum?" Amanda was normally as skeptical as I am.

"Hell yeah!"

Another pendulum junkie had just been created. And one who didn't fear learning her own Peggy rating. (Months later, Amanda went to Malaysia and Indonesia for a period just shy of two months.)

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Eight weeks had passed since the manuscript made it to New York. Peggy was saying all these wonderful things, but somehow I just couldn't buy it. I was afraid to bother the publisher, but I just had to. Crushing my hat in my hands, shifting weight one foot to the other, I sent an email. Two days later I got one back. A few lines, terse. My book would be read in good time. If I was in a hurry, they'd be only too happy to send it back so I might give it to someone else. In which case I was to send them proper postage.

I got Peggy on the line. And railed at her. Anybody peeking in the window would have seen this bald, white bearded old fart, veins poking out his neck, head bobbing back and forth, face a hot shade of crimson, holding before him a string attached to an outdated half penny. No sound.

--You lied! You just...lied!! If, of course, you really are you and I'm not completely off my rocker. How can you lie? How? And now that I think about it, your death date, Brenda's last name, your daughter's phone number: excuse me, but this sucks, all right? You guys want me to do something for you. You've got some sort of problem up there and you need Barry to write a book when Barry doesn't want to write another book. Okay, I'll write another book. At least I'll try. But how about you deadheads paying your dues. I'm asking for a lot here, Momma. It's called honesty. You tell me there are no lies up there; none is needed because everybody knows everything so what good's lying. But I'm a dummy. I know *gornisht*. And I'm silly enough to believe you when you tell me something – can you imagine that! So here it is, babe: no honesty, no book. Tell that to the big boys!

Actually, I didn't feel anywhere near as angry as I'd made it sound. My rant brought back another, similar outburst, 15 years before.

I had been teaching Alpha at Auckland University. Not as part of the university, but, like at Penn, I would use the facilities, and it didn't hurt my credibility any to hold class on campus.

I ran only two courses a year: each comprised of back-to-back weekends, nine hours each of the four days. And they just got better and better. The first one in 1987 was my best ever. Three hundred students, nice cross-section of humanity, and everything worked. The people were terrific, they responded to my stories, laughed at my jokes, energy was sky-high and we had a perfect psychic reading session at the end. I passed the hat around each day following

a little song and dance. New Zealanders are not the most giving of people (although they like to think so). This used to be a socialized country, and the word donation meant a shilling (before the currency was changed over) in the wicker basket on Sunday mornings. Which often was what I got no matter how strong my pitch. This particular group gave me the biggest overall donation in the half dozen years I had been conducting class in the country. (As was my custom, I gave all the money less my expenses to local community service.) My feeling was, the whole deal had finally plateaued. I'd worked out the kinks. Like sliding with wool socks on a marble floor now. A class every six months, I could do this gig till I was too old to stand.

The first day of my next course, every single conceivable thing went wrong. A fire alarm went off during the first visualization exercise, and no one could figure how to turn it off. A rock band, scheduled to perform that evening, chose to practice in the room directly above. Plus the people. In 15 years of teaching large classes, I never did figure out what created group dynamics. Where the course six months before had the most wonderful feeling, this bunch was the most discordant, inharmonious assemblage I'd ever had, in either hemisphere.

End of that first day the muscles of my neck and shoulder area were starched and knotted ropes. I'd run marathons where I hadn't got as tired. I maintained a pasted-on smile – grimace, in truth – as they filed out. Then I shuffled out of the building, got in my car and drove towards the North Shore, where I was staying with friends. Soon as I hit the Harbour Bridge, something snapped. I began screaming invective at all and sundry who ran the show from up yonder. Just screaming.

“You bodiless bastards get yourself another nigger! I'm done. You hear that? Finished doing your so-called work. You can push me off this bridge, I don't give a damn. Right off this bridge! Right now!! (I waited a few beats. Breathed a sigh.) I'm sure you can find another sap with a big mouth to do this stuff. Not me. I am not doing another gig. Get stuffed! All of you!”

I happened to glance over at a car in the next lane, for the moment directly abreast. The passenger, a middleage woman, was gaping at this man, both hands waving wildly in the air, screaming mayhem with nobody else in the car.

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“Are you looking at me?” I yelled over. New Zealanders are not used to this kind of behavior, and she quickly turned away.

Of interest, the following day went far more smoothly. And the second weekend was pretty good as well. But I did keep to my word: I’ve never taught a complete Alpha Mind Control course before a group again.

Following my scolding of Peggy, I felt remarkably sheepish. What did I expect? What did I want of all this? A jog on the beach gave me a pretty fair clue.

I’m not normally a reader of fantasy. But I caught a rave review of Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy, and figured I’d give it a try. The books are fantastic.

Basically, there are parallel universes. A boy of 12 finds a magic knife that enables him to cut windows from one universe to another. He comes from the world that we know.

He meets a girl from an adjoining world, very much like ours except it seems to be lagging around 75 years behind. In her world, everybody has a personal *daemon*. This is an animal that possesses full intelligence, speaks your language and never, ever, strays more than a few feet from you. This animal is your other self, so to speak. The two of you can argue, bicker, disagree. But the *daemon* is still your closest friend. In fact, one cannot exist without the other. If the human dies, the *daemon* dies immediately. Should the *daemon* be taken from its human (and in Pullman’s books the baddies are plotting to do this), that person becomes a zombie.

When girl meets boy from another universe, she is aghast that he has no *daemon*. How can this be? Whom do you talk to, confide in? Slowly she figures it out. “Your *daemon* is inside you! And you talk to your inside *daemon* in silence, and your *daemon* talks back.”

When I read this, my immediate thought was Ah, how marvelous. Because my inside *daemon* IS my very closest friend. It has enabled me to survive years of aloneness, of loneliness, of self-loathing and confusion and intense depression.

And now I had another *daemon* of sorts. It could be argued (and I did plenty of that) whether she was real or in fact I had created her. No matter. A bit sick, this? I didn’t feel that. Unorthodox, hell yes. But there was always

the possibility that this was very, very real.

In life, Peggy had been a class A liar. She gave you what she assumed you wanted to hear. But this generally when it concerned her feelings and her family. Oh yes, everybody's well and happy and the check is in the mail. Once she told me: never show your hurting face. I found her honesty in just about all other areas of life quite solid. She had a sharp mind and penetrating eyes, and if you asked (and she felt safe doing so) she would level. If lying about certain things had become a habit – and really, quite often she was unaware – maybe being in a place where lying was impossible because everything was known to all was a bit daunting. Here was an opportunity to practice the old art. Except why was she lying about these particular things? Once again, I began to have my doubts about this whole business. But I quickly pushed these aside. I had chosen to go with this thing: that Peggy was Peggy and we were indeed having dialogues.

--Peggy, you are real, right?

--Yes.

--What I mean is, I haven't created you, have I?

--No.

--That's —. Wait. No?

--Yes. (No)

--Hang on, hang on. You mean to say I have created you?

--Yes.

I experienced a coldness in my heart.

--Then – then you don't really exist apart from me.

--No.

--Aw, Jesus, this can't be right. Are you saying that you do exist apart from me?

--Yes.

--If there were no Barry there would still be a Peggy.

--Yes.

--But didn't you say before that I created you? Wait, wait. Did you say before that I created you?

--Yes.

--Both? You exist apart from me *and* I created you?

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--*Yes.*

--Look, you can't have it both ways. Oh damn it, I did it again. Can you have it both ways?

--*Yes.*

--Aaah, I'm an idiot.

--*No.*

What I knew now was this: I needed a break. Not just a break from Peggy and the pendulum, from all of it. It had just turned April, Down Under autumn. The ocean had become too chilly for more than a quick dip following a run. It made great sense to do what I do best in life – escape.

I borrowed a friend's van, got another friend (no, not *her*) to house-sit and Timothy-mind while I was gone. And hit the road.

New Zealand when first I'd discovered it in 1980 was 20 years behind the rest of the developed world. Which I loved. Auckland, the main center, was not so much a city as a cluster of safe, quiet, pleasant neighborhoods. Now the country's biggest town was big, noisy, fast, dirty and ugly. A crime rate higher than New York's. And people there, whether Maori and Pacific Islanders, who reside mostly in the southern suburbs, or the inner city strivers and achievers, can be mean. There's a term for them known throughout the country. They are JAFAs. Just. Another. Auckland. I'm sure you can work out the F word. That the recently elected mayor was a world class buffoon (former minister of police) seemed ever so appropriate.

The rest of the country, despite extensive (and tasteless) modernization in the towns, still was New Zealand: the place that adopted me 22 years before when I was lost and homeless. Especially the South Island. The "Mainland", as the inhabitants there called it. The SI, together perhaps with Tasmania at the bottom of Australia, were the last frontiers of the Western world.

The first day away, I just drove south. Made it to Wellington, and grabbed

a late night ferry. By the time I got off in Picton, the very top of the South Island, the only dead on my inside scope were the possum roadkills.

Not a blade of grass anywhere, everything brown, the cows are dry, sheep starving. Miles and miles of parched withering life forms becoming non-life forms. It is the worst drought in years.

And then the West Coast. Green again. Suddenly, rain. The sound on the metal roof is so very welcome. I thrill to the wealth it brings to the earth beneath me when I stop for the day. But on and on, harder, more, columns of water, pillars. The van begins to leak. First one spot. Then another. 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 windshield. So I park by a lake. Scenic wonderment, three stars. But not today. That night come the mosquitoes. How do they get in – follow the raindrops? A platoon, battalion, regiment. Okay, here, take your blood, just don't sing to me of your conquests! No. Sonatas in A-positive.

On the radio I learn the roads are washed out above and beyond. Imprisoned in a metal coffin on wheels, one that smells of wet dog yet.

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. Peace.

Margaret is a tiny, beautiful woman of 72. Her husband is a year older and an alcoholic.

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Margaret's husband is a retired English seaman. And a bully. She tells me over a delightful lunch on her veranda that she had left him for three years but returned some months ago. Nothing was 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 if she's afraid to be on her own, is this why she came back. She says no, those three years away were her finest in nearly half century of marriage. What then? I wonder. I felt so guilty, she says softly.

I talk to her about reincarnation and karma – the miniscule I know about such things. Don't you think you've worked off whatever karmic debt you may have owed to this being? I ask. Margaret smiles brightly. So few people think like that, she says. Do you? I wonder. Oh yes! And it's so encouraging to hear someone as well traveled and read as you say what I feel so strongly to be true. Then I tell her about Peggy. Slip the pendulum out of my wallet (don't leave home without...), and give her a demonstration. Nothing deep. Just contact and a few simple questions. I don't know how she'll take it. But Margaret's clear blue eyes light up.

"Oh, I do hope I get to know her. She sounds like such a wonderful being."

Then you believe? I ask. Why, of course! she laughs, as though why ever would she not.

I finish my lunch and take off, certain Margaret will never again leave her drunken bully husband until time comes for her to meet Peggy face to face.

The Strait 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 can now be read on my sweater. Swerving and stumbling I make it to the other side, sit on a bench beside two yahoo types. The sea doesn't bother them in the least. One reaches into a soiled white

paper bag and removes two 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 boyos.

As I hang there, the wooden rail both supporting me and digging into my waist, issuing forth ghosts of meals past, I lift my head in time to see that most wondrous of winged creatures, 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 splendid sampling of nature’s art before me.

The German hitchhiker has a madonna’s face and trim curvaceous body. She’s been thumbing on her own three months, she informs me. We swap ironies 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 the van. I drive off to a spot where the sunset can be viewed at its loveliest. When the colors have faded, I set up the cooker and prepare a feast. As we eat I silently thank Them Up There for sending her my way.

Following dinner we sit quietly sipping herbal tea, and she begins. A monologue. About her non-understanding boyfriend. About his kid brother who secretly became her lover. About her jealous sister and bitchy mother, and about the time she swallowed 25 capsules to rid herself of the lot and even failed at that.

She lights up a joint to help her sift through this miasmic memory bank. Pungent smoke fills the van. I open all the windows and battle for fresh air.

When it’s late I drive her back to her cabin. 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.

I spot the two young Israeli women off by themselves in a corner of the backpacker's lounge. The Izzies who travel New Zealand following their military service tend to be a different, far more gentle breed from the largely arrogant and obnoxious types who do Asia in great mobs. Still, young Israelis have a well-defined word of mouth network of hostels in NZ, and this place definitely is not on that track. Curious, I go over and introduce myself, ask may I sit down.

"Yes, we thought you might be Jewish," one says. "You look it."

"Oh?" I feel just a little bothered by this. When I travel overseas, especially Asia, I do so on a New Zealand passport and often carry a crucifix or St. Christopher's medal. I have a line, if ever I should be questioned by a card-carrying terrorist: my grandfather – *father's* father – was Jewish, but he converted when he married my grandmother. Other than that I'm pure *goy*. By the way, I really enjoyed reading the Koran!

These two *shaine maidels* I now engage in conversation. What I want to tell them is that, yes, absolutely, something major has to be done about the crazies on the other side, but that Sharon, whom I liken to a certain unkosher animal, is going about it all wrong. Mainly, I wish to say, I find it difficult to believe that Jews, who are supposed to be so intelligent, so clever, are losing the spin war to a mug like Arafat and thus turning the entire world against Israel. But I'm hardly a sentence into my rave when they immediately turn to stone. One of them reaches into a wallet, takes out some photos. Being Israeli, she does not hand them to me. She throws them. All show young women like herself.

"That one," she points, when I get them assembled, "that was my sister. The others were my closest friends. None over 18. All dead. Killed by some grinning son of a bitch with a long overcoat and explosives strapped to his body. What was their crime? Hm? I'll tell you. They were socializing with other young people at a restaurant. You don't like Sharon? What would you do, hold more peace talks? Beg them not to murder your children? Hm?"

Instantly, I back-foot it. Just how can you argue with someone who's been through all those deaths? You can't. You don't. A thought of whipping out my pendulum and asking in their company questions about death, flits in and just as quickly flits out again.

Driving through the beautiful South Island countryside a little later, once again focusing on the great open spaces between human habitation, I concoct The Plan.

There is, and will continue to be for some time, a worldwide mass exodus. By far, those seeking new homelands are of the lowest socio-economic order. Australia blatantly turns them away or, if they do land, locks them up (in American-built and managed “detention centers” – Auschwitz-South); New Zealand, although far more liberal, is beginning to lean that way. But Israelis are hardly lower order types. They are, in fact, the brainiest, most resourceful, hardest working people on earth.

Evacuate the lot of them.

And send them where? Right here. The SI of NZ. Roughly the size of Illinois, the South Island houses around 500,000, if you forget Christchurch, the only major city. Another half million wouldn't cause so much as a dent on the landscape. If we act fast, we get the cream of the Izzy crop. Medical professionals, scientists, their best biz minds. Not only wouldn't they tax the resources and economy, their presence would create a boom, countering the dreaded brain drain New Zealand suffers.

Okay, half mill. What about the rest? Well, there's that wee island to the northwest of here. Twenty million people on a land mass virtually the size of the continental US. Sitting in the center of that wee island is a desert half the size of Europe. Israelis have proved themselves as cultivators of desert. They grew pineapples in the goddamn sand!

Who would pay for all this? America, for a start. We pour three billion a year into Izzyland anyway. Plus wealthy Jews worldwide. Plus wealthy Arabs worldwide! And anybody else who might think not killing innocent people is rather a nice thing.

Would Izzies want to leave their homeland? Not likely. But migration is in the Jewish blood, is it not? (In three generations my own clan has moved from a shtetl in Russia to Philly to a beach in New Zealand.) Besides, have they a choice?

Impossible, this idea? No, just decidedly difficult to orchestrate.

I'll tell you what is impossible:

Peace in the Middle East.

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From *Death of a Scavenger*, an old detective novel by one Keith Spore, which I found in a second-hand bookstore:

“...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.”

And from an even older detective novel entitled *Dark Passage* written by David Goodis (a Philadelphia boy, who also wrote *Shoot the Piano Player*):

“Parry said, ‘I’m a coward. I don’t like pain.’

“‘We’re all cowards,’ Coley said. ‘There’s no such thing as courage. There’s only fear. A fear of getting hurt and a fear of dying. That’s why the human race has lasted so long.’”

These words are read late at night in my van, by candlelight. Messages are found in the most unlikely of places.

I call them Sadie and Max. They are paradise ducks, plentiful throughout the South Island. But these are names given them by men.

I have a block against remembering men-assigned names for things of nature. It took me my first two years in New Zealand to remember pohutukawa, the tree that dominates the North Island coast, 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, just below the snow line of the glorious peaks of Fox Glacier a brilliant red tint is softly highlighted by the setting sun.

“I didn’t know pohutukawa blossoms stay on this late in the season,” I say, 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 informs me. “Those are rata.” (Which I now remember only because it’s the first syllables of a machine gun blast.)

Bringing me back to paradise ducks. Sadie has a white head; Max’s is black. They are only found in pairs, and rarely do you see more than one pair at a time.

I am extremely fond of them. They represent union as I have never known it. They converse in alternating staccato squawks, hers higher than his. Seems to me that Sadie does most of the squawking – at Max of course, who pays her no mind whatsoever.

It is when they take off and fly together that Sadie and Max present their truest harmony. Oh, how they fly in such magnificent unison.

I wouldn’t mind a mate who squawked at me if we could fly together like that.

The van is my womb, like me slow but sure, and in just a brief time we have become molded to each other’s fabric. We now come to a city, a small city where I’ve been before with good feeling. But something is wrong. I walk the streets and no one looks me in the eye. I catch a movie, browse the bookshops, patronize a favorite bakery: all the standard pastimes in a city, but something is very wrong. On the second day I figure out what it is. There’s no soul here. Yeah, I know: soul is where you find it coz it’s right there inside you. Maybe I left mine at the city limits.

In a sweat and partial panic I drive out of the city, streets and houses becoming roads and fields, hills and sheep. (Always sheep.) Then a lake, then the sea, then the mountains. Ahhhhhhhhh.

There is no way you can visit the South Island of New Zealand without going for a trek in the mountains. It’s so odd: when I lived in America, “outdoors” was this airy, roofless passageway necessary to traverse to get from one indoors to another. But the SI has a dozen world class tracks,

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generally four day walks of unsurpassed beauty, and over the years I've managed to do every one. The most famous is the Milford, but it is not my favorite. The Routeburn is. I suppose this is because it was my first. I probably never would have done it had it not been for Marianne. She was a Swede (another one!) I first met in Dunedin. She was attractive, intelligent, but short on confidence, even less in self-esteem. Until we hit the Routeburn.

She not only talked me into the trek, she showed me what to take, how to pack, how to walk – all of it. We were no more than a hundred yards into the track when the Clark Kent of Marianne became this Superbabe called Mountain Woman! I have never in my life witnessed such a total transformation of a human being based solely on the terrain.

Hey, slow down! I called out. She turned around and showed a face full of euphoria. It was downright scary at first. But she was simply in her element – truly.

When third day along I slipped on a wet rock formation and twisted my ankle, Marianne did what any woman might do in such circumstance: first, she expertly bound my ankle, then she took from me my pack and put it on her front. And carried both until we got off the track a day and a half later. I suppose if I had really hurt myself, she would've slung me in a fireman's carry and shlepped me down that mountain as well.

I take it slow. The Routeburn has everything, rain forest, snow, lakes, open plains. Four seasons in a day, just about. The huts spaced several hours apart are full of young semi-reveling Germans, but I'm so tired by the time I land in one at the end of the first two days, I simply find a cot, lay out my sleeping bag, crawl in and fall asleep in seconds.

The third day, in a drizzle, I hardly see a thing. The clouds are low and besides, no Marianne to provide assistance should I take a tumble, I am careful to keep my eyes on where I step. Then of a moment, everything clears. The drizzle abruptly stops, the clouds part, and I can see for a hundred miles. And as though the outside provides a signal to my inside, there is a clearing there as well.

What the hell am I so uptight about with this bloody book? Me, who hates *them*, who loathes their damn clubs, their fraternities, their systems, who's always been a loner and hasn't exactly done badly by it, I'm putting

myself through a wringer hoping for acceptance...from *them*? I am indeed, and I know why, too. I want to show those I left behind in Philadelphia. But who are they? Oh, I couldn't care less what any single one of *them* thinks, or even the lot of them together. I want to show *her*! Hey, look – I'm a big boy now and I've finally become a success! Never thought I had it in me, huh.

Standing there, on top of a mountain range in the South Island of New Zealand, an *aha!* of, well, mountainous proportions. The appropriateness begins to tickle me. Soon, full-throated laughter. It won't go away. Guffaws, echoed back to me. A small group of Germans passes by, serious mountain types. They give me a wide berth. Which adds another level to my delightful outburst.

Finally I calm to sporadic light chuckles. As I do, the clouds close in and the drizzle starts up again. Well of course. And I focus on my step, and the next, and the next.

“You must visit the *spiritual* community.”

I've heard this time and again on my brief journey. So following the map, the thick red-line roads becoming thin red-line roads, then finally dirt (“metaled”, as they call it in NZ), I drive into the spiritual community. And quickly learn that it is having its problems.

One of the many back-to-the-basics centers that sprung up in the 1970s, this community exemplified the statement serious younger alternative types hoped to make then. Several hundred acres of regenerating bush far from the madding crowd; no private ownership; constructive social activism; no meat, drugs or booze; a popular acceptance of the principles of Buddhism. In sum, a renunciation of all that was deemed excessive and wrong, and a sharing of those qualities which are loving and essential.

Nice ideals. And for a time the community worked. No one here seems to know just when their unified strength began to break down: when they ran out of steam.

Now a score of adults and a like number of kids make their home here in

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self-styled dwellings and house trucks, with a communal eating/gathering place which brings them together at least once a day. Except it doesn't bring them together once a day, sometimes not even once a week. There's a curious listlessness to the place, an overwhelming sense of fatigue.

Not that the place isn't friendly. I was at once made welcome, in the quiet, understated New Zealand manner. No great show of hospitality, but neither a vibe of unwelcome. Small smiles and would you care for a cuppa, mate.

None of the original members are still around, I'm told, and the turnover of new faces is high. Moreover, there's little sign of structure. A few maintain that the community is undergoing an anarchy phase, but that's just another word for an act not being together.

Until recently, for example, there's been a rotating schedule of house persons. Each day, the nominated adult cooks the meals, bakes, cleans up the communal compost toilet, makes sure the kids get their snacks after school. In other words, supervising the activities of the kitchen/gathering place, the nucleus of any center, be it called commune, community or kibbutz. Enough people participate so that no one is called upon more than once every two and a half weeks. This system, I'm told, works beautifully. In theory.

The four days I spend here, one woman voluntarily prepares a single midday meal, another cooks two more. For dinner, nothing at all takes place. The kitchen is often dirty, and unlabeled bags of grains, cereals and flour are scattered here and there. The kids when they return from school are forced to ransack the larder, small hands dipping into caches of nuts, seeds and raisins.

Other problems abound. Money, for one. The community is broke and so are most of its citizenry. A couple of the men are laborers on a temporary project nearby, and a few of the women work at a village store. One single mother receives child support from her ex, another is on the domestic purposes benefit. No one is on the single person's benefit – the infamous "dole". Times are hard.

Energy: nobody seems to have any to speak of. I'm told that in the past two weeks four separate attempts at holding a meeting to discuss the community's apathy failed when no one showed up.

A handful practice yoga most every day, and this appears the extent of

any real effort at spirituality. Social activism is limited to signs and bumper stickers reading GE FREE.

“I’m totally burnt out,” one woman tells me. “The past few years, in addition to raising a child I’ve spent almost all my time doing volunteer work for the women’s refuge and getting the Greens into Parliament. You use all your wits, your heart and soul, to get the bloody corporate-loving Nationals out of power. And by gum, out they go! Labour get in, and the Greens make it to the pivotal balance of power position in the coalition – you couldn’t hope for better, right? Then they agree to send troops to Afghanistan; the PM plays kissy-kissy with Bush and that little jerk in Australia in order to help our business geeks; the government bail out Air New Zealand, a private airline, at the cost of a billion dollars, and corporate America get the red carpet treatment to waltz in and plant their GE seeds. I ask you: genetically engineered food! Bloody hell, this country could be the organic garden of Eden for the entire world! The rich countries in the Northern Hemisphere, Europe and Japan, are dead set against GE, plus they’re crying out for organics, and since our growing seasons are opposite to theirs —.” She sighs loudly. “Pardon my outburst, mate. I’m just stressed out of my gourd. Knackered, too.”

Many of the others, I gather, are of the same mind.

On top of this is the season: winter’s coming. Winter with its heavy rains, the mud, the cold, the long nights. The gloom.

And yet, none of these things constitutes the main problem here. This is called relationships.

At the community there are two true families: woman, man, kids, happily living together. There are two other couples, except the female of one is on occasion coupling with the male from the other – to the distinct lack of appreciation of the more permanent mates.

Another woman is sometimes coupling with a man whose prior woman has lately turned celibate. The first woman’s former partner now and then couples with a different woman except he’s still hoping to reconcile with his original mate, who appears to want none of it.

Still another woman had a partner for some time but now he’s hot into a love affair that seems to affect most New Zealand men at some time in their lives: with the sea; and while he spends most of his waking time constructing

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the vessel that will deliver him to his ultimate freedom, his woman suffers their ultimate further separation.

And so it is going at the spiritual community.

Enter the Savior.

Not long before my arrival, an organization of Christians petitioned the community for use of their land to hold a weekend workshop, ostensibly to be geared to the public at large.

I watch as the Jesus folk drive in with two rented vans and displaying practiced efficiency set up a pair of circus tents. They're smiling and cordial and fast to make friends.

"Hi, I'm John!" one claims, rather loudly and with firm handclasp.

"Hi, I'm Heather!"

"Hi, I'm Grant!"

Several appear to know community people from a time ago.

"Yeah, last time you saw me I had gelled spiky hair, was working seventy hours a week, then dropping e on weekends and partying all night, eh? Well, that was just my way of searching for identity. The search ended when I found Jesus!"

"Awr, I used to do yoga and tai chi, meditate every day, y'know. But since I let Jesus into my heart I don't need that stuff anymore."

One man had been a confirmed vegan. He laughs at the memory. "I was into raw food, no meat, no dairy, all that. Well mate, Jesus showed me the way back. After all, he's provided animals for us to eat. So eat!"

During the day I observe as the visitors get close to the residents and long, heartfelt, one-to-one talks ensue about the subject most prominent. A few workshops during the afternoon – lectures, really – are attended by a handful of the community's curious. (Not a towns person appears all weekend.)

Towards nightfall the Christians prepare a sumptuous feed (meatless), and a circle is formed around a blazing bonfire under the perfect starry sky. A newcomer, knowing no one, might easily identify two distinct groups. The residents sit in clusters, women together, men together. The visitors are formed as individual families: grownups and kids, smiling, happy, holding hands or arms placed warmly around one another.

“Yeah, Philip and I were into an open relationship sort of thing too,” I overhear a Jesus woman remark to a resident. “He had affairs and I had some as well, but there was always jealousy no matter how understanding we tried to be, you know? Soon as we turned to Jesus it was obvious we didn’t need any others. I mean, really, we’re so high all the time!”

It’s a confession I hear from different people throughout the weekend.

Following the meal, music begins. There are guitars, a flute. All the music revolves around JC. A community woman who plays a mean fiddle tries to get a jam going, but without success. The others let her play alone, then climb back into their religious songs when she’s finished. She puts the fiddle away.

It’s getting late when someone says, “Yo Trevor, how about a story!”

“Yeah! Trevor’s the man!”

Trevor tries his best to decline, then as the circle of people grows quiet, the only sounds now the crackling fire and night birds, he begins. He chooses the resurrection as theme. It seems not to fit with the tranquility of the evening, a point Trevor himself makes note of more than once. Still, he talks on. More and more graphic does the story grow, interspersed with contemporary phrasings (“...so Jesus decided to just do it!”) He takes half an hour and more; the night seems to grow colder as he goes on. The moment he finishes, on cue, a guitar strums and the Christians break into song. Song ends and it appears so too have the festivities, and the community people, who, as New Zealanders do, have sat through the spiel with plastic smiles and feigned patience, make to break the circle. But no, Trevor’s got more to say. No story now. A rant. Loud. Emphatic.

“People, I want to tell you, if you think finding Jesus is easy, well, no way! Getting to know Jesus is hard work, the hardest work you’ll ever...”

Heavier and heavier. Freezing, half asleep, my night is over. I stand up and walk slowly away, noting I’m the only one to do so.

Sunday I run into Trevor, a former roadie, and we actually have a decent talk about places on the globe we’ve traveled. Then he slips from his inside jacket pocket a black-bound book.

“It’s the Book of Hebrews. I’d like you to have it.”

“Well, uh, I think it’d sort of be wasted on me.”

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“Why? Have you read it? Aha, of course not! Look, take it and read it, okay? It’ll really blow your mind.”

But you see, I’ve been in touch lately with this dead friend, right, and she tells me —. No, I don’t dare: they’d burn me at a stake.

“Ah, well, thing is, I travel pretty light, know what I mean? Why don’t you put it in the library they have here?”

“But I want *you* to have it, mate!”

“Please —”

“Please —!”

A comic thrusting of the scriptures back and forth. I prevail. Trevor is genuinely hurt. And I feel a prat. Hell, I could’ve taken it, left it in a men’s room somewhere.

After the entourage has packed up, after the goodbye hugs, after the rented vans leave the community, it’s time for me, too, to take off and head back to my beach. I go round thanking folk for their hospitality, leave some bills in the moneybox in the kitchen, and as I approach my van spot a group of resident women thick in discussion.

“They’re so bloody closed-minded!”

“I know! Try to tell them anything and they quick open their book. ‘Right here it says —’ Always the damn book!”

“Exactly. And when you tell them there are other books that have it different, it’s ‘But *our* book is the truth!’ How do you reason with thicks like that?”

“And their ideas about women! Back to the kitchen, girls, and pump out those babies!”

“Yeah!!”

Silence.

“Y’know, they sure were good-looking couples.”

“Sure were. The kids were so happy too, eh?”

“Good to see families really close like that.”

“Yeah.”

Silence.

“Y’know,” says the woman whose man is preparing his yacht for the open seas, “they invited me to their place. I think maybe next month I’ll drive

on over. Not that I'm into any of this Jesus crap. It's just, well, you know..."

"Yeah."

There's a prolonged silence as each of the women from the spiritual community gaze out as if to an unseen evidence, and I make my way to the van.

--Look, I wasn't really offended when I yelled at you a few weeks ago. More disappointed. But I still think my desires influence the answers I get.

--No.

--Yeah, yeah. Well, you did tell me they're only 70 percent accurate, and even though this makes no sense at all, I just have to live with it.

--Yes.

--However, I would like to know how you're feeling about my skepticism here: any problem?

--Yes.

--Pissed off at me for my failure to be a flat-out believer?

--No.

--Hey, maybe you're feeling a bit ashamed about the wrong answers you've given, especially about the book.

--Yes.

--A whole lot ashamed?

--Yes.

--Good, you oughta be. Only kidding, Old Thing. Right, then. Can we clear the slate and get back to biz?

--Yes.

--Terrific. So, there's still no God.

--Yes. (No)

--Old Boy just hasn't wandered off, can't find his way home.

--Yes. (He hasn't)

--You caught those born-again at that community.

--Yes.

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--They're so sure, man.

--Yes.

--So absolutely sure.

--Yes.

--Be nice to have a sense of belonging and devotion like that, eh.

--Yes.

--So if God is not, prayer is useless.

--No.

--Oh? Who answers prayers then, you guys?

--No.

--But prayers do get answered.

--Yes.

--What about programming? (Alpha programming refers to using powers of visualization to create desired future achievement. By relaxing into the Alpha state, focusing on a mental image and repeatedly sending out the mind juice with a strong sense of positiveness, you can make that image a reality. It's the basis of all mindpower work.)

--Yes.

--So which is more effective – prayer?

--No.

--Programming.

--Yes.

--True?

--Yes.

--Then...is prayer just a form of programming?

--Yes.

--Ahhhh. And programming works because – how do I put this? – it's part of some sort of existing process or system of life?

--Yes.

--Like, oh, electro-magnetic force fields: it's there, it's the highest, most natural form of energy, can't be depleted and so on, but very few know about it and nobody uses it.

--Yes.

--And when somebody does come up with an idea or invention along

these lines, like the brilliant Nicolai Tesla did, or Robert Adams (the old guy in my town who's designed and constructed an engine that runs solely on magnets), right away he's discredited by vested interests in the going energy industry?

--Yes.

--And the biggest going energy industry in the world, bigger even than oil, is the God biz.

--Yes.

How many times in the 30 years I've been involved with mindpower have the Christian nutballs cried, "Devil's work!" and told me I was going to burn in hell for teaching this wonderful stuff?

--So Alpha was the real McCoy?

--Yes.

--What about Vipassana (S.I. Goenka's powerful 10 day silent retreat technique)?

--Yes.

--Far more effective than Alpha?

--No.

--What do you mean: Vipassana's not more effective?

--Yes. (It's not)

--Alpha is?

--Yes.

--Because it's more in line with the natural system of life?

--Yes.

--You're not lying to me again?

--Yes. (She's not)

--Telling me what you know I'd like to hear.

--No.

--Well, don't be mad, but I'm just not buying it.

--Yes. (I'm not)

--I want to make sure I really understand this natural system business. Psychics and clairvoyants, right? We got to know them all in Philly back then, and most of them were loonies.

--Yes.

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--Not that they couldn't do the stuff, some of them. But their lives tended to be all screwed up.

--*Yes.*

--I've often thought of this. Is the stuff they're able to do simply what we're all capable of?

--*Yes.*

--And for some reason these people were able to jump into this natural system you're talking about?

--*Yes.*

--Maybe they were screwed up because clairvoyance is considered either so oh-wow by the airy-fairies or weird and devil's work by the you-know-who's, and they can't properly deal with that kind of attention.

--*Yes.*

--And characters like that fellow Ingo Swann: remember him? (You could give Swann a map coordinate down to the tiniest increment anywhere in the world and he'd send his mind to the actual place and tell you what physically was there.)

--*Yes.*

--So, he too somehow was able to slide into this system.

--*Yes.*

--And we're all potentially able to do this.

--*Yes.*

--And when somebody dreams about their Aunt Tilly at two in the morning, then they get a call and are told Aunt Tilly died exactly at 2 am – is it that such strong energy was wrapped around her death that even people who normally don't tune in get the message?

--*Yes.*

--And somebody you haven't had contact with in years and suddenly get the urge to call, and at that moment the phone rings and it's *them*: same deal?

--*Yes.*

--What you're telling me is that we're able to do this stuff all the time because that's just the way of this natural system.

--*Yes.*

--And maybe we can't do it, or it only comes at certain rare moments,

because we're too focused on life's really important matters like the Super Bowl or the depth of Britney Spears's cleavage.

--Yes.

--And speaking of things that may be of total inconsequence to those no longer among the living, I'd really like to know more about this rating system, Barry's hypothetical 1 to 10. Is a person's rating down here based on accomplishment?

--No.

--So when Bill Gates goes over he gets no bonus points coz of his gelt?

--Yes. (He doesn't)

His rating down here I worked out to be a 3!

--So Gates is a 3.

--Yes.

--And Amanda's a 6!

--Yes.

--Do you think Gates'd be jealous of her if he knew?

--No.

--I suppose not. Do you think it's time I found out my own rating?

--Yes.

--No it's not. I mean, I will one day, for sure. But I want to take this slow, know what I mean? Actually, I had a thought when I was up on the Routeburn last week. See how this hits you: I'm double-binding myself. If I score low, I'm a failure; if I'm high, well, then I'm not at all using this va-a-a-ast potential of mine. Get it?

--Yes.

--Okay. Am I – am I a 10?

--No.

--Thank Moses! A 9? (I'm cringing now.)

--No.

--Whew. Right, that's enough for today. Theoretically speaking, though, what keeps me from being a 9 or 10? Is it coz I'm a lazy, worthless, cowardly, dirty-mouthed, lustful, gluttonous bullshitter?

--No.

--No to which? To lazy?

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--Yes.

--I'm not lazy?

--Yes. (I'm not)

--Coulda fooled me. Right then. Coward.

--No.

--Surely dirty-mouthed.

--No.

--Aw yo – you don't give me any credit! Lustful?

--No.

--Peggy! Gluttonous?

--No.

--Well for certain I got you on this one: bullshitter.

--No.

--Momma, I don't think you've been paying close attention.

--No. (She has been)

--So it's other junk.

--Yes.

--What's my worst trait – my anger?

--No.

--How about jealousy?

--No.

--Right, right, I'm not all that jealous, am I? (Except of the guy with the blue Toyota Celica, who, I've noted since my return, sometimes stays overnight with the Swedie down the beach.) Okay, what about patience? As in I ain't got none.

--No.

--My intolerance?

--No.

--All right, all right, I'm stumped. Spell it out?

--Yes.

--First letter. A to M inclusive?

--No.

--N to T?

--No.

--U, V or W?

--Yes.

--W?

--Yes.

--W...what begins with W? It couldn't possibly be all the worrying I do over stupid little things.

--No.

--No. You mean yes, it could possibly be.

--Yes.

--And that's the worst thing about me?

--Yes.

--Amazing. Babe, you've known me for, what, 25 years. Have you seen changes? Improvements?

--Yes.

--Major?

--Yes.

--So, if I continue to change, improve, till I wipe out the worrying and other nasties, I can upgrade from whatever I am now?

--Yes.

--And keep getting upgraded, like earning brownie points?

--Yes.

--Till finally I reach a 10?

--No.

--You're saying I can never be a 10.

--Yes.

--No matter what I do, how hard I try.

--Yes.

--Aw, dude! So this rating business, it's mainly based on something else?

--Yes.

--Totally based on *one* something else?

--Yes.

--What the heck can that be? Smarts?

--No.

--Kind of work you do?

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--*No.*

--Making the best with what you have?

--*No.*

--Ability to love?

--*No.*

--Not love?

--*Yes.* (Not)

--Can you spell it out, then?

--*No.*

--Oh great. This is one of those you-have-to-discover-for-yourself-Barry thingies, yes? You don't want to deprive me of my own *grasping*.

--*Yes.*

A week went by; two. The weather had grown cold and wet, and I could feel the onset of the pre-winter blahs. The book rejection when it came meant nothing. What shall we do with the manuscript? they wondered. Well...

I had got on the pendulum once during this time. It wasn't Peggy. Rather the Ghost Who Haunts Me. I wasn't even upset with that. In fact, the only thing I was upset with was me: I could sense my enthusiasm slipping away, and I hated it.

Ever since 9/11 I had been a changed person. I felt ever so strongly that the event marked a major and critical point in my life. Shortly after, I had spent time with people I was close to, explaining the notion that we all must, we absolutely had to, cut the fat from the bone of our existence and *do*. Forget security, man, there is no such thing, not anymore. Step out, take risks, c'mon! The book had been my own stepping out. And that had led to the dialogues with Peggy. Now I had to fight against my standard predilection towards numbness. And I harangued others to do likewise. But it was like urinating in the ocean to change its ph level.

I remember a long-distance phone call to a friend one evening, telling him all this. Throughout my soliloquy I could hear him yawning. It was

symbolic. A good man, a good mind, trying to extend his life beyond earning a living, bonking his wife, shopping for food and keeping his car roadworthy...and the damn internet – but he just couldn't keep from nodding off.

So I had cut off from him, from all those I knew. One of the few I spoke to at all was the woman who the year prior had dumped me following four and a half years of a strained relationship. Raewyn would show up now and again, tell me of the crazy things she was thinking, crazy things she was doing. There were times I could hear her soul crying. But she was trying. How many had I met who just mouthed the buzz words, but came crunch time back into the fold they fled. Raewyn was struggling and no doubt would continue to struggle. But she really wanted to break free of the box, and I respected her for it and wished her well.

I got back on the pendulum.

--Are these answers coming from a source beyond myself?

--No.

I put it down. In fact, I yanked off the thread, tossed the coin in a pile of other coins, mostly foreign, picked up in my travels.

Outside, Timothy was busily engaged in cleaning himself. My one and only friend was looking good. He had gained back some of the weight he had lost following his op, and generally had a far more healthy aura about him. If you didn't count the scratches and bruises from nocturnal cat fights, that is.

“Mate, if it wasn't for you I'd seriously be considering a swim to Fiji. But who's gonna feed you, worry about you, scold you when you come home looking like Stallone in *Rocky II*? You're my one reason for hanging in there at the moment.” Slurp, slurp.

I found an old washer in my nuts-and-bolts jar, tied a thread onto it.

Immediately I began using it, I felt this oily sensation. That's the best word for it: oily. Detached the thread, replaced the washer in its jar.

Tried another old coin, English this one. No really a bad feeling, but I knew it just wasn't right. With a sigh I retrieved the half penny.

--Are the answers coming from a source beyond me?

--No.

--So...what? This you, Me?

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--Yes.
--Highest mind?
--Yes.
--No Peggy.
--Yes. (No)
--She pissed off at me?
--No.
--Will she ever get on the line again?
--Yes.
--But not for a while.
--Yes. (No)
--So we're stuck with each other for the nonce.
--Yes.
--I guess I'm an asshole, huh.
--Yes. (Oh, swell. My own highest mind, yet.)
--Hey, Me: I'm lonely, sad and angry.
--Yes.
--And an asshole?
--Yes.
--Really?
--Yes.
--I thought maybe you were just saying that.
--No.
--Okay, lonely, sad, angry and an asshole.
--Yes.
--Tell me, though: will you lie to me?
--No.
--Absolutely, positively not lie to me.
--Yes.
--Are you lying to me now?
--No.
--The other day I got that spirit on the line. You know, the one I can't seem to get rid of. Can I be hurt by one such?
--Yes.

--Will I be?

--No.

--So he can but he won't.

--Yes.

--And I'm an asshole.

--Yes.

--Because of the way I've been treating people?

--No.

--Coz of the way I've been treating...myself?

--Yes.

--So I'm an asshole because I've been an asshole to me. To us.

--Yes.

--All right. I'll apologize to you, but not to me. Even though you are me.

Do you know everything?

--Yes.

--Just like the ungrateful dead.

--Yes.

--Well, you're pretty stingy meting out knowledge to me.

--No.

--Says you. Are you part of me, completely?

--Yes.

--Do you exist at all outside of me?

--No.

--When I die, do you die?

--No.

--So you're the part of me that lives on when I die.

--Yes.

--Are you my soul?

--Yes.

--So highest mind and soul are the same?

--Yes.

--And you never die.

--Yes. (He doesn't)

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--Just jump back and forth from Up There to down here. Different me each time.

--*Yes.*

--Besides being lonely, sad, angry and the other thing, I'm frustrated as hell.

--*Yes.*

--I'm really of a mind to do more, to do something that is meaningful. It's frustrating because I can't figure what to do now that the book is done. I thought I might do another book, you know, on the dialogues. But with Peggy on extended leave, there ain't much dialoguing. That's just one cause for my frustration. The other is that everyone I know seems to be sound asleep. I feel I have to cull all those who are not intent on either helping others or helping themselves in some sort of concerted manner. Is this bad?

--*No.*

--Should I turn my back on everyone I now know?

--*No.*

--I shouldn't turn my back on anyone?

--*No.*

--Just on some?

--*Yes.*

I threw out a bunch of names. Except for Raewyn, everyone I got an "okay to cull" until I came to Joe.

--Aw, you're joking.

--*No.*

I had known Joe for ten years. Originally from Boston, he and I met in New Zealand. We clicked instantly. He moved to Brisbane a few years back, and I'd spent time with him over there every year since.

The guy had the goods – every necessary ingredient to become an effective teacher or counselor or therapist. Or something. But he steadfastly refused to get off his safety perch. I'd pushed. I'd pulled. I'd prodded. I taught him Alpha, one to one. I offered to work with him, bring him along slowly, do the parts he felt he might not be good at. Nope. He seemed content to work in a hardware store, selling paints. Following September 11 I sent him a letter. *It's time*, man, I wrote. What I got back was a letter in which he said, basically,

he was who he was, and that was that. Bloody waste of a good mind.

So I gave up on him. He came to New Zealand a few months back to be close to his kids. In three months, I saw him once. Didn't say a word; just obligatory chitchat. I'm finished with you, guy, was my unbroadcasted statement. That's the message he'd taken back to Australia.

Now my highest mind wanted me to get back in touch.

--Okay, but I'm not gonna be gentle.

--Yes.

--I mean, I'm really gonna box his ears.

--Yes.

I sat at the desk and wrote a stinging letter. I think you're a total lost cause, but the universe says no, I told him. (I was a bit ashamed to say I had learned this from a coin on a string.) You've got by all your life on your charm, your bullshit, and that dago temper of yours when you've got more natural ability to do the work than anybody I've ever met. There've been times I just wanted to punch you out, but I was afraid I'd swing and miss, go cartwheeling into a wall and throw out my lumbar. I do not think you'll ever step away from your fear zone, but the universe apparently does, and for sure they know better about such things. I just wish they'd start contacting you directly and leave me out of it.

And more. And worse.

--Okay?

--Yes.

--Not too heavy?

--Yes. (It's not)

I left the letter overnight, reread it the following morning. It hadn't got any softer. I couldn't help feeling a little sheepish. I liked Joe. I really did. And this was going to knock him around.

--So...send it?

--No.

--No!

--Yes.

--Well, what was all this – some sort of schoolboy exercise to relieve my frustration or something?

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

--*No.*

I was about to crumple the letter and toss it. For some reason I didn't. Left it on the desk. That evening I got a phone call. From Joe. We used to talk by phone every couple of weeks, but this was the first I'd heard from him in months. He'd just got into New Zealand. A short-term job offer from the people he'd worked for here over the summer.

We met for coffee the following morning. I handed him the letter – after explaining what the whole thing was about. He gave me this look like I was the principal and he'd been caught peeping into the girls' locker room. But I felt fine with it all. This was so much more sensitive a way to deliver my message than simply dropping it in the mail.

--You knew! (Me to Me, later that day.)

--*Yes.*

--You bloody *knew!*

--*Yes.*

At least a part of me had good sense.

But Highest Mind wasn't perfect. I asked Me about the upcoming Lennox Lewis —Tyson fight. Tyson was doing a magnificent job gaining public interest with his bad mouth and nasty shenanigans. The man was a lowlife, a has-been fighter, but truly a master at getting people to hate him so much they'd pay anything to see him whipped.

I approve of boxing. I approve of all sports. Yes, they're bullshit. Yes, there are far more important things. And I cringe at the thought of a shortstop or quarterback or basketball center with an IQ in the seventies making 25 million a year when that money would keep a few hundred thousand people in food, clothing and shelter where now there was none. But I don't believe people's desires to be a small part of something bigger than themselves will ever change. And hadn't I been there myself for ever so long? For years and years, I lived and died with the Phillies. The only time I ever rooted against them was when Sandy Koufax pitched. He was one of the enemy, yes, but more he was one of us!

A few years back I got a package from a friend in Philly, a former sports reporter. It was the yearbook of the Big Five Hall of Fame. Five college basketball teams around which several strata of life existed. Inside were listed

the Hall of Fame members. Not only players, but writers, announcers, the respective schools' sports information people. Hangers-on. A scribbled note alongside his picture: "You left town too soon. You could've been in here!" Was he serious? Yes, I suppose so.

Anyway, I figured Lewis would demolish Tyson in seven or eight. Highest Mind, who knew everything, said Lennox, sure, but it'd go the distance.

--No way!

--Yes.

When Lennox pounded the crap out of Tyson in eight, I had to wonder. A common belief about pendulum use is that it gives you the answer you most want to hear. I can't imagine that I wanted to hear the fight would go the full fifteen rounds. Still, I know Highest Mind is the smartest part of whatever parts go to make up Barry. Which tells me a bit about foretelling the future.

My first time in India, I met a little man who did street corner palm readings. He was good. Better than good. Rather astounding, as a matter of fact. I oversaw him do half dozen readings for young Western travelers. He'd say such things as, "You have six brothers and four sisters."

"Yes!" the palm's owner would cry.

"You fell from a tree and broke your left wrist when you were five years old."

"Yes!!"

And so on. Then he'd go into a spiel about the future. "You will have many healthy children, become very wealthy and live to 98." To which the person on the other end of the palm would practically swoon. And, naturally, hand over more and more rupees.

During a lull in his action, the man turned to me. "Would you like your palm read, sir?"

"No, thanks."

"Why is this, may I ask?"

I shrugged. "Who cares?"

"Ah, a very wise man." He looked around, lowered his voice. "Can you tell me, if I may so bold to enquire, why it is that Western people are so...shall I say, gullible?"

"How do you mean?"

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

He took my palm. “Look here. This is a picture book of your entire life. A diary. When you write in a diary you make note of what has happened up to the present, yes? Do you write what will happen tomorrow? You may write what you plan for tomorrow, or what you hope will happen tomorrow. But you can only write about what truly happens tomorrow when tomorrow is here. I would think this is a fact known to all. I can look at your palm – hm, interesting heart line you have, sir – and tell you what may *possibly* happen tomorrow. It is simply extending the trend of what has happened up till now. But there are so many variables to this equation we call life. Now, I am a bit of a rascal. Many children have I sired, all of whom have this terrible habit of needing to eat. Because I know how gullible Western people are, how comically desirous to hear great and wonderful things for their futures, I merely conform to those desires.”

--You blew the fight, you mug. (Me, talking to Me.)

--No.

--No, your sweet *cojones*. So, tell me: is the future untellable?

--No.

--But it's no sure thing.

--Yes. (It's no)

--So you looked at the fight from the perspective of probabilities?

--Yes.

--From your exalted position overlooking past, present and future, it was *probable* that Lewis would win on points?

--Yes.

--So when Peggy told me the publisher would take my book and run with it, was that too just a probability?

--No.

--It wasn't?

--Yes.

--It was more than a probability.

--Yes.

--It was a sure thing.

--Yes.

--That didn't happen.

--Yes.

--Boy, am I a dumb ox.

--Yes.

For the next three weeks I got only Highest Mind whenever I tried the pendulum. Wait, I lie. Twice I got weird stuff; both times I put thread and coin down and got out of there. Spirits, Highest Mind reported. Mischievous, not malevolent. Which still were capable of hurting me, yes, but would not hurt me, no. Figure that out.

One day during this period Amanda came over with a book. "Have you read this?"

It was a current New Age bestseller, written by a chap who supposedly got messages from God through the medium known as automatic writing. What this entails is holding a felt-tip pen very lightly so the tip just rests on the paper. Anybody interested in sending you a letter did so by transmitting an impulse through your fingers.

I'd never been able to do it myself. I knew one young woman who could, but the messages she received all were written in terrible grammar, awful sentence construction, and too many repeats of the main point, which itself was largely banal.

This particular book which Amanda handed me was one of three in a series. Very big sellers.

"Nah," I said. "You?" She nodded.

"What is it, the Celestine Prophecy of the 21st century? More mind muck for the dolphins, rainbows and crystals set?"

"Oh, no. It's really amazing. All three of them are. It's not your conventional airy-fairy pap by any means. In fact, there's a lot of stuff here which is completely along the lines of what you're always talking about. How religions are crap, and we have to get our acts together ourselves and stop relying on others to do it for us – and this includes God. Barry, you've got to read this!"

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

I took the book, and as I always do (for whatever reason), I scanned first the acknowledgements page looking, I suppose, for familiar names. The only one I saw was Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a favorite human of mine. Then, at the very end:

“Oh, shit! Have you seen this? He’s thanking – get this – John Denver, Barbra Streisand – Barbra *Streisand* – Richard Bach and Robert Heinlein. They’ve been inspirations for him! Bach, okay. But those others? Heinlein especially. Ex-military, rightwing Babbitt, probably the worst writer ever to get into print. Your man forgot to mention his favorite magazine, Reader’s Digest (Condensed), and movie, The Sound of Music. Babe, this guy’s a *doofus!*”

“Okay, so he’s not cool. You think God would trust somebody cool? You’d change all His words around.”

“But there is —”

“Yeah, yeah. No God. Well, whoever’s minding the store then. Read it!”

I took the book but made no promises.

Making no contact with Peggy wasn’t all bad. In fact, I was getting to enjoy the dialogues with Myself. One day, I wondered:

--Am I still an asshole?

--No.

--No??

--Yes.

--Something’s changed?

--Yes.

--I’ve done something different.

--No.

--Said something?

--No.

--*Thought* something!

--No.

--Damn, you're difficult.

--No.

Following day was a Sunday, and as usual after my run and shower I drove to my "office". There was no one else there. Which is as it should be. Peace. Quiet. Coffee and nosh. Ahhh.

Ordered my standard flat white in a large blue cup and carrot cake with yogurt on the side. Sat down on the soft leather chair in the corner (it's taken the shape of my bottom), got out my book and indulged in two of my favorite pastimes. I was reading Cormac McCarthy's Border trilogy. And losing myself in his characters. The man is so good.

Over time, noises. People were coming in. This was to be expected, but these were not the usual café types. More, families. The dreaded enemy. Soon, the place was filled. But it never gets filled Sunday mornings. I noticed my friend Lesley, accompanied by her mother.

"How are you coping?" she laughed.

"What the hell's going on?"

"Barry, you are so out of it – it's Mother's Day!" Whereupon Rosenberg broke the Southern Hemisphere record for exiting a café.

The rest of the day was as usual. Futz in the garden. Walk on the beach. Make my humongous midafternoon salad. Barry's life.

Early evening, nothing else going on, I sat at the desk to have a man to man talk with my Main Man. I asked the obligatory getting-into-it questions.

--Are these answers coming from a source beyond myself?

--Yes.

--Really??

--Yes.

--Peggy!

--No.

--Oh. Well, let me guess. You again, right?

--Yes.

--Here to mess with my head.

--Yes.

--You want to hurt me?

--Yes.

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

This was new. I didn't remember this bird having claimed it had wanted to hurt me before. There was a moment I was all set to drop the string and boogie away. But no. It was time to settle this thing.

--You want to hurt me because – what? – I'm an asshole?

--Yes.

--But the world is full of assholes. Millions. Maybe billions. You want to hurt us all?

--No.

--Only me.

--Yes.

--Why, have I done something to hurt you?

--Yes.

--You specifically?

--Yes.

--Oh. Well, if I apologize is it possible we can be friends?

--Yes. (Rather reluctantly.)

--Okay, I apologize for whatever I thought or said to you. In my own defense I've felt abandoned, confused, lonely, and generally lousy lately. Besides, what can you expect from an asshole? Apology accepted?

--Yes.

--Thank you. Um, by the way, is it possible I can find out why you've been haunting me?

--Yes.

--I've done something to you personally? What I mean is, not just to your kind, your religion, your leader. You.

--Yes.

--So I suppose this means we've known each other in human form?

--Yes.

--This lifetime?

--Yes.

--I see. (How many people have I pissed off in 63-3/4 years – must be thousands.) This happen in America?

--Yes.

--Did I write a magazine piece about you?

--No.

--Hm. That lets him out. Did we know one another well?

--Yes.

--Ah-ha. Were we by chance related?

--Yes.

--Ro? (My sister Rosalie, who towards the end of her life grew angrier and meaner to everyone. For the final few years she even refused to talk to me. When I called her one time, begging: "Please – tell me what did I do?" she replied, "You know what you did!" "Actually, I don't," I said, "but whatever it was, hey, I'm sorry." "You *can't* be sorry! I won't let you!" Then: "Now be a good boy!" Slam!!)

--No.

--Not Rosalie?

--Yes. (Not)

--Cousin Margy? (The most recent death in the family. But she and I had got on beautifully.)

--No.

--Then who —? Ah. Aaah. Aaaaaaaah. (Chills in my spine.) Oh Jesus, Joseph and Julius. (My entire body.) Not you!

--No. (Yes)

--Lena? (My mind-voice barely got it out.)

--Yes.

--This is really Lena??

--Yes.

My mother. Who died in 1963. Who when she was alive, for 25 years of my life, treated me with contempt, anger, rejection. Who was, I know, responsible for my own anger, my self-denigration, my horrendous lifelong depression, my terrible, sometimes disastrous, relationships with women all through this journey. *LENA!* I fumbled the pendulum, very nearly dropped it.

--Are you, uh, angry at what I wrote about you in the book? (I'd spelled it out quite clearly.)

--Yes! (Emphatic)

--Well, sure, I'd be too, I guess. Um, did I say anything that wasn't true?

--No.

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

--So you want me to change it?

--No.

--None of it?

--Yes. (None)

--Then what —. Wait a minute. The light finally shines. *You're* feeling guilty about how you treated me!

--Yes.

--And you want – oh, this is rich – you want forgiveness!

--Yes! (Emphatic)

--Well, tough t—. Wait, wait. (Long pause.) Did you, ah, did you actually, eh, love me?

--Yes! (Emphatic)

--But you couldn't express it?

--Yes! (She couldn't)

I watched the pendulum, the coin swinging in a bigger arc than ever I'd seen it.

--You really loved me?

--Yes!!

I sat there, minutes it seemed like, watching that half penny swing like a juiced-up inverted metronome.

--And I never knew it.

--Yes.

--Hadn't a clue.

--Yes.

--All my life up until now.

--Yes.

--Me, guru to the multitudes, adviser to the minions, and I couldn't see my own true story beyond my big nose and aching heart.

--Yes.

--I just thought of something. You're the one put that red sticker on my chest!

--Yes.

--I took that as some sort of threat. You know, "see what I can do?"

--Yes.

--But that's not what it was meant to be.

--Yes. (It was not.)

--Was it more some kind of sign you wanted heart contact with me?

--Yes.

--Oh, my. What a bird-brain I am.

--No.

--Thank you. And were you the one said you were Lou and Uncle Nat?
And Arthur Young?

--Yes.

--Have you been trying to hurt me since you died?

--Yes.

--In my relationships with women, I bet.

--Yes.

--You did the job, all right.

--Yes.

--Have you liked any of my women?

--Yes.

I proceeded down the litany of names. No. No. No. Etc.

--Who then? Ah – Jessie! (My de facto daughter of some years back, with whom I had the closest, most loving relationship I have experienced with any human being.)

--Yes.

--You really liked her, eh.

--Yes.

--Okay, Mommy dearest, here it comes. Ready? *I. Forgive. You.* That do the deed?

--Yes.

--How strange, really. Here I've always craved forgiveness from you, even though I never knew what for. Living, I guess. Now I'm forgiving you.

--Yes.

--So, am I still an asshole?

--No.

--I've got both you and my own Highest Mind in agreement here. Is it now universally accepted that I've passed my de-assholification finals?

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

--Yes.

--Still, I ain't out of the woods yet. Will you help me extract myself from the mess I've been in all my life?

--Yes.

--I'm really tired of worrying and being angry and kicking myself around all the time. I would love help from you. Deal?

--Yes! (Emphatic)

--Okay. It may be late in the day for this, but if by some miracle I meet a woman, a really fine woman, and by some even bigger miracle she can see past all my failings and infirmities, will you give me support?

--Yes.

--Even if she's a *shiksa*?

--Yes.

--Ma! Haven't *you* come a long way!

--Yes.

--Look, are you close to Ro? (They were more like sisters than mother-daughter. Which at times drove both my father and me batty: he had two wives, I had two mothers. Two *Jewish* mothers!)

--Yes.

--Give her my best.

--Yes.

--And tell her to be a good girl. That's a joke between us.

--Yes.

--What about Ruby? (My father. I used to say the bond that kept them together just shy of 50 years was their mutual hatred.) You guys close?

--No.

--Wouldn't have thought so. Do you see anybody else we knew? Any of your brothers? The cousins club??

--No.

--That's interesting.

--Yes.

--Well, look. What about me: you'll be on the welcoming committee when comes my time?

--Yes.

--Cool.

--Yes.

--Hey, I just remembered. Happy Mother's Day!

--Yes!

I put down the pendulum. I feel tired. Worn out. But strangely content. I realize this may very well have come out of my own crazy mind. But so what? Really: so what? If this pendulum thing proves (and how will I ever know?) no more than a bit of unorthodox self-therapy, I'm a winner. For damn sure it's time to give up the ghost (ha ha) of growing up with an unloving, critical mother. Carrying those lead-weighted bags for 63-3/4 years.

I straggle out onto the beach. The sun has recently set, the sky that magical mix of early winter twilight pastels. The colors are all but overwhelming. The scenery – dunes, ocean, hills to the West, low mountains off to the East, the fuming volcanic island 30 miles out to sea...always beautiful, but at this moment special.

I feel like an anvil's been lifted off my chest. An elephant. A city.

Live, Barry. Live and be happy.

Grasp.

--Are the answers to my questions coming from a source outside myself?
(This the following day.)

--Yes.

--A spiritual force I've been in touch with before?

--Yes.

--Lena?

--No.

Pause.

--Peggy!

--Yes.

--Momma, you're back!

--Yes.

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

--I suppose you were tuned in to what went on yesterday.

--*Yes.*

--What – the ten zillion of you were watching, like a cosmic coliseum and we were the main event?

--*Yes.*

--So you were waiting for the whole thing to happen before getting back on the line. Like the thing with Lena opened a sealed door.

--*Yes.*

--And Lena had been trying for some time to get in touch.

--*Yes.*

--I'm quick, eh.

--*No.*

--An asshole?

--*No.*

--You betcha. I feel great, Peggy.

--*Yes.*

--I mean, really, really great.

--*Yes.*

--I can't remember feeling this good.

--*Yes.*

--Oh, 1980 maybe when the Phillies won the Series. But this is different.

--*Yes.*

--I mean, look, I know I'm not done with being angry and intolerant and self-abusive. They're like frayed old clothes I hate to part with coz they fit so well. But this truly feels like the beginning of a brand new chapter.

--*Yes.*

--You had a hand in all this, did you?

--*Yes.*

--Pretty amazing old tootsie, you are.

--*Yes.*

--If you can give me a new state of mind, can you give me a bigger doodle?

--*No.*

--Didn't think so. Doesn't hurt to ask though.

--Yes. (It doesn't)

--Were you not allowed to contact me the past few weeks?

--Yes. (She wasn't)

I tried to get her to tell me just who it was wouldn't allow, but the best I could gather was that it's simply the rule over there. Something you just know when you know everything.

--Peggy, truth-up: do my deepest-seated desires influence the pendulum when I ask these me-me-me questions?

--No.

--So...the publisher: it wasn't my deepest-seateds, and you weren't lying.

--Yes.

--But you were so sure!

--Yes.

--Was it, as Highest Mind tells me, a future probability thing?

--No.

--Then you *can* see the future, even if it's only a probability; the publisher *did* accept the book in some future vision you had, and still they turned it down.

--Yes.

--You see where I may be having a problem *grasping* all this?

--Yes.

--Okay, enough of Barry. Are you still a 2?

--No.

--You've moved up?

--Yes. (We worked it out to a 5.)

--Not bad, not bad. Anything to do with what's going on between us?

--Yes.

Rosenberg, therapist to the deceased.

--So this means you've shed a bunch of your guilt over the kids.

--Yes.

--Anything else? New position? Title? Assistant commandant Peggy?

--No.

--Are you on your way to a 10, do you think?

--Yes.

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

--Is the aim of all life, or whatever you deadheads call it, to rise to a 10?

--Yes.

--Do you then go on to a new realm or place?

--No.

--You just hang out forever, top of your class.

--Yes.

--Since all of you, 1 to 10, have all knowledge, do you ever, um, debate the meaning of this knowledge?

--Yes.

--You do this a lot?

--Yes.

--Like, most of the time?

--No.

--More of your time – and I realize that’s not the appropriate word; untime? timeless time? – is spent in counseling?

--Yes.

--So it’s a major deal your side to rid of the baggage.

--Yes.

--Which leads to another question. Highest Mind tells me that when I die, he lives.

--Yes.

--Highest Mind has done this back and forth journey umpteen times.

--Yes.

--And yet you said you were scared shitless when you were going through the tunnel.

--Yes.

--Your *highest mind* was scared shitless.

--Yes.

--Let me think about this one. Is it...is it that when earthling-you died, all the baggage was shifted over to highest mind-you?

--Yes.

--And this transfer now meant that all the earthling’s fears became your fears?

--Yes.

--So here's highest mind-you, suddenly loaded down with major baggage, like a wealthy dilettante being made to carry a huge load for the very first time.

--*Yes.*

--Hell of a shock, I imagine.

--*Yes.*

--Highest mind-you staggers towards the light, bouncing off walls, shorn of confidence and know-all.

--*Yes.*

--And once out of the tunnel and into the light, even though you're greeted by old friends and made to feel welcome, you can't just set down the baggage and start dancing.

--*Yes.* (You can't)

--Lena's been holding on to hers for almost 40 years.

--*Yes.*

--Although 40 years in our terms might be a blink of the eye in yours.

--*Yes.*

At this point in the dialogue the pendulum had less and less motion, until it just hung there. I put it down and picked it up half an hour later. I wondered whether it was like radio transmission that sometimes fades in and out. *Yes.* But why? Well, that's not a question one can ask via the medium of a pendulum.

For some reason this conversation, or perhaps it was all the new information from the preceding one, again left me feeling exhausted. I crawled into bed just after eight, tried to read but couldn't focus. At eight thirty I turned out the light. A lot had come my way the past 24 hours.

One of the more fascinating aspects of Alpha work, and certainly the most important, is healing-by-mind. During the years I was teaching this wonderful stuff my classes did a few thousand healings in total, and feedback received proved, to me at least, the effectiveness of transferring positive thought (and images) across huge distances.

DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND

Unwittingly, I came upon another method one morning 20 years back. I was in a remote part of New Zealand's Northland, trying to thumb a ride to Auckland. I was applying for permanent residence in the country at the time, and one of the sillier rules was having to report in to the immigration department every month. Following day was when I was due.

So there I was, beautiful morning, lovely scenery all around, and hardly any vehicular traffic. Three hours passed, maybe a dozen cars, the drivers smiling and pointing to the side, as they did when indicating they were going just a short distance. Took out my tin whistle and played for a while. Had conversations with the birds. Tried to name all 25 players on the 1950 Phillies roster. Then I reached into my daypack and pulled out my journal. I was all set to write what was happening, both around me and within me. Set pen to paper. And stared as the first words to appear were: Dear God.

Dear God?

Oh, well. So I wrote the Old Boy (this long before I learned he doesn't exist) about what was going on. At the end I put in a plea: a ride, please. Thanks.

Put back the pen and journal. And immediately a car stopped.

"Where you going, mate?"

"Auckland."

The driver laughed. "I'm only going a kilometer down the road."

I jumped in.

Seven rides later and I'm in Auckland. Hm, I thought.

Prior to getting my rubber stamp at Immigration I had to stop in at Air New Zealand. My original ticket from LA had been good for three months. Three times I had it extended, no problem. Fourth time the chap said there had been a complaint from the issuing authority, the NZ Tourist Board in San Francisco. This is absolutely the final extension, he'd said then.

I could not get my Immigration rubber stamp without a valid ticket out. I couldn't get another ticket extension. I had no money to buy a new one.

Dear God, I wrote. Hey, thanks for yesterday. Now look...

Walked into Air New Zealand. The chap who couldn't issue me another extension spotted me, smiled, and reached into his desk for a blank ticket. Chatted away merrily as he wrote me a three month extension.

I decided to hang around Auckland for a while, but hadn't a place to stay and very little money to pay for one if I did.

Dear God...

Later that same day I hitched a ride across the Harbour Bridge with a young guy in a van. He said he was going to have a look at a place in Mairangi Bay where he intended to house-sit for a month while the owners went to Australia. It was on the way to where I was headed, so I went there with him. A small cottage, old and cozy.

"It doesn't have hot water," he said to me. "I can't stay in a place without hot water." Then: "Would you like it?" Would I ever! Moved in the following day. And guess what? Plenty of hot water.

The month passed. It was winter and I was fed up living in this manner. Dear God, I wrote. I want a home. My very own home. But I got no gelt. Pleeeeeeeze?!?

Showed up at Immigration. Presented my passport. A funny look from the clerk.

"But Mr. Rosenberg, we can't stamp your passport anymore. Didn't you get the letter we sent you?"

"Um, no. I've been moving around a bit." I cringed. This was it, I thought. My whole life had come down to this moment. My dream of living in this beautiful country was about to be shattered. I wondered how long they'd give me to pack my things and leave.

"...and if you'll bring in your old passport we can tear out the sticker you got when first you arrived here, then stamp your new passport..."

I had to ask her to repeat those last few lines. I mean, did she really say what I thought she'd said?

The clerk looked at me, no doubt thinking, Him? We're letting *him* in?

I couldn't believe it. I just could not believe it. This was during the height of the cold war, 1982, and thousands of Europeans, scared witless to be sitting ducks in the middle of the two nuclear neurotics, were trying desperately to immigrate to New Zealand; something like 99 percent were being rejected despite excellent credentials, and they accept *me*...!

I wanted to tell this to someone. I just had to share this, this fantastic bit of news. Outside in the corridor the door to the elevator ("lift") opened and out

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stepped a man I knew, a radical Samoan lawyer whose main work, ever so frustrating at times, was trying to keep his fellow Samoans legally in the country.

“Fui!” I yelled, grabbing the guy in a bear hug. “I made it! I’m a New Zealander!!”

“Who the hell would want to be,” he sneered, shrugging me off and passing into the main office.

Dear God. Yo! When I wrote *home* I was thinking of a house. A whole country? Hey, I’ll take it, I’ll take it!! Thanks, Big Dude!

Later, I began using my Dear God letters for healing. It was a lot easier than Alpha programming, and I hadn’t been knocked back yet.

I got a call from my sister Myrna that her husband was in the hospital with cancer of the prostate. Got out the journal. Dear God. Heal Norman, please.

Norman’s op was a total success. But more than that, Norman, a systems analyst by profession and a skeptic by nature, later described how he saw this golden light in the area of his lower abdomen while lying in the hospital bed. Not only saw this beautiful light, but felt something as well. Something very nice.

For whatever the reason, I had let the Dear God letter business slide some ten years ago. Now I got an email from Joe, back in Brisbane. His sister in Denver had cancer. Could I do some Alpha?

--Momma, can you help with Joe’s sister?

--Yes.

I provided her name, age and address.

--Anything else I need to do?

--No.

--No Alpha programming to go along with?

--Yes. (No)

--Asking you through the pendulum is an effective means of healing?

--Yes.

--The most effective means at my disposal?

--Yes.

--So you can do stuff like this?

--Yes.

--Not against the rules?

--Yes. (Not)

--Because I requested?

--Yes.

--It's just not kosher to do it unsolicited.

--Yes. (Not)

--Can anybody make requests of you guys and get help?

--No.

And again, I couldn't come up with the proper questions to determine why.

--Change of subject. Is the main reason we have to keep coming back to the physical world to experience things we haven't experienced before?

--No.

--Oh. What, then? Work for world peace?

--No.

--Help our fellow person?

--No.

--Right. Has it to do with the baggage you had to shlep over to your side?

--Yes.

--That's it then? We're here primarily to work through our baggage?

--Yes.

--Is this often accomplished?

--No.

--I shouldn't think so. It'd seem we accumulate more than we let go.

--Yes.

--So how can we do this: meditate? Spiritual practice of some kind? Good deeds?

--Yes.

--That's it?

--No.

--There's more.

--Yes.

--Considerably more, I suspect.

--Yes.

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--I've asked about punishment Up There for bad stuff done down here, and you say there isn't any.

--*Yes.* (There isn't)

--And the biggest problem on your side is the guilt.

--*Yes.*

--Not just for mothers who weren't all that great with their kids.

--*Yes.* (Not)

--Everybody.

--*Yes.*

--So can't you thin out your baggage by joining a convent and meditating and performing good deeds and not sassing back the mother superior?

--*Yes.* (You can't)

--Just being a goody two shoes won't cut it.

--*Yes.* (It won't)

--There's something I'm missing.

--*Yes.*

--It's probably pretty obvious, but I'm not seeing it. I asked you this a while back, but maybe coz I'm no longer an asshole you can now spell it out for me?

--*No.*

--The meaning of life and you won't even give me a clue.

--*Yes.* (She won't)

--You're familiar with the book Amanda lent me?

--*Yes.*

--You've read?

--*No.*

--Oh, that's right. You don't have to read. You know.

--*Yes.*

--You like?

--*Yes.*

--Good stuff?

--*Yes.*

--I tried reading it. Hoo. I mean, this guy's version of god sounds like a Texas Republican.

--*No.*

--Not a whole lot of warmth and joy there.

--*Yes.* (Not)

--So you say there's no god, and yet supposedly god wrote these books.

--*Yes.*

--Oi! I'm just not *grasping!*

--*Yes.* (I'm not)

--By the way, can you give me the name of god's literary agent?

--*No.*

By this time of year I was normally out of here. Because Asia has two monsoon seasons, I generally did a dance from one to the other to avoid the rains. But I definitely wanted to hit India again, and I'd pretty much decided on Burma (Myanmar) as my second country, all of which would take place October through December. For a month or two prior I could hang out in Australia and maybe Thailand or Malaysia. That was the plan. I wasn't altogether happy with it. I felt I was wimping out on a bigger and better journey. But I had notice the past few Out Theres that I was growing weary at around the four month mark. I wasn't *doing* anything tiring, hardly deviating from my standard shirkaholic non-activity when I'm home. Ain't the body, it's the head: I knew this. Nonetheless I didn't like the battle-worn feeling I got when I was on the road beyond month number four.

What this meant was not leaving New Zealand until sometime in August, and what *this* meant was a winter here. Why I'm so against this is beyond my comprehension. The beach did not get cold, not really. Hardly ever a frost – the ocean breeze kept it away. So what then was my hangup with staying through a winter?

There was a silly thought-form at the back of my brain that said since I didn't have *that* much more time in this body, I should spend as much as I can in warmth and sunshine. Yet another voice whispered, "Balance, *bubbela*: remember? You believe in balance and harmony, and this is it." Yeah, yeah:

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mutter mutter.

So there I am, crawling out of the bed (to the disgruntlement of a disturbed Timothy – how can a cat give off such dirty looks?) with four layers, woolly cap and socks, peeling them off and replacing with three t-shirts (which reek to high heaven), shorts, yet another woolly cap and two pair of gloves. Plus socks and my holey but reliable New Balance running shoes.

Because of the trees on my property, I can't see the beach. So until I get past the tree line, forcing myself like a parent pushing a kid who doesn't want to go to school, the whole idea of running in the cold is patently absurd. From tree line to the beach takes maybe 15 seconds. Even before I hit the beach, passing through the dunes, I've already branded myself an imbecile for holding any doubts. The picture before me is so special, so outrageously beautiful. Without working to any timepiece, I somehow always manage to get out there just as the first wink of sunlight pops over the watery horizon and says giddy.

I run west, mainly because there's a stream 50 yards to the east, and not really crossable without getting the shoes all sappy. So I have to keep peeking over my right shoulder to watch the sun as it slowly ascends and creates an eerie steam rising off the ocean.

Every beach has its morning regulars. Here there's Harry, who's nearly 80, walking Jasmine, a small black dog on a leash that seems to expand forever. Sue running with her boxer dog. (She appears to be just loping along, but if she's up ahead of me I can never catch her.) The retired lady schoolteacher, ever so polite, jogging with her small tan, equally well-mannered dog. Jim, a short Liverpoolian, a diehard socialist he is, and his frisky, rather goofy wirehaired terrier. A delightful English couple sent down by Central Casting: short and chunky, the husband looking like he should teach physics at Oxford (he's probably an engineer at one of the local mills). They walk a beautiful young Dalmatian. A few actually walk without dogs. Like Stromboli Joe, short, bald, opinionated, amiable, and if you stop to talk – pardon: listen – to the guy, kiss the morning goodbye. And one or two others. That's the lot. Rarely do I get them all on the same run. Meaning that a setting this spectacular – five-star/world class/scenery to die for – there are never more than ten people covering my two and a half miles and back.

As I run, I think. In my wee beach town, the American mania for *big* has lately caught on. When I moved in, 1985, the houses were small and plenty of space for gardens and trees existed on every property. New homes, and there seemed to be construction started every third day, are huge, taking up virtually the entire lot. And ugly! Ever there's a Nuremberg trial for architects...

And *inside* those houses – hoo! I'm always amazed that women blab so freely to other women, knowing (well, they must) that what they say will be passed on. Oh, not to me. But a friend, a widow, appears to be gossip-central, the town clearing house for the nudge-nudge. I stop in to see her now and then. And grab an earful. The drugs (mostly prescription), the booze, the cross-dressing, the spouse swapping and bed hopping, the punch-ups and dish throwing: your standard suburban fare. Maybe that's why so few go out on the beach, they're too damn busy doing silly things behind closed doors and drawn curtains. And will you just look who's talking: your friendly neighborhood old bod, smiles and waves to one and all, then goes home, sits down at his desk and spends hours staring at a swinging coin attached to eight inches of cotton thread.

So it's now June, which is winter (which even after 22 years Down Under is still weird), but my post-run day is same as it is in summer, same as it is when I'm on the road. I do nothing. But I do it ever so creatively. A woman I know works in a supermarket. A year ago she won half a million in the lottery – “lotto” here. She took an around the world trip with a friend, bought a property for investment and put a stash in the bank. She never had to work again. But she did have to work again because, she told me one day standing by the mushrooms in the same supermarket, not working would drive her up a wall. Which is most likely what would happen to me ever I had to pull a 9 to 5.

But that's not the main difference between her and me, between all of them and me. The main difference is that when I'm finished farting around town, usually shortly past noon, I come home, slip off my shoes and have a dialogue with a dead friend.

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--All right: I'm not a 1, not a 2. Nor a 9 or 10.

--Yes.

--So I gotta be between a 3 and 8.

--Yes.

--And this is a measure of something that I don't know what it is.

--Yes.

--Can't you give me the slightest hint so I won't be disappointed if I'm pretty low?

--Yes. (She can't)

--Well, maybe I'll figure it out on my own.

--Yes.

--Then I can find out my number without feeling, y'know, uncertain.

--Yes.

--Anyway, how are you, Momma. Well?

--Yes.

--Are you ever not well?

--No.

--Is anybody up your way ever not well?

--No.

--Even those who've shlepped small mountains of baggage over and need eons of counseling?

--No.

--So no matter what, every being is at peace Up There.

--Yes.

--And it's not boring.

--Yes. (It's not)

--You realize I find that hard to believe.

--Yes.

--Even with my low level of doing, your place makes me feel like a speedfreak do-aholic. You said you have friends.

--Yes.

--Relationships?

--Yes.

--Um, Peggy, this is probably a strange thing to ask, right? But is there anything on your side that's sorta, y'know. Like sex?

--Yes.

--Yes?

--Yes.

--But you ain't got no bodies!

--Yes. (We haven't)

--Mindsex, then?

--Yes.

--True!?

--Yes.

--Good stuff?

--Yes! (Emphatic)

--Oh my!! So you guys must be bonking all the time!

--No.

--A lot of the time?

--Yes.

--Aiiieeee!!! Can I —. Is there —. I mean —. Oh hell, what I want to know is, do you, can you, sort of, you know, um, use your mind to make another spirit look like, well, the Swedish babe yonder on my beach?

--Yes.

--Whoaaa!!! And I wouldn't have to listen to her before or hold her after?

--Yes. (I wouldn't)

--You're not just yanking my cord here.

--Yes. (She's not)

--Peggy, do you know what would happen if this got out?

--Yes.

--Except you can't accelerate the process, can you? Slit your wrists so's you can mindbonk the body of your wildest dreams 24 hours a day.

--Yes. (You can't)

--You'd just get sent right back.

--Yes.

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--Bum-mer. But in terms us dummies'd understand, I'd like to know the feeling you have Up There. All the time, I mean, not just when you're doing the dirty. Can you relate it to, uh, say, a good orgasm down here?

--Yes.

--I take back what I said before about boring. I think I could get used to it.

--Yes.

That night I had the dream again.

I was in one of my usual scenarios: traveling around, looking for my home. I think I was in America, but in a city I wasn't familiar with. I found what I suspect was my home, though it wasn't even remotely familiar. I walked into a bedroom. Suddenly I was looking down at the bed. I was on it, quite dead, but once again looking very much at peace. Then a tremendously loud, ongoing sound filled my senses. I began moving into, then along, a tunnel. Not walking, more like floating. The tunnel had no obvious source of light, but it wasn't dark. Pleasant art work adorned the walls. As I got to the middle of the tunnel, the light at the end growing larger, I began to accelerate. Faster and faster. I was nearing the end when I awoke.

Something...something about the whole episode tickled my mind. The answer came during my morning run. Instead of jumping in the shower immediately after, I sat down still sweaty and stinky and gassed up the pendulum.

--Peggy, you know about my dream, yes?

--Yes.

--Well, the tunnel: *that's the damn birth canal!*

--Yes.

--When we go over, we're not dying – we're being born!

--Yes.

--This is true birth!

--Yes.

--And your side is true life!

--Yes.

--Oh for pete's sakes! Down here's like the womb, isn't it? The cocoon. The factory.

--Yes.

--Dying is True Birth into True Life!!

--Yes.

--And we're not brought into life by some dispassionate quack wearing a green gown and facemask in a sterile white-walled hospital theater, but with love and caring by dear friends.

--Yes.

--We've got it all back-asswards here!

--Yes.

Duhhh.

Early winter is fruit time here. The feijoas are gone, those sweet, green, egg-shaped yummys that are all over the place in April and May; now we have tamarillos, persimmon, and of course kiwifruit. Don't know how much the last named costs where you live, but here you just roll up to the local packing house, open your trunk ("boot") and fill er up. Free.

I usually eat just one meal a day, and that around 5pm. This is my huge salad. Nothing cooked, most right from my garden, just about everything organic. Summer and early autumn I load the bowl with leafy greens, but with the colder weather they don't grow nearly as fast and so I replace them with pumpkin, potatoes, and kumara (sweet potato), grated raw.

Now I find I'm having my meal around 3.30 or 4. This is because the sun goes down lots earlier and my body needs more heat. I want to eat raw as late into the colder season as possible. As we approach winter solstice, I begin making soups. This is an art I thrive on. Man, there's nothing don't go into my soups. (Except dead animal, of course.) Ain't nailed to the floor, in you go. Soup, salad and fresh fruit. *Mecheiehdik!*

A thing I initially found curious about Peggy's present place of residence was not so much that there's no need to eat, but rather no desire. And yet, when I've done fasts, the longest being 28 days but most around five to seven, after the second or third day the desire to eat not only fades, but the very idea becomes repulsive. I've met a few people who claimed to be breatharians.

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Lived on *prana*. The energy in air. No food whatsoever. Well, if you can have mindsex, why not mindsalad?

It came to me, once again, while I was running. So many of my *ahas* do. Jogging the bod seems to jog the brain.

--I think I've finally figured out the determining factor for our ratings down here. Ready?

--*Yes*.

--Compassion.

--*Yes*.

--Which you say is different from love.

--*Yes*.

--Is compassion, then, sort of true love – that is, heart love – but instead of its arising only in the case of another specific being, it's something you've always got?

--*Yes*.

--So, is that it then?

--*No*.

--There's more to it than that.

--*Yes*.

--You just can't have it, you've got to apply it?

--*Yes*.

--With intelligence and sensitivity.

--*Yes*.

--Be *effective*.

--*Yes*.

--So, really, smarts do count.

--*Yes*.

--But on its own, being a genius doesn't count for much.

--*Yes*. (It doesn't)

--Okay, so let's see if I have this straight. No matter what our rating here,

whether you're a 1 or 10, when you get Up There you get thoroughly scrubbed of your muck over a period of your time.

--Yes.

--Then...do we all come back here with the same level of compassion?

--Yes.

--Ten out of ten?

--Yes.

--Doesn't depend on whom you've been before, or what genes you're now carrying.

--Yes. (It doesn't)

--Is it mostly environment, then, that knocks us back?

--Yes.

--Like sliding down a compassion pole.

--Yes.

--So people like Dubya and his cast of cold-hearts, they've slid right to the bottom.

--Yes.

--So my number, whatever it is, is my level of compassion.

--Yes.

--Look, babe. I mean, you know me. Love animals, kids, nature. Handful of adults. That's it. Mainly, I have no love and no time for the vast majority of human bigs. So will this mess up my rating?

--No.

--Oh. I still might have a decent number even though I'm an intolerant old curmudgeon.

--Yes.

--Is this because of all the Alpha classes I've taught over the years? And the fact I didn't charge?

--No.

--I would be whatever it is I am even without having taught Alpha?

--No.

--Ahh c'mon, make up your —. Oh. Do you mean I might not be, say, a 6 if I hadn't taught Alpha, but close. A 5, say.

--Yes.

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--Nah, sorry. Still don't buy. Have I known any 10s? Known personally?

--Yes.

--Who – Arthur?

--No.

--Well, I've met the Dalai. I suppose he's a 10.

--No.

--No? A 9 then?

--Yes.

--So who's a 10? Pat?

--Yes.

--Ah, that dear person. And she's a 10 Up There as well?

--Yes.

--Tell her I'm not quite *grasping* yet, but I'm working on it.

Compassion, n. a feeling of deep sympathy for another's suffering or misfortune.

Wow, did I have questions about this one. For example, one thinks compassion, one automatically thinks Mother Teresa, right? Except according to my dear, dead authority on the subject, Mother Teresa scored an 8 while she was down here.

--Is this because Mother Teresa did very little to *prevent* suffering? Only to alleviate it? Like, although she had no problem touching the leprous untouchables, staunch Catholic that she was she steadfastly refused to even consider promoting birth control amongst them?

--Yes.

--Obviously, you guys and us guys have different definitions and rating systems.

--Yes.

--Do you have national compassion ratings? Some countries just have it together more than others?

--Yes.

--Really? Sort of like a world cup of compassion?

--Yes.

--Mind if I go for some ratings?

--No.

Spent quite a bit of time on this one. Felt like a panel of judges was holding up cards bearing numbers, like Olympic skating competitions.

The top country in the world, scoring an 8, was little Costa Rica. New Zealand, interestingly, came in second with a 7. I suppose because I spend so much time here, and can see it not all shining and sparkly as a tourist might but with its zits and warts evident, I had some problem digesting this. Guatemala was a 6. These three were the only countries coming in on the high half of the scale.

According to Peggy, 5s were ascribed to Australia, Laos, Belize and the Maldives. It was apparent small countries stood a better shot at the compassion medals than the big guys.

America got a 2, one below Britain and same as China, Germany and Japan. World's worst? Bit of a shocker, this: France, scoring a 1 and proving that romance and compassion definitely weren't the same.

--Are these ratings just of the people who live in these countries?

--No.

--More to do with the energy of the land?

--No.

--Both?

--Yes.

--Anything else? Other components?

--No.

--Does the land affect the people?

--Yes.

--Okay, let's take New Zealand. Back in the late '70s I was hanging out at a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery in Nepal, right. And I overheard Lama Yeshi, supposedly a very high dude, say that New Zealand was going to be a spiritual refuge for the planet in the future. He'd never been here, probably couldn't even find it on a map, but those guys are like you lot: they know stuff. Anyway, was he referring to the land?

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--Yes. (NZ's *land* is rated an 8 – highest in the world.)

I was fascinated by all this. Could've stayed with it all night. Maybe rating all the countries of the UN. Peggy, I think, found it a bit tedious. The pendulum after a while was swinging less and less, until it just...quit. Not a millimeter would it move. This, I'd begun to sense, was her way of politely getting rid of me when I was being silly.

Next day I grew a tad more serious. I wanted to know what one might do to upgrade the compassion quotient. As she had noted prior, meditation might help, as might a spiritual practice of some kind. But not necessarily. How about becoming a missionary? Social worker? Lawyer working for the indigent? No, no and no. I was way off base in my thinking.

--So it really doesn't matter what one *does*.

--Yes. (It doesn't)

--It's more attitude?

--Yes.

Well, that helped a lot.

--Look, I'll have to do some thinking, come back to it another time, okay?

--Yes.

--You said there's mindsex Up There.

--Yes.

--What about mindart?

--Yes.

--So, anything that's done here can be replicated, or even upgraded, Up There through mind?

--Yes.

--Somebody gets an idea, they just broadcast it mentally.

--Yes.

--Neat. You guys got movies?

--Yes.

--Music?

--Yes.

--Does Jerry Garcia compose any?

--Yes.

--Wow. You like?

--No.

--Oh, I forgot your tastes. Not nearly as good as John Denver, right?

--Yes. (Not)

--Unbelievable.

--No.

--Speaking of the Rocky Mountain Kid, can I ask you about the book – or books – where the god who's not god wrote three best sellers?

--Yes.

--Did the dude who adores Streisand and Heinlein make the whole thing up himself.

--No.

--Pity. I'd have a lot more respect for him if he had. Well, if he didn't write them, and there is no god, that would seem to leave only one obvious source.

--Yes.

--You jokers.

--Yes.

--Just a bunch of ghostwriters.

--Yes.

--May I ask why?

--Yes.

--Well, the whole premise of the books seems to be don't give your power away, whether to god, to religious institutions, whatever. And if you have, take it back. True?

--Yes.

--Well hell. John Lennon said it a lot better, and a lot briefer. (I break into song:) ...*don't believe in Zimmerman...don't believe in Beatles...just believe in...*

--No.

--Anyway, you guys thought the books would help the world gain necessary compassion?

--Yes.

--And you reckoned that if it came from god you wouldn't scare off the churchies?

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--Yes.

--And it worked, right?

--No.

--Of course not. You may be able to arouse the truly dead, but not the dead of brain. On this same topic, you know how I feel about September 11.

--Yes.

--That, overlooking the horror of the events, the whole thing was a major wake-up call.

--Yes.

--You folks didn't, um, have a hand in it, did you?

--No.

--But surely you knew it was coming.

--Yes.

--Did nothing to stop it, as is your way.

--Yes. (Did nothing)

--I would venture that not only hasn't it awakened people, it's put them further asleep – with fear.

--Yes.

--They've given even more power away – and to pretty awful people.

--Yes.

--And despite the fact that you non-bods don't give a hoot about us who got bods, for some reason it's important to you that we wake up down here.

--Yes.

--And gain compassion.

--Yes.

--This wouldn't have anything to do with your wanting me to write a book about our dialogues, does it now?

--No.

--No? Oop, my fault. Let me rephrase that. You want me to write a book on our dialogues because you feel god's efforts may have made for nice reading but didn't quite pull off the hoped-for job.

--Yes. (They haven't)

--Nor September 11.

--Yes.

--Excuse me, my darling, you think I'm some sort of geriatric Flash Gordon? Me and my Captain Midnight decoder ring gonna save the world from itself?

--*Yes.*

--Bull. Shit.

--*No.*

--You know what happened to the last Jewboy tried on this act?

--*Yes.*

--And he was a 10!

--*Yes.*

This was a bit much. Even if Peggy were not truly Peggy, there was no Up There, and this whole deal came, as often I figured it might, out of my own delusional mind, hadn't I given up this hero-saving-gorgeous-damsels number when I was a teenager half a century ago?

I wanted to digest the compassion question more, not think about writing another book (and thus positioning myself to incur yet more rejection), just engage in the normal safe, mundane affairs which keep the general populace occupied: Sports. Entertainment. Politics. Especially politics. The utterly banal and ridiculous.

The opportunity presents itself when a murder visits the town to which my beach is a burb. A Maori gang tiff goes too far, and a 20 year old is stabbed to death. Everyone's in an uproar.

I write a letter to the local paper.

I talk about Carl (Poppy) Sharp, a Camden, New Jersey street thug who one day went to hear a nationally known black radical named Rap Brown, making a guest appearance in town.

In my letter I quote Poppy as saying: "I had just put in a hard day's work – stealing and stripping a car – and went over to catch this radical dude. I thought, let's hear what this fool has to say. An hour later I was converted. That man turned my whole life around in one hour! I stopped stealing, stopped

fighting, stopped dealing dope, and began to work for my people.”

Which was when Sharp became a real troublemaker. He led street marches, sit-ins and frequent visits to city hall and the welfare offices. Shortly after, he was set up on a heroin charge. It was my investigative article for Philadelphia Magazine which eventually got him set free – following the daily print media’s having already convicted him as a societal menace.

We became friends. Poppy showed me the inner workings of the Camden ghetto. I met the top dealers, gamblers, loan sharks, enforcers, all of whom had utmost respect for Sharp.

“He’s doing what we should all be doing,” a bear of a man named Brownie told me. “We’re all behind him one hundred percent.” I witnessed Brownie stuff a roll of bills into Sharp’s pocket.

I write this for two purposes. First as a message to Maori gang members to consider emulating Sharp’s work. And second to open their eyes to a much broader picture.

“Brothers and sisters,” I say in my letter, “forgive me but I must tell you this: you are a disgrace – to your families, your people, your ancestors and to the state of Aotearoa (the Maori name for NZ). Not because of your silly rivalries, your rumbles. Boys will be boys, mindless and at times ruthless, wherever. Too much testosterone, too much bad food. No, you are a disgrace because you are so self-serving, involved in your own petty disputes, that you fail to see what Corporate America is doing to this wonderful, beautiful land – your land, your people’s land. Corporate America has brought to this country the ugliest, deadliest byproduct of its greed yet devised. It’s called genetic engineering, and aren’t our politicians and media welcoming it with open arms (and pockets)! Just think of the power you and your friends might exert if you were to put aside your animosities, join hands and, like Poppy Sharp did so effectively for his people in New Jersey, descend on Parliament demanding an end to the diabolical folly called GE!”

I end the letter:

“Last week, a most delightful irony took place in this country. Days apart, two major world figures appeared here to speak: Slick Willy Clinton spoke about business to a crowd of greedies at \$25,000 a head. The Dalai Lama spoke about compassion to the people for free.

“And guess which one received – by far – the greater play in the media?”

Do I hope to actually change anything with such a letter? No, of course not. Still, the need is there to do something. And who can say for certain that a Maori Poppy Sharp *doesn't* exist in NZ?

The paper runs my letter. Oh yes it does. Of course, it cuts out all mention of Corporate America, politicians and media. And the bit about Clinton and the Dalai. And most of what I have to say about Poppy Sharp. What they do use is the part about Sharp's being a car thief and chop-shop artist. However, since they neglect to use quote marks or give any sign the comment is attributed to Sharp, it appears that one Barry Rosenberg, writer of letter, is in fact stating that it was *he* who'd put in a hard day's work stealing and stripping a car!

And thus is aborted my short-lived career as a political analyst. I am far better suited to engaging in dialogues with the dead.

Compassion.

It's a big thing with the Buddhists. Who are the current flavor of the decade for the hipper seekers. But long ago I made a discovery about the Budes. Broken down into component parts, you have the Buddha (whom Peggy says was a 10). From his teachings sprung Buddhism, a pretty neat philosophy. Which attracted followers, called Buddhists, who made of the philosophy a religion. The three elements are not to be confused.

You do know that the Buddha was the first backpacker. Sure. Young Siddhartha Gautama left the comforts of home – loving family, brilliant tutors, security – because he was bored out of his Brahmin brain. Hit the road to discover what life was about beyond the ranch. And it appears he did just that.

He sat under a bodhi tree one day and got instantly and thoroughly zonked. One moment just a rich kid with a rucksack, the next – *zap!* – he's Sidd the Bude: total enlightenment.

Some years later I, too, abandoned the comforts of home – unemployment check, sofa, TV – to cut a similar path of discovery. Did I succeed? No question.

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I discovered bed bugs in Afghanistan, blocked-up crappers in India, apathetic guesthouse staff, surly visa officials and intestinal parasites everywhere. Many a time did I hear myself uttering Sidd's legendary lament: All life is suffering!

But it wasn't always like that, and for this I had the Bude himself to thank. For by the time I first hit Asia there existed numerous temples and wats on the backpacker circuit. These were laid-back oases where you could hang out for a week or six, do some meditation, scoff down primo veg food (though the Budes themselves ate dead animals; however, they always had Hindus or Muslims slaughter the wee beasties so they incurred no bad karma), and listen to some wise bald bods called bhikkus and venerables, lamas and rinpoches, talk up the Bude's choicest words. All on the cheap.

Mainly, those Westerners taking advantage were humorless young Germans riddled with guilt over their fathers' sins, and hashed-out Yanks hopping like fleas along the dharma trail before returning home to the burbs and taking over the family discount warehouse biz. Over the years, monastery attendance for Westerners has spread like a plague of cane toads, only what once was a retreat for alternative roadies has become a quest for instant nirvana by the dot-com set.

For sure I have no quarrel with what people choose to believe and follow...in their own backyard. See, religions are natural outgrowths of their environments. Hinduism, with its mind-blowing sights, sounds and scents, is ideal for an explosive culture like India's. Christianity, the men in black, suitably fits the colorless stolidity of Europeans. It's when religions leak out of their home turfs and take to the highway, or begin to attract wide-eyed trendies, that confusion sets in. I don't believe it possible, except in the rarest of cases, that one can switch spiritual horses midstream. You can learn the trappings, the terminology and buzz words, right. But the essence, the core – you have to grow up with that. A white scarf draped round your neck by some high monk does not a Buddhist make.

My own take on Sidd the Bude? Sharpest cat ever. More important, I reckon, was his scoring of heart over head. The Bude's main song, first, last and always, was – you got it – compassion.

A brief dialogue with a 55 year old New York woman in Bangkok not

long ago:

SHE: In the '60s I dropped acid to open my mind. The '70s I did est, Lifespring and Rolfing. The '80s it was feminism, '90s intensive therapy. Now I'm a practicing Buddhist.

ME: So you're happy?

SHE: Of course not, dammit!

Compassion.

The newly arrived California couple encountered in Pokhara a few years back were expounding on their ten day journey to Nepal for the purpose of doing a course with "our lama" (speaking as of a cute furry four-legged). I was just concluding a three month stay in the country, much of this working in an off-the-beaten-trek Tibetan refugee village, dormouse-poor.

"Airfare and gift to our lama cost us over \$10,000," the California man announced proudly, "but worth every penny!" His wife nodded approvingly. I thought how far ten large would go in the village: a new school, perhaps; a hospital. Compassion.

I'd been telling my new friend at the hotel in Thamel of the good old days when, in the '70s, I'd spent several weeks at the Kopan monastery outside Kathmandu. How we had slept on bare wooden boards, the temple an ancient marquee with dirt floor, no electricity or flush toilets. "Take me there!" she pleaded.

It's a lovely walk along a winding track north of the crowded, polluted city. An hour along, the only sounds cicadas, the wind whistling through the trees. Suddenly, no warning, a shiny new SUV comes roaring around the bend, headed directly for us. Horn blaring, no slow-down, no swerve. We just barely leap aside, the vehicle missing us by inches. Within, I glimpse four monks, the driver-monk sporting Ray-Bans and... was that *really* a Rolex on his wrist?

Present day Kopan? Spanking new temple, all glitter and glitz like a gigantic over-the-top wedding cake. Vehicles abound. Satellite dishes. All paid for by Western "gifts". Compassion.

I met the Canadian-born abbot of a small Theravada monastery in New Zealand ten years back. Nice enough chap, amiable and lovely sense of humor. Ironically, the person who'd first turned him on to the Eightfold Path many years before was none other than one of my dearest friends, a German-born

monk whom I call, simply, “The Monk”. (He calls me “Professor”.)

I wondered why his monastery had been built just outside Wellington, and not Auckland, the main center of the country. The monk said he had been sent to NZ by his teacher in Thailand specifically to turn on New Zealanders. However, the financing for his monastery had been supplied by NZ-based Asians, most of whom lived in Auckland. Because he didn’t want Asians overrunning the monastery they had paid for, and perhaps scaring off timid white New Zealanders, to whom he had been sent to turn on, he had the monastery built far enough away from Auckland that the Asians would not readily show up there. (The lowest seeded monk was dispatched to Auckland for weddings, funerals and major Bude festivals.)

I attended a ten day silent retreat conducted by the Canadian monk at a center on the Coromandel peninsula. The retreat was a combination of both sitting meditation and walking meditation. Plus informal discussions. For my tastes the retreat was too loose; people began whispering to one another around the fourth day, and no one made any effort to shush them. (Well, I did.)

During lunch on day six I was taking a walk in a wooded area adjacent to the meditation hall. There I bumped into the monk, also out for a stroll. I noted how beautiful this place was, and wouldn’t it be a great venue for his mentor and mine, The Monk, to take up residence. This monk’s face turned dark. He proceeded on a litany of accusations against The Monk: his superior attitude; how he improvised on the Dhamma instead of following it to the letter; that frequently he confused young monks by advising them to go among the populace rather than remain cloistered. On and on did he rail about The Monk.

Me, I stood there flabbergasted. I really thought the monk and The Monk were buddies.

The initial accusation was the only one I felt to hold any truth. And this was, to me, due simply to The Monk’s being German. Whenever he started such crap with me I’d immediately stand rigid, place my left index finger horizontally under my nose and shoot the right arm straight out, palm flat. The Monk would howl. And apologize for what he couldn’t help being.

The Monk’s teacher had been a man known as Buddhadasa – servant of

the Buddha. His philosophy was simple: once you gain command of the teachings, apply it in the manner you think best. The Monk, being very much a people person, advised all who sought his counsel to use the dhamma in their everyday lives – their relationships, their work, their communities. Plus he encouraged them to become involved in important lay issues such as the environment. This, he felt, was the true essence of Buddhism.

The Monk and the monk. I liked, and admired, both of these men. Who was the better Bude? When in doubt, ask your pendulum.

The Monk, 9. The monk, 7.

Compassion.

Peggy was becoming a minor celebrity. As I gained the courage to tell more people about the dialogues, a number of them begged to be let in on the act. What intrigued me, really, was that not a one thought it wasn't real, or that somehow I was faking it.

Upon assembling, I said they weren't to ask silly or mindless questions. (I saved that privilege for myself, in private.) Of interest, though, they weren't concerned with juicy tidbits ("Who cares if Jim Morrison's composing music Up There? I can't listen to it!") or their personal futures ("I wanted that, I'd get my tarot cards read.")

Heads converged like a football huddle or rugby scrum, watching the coin's every movement.

"Ask her if she ever gets lonely," someone suggested.

--Yes.

--For somebody in particular?

--Yes.

--One of her kids?

--No.

--For Barry?

--Yes.

--Is Barry your soulmate?

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--Yes.

“Aw yo, just wait a minute here!”

“Shut up and concentrate on the pendulum!”

--Is he truly your soulmate?

--Yes.

--You’ve been together before?

--Yes.

--Many times?

--Yes.

--As lovers?

--Yes.

“*Vey iz mir!*”

“Quiet!”

--And other combinations as well?

--Yes.

--So the concept of soulmate is real, then?

--Yes.

--Can a person have more than one?

--No.

--And Barry’s yours.

--Yes.

--Did they – whoever they are – give you permission to dialogue with Barry *because* he’s your soulmate?

--Yes.

--They wouldn’t have otherwise.

--Yes. (They wouldn’t)

“Change the subject, all right?”

“Peggy’s told you she’s progressed from 2 to a 5. Ask her if it’s possible to *lose* points.”

--Yes.

--Can you do something *bad* Up There?

--No.

--How about making contact with someone down here without authorization? Would that drop your rating?

--Yes.

--Does this happen?

--Yes.

--A lot?

--No.

--Barry's told us this happens mostly by non-graduates for purposes of revenge.

--Yes.

--But could it also happen for purposes of compassion?

--Yes.

--And still points are lost.

--Yes.

--They're really strict about contact between us, eh?

--Yes.

--Can a 10 lose points?

--Yes.

--Has it happened?

--Yes.

The discussion following this group grope was animated. Everybody, it seemed, now had their own pendulums, but none had been able to break through the ceiling of their own selves. If my ego felt good about that, my self-preservation mechanism looked at it another way: I did not, absolutely and positively did NOT, wish to become another damn channeler. "Can you ask Peggy where my Fred hides the letters sent him by his mistress?" HELP!

So I disbanded the group following that one session. Truth was, I enjoyed our one-to-ones. Selfishly, I wanted Peggy for myself.

--Momma, we're really soulmates?

--Yes.

--You knew this back in Philly?

--Yes.

--But – what? You were afraid if you told me I'd just laugh?

--Yes.

--Well, you're right. I woulda.

--Yes.

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--How about you and C____? (A woman my age who was part of our Relax For Survival mob. Highly intelligent and one of the few who truly helped me. She and I were lovers for a bit. And later she went on to become a therapist in another avenue of mind work.) The two of you were like cats that didn't get along.

--Yes.

--Bad vibes in past lives?

--Yes.

--So what we call instant enmity, or on the other hand so-called "love at first sight", can be a meeting up with someone you played or fought with before.

--Yes.

--You said I'm in my final lap down here.

--Yes.

--Is the last life important?

--Yes.

--More than any other?

--Yes.

--Do I have to experience a bunch of stuff I've never gone through before?

--No.

--So you can graduate without having done it all.

--Yes.

--Your last life, then. That body. Any meaningful reason for it?

--No.

--Just sloth, eh.

--Yes.

--Elizabeth Kubler-Ross told me once that she had "help" in a very trying situation. At the time I assumed she was just being kooky. Or religious. But now I wonder: despite the ban on contact, could she have had help from Up There?

--Yes.

--So it does happen?

--Yes.

--Legally?

--Yes.

--And only in the final lap – the last earth go prior to graduation?

--Yes.

--So you guys will extend a hand to last-timers?

--Yes.

--But only if we ask. Or program.

--Yes.

--Like my requesting healing for Joe's sister.

--Yes.

--Also, when I dialogued with Lena, I asked whether she had anything to do with Ruby (my father) Up There, and she said no. I figured this was because they couldn't stand one another down here. But is it possible he's come back here?

--Yes.

--His last time?

--Yes.

--Is he doing okay.

--No.

--Oh? Can I ask where he might be?

--Yes.

--America?

--No.

--Europe?

--No.

--Is he in a Western country?

--No.

--Asia?

--No.

--(Pause) Peggy, he's not in the Middle East, is he?

--No.

--Meaning he is.

--Yes.

--Israeli?

--No.

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--Oh, shit. He's on the other side!

--Yes.

--Is he fanatical?

--Yes.

--Part of Hamas? Or some such bunch?

--Yes.

--Is he planning to do something really terrible?

--Yes.

--Suicide bomber?

--Yes.

I felt shivers all over.

--Aw, my poor daddy's gonna need a moving van to bring all his baggage over.

--Yes.

--But if he does a suicide bombing, won't he be sent back?

--Yes. (He won't)

--Ah. So even though suicide is normally a one-way ticket back to the same, or similar, setup you've escaped from, suicide bombers are considered exempt because – they're acting as soldiers or some such?

--Yes.

--What about euthanasia?

--No.

--You're joking! A dipshit suicide bomber kills a restaurant full of kids and babies. He doesn't have to go back. Somebody dying of cancer, in unbearable pain or zombied out on drugs, in sheer desperation takes an overdose...and has to!?

--Yes.

--Oh, man. I'm not all that keen on these rules you folks have, Momma.

I have another dream. Or rather, the same dream again. Get right to the tunnel opening before I wake up with a start.

--Is it right to say that earth is a shadow of your place?

--Yes.

--And that at one time you dead bods would materialize back here and play poker with us still-live ones?

--Yes.

--And the whole thing is a system just like pure math and gravity, but we're too thick to understand it.

--Yes.

--Okay. Reason I'm asking is this: you're familiar with the Balinese concept of reincarnation, right?

--Yes.

--They maintain that people always come back not only in the same caste, but in the very same family. (When my surrogate daughter Wayan was pregnant a couple years ago, a medicine man who supposedly is able to divine such things told her the baby-to-be was her grandmother.) I've often heard such tales there, but thought them quaint superstitions of a people who only recently had stepped out of the loincloth and put down the spear. As I consider it now, it seems like they're pretty close to what we've been talking about.

--Yes.

--So, the Balinese *know*?

--Yes.

--They understand the system and use it the way that suits them best?

--Yes.

--Have they simply figured it out, or have they never allowed themselves to forget the way it was in the days of open contact? Um, sorry: first part first.

--No.

--So they haven't forgotten and remain faithful to the memory.

--Yes.

--And at this time in history they have the closest ideology to the true workings of life and death on the planet?

--Yes.

--Look, is there anybody, any group or sect or whatever, that *doesn't* go through the born-die/born-die/graduate-to-permanent-Up-There-residence routine?

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--Yes.

--Oh? You mean they don't come back here at all?

--No.

--Then – what? They never graduate?

--Yes.

--Really. They just keep being recycled.

--Yes.

--They *choose* never to graduate?

--Yes.

--Whatever for? To serve down here?

--No.

--To protect their land maybe?

--No.

--All right, skip that for now. Are we talking the Balinese again?

--Yes.

--So Wayan will forever keep coming back to Bali.

--Yes.

--Because she *wants* to.

--Yes.

--I gotta have a talk with that gal. Anybody else? Groups or peoples?

--Yes.

--The Tibetan Buddhists, maybe?

--Yes.

--More?

--Yes.

--A lot more?

--No.

--A few more?

--No.

--One other?

--Yes.

--Another bunch of Budes?

--Yes.

I narrowed it down to a minor group residing in Southeast Asia, but

couldn't get which one.

--And all three, two Buddhist and the Balinese Hindus, choose never to graduate.

--Yes.

--Or perhaps they go to different Up Theres. Their own hangouts.

--No.

--You know ____, right?

--Yes.

--Well, she's a card carrying Bude, okay. And upon hearing about you, she claimed the Tibetans subscribe to the belief that there are any number of Up Theres, and suggested your place is just a sort of holding pen, that eventually you'll all move on to higher realms.

--No.

--She also says you don't really have total knowledge and so you wouldn't actually know about more elevated planes.

--No.

--But how do you know you know everything? Even the 10s. Isn't it possible your knowledge at present is in fact limited?

--Yes. (It isn't possible)

--Do you know how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?

--No.

--See? Maybe you don't know everything.

A few days later Peggy revealed she was now a 6! And, according to the arc of the coin, not at all displeased about it.

--My, my – vanity, darling!

--Yes.

--So I suppose it's all right to have some down-here type emotions Up There?

--Yes.

--Seems odd. I mean, most spiritual teachings, especially Eastern and

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esoteric, say emotions are not good for you. We should work to get rid of them and be serene all the time. But you, it's like you just won the school prize.

--Yes.

--And you can be jealous, lonely, and loaded with guilt, and still be blissed out.

--Yes.

--Like an all-day climax.

--Yes! (Emphatic)

--Damn – look at that pendulum swing!

--Yes! (Emphatic)

--That old coin looks ready to shoot off into space!

--Yes! (Emphatic)

--And this is the way we should be down here?

--Yes.

--But only if we grab us some heavy-duty compassion.

--Yes.

--I'm still confused about it.

--Yes.

--Anything you can tell me that might define it better?

--Yes.

--Spell it out?

--Yes.

--A to M inclusive?

--Yes.

--A to G?

--No.

--H, I, J?

--No.

--K?

--No.

--L?

--Yes.

--You're not going to tell me *love*, are you?

--No.

--Meaning you are. But didn't you say love and compassion aren't the same.

--No.

--Wait, wait. Too many negatives. Christ, I wish you could speak to me! The point I'm making is: love and compassion are NOT the same.

--Yes. (They're not)

--But something about love is essential here.

--Yes.

--You want to tell me how much you love me.

--No.

--Peggy! Okay. Er, how about this: what we say is love, call love, write songs of, even, hot damn, put on postage stamps! – none of this is really love.

--Yes. (It's not)

--Which is why France, with its reputation as a nation of great lovers, can be the least compassionate country on earth.

--Yes.

--So...true love is – ah, I get it now: love of self!

--Yes.

--You've got to fill the cup before it spilleth over.

--Yes.

--Terrific. So how do I get to love Barry when Barry is a worrying, angry, impatient, self-abusive stumblebum who now and then rises to the heights of a certified asshole? Mind another spelling?

--No.

--A to M inclusive?

--Yes.

--A to G?

--Yes.

--A, B, or C?

--Yes.

--A?

--Yes.

--Hell, why didn't you say so right off. A...A... Okay, here goes: to

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become compassionate, which means loving Barry, I first must *accept* Barry as he is.

--*Yes.*

--Only when I fully accept me, all of me, can I know me, and thus love me.

--*Yes.*

--The vessel filled with love, and the tap continuing to flow, compassion gushes out of me.

--*Yes.*

--Easy, eh.

--*No.*

--You betcha. But let's say I get there. Can I be compassionate and still be impatient at times?

--*Yes.*

--Intolerant?

--*Yes.*

--Rude, crude and not doin as I shood?

--*Yes.*

Achchah! Okay, I like it. I guess I've been an either-or man too long.

--*Yes.*

--And all the forces of bad have been shining the bright lights of god, religion, status, and gorgeous babes with airbrushed heinies in my face to blind me and keep me from accepting myself.

--*Yes.*

--And Pavlovian cur that I am, even when they turn off their lights I'm still walking around blinking.

--*Yes.*

--And would you say I'm one of the more clued-in bods tripping around upon planet earth?

--*Yes.*

--More, eh, insightful (if not compassionate) than the majority of my kind?

--*Yes.*

--And still you believe there's hope for us down here?

--Yes.

--Mad you are, Momma.

--No.

It was a 14 year old girl, daughter of a friend, who brought up the subject.

“Have you ever asked Peggy about parallel universes?”

I smiled. “You’ve read Philip Pullman too, have you?”

“Who’s Philip Pullman?”

Uhh, right. This was a 21st century teenager. Wait till it comes out on DVD.

“Uh, no, actually I’ve never asked her.”

“Why not?”

“I just...I dunno. Never thought of it, I suppose.”

“I bet she says there are.”

“Parallel universes.”

“Yeah.”

A few days later, having run out of imbecilic questions:

--Peggy, you’re aware of what that kid asked me.

--Yes.

--There’s no such thing as parallel universes, is there?

--No.

--Hold on. You mean there is such a thing?

--Yes.

--Parallel universes.

--Yes.

--Just like ours only not like ours.

--Yes.

--Physical worlds and solar systems and galaxies. That stuff.

--Yes.

--They show a lot of Trekkie reruns your place?

--No.

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--Roddenberry a prime producer of Up There art?

--No.

--So...in another dimension, or whatever, there's another planet earth.

--Yes.

--An earth-clone.

--Yes.

--More than one?

--Yes.

--More than ten?

--Yes.

--You're in grave danger of losing your credibility here, old girl. More than a hundred?

--Yes.

--Two hundred?

--Yes.

--A thousand?

--No. (The number we arrived at, roughly, was 250.)

--Before we go further, are there UFOs?

--No.

--None?

--Yes.

--The American military captured aliens at Roswell?

--No.

--Spacemen with six-pointed stars on their helmets indoctrinated the first Jews?

--No.

--Beings from other planets taught the Egyptians how to build the pyramids?

--No.

--Designed Stonehenge?

--No.

--Have there been any spacecraft from other worlds to ours, ever?

--No.

--Just 250 parallel worlds the same as ours.

--Yes.

--Whew, that's a relief.

Up till now, I could square with everything Peggy had told me. This was...*straaange*. I talked about it with a few friends. Separately. Not a New Age whacko among them. Down to earth folks. When I would mention parallel universes, each immediately began nodding her head.

"I've had that sense for quite some time," one said. And she was typical.

Obviously, then, it was me. Here I had thought myself liberal and lateral of thought.

--Right, then: parallel planet earths. You don't mind a few simpleminded questions on the subject.

--Yes. (She didn't)

--Do they visit us, these other-earthlings?

--No.

--They're not responsible for UFO sightings and such.

--Yes. (They're not)

--Besides being here, am I on any of these other earths?

--No.

--Or some gorgeous hunk who's my perfect twin?

--No.

--I'm the only Barry there is.

--Yes.

--Do these other planets have the same country names?

--No.

--Same boundaries?

--No.

--So it's just our basic physical world 250 times over.

--Yes.

--Each one populated by human beings?

--Yes.

--Any communication between them? Radio, email, smoke signals?

--No.

--Are any of them aware of the presence of the others?

--Yes.

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--They know but they don't communicate.
--Yes.
--Because they can't?
--Yes.
--Does each have its own Up There?
--No.
--They don't?
--Yes.
--Oho. So do they – do we all – use the same Up There?
--Yes.
--Good lord, you must have one hell of a gridlock problem!
--No.
--All right. You guys are like the nucleus around which 250 planets revolve.
All the same appearance, land masses, oceans, polar ice caps. Is that it?
--Yes.
--Is there ever an interchanging of earths come recycling time?
--No.
--Once I'm born on a particular earth I keep going back there till I graduate.
--Yes.
--No wonder there's no god. How could he handle 250 asylums like ours?
--No.
--No what? They're not asylums like ours?
--Yes.
--You're not going to tell me. You're not. There's 250 planet earths, and
249 of them are cool.
--Yes.
--Have their acts together.
--Yes.
--Have *compassion*!
--Yes.
--We're talking – what? – a trillion bods now, more, every single one
holding down a 10 rating.
--Yes.
--And guess who's the black sheep.

--Yes.
--The juvenile dee amongst the choirboys.
--Yes.
--(Breaks into song) Which one of these is not like the others... Oh, Peggy.
Not only do we have a mass inferiority complex, we are inferior!
--No.
--We're not inferior.
--Yes. (Not)
--Just doing a fantastic impersonation.
--Yes.
--And growing worse all the time.
--Yes.
--The other 249 know about us?
--Yes.
--And are pissed off big-time?
--No.
--Ah, because they're so compassionate.
--Yes.
--Nonetheless, by the sound of it, we're messing up some sort of major deal here.
--Yes.
--There's something that's supposed to happen but it requires 100 percent compassionate cooperation.
--Yes.
--Moving on to the next stage of evolution, maybe.
--Yes.
--But they can't coz the retard of the system hasn't yet learned to tie its shoes.
--Yes.
--Up to me, I'd do a Darth Vader and blow us out of the skies.
--No.
--I know, I know. That would show a lack of compassion.
--Yes.
--Peggy, I suppose all this is possible. I mean, why not. But for the moment

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it's just too damn big for me to process. So I'll see ya later, babe.

First thing I do, I try to get into the old Fiat through the *left*-hand door. Key in the lock, inside knob popped, when suddenly I look in...and there's no steering wheel! How long since I've done that one down here.

Pull out of the garage slowly, purposely craning the neck to peer down the road to my right. Nothing coming so I scoot across the white line – and just miss getting waffled by an SUV barreling along from my left. Didn't even see it. Woman driver snarls and presents me the magic finger.

Top of the hill I make a choice which of two favored cafes to frequent. The Bean has the best coffee in town; the Rendezvous has the best cakes. I choose the coffee place; I need a good strong fix this morning.

Sorry, says the owner as I walk in. Espresso machine's down.

Stop in at the computer shop to have them print off from a floppy a short story I've been playing with. (I don't have my own printer.) Penny, the woman who clerks the shop and led me by the hand like an old blind uncle all through the book I recently finished, can't figure out how to convert the hoojiss to the wakfug, and tells me to come back tomorrow when Jody the tech is in.

I go to the supermarket and walk down every single aisle trying to remember why I've come to the supermarket. I leave empty-handed and it's only when I'm in the car and halfway home I remember what it was I went to the supermarket for.

I carefully pull into the garage without taking off a fender, walk around the house calling for Timothy. Damn cat is nowhere. I all but step on him, sitting there on the doorstep peering up at me, a cartoon question mark sliding up out of his head.

I enter the house, set down my bag, put on some Aaron Neville and light a fire. I never have a fire during the day and it's barely noon and I light a fire. Half an hour later I feel like a human being, but only just.

Compassion I can understand. Talking to Peggy – hell, talking to my *mother* – via a pendulum I can understand. Death that's really life I can understand. A

natural order or system that we're either wholly ignoring or trying our best to synthetically screw up I can understand. That planet earth is going down the gurgler and needs to be yanked up by its neck-scruff I can surely understand. Two hundred and fifty earths, all but one of which are compassion-supreme and waiting, waiting, ever so patiently, for the sick-minded nasty bit of pus that's us to stand up and shout, six billion strong, to our power-mad controllers: Hell No I Won't Go!!! That, I can't understand for the life of me. And yet, everybody I talk to about it, from a 14 year old girl to a 78 year old great-grandmother, thinks it's the most logical thing they've ever heard.

A national election has been called here. (I love the way in the parliamentary system the in-mob can juke and jive and call an election whenever they feel the winds are blowing their way.) I wonder if the pollsters would mind adding one more to the scores of moronic questions they're asking of that special mysterious slice of humanity they poll: "...and which party has the best chance of moving *our* planet earth into compassionate harmony with the 249 others?"

And my question to me, well I suppose it ought to be why can't I get my head around this? After all, doesn't it make sense in the goony, topsy-turvy way that's us? As a species we do just about everything wrong. We rape our mother planet for irreplaceable fuels when there are sun, wind, ocean waves and a known grid network of natural energy, with lay lines and magnetic "highways" all over the place; build enormous dams for unneeded power (all in Third World countries, of course) and either flood entire regions, forcing millions into homelessness, or create vast wastelands and deny water to those who need it most; the richest countries eat shit food and grow obese, use – literally – ten times the energy they need to, and squeeze the world's poor to such an extent that first the Chinese and now the Muslims grow so desperate they feel their only recourse is twisted, insane violence. So sure we spend zillions looking out there for signs of life when there just might be 250 other earths full of people right here, right *here*, and all we'd have to do to find out is upgrade our mindpower, and that doesn't cost a blessed farthing.

--Is there any time limit on our coming around compassion-wise?

--*No.*

--And no danger, other than reverting to a technocratic stone age, if we

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can't manage it.

--*Yes.* (No danger)

--Look, parallel universes, right?

--*Yes.*

--Are there solar systems like ours in other galaxies?

--*Yes.*

--All within these same parallels?

--*Yes.*

--So that means there's life beyond earth. Beyond earths.

--*Yes.*

--Ah so. Is the next step for our gang of 250 to, say, amalgamate with some of the other gangs?

--*Yes.*

--Are they already united, and we'd be the new guys trying to get in?

--*No.*

--But all those compassionate types are hot to get something started.

--*Yes.*

--Again this sounds like sci-fi, you know? Life imitating Lucas. But you say none of these other solar systems have ever visited us here. Not in spaceships, at any rate.

--*Yes.* (Not)

--How about by mind?

--*Yes.*

--So spaceships, UFOs, those things are anachronistic, obsolete.

--*Yes.*

--Thinking is the best way to travel.

--*Yes.*

--Are there any humans out there?

--*Yes.*

--True?

--*Yes.*

--Two arms, two legs, innie or outty genitals?

--*Yes.*

--On more than one planet?

--Yes.
--More than a hundred?
--No.
--And is each of them part of a cluster of parallels like you say we are?
--Yes.
--I bet they got compassion.
--Yes.
--All of them?
--No.
--Good, good. We are not alone.
--Yes. (We're not)
--Did we all come from the same source?
--Yes.
--But you said no alien space players ever visited us. Didn't you tell me that? Um, hang on. I'm getting a bit too excited here. Did you tell me this planet has never had space visitors?
--Yes.
--Well then how —? Ooooooh. Oh-hooooo! *We went out there!*
--Yes.
--A long long time ago?
--Yes.
--To a place far far away?
--Yes.
--Atlantis!!
--Yes.
--*Ding!* And all the other 249 Atlantises as well?
--No.
--Ours was the only Atlantis to space travel?
--No.
--But how can —. (Pause) Barry's either-oring again?
--Yes.
--Um-um-um-um...there weren't any other Atlantises?
--Yes. (There weren't)
--*Dong!* So our Atlantis had their act together so well they sent bruisers

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in cruisers to colonize the universe.

--*Yes.*

--While the other 249 earths were still in diapers.

--*Yes.*

--But then...somehow Atlantis screwed up.

--*Yes.*

--Did they know about the other 249 earths?

--*Yes.*

--Sure they did! They were advanced, had compassion – did they have compassion?

--*Yes.*

--They also had a pretty keen sense of adventure.

--*Yes.*

--And they – uh-oh, I think I've got it. They tried to penetrate through to the other parallels!

--*Yes.*

--Which was bucking the natural system.

--*Yes.*

--And they blew themselves to kingdom come.

--*Yes.*

--While Atlantis was head honcho here, were there any other relatively advanced civilizations on our earth? The Incas and such?

--*No.*

--Right, they were later. So when Atlantis was here, everybody else was running around with a chicken bone through the septum.

--*Yes.*

--So earth, *our* earth, which in the time of Atlantis had been the star pupil in our cluster of parallels' post-graduate class, all of a sudden we were back in kindergarten.

--*Yes.*

--All our top people had migrated and were now living on the fifth planet of the twelfth star of the glorious galaxy of *Veibersheh Shtik*.

--*Yes.*

--And couldn't care less about what'd happened to the homeland.

--Yes.

--The first case of brain drain in history.

--Yes.

--And since that time, all the other earths have advanced up to, or even beyond, what Atlantis was.

--Yes.

--So no doubt they've colonized the sundry parallel planets to the Atlantis mob's.

--Yes.

--Creating systems of clusters just like the one we're part of.

--Yes.

--Look, can't the other earths just hang a dunce cap over our north pole and shlep us along?

--Yes. (They can't)

--Has to be a hundred percent.

--Yes.

--Is it like ---? Okay, this may be a bit lame, but here goes. I read once that LSD didn't work in its early usage. But soon as the first nuke was exploded, LSD worked fine. Some call it synchronicity. In other words, it's not man's law, or even physical law as we know it. It's some sort of universal law.

--Yes.

--It's not just a matter of filling up with fuel, checking the map and off you go.

--Yes. (It isn't)

--We *can't* breach space, not to this extent, because space is closed off to us unless – until – the entire cluster attains the topmost level of mindpower-slash-compassion.

--Yes.

--One hundred percent compassion opens the drawbridge.

--Yes.

--Can I tell you something, Peggy?

--Yes.

--You ain't got a prayer.

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A few days later I asked Peggy if she wouldn't mind a bit of trivia. Normally, soccer is a sport about which I couldn't care less. But living in New Zealand, all these British types, there's a big fuss here, even though NZ rarely is good enough to qualify. Came down to the final: Germany vs. Brazil. It's not so much that I wanted Brazil to win. But it's always a treat to see Germany eat kaka.

Before the final match I asked Peggy who was most likely to win. Germany, she said. (The probability.) I found this strange, as the odds makers were touting Brazil. Up There bookies obviously worked on a different system.

The match was played late at night, NZ time, and the following morning's paper didn't carry the result. I whipped out the pendulum.

--Germany win last night?

--No.

--Brazil then.

--Yes.

--By one goal?

--No.

--Two?

--Yes.

--2-0?

--Yes.

In truth, I was reluctant to learn the actual score. What if she was wrong, what then? I put it off till I couldn't stand it anymore. Called up the local radio station: Brazil, 2-0.

I found myself growing a bit tired of our dialogues. Not of Peggy, for sure. But of my own ignorance. Okay, there were a host of things, the parallel universe number perhaps foremost of these, I just couldn't buy. More than that, though, was the sense that no matter how hard I tried, I, me, Barry the

Dumb, could not jump, slide, or hammer my way into this system of knowing. When I'd mention it to Peggy, all I got was just relax, it's already happening. Sure, sure. I mean, even Castaneda caught on after four or five books.

Once following a bunch of Q's and A's that were no more than drivel, I asked if there were anything else before I put the string down.

--*Yes.*

--Yeah? A message?

--*Yes.*

--About the book?

--*No.*

--About me?

--*Yes.*

--Okay, spell it out?

--*Yes.*

--A to M?

--*Yes.*

--A to G?

--*Yes.*

--A to D?

--*No.*

--E or F?

--*No.*

--G, huh.

--*Yes.*

--Second letter a vowel?

--*No.*

--L?

--*Yes.*

--Third letter A, E or I?

--*No.*

--O?

--*Yes.*

So I had GLO. After that it got a bit fuzzy. Glob? Glop? Gloop? I got out the dictionary, ran through the glo's.

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--Glory?

--Yes.

--Glory. Glory what? Glory glory hallelujah?

--No.

--Are you telling me this is what you have Up There? Glory?

--Yes.

--“Resplendent beauty or magnificence?” (I read)

--Yes! (Emphatic)

--“A state of absolute happiness...to be in one’s glory?”

--Yes! (Emphatic)

--“The splendor and bliss of heaven?”

--Yes!! (Emphatic)

--Oh, terrific. And I’m sitting down here up to my mustache in —.

Wait. You’re saying that’s what’s ahead for me Up There?

--Yes.

--But I should *grasp* so that I find *glory* while I’m still here.

--Yes.

--Oh Peggy m’darlin! What I wouldn’t do, what I surely wouldn’t do to find the path to that wonderful place!

But as June became July – mid-winter now – I became more and more grumpy. Election time was coming. And the ugly that was being slung around by the candidates in this, the second highest compassion country in the world, was diabolical.

Despite myself, I got involved in a very minor way. I placed huge billboards on my garage doors. One said, simply: PLEEZ VOTE GE-FREE. Another was a giant picture of Uncle Sam, the caption reading I WANT YOU...TO BE GE-FREE. They attracted attention (the local paper did a story, and not bad at that, quoting me as urging NZers to keep Corporate America out of this lovely land), people commented and said pleasant, positive things. But this is New Zealand: they would.

Came the election and the lone party calling for a GE moratorium, the Greens, drew a measly six percent of the total vote, running behind not only the two main parties, Labour and National, but as well the Racist Party (fronted by a two-faced, forked-tongue slimeball), the Bible-Bashing Party (fronted

by a Family Values/Right-To-Life grinner), and the So-Far-Right-As-To-Be-Falling-Off-The-Edge-Of-The-Earth Party.

Even so, the leading Labour Party was kept from a majority, meaning the Greens held the balance of power. Except they didn't hold a balance of power because the PM, herself one of the highest compassion raters of all the world heads of state (source: Peggy), announced that should the Greens try to keep her from going ahead with implementing full-scale genetic engineering in the country, she'd join forces with the Super-Christians to get her way. And Labour's the good guys, right? As Michael Moore wrote in *Stupid White Men*: "Bill Clinton was the best Republican President we ever had!"

If I'd been sinking before the election, I now felt drained, wholly gloryless. And my dialogues with Peggy were digressing from drivel to blather. I mean, really – asking her about my *cholesterol* count! On her part, Peggy had taken to playing with me, toying, taking the piss, as they say down this way.

--I'm serious here!

--Yes.

--But you're not!

--Yes. (She's not)

--Look (I'd reason), I'm still down here, right?

--Yes.

--You may remember what it's like to be in these strange bodies and having to deal with human emotions.

--Yes.

--So can't you cut me a break?

--Yes. (She can't)

--You're gonna continue lying to me?

--Yes.

Once following a string of her obvious fibs I wondered:

--What is it with you: you consider me some sort of joke?

--Yes.

--Wonderful. All you high and mighty Up Thereans?

--Yes.

--A joke.

--Yes.

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--The hell with all of you.

--No.

Even my late afternoon dune-sit, peacefully taking in the magnificent colors of sea and sky, was now denied me. Every sundown, some mindless dork would pull up in a giant SUV, boom box blaring, then proceed to do figure-eights on the surf in a whiny, moronic jet ski.

Okay. Okay. I get the message. It's obviously time to do what I do best. Pack the sack and head out on the road.

--Momma, I'm gonna take you with me, okay?

--No.

--No?

--Yes.

--Oh. You mean, I can only talk to you from here?

--No.

--It's possible to talk to you when I'm out of the country, then.

--Yes.

--Oh. So...you don't want me to take you with?

--No. (She does)

--Here we go again: riddles. All right, all right. You want me to take you, I am able to talk to you while I'm on the road, but there's a reason why I shouldn't.

--Yes.

--They don't approve!

--Yes. (They don't)

--The ones who make up all the rules I love so much.

--Yes.

--Well, you know what, Momma?

--Yes.

--Indeed, yes. They understand Yiddish, you think?

--Yes.

--You'll please give them this message for me: *kush mich in tuches!*

--Yes.

I placed the coin bearing the likeness of a very young Queen Liz into a tiny plastic ziplock bag. I had recently bought a new daypack with untold

compartments, one of which was probably meant for a knife or the tiniest of flashlights: just right for a pendulum. Stuffed it down, turned the bag upside down and shook. The ziplocked coin did not move. Shook the daypack a second time, harder. The plastic bag, as I jammed my finger down, was nestled securely. I was ready.

“I own eye Myanma eeul.”

“What?”

“Oh ooh, ee?”

“Pardon?”

The speaker, if you could call him that, was a young man working at my hotel in Bagan, a rambling town of eye-popping beauty in the country they used to call Burma. Like a lot of Myanmar people in the tourist trade, this chap had a working knowledge of English, except his pronunciation was near to incomprehensible. What made it totally incomprehensible was that he was talking through a mouth full of blood-red betel leaf juice. Males, females, shopkeepers, monks, police, hill tribe women with baskets of firewood hanging from their heads – half the population of the country walked around looking like they’d just kissed a Randy Johnson fastball.

Automatically I leaned in closer in attempt to decipher his spiel. Mistake. The next inarticulate sentence produced a fine spray of maroon on my t-shirt.

What he was saying, this young man whose name was spelled Kyaw Kyaw and pronounced Jo-Jo (Myanmar names tend to read and sound like 1940s bebop), as I finally, somehow, pieced together, was that he was not terribly fond of his fellow Burmese. Which, I’d found in the brief time I had already been in the country, was not unusual.

Myanmar is a concoction of races, ethnics, tribes, languages, dialects, face-types, body-types and dress-types, loosely – very loosely – held together by the iron fist of a crafty, wholly corrupt and paranoiac gang of criminals

in olive green uniforms.

But mostly the populace was content to just get on with it, genuinely friendly (to foreigners, if not overly towards one another), and seemingly unbothered by the on-again, off-again political standoff between the generals and the world's best known living martyr since Nelson Mandela got out of jail.

In but a couple of weeks I had come to know the place as a land of ironies and oddities: resourcefully abundant yet dirt poor; unparalleled scenic magnificence and Orwellian citified ugly; superior creative ingenuity yet astoundingly set in their ways. But what might you expect in a country where the men all wore skirts (called *lungyis*) and women smoked cigars?

It is a land so absolutely corrupt there exists here a basic honesty. I mean, in Myanmar there was no such thing as under the table: everything was known, by everybody, soon as it happened. No Enron scandals possible here, no hubbub over the top dog getting his bone hoovered by a lowly office tart. Shit happens, shit always happens, and it's expected to. Like international trade. Ninety-nine percent was with China. The Burmese exported valuable mined gems and irreplaceable teakwood to its giant neighbor and received in return armaments to keep the citizenry oppressed and cheap t-shirts with cute cartoon animals. Yeah, so?

The first taste of something's-not-quite-kosher occurred right in the airport in Yangon (what used to be called Rangoon) following the hour flight from Bangkok. I passed through immigration in relatively decent time, then was directed to a kiosk behind which, in typical Third World fashion, half a dozen people in official looking uniforms were standing where one, possibly two, could do the job. This was the arm-twisted-behind-your-back department. Only instead of physical, fiscal violence was meted out.

I was informed I had to buy \$200 worth of "Federal Exchange Currency" before I was allowed out of the airport. Which was ridiculous because most everything could be paid in US dollars. I had heard about this blackmail from travelers in Bangkok. Also I had heard it sometimes was possible to bribe your way out of it.

I placed a five dollar bill in my passport, half of it sticking out.

"Uh, look, I'm only going to spend a few days here," I said very quietly

to the woman attending me. “Perhaps it’s possible I don’t have to buy any FEC.” Wink-wink.

“Okay. You give me five dollars and I’ll let you go.” Loud.

I winced. The other people inside the kiosk had to have heard. This presented her no concern whatsoever. She took the five and actually held it up to the light. Looking for a secret message, perhaps. None of the others paid her the slightest attention. Either they split bribes six ways or this was her good karma day and they all knew it.

I stepped out of the airport and suddenly became a most popular fellow. Taxi drivers and porters surrounded me. I inquired. They replied. I bargained. Followed a chap to his cab, got in. And we took off into traffic. Immediate reaction: omigod, he’s driving on the wrong side of the road! Actually, he was driving on the *right* side, which they do in some countries, except his steering wheel was also on the right side.

Later, I learned. For a period of some 50 years, not long after the British bailed out, Myanmar was run by a despot named Ne Win, who was just a trifle, uh, call it quirky. The man was a great believer in the wisdom of the stars. And when his favored astrologer predicted a serious traffic mishap for his patron, and Ne Win ascertained it would be on the left side of the road, which is where everyone then drove, he did what you or I or any sensible soul would have done. He declared that traffic immediately and forevermore be shifted to the opposite side. Of course, this made it a bit awkward for public transport, buses now disgorging people into the middle of vehicular mayhem. No problem, said Ne Win, and he ordered all the buses in Myanmar to seal up their left-side doors and cut out entrance/exit portals on the right. Did it work? You bet. Ne Win never had the foreseen accident, and lived to be 90.

And when his astrologer told him 9 was his lucky number, Ne Win didn’t just sit there and say, Hey, groovy. He changed the denomination of Myanmar’s currency, so that former 50 kyat (pronounced “chat”) bills became 45, and 100s, 90. Truly, this was a dude who got things done.

Since his death, the country’s bosses did relax things a bit. The 45 and 90 kyats were abandoned (although some yet remained and were still legal tender) and even if Myanmar was the only country between the Mekong

and Afghanistan to drive right side, they did expand the seven-day max stay for foreigners – Ne Win didn't want his people's minds corrupted by turistas – to 28. (In fact, you could stay for three months on a tourist visa, you simply had to fork over three dollars a day penalty beyond the permitted four weeks.)

At the guesthouse, I met a German woman and an Austrian guy, both in their 30s and each traveling solo. We decided to see the city together. They wanted to see the famous Shwedagon Pagoda, I wanted to just walk the streets. So we did both.

The day was sweltering. As usual, my sense of direction was pathetic, and theirs wasn't much better. So we took ancient taxis everywhere.

The pagoda was pretty impressive. Normally I am not keen on temples, monasteries, and the like, but this one was a beauty of vast proportion and magnificent detail. Smack in the middle of the city, too. Well, there may not be a god, and religions might repress rather than expand people's sense of spirituality, but together they sure did inspire some nice works of art and architecture.

The center of Yangon is a grid. We were strolling the streets, remarking to one another the surprising lack of military presence, the calm air of the people. A man approached, 50s, clean shirt, pressed trousers, polished shoes. He asked where we were from. When we reported three different countries, he wasn't the slightest bit curious. We might just as well have said Mars, Neptune and the Dog Star.

"Myanmar is a very friendly country," he then said. "You'll find the people very open to foreigners. And we are a happy people!"

We continued our walk. Ten minutes later a man in his 30s came over. He asked where we were from. He nodded, seeming to understand perfectly how three people from three different countries would be together.

"Myanmar is a very friendly country," he said. "You'll find the people very open to foreigners. And we are a happy people!"

We were on our way back to the guesthouse when we were stopped by a man in his 40s. He asked —. He said —.

"You would think," said Ziggy, the German woman, as we left the man behind, "they would at least change the speech around a bit from person to person." Agents of the regime, we learned, were one in ten of the population

throughout the country, more in the major cities.

At the guesthouse I met three Italian guys who had concluded their four week stay and were flying out following morning. Stefano was a lifeguard and student of psychology; Riccardo a newspaper seller; Andrea a cop. Together, they were hilarious relating travel yarns in their broken English.

“Hey,” Andrea then said, “we are invited to-a have dinner with this teacher. We meet him this afternoon. You want-a come with us?” The other two said yes, come. My suspicions said there was something funny in such an invitation (especially after the three proclamations of friendliness and happiness encountered earlier). But why not.

We walked, jumped in a taxi, walked some more trying to find the address they’d been given. Buildings in the central part of the city all were pre-World War II, dingy and encrusted with green mossy stains. We found what appeared to be the address, and walked up three flights of stairs. An open door brought us the sound even before we bunched outside and peered in at the sight. People. Mainly teens and 20s. Well dressed. Around 40 of them, packed into one large room. Sure – it was the teacher’s entire English class. And we were the prize pickings.

The students were ever so polite. Their English was awful. The teacher was drunk. His smiling wife was gorgeous.

The three Italians and I each were immediately surrounded by clusters of students. Who shot questions at us. We had to shout our answers over the clamor. The student closest to me smelled of onions. I would bounce my head back and forth like a sideways yo-yo, placing my ear near to him so I might hear through the noise his comments and questions, then pulling my nose away to avoid the odor. An hour of this. Then two more Westerners arrived. A young couple, American.

The teacher, growing ever drunker, announced that the American woman would now get up and dance. Remarkably, she did so. Badly. At this point, I got up and stepped out of the room onto the landing, searched around the myriad pairs of shoes for mine. I staggered back against a wall to slip them on just as Riccardo, Stefan and Andrea darted out. So did the teacher. He put his face inches from Andrea’s, his arm around the man’s shoulders. “I love you,” he said loudly, to the cop. “Know that I love you.” His gorgeous wife

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stood behind him. Smiling.

I chose to fly to Bagan. Domestic flights in Myanmar were far from cheap, but everything I had heard about long distance bus and train travel spelled spinal disaster. At the airport in Bagan, I had to hand over ten dollars just to, well, just to leave the airport.

I had no idea where the town was, but it was a sunny day, not too hot, so I chose to walk. Half an hour along a pickup truck stopped and the driver took me to “his” hotel.

My room was large, carpeted and air-conditioned with toilet and shower. Six bucks, breakfast included. For a week I was the only guest, served by a staff of a dozen. Everyone was nice, and I felt ever so relaxed.

Each morning I rented a bicycle and toured the countryside. Thousand year old temples and pagodas that, truly, put Cambodia’s heavily hyped Angkor Wat to shame.

I would climb to the top of these edifices and sit there for hours just feeling the air and staring out at a magnificent countryside dotted by scores of lovely ancient temples. A marriage of the Bude and Disney, this place.

The hassling was there, but minimal. At one place, a young man selling rather awful art works kept following me around. Finally I said to him: “Look. I’m a Buddhist. I come here to meditate, not buy paintings. Please let me talk to the Buddha in peace.”

His eyes grew large. “You are Buddhist? Please, sir. You go meditate. I make sure no one disturbs you.” Gotta know the right line.

Then one day a bunch of people arrived at my hotel. Myanmar people. Young people. Students from Mandalay University, I was told. Having just finished their exams. They weren’t anywhere near what Western, or Japanese, students can be in such situations. But following a week all to myself, they were a bit disturbing. I asked the manager to request the students be a little quieter. She shrugged. “This is a hotel,” she said ever so politely.

So I moved out. My next place was more modern, even had a TV in the room, on which I might watch either of Myanmar’s two government-run channels, if I could handle the excitement. And the expensive looking pedestal sink in the bathroom emptied only about half the basin’s water onto the floor when the plug was pulled. Five dollars a day, breakfast included.

My early morning trip to the airport a week later was done by horse and cart. Through the mist and fog. Clip clop, clip clop. Along the way I realized I was in grave danger of falling in love with a country and its people.

“Politics!” Maung Naung made a face and waved his hand dismissively. The 29 year old went on: “Western people think all we do is sit around and secretly talk about the government. The truth is, except for a handful of fanatics, we couldn’t care less about politics. Everyone I know is interested in just one thing: finding good work and improving our lifestyles.”

Maung Naung lived in the tiny town of Nyaung Shwe, in the mountainous southern Shan state. The town itself sits alongside a canal which is the runoff of Inle Lake. You travel the world for 35 years, visit scores of countries and untold beautiful and remarkable places, and the mind begins to yawn and stretch. You’re convinced you’ve seen it all, and trucking the earth with a pack slung on your back has become just another soul-numbing gig. And then you hit Inle and suddenly you’re wide awake, the juices of curiosity and wonderment and awe over the human animal’s antics flowing again.

The lake is pretty, sure. Surrounded by tropical vegetation and low range rolling mountains, the area is a postcard. But so is half of Switzerland and most of New Zealand. At Inle, what causes the brain to instantly defog are the people: what they’ve done, and what they do.

See, there are villages on the lake, a bunch of them. No, not on its shores, right there *on* the lake. On huge hunks of land they somehow, Buddha knows, sawed off from someplace else and dragged by boat into the lake and plopped them there. And you’re going to have to ask them how, but they made these globs of mother earth, no more than a yard deep, *float* on the surface. Whereupon they built houses and pagodas on poles, and on the floating bits, giant finger-strips of the richest vegetable gardens I’ve ever seen. Then, so the whole lot wouldn’t knock into one another or blow to one end in a force ten, they jammed thousands of bamboo poles through the soil and down into the lake floor, anchoring them to their selected spots.

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Wait, it gets better. These people, the Inle villagers, they didn't walk anywhere. How could they, there's no land. You wanted to go drop in on old Moe Moe down the channel? Jump in the family canoe, of course. And just when you're thinking, right, right, I've got the handle on all this now, wrap your cerebellum around what the dude did in that canoe. These folks, man, woman and child (some barely post-crawl stage) didn't row with their hands, oh no. They stood on a lip at the rear of the canoe and wrapped a calf (usually the right calf; well, at least the did something conventional) around a long paddle, tucked it behind the ankle, and *leg* rowed. Made you want to dig up Darwin and cry, "Talk!"

These villagers were not poor. Some were what you might even call well-to-do. (Evidenced by those satellite dishes mounted prominently on the roofs. Whether or not the village had electricity.)

The crops that grew on those long finger-strips of staked-down floating dirt were what did it. Tomatoes, mostly. Inle Lake supplied all of Myanmar. Every morning before the sun peeked over the eastern ranges, long narrow boats – crafted totally by hand in one of the villages – laden with overflowing baskets and powered by noisy Chinese motors, raced up the canal to Nyaung Shwe's distribution depots.

And the town itself: at 2900 feet above sea level, nice year-round climate. Sleepy, gentle, pleasant. Cows meandering through the narrow, tree-lined streets (some paved), the occasional water buff with grubby kid riding bareback. Winsome maidens bathing by the canal. Large morning market featuring cheroot-puffing Paoh hill tribe women in black dress and colorful towels wrapped round the head. Got the picture? Half-century behind, more, and no hurry to catch up.

"Home" for me was an old four-room hotel, my own quarters a large room with queen size bed under a mosquito net, toilet and shower attached. And best of all, a large balcony overlooking the canal. Three dollars a day, including breakfast. The only possible drawback was not a problem for me: the noisy boats that tooted up and down the canal, beginning at 6am.

I would spend hours on that balcony throughout the day. Morning especially, watching the people huddled under umbrellas against the wind and spray as the boats powered them and their wares the last few hundred

yards to the depot; watching the people across the way bathe in the canal, men and women separate, but everyone taking 20-30 minutes to bucket soak, lather, bucket rinse, then repeat the process a couple times more. Then back in the late afternoon, work finished, their bathing a backdrop for the boats going the other way.

During the day I walked. And cycled. And met people. And talked. One day I did the inevitable tourist trip: took a powerboat out onto the lake.

The boat's pilot was a handsome young man named Su Su. I let him do the standard tourist riff for the first couple of hours, it was that fascinating. But after seeing the silk factory, the ironmonger factory, I said to the guy, "Su Su, I'm not a your standard tourist, okay? I really don't want to hit another factory."

"Monasteries?"

I made a face. "I just came from Bagan. I'm templed-out."

He appeared uncertain. "I don't know..." Thought. "How about coming to my home in my village?"

"You don't mind? Aw, yeah!"

We actually went to his family home, he, his wife and two sons now living separate. The family dwelling was a lovely two story teak building. No furniture downstairs – this was the work area. His aunt, a woman perhaps my age, and two teenage girl cousins sat on the floor hand rolling cigars. They rolled tobacco around a metal cylinder, wrapped leaf around it, yanked out the cylinder, stuffed in a filter made of corn husk and old newspaper, glued the leaf with vegetable-based paste, sealed one end and snipped off the other: voila, a cheroot. Thirty seconds. Each of the women rolled 800-1000 a day. At the shops they sold two for a penny

SuSu and I each smoked a cigar. It was surprisingly mild. (As well, my initiation into Burmese cheroot junkiedom.) And were offered cup after cup of Chinese tea.

I asked Su Su if the women were happy in their work. He translated my question, and for the first time expression appeared on the females' faces. Laughter. Disbelief. Is this monkey for real?

He took me upstairs. A TV, tons of Buddhistic *chatchkas*, photos of ancestors, china closet, chest of drawers, a number of mattresses on the floor

behind a now-open curtain. Everything absolutely spotless. After watching from my balcony the people bathing so meticulously, I had expected nothing less.

We lay down on plaited bamboo mats and had us a brief midday snooze. Then SuSu disappeared for a few minutes and came back with two teenage boys. He nodded for me to follow as they headed back out, then pointed to a canoe. I got in and the lads expertly steered the boat out of the tight channel and into a series of narrow watery passages between the long strips of floating gardens. Along the way I reached out and picked a tomato, a green pepper. The guys thought it hilarious I would munch on a pepper, raw.

I saw nobody, but at one point the lad leg-rowing from the back gave a whistle. Suddenly a head popped up from the tomato patch we were navigating past. Another teenage male. He took one look at the old whitey with his bald head and gray beard and let out a cackle. A bit of banter between the tomato patch worker and the paddlers. I'd be the topic of conversation in that quiet village for some time.

SuSu and I got back to the main canal in time for sunset. Actually, he turned off the canal just before we hit Nyaung Shwe, killed the motor and paddled silently into a network of channels that wove through a cluster of villages. One of the channels opened onto a huge pond filled with red and pink and white lotus flowers, and it was here I caught the sun's final rays from the hills to our west. Majestic.

This, then, is where Maung Naung grew up, one of the poorest kids in town.

"Often we didn't have enough to eat," he told me from his tiny restaurant called the Inle Pancake Kingdom. Seating for a dozen and pancakes to die for. "Or sometimes, just enough rice for one meal or maybe two. But never three. A lot of parents wouldn't let their kids play with my sister and me, we were so poor," he laughed.

A number of lowly jobs after school and on weekends, the wages barely pocketable. (Average adult wage in the town was now a princely five dollars a month.) His grades in high school were good enough for a free ride to

university, but not to study his chosen field of engineering. So instead Maung Naung got a degree in physics, which would have meant moving to one of Myanmar's big smokes – Yangon or Mandalay – to land a job. No dice. A homeboy, this.

He again took on a range of menial work, including cleaning the town's largest monastery. It just happened that this monastery had Nyaung Shwe's very first computer. Maung Naung hadn't studied computer at college because it cost too much, but here seemed the perfect opportunity.

"Except the monks wouldn't let me touch it, not for four months. But they were keen to learn English in order to understand the software, so we worked out a deal: I would teach them English, they let me work on the computer."

He took to it, duck to water. Soon, he was their teacher in both English and computer. Still, he was no more than scratching surface, and he knew it. With the money he had saved from his various labors, the guy in 1998 built a small bamboo hut on the family patch, put in half dozen tables and hung out a sign. With tourism growing quickly, he soon had enough to buy his own second-hand computer.

"I'd ask every tourist who came in for pancakes if they knew anything about computers," he told me as I sat there scoffing down a papaya 'cake, helped along with a banana smoothie. "They were happy to teach me. Then a guy from Microsoft showed up. I traded him a free pancake and milkshake for some instruction. More Microsoft people came and I made the same deals with each of them. They not only taught me software, but how to take the PCs apart and salvage spare parts to put into units that had broken down."

He began traveling to Yangon – 18 to 24 hours by ancient bus – and buying cheap seconds, repairing them, keeping what he needed for himself and selling others...with one year service warranty. Since there is no such thing as a secret in small-town Myanmar, computer interest in Nyaung Shwe boomed, and Maung Naung soon was teaching his self-acquired skills to ever-increasing numbers of Inle's residents.

The cyber-center: basement of the family home. Concrete floor, plaited bamboo walls, newspaper-covered, beam-exposed ceiling. A Chinese print curtain hung on clothesline hid the bed he, his wife and two small sons slept.

Place had the air of a makeshift field radio op from an old war movie.

He now taught both English and computer. For the latter, he charged three dollars for a six week, six day, hour and a half per session course, then asked ten cents an hour for graduates' use of his current half dozen PC clones. But the fees were conveniently overlooked if a hopeful student couldn't afford it. The man knew what it meant to be broke. Four hundred school kids and nearly a hundred adults had gone through his courses by late 2002.

Stay in a place for a while and you get to know all sorts of things the guide books never tell you. The monasteries, as example. In Myanmar, you're a young male with no family clout, you go into one of the two reigning mafias: either military or monkhood. No question which was preferable. When you had a business, 100% free labor, food donated, no worry about clothing allowance, how could that business not make money? A few of the monasteries there in Nyaung Shwe were, relative to the civilian scene, extremely well off. Some of the best fed, strongest looking people I saw there, hell, in the entire country, were monks. And not all of them serene. Many looked brutish, covered in tattoos, not to be messed with. If this weren't enough, one monastery in town was undergoing major restoration and modernization as the beneficiary of some \$50,000 donated by an American with far more gelt than good sense.

In a few weeks in this lovely place I seemed to know everyone. For certain everyone knew me. I received invitations to dinner, and every now and then a free meal at a restaurant. What it reminded me of, Nyaung Shwe, were small towns in Thailand as they'd been pre-touristic discovery 30 years back. Same feel.

It's near the end of my stay. I go for a one-day solo trek in the hills outside town. After some hours I come to a small lake, no people, perfectly tranquil. I peel off my pack, sit on the grass. On a dirt path across the way, an antique bullock-drawn cart, huge spoke wheels, carries a family of hill tribes. I follow their movement until a clump of trees swallows them up. The only sounds now are the occasional birdsong. Peace.

Ten minutes along, four kids appear, earliest teens. I sigh and gird for the onslaught: the questions, the taunts, the peer group macho. Requests for money, pens, 'bonbons'. This is, after all, 21st century Asia.

But the kids walk past without a glance, settle ten yards away, bring out

homemade bamboo fishing poles. Light chatter amongst themselves. I wait a while, then reach into my pack, take out an unopened box of biscuits. Calling out, I toss the box to the nearest kid (it probably cost more than his parents will earn this day), motion he should share with his mates. He smiles shyly. “Sank you,” he says softly. The others chuckle at his English, turn back to fishing.

Myanmar. The age of innocence. Still.

I hate Delhi. It’s the scam capital of humanity, especially around the airport. Arrive late at night (which all flights into India seem to) and even if I have a hotel booked (which I never do), the notorious taxi hoodlums somehow work an angle to take you someplace you don’t wish to go, and relieve you of money you don’t care to part with.

This time, immediately outside the terminal, hordes of drivers smelled fresh meat and descended. As contrasted with the cabbies in Yangon, relatively gentle and polite, these characters were as sweet as soldier ants. As I stood there, besieged by shouting and swatting away hands that roughly tried to take my pack, an idea struck: why go into Delhi at all?

“How much to drive me to Pushkar?” I wondered. At once all sound and movement ceased.

“Pushkar, Baba?” one man asked, in disbelief.

I nodded my head, then remembered where I was and quickly switched to the side-to-side head wag that means yes.

“But that’s —”

“Eight hours. How much?”

An internal buzzing amongst the drivers. While this was going on, I got close enough to perform breath checks. Whoever drove me, I wanted absolute assurance his belly was filled with the three C’s (cardamom, coriander and cumin), and not the three B’s (bourbon, beer and brandy).

I finally selected a small, slim man (at \$60 for the journey). His car was an ancient once-white Ambassador. Amazingly, the tires had a tread or two. I

crawled into the back, curled up on the seat, my face pointed to the front, then turned over so my face was pushed into the backrest, which smelled of sweat, urine, garlic and whatnot, finally flipped around completely, my head the other way, daypack serving as a pillow. I knew I'd never fall asleep contorted like this and cursed my cleverness. The vehicle started up and we pulled away into the darkness, horn beeping constantly. Next thing I knew, it was light out. I raised my stiff and aching body and saw we were on the approach road into one of my favorite spots in the world.

Pushkar is a town of some 12,000 souls in the Rajasthani desert. It does not abut on another town, has no suburbs. It is surrounded by desert sand and is considered a holy place because it has the only Brahmin temple in all of India. By Hindu law, then, it is pure vegan and 100% alcohol-free.

My tiny room from last year at the Hotel Sarovar, eight feet by six, ceiling fan and window overlooking the holy lake, was unoccupied. (I'd done more than a little Alpha to make it so.) Dumping my backpack on the bed, I made for the narrow, winding streets. I could feel my chest filling with life.

People recognized me from the year before. There was "Bette" (Hindi for daughter), the beautiful crippled beggar with the magnificent smile. She was sitting on the same spot of concrete where I'd left her ten months before. "Papa!" she cried out upon spotting me. I went over, crouched down and took one of her hands in mine. I had to fight to keep back the tears.

"Baba!!" cried Prem, the slim, mustachioed man in his 30s who worked a wok on the main market street (an alley, really) and served food to the tourists at ridiculously low prices. He actually got up from his stool, came over and gave me a hug.

Then *Ram-Ram* man, a one-legged beggar who moved around on a mechanics' roller constantly calling out, "*Ram-Ram...Ram-Ram...*" The local greeting. He had a beautiful face with white beard and always wore one of those small umbrella hats to keep the sun off. Whenever he would see me, he'd stop, pick a flower from the many in the front of his roller, bless it and offer it to me. In turn, I was always good for a *chai*, the Indian milk tea. We exchanged our gifts now.

Laxmi, the short, squat incense and scented-oils maker, sitting on the floor of his tiny shop, quickly beckoned me to come sit beside him. I took off

my shoes, climbed the two steps and did so. The shop probably hadn't been cleaned since Brahma himself pissed off Mrs. Brahma by diddling the milkmaid, but the smells; ah, the smells.

Holy Shiva, I was home!

I stayed in Pushkar two months. What did I do each day? Walked miles. Had three meals at the Om Shiva Buffet (all you can eat for 50 rupees, or slightly more than a dollar). Read. Wrote in my journal. Took naps. Rented a bicycle from Hari the jeweler for four rupees an hour, rode hard out the desert road and back, calling out, "*Ram-Ram, Ji!*" to all I passed, now and again receiving the same back. And the smiling kids, running up to the road as I passed, yelling, "One rupee! School pen! Choc-o-lot!" And in between all these efforts I sat on the balcony outside my room and gazed for hours out at the lake and the 500 year old surrounding architecture.

One day I got into a scuffle. There was a ritual at the lake whereby Brahmin men performed *puja* with tourists. This is, in theory, a religious offering, a cleansing, a teaching. In reality, it was Pushkar's prime scam. An unsuspecting tourist was given a flower by a smiling man. Then asked whether he/she wanted a *puja*. Free. Oh, if the good sir or madam wishes to give a donation after...

Mostly, the *puja*-givers were older men. But this year, I noted, a few young toughs had joined the crowd. I was walking through the market square when I saw a couple of these guys hassling a young tourist, Italian he looked, or Spanish. The tourist looked befuddled, caught between wanting to get away and feeling obligated to accompany the Brahmins to the lake.

"Why don't you leave him alone," I said casually to the young Indian guys.

The taller, better built of the pair gave me a dark look.

"He's our friend," he said. "And what business is it of yours?"

"I live here. This is my home. Who the hell are you?"

"We are Brahmins!"

"Big deal. You don't even live here. This isn't Delhi, this is Pushkar." Volume rising. "This isn't Connaught Circus, it's the Sarovar (holy lake). Go get a proper job and stop harassing people."

He moved closer. "You are crazy old man! You better get out of here

before we take good care of you!”

I moved closer to him. “Just the two of you? Not your whole family? For sure *you*’re not gonna try it all by yourself!”

We were nose to nose, our chests practically touching, a position we maintained, together with sneers and snarls, for several seconds. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder, gently pulling me back. I looked around. An Indian friend, also a Brahmin, had stepped out of his jeweler’s shop. He said something in Hindi to the young scammer. The jeweler was a weightlifter, well muscled. The young guy gave him a face-saving glare, then grabbed his mate and moved on.

“Baba, baba,” the jeweler laughed. “You are truly *sati buddhi nati!*”

Quickly I lost all semblance of anger. “Sati...what?”

“*Sati buddhi nati,*” he repeated, and a number of the men who had crowded around to watch a brewing fight now laughed heartily. “We have this saying in Hindi: when a man passes the age of 60 he begins to act like a child again. Does crazy things only kids do.”

And henceforth I became known in Pushkar as Baba *sati buddhi nati*.

The first month passed otherwise uneventfully. But the second more than made up for it. First thing, I caught a cold, which most people did when in November the weather suddenly got cold at night and early morning. Pushkar colds were notoriously hard to shake, and mine lasted for days. I had some ayurvedic treatment, but it didn’t seem to do much good. Then I remembered Peggy.

I hadn’t touched the pendulum once since leaving home. My mind occupied with life on the road, I had no need to.

I opened my daypack, stuffed my finger down the narrow pocket I had put the ziplock bag.

Nothing.

I got out my flashlight and sent the beam into the pocket, then took out pens and my Swiss army knife from all the adjacent pockets. Took every single thing out of the pack. Then proceeded through the larger rucksack. My tiny room looked like it was housing a jumble sale. But no pendulum.

I let out a sigh, replaced everything in their respective packs. I hated losing that old half penny. No matter, and I set about constructing another

pendulum. I used a washer and a length of genuine Indian cotton thread.

“Give me a yes.” Back and forth.

“Give me a no.” Side to side.

--This a good time and place to be using this pendulum?

--Yes.

--That you, Peggy me girl?

--No.

--No?

--Yes.

--Uh, am I in contact with a being, a spirit, anything, outside myself?

--No.

--Highest Me, then?

--Yes.

--Well... I mean, no hard feelings, bro, but I'd really like to gab with ol' momma.

--No.

--Whattaya mean, no. You saying I can't?

--Yes.

--Because – because I'm using a different pendulum?

--Yes.

--And she only comes through the coin that I suppose I've lost? (Mild sense of panic.)

--Yes.

--Awww. If I find it again, the half penny, I can talk with her?

--No.

--Dude!! No more Peggy? Ever?

--No.

--No. Wait. No means yes, as in there *will* be more Peggy, right?

--Yes. (Relief)

--But —. Ah. Ah. She said I wasn't supposed to take her along on the trip. Is that it?

--Yes.

--Is this some sort of punishment, then?

--No.

Once again, I couldn't come up with the appropriate questions. I wish I did automatic writing so I could get more sense out of my better half.

Then things got really bizarre. Shortly before, terrorist bombs had leveled a nightclub in Bali, killing nearly 200 people, most of them young tourists from Australia. People were on edge everywhere, but it really got intense here. Why? The scenario went like this:

A national Indian newspaper made a statement that since Muslim terrorists had blown up a tourist spot, maybe they're thinking about the Pushkar camel fair, which normally attracts lots of tourists. Next day another national newspaper said reports were circulating that Muslim tourists are thinking seriously about disrupting the Pushkar camel fair. Day following that, a TV network claimed that information had been received that Muslim terrorists definitely are planning to sabotage the Pushkar camel fair. The day after that, the American, British and Australian governments issued stern warnings for their citizens to avoid at all costs the Pushkar camel fair. And the very next day, the Indian government declared a red alert and mobilized 4000 commandos armed with machine guns to patrol Pushkar and its surrounding regions to thwart the imminent terrorist attacks at the camel fair.

And the day after that, 200 hotel bookings were canceled and untold tourists already in town packed their bags and fled.

All of which was delightful for me. Because as the camels were being driven in off the desert, and Hindus from all parts of India were arriving to celebrate the festival of *Mela*, which annually coincided with the week-long fair that ended on the November full moon, there were far fewer silly Western and Japanese tourists with their yard-long lenses and in their place lots and lots of soldiers with great big guns to entertain Barry.

Returning to my hotel one evening I noted two Uzi toting commando types smoking on my balcony.

"What are you doing here?" I called out.

"Duty, Uncle!" one replied tersely.

"What, you expect Osama to pop up out of the holy lake, snorkel mask on and bombs in either hand? *Jow!*" I demanded. *Piss off.* Unbelievably, they did.

The fair, of course, went off without hitch. When it ended, camels, Hindus

and Westerners cleared out, and everything was back to normal. But not for me.

My hour-long morning bicycle rides out the desert road were taking me further as I grew more and more fit. Six weeks of daily pumping of that antique, single-speed Atlas bike had given me leg muscles like unripe honeydews. I was definitely in great shape.

Just shy of my new turnaround point, in an otherwise isolated area, sat a small *chai* stall on a bit of a rise 15 yards off the road. When I passed this one morning I smiled and called out the standard *Ram-Ram, Ji!* And was greeted in return with deadpan glares from the crew of twentysomething toughs sitting there. A minute further on I stopped, stretched, walked the bike in a semi-circle, then hopped on for the half hour ride back.

Up ahead as I came to the area of the stall, I saw one of the men walking a bike across the road. He pushed it directly into my path as I approached, in such a way that I was forced to brake to a stop.

“What’s this?” I asked, as he and his bike stood in front of me, blocking my path. Then out of the corner of my eye I noticed movement. I looked over and saw two men running down towards us, one wearing a bandanna across the lower half of his face. At once I knew what was coming down. Either highway robbery or...worse.

I had on me, in the pouch stuffed down my jeans and held in place by an elastic band round my waist, two thousand dollars in cash and travelers checks, plus my passport, airline tickets and Visa card. For some time I had been debating whether to leave a substantial part of the booty in my room, except it was pretty easy to get into my room and —.

The three of them now had me surrounded, the guy with the bandanna on my left. I looked at them. They looked at me. Hard. I thought: I’m in the middle of the godforsaken desert. I thought: not a soul knows I’m here. I thought: I’m dead. And then I stopped thinking.

What I did next was a surprise: to them, to me. I slid forward off the seat and straddled the bar. I curled into a crouch, bent my elbows and placed my forearms parallel before me, left hand over right, palms down. I widened my eyes to bulging point, poked my tongue out full length and pulled a face even more menacing than theirs. As loud as I could, I screamed in staccato:

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“KA MA-TE! KA MA-TE! KA ORA! KA ORA!”

All the while viciously slapping my thighs, forearms and triceps in no particular sequence.

Now, if you’ve never been to New Zealand, know not a thing about the game of rugby and if Maori is no more than a term you’ve heard applied to a certain Pacific peoples, you haven’t a clue what I was doing. What I was doing is called a *haka*. It is the Maori war chant, and when it’s being performed by a bunch of huge Maori men with fierce looking facial tattoos, it is scary as hell. The All Blacks, the national rugby team, perform the *haka* prior to every match (this even though very few of the team are Maori), and is it ever intimidating. But a mid-60s Jewboy from Philadelphia? I didn’t even know the words!

No matter. I repeated the opening line, even louder, if that were possible.

“KAAMAATEEKAAMAATEEKAAORAAKAAORAAAA!!!”

And the three banditos did back off a step. Just a step. But that was all I needed. I hopped back onto the seat; my shoes hit the pedals. The bike had actually been shoved off the road a little, onto sand. But that didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but saving my sorry ass.

I pumped. I pumped again. My front wheel nudged the other bike’s front wheel, pushed it aside. Pumped.

The bandanna thug grabbed hold of the rear carrier. I pumped harder, my leg muscles straining. Somehow I gained traction. Pump, pump. I felt like I was going nowhere, but then I was past the guy with the bike. Pump, pump.

I had enough momentum now so that the carrier broke free from bandanna thug’s grasp. But he began jogging alongside me, reached out, took a swipe, missed, then got hold of my t-shirt. Pump, Pump. He pulled, and I felt myself falling to my left, kept pumping, somehow regained balance. Pump, pump, pump.

I got free. Somehow, I got free. Guided the bike back onto the macadam. Pump, pump, pumppumppump.

I was away from the three of them. Just. They broke into a run, the guy with the bike jumping on. I easily outdistanced the runners, but the cyclist picked up speed. The chase began. Absurdly, I remembered an old hippie comic, The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers. The three brothers, Fabulous

Phineas, Freewheeling Franklin and Fat Freddie, were all on a bicycle, one riding, one sitting backwards on the handlebars, one on the carrier. They were going over the Golden Gate Bridge, pursued by a cop car. The guy on the bars whips out some cocaine, shoves it up the nose of the brother pumping. He accelerates into two-wheel warp speed, leaving the cop car in his dust. I felt just like that, my drug adrenaline.

A hundred yards along, I looked over my shoulder. Was I pulling away from the bastard? Another hundred yards, he'd dropped twenty yards behind. I accelerated. Another hundred yards...and I stopped. Far behind, so did he.

I didn't call back, made no motion. Just stared. He stared back. Then I slowly got off the bike. Turned around facing away from him. Pulled down my pants. Both pants. Bent over. Spread em wide.

Got back on the bike and rode at normal speed back to Pushkar. Singing loudly.

"...Head out on the highway/Looking for adventure/In whatever comes my way...Born to be wi-i-i-ild..."

Sati buddhi nati.

A week later – and with just a week to go before I was scheduled to leave town – I got up at the normal time of just past 6. My tiny room had no toilet or shower, so I always got out early to claim one of the two communal toilets. Towel round my waist, I stepped from my room onto the outdoor terrace and walked 50 feet to the ablution area.

The morning was chilly, and a mist hung over the lake. When I'd finished, I rewrapped the towel, stepped back outside. Where before there had been no one around, I now saw a figure heading my way. The figure seemed to move through the mist, an apparition. As we got closer, I saw it was a woman wearing slinky, clingy black. A beautiful woman, becoming even more beautiful as we approached one another, until we passed and she smiled and I told myself that this was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

In my room I dressed, putting on two sweat shirts against the cold, slung

on my daypack, opened the door and stepped out, turned around, locked the door, turned around again...and the woman in black was sitting on my balcony. Well, it wasn't my balcony, it was communal, but by right of having been there nearly two months I thought of it as mine. I walked past slowly. She smiled again. She had an exquisite smile and the thickest, most radiant hair I had ever seen. I took a deep breath, heaved it out, and continued on my way. For about fifteen feet. Then I turned around, went back and sat down on the balcony next to the woman in black.

Her name was Elisa and she was English and she was 48 and divorced and her first time in India and traveling on one of those Australian-based open trucks where they whisked 25 people through half of Asia in a couple of months. They had got into Pushkar last night around 8 and would be leaving Pushkar this morning around 8. *Meep meep.*

We talked. She told me she had been married 27 years and had four grown daughters and her husband was this really nice guy who'd been good to her and the girls, but for years there had been no real feeling between them, or at least she'd felt nothing, because when finally she told him she wanted out of the marriage he was shocked and crestfallen. I told her I had been through something quite similar, only my relationship was four and a half years, still when I got the word I too had been shocked and crestfallen.

She had a boyfriend back home – quite a bit younger than her, she noted, a bit sheepishly – and she'd wanted him to come with on this journey but it wasn't his thing so she just upped and ventured out alone. The truck deal wasn't all that great, but as a solo woman in Asia she felt she needed the security. She described her journey, whizzing through open countryside, dust flying in her face all day, given barely enough time to set her feet on the ground at any one spot, the others generally much younger and nobody really having much to do with her, although it was really okay because everything was so new and fascinating, and as she talked I was convinced I had never in my life sat this close to a woman so beautiful.

Somebody from the truck's crew came up and fetched her, so we swapped emails and Elisa the woman in black stood up and walked away, turning once to smile before heading back into the mist.

Timothy looked up once from licking his nether bits, then immediately went right back to licking. Welcome home, Pa.

The house sitter had already bailed out, the place pretty clean and tidy. I dumped everything in the spare bedroom, went for a brief jog on the beach, came back, had a shower, and began sorting through the packs. When everything was removed from the backpack and either put someplace or chucked in a pile for the laundry, I started in on the daypack. Got everything out that didn't belong for my daily needs, then just as a matter of habit I slipped my finger into the narrow pocket that once held a pendulum in a tiny ziplock plastic bag, and there, exactly and precisely where I had put it some months back, was a 1960 half penny in a tiny ziplock plastic bag. I took it out, held it up, and considered just how bananas I had become over the past year.

--Am I in touch with a being outside myself?

--Yes.

--Is it you, Peggy?

--Yes.

--It's really you?

--Yes.

--You guys disappeared the pendulum on me?

--Yes.

--What an act!

--Yes.

--There's a reason you bods did this, yeah?

--Yes.

--I'm to talk to you only when I'm in New Zealand?

--No.

--I can talk to you in other countries.

--Yes.

--Only not this trip.

--Yes. (Not)

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--Again, a reason for this.

--Yes.

--A specific reason.

--Yes.

--Anything to do with that bicycle thing in Pushkar?

--Yes.

--Thought so. Peggy, y'know I could've got killed that day.

--No.

--No?

--Yes.

--They were just going to rob me.

--Yes.

--But —. Hold on. You knew this before I left here?

--Yes.

--The jokers up your way wanted me to lose my bundle?

--No.

--Aha. This was some kind of major test for Barry?

--No.

--Truly?

--Yes.

--Okay, how's this: I had to go through this thing and, let me see if I can get this right, you weren't allowed to tell me about it.

--Yes.

--You being you, you'd've tried to warn me away from what happened.

--Yes.

--I had to do it. To be there.

--Yes.

--To learn a lesson?

--No.

--Not to learn a lesson.

--Yes.

--Look, I hate using this word, but...karma?

--Yes.

--I was a highwayman in a past life and I had to go through what I'd done

to others?

--*No.*

--I give up. Hey, were you proud of me?

--*Yes.*

--All of you Up There watching the show?

--*Yes.*

--An audience of billions. Far out!

--*Yes.*

--And this Elisa person I met. Gorgeous, eh.

--*Yes.*

--You think I should keep in touch? Email her?

--*No.*

--Right, right. Dream on, Rosenberg. Look, to make up for almost dropping me in the soup out there in the desert, do you mind giving me a game score? (The Philadelphia Eagles, my last-ever employers, had just played Tampa Bay, the winner off to the Super Bowl. The Eagles had beaten Tampa twice recently, and were heavily favored. The game was already over, but I had no way of knowing who won.)

--*No.* (She doesn't mind)

--Good. (Following the World Cup final, Peggy hadn't given me a decent score in any number of tries. Couldn't be bothered by such trivia, I'd got her to tell me.) Okay, Eagles win?

--*No.*

--Really?

--*Yes.*

--Aw, too bad. Lose by a less than a touchdown?

--*No.*

--More than a touchdown?

--*Yes.*

--More than two TDs?

--*Yes.*

--Good lord! More than three TD?

--*No.*

By playing around with the numbers, I got a final of 24-7. Following

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morning I went into town and checked the paper. The *real* final was 27-10. Which both elated me and made me curious. I mean, she got the underdog winner by a 17-point spread, which is pretty amazing. But why not the correct score? When later I asked her this, I got gibberish. So much do I not understand.

I got into summer. Summer at the beach. There was a time when I had thought seriously of doing what many of the English do who come down this way: six months in New Zealand, six months at home. Follow the sun, in other words. But I haven't done this for two reasons: one, I love to travel Asia; and the second is, I'm afraid of growing bored, always in summer. Can you grow bored of something you love? Oh yes.

So I jogged on the beach and talked to Peggy and thought of Elisa. Despite Peggy's advice, I did send her an email. And got it back the next day with a notice from the server that no such address existed. I looked at the page in my journal where I had transposed the note she'd given me. There were two words, her name and the city where she lived, and something between the two. A single letter? A two letter word?

--Peggy, will you give me the letter or letters in Elisa's email address that I can't make out?

--Yes.

--Great. Is it a single letter?

--Yes.

--A to M inclusive?

--Yes.

--A to G?

--No.

--H, I or J?

--No.

--Wait, I know. First letter of her last name. Is that it?

--Yes.

--Terrific. Thanks, Momma.

Only it wasn't the first letter of her last name because I got that one tossed back as well. So, okay. Just another gorgeous female who smiled at me. Grow up, dude.

Joe rang from Australia. His sister was 100% free of cancer. But now his

mother had it. Joe's family: whew. A large Italian-Portuguese clan, many of them were smokers. (One of Joe's brothers had caught the Big C a few years back.) So once again I asked Peggy whether pendulum-healing would be more effective than straight mindpower. She said yes. Moreover, I did not have to do complementary visualization work because the biggest light of all was now shining on Joe's mom.

And I thought of Elisa.

--Is she with someone now?

--Yes.

--A relationship?

--Yes. (Rats)

--She happy?

--No.

--Does she ever think about me?

--Yes.

--Awriiight. A lot?

--Yes.

--All positive?

--Yes.

--And still you don't want me to contact her.

--Yes. (She doesn't)

--You jealous, maybe?

--No.

--Sure, sure.

Still, I tried again. Any number of times, any number of single letters or combinations of two. Nada. Sigh.

Meantime, something big was happening in New Zealand. America, about to go to war against Saddam, was busy collecting allies. Britain and Australia were in. Which meant untold pressure from all three on Helen Clark, our PM.

I wrote her letters. You're kissing America's butt over the genetic engineering fiasco, I wrote. Isn't that enough to soothe the savage beast? Listen, I said, I lived in that country 42 years. I know how they operate. Just look what they've done in Afghanistan. How many innocents have they killed, and have they got close to Osama? You know they're gonna do the same in

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Iraq. You want to be part of this, have this insanity on New Zealand's conscious? Besides, I concluded, 911 only happened because Bush was president. Had Gore won (well, he had), there would've been no need for the crazies to do their awful deed.

Dear Helen waxed and waned; should she or shouldn't she. Mentally, I was betting five to one the country would go. And then came the announcement. We were not. I lost, and I won.

New Zealand had done this to me time and again. Soon as I would become firmly convinced no one here really cared, that NZ did whatever it was told to do by England, or Australia, or the USA, there'd be a point, a moment, when the Kiwi said, Now hang on a minute, mate. Like becoming the world's first nuclear free nation back in '84. The Iraqi thing, I felt, was even more significant. God, Helen, have you ever got balls!

I began to wonder whether she had, in fact, read my letters when, shortly after her announcement, she made a public statement to the effect that had Gore been elected instead of Bush... Yo, Helen – not out loud, fer chrissake!

And then something happened that shoved Iraq and New Zealand's non-involvement onto the back burner. I got an email from Elisa.

I remember you as this really attractive man, she wrote. Well, I'm in Malaysia at the moment. It's nearly the end of my journey. Before going back to England I was thinking of coming down to see you. It would only be for a few days. Will that be all right?

Whaaaaaaaaat?!?

--Peggy!

--Yes.

--You knew!

--Yes.

--Don't call her, she'll call me!

--Yes.

--You old devil, you.

--No.

There were delays in Australia, complications at Auckland. Finally she stepped off the tiny plane at the local airport. Our eyes met. That smile. I had thought her hair, still magnificent, had been darker, that she was a bit

heavier. Later she said she'd thought I was taller.

At home she handed me a bottle of Southern Comfort bought at duty free. I smiled and shrugged.

"Is it all right?"

"I suppose. Janice Joplin drank plenty of it."

"Oh. You don't drink."

"Well, no, not really. Hey, it's kind of you. Don't worry about it. For sure it won't get thrown out."

We talked. She had left the truck not long after Pushkar. Met up with this American guy and they traveled together several weeks before splitting up. She showed me pictures of the two of them together. Nice looking guy. Nice looking couple. Hell are you doing *here*, dude?

We walked on the beach. We ate dinner together. I took her to my "office". Talked and talked.

I slept in one room, she slept in another. I was being cool. Spelled *fear*.

One afternoon she was sunning in the garden, wearing a bikini. I was sitting at my desk, trying not to look out at her. To focus my mind elsewhere, I got out the pendulum.

--Whattaya think, Momma?

--Yes.

--You like her?

--Yes.

--You think it can happen between us?

--Yes.

--You're not jealous?

--Yes. (She's not)

--You really feel good about her, then.

--Yes.

I glanced outside. Elisa had turned on her side, facing away. I quickly returned to the half penny.

--Have I ever known her before?

--Yes.

--True?

--Yes.

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--We were lovers?

--*No.*

--Related maybe?

--*Yes.*

--Once only?

--*No.*

--Twice?

--*No.*

--More than three times?

--*No.*

--Three times, then.

--*Yes.*

I got that we had been mother-daughter, father-son, and brother-sister.
I'd been the daughter, father and brother.

--So maybe we're, like, some kind of soulmates.

--*Yes.*

--But not true soulmates?

--*No.*

--No? Hang on there. You're saying Elisa and I *are* true soulmates?

--*Yes.*

--But I thought you and I are soulmates.

--*Yes.*

--And that you only have one soulmate, no more.

--*Yes.*

--So you and I are soulmates, Elisa and I are soulmates, but we only have
a single soulmate throughout our lives.

--*Yes.*

--Jeez, imagine me not understanding when it's so very simple. I really
must be thick.

--*Yes.*

--Sure, sure. Hey, d'you mind giving me a one-to-ten on her?

--*No.* (She doesn't mind)

--Right. Five or better?

--*Yes.*

--Six or better?

--*Yes.*

--Seven or better?

--*Yes.*

--Hm, interesting. Eight or better?

--*Yes.*

--An eight?

--*No.*

--Damn! She's not a ten, is she?

--*No.*

--Nine, then.

--*Yes.*

--Peggy! This isn't some sort of feminist one-upmanship thing?

--*Yes.* (It isn't)

--A nine!

--*Yes.*

I looked out through the french windows. She was on her belly now. Timothy had wandered over and she was scratching him under the chin.

--She's higher than me.

--*Yes.*

--Bloody hell.

--*Yes.*

--Can I demand a recount?

--*No.*

--Look, one more thing. She gets headaches and is taking some sort of painkiller I don't like the looks of. Is there some kind of natural remedy that would suit her better than these drugs?

--*Yes.*

Homeopathic, maybe?

--*No.*

--Chinese herbals?

--*No.*

--Ayurvedic?

--*No.*

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--Acupuncture?
--No.
--Uh, is it something she can get locally?
--Yes.
--Mind spelling it out for me?
--No. (She doesn't mind)
--First letter A to M?
--Yes.
--A to G?
--Yes.
--A, B or C?
--No.
--D or E?
--No.
--F?
--Yes.
--Okay. Second letter. A vowel?
--Yes.
--A, E or I?
--No.
--O?
--No.
--U?
--Yes.
--Right. Third —. Aw, dammit, Peggy!!!
--Yes! (Emphatic)

Evening of the third day – she was only going to be here a total of five before heading back to England – I said, “Um, look. You want to sleep with me, that would be wonderful. You don't, that's okay too. I mean that. But it's your call. You want, come to my bed some night.” She said nothing.

That night, we went to our separate rooms. I was asleep when she came into the room, naked, gingerly pulled back the cover, slipped in beside me. The feel of her body snuggled next to mine, the total feel of her, the smell of her, even before we made love, that, I do believe, was the highest high I've ever known.

The love-making bit wasn't all that bad, either.

I woke up rather late for me, 6.30. Her head was propped up on an elbow, peering down. I smiled. But she did not.

"You must think I'm terrible." Her first words of the day. I just blinked. "I've never done this before. Never."

What? Had sex? Had sex with a 64 year old? Had sex below the Equator?

"The relationships I've had, and there've not been a lot, I always waited. With Julio (the American guy she traveled with in Asia), we were a month together before I said yes. And Derek, my boyfriend at home, it was ages. I can't believe I got into your bed after being here just three days."

"Are you sorry you did?"

"No!"

I watched her as she got out of bed, stretched and walked slowly out of the room. Neither am I, dude.

Day five came, and by her choice I drove her 60 miles to the nearest city where she caught a bus to the airport in Auckland. We stood there smooching while everybody climbed on board. Then it was her turn.

I waved good-by, then walked back to my car. The bus started up and passed right by and I looked for her to wave again. But she was already in conversation with the woman seated alongside, and my wave slowly died.

She said she'd be back but, well, y'know. England was a long way off. So was her life compared to mine. Three-to-one, against.

We did exchange emails. She wrote that she was coming back to New Zealand in June. I thought: yeah, yeah.

I jogged on the beach and tried to write a book about my dear dead friend Peggy, about death after (and before) life, about parallel universes.

But my head wasn't into it.

I wondered whether, if the Universe wanted you to do something, really wanted you to, could you not do it? Hell, *could* you do it! I mean, what did I

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expect, I would go into some sort of prolonged trance and this perfect work would flow through me and out my fingers? And then the CEO of some major worldwide publishing house would be visiting New Zealand, tooling through the countryside, his Mercedes getting a flat just outside my house as I was standing there raking leaves...?

Her email said she was coming the tenth of June.

A former partner once asked my definition of love. Without pausing to think, I said: "An old couple walking along the beach holding hands." Elisa and I may have had love those early days, I'm not sure. Because if it was there, it was blinded by my passion. Love is what you think you want, and passion is what you really want, and it is that, or the hope of, that sells women's fashions, fancy cars and trips to romantic places.

Love, my sense of it, should make you calm, focused, centered. Like a really terrific meditation session. I was as calm, focused and centered as a car hurtling off a high bridge.

One cold evening we were lying naked in front of the fire. Elisa naked, for me, was a sight that should be led up to, absorbed in tiny doses. And here she was in the *all*. I didn't even know what to do with her. Yo, I am not exactly an inexperienced guy, and I did not know what to do with her, lying there naked on the carpet in front of the fire. Thank Up There, I thought, she doesn't move like the Swedish babe who used to live down the way. Elisa's bod and that walk, we're talking heart attack country here.

So, no, I was not your typical New Age calm/focused/centered guy, not in those early days. Example.

I woke at the normal time, coaxed Timothy out of bed (conveniently placed equidistant between us) for his breakfast, layered on the clothes and stepped out to the beach. The winter sky was on fire, the sun minutes from popping its eye over the watery horizon. I raced back to the house.

"Elisa, you have to see this sunrise, it's gonna be amazing!"

The supine figure let out a groan. My pillow was now over her head,

creating a mop sandwich. “I didn’t sleep well. You go. I’ll see it with you tomorrow.”

I trudged back to the beach. The sunrise indeed was spectacular. But I didn’t feel it. How could she just lay there? She’s my woman, she says she’s my woman, why won’t she share these important moments with me?

I went for a walk but didn’t see anything other than my shoes. Returned home, she was in the kitchen, at the stove, wearing terrycloth robe and wool socks, her incredible hair in tangles. Her first words:

“There’s no laundry detergent. I need to wash some things.”

“There’s a whole unopened box. I just bought it.”

“Well, I couldn’t find it.” Not even looking my way.

I went to the laundry room, retrieved the box of detergent. Back in the kitchen, I placed it on the table. “One box, laundry detergent.”

“You should put in where I can easily find it.”

“Elisa, what’s wrong?”

“There’s nothing wrong. Why does there have to be something wrong?”

“Aarrgh.” I swept the box off the table onto the floor.

“If that box breaks, you’re going to clean it up.”

“What? *Whaaat?*?”

I looked down at the box. I moved up to it, gave it a hard kick. For the first time that morning, Elisa looked at me. I kicked it again. She ran past me, out of the kitchen. Third kick might well have been heard in Nova Scotia. Seen, too. Because the box exploded and everything – *everything*, every square inch of ceiling, walls and floor, every single molecule of air in that kitchen – was instantly coated with white scented powder. Including every stitch of Barry’s clothes, every pore of exposed skin. Felt great.

“I really respect you for what you did,” she said later.

“Yeah?”

She nodded. “I hope you don’t do it again, mind, but it was amazing how you expressed your feelings. Not many men can do that, you know.”

The English.

The year before, Elisa had participated in a triathlon in her home town. And won, beating all comers, including the men. This because she was such a powerful swimmer. But the first time we went for a bicycle ride on

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the road that parallels our beach, I was going slow as I possibly can, and still I had to stop several times to let her catch up.

“C’mon,” I called out to her once. “Why so slow?”

“I don’t want to get in an accident,” she said. There was a vehicle passing about every two minutes...speed limit 50kph.

So frustrated was I that finally, on the way back, I just left her and hit the pedals hard as I could.

Two adults, both intelligent and resourceful. And three previous lifetimes together. Trying to find a common and healthy path in this thing called relationship.

One day the subject of marijuana came up. I hadn’t smoked in twenty years. Wait, I lie. I did once, while with a party of trekkers in the Golden Triangle, ’87 or ’88. We came to a hill tribe village just as the sun was setting. After we ate, we sat around in that awkward time prior to crawling into our sleeping bags. I noticed a couple of young local guys, dressed Western. One looked like he was holding a head of broccoli.

“Is that what I think it is? I laughed.

“You want try?”

“Sure, why not.” I had three, four hits, no more. And got absolutely demolished. I got up and went for a walk. There was a full moon and I was convinced I was on it, and that big light in the sky was earth. How was I going to get back? I sat down and began to cry. How I would miss my home planet!

That was the last time I indulged.

“You know, I’ve never smoked,” Elisa was saying.

“Never? You have four grown daughters and none of them ever shared a joint with you?” She shook her head. “Would you, well, if I can score some?”

“I told myself I’m going to try everything on this trip,” she said.

The only one I knew who always had some dope was my friend Peter. But Peter was now on extended 18 month holiday, an all-expense-paid stay at an exclusive resort, courtesy of Her Majesty.

A struggling, small-time local farmer, Peter was a lovely chap. A hard worker. Good to his missus. Loved his kids. Forever giving to his mates. None of these traits earned him his windfall vacation though.

See, Peter smoked weed. Lots of weed. Claimed it enabled him to commune with nature when he was out there milking the cows and feeding the chickens. Also, it helped take his mind off his personal finances, which for some time had been very sorry indeed. And since it was his work to make things grow, the weed he smoked came from seeds he himself had planted and cultivated.

Because it became known he was growing and smoking this particular type of weed (and not, say, oxalis), four men paid him a surprise visit a few months back.

Observing the bare furnishings, the ancient van, the miniscule bank statement, three of the visitors were quite civil. Not the fourth.

This chap threatened Peter with confiscation of his farm, even with taking his kids away. Such is the goofy law. Peter was shaken, obviously. The past season's harvest had been his best ever, far more than required for his own personal use. And even though he had never before sold any weed, he did admit that due to his financial situation he had been considering it. Which admission earned him the all-expense-paid holiday at an exclusive resort courtesy of Her Maj.

In addition to the \$45,000 annual tab for Peter's luxury accommodation, the New Zealand taxpayers (of which I was one, though minimal) were now paying Peter's missus a nice round sum to run the household in his absence. Maybe Peter wasn't such a sap after all.

Weed, said the lawmakers in my adopted country, was unlawful because it's bad for us. Fair enough. Tobacco, alcohol, fast foods, genetically engineered foods, chemical sprays and dioxins released into the air and waterways from the chlorine bleaching facility of the local paper mill? Um.

A while back, I went to the local pharmacy and asked to see the latest copy of the New Ethicals Catalogue. Looked up Prozac 20. The "Adverse Effects" section. Scary.

Why, then, were some "drugs" legal and others got you a free long-term holiday at Club Med With Bars? That's a toughie. No matter, ever Rosenberg gets elected NZ's first Jewish pope, first thing I do is make everything legal. Whether you smoke it, snort it, slurp it or stick it, it's fair go.

Weed? Tightly controlled. You'd need a permit to buy from government

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operated stores. A periodic checkup from your family quack. Get caught selling to minors? Kutcherkokoff. And who would be in charge of growing the stuff? Who else: chaps like Peter. The millions in revenue go to programs set up to help kids get a decent start in life. Maybe that'd help deflate the world's highest suicide rate of 15-25 year olds.

Me, I no longer smoked the stuff for three reasons. First, it stinks. And the stink lingers forever on the face hair, on the clothes, in the nostrils. Second, I get a better high off meditation, from sunrise runs on the beach and strolls in the bush. And third, if you've ever sat in on a dopers' conversation...well, it makes commercial TV sound intelligent.

So I drove to a nearby town that was known for resident lawbreaking of this heinous order, and when I drove back an hour later I had in my shoe a joint the size of my pinkie.

We sat on the bed, facing each other. I lit the cig, took a small toke, passed it on. Elisa put it to her lips and did a comic parody of the first-time dope smoker: furrowed brow, eyes squinting against the smoke, the teensiest, tiniest in-breath followed by a racking cough I thought would take out a wall. We had two more hits, each time she took hardly anything in, hacked like a consumptive. I figured she wouldn't feel a thing, the maiden voyage often producing not even a buzz.

I had my fourth go, held it out. But Elisa was not there. Well, she was there. But she wasn't. Her forehead was down on the mattress, her hands covering her ears.

"Elisa? Dude?"

I put my head down alongside hers. The girl was gone. Last thing I wanted to do was start asking was she okay, but was she?

I did some Alpha on her, which in my state of mind was no simple task. I faded in, faded out. Still, Elisa was making like a tumbler who'd forgot to flip her ass over.

Went on like that for, well you know, who can figure time in these situations? I stroked her head, lightly, kept my face down close to hers. Finally, ages later, she moved. Lifted her head. Opened her eyes. Which were pink-rimmed and bloodshot. She looked at me like she was seeing me for the first time, ever.

“How y’ doin?” I asked, with feigned cheer. She didn’t answer. Maybe she hadn’t heard. Or couldn’t associate the sound of my voice with me. She just sat there.

Much, much later, she got up, went to the toilet. Came back looking fine. I didn’t want to ask, sound like a damn academic. We went for a walk on the beach, in silence. I put my hand in hers, but I might’ve handed her a leg of mutton for all the closeness it brought us.

Back home, she finally looked at me. Smiled that magic smile.

“Can we do it again, sometime?”

By the time we left to go travel, I was somewhat more relaxed. Maybe it was because I no longer did an eyeball-spinning, Wily-E.-Coyote-into-a-cliff-face number every time I looked at her. Still, shortly after we got to Byron Bay, we had us a major. Over, would you believe, money. And not even a lot of money. But really, it wasn’t about money, it was about not giving away personal power to the other. And isn’t that what it was always about.

We didn’t talk for two days. Slept in the same bed, and didn’t talk, didn’t touch. Once during this time she was on the beach in her bikini, and I was in the apartment we were renting, a lovely spot no more than twenty feet from the beach, but as well fifteen feet above it. I stepped out onto the small lawn. I couldn’t see her. Walked to the edge of the property and looked down. A young guy, 30s I suppose, was standing there running a number on her. She didn’t look all that pleased, but neither was she brushing him off.

Maybe it’s for the best, I thought. Maybe I’m just not cut out to be a couple, I thought. Maybe I’m full of crap, I thought.

Later she told me she had seriously considered leaving, but she liked Byron, liked our apartment.

“I’ll pay half the rent,” she said. (I had volunteered the entire bill since, after all, she’d put out a small fortune to fly Down Under to be with me.) “Then when it’s time to leave here, we’ll go our separate ways.”

A day later we were making passionate love. I didn’t even know who

initiated it, how it got started. After, she “confessed” having had a date with this chap she’d met on the beach. Nothing happened, just coffee and talk.

“I knew he wasn’t for me. But I never thought you and I would get back together.”

By the time we got to Bangkok a month later, we seemed to have worked out a lot of the kinks. For sure there were more. I know a couple, he a New Zealander, she from Mainland China. Now *they* obviously were a cross-cultural match. But so were we, East Coast Jewboy and midlands Brit, except it wasn’t nearly so obvious, and that made it even tougher.

We took the overnight sleeper train to Malaysia, hung out in Penang a couple weeks. I really enjoy Georgetown, the main city on that island, and so now did Elisa. We stayed at a creaky old English hotel with loads of character (now run by Chinese), and walked that city till our arches ached.

One evening we grabbed the bus to a suburb not far off and had dinner at a restaurant run by an Indian couple I knew from years back. To make things easier, we were telling locals we were married. Bala, the husband of the Indian couple, sat across from us at the table. He winked at me. “You have a beautiful wife, my friend.” I looked at Elisa, saw her as I’d first seen her on a misty morning in Pushkar. Yes, I do, I thought. Indeed I do.

But when we returned to Bangkok, another fight. “I can’t cope,” she announced. “I’m leaving.” Which she did. And met up with me again in Nyaung Shwe. She stayed at a hotel just across the canal from mine. We could see each other from our respective balconies. All we needed were two tin cans, a length of twine. It was like starting over, two solo travelers meeting, sharing hours and experiences. Your hotel room or mine, m’dear.

She loved Nyaung Shwe. I introduced her to the people I had met the year before and we did all the things I had done. But she wanted to see more of Myanmar, whereas I was content to stay put in the town I had come to feel, along with Pushkar, as my Out There home.

Some weeks later we met up in Bangkok. No plan or design, just ran into one another on the street in Banglumpu. She told me she’d gone back to Penang for a couple weeks.

“I stayed at this hotel not far from ours. There were these four Asian men in the room across the hall. One of them kept calling me on the room phone,

sending me little presents. I thought about Connie (a mutual acquaintance from New Zealand known to enjoy the company of a man). What would she have done if she were in my place? I'm sure she would've gone to bed with him."

"And?"

She shrugged. "No. I really didn't want to."

Then back in Bangkok, just prior to my returning from Myanmar, she'd met a German guy.

"He was 35, and really coming on to me. He was very nice, but then I told him I was 49. 'You're not!' he said. 'I don't believe you!' So I showed him my passport. His face turned white. 'I could never go to bed with you, you're so...old!' I don't think I really wanted to, but it would've been nice if he'd tried."

For a while there in Bangkok we again stayed in separate hotels. Then she moved into mine. Taking her own room.

"I wake up in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep," she once told me. "When this happens I like to watch TV. If you're there in the room, I can't do that."

"I don't mind. Really. You know I can sleep anywhere, through anything."

"Well, it just wouldn't be right, somehow. I'd feel guilty I was disturbing you."

We did, though, spend almost all the waking day together. We had breakfast in one nearby vegetarian restaurant (since meeting me Elisa had stopped eating meat), walked and walked the city, had lunch in another veg restaurant, walked some more, retired to my room, made love, then she went to her room. Then out again, eating dinner on the walk from one or more of the street food stalls in Banglumpu.

We were strolling along Khao San Road one evening when Elisa spotted two men seated at an outdoor bar. She introduced us.

"These are the guys I told you I traveled with in Myanmar after I left Nyaung Shwe," she said.

"Good to finally meet you," one of them said. "All she talked about was this chap named Barry. We thought you'd be at least ten feet tall."

Those days in Bangkok were the best times we'd had since June. There

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was nothing I loved more than just mooching around a city as diverse and fascinating as Bangkok, and so too, it appeared, did Elisa. Despite the differences, we now saw we had many things in common. I felt that, at long last, I had found my true roadie mate. Yeah, so she still needed to be seen as attractive by men. I had no problem with that, felt no threat. Truth be known, I got off on the ego boost of her attracting these younger guys yet always coming back to me.

It was now mid-November. My flight back to New Zealand was early December, while Elisa was going to stay on to meet up with two of her daughters, do some traveling together, then fly down in January. But I was growing tired. Some days back we had reached the four month mark, my limit of late, and I could feel my energy dragging.

I had an idea. I exchanged emails with a friend in Auckland I hadn't seen in years. Then I went to the airline office and changed my departure date to ten days earlier. I would hang out in Auckland with my friend before heading home.

A few days later, no thought, no reason, I returned to the airline office and changed my ticket back to the original date. It was two days after that Elisa began complaining of abdominal pains.

For some time she'd had to pee a lot. Lately, the need to urinate was prevailing more frequently, but when she went to the toilet, she told me, little or nothing came out. Now the pains.

"Maybe you ought to see a doctor."

"Oh, it's all right. Women's stuff, you know how it is."

The following day during a walk, she suddenly doubled up in agony. The pain lasted a few minutes, then went away.

"Dude, they have good medical care in this city. Go see a doc. Please?"

Next day she took a bus to a hospital not far from our hotel. I didn't go with at her insistence. Later we met for lunch.

"How was your day?" she asked.

"Aw, y'know. Walk, eat, walk, ride the ferry, eat. How about you?"

She went silent. Then: "They think I have cancer."

A two-dimensional cartoon me slid down my body, off the chair and onto the floor.

The ovarian tumor, they said, was the size of a grapefruit. (It was *that* I had been poking against last time we made love, when she said it hurts, but please don't stop.) At first they said it could be either-or. But when they took a second x-ray, the tumor was filled with dark, solid matter.

Her maternal instincts now came out. "I don't want to disappoint my daughters. They've already paid for their tickets. I think I'll just stay in Bangkok, then go back with them. I'll be all right."

I restrained myself from screaming out the obvious. Finally: "Just imagine the guilt those kids will carry when finally they do learn. Elisa. Go home."

Later: "I would've come to that decision myself, you know. I really do what's best for myself."

"I know, dude."

My fly-out date was now a day away. I offered to stay with her until she arranged a flight back to England. "No, I'll be okay here on my own. You go back to New Zealand. When this is all over with, I'll be there with you."

Following afternoon, she walked me to the ferry. I like to travel local transport whenever I can; the ferry, a brief walk, then an air-con bus would deliver me right to Don Muang Airport. We hugged on the pier as the ferry docked. I jumped on, almost tipping over under the weight of my packs, found my balance. As the rope was untied and the boat started away, I quick turned and looked towards the pier. Elisa was hunched over in tears, her back towards me. I kept my eyes on her until the ferry made its way to the middle of the river and I could see her no more.

At the airport I called the hotel. "Just want you to know, you are not alone in this."

"I know. And I love you."

"Me too, my dude. Me too."

I was numb through the three flights home. No emotion, no feeling inside. Once again, the house-sitter had left early, leaving a note saying how much she had enjoyed the place, and especially Timothy's company. The garden was unkempt, which was a blessing. I attacked it, both hands, yanking up

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weeds till it got dark, Timothy right there, rubbing against my legs.

--Peggy, what the hell is going on here? What the *hell* is so screwed up with my life that I go sixty-five years without love, without real, true, bonafide love, and then I find it and now this. *Goddamn it, answer me!!!* But of course you can't. Just yes and no, yes and no, and often that's full of crap. But you got ears, all you bastards Up There have ears, so listen up. I shall now throw away any doubts as to your existence. I exist, you exist, we exist. And here's what we are going to do together. *We* are going to heal that woman. There is nothing that takes priority over this. Nothing. No saving the planet from self-destruction, no upgrading the compassion level so the entire universe can move on. That we do later. Right now... *We*. Will. Heal. Her. No games, no karma horseshit, no you-know-best-and-I'm-just-a-dumb-shit-down-here-in-a-body. You get me?

--*Yes.*

--Now I am going to ask a bunch of questions. Specific questions. You will give me one hundred percent truthful answers. Ready?

--*Yes.*

--Is she going to survive this?

--*Yes.*

--She is going to get well and be healthy and live a good long life, right?

--*Yes.*

--And you and your bunch of bodiless know-everythings are going to make that happen, yes?

--*Yes.*

--Right. You've told me in the past that I only have to request a healing one time. Is that the case here?

--*No.*

--So I have to bug you.

--*Yes.*

--Every day?

--*Yes.*

--Several times a day better?

--*Yes.*

--Should I do Alpha as well?

--No.

--Your crowd will do the entire job on your own.

--Yes.

--Right. Get cracking.

--Yes.

Cancer. There was an epidemic going around during these earliest years of the millennium, a veritable plague. Everybody to whom I mentioned Elisa's situation had stories, ghastly stories, of relatives, friends, friends of friends, who currently had, or have had and died horrible deaths. When I phoned Elisa's yoga teacher here, asking her to please send an email to England to cheer her up, *she* quick ran to a doctor to check on a painful bowel condition of recent weeks (and which two other doctors had told her no problem) and it turned out *she* had the Mighty C. What was happening on planet earth?

Cancer. My Alpha classes over the years had performed untold healings on cancer people. And so many got better. Some got better instantly. Not all, not half. But many, well above any law of averages. How can this happen? Does it have something to do with the nature of the condition? Is it more than just smoking, too much red meat, industrial waste messing up the cells? Is it – shit, I hate thinking like this – the world's *karma*? And once you put that karma back in balance...?

I was visiting this health center in Boston, mid-70s. I used to go once a year back then to do a fast, clean out the body (and thus the head), and while there run seminars.

One day a woman approached. She said her name was Mary Smith. That was her real name, Mary Smith. Woman in her sixties, lovely smiling face, clear eyes.

"I'm Bill Smith's mother," she said. When I looked nonplussed: "He was in your class at Penn a year ago. I had cancer. They said it was terminal. Your group did an absentee healing on me, and when I went in for my checkup a few days later I was clean! A miracle, obviously, but I couldn't help wondering why. Now I have to tell you this. The cancer's come back. Just recently, that's

why I'm here." She must've seen the anguish on my face. "Wait. It's all right. Let me tell you what happened. When I learned I was free of cancer, I thought to myself, Mary, you've been given a reprieve. Now go out and use it! Live!! I left my husband – Bill's father. For some reason I can't explain, I decided to go to Florida. And there, by sheer coincidence, I ran into my old high school boyfriend, whom I hadn't heard from in forty years. He owns a boat, and that's where we lived, just the two of us, sailing around the Caribbean, for the past year. It's been the most wonderful year of my life, and I'm ready to die now because I found love, I found true joy, which I had never known till now. I just wanted to share this with you."

Cancer. In his wonderful book *The Transformed Cell*, Dr. Steven A. Rosenberg (no relation; or if he is, for sure the smarter branch of the family tree) wrote 350 pages about the research work he has done on cancer cells. The book is subtitled *Unlocking the Mysteries of Cancer*. Yet Dr. Steven A. Rosenberg had but a single, very brief reference to mindpower healing. When questioned about it, his dismissive reply was, Well, it can't hurt any.

Oh, but it can "hurt". Shortly after returning to New Zealand, I read a comment in the national paper by a leading American oncologist. Mindpower-type healing was potentially dangerous, he said, because *it gave people false hope*.

Then there was the area of the so-called alternative, or "soft", therapies. Whenever mention was made of one such in the mainstream press, so very often was it accompanied by refutation from a medical authority. One of the more successful of these therapies was developed some years ago by the late New York physician, Max Gerson. Chiefly, the program involved a rigorous diet; however, a key feature of the therapy (now run by Gerson's daughter) was the rather unconventional application of coffee enemas. Like with mindpower healing, there is a success rate here well above the standard percentages. And also like mindpower healing, there appear to be no adverse effects to having a latte shot up the bum. But when England's Prince Charles – poor maligned Charlie – happened to make an innocent statement in support of the Gerson method, he was instantly crucified by the American Cancer Society as well as "unnamed" cancer specialists. And just who was it being anal here?

Cancer. The medical profession practices what is tantamount to Dark Ages science. Radiation? Chemotherapy? What we have here is the same mentality that napalmed Vietnamese villages to save the people from communism, bombed the shit out of Iraq to liberate and democratize a populace that generally desired only to be left alone. Yes, and continues to suck the earth dry of petroleum, which goes to produce a filthy, polluting, *carcinogenic* fuel, while ignoring the clean, inexhaustible natural energy sources all around us.

So after all the trials, all the treatments, billions and billions of dollars spent, the brightest people in the world working on it, we have...chemotherapy? We poison the entire body in this most horrendous manner to get rid of cells gone mad?

I did not, could not, say any of this to Elisa over there in England. This had to be her decision; she needed to do her own thing, her way.

I had assumed she'd be operated on right away, but no. Six weeks of blood tests and biopsies and chemotherapy came first. The tumor, she was told, was too big for them to operate on safely. So they gave her two chemo jolts to shrink it to operable size. Did it work? It did not; the tumor continued to grow until it no longer bore any resemblance to citrus, rather the melon family. What the chemo did do, however, was make Elisa violently ill for ten days to two weeks following each treatment. Then, just so she wouldn't have *false hope*, they informed her she well might lose her pancreas and part of her bowel, as well as having to spend the rest of her life changing colostomy bags.

Now they were ready to operate.

Well, the operation was deemed a success, and she did not lose her pancreas or any of her bowel. She did, however, have six more horrid chemotherapy shots over the following months. Among other tolls on her body and spirit, every last strand of that incredible hair fell out.

If this sounds like a condemnation of all or even any of the individual people who had a hand in Elisa's treatment, or the British system of healthcare as a whole, it is not. According to her reports in our frequent telephone conversations (some while she was morphined to the gills to relieve the pain, the nausea, the total dearth of energy), every single person who tended her

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was diligent, dedicated, concerned. They cared. And get this: from top to bottom, beginning to end, her treatment cost her not a shilling. They picked her up at home and drove her to the hospital and back again every single time. Free. The nurse who came to her home to administer the drip that kept her from going starkers from chemo horror: free. Plus, she received a “tidy sum”, as they say, in disability allowance. Must’ve had a pretty good private health insurance policy, eh. In fact, she had no private health insurance. All this happened because England, unlike another Coalition of the Willing partner (and despite twenty years of being prime ministered by compassionless dipwads), still took care of its people.

And halfway across the world, all through the summer and autumn, there was Barry talking to a dead friend through the medium of a coin-operated pendulum in hopes of healing the woman he loved.

Was I cool through this period? Was I certain what I was doing, together with what they were doing in England, would work? Fat chance. I worried, I fretted, I doubted, I felt maximum guilt. This was Barry, remember, *schlumiel* of the universe, who all his life had been led, by Whomever ran the damn show, to the church steps and thereupon abandoned. Yet I never worked so hard, focused so intently, to believe.

Elisa, of course, wanted me there in England with her, and at one point, early on, I was set on going.

--Would it be to her benefit if I were there with her?

--Yes.

--But would it be more than just a comfort?

--No.

--My presence there wouldn’t actually help her.

--Yes. (It wouldn’t)

--So it’s best I stay here?

--Yes.

--If I stay here and do the work with you guys it’ll be more effective than if I’m there?

--Yes.

--Is this something she has to go through on her own, without me?

--Yes.

--You know, this sounds like a cop-out on my part coz the fact is I'd prefer to stay here and do the work.

--No.

--And we're gonna win this thing.

--Yes.

--Not a chance it'll fail.

--Yes. (Not)

--Do I believe you?

--Yes.

--Amazing.

--Yes.

On the first of July, at night, Timothy curled up before the fire, I was on the sofa holding a detective novel by Reggie Nadelson: holding but not reading. Finally I put down the book, took a few long, slow, deep breaths. And made the call. Her phone rang quite a few times before she answered.

"I was lying in bed with earphones on, listening to a tape," she explained.

"How're you feeling, dude?"

"Oh fine, fine."

She'd had a full scale testing the day before: all of it. But I knew I'd have to wait until Elisa was done being Elisa. She asked how I was, what I was doing, how the day had been. The phone was clamped to my ear, the fingers of my free hand were curled, my elbows pressed tight against my body. I couldn't bear it any longer.

"Um, your tests at the hospital?"

"Perfect. A hundred percent. I'm *clean!*"

As Ed Hillary said when he stood on top of Everest: *We beat the bastard!*

So we lived happily ever after, right?

Sure, sure.

Certainly it started off well. We met up in Brisbane. To be specific, we met in the Fortitude Valley, on the Brunswick Mall, outside the Cosmopolitan

Restaurant, my Brisbane “office”. It was the third time in 16 months she had flown thousands of miles across the Equator to be with me.

She looked different. As expected. That gorgeous mop had been replaced by an inch-long blond brush. Her body too had altered. Gone was the gym-firmed muscle tone. Most people, when they quit the gym, turned to fat. Elisa had turned to thin, bordering on scrawny. Mainly, the change I noticed was the soft blond down on her lower face, half an inch long. I was sure it hadn't been there before.

The examination took microseconds. She stood up from the table where she had been seated, and we had us a mighty hug. A few kisses, some tears, but the hug went on and on.

We stayed at my friend Lome's house in Paddington. I've known Lome, a Fijian, a dozen years, ever since she'd picked me up hitching outside my home in New Zealand. She had moved to Brisbane a few years later with her three kids, now young adults.

Another plus: my surrogate daughter Wayan flew in from Bali for a week to spend some time with us. She had the year before taken a new partner, an Australian who lived in Bris.

One evening the five of us got together for dinner at the partner's flat. Five people from five different countries. Wayan had prepared a Balinese feast, seven or eight courses. I felt such joy being with my woman, now healthy, and these ever-so-close friends. There was a moment I looked at the three women sitting together on the settee: one black, one brown, one white. All dear to me.

Elisa got up to take her plate to the kitchen, and I took her place alongside Lome. We'd had a few glasses of wine, and as we watched Elisa move in that loosey-goosey manner, first the head, then the neck, followed by one shoulder and then the other, as though the parts only recently had been assembled and she wasn't yet sure how to coordinate them, Lome, one of the most graceful women I've known, and I had us a secret chuckle. For me, it was one of sheer delight. My babe.

We went off to Byron Bay. Stayed in the flat we had spent a month the year before. Just overlooking the sea. Dolphins and whales and sunrises over

the ocean almost within reach. It was, I reflected, our third honeymoon. How damn lucky can you get?

We walked the beach, swam in the somewhat chilly but enjoyable winter sea, strolled into town, coffee at Espressohead, split up for a couple hours, Elisa to the charity shops to look for clothes, me to the library or secondhand bookstores. Then we'd meet on the grass just off Main Beach and walk back barefoot in the sand, holding hands. We'd make love, have a nap. Or sometimes, have a nap, make love.

Life was a *mechiah*.

Elisa's youngest daughter was to join us for a few days towards the end of our first month in Byron. She'd been traveling solo through Asia the past four months, and would be spending a few weeks in Australia before heading home and starting university. I felt something change just days before she was to arrive.

Even now, I can't say what the change was. Was it Elisa, preparing for her daughter's coming? Or me, girding up for the loss of our couple's privacy? I'd say both.

Sioban was almost twenty, and beautiful: a blue-eyed knockout. And deferential in the way the English can be. So for sure she wasn't the problem.

I think what it was, we had to move flats her second day there. The new place was nice, but tiny, far too small a space for three. So I backed off. Maybe I backed off a little too far.

Mother and daughter. I was seeing a different Elisa. A bit controlling, certainly tighter. And boy, was I ever growing tighter. Elisa had asked me whether she and Sioban should move into another place while she was there. Hell, no, I said. But perhaps that would've been for the best.

One evening I'm in bed reading. Mother and daughter are in the kitchen/living area. Elisa comes in, begins stripping a blanket off the bed.

"What are you doing?"

"Sioban was cold last night."

"So you're taking this blanket, which keeps me from getting cold? There's plenty of other blankets in the wardrobe."

Sioban came into the room. "It doesn't matter, Mum."

"Yes it does. You said you were cold. I don't want you to be cold."

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She held up the blanket she'd just removed from the bed. To Sioban: "Do you want this one or another one?" Both Sioban and I started to giggle. "Ease off, dude," I said. "Kid's just spent four months traveling on her own in Asia, f'chrissake. She wants an extra blanket, she goes and takes one. Now put that back."

Only Elisa didn't see any humor in the situation. Or in much else.

In the early mornings I was getting out of bed, hitting the bathroom, throwing on some clothes and rushing out to catch the sunrise over the Pacific, a glorious sight.

"You've stopped holding me in the mornings," she complained.

"Well, yes, sorry. But in the other flat we could see the sunrise from the bed. Here you have to go out to the beach."

"I just want you to hold me."

"Can't I hold you after I come back? Or better yet, come with me. You know how I love sharing it with you."

Following morning she did come with. We stood together watching the pre-sunrise colors change. Only I don't think Elisa was seeing it. She kept glancing at her watch every thirty seconds.

"What's with the watch, dude? You have a train to catch?"

"I want to be back to make sure Sioban's up before seven. She has to be in town by eight to go kayaking with the dolphins."

"Aw for Pete's sake!" At which point Elisa turned on her heel and stalked away.

"She doesn't *need* you anymore, Mummy!" I yelled after, about as juvenile a line as I could manage.

And that's the way it went. During the day, they stayed away to give me space. In the evenings, I'd crawl into bed with a book to give them space. At times, Sioban and I would sit together on the settee and watch an English detective show on TV. If there was increasing static between the mother and me, the kid and I got along fine.

"Babe, you're so uptight since she's been here," I said one day.

"I'm uptight? *You're* uptight!"

"Okay, we're both uptight. Can't we do something about it?"

"She'll be gone soon," was all she would say.

The morning Sioban was to leave – after a week and a half – I went for my morning sunrise jog and swim. When I got back they were together in the kitchen area. Neither so much as glanced my way as I came through to the shower. When I got back to the bedroom, I saw there were two bags packed. One was Elisa's. She was leaving me. Again.

Elisa moved into a noisy backpackers. She would meet me each morning at Espressohead.

“Well?”

“I love you, y'know.”

“And?”

“I have to do this.”

She flew to Cairns for a week to be with Sioban, who'd already gone north on a tourist bus. When she got back, I figured she'd move back in. She didn't. She even stopped meeting me at the café.

I saw her once sitting on a bench outside a bank. Her hair had got longer. So had the silky down on her lower face.

“I went to see a numerologist,” she said. “She did both our readings from the dates of birth and the letters in our names. I'm guided by emotion, and you're guided by intellect.”

I just stared at her. She began crying. Got up and walked away.

Elisa had this uncanny Barry-locating radar. The year before in Bangkok, a city of 12 million, how many times when we were staying at separate hotels did she bump into me on the streets. Now, in Byron, a town of six thousand, I hardly saw her at all.

I moved from the beach to a house in town. The owner was a 58 year old guy name of Doug. He had just moved into a new house he'd built on the back of his lot, making available his original place for rental. We quickly shared life stories. When I told him about Elisa, about our strange breakup, he gave me a look.

“For a guy who's just been dumped by the woman he loves, you sure look terrific,” he noted.

Which I did. For some reason, I looked, and felt, fantastic. When my last woman, Raewyn, had left me in 2001, I completely fell apart. For weeks I looked like hell. Now, a woman I felt more for, in whom I had invested far

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more of my heart and mind, drops me and I couldn't remember ever feeling better.

My day now began at 4.30. Out of bed, on the ancient mountain bike Doug had lent me, a four-minute pedal to the beach. An hour's walking and jogging, twenty minute meditation, swim, back for a shower, then another four minute bike ride to Espressohead, where I had become such a regular that Michelle, the owner, and her staff didn't even bother asking; the long black with a side of hot milk arrived almost as soon as I'd found a table.

The rest of the day was spent in whatever manner appeared. I was not idle. I was not bored. I had books to read, the occasional person to rave with, CDs to listen to, maybe a rented DVD to watch at night. In bed by nine. I was, curiously, happy.

I did have this one bother. In July, I'd had arthroscopy done on my knee. A piece of cartilage had come loose, and the minor op had removed it cleanly. Shortly after I'd got to Australia, the country's top woman hurdler had had a similar condition, and the same operation. Two weeks later she was competing in the Olympic finals. Now October, my knee was still bothering me. No major pain, but swelling, aches, stiffness, the occasional twinge.

I decided to question the pendulum.

I had left both coins – the direct line to Peggy and the second, to my Highest Mind – at home. So I thought I'd fashion a new one with which to speak with the Barry That Knows All.

No way of drilling a hole in a coin, I first tried a button, but it didn't have enough weight. Then a screw, which quickly proved too unbalanced. I hunted around, finally settling on a large safety pin onto which I tied a piece of thread.

--Is there a major problem with the knee?

--No.

--But there is a problem.

--Yes.

--Do I need to have it looked at by a doctor?

--No.

--Will it heal on its own, given time?

--Yes.

--So is it okay to run on now?
--No.
--I should give up running altogether?
--Yes.
--Aw. Bicycling all right?
--Yes.
--Did the lady hurdler have a better surgeon than I did?
--No.
--Just a younger knee.
--Yes.
--So be patient.
--Yes.
--Which I'm so awfully good at.
--No.
A thought struck.
--I am talking with my Highest Mind here, right?
--No.
--No?
--Yes.
--Is this Peggy, then?
--Yes.
--Momma! You're coming through on a safety pin!
--Yes.
--Hot damn! Uh-oh. Ohhh boy. Um, I supposed you're pissed off as hell
at me, eh.
--No.
--You know. Over blowing the deal with Elisa.
--No.
--No, what? You're not pissed off or I didn't blow the deal? Wait, wait.
It's been so long, I forgot. Are you telling me I didn't blow the deal with
Elisa?
--Yes. (I didn't)
--But-but. Hang on. Did she blow it?
--No.

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--Nobody blew it, but it's blown.

--*Yes.*

--Another Peggy riddle.

--*No.*

--Okay, time out. Stay with me, I'm trying to work this through. Elisa and I are soulmates, yes?

--*Yes.*

--And the thing between us – is it over?

--*Yes.*

--It's really over?

--*Yes.*

--Is she doing all right?

--*No.*

--No. You mean she's regretting what's happened?

--*Yes.*

--Will she contact me, then?

--*No.*

--Stubborn pride.

--*Yes.*

--Should I contact her? Email or something.

--*No.*

--I shouldn't try to make contact?

--*Yes.* (I shouldn't)

Here, I almost put the safety pin-pendulum down, so deep into thought did I climb.

--Listen. Are you saying. What I mean is. Peggy, did we, Elisa and I, did we come together because...because you, you guys, Up There, you knew her cancer was coming?

--*Yes.*

--And-and you couldn't on your own do anything about it?

--*Yes.*

--But I could!

--*Yes.*

--By contacting you and asking for help.

--Yes.

--You wanted to help her, but you couldn't, you're not allowed to, without me seeking it through you.

--Yes.

I let out a huge sigh.

--And so...even though she misses me, and I, well, y'know, she's a major league, all-star pain in the *tuches*, still it'd be kinda nice to, I don't know, if not live together, then see a lot of each other, be close. But you're saying it wouldn't be right?

--Yes.

--It's in the highest good to just go our separate ways.

--Yes.

--Peggy, there are times, maybe most of the time, when I can't connect with what you tell me. What I get from you. Know what I mean?

--Yes.

--But now. I mean, this is so ridiculous, so damn absurd. Yet for some reason I really *feel* what you're telling me is capital-t truth.

--Yes.

--Don't you find this situation sad?

--No. (She does)

--Me, too. I rubbed my hand across my face. Me, too, Momma. Look, do me a favor?

--Yes.

--Send her healing. Not just the body. And not just for this moment. A mammoth ball of love and light, continuous and ongoing. Maybe – aw, hell – maybe even let her meet up with some dude she can really connect with, feel safe with, and have all the good things she and I had but without the constant bickering and aggravation. Will you do that?

--Yes.

--Cool.

--Yes.

I'm inside, at the desk. Outside the French window, Timothy is sleeping in

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the garden.

I don't talk with Peggy all that much anymore. I guess I don't need to. She won't provide me Phillies scores, won't give me a true cholesterol count: what the hell. Now and again, though, I pick up the pendulum to ask her to send a bit of loving juice to two beings that I love. A mad cat and an Englishwoman. Now I nod at the computer monitor.

--Reckon it's finished, Momma?

--Yes.

--Anything need changing?

--No.

--Read so far by zillions of dead folk, and maybe half a dozen who're still alive.

--Yes.

--Anything else before I go outside for a jog?

--Yes.

--Oh? You've got a message for me, do you?

--Yes.

--This to do with the book?

--No.

--My upcoming journey?

--No.

--All right, spell it out. A to M?

--Yes.

--A to G?

--Yes.

--A, B or C?

--No.

--D or E?

--No.

--F?

--Yes.

--Hell, Peggy. Not another haw-haw, elbow poke in the ribs.

--Yes. (Not)

--Okay. Second letter a vowel?

--*No.*

--Oh. L then?

--*No.*

And I know what it is. I take a deep breath, let it out slowly.

--Friends?

--*Yes.*

--Friends.

--*Yes.*

I glance out the window, back at the pendulum.

--You and me, babe.

--*Yes.*

--You betcha.

--*Yes.*

--Nice, dude.

--*Yes.*

--Thank you.

--*Yes.*

--For everything.

--*Yes.*

--Ah, just one more thing, if you don't mind?

--*Yes.*

--Am I, ah —. Am I, um, a 4 or better...?

EPILOGUE

The Future: Scenario I

I looked so serene. Below, off at an angle, I lay there, gray and wrinkled, but at peace. Thanks, old friend. Good friend.

I blew me a kiss.

The noise began. Louder. Louder. Louder still.

The scene changed. No longer in a familiar, comfortable room. I was now in a long tunnel. Moving, though without effort on my part.

Far in the distance I saw a circular light. I was being drawn towards this light.

I knew I'd been down this enclosed road before, but could remember none of it. Where did the illumination come from? What exactly were those art works on the walls?

I felt good. Contented. Relaxed.

I began to move faster. What mode of locomotion was this? I wondered.

The circular light was drawing closer. I so looked forward to getting there.

Closer and closer. Not far now. Not far at all.

And then I came right up to the mouth of the tunnel. And stopped. I looked out and was puzzled by what I saw.

The "light" was actually fires. Many, many fires. Hundreds of fires. Between them, above them, all appeared dark.

I stepped out, and was hit by the heat. Stifling, overpowering heat. I thought I saw a few figures silhouetted in the glare of the fires. I shielded my eyes, squinted. The figures – there now seemed to be more than a few – were small. Children? They approached.

They were not children. They were. They had. They.
They swarmed around me. Small, bent. Fat bodies and skinny limbs.
They had horns on top their heads. And tails. And cloven feet. And the
smell!

I could hear them cackle. Then as one they screeched: “*Surpriiiiiise!!!*”

I screamed.

They grabbed for me. I swatted away their scaly hands and took a step
back. Then another. I looked over my shoulder but couldn’t see the tunnel
mouth. It wasn’t there.

One of the small creatures began an obscene dance.

“You can check out anytime you like,” it sang in a creepy voice, “but you
can neeeeever leave!!”

They pulled me. Tugged me.

I began to scream. “No!!! NO!!! NOOOOO!!!!”

I couldn’t get away.

I screamed louder.

They dragged me through the fires to a stairway. A stairway going down.
Far down. Far, far down.

I screamed even louder as my legs failed me, crumpled beneath me. I
could feel the steps banging against my knees and shins. I used every ounce
of strength to pull away, but they were too strong.

Down I went.

Down.

Down.

Screaming.

Screaming.

Screaming.

The Future: Scenario II

I looked so serene. Below, off at an angle, I lay there, gray and wrinkled, but at peace. Thanks, old friend. Good friend.

I blew me a kiss.

The noise began. Louder. Louder. Still louder.

The scene changed. No longer in a familiar, comfortable room. I was now in a tunnel. Moving, though without effort on my part.

Far in the distance I saw a circular light. I was being drawn towards this light.

I knew I'd been down this enclosed road before, but could remember none of it. Where did the illumination come from? What exactly were those art works on the walls?

I felt good. Contented. Relaxed.

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I stepped out and was hit by the heat. Stifling, overpowering heat. I thought I saw a few figures silhouetted in the glare of the fires. I shielded my eyes, squinted. The figures – there now seemed to be more than a few – were small. Children? They approached.

They were not children. They were. They had. They.

They swarmed around me. Small, bent. Fat bodies and skinny limbs.

They had horns on top their heads. And tails. And cloven feet. And the smell!

I could hear them cackle. Then, as one they screeched: “*Surpriiiiiise!!!*”
I screamed.

They began changing. Suddenly, the faces and bodies of these horrible creatures were changing as though made of soft plastic. Growing taller. Leaner. The faces becoming human.

And the fires. They were dying out. And the sky was getting lighter.

One of the creatures had become Lena. My mother! Only she was young and beautiful.

And next to her, my sister Rosalie. And there: Uncle Nat. And Cousin Margy. And Lou. And, oh gracious me: Pat! They all looked so young. And healthy.

Night had somehow turned to day. The fires were gone. The scene around us was rolling hills and mountains behind them. And off to the left a lovely lake, and there to the right a beach with palm trees and sunlight creating diamonds on the surface of a sea.

They gathered around. More and more of them. There was Dippy, an old friend who once played basketball. And Richie, a friend who used to play baseball. And – oh my, Timothy! How good you look, Timbo! And Mister Futties, my ginger tom! How I loved you, dude! And there’s Little Futties, his bro! And look there: Zero the collie, and Farout the mutt, and Maz and Bessie and Joshua, all the dogs I’d ever had! And flying around them George the parakeet and Icky the canary, from when I was a kid!

Everybody was laughing. Even the animals. And glowing. My, how they all were glowing.

I felt tears forming.

“It’s true, then.”

“Of course,” they laughed.

“It’s all true!”

They laughed even harder.

Lena gave me a hug I thought would snap my back. “Welcome home,” she said softly. “And thank you.”

Her breath smelled of cinnamon and cloves.

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Then I had a thought. And as I had it, it seemed every one of them had it too.

They didn't draw back, exactly. Just made an opening so I could see past. She was standing just beyond.

At first I didn't recognize her. There was something familiar, but...

"Peggy!" I cried ever so softly. "Look at you!"

She didn't look at all like the Peggy I once knew. In fact, she looked...great! Healthy, radiant, beaming.

Boy, was she ever beaming.

I walked towards her.

She stood there waiting for me. Beaming.

I came right up to her.

"Momma," I smiled.

"Poppa," she grinned.

"Your idea to scare me shitless?"

She nodded.

"Figures." And we both broke out in guffaws.

We hugged. Oh did we ever hug. Behind me came cheering, applause.

I turned around to acknowledge, but...

There was no one there.

"Where did —?"

Peggy took my hand.

"Don't worry, love. You'll have plenty of time to see them all."

We had yet another laugh at that.

And hand in hand, we began walking slowly towards the beach.