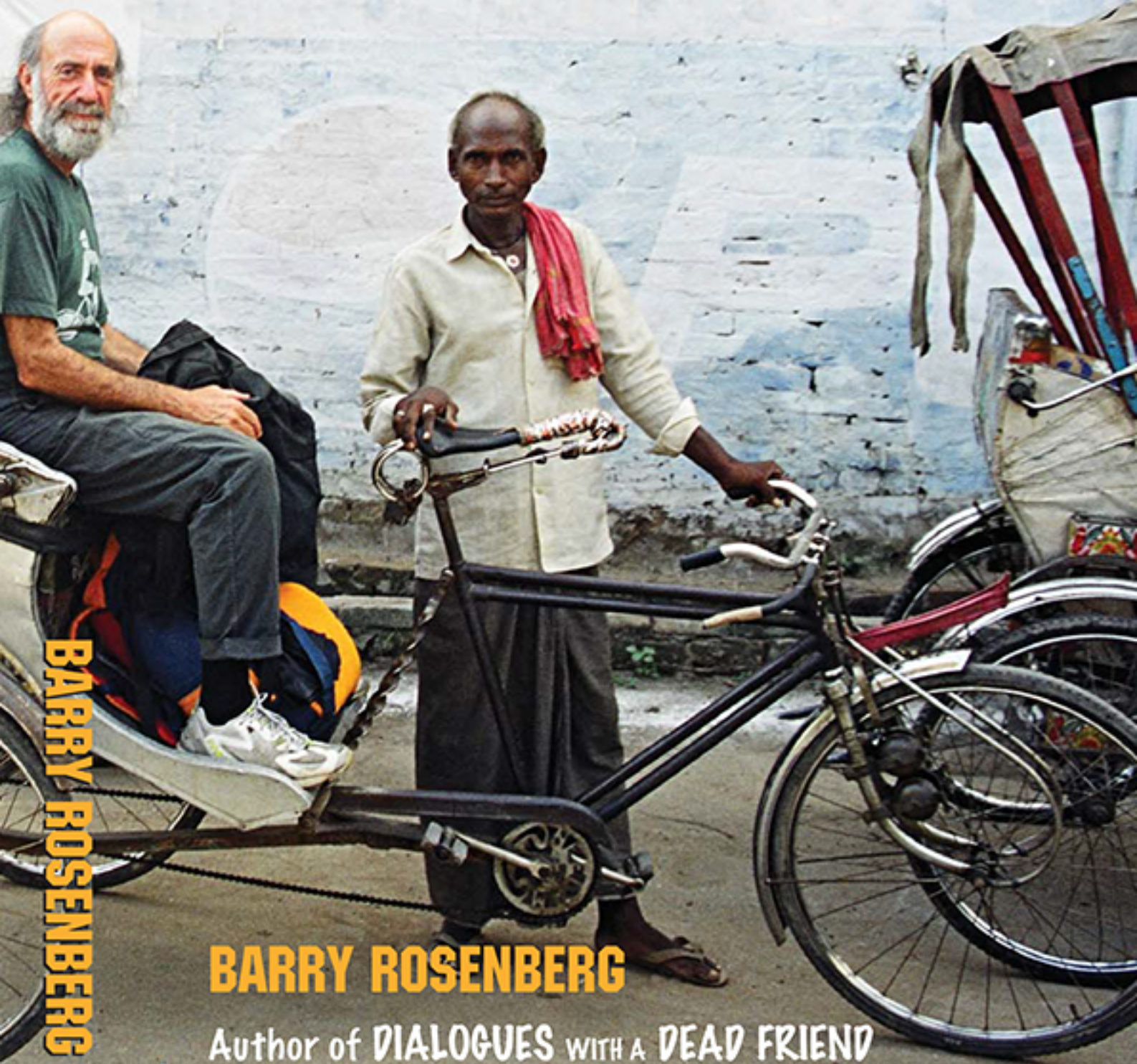


**FEARBUSTING**

# FEARBUSTING

BACKPACKING THE WORLD PAST 60



**BARRY ROSENBERG**

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Author of **DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND**

## The Author

Barry Rosenberg has taught meditation and mindpower to thousands of people around the world since 1972. He was founder and director of the Relax For Survival Foundation in Philadelphia in the 1970s, and founder/director of the Australasian Mindpower Institute in New Zealand and Australia in the 1980s and '90s. As a freelance features writer he has contributed several scores of articles to major magazines in America and Australasia, and is author of the non-fiction book *Dialogues With a Dead Friend*. He lives half the year on a seven mile beach in New Zealand, the other half out of a backpack.

*For Jean and Ernie...*

170 years between 'em  
those road legs may be wobbly  
but the minds are sharper than ever.

you're an inspiration, dudes!

# **FEARBUSTING**

*Backpacking the World Past 60*

**BARRY  
ROSENBERG**

Tookus bookus

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First published by *Tookus Bookus* 2005  
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35 Irene Street

Wynnum, Qld 4178

Australia

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Printed in New Zealand

ISBN: 0-476-01500-6

Second Printing: 2006

## Prelude

Halfway through living this book, the world came screeching to a halt, then veered into an abrupt 90° turn and shot off again. Like everyone else, I was thrown off-balance, in a state of shock. But my shock-state seemed different from everyone else's. What they did was panic. And stampede. Wild-eyed, the stampede blew past me, sometimes brushing by, but mostly zooming beyond. I'm not by nature a herd creature, though for sure a curious one. So I started moving along with the flow, slowly, asking: "Why are we—?" But no one answered. No one listened. They simply stampeded. I stopped. And the curious part of me thought: Now if they're going *that* way... And, one step at a time, I began moving *against* the flow. I, too, had fear – did I ever – but mine, interestingly, was overshadowed by curiosity, then a sense of rightness, then sheer determination. I quickened my pace. I jogged. I ran. Oddly, my path was without hassle or obstacle. Suddenly, I came to a clearing. And there I found ... I found ...

# 1

## May, 2001

I was sitting on the settee, the phone cradled between my legs, receiver clamped to the right side of my face. A female voice was talking. I only half paid attention.

Joe was just visible in his bedroom trying on a shirt given him by Elena, who was standing not ten feet away, ignoring me. Elena did not like me. I did not like Elena.

Elena was 12 years older than Joe. I was 24 years older than the woman whose voice on the phone I was half paying attention to.

Joe came from Boston. I came from Philadelphia. Elena was from Ghana, and the owner of the voice, name of Raewyn, from a small city in New Zealand. We were all born in the year of the tiger, Joe had discovered, only three different tigers. Terribly exciting.

Joe emerged into the living room wearing his new shirt. It was the kind of garment that would be the hit of any Halloween party. Joe had this goofy grin, whether from joy over the gift, the absolute ridiculousness of his appearance, or the knowledge that Elena was going to take him home, feed him lasagna, then shag his lights out, I neither knew nor cared.

Raewyn was talking.

It was late in my 63<sup>rd</sup> year. We were in Brisbane, which is a city of 1-1/2 million halfway up the east coast of Australia. All except Raewyn, who was at our beach home in a tiny town in New Zealand.

Raewyn and I had been a couple 4-1/2 years. There was a lot of love between us, but it hadn't been easy. We had, I think they call it, a cross-cultural relationship. *Joe and Elena* had a cross-cultural relationship, but theirs was obvious. A Philly

Jewboy and a Kiwi sheila: well, we spoke the same language (sort of), were of the same race (loosely taken). Beyond that, stratospheres apart. They drove on the left, we on the right. We switched knife-and-fork hands between cutting and eating, they didn't. That was the easy stuff.

Me, I was CEO of the Take No Shit Club. I wasn't pushy (especially). Nor aggressive (particularly). Nor boorish, loud or rude (much). And I gave you every opportunity to express your assholosity. So long as you were brief. Raewyn believed that making a fuss, of any kind, at any time, was not constructive human behavior. Where I tended to confront, she avoided, withdrew, *denied*.

When I met her, she was making a lot of money working for a major corporation. And spending it all. The past few decades I rarely reached five figures a year, and I bought only what I absolutely needed. She had changed quite a bit in this regard. That is, she was making even bigger money now that she was freelancing and contracting out to the very same corpo, but most of it found its way to the bank.

"There's only one thing worth spending gelt on," I announced early-on in our coupledom: travel.

I'd been a roadie since my thirties.

It was then I discovered a means to do this cheaply. My tutor was a young hippie female who used to hitch flights on private crafts, mainly corporate. It cost her nothing save short-term platonic company for the solo pilot. Sure, the guys try, she said. But she'd merely flash a smile and gently lift their hand off her thigh. And it worked. "Pay to fly? Hey, no way," she told me.

Not many private planes crossed the Atlantic. But charters did. And they left from east coast ports for Europe all the time.

Primarily, these charters were filled with clubs and groups, many of their members older types. They booked and paid months ahead. The period between booking and flying, some got sick, some died, some invented catastrophic fears (we're talking back THEN, understand). Meaning there frequently were empty seats on charter flights.

I'd go to Philly International and cruise the counters, looking for a bribe-able face. How did you know when you found one? You just did.

"Aw, man, I really need to get to Europe," I'd say, half smile, half forlorn. "Look, here's her picture." (I'd found it – years back.) "Ain't she a babe? Now look at *me*! Exactly! And if I don't get over there soon, she's gonna take off. Thing



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is, where'm I gonna get money for a ticket? I got fifty bucks to my name! Aw c'mon, man, there's got to be an empty seat. Huh? Huh?"

I joked. I pleaded. I looked pathetic. It never failed.

I didn't really care where the flight landed. Once over the Atlantic, out went the thumb. This was a novel experience my initial voyage, but after a while I got good at it. I might wait minutes, I might wait hours. But I always knew that at some time, some good person, some stranger, would stop for me.

My general direction was always south. To Italy, down the west coast, across the boot to Brindisi, the boat to Greece. For some years, I settled on the island of Paros, in the Cyclydes. Then my wonderful island was discovered: more and more backpackers, fat German businessmen, middleclass Greeks from Athens.

I island-hopped, made it to Turkey. Kept moving east – no more hitching, rather hippie buses picked up at the Pudding Shop in Istanbul. Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan. Dodging wars and civil unrest along the way. Finally I hit India, and bit into a slice of life which for me was like a needle and syringe. I became an Asia junkie.

I'd hang out longer and longer before going back to Philly. And upon each return, the pits. I simply was not one of these bods, many encountered on the road, who were always on the move. Who, many of them claimed, had no home. My umbilical cord might stretch halfway round the world, but ultimately its spring action would whip me back. To the skids.

I should explain. Roll back some years. Some *more* years. That's me, scrunched over in a chair, chin on my chest. In a darkened room, blinds down, curtains drawn. I had streaks that'd put Cal Ripkin to shame – months at a time. Get up to pee, grab a quick bite. Venture out only to restock the fridge. Months. What was I thinking about? What went through my mind? I didn't really feel bad. I felt nothing. Months. Then one day I'd go out – Christ, it's spring! It was over. Interesting thing, though I hardly ate more than the bare minimum for survival, upon my emergence from the hollow log I would note that I had *gained* weight. How was this possible?

My first memory of overwhelming unhappiness: I was nine. Walking on the boardwalk in Atlantic City with my mother. It was evening. I'd had my all-time favorite dinner – chicken in the basket – at my all-time favorite restaurant. A grape soda (5 cents) at the automat. Peanuts, hot roasted, from Planters. The boardwalk in Atlantic City, with its rolling chairs, bright lights, festive air. It should've been

a *mechiah*.

I walked alongside my mother in silence. I wanted – needed – to express what I was feeling, but was afraid. You always had to be careful what you said to my mother. You never knew what might set her off. So I strolled along, being eaten up by my insides. Finally I could hold it in no longer.

“Ma,” I pleaded, a soft, sobbing voice. “I’m...unhappy!”

She glowered at me, gnashed her teeth. “So who’s happy!” she bellowed.

Back further. I was, I think, three. Still in the crib. I’d wakened from my nap, bladder bursting. I could hear her downstairs, talking with the next-door neighbor, Mrs. McGrane. I called out. I was ignored. Again. “Be quiet! I’ll come up when I’m good and ready, not before!”

I was crying now. The pain, the burning. I was not allowed to call out. I couldn’t climb out of the crib. Finally, finally, I poked my wee bit out the pajama bottoms, through the bars, and let loose. Crying, crying. Later I could hear the outside door close, clump clump clump up the stairs. “You dirty little *momzer!*” she yelled. Tore the pajama tops off me, rubbed them in the puddle on the floor, then grabbing me by the back of the head, she rubbed the soiled top viciously in my face.

Report day was always traumatic. There’s me now, all A’s. Straight line of the alphabet’s leadoff letter. Except at the very bottom. “Co-operation.” C. Result of my chatterbox mouth. The phone would ring soon as I stepped through the door. Aunt Mary, on the reports of her three angels. A’s and B’s. “My sonny got a C in Co-operation!” was my mother’s sole declaration, showing me her sneeringest face.

I began letting things slide when I was around 14. Would start off like a bullet, do my homework, study for exams. Score top grade in the class, whatever the subject. Then I’d let go. No homework, no study. Still get A’s, mostly. But I didn’t care. I just didn’t care.

Somehow I got the scholarship to Drexel. Electrical engineering. I don’t know why I chose engineering. For sure I had no interest in either the sciences or technology. My mother, of course, wanted me to become a doctor. Engineering was a feeble attempt at rebellion, I suppose.

None of us straight out of high school was prepared for Drexel. There were old guys, just back from Korea. And Eastern Bloc refugee geniuses. No more number one, no more all A’s. Still, I didn’t do badly. Ninety in English down to 76 in

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algebra. Sixty-five was passing. Four of us passed algebra that first report.

My father was studying my card. A small man, barely clearing five feet. Bald, large nose. His head tilted back, bifocals on the end of his nose. “How come a 33 in algebra?” he wondered.

“No, look.” I ran my finger down the columns. “That’s the course number. Math 33. The grade is here. Seventy-six. Um, fourth highest in the class.”

“I see that. But a 33 in algebra! You used to be so good at math.”

“Dad, I just got done telling you. Wait.” I grabbed the catalog. “Here. Algebra. Math 33. They give each course a number. Helps them with their bookkeeping, I guess.”

“But that still doesn’t explain why you got a 33 in algebra.”

“I can’t believe you’re so thick! What did I just explain to you? I got —”

“Don’t you talk to me like that! I’m your father, don’t you dare yell at me!!”

My mother died when I was 25, of cancer. She just rotted away in the hospital. Towards the end she would talk to my sisters, talk to my wife, but not even look at me when I went to visit. I was there when she died. When she stopped...living. I began to bawl. It just exploded out of me. I dashed down a corridor until I found a fire exit. An orderly brought me a paper cup of something pink, a liquid. Like a child in tantrum, I swatted it out of his hands, bawled louder, uncontrollably.

My father had a stroke four years later. My older, unmarried sister moved in with him. From his deteriorating state, sitting scrunched over, squeezing a rubber ball – the only physio he subscribed to – he called my sister Lee. My mother’s name. Eerily, my sister began to look like my mother. She now even gnashed her teeth when angry. They had a relationship scripted by Edward Albee. Or Roald Dahl. Hate was their bond. As had been my parents’.

He died at 77, when I was 34. The last time I visited him at the hospital, he was sitting in a chair, eyes closed, a shrunken sack of corn. He did not acknowledge me. Sat there scrunched over, chin on chest. I knew he was aware of my presence. But did not open his eyes.

I never put a name to my condition. I took no medication. Nor sought help. I was unhappy – so who’s happy? There was a flip side to my prolonged states of sitting scrunched over in darkened rooms. I had, now and then, outbursts of anger. Raw, red...*rage*. No violence, mind. I wasn’t physically strong, had no idea how to fight. My mouth. When I was younger, in my teens, friends would wager I’d

end up dead before I was 40. “Death Wish,” they called me. I, too, was convinced I’d never see 40, but for a different reason. I was sure I’d die of cancer.

When my marriage fell apart – who in their right mind would want to live with me? – when I got laid off from my first real job, as house organ editor for RCA, then fired less than a year later from my second, doing PR with the Philly Eagles, when I fell out with every editor I ever dealt with as a freelance magazine features writer, when I lived in a VW bus on the streets of San Francisco, when I began a rather astounding, albeit perplexing career teaching meditation and mindpower to auditoriums full of people, making them laugh, setting them right, performing some 50,000 remote brain operations across a five year block in the ’70s, all this time I was a closet scruncher. What got me out of this deep, deep hole; what finally yanked me up to the surface and set me on my way to being a full-fledged member of the human race? Two things.

I’d like to say it was all the meditation and mindpower work I had done, and for sure this helped a hell of a lot. I’d love to report it was my change of diet, when I became meatless in 1974, and eight years later gave up fish (even lox!), to the point where, when I was at home, I ate roughly 90% raw and organic vegetables. I *know* this has been of vast assistance. But neither mind nor gut was what really did the deed. Two things.

The first was running. I started, seriously started, in 1977. I’d just divorced myself from the center I had formed around my teaching (the “Relax For Survival Foundation”), which had grown bigger and bigger, more and more people pouring through, 30 courses each semester in everything from a bicycle repairing course for women to do-it-yourself solar heating to your standard mind/body/spirit stuff. This in addition to my own full schedule of “Alpha Mind Control” classes. All at budget prices. Me making not a cent, living off the perks (free rent, food, gas for the VW). The only center of its kind in America: minimal fees, wholly non-religious, no guru figure (somebody made me a T-shirt reading GURU-SOME). Simply my hippie ethic carried over from the decade past: if it’s good, give it away.

Worked wonders for the multitudes, the center did, until it damn near suffocated its creator and director. There was a term for what I was suffering at Relax For Survival: ABOS. Activist Burnout Syndrome. When in 1977 the opportunity arose to go network with my act, moving it from Philadelphia to New York and then all major cities, I was ecstatic. There was just this one tiny problem. It would kill me.

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(My 40<sup>th</sup> birthday was a year away.)

So I quit. Turned the keys to the center over to a group of interested people, along with the program and what money was in the bank. The center folded four months later. Couldn't have cared less.

I drove cross country, settling with friends in Berkeley. Immediately, I got hit with a bout of diarrhea. It lasted two months, resisting all manner of medication. I'd forgotten what a stool looked like. Finally, my bowels got back to normal. The very next day I developed a skin rash that looked like scabies only wasn't scabies. Applied every potion and poison the quacks gave me. Nada. After two months the rash disappeared. My detox period had ended.

Still, I was in rotten condition, flabby, lethargic, woolly headed. Not a drop of energy. Living in someone else's home, I could only sit scrunched in a darkened room, chin on chest, during the day while they were working. My first 9 to 5 in years.

One of the guys in the house was a runner. Did a marathon every month. Me, a stroll around the block wore me out.

This one day, thoroughly fed up with my physical condition, I drove to Oakland. Parked the van, walked a block to a football field, stared at the surrounding running track. At the pace of an octogenarian *bubba* with a stroke cane, I loped around the cinders. A bunch of young black toughs sat on the sidelines cackling, calling out shit. I developed a side stitch, pushed on. A hundred yards to go, I stepped up the pace. I would sprint to the finish. Fifty feet from the end all my leg muscles seized. I fell on my face. The black guys slapped palms, bent double in hilarity. A normal place, I'd hand over my keys, ask to have my van brought round. Oakland. Right. I crawled, rolled, crab-walked to the VW, slithered in, drove away.

Three and a half months later I ran my first marathon.

My marks of success as a long distance runner? Shin splints. Metatarsal tears. Tendon pulls. Knees like jelly. So what. Above the waist I had never felt better. Tough shit, you guys south of the belt.

I moved to Eugene, Oregon, running capital of the galaxy. I ran every day. I couldn't not run. Five marathons total, plus several halves. As my body was getting slimmer, stronger, so too, I noticed, did my head. Sit in a darkened room, scrunched over, chin on my chest?? Are you out of your effing mind?

My running tapered off considerably over the years. Home now was a seven mile beach in New Zealand. There was nothing like a long beach run early every the morning (I did five miles), followed by a plunge in the sea.

Running led me to walking. (It's been said I run at the speed of walking.) I found early on in my dual occupations as a runner and a traveler that, for some odd reason that was me, the two didn't go well together. I ran at home, walked when on the road. Walked for hours, whether in a city, town or the country. The places I liked the most in untold years of backpacking the world were those that inspired good walking. When I first got to New Zealand in 1980, the city of Auckland was still pre-yuppie – a conglomeration of quaint, little-old-lady neighborhoods. Delightful walking town. And perhaps the only city in the world where you could walk from one ocean to another in a single day.

The second thing that yanked me up from my personal abyss was also a form of running. Running away.

Spring of '74. What was I doing? What else. I was broke, I was miserable, I was a sham. Me, the teacher of positive mindpower. You're supposed to teach best what you most need to learn? So learn!

I got off the chair, wandered downstairs to collect the mail. (I did this on occasion.) Letter from a lawyer. Years before, I'd been passenger in a car that got clipped by a drunk running a stop sign. The person driving my car hired a lawyer. Who called me. I resisted playing the game, but a chin-on-chest scruncher is no match for lawyerly persuasiveness. Every few months I phoned him – whenever I was completely broke. I'd last done this last a few days back. Probably a lost cause, he said. Other side won't budge.

The envelope bore a check for \$4500. They'd budged.

I asked friends what I should do with my windfall. One said, Travel. I don't think he'd ever been more than 200 miles from Philly.

I bought a backpack designed for Shaq O'Neil, boots that belonged on Bjork, a sleeping bag which rolled to the size of a beer keg. Went to the airport and "bought" a ticket to Europe.

The beginning of an addiction.

Every year around May I'd head to Paros. First time there I discovered a deserted lighthouse keeper's shack on the very point of the island. Home. I slept on the beach, swam naked, meditated in a tiny church that, I learned to my delight, was

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used one day each year – my birthday!

I grew brown, my beard turned blond, my body got firm. Then I went back to Philly and regained in weeks my normal states of paunch and scrunch. Which hung around till May.

I had two experiences on Paros that might bear mentioning.

Sleeping on the beach. Cocooned in my sleeping bag. In my dream, a voice: Wake up and look at your house.

I forced my eyes open. Peaked at my watch. 4am. I was facing away from the shack. I twisted around and there, sitting just on the edge of the roof, was the full moon, huge and orange. It was as though something – guardian angel? spirit guide? Plato? – wanted to share with me this remarkable picture.

Following year. I decided to meditate as the sun was setting one evening. I didn't often do this, being primarily a morning meditator. When I focused my eyes after, the sky was a magnificent tapestry of pinks and purples. Stunning. Again a voice: "You're really a good friend!"

In 1978, no longer teaching, no longer a center to attend to, I kept going east when I left Paros in September. Hitching now was out of the question. So in Istanbul I connected with a guy from California who had a VW bus. Then a third party joined us: a feminist type from New York.

The feminist made no bones about her sexual politics. Even when the California guy, who'd been this way half dozen times, explained we were going through heavy Muslim country.

"Then it's about time they learned about women's rights," she said.

It was in eastern Turkey ("Dodge City," the Californian called it) that the feminist decided to go for an early morning jog. We tried to dissuade her, or at least let one of us go with. No deal. "Look, there's no one even around!" she said. Dressed in tight T-shirt and short shorts, off she went. Over a rise and out of sight. For 30 seconds. Then back over the rise she came. Fast. Followed by about 50 local males, their eyes wide, tongues lolling. We tossed our breakfast things in the bus and took off, dragging her into the vehicle as we swept past.

Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan. Finally, India. Disneyland on acid.

In Delhi I hopped a ride in a converted Mercedes bus with a dozen hash smoking young Germans. The motor semi-conked out shortly after we began heading southwest, but this was a blessing. Limited to 30km an hour, we slowly transversed

the Rajasthan desert, a truly amazing visual experience. Then we hit Goa. And the beach. And gorgeous Western babes walking around naked. Heaven! I thought, as we pulled in one afternoon. Hell! I realized the following morning. I was not one to talk about vibes, but never in my life had I felt such bad ones as on this magnificent, hippie-laden, drug-infested, ripoff-happening beach.

So I grabbed a series of local buses, on each one asking if anyone knew of a beach *with no white people*. They thought I was nuts, yes, but Indians think all whiteys are nuts. Four buses later I'd found my perfect beach, Bapsoro by name. And stayed there almost till the end of winter.

It was not quite spring when I got to Nepal, overlanding from Varanasi to Pokhara. I found one of the few accommodations for backpackers. (There are hundreds now.)

I arrived at night. There was no room at the lodge, but this proved little problem. The *did*i (older sister) simply kicked her father out of his bed. I slept there, he on the floor beside me.

It was barely dawn, and cold as sin, when I awoke to the old boy yanking me by the arm out of my sleeping bag. "Baba, get up! Come!"

Cursing, I crawled out of the warm bag, smacked my head against the lintel of the doorway (for the first of many times in this country of small people) and stumbled outside.

I stood in the garden, wrapped in my bag. "What the hell do you want, you old geezer!"

"Baba, look!" he pointed behind me. I turned around, expecting lord knows, and let out a cry. For there stood the entire Annapurna range, six of the ten highest peaks in humanity, like great scoops of ice cream, seemingly within fingers' reach.

I stood there watching the mountains boldly emerge as the background turned from dark gray to light blue. Of a moment, the first speck of sunlight kissed the right side of the highest peak. It was then I realized I had in my hand a cup of hot tea. I didn't remember how, or when, it'd got there.

One night, after everybody had gone to bed following the standard roadies' rave, I stepped outside the lodge for a short walk. It was freezing cold, the perfect sky starred like a glowworm cave. I was ogling the sky as I strolled. Suddenly a force—the best way I can describe it—bowed into me from the right, knocking me on my backside. There was no one there. No animal. No yak, no yeti. Directly



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ahead in the path I was taking was a cesspit, six feet deep, thin layer of frozen scum on top. My next step would've taken me in. Through the ice and over my head and...

I sat there, stunned. No explanation. None.

The two "voices" on Paros and the blind-side in Pokhara come readily to mind. But there've been dozens, scores. Walking down a street and for no obvious reason turning up an alley and there, *there*... That sort of thing. It seemed to happen all the time when roading, until my reaction became more *of course* rather than *oh wow!*

In mindpower parlance, the mind becomes unencumbered by the standard baggage, so much more clear and focused that it simply is doing what it should be doing normally, what Einstein was referring to when he said we're using only 10% of our mental capacity. Double it and you're still a dummy, but what amazing stuff you come up with.

The trouble was this: these wonderful "coincidences" (I called them *aha's*) only happened when I was Out There. Well, I suppose they happened at home, now and again; I was just too blunted by reality to be aware.

Why not spend ALL my life on the road, then, creating and living magic 365 to the year? Because, as I learned early on, travel for me truly was Running Away. And there came a moment when what I was running away from caught up.

I had an insight a few years after I'd begun serious travel: I possessed a built-in roadie timing mechanism. Maximum feel-good duration in any one place was six to seven weeks. In this time I could thoroughly absorb a place, become part of it. I no longer was a tourist (in their eyes), nor a traveler (in mine). I belonged. And that was the problem. Because after six or seven weeks the zits and warts surfaced, I began growling at people, got down on myself. I could FEEL myself slow-motion scrunching over. The ogre had caught up with me. Time to mosey.

It took six *months* before an entire journey got that way. The bastard was sitting on my head, glued there. Time to go home.

When the year prior to meeting Raewyn the whole Running Away game seemed to crumble, when the brain began numbing down following a much briefer period, and I could hear Scunch heavy-breathing just round the next bend, I should've pulled up the pegs and flown on home. Instead I forced myself to keep to my usual schedule. And grew numb, numb-er, numbest.

I dragged myself back to my gorgeous beach and made a few half-hearted

attempts at my happy summer routine. A few runs. A swim now and then. But mainly I sat. In *that* position. Oh God, I thought. It's all over.

Then I met Raewyn, a corporate soul, the least likely person to team up with a guy like me and go roading for half a year. But she did it. First year we mainly did Indonesia. Early in the journey she began putting up a stink and dragging her heels. She had just left the business world: computers, fluorescent lights and a vocabulary that included words like "prioritize". Twelve years in that milieu! This entire lifestyle – not just traveling, but doing it relatively unplanned; staying not at starred hotels but guest houses and homestays – was against the grain of her very corporate being.

It was not fun sharing road life with a thirtysomething recalcitrant child. We'd talk about it. That is, I would. She'd go blank. I seriously thought we'd have to separate. And then one day she quit the shit. Just...grew up! And life on the road became bliss.

Following year we did Nepal and Laos. In between, Raewyn went back to the corporos as a freelance. Long hours, yeah, but no more viva la company.

Year after that we stayed closer to home, exploring the east coast of Australia and New Zealand's South Island. And then last year, well, what we decided was this. Raewyn would work one long, concentrated term through the winter. I'd sacrifice my annual Out There and remain home to support her. Then we'd break loose. India. The Big I. The Big Show of backpacker travel.

At Auckland International, the boarding call came. We hugged. And hugged. She wouldn't let go. "I love you," she cried, tears down the cheeks. "I love you so much."

\*

Elena is already out the door. Joe, in his silly shirt, his even sillier grin, is heading that way. Door closes.

Raewyn is talking.

"What was that you said?" I ask into the phone. A tiny bell, a tinkle, is going off in my head.

"I was saying about the office, how—"

"No, no. Before that. Something about—"

"Oh. Well. I said that, um, there's going to be some changes. You know, like in

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our relationship.”

“Ah? Specifically.”

“We’ll talk about it when I get there. It’s no big deal.”

Another bell. A gong.

“Hold on, hold on. What’s going on here, dude?”

“Look, don’t worry. I’ll see you soon. Two weeks. Less than two weeks, more like twelve days. Or is it thirteen —”

“Rae-wyn.”

Silence.

“Well, it’s just, y’know. I think it’s, that is, the two of us...”

“RAEEE-WYYYN!!!”

Silence.

“I just think it’s best that we don’t, um, that we stop being, ah, y’know... That we just be friends. Is all.”

Friends. But we are friends, best friends. How can —?

The only sound is the distant plinking of tumblers falling into place. Then:

“AAAARRRRGGGGGGGHHHHHHH!!!!!!”

Bestial, primordial, a wolf roar from a part of me so deep I didn’t know existed. Suddenly, I can’t catch a breath. Involuntarily I fall over on the settee.

I think: How? Why? Everything’s been so good lately.

I think: She’s got someone! But if she does, why does she still want to go traveling with me?

I think: Traveling! She’s dumped me and still wants to go *traveling* together!?

I had a phone in my hand. I was lying on my side on a settee. In Joe’s living room. In Joe’s house in Stones Corner, Brisbane. My face was hot, hands were icy cold. The rest of me didn’t exist.

The voice, when it appeared, was hardly recognizable.

“You’re out!” it croaked. “Out of the house. MY house! Pack and leave. And for sure I won’t be traveling with you. I don’t even want to see you when you come over here. I’ll change my ticketing. I don’t know how, exactly, but just so I don’t have to spend time with you, anywhere.” I hung up. Slam.

I could feel my body now. From neck to knees I was in a vice clamp.

Sudden thought: India! I’ll have to travel India...*alone*! Jesus Christ, I’m 63 years old! There’s no way I can solo India at 63!!

India...63...India...63...

And the rage I'd felt just moments ago was now completely blotted out by an overwhelming sense of fear.

\*

Christians blame the devil, an external force. Muslims blame everybody but Muslims, calling them infidels. Freud claimed it's all us, within us, and gave the deal a few stuffy names like id and ego and superego. The Buddha, it was said, broke the mind down into 85,000 component parts; but then, the Bude always was a bit of a showoff.

I've got my own theories. That part of the mind which gets us through the day, up in the morning, out on the job, work like the, um, devil for our pay, this I term Base Mind. Teach Base a trick – tying your shoelaces, say – and Base will have you doing it automatically the next 90 years. A plodder, this, a workhorse: reliable and steady.

Then there's High Mind. This is the part that delivers terrific ideas and hunches – the ones that work. High Mind is creative, provides you sparkling observations and insights (*aha's*). It was High Mind which spoke to me twice in the Greek islands, that knocked me on my keister in Nepal. And which has been as essential a part of me when I'm on the road as my passport, or backpack. High Mind is the mental energy behind what's wrongfully termed miracles.

Oh, if only High Mind were in charge of the show all, or even a substantial part, of the time.

It's not, because of Asshole Mind. This is the bad dude, the one gets you in trouble. The one that says, Yo, one more drink before you get in the car, go on. Or, See the babe at that table? She's just *waiting* for you to go over and make a play. Or, the next toss of the dice is a winner, I *know* it! Asshole is a master of disguise and deceit, has ever so many voices. I still haven't made up my mind whether Asshole is malicious or simply mischievous. (Problem was, which part of my mind would do the making up?)

Asshole Mind has this craving to run the act. And mostly did. Oh, it gave you rope, understand. Enough so you thought, really believed, you'd beaten the bastard.

Now, fear. This is Asshole Mind's prime tool. It generally manifests in obvious physical ways, anything from butterflies to diarrhea to herpes outbreaks. But not

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always. Denial and Control are masks, placed to hide the fact of fear. They're worse than the physical symptoms because time usually smooths out the shakes, or panic. The twins, D & C, are nearly impossible to get rid of because you deny they even exist.

Freud had us believe there's only one primary fear: death. Everything else is a mini-death. Like loss. Of freedom, of possessions, spouse, job, face. Ah, face. Big mutha, is face.

Upon Raewyn's declaration of divorce, Asshole Mind was rubbing its hands with glee. Because it knew well that one of my biggest hang-ups was the body that had been carrying me around this incarnation. Although in recent years I'd pretty well come to terms with my physical being, I could never say I liked it.

My face, for instance. From the elongated crown to the recessive chin, and that big Jewish nose in the middle. Good lord, was there a first cousin marriage in the woodpile somewhere? Just when I grew a beard to hide the chin, the hair up top fell out, revealing the conehead in full.

My ears. Well, they're not bad as ears go. Nice shape, not too big nor too small, don't stick out. And then, one day, probably one single moment, they began sprouting hair. Not peach fuzz, oh no: *hair*, momma – black and thick. On the tops, on the lobes, and from within, gushing. Where the hell did these follicles suddenly come from? So there's me shaving: my cheeks above the beard, daily, so I don't look like Wolfman; my pate every few days so the dozen pathetic things that do grow there (and stick straight up like I've put my finger in an electrical socket), my ears once a week.

But none of these self-complaints represent the worst of that face. This happened just recently. After years, years, of perfectly healthy teeth, hardly a cavity, rarely a filling, they began loosening. First to go, the back ones, didn't bother me all that much. So long as I had a few to chew with and the gaps didn't show. Then the four front lowers got so floppy they sounded like wind chimes when I talked. I put it off and put it off. Finally I had them yanked.

Obviously, there are a hell of a lot of things – war, pestilence – worse than having to wear a dental plate. For the rest of humankind, that is. For me...well, I hate it. Hate it and am ashamed of having to wear the blasted thing.

Then there's my torso. When I weighed 215, I was a fat slob. The 140lb marathon man was scrawny. Now around 150, I run, yes, but I don't have a runner's

body. Never did, actually. In the past, I might be the lone entrant in a field of 5000 marathoners with pockets of flab.

I have wide shoulders but pipe-cleaner arms and dainty wrists. Fatty breasts, love handles, wide hips, flat ass, skinny legs. Was there a wildcat strike on the assembly line the day they put me together, and a bunch of management dolts slapped on whatever spare parts were handy?

And that wrinkled little knob between my legs? Don't even ask.

No, a hunk I am not.

My hippie days, the peer pressure to be naked amongst 50,000 nude bodies in a Golden Gate Park be-in, say, brought me out of an intense shame over not looking like a model for Jockey briefs. As a matter of fact, for a quarter century the body was more cause for humor than woe. The telltale signs of aging, face lines, doohickeys, the graying beard, cut short the laughing.

In my mid-fifties, I was convinced I would be single, and celibate, for the duration. Then came Raewyn into my life, and once more I could look at myself in the mirror, giggle and wonder, "Why would anybody want to look like that?"

Strangely enough, the package that I've found either lamentable or laughable has over the years and decades found its way into a rather fascinating number of beautiful women's beds. Rarely at my instigation. Females sure are weird.

But this was different. I was now 63: *zeida* country.

Those first few days following the Announcement, I allowed Asshole Mind to completely override its brothers. (Like I had a choice.)

AH convinced me, for example, it would be right and proper to forgo India, at least for this year, return to New Zealand, get in the car and tour my adopted country. Just imagine how much fun that would be! I bought this line so completely that I phoned my travel agent in New Zealand to cancel my entire ticket. When I learned he was off on a two week golfing trip, I felt a jolt of ice shoot through my veins. Asshole Mind cackled. High Mind went tut-tut. And Base Mind took me to the fridge for a nosh.

All right, I thought, I'll go to Asia, BUT NOT TO INDIA!!

Worst times were night and earliest morning. Sleep? Forget it. In between nightmare videos I'd lie awake, heart pounding, notions of escape flickering across the screen. Morning (usually it was still dark, but no hope of returning to nightmare mode past 5am) I'd just lay there dreading the coming of day until I heard Joe

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stirring from his room. I always gave him first bathroom time, he being a working sort.

Once out of bed I was okay. Because that's when anger hip-shoved fear aside and took charge.

Anger. How many times a day did I do her in, and in such delightfully innovative ways! Yeah, anger carried me through until late at night when I was too weary to remain awake. Then fear returned, and its all-too-vivid scenarios.

Every dream segment had to do with abandonment. People from every paragraph of my life lined up to reject me. Animals too, especially cats. They'd be right there, in my house-that-suddenly-was-not-my-house (buildings rejected me as well), then they'd disappear, never to be dream-seen again. A human turning me out was bad enough, but a cat! Hey, I'm the all-time cat lover!! Often I'd awake from a feline-fleeing vid with an overwhelming sense of guilt and sorrow.

When in Brisbane, I walk. Miles and hours daily. It's a splendid walking city, cut in halves like jigsaw puzzle pieces by the Loch Ness Monster-shaped Brisbane River. But there was now a problem of sorts walking.

A few months before, at home, Raewyn and I had gone to a concert held in the park. The band was playing some old-time rock n roll, and we got into it. Must've danced two, three hours. Barefoot, on the grass. Next morning I could hardly walk. My heels were killing me. Bone spurs, I was told, whatever they are. They'd improved some, still they hurt like heck. So added to my trick knees, lower back degeneration, and upper back frequently acting in sympathy, I had heels that pained and burned. End of a walking day I'd apply ice, hot water with Epsom salts, arnica oil. Nothing worked. But NOT to walk was death. It was either walk or give in to Scrunch. Who now had a comrade in AH.

I'd leave the house around eight and walk north to the river, several meandering trails to choose from, each about 40 minutes. Once I hit the river I could either cross on one of the bridges – the ancient Story was by far my favorite – or hop on a ferry. Didn't matter whether it was the speedy Cat or the ever-so-slow, old city ferry. Nor which direction it was headed.

I would get in the queue, the sole anomaly to the dressed-in-black, cell-phone-clutching, chemical-stinking shoetop-starers, and shuffle aboard. I might be the only one to say good morning to the ferry staff. The biz bods sat inside, silently staring down at their laps; I would stand out on the deck, letting the wind and early

sun hit me in the face. Christ, I might be filled with fear and hopelessness, but I was still alive!

Always I ended up at the Cosmopolitan Restaurant on Brunswick Mall in The Valley. My safe house. I have this remarkable sonar for café-hangs. I can arrive in a new city anywhere on earth and within hours caffeine-see out the perfect place to sit, have a great coffee, read or write or just look at the locals. The Cosmo was a nine-point-seven.

The Mall itself is now pretty much owned by Hong Kong Chinese. Who are, of course, famous for their sterling taste in architecture and decoration. But the Chinese are far from stupid: they took over everything, tarted up the shops, screwed up the ambiance, sure. The Italians they leave to run the cafes.

So I would sit outside, at a table where the tobacco smoke hopefully didn't find a thermal into my face (fat chance), and become part of the best scene in town. The old Eye-ties talking soccer (heatedly). The Chinese and Vietnamese talking biz (loud). The struggling musicians, artists, professional lesbos. The bedraggled junkies and hookers wandering past. The aborigines, the pumped-up cops. A scene.

And for a few minutes I would completely get away from my sorry state of being. Until Asshole Mind said, Forgetting something, pal?

Ten, ten-thirty, I was off again. Wandering. Every second day, it seemed, I'd stop in at the airline office. I was using Thai for the entire journey, mainly because they permitted date changes at no penalty. I frequently changed dates on my trips; now, *now*...

Over the two weeks following The Crash, I changed dates no less than half dozen times. I always dealt with this one agent in the Thai office. I felt hugely sheepish. Once I almost blurted out the truth. "She dumped me and I don't want to face up to her!" For once, Base and High stuffed a rag in Asshole's mouth.

The sixth change seemed set. Not only would I avoid Raewyn completely, but, as the agent pointed out, every new flight booking had an available window seat on a break row (leg room, you see). She couldn't remember this ever happening before. An omen! Yes!!

That afternoon I went to a movie. There were half a dozen people in the theatre. The movie, I couldn't remember. What happened after will stay with me forever.

On the way out, I stopped in the men's room . And was hit with a feeling never



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before experienced.

First I had to puke. Then my legs turned to rubber. I could no longer breathe. I became dizzy. I braced against a wall, and when this didn't help, made my way into a booth and sank to my knees. I couldn't unload, and the other sensations just got worse. I thought: I'm dying! Oh, how fitting: Death in a public toilet!

It got worse. I cried out: "RAEWYN!!!" *Raewyn?* Asshole Mind let loose a shriek of delight.

After several minutes I stood up. Passing a mirror I noted my face was alabaster. I tried a breathing technique, long, slow, connected ins and outs. This seemed to bring some relief. I was still wobbly when I hit the street. A junkie having a coronary.

The walk home took 45 minutes. It would've taken considerably less had I gone in a straight line instead of staggering from one side of the pavement to the other. Along the way "I" had a great thought: Why NOT have Raewyn accompany me as planned? So we won't have sex, so what? We hadn't exactly been burning holes in the bedclothes lately anyway. Hey, yeah!

When I was nearly home, it occurred that the symptoms of my not-death had all but vanished. I actually jogged the last few hundred yards, and by the time I was in the door, I was fine. Shaky, but fine. No noticeable fear. No anger. And no more thoughts of asking a certain ex-partner to travel with me.

That night I had my first good sleep in two weeks. Not one noteworthy dream of loss. And when I awoke...

When I awoke, I rang up Thai and canceled all the bookings I had made the day before.

# FEAR-BUSTER #1

## Meditation ... a simple how-to-do-it for calming & focusing the mind

In the 1960s, a clever little brown man looked around from his perch in India and noted a great discrepancy on the planet. Most of the people lived in his part of the world, yet most all the money was in the other.

Another thing he noticed was that the wealthy, almost all of whom were white, suffered from great stress and stress-induced illness. Shiva's balls! he thought. I'm gonna be rich.

Now, meditation has been around for a few thousand years at least. Who in India had not heard of it, or tried it out? What the little brown man did that was so special was *package and market* the stuff. He wrapped it with pretty ribbons, placed a mystique around it, added some big name Western artist supporters, and gave it a brand name. And then he made an outrageous statement: his brand (we'll call it Toyota Meditation) was the *only* sort that worked for whiteys.

Well, the whiteys bought it. Toyota Meditation sold in the West like samosas. And indeed, it did work. The little brown man made zillions.

The game was this: you brought in to the teacher (the little brown man had long hair and beard; his teachers all looked like they were spawned by the Bush family) 1) a piece of fruit; 2) a clean handkerchief; 3) a pile of gelt. All for a magic word, which you pledged not to tell a single soul. (Reason being that everyone of the same age got the same word.)

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Amazingly, people wouldn't tell even closest family members or friends what their magic word was.

My best friend around this time was a guy named Benny. Benny and I shared everything. No deep, dark secret existed between us.

When I began teaching Alpha Mind Control at the University of Pennsylvania in 1972, I begged my best pal to come sit in on the class. He never did. Then one day he confided he had paid \$500 to be "initiated" into the Toyota Meditation club.

My first question: "You whaaat?" My second: what's your mantra?

"Oh, I can't tell you that -- it's a secret between me, the little brown man, and the little brown man's accountant!"

"BENNY!" I yelled. But he would not be moved. So I did this: I closed my eyes, took some deep breaths. Then I took myself down to my Alpha Temple (Benny had no idea, of course), sat before a large white screen, took a console in my hand, and sent out this directive to the Universe: I want Benny's mantra to appear on the screen.

I fiddled the knobs on the console some, then waited. In maybe 20 seconds tiny black dots began streaming in from the left side of the screen, forming slightly out of kilter patterns. I fiddled with one of the knobs, and letters began focusing into view.

"I see an S," I said aloud, my eyes still closed but squinting now. "Then H. I. A. And I can't quite - I think it's an N. SHIAN?"

I opened my eyes to see Benny doing a standup impersonation of the Lincoln Tunnel.

"It's Shiam," he said softly. "But Jesus F, how the hell did you do that?"

I held out my hand. Grinned. "Gimme five hundred smackers, boychik, and I'll tell you."

Meditation. I won't deny Toyota works; it does that. So do a thousand other types. It's a practice of quieting the mind that's easy to learn, easier to do.

The basic premise is this: by concentrating on a single thing, to the *passive exclusion* of everything else, you focus, and then bring an attentive sense of peace, to your mind and body.

To the body? Yes. And when the Toyota people's claims of such were made public, a nice Jewish boy at Harvard Medical by the name of Herbert Benson cried, Rubbish! He knew that only drugs and sharp knives could accomplish this.

So Herbie the Doctor did an experiment. He took 30 Harvard students who were about to be soaked by the little brown man's robots, and tested them for a number of physiological functions like blood pressure, circulation, heart and pulse rate. Those who, months later, claimed to have meditated every day, were brought back for followup testing. And lo and behold, their physiological functions had, to a large extent, normalized! Herbie was aghast.

What he reckoned was that 1) meditation does, in fact, work, but 2) Toyota was not the only vehicle that could take you there.

So what he did was test 30 different non-meditating students, then taught them to meditate simply using as their target of attention the word "one". Months later? You got it. They, too, had normalized. Ergo and alas. (Benson's findings were documented in his book *The Relaxation Response*.)

Think of meditation this way: place your hand directly in front of your face. Focus on it. What most likely happens is your attention, for a time, remains on the hand, then suddenly it shifts to the area beyond. You bring it back to the hand; it stays glued, then shifts away again. Your hand represents the object of your meditation, everything else the stuff in passive exclusion. You don't deny the background exists, you simply try to gently keep it...in the background.

Our minds, you see, are cluttered with verbal rubbish. Voices talk to us, nag us, tell us how inferior we are. We reflect on mistakes of the past and apply them to events expected in the future. Yeah, Asshole Mind has a variety of tricks.

Ideally we would empty our heads of every single thought. Just try it. (Like telling someone, "Don't think of a carrot.") So practically speaking, meditation does the next best thing. It teaches us to concentrate on one single thing.

Now, this source of attention can be many things: a sound, a picture,

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flame of a candle, your own breathing. The simplest focal object is a sound you yourself create. Thus the mantra.

By definition, a mantra is a syllable, or series of strung-together syllables, that have no pictorial representation. Nonsense words, really.

In ancient times, the wise folks, their imaginations not yet sucked dry by TV, fast food and the Net, discovered vibrations. ("In the beginning there was the word." Hm.) There were vibrations to enhance all sorts of things when chanted over and over for several minutes. (The first love song?) A meditation mantra, or vibrational sound, has the quality of creating a more relaxed, mentally healthy state when repeated over and over.

Now hold on just a second. Cut out the airy-fairy crap and tell it in terms I can relate to! Okay.

In the 1960s, some scientific types discovered the existence of electromagnetic brain waves. There are four basic waves, ranging along a scale of cycles per second, or *hertz*. The wave that exists between seven and 13 hertz (which they labeled *Alpha*) was found to be related to a relaxed, *yet alert*, state of mind. Prolonged times spent in Alpha, the researchers found, will make you, well, sort of stoned. But with total control of the thought processes. Einstein, according to his autobiography, spent an inordinate amount of his time Alpha-stoned.

Just as pumping iron over a period of months will give you muscles, not just when you're lifting, but all the time, the practice of staying in Alpha -- meditation -- will, eventually, enable you to be more relaxed and better focused not only during your period of meditation, but 24 hours a day.

I found my personal mantra (free!) in the Himalayas a bunch of years back. I was trekking solo on the Langtang Track. I was a lot heavier then, and even though the Langtang is one of Nepal's easiest Himalayan walks, I was struggling. Locals, women and kids as well as men, all barefoot and many carrying goods the size of refrigerators in those woven baskets strapped to their foreheads, would jog past me as I huffed and puffed along. I could hear them saying something that sounded like, "Oh money pad my home." Though it was in their local tongue, I could guess what it was: "Hey, lookit that fat git with his fancy shoes and color-coordinated

gear. What a turkey!"

In every village I came to was a temple, Hindu or Buddhist. Inside, graffiti was knifed into the woodwork all over. Four words, in the Sanskrit alphabet. I asked someone who spoke English. "Oh money pad my home," he replied. I mean, how the hell did they know I was coming?

But no. *Om mani padme hum* is a MANTRA, it was explained. (Pronounced ohm mah-nee pahd-may hoom.) Literally translated, "the universe is the jewel in the lotus of my heart". Which is sweet, but it is the vibrational quality of those six syllables that make om mani padme hum effective.

While there is only a single hard-and-fast rule to mantra meditation (do it! daily!!), there are any number of sensible suggestions.

Basically, try to make meditation a feel-good habit. (If you set out to meditate because you *should*, because it's *good* for you, forget it - you'll find some "valid" reason to quit.) A set time and place every day will in a matter of weeks become a habit. Base Mind will lead you to automatically.

I reckon the best time is early morning; this will set the tone for your entire day. Best place? One free from distraction or disturbance. A pleasant room, the garden, whatever. (I've known people living in crowded town accommodation to use the bathroom. Whatever it takes.) Turn off your mobile!

Try NOT to meditate soon after eating, as a recently fueled body tends to make the mind sluggish. Nor prior to sleep, as either you might be so tired you'll crash out during your session, or, since meditation not only relaxes but energizes as well, you may well lie awake for hours following your session.

Position is important. Two main things to keep in mind here are: keep your back as straight as possible (without holding it rigid), and be comfortable.

Sitting cross-legged, knees on the floor and five or six inches of cushion elevating your bottom, is the most preferred position. (Elevating the tush prevents the back from doing a "macaroni".) Sitting in a straight-back chair, feet flat on the floor, is fine.

Do not lie down nor sit on a bed. Why not? What do you suppose the

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brain thinks lying down, or a bed, means? Zzzzzz. (Saying this, I know people who meditate lying down and on the bed and claim it's no problem. Just a suggestion.)

Having realized time, place and position -- hey, you're ready!

Okay, close your eyes and take a few long, slow, deep breaths, visualizing the air coming into, refreshing, then leaving your body. Slowly count from ten down to one, seeing the numbers in your mind's eye, and saying them in silence.

Begin to subvocally recite your mantra: om mani padme hum...om mani padme hum...om mani padme hum... Not too fast, not too slow. By doing it, you'll find a rhythm and cadence most suitable for you. Just keep saying your words. Over and over and over.

Your mind wanders? No sweat. Om mani padme hum. A nasty thought? A *good* thought? A truck rumbles by? A birdie sings? Om mani padme hum.

The ideal duration for beginning meditators is 20 minutes. If your eyes are closed, how will you know when time is up? Place a timepiece nearby. Sneak peeks. You'll no doubt find that after, oh, a week, you are opening your eyes at precisely the 20 minute mark. (Although you'll *think* it's less!) Please do not use an alarm clock - that's a dreadful way to end a peaceful period of meditation.

One formal 20 minute sitting a day. That's the basic. The Toyota Med people will tell you twice a day. I've been meditating 33 years as I write this, and one shot daily is, I truly believe, sufficient.

Now, this doesn't mean you can't do more than one, or that beyond the 20 minute session you can't do other, shorter meds. You can meditate whenever the opportunity arises, even if it's only for a minute or two. What's that your mind is normally doing when you wash the dishes? When you're sitting on the potty? Probably thinking. Recycling old rubbish.

Meditation is not-thinking. Consider thinking as a flashlight. Lots of energy, but the beam spreads out far more than you need it, and as result the light goes only a certain brief distance. Meditation uses the same amount of energy, but like a laser: a narrow beam that hits only where you want it to, and goes much, much further.

While in your med, don't be upset when thoughts come in. Of course

they'll come in. The trick is not to become attached to them. Not easy, but. Remember, your mantra is the hand in front of your face. Life goes on beyond, nonetheless keep your attention in the foreground. Om mani padme hum, om mani padme hum...

If you should suddenly realize you've stopped meditating, just go back to it. Nodded off? And the 20 minutes aren't up yet? Get back into it and quit at the original set time. Keep falling asleep? Try a different position or another place. It's okay to be flexible.

After 20 minutes, stop reciting, keep your eyes shut and remain silent for several moments. What I do, at the conclusion of every meditation period, is look inside and ask three questions, one at a time: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? I don't search for, or even expect answers. If one does come, I recognize that it is appropriate only for that particular moment.

Gradually open your eyes, readjust to your physical surroundings and slowly rise to your feet. It's important you don't get up too quickly, as whether you realize it or not, you're coming out of a pretty deep mind-state. Stretch, walk around, touch things. Return slowly to the "real" world.

Question: do I have to use om mani padme hum as my mantra? No, of course not. You can use *Ich bin ein Berliner* or *Saddam's got WMDs* if it suits. If. It. Suits.

In 1979 I was in India. I was asked by a Catholic priest in Goa to teach a bunch of Indian nuns at a nearby convent. (The irony of a Jewboy from Philly teaching meditation to Indian nuns...)

After they did their first-ever meditation, I asked for comments. One of the nuns smiled sheepishly and said she had done it wrong. Oh?

"About halfway through, I decided I didn't like the feel of om mani padi hum. So I changed it." To what? To "Thy will be done". Hey, terrific!

The way to make meditation successful is not to look for success. Truly. And not to look on it as a chore, but rather as a daily meeting with your highest self (or God-self, or Christ-self, or Elvis-self: whatever your personal belief).

And please understand this: meditation is a slow and natural process.



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It is not a miracle drug that instantly zaps a particular symptom of disease (while leaving the root cause untouched). Just enjoy.

Once I heard a Toyota disciple declare: "The very first time I meditated I felt the *shakti* shoot up my *kundalini*!!" Next time, bro, sit a little further away from the electrical outlet.

So...how can you be sure you're doing it right? Simply by understanding there is only one way of doing it wrong. And that is not doing it at all.

I have taught scores of thousands of people to meditate. I've witnessed some remarkable results. Just remember this, please: Meditation can take you up to the very end of the highest diving board. But only you can make the jump. Meaning that whether you pay megabucks to learn to meditate, or use the cheapie method here, chances are more than two to one you'll quit before a year. When asked how come, here are the five main reasons my quitters have given:

1. I no longer have the time.
2. It doesn't *really* work.
3. Well, it works okay for others, but not for me.
4. I don't need it anymore.
5. I'll begin again tomorrow, swear!

Lies, all lies. There is only one valid reason for discontinuing the practice of meditation: a sweet little voice tells you, "Oh, *you're* not worthy of being calm, healthy and happy!"

And that, my friend, is the biggest lie of all.

## 2

### June, 2001

I didn't like Sydney. It was an ugly, unfriendly city.

It's a little like Chicago, Sydney. A grunt town. Mean. And yet, there was a part of it so beautiful (in Chicago's case, the lake of course), that was what you think of when you heard the place mentioned.

Sydney happens to have the most magnificent harbor in the world. Absolutely spectacular. And somehow, they had the good sense to put up that opera house. Which along with the Harbour Bridge (spelled with a *u*) makes Sydney a prime tourist attraction. But you sure as hell wouldn't care to live there.

I wasn't here to live, or even stay more than a few days tops. I was here on a mission. Couple of them.

When I woke up that morning at Joe's house, the picture of my future seemed clear. Firstly, I would not go to Asia this year. Nor would I tuck tail and scurry back to the safety of New Zealand. Instead, I would explore the country where I was at present.

I'd been here to Aussie a number of times, but had only glanced at the place. It'd been on my mind for years to give it a full-scale exploration. When I got my permanent residence in NZ in 1982, I was presented with the option of applying for citizenship there. First move was a visit to the American consulate in Auckland.

"You will lose your US citizenship," they informed me. "It's automatic."

I couldn't believe it. Nor could I imagine myself being a not-American.

I wrote scads of letters to people in the States. Important people. People with influence. Most ignored me. One who didn't was Teddy Kennedy. Why in the

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world I wrote Fat Ted is beyond my recall. What Fat Ted did was the one thing I begged him not to do: let word of my inquiry get to the Powers That Be. He (well, his office) actually turned the letter over to the State Department. Which sent me a curt reply: go for your Kiwi, lose your Yank.

I went for it anyway. How come? A New Zealand passport gave you free in-and-out access to Australia. Aussie for years had been a magnet in my mind. It seemed like the most fascinating country on earth.

When I got my NZ citizenship (a quaint little ceremony with me and 53 Cambodian boat people; it was the only time in my life I was ever amongst that many adults and was by six inches tallest in the room), I took it to the US consulate. I suppose I expected a beating by the Marine guard, at the least. Instead I was handed two sheets of paper to sign. One listed ten things I couldn't do (burn an American flag in public, for example), the other eight I had to do (like maintain a US residence).

"That's it?" I wondered incredulously as I handed in the signed forms.

"That's it," the woman behind the glass said.

"But you told me I would lose my American citizenship," I said.

"I did that. We're instructed to lie to people like you."

All that fuss, and it took ten more years before I first saw Australia.

So I would be spending the Down Under winter in Aus. That was the first decision. Second was to do what, as a meditation/mindpower teacher (albeit retired) and a person sworn to healthy diet and lifestyle, I knew darn well was right and proper action for a person in my messed up state. I would clean out head and body. In a sense, begin my journey Out There with a journey In Here.

I flipped a coin for first up. Body won.

Roll back the years. A SEPTA bus in Philadelphia. Crowded. Most people smelled of BO and cheap perfume. Except the woman sitting next to me. She reeked of grass. Not the kind that's illegally grown, surreptitiously harvested, clandestinely smoked. She turned my way to exchange a pleasantry and a wall of freshly mowed lawn tumbled out her mouth.

"Wheatgrass," she explained. The woman – her name was Margaret – was late fifties, gray hair but clear skin and sparkly blue eyes.

She'd been deathly sick, she said, beginning a rave I knew wouldn't end quickly. All the doctors in the world, etc., etc. Then, just as she'd given up, along came the

elixir of life to the rescue.

The grass of the wheat berry. Pop it into a shallow tray of dirt right in your own kitchen. A week later you had a blade of grass a hand-length high. Juice a bunch and I yam what I yam, Olive me gorl.

Margaret – Maggie, she was – had been restored to perfect health in no time flat. Gave up her job in an office and was soon to become manager of a health resort in Boston, where she was heading next week.

She gave me her card. The Hippocrates Health Institute, it said. I stuffed it in a pocket and sighed.

I'd heard it all before. Too many times. Food as god, the body as religion. Nevertheless...

All my life I've been troubled by a gland condition. The gland is my mouth and the condition was that it refused to shut when food was around. Suicide by ingestion. When I was married, my wife quite slim then, we looked like the number 10 when walking together. Or, seen from the other side, "Oi".

Existence has been a continuous series of diets. All told, according to my calculations, I have lost two and a half tons through grueling, self-punishing effort. Somewhere in fatty heaven sits a mountain of lard that once was me.

"...and I'll arrange for you to stay a week for free."

What? I had Maggie repeat her last line. If I intended to head up to Boston in the near future, and might bring a few items she herself wouldn't be able to carry...

Two weeks later, my VW bus loaded to the gills with steamer trunks, the undercarriage barely clearing the turnpike, I was chugging towards Boston.

The Hippocrates Health Institute was a huge, old, spooky-looking five story mansion on Commonwealth in Back Bay. The spacious living room had giant sprouts painted on the walls and replicas of grass emerging from the baseboards. Somewhere a phone was ringing. Not a soul was in sight.

I went from room to room. Nobody. I was all set to leave when I heard a slight sound from the other side of a double sliding door. I stepped over and peered in through the narrow vertical slit between the doors. And this is what I saw:

A long table, around which 25 people were seated. In front of each were a glass of green liquid and a plate of watermelon. At the far end of the table was my friend Maggie. None of this was in any way odd. What was odd was that every one of these people – male, female, young, old, black, white, yellow – every single one

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was...glowing. I kid you not, they were damn well glowing.

I stood there staring. I could hear a light patter of conversation, most notably Maggie's as she talked to people in the manner of a preschool teacher addressing four year olds. Maggie was glowing. Those immediately next to her were glowing. The people next to them were glowing. Everybody was glowing.

Everybody except me.

Suddenly the doors flew open and 25 sets of eyes focused upon me. I was mortified: me, a non-glower. To make matters worse, Maggie stood up, tapped her glass several times with a spoon and introduced me in her schoolmarmish manner.

"Say hello to Barry Rosenberg, everybody!"

"Hello, Barry Rosenberg!!!"

They gave me a plate of watermelon and a glass of the green stuff, which turned out to be watermelon rind, juiced. I ate and drank, working to wipe away thoughts of a huge omelet, stack of hash browns, four or five slices of buttered cinnamon toast, coffee.

After breakfast – that's what they called it – Maggie showed me around the house and introduced me to a number of people. They all smelled like freshly mowed lawn. I smelled like sweating gorilla.

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

Though eating between meals was a no-no, people fixed themselves frequent wheatgrass juice drinks from what seemed like thousands of trays of spiky green hair growing all around the place. Only they weren't simply drinking the stuff.

"It's good everywhere!" Maggie declared. And indeed, the residents were using it as eyewash, earwash, douche...no bodily portal need remain virgin to nature's own.

Maggie herself made me a cocktail. I watched as she harvested the grass from a long tray, cutting it as close to the dirt as possible, then stuffed it into a special juicer, a standard grinder to which had been connected a small motor. As I held the glass before me, the wheatgrass juice possessed roughly the color and consistency of Siberian goose plop.

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

I took one tiny sip. I felt my face corkscrew. Somehow, little by little, I forced it down. It was, without question, the vilest tasting thing that had ever passed my palate.

Lunch was oranges, as many as you wanted. I scarfed down a dozen, thought about eating the rinds. Left the table hungry.

Dinner was weeds. Swear to Moses. The kind one normally uprooted, dumped into a mound and set fire to. Weeds. Here we ate them.

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

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

I began to chomp slowly, but by the fifteenth hit my mouth no longer was a receptacle for solids. Try as I might I could never get past 20 before the “food” liquefied and dribbled down my throat. Young Jesus, his green-lined mind contemplating galaxies the good ship Enterprise would never see, munched away steadily, 50 to 60 chews per clip.

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

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

“Look! Look!” she called, shoving it toward me. I backed off a step, as though it might spit wheatgrass juice.

“It’s – it’s – *gone!*” she exclaimed.

“Gone.”

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

“I see.”

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“The tumor. It’s just...disappeared!!”

I was about to ask whether she had the right one. That is, she HAD the right one, maybe she should’ve had the left. But before I could speak she dashed off, squealing with delight, the extended pink-eyed beacon guiding her way. I didn’t know what to think. Wheatgrass juice? For real?

The same day I began my very first fast. I would eat only a breakfast of watermelon and then consume nothing but pure juice or broth or distilled water. Day one was murder, but the days that followed were quite easy.

“I know you don’t like the taste of the wheatgrass juice,” Maggie said to me on day three or four (after telling me how much better I looked, and indeed, I felt it). “But if you don’t like drinking it, you can implant it.”

“Implant. In the garden?”

“No. In the bathroom.”

“Ah.”

“See, first you do an enema—”

Oh God.

Maggie had one of the staff, a young woman, give me instructions. She volunteered to take me into the bathroom and give me a demonstration, but I coolly informed her verbally was fine. She then gave me a bunch of paraphernalia, and bid me on my way.

I trudge upstairs, enter the bathroom, lock the door (deadbolts would be preferred) and fill the two-quart transparent enema bag with lukewarm water. I hang it on the nail placed exactly three feet high on the wall and then watch as the water leaks out onto the floor. I mop up the puddle, refill the bag, clamp shut the stopper, hang it on the nail. I remove my jeans and underpants, lie face-down on the floor, bringing my knees to my chest, my hind quarters in the air. I take the long skinny hose with the detachable tip, now lubricated, and slowly, sloooowly, and ever-so-gently, insert it in the virginal apertures.

I reach up, unclamp the stopper. Beads of sweat emerge on my brow as the minutes pass and the bag slowly empties into my colon. I try to perform the prescribed exercises, leg rolls and bicycle kicks and such, but I am greatly troubled by gas. And, curiously, I’m leaking. So I get up and move to the toilet. I gurgle for ten seconds. There’s a pause, followed by another ten second gurgle. Half a minute passes, then a five second gurgle. A full minute goes by and nothing. I flush, put

on my undies and jeans, open the door, step into the hall, walk to the stairs, walk halfway down the stairs, stop, turn, walk back up the stairs, along the hall, into the bathroom, close the door, pull down jeans and jockeys, sit on the toilet and gurgle for a full twenty seconds.

A few minutes later I am downstairs harvesting and juicing a tumbler of wheatgrass.

Back in the bathroom, I tip almost all of the tumbler of thick green juice into the bag. The rest I pour into an eyeglass. I place the glass to my right eye, tilt back my head – and let out a howl. The damn stuff burns! Looking at myself in the mirror above the sink, I am confronted by a face, one eye standard, the other splotted with green goo as though bombarded by a sharpshooting waterfowl. I should, at this point, realize the consequences of my next act. Right. And I should've bought Microsoft when it went on the Big Board in '86.

This time, because I won't be exercising, I don't bother to completely remove my jeans, merely drop them to my ankles. Back on the floor, face down, knees to chest, afterdeck elevated. Take hold the hose, place lubricated tip in position, reach up and release the stopper. Looking at it upside down, I see the green ever so slowly begin to drain out of the bag. For a proper implant one is supposed to leave the wheatgrass juice in the colon twenty minutes. I reckon fifteen would do. Or even ten.

The juice feels cold as it enters my person. More and more and more of it snakes inside until finally the bag on the wall is empty.

And then it happens.

And then I know.

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

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

My immediate actions are outlined before me. I have to pull out the hose, stand and, because a pair of jeans are binding my ankles, hop to the toilet. In three



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seconds.

I reach back, yank out the hose with its lubricated tip; stand up.

ONE!

Hop three steps towards the toilet.

TWO!!

And because the toilet is facing me directly, on my next and positively last hop I have to pirouette a 180-degree turn in mid-air. I now leap into the air and using my arms as rudders spin a perfect semi-circle, landing square on top the toilet just as a volcano of green slime erupts from my fundament with devastating force.

There is only one problem.

The toilet lid is down.

*THREEEEEEE!!!!!!*

\*

That was 1975. May I say that never again have I got anywhere near wheatgrass, in any of its forms? But I did learn an awful lot about the care and feeding of this funny body.

For one thing, I do at least one fast every year. I've managed as long as 28 days without solids, but five to seven days generally feels right. And I got into another aspect of cleansing – the colonic.

A colonic, if you've never indulged, is a long, thorough enema, where the water is forced into all three sections of the large intestine, washing away gunk, some of which might well have been stuck to the walls for years, maybe even all your life. A good colonic therapist can make it a pleasant experience. Always, I feel terrific after.

In Sydney, still feeling the jitters, still encountering the occasional wave of fear-related discomfort, moments of unexplained panic mostly, I decided to do a five day juice fast, then follow this with a colonic clean-out.

I was staying with a few young males in their flat. One had met Raewyn and me the year before, and just assumed we were still together. I was too embarrassed to tell him different.

They knew I was fasting, and when I mentioned having a colonic, one of the guys said, "Oh, I know a good one for that!" There was a bit of a leer on his face. "She's, um, well, a real fox, this bird Glenda is," he chuckled.

I went to the clinic in the main business district where she had her practice. Pretty fancy. I was told the colonic cost \$75 Australian. “But,” the receptionist added, “there’s a \$35 consultation fee if this is your first time.”

“Oh, I’ve seen Glenda before,” I lied. “Quite a few years ago.”

“That must’ve been when she was in Bronte.”

“Yeah, Bronte. That’s sounds right. And, look. You have a discount for seniors, right?”

She looked at me skeptically. “Are you a senior senior, or just a senior?”

“What’s the difference?”

“Are you over 65?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure.” And feel about 80, I might’ve added.

A few days later, fast completed, I showed up for my appointment. Glenda, upon first glance, was a good-looking woman in her thirties.

“My Bronte files go back seven years,” she said. “I couldn’t find you anywhere. You probably saw me when I first started out, in my family home in Coogee.”

“Coogee! Yeah, that was it.” I was feeling uneasy about my lies.

She gave me a gown, told me to change in the bathroom. The gown, open down the back, made me feel like a Ward 8 patient.

Up on the table, my back to Glenda, knees to the chest, long, slow breathing. I felt the tiniest bite of cold as the tube was inserted. Then onto my back. Glenda sat on a stool to my right. I noticed the top button on her blouse was undone. I could look down and see the pink of a bra.

In went the water, lukewarm. Slowly. Out it came. Considerably faster. Her machine had an illuminated transparent tube through which the feces passed, left to right.

“Lentils,” she said, as we both watched my performance. “Reminds me I have to get back to sprouting.”

She filled me again, then placed her hand on my abdomen. I felt myself react.

“Um, I’m sure you’re impressed by my rock-hard gut.”

“Actually, I like a soft middle. It’s easier to massage.” Her fingers kneaded my tum. “So many of the guys who come in here are, y’know, gym bores. They’re like marble down there. Plus, they’ve been waxed – yuk! I like the feel of hair.”

Clean water in, murky out. Her hand working my middle. My eyes strayed to her open blouse, then quickly away. And back again.

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And we talked. This and that. How she got started. How most males she met thought what she did for a living was weird. How the last guy she'd lived with had cheated on her. Twice.

I couldn't imagine anybody in his right mind cheating on Glenda.

It struck me that this was possibly the most intimate situation I had ever been in with a woman. Sex, sure, that's intimate. But here was more than sex, than the old in-out, in-out. I was totally relaxed for the first time in ages. I was on my back, a most vulnerable position, with this beautiful woman tenderly running her hand over my most vulnerable part. And she was cleansing me. *Healing* me.

At what point was it I fell completely in love with Glenda?

She was 37, she said. (Two years younger than Raewyn!) Her last boyfriend had been a few years younger than her. I'm so sick of these young guys, so full of themselves, she said.

Could you, um, relate to an older man? I wondered.

Oh yes! She replied quickly. "But where do you find an available mature male who's young at heart?"

How I regretted adding the years to my age in order to save a measly \$7.50 Australian!

We joked. We laughed. I looked into her eyes. I looked at her pink bra. This woman was so-o-o lovely.

An hour and a half later we finished. Back into the bathroom to let go of whatever liquid was still in there, then the change back to my clothes.

"I can't remember ever enjoying a session so much," she said. She came over, gave me a big hug and a kiss, almost, but not quite, on the lips.

I thought: I've gotta do it. I've gotta.

I said: "I'd like to see you again."

"Sure!" she smiled.

"Um, look, I don't want to make a fool of myself. Any more than I already am, that is. So, if it's okay, you have my number, will you call me?"

"Oh. Okay." I gave her a fifty and a twenty. I wanted to give her the full \$75, but I couldn't, not and reveal a silly lie. She gave me back \$12.50. She seemed flustered. Finally got it right.

I virtually levitated out of there. My bowels were clean, my heart was light, my spirit whole.

Back at the flat, I broke my fast with some boiled rice.

“Hey, how was Glenda?” one of the guys wondered.

“Fabulous!” I replied.

“She have the top button of her blouse open?” another of the guys laughed.

“Hell, she had Stan here going back half a dozen times.”

“That right?” I slowly chewed my rice fifty times. “She give you a hug and kiss after?” I asked Stan.

“No. Hug and kiss, eh? No, she didn’t.”

I sat down that night and wrote Glenda a letter. Actually, I wrote three, the first two going in the scrap bucket. I said, Hey, what good fun you are! Maybe when I said I wanted to see you again you thought I meant professionally. Well, that too (heh heh). More, though, for a stroll in the park, or a coffee somewhere. But if I don’t hear from you, I’ll know you’d rather not, and no problem. (Lie!)

Ironically, amazingly, I ran into Glenda the next morning as I was getting off a ferry, and she was waiting to get on. There was just the barest hint of an expression when our eyes met.

I thought: forget the letter.

I thought: c’mon, wuss, give it to her!

“Look, I wrote you a letter,” I blurted out. “I was going to mail it, but, well, running into you. I mean, a city of four million people!”

“Thank you,” she said, taking it from me. “I’ll read it on the ferry.”

As she caught up to the queue, I noted she didn’t look nearly as good as the day before. How she had a long face, kind of horsy. And her backside was too big for the rest of her. And, and –

I felt my shoulders sag, my heart slide to my knees. Rosenberg, you sap, you *unbelievable* sap.

Glenda never called.

I didn’t think she would.

\*

The third day of my seminar was over. Drained from the nine hour ordeal, I was sitting in the New Age center’s dining area, sipping herbal tea and half listening to one of my students, seated alongside.

It was summer and I wore a T-shirt and shorts, no more. I was only partially

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conscious of a silky sensation on my bare left foot; it came, it went: an insect most likely, not worthy of attention.

Then the chap on my right stopped talking and sat staring bubble-eyed, past my knees to the floor. Following his gaze, I peered down.

A woman in her forties, another member of my class, was on her hands and knees, her nose inches from my ankle. She was slowly shaking her head, allowing the ends of her long hair to brush against my foot.

“What are you doing!” I cried, yanking back my titillated foot. The woman looked up with glazed eyes, beatific smile.

“You’re even *better* than Osho,” she said huskily.

The New Age. Boy, I can tell you.

I was a pioneer, a frontiersman in the human potential/personal development/self-realization movement. For me, it was a natural extension of the sex/drugs/rock n roll days of the late '60s.

In the space of a few years I saw myself transformed from a bearded freak living on the streets of San Francisco to a meditation/mindpower mavin holding forth to auditoriums full of eager seekers. How did I get from one station to another? America.

To add to the wonder, I did it without a moment’s training or preparation. I’d read a lot about the mind, okay, but mostly I seemed to be making it up as I went along. And it worked. Must’ve, because the crowds kept getting bigger and bigger.

My idea was to have fun, share the wealth, that sort of thing. And get laid a lot. Which I did. And it didn’t matter a whit that it wasn’t ME the babes wanted to bounce with on a mattress. The stuff dreams were made of. Then the dreams all turned to the stuff colonics were made of.

Suddenly, I was teacher, organizer, headmaster, financier and newsletter editor as well as sex symbol. I had my own radio show, appeared on TV a lot, spoke at schools and Unitarian Church singles clubs. Oh yeah, and played nursemaid to any number of well-intentioned volunteers who came to the Relax For Survival Foundation, ostensibly to help spread the word. What they helped spread was me, thin as gold leaf.

All of this I somehow survived. Greatest difficulty was my own self-doubt.

I had no background, no degree, not even a certificate from a back-of-the-magazine correspondence school. What was I doing, *me*, teaching people how to

better their existence through mindpower and running a center that provided essential life skills to the masses?

My classes at the Penn Free University were in the evening, 7 to 11. For four hours I'd do this dance. Tell funny stories, banter around, have 'em in the aisles. The subject matter was so good it took care of itself. Eleven o'clock they'd file out, grinning ear to ear. I'd slink into the VW, drive to the old Fairmount brownstone, shlep up to my third floor nest, sit down on the overstuffed chair with the springs oozing out, and hang my chin on my chest. Often I'd wake up in that position middle of the night, crawl into bed, sleep till noon.

At one point, fed up with being the sham that am, I wrote a heartfelt letter to the first apostle of mindpower: Look, I said, I'll wash dishes, scrub the toilets – anything – only please teach me what you know. His response? The multi-national organization bearing his name *sued* me for infringement of copyright! (I won.)

Still, I went looking. Using aliases, I checked out whatever was happening in the industry. If it was there, I sampled it. And here was what I found: the New Age in America was a royal serving of 24 karat moosepoo.

Love, Peace and Sharing definitely were not on the menu by the mid-'70s. It was now Money, Power and Never Give a Sucker an Even Break.

Whenever I challenged the need for those exorbitant fees the New Ageys charged, I was told a) in our society people equate value with price tag, and b) if you truly want the benefits of our training, you'll find the money to pay for it. Never: we're a pack of greedy bastards out for all we can grab.

I'd test them. My test was this: how about, instead of paying you the fee, I made a donation – in your name – for the full amount to a worthy charity?

Tried this a bunch of times. How many said yes? The next will be the first.

I noted there were three types of New Age hucksters. In the leadoff position, The Serious Sorts.

The Toyota Meditation people fall into this bin. No giggles with this gang. After all, for the wad of money you pay, plus fruit, plus handkerchief (what, I've always wondered, did they *do* with all those hankies?), you'd better believe this is No Laughing Matter.

If I give the impression that theirs was a one-time session, wham-bam then good-by Charlie, I do beg your pardon. All indoctrinates into the Toyota Method have the privilege of being "checked" as often as they like. This means you can

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make an appointment, come in and ask silly questions about your meditation.

Which I used to do regularly. True, I hadn't been Toyota'd, not officially. But I did pinch a friend's precious mantra, and this gave me access to the lore and wisdom.

Once, the checker was the straightest white man in America. Short blond hair, wire-rim glasses, suit and tie. And that look.

I heard him say to the young woman being checked before me that he had actually spent a year at the university named for the little brown man in Europe. I thought: wouldn't it be terrific to have a university named after me? We could even join the Big Ten!

"...and in this weekend's major upset, the Rosenberg Mindblowers crunched the third ranked Ohio State Buckeyes, 73-14, led by..."

I presented my secret mantra to the straightest white man, and asked a standard silly question. The checker went to *The Book*, began reading. (They were not permitted opinions, these checkers.)

"Can you tell me," I interrupted, all innocence, as he read aloud, "why it is that after 14 minutes I get an erection? Every single time."

"...uh, uh, well..." Paging through *The Book* now.

"Yeah, and I'm having these incredible sexual fantasy dreams lately. D'you think they're related to my mantra?"

"...er, ah, um..." Paging frantically. Sweating.

Next group of New Ageys was *The Cheeries*.

The good cheer promulgated by these people was remarkable, like their cheek muscles had seized in the ON position. Didn't they ever get sad? Angry? Lonely? Was I the only one in this game with problems and hangups?

Hell, I thrive on laughter. It's saved my sorry ass on so many occasions. Cheer, though, is fake. Cheer has nothing to do with humor, irony, absurdity, genuine belly laughs.

During a lunch break at a Cheery seminar I was attending, I put on a Springsteen tape and began to dance. I love to dance solo, and *The Boss* brings out my best.

Like a flash, one of the facilitators (love that word!) rushed over and flicked it off, giving me a momentary uncheery face. In its place she substituted one of those puke-awful New Age elevator music tapes the Cheeries were so fond of. Try dancing to that.

Opposite to the Cheeries are the NASTies: New Age Storm Troopers. These types beat you with psychic rubber hoses for 59-1/2 seminar hours, then in the final half hour tell you how truly wonderful you already are. And oh my, aren't the clients ever thrilled, running around crying, "I've found it!!" (Yeah? Well, don't let me catch it.)

The NASTies have a two-faced approach to your dilemmas. Every single one encountered told me: all you need to change your life is our basic seminar. Finish the basic and along cometh the squeeze. Followup courses. 6am weekly breakfasts with your *team*. Help with the phone solicitations, or set up the room for the trainers. (Millionaire biz types, major political bods, on their knees with rulers, measuring the distance between chairs!) And just TRY and leave the team, the *family*, once you're in it. *Jawohl, mein Feuhrer!*

Even the oldies and proven goodies: yoga, tai chi, sufi dancing, all fine stuff. Except why did people need to form clubs? Committees, pecking orders, picnics and parties. Buddhism? Biggest club going in the West.

To me, only two things were important in any discipline you might undertake – your daily practice and your personal integrity. And these were distinctly individual traits.

Speaking of integrity, I was fooling around on the internet one day and for no good reason I typed in [www.relaxforsurvivalfoundation.com](http://www.relaxforsurvivalfoundation.com). Like I was doing a time-warp thing. And there, lo, behold and shivers up my spine, was a website! Oh, it had nothing to do with me. Some New Age creep in California. Coincidence? Aw yeah, right. Sure it was legal; my copyright had expired a few decades before. But...couldn't you come up with your own original moniker, pal? Integrity.

By 1977 I'd had enough of the New Age, even though my own part, I'd like to think, had a relative honesty to it. (Towards the end I even kept away from the women. ENOUGH!) Left The Game, left America, traveled east, eventually to India. Here, I knew, I would find the Truth! Did I ever.

The truth is, there's more hokum in the Big I than the Big Apple. Gurus, several to a corner. My ashram is holier than yours, my swami more ascended than your swami (he manifests Rolex watches!), my babaji is the genuine original. My, my, my.

The line of whiteys winds twice around the block. Turn in your jeans and travelers checks at the door, grab a robe, God will be along shortly to assign you



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your new unpronounceable name, hurry along now.

Late in 1980 I reached New Zealand. Still seeking, of course. But what I was seeking now was to get as far away from the human race as possible. Next only to Antarctica, that was NZ.

I hadn't taught in three years. I was "retired". A few months after my arrival I was teaching at a New Age center in the hills outside Auckland (charging a donation and turning all the money over to the center), and before I'd been in the country a year I was standing before huge throngs at Auckland University.

Things were different in NZ. The people weren't so desperate, the market was too small and the distance too vast for the New Age marketers to come all this way from California to sink in their fangs.

This was what I told myself.

Words of a fool.

One day a woman showed up at my door. Said she'd just bought the NZ franchise for a certain multi-national mind dynamics outfit known to sue people. She made it quite clear: I shut down my operation, or else. I made it clear: no way. High Noon at the New Age corral.

I had just filed my application for permanent residence. Soon after our meeting, a letter appeared on the desk of the minister of immigration, stating that one Barry Rosenberg was a known major drug supplier in America. Sweet.

Well, many years later I'm still here, and the franchisee long ago moved on to other New Age pastures. But she was the harbinger. By the mid-'80s, New Zealand had joined its big bro Australia as carrion for the New Age vultures.

Cheery seminars in the West and ashrams in the East are made up primarily of frustrated white females (NASTy gigs have a far stronger male population), not a few of these women harboring a secret (and occasionally not so secret) yearning to personally adopt the Big Daddy and *organize* the show. Don't I know it. The woman brushing my foot with her hair, who credited (or accused) me of higher status than one of the game's then featured players, while taking me aback momentarily, was not all that surprising.

Look, I can understand the mongers of greed, power and control. Make our sad, sick planet spin, those big three do. What I don't get is the multitudes who WANT (need?) to be controlled. Who pay good money for it.

Trouble is, the New Age has some major quality goodies to offer. Hell of a lot

more than the shrinkologists. But does anybody listen? Really pay attention? Sure, they talk about it. Live it? Be it? Ah, well, um. (Glance at the watch.) Sorry, gotta rush. Late for my Prozac.

It was with such unrestrained cynicism that I gave up teaching for good in 1987. Still, I was determined not to let my reaction to New Age avarice and narrowness stop me looking for ways of bettering myself. So I set up criteria that any discipline or teaching had to conform to before I'd set foot through the door. These were: no price tag (beyond obvious expenses); no conversion, no deity, no guru; no pressure to do followup training; no family, club or team to join; provided a concrete technique for daily practice; and the teacher damn well practiced what she/he preached.

Which was why I was now on the train headed from Sydney to the Blue Mountains.

Dhamma Bhumi in Blackheath is a gorgeous affair. Less than a mile from the train station, and a lovely walk. The campus is immaculate. Main building had dorm rooms (boys and girls separate) on the ground floor, kitchen and dining room, with wonderful views of Wollemi National Park and the Great Dividing Range, upstairs (boys and girls separate). It was a short meander to the meditation hall itself (boys and girls separate). Even without the instruction, not a bad place to hang out.

I'd done Vipassana before, but the most recent was ten, eleven years back. And I needed it. My colon might be squeaky clean, but I still had a head full.

I shared a room with three other males, a 20 year old German and two guys in their 30s, from England and Sweden. We introduced ourselves, spoke a little of our travels. This was the first retreat for them all. Me, too, I lied.

I told this lie (under a pseudonym) for two reasons. The Vipassana people ask if you're doing any other techniques, therapies or healing practices. If you say yes, they tell you to cut them out. I thought it none of their darn business. To me, this was like being asked if you believed in Jesus before you're allowed into a synagogue. So I fibbed and said no, but doing it under a phony name wasn't really a lie, was it?

Second reason for faking virginity was even sillier. At Vipassana, they fed you, and beautifully. Except that the last meal of the day, in the Buddhist tradition (even though this was not a Buddhist trip, exactly, it was derived from the Theravada

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Budes in Burma), took place at midday. No food till the following morning. If it was your first time, however, they took pity and let you have some fruit late in the afternoon. What can I say; I love my food.

Early evening, we were led into the hall and assigned floor positions. By my rough count there were around 70 of us, maybe 40 females. Ages ran from late teens to, well, if I wasn't the oldest, I was pretty close.

No chairs, just cushions laid out on the floor. Some people had brought meditation benches. I was one of these. I'd quickly fashioned mine in Sydney out of a few pieces of wood, glue, and four nails. The bench measured 14 inches by 5, and around 7 inches high, with a slight downward slope. I'd also brought a bunch of foam rubber pieces which, I knew from experience, would prove useful.

There was none of the standard retreat embellishments: no statues of the chubby, bald grinner; no candles or incense. Nothing. It was the way I liked it. I was here to work.

At the front of the room was a woman in her forties. She was the assistant teacher. The real teacher was 8000 miles away, in western India. He would appear regularly through audio tapes during the day; in the evening, a video discourse. Dude's name was S. N. Goenka.

The assistant gave us "precepts" – thou-shalt nots. No talking, no eye contact, no lying (uhhh), no killing (of insects, I supposed), no reading, writing, smoking, alcohol, drugs, no venturing beyond the center's fenced boundaries, no sex (with whom? how?)

The assistant turned on the player: a man chanting. Goenka. He sounded like a cross between a creaky door and Bela Lugosi gargling Velcro.

Through the taped tuition we learned a simple breathing technique: focus attention on a triangle of nose and upper lip. Breathe normally, and observe as the breath came in, the breath went out.

I was in pretty good meditative shape. Nonetheless, after half an hour my back, knees and ankles, as I balanced myself on the wee bench, soon became stiff. Stiff became achy, achy became downright painful. I wrapped hunks of foam around every movable body part below the waist. Still, at some point before the two hours were up, rigor mortis set in. Poor guy sitting next to me, a short, fat, penguin of an Israeli, seemed in far worse condition. Or so I assumed, as I couldn't look at him, only listen to his quiet groans.

The night was cold as we walked back to the dorms a little past nine. I crawled into my sleeping bag, zipped it closed around me. It was deathly quiet. Except for a screaming voice I had no problem recognizing.

“ARE YOU JOKING?? GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!! THIS IS MADNESS!! RUN!! FLEE!!!”

For sure, I considered it. I imaged myself getting up in a few hours, tiptoeing away. No train this time of night? Hell, I’d walk back to Sydney – or Philadelphia – if necessary. Might’ve, too, except the next thing I knew, the wake up call. 4am. I have never been able to figure out why retreats begin at such an ungodly hour. Except to torture you, that is.

I stumbled into the hall, found my spot, sat down to watch my breath. More than a few snores were heard around me.

When the bell sounded for breakfast, I straightened my limbs, slowly got up – and my lower back took a huge bite out of my nerve endings. The penguin just sat there like a puddle, dazed.

Breakfast was porridge and stewed prunes, toast and an assortment of herbal teas. I ate enough to sate the population of Nova Scotia. Then more sitting, more breathing, more taped chanting and instruction from the Goenka chap. I breathed, I observed. In. Out.

This is stupid, my mind said. Just do it, dummy, my mind said. You could be home on the beach right now, my mind said. This is great discipline, my mind said. For what? my mind said. Well – what if you were in prison, my mind said. Or held hostage by Arab terrorists, my mind said. Arab terrorists had you, you’d be chewing your testicles by now, my mind said. Jesus, will you guys shut up and let me concentrate! my mind said.

I went from sitting on the bench, legs straight back underneath me, to a stack of cushions, back to the bench, legs crossed before me. I squinted open an eye and noted that everyone else, even the penguin, was sitting like a statue.

Lunch was at 11. I piled the vegetarian food on my plate and sat down to eat. Chap next to me, late twenties, was slurping his food loudly. I felt myself growing irritated, especially since I couldn’t even give him a dirty look.

Afternoon sessions were more of the same. The mind talked, the mind balked.

You’re supposed to be watching your breath, my mind said. Get off my case, willya? my mind said. *Oi vey*, I got 9-1/2 more days with you two schmucks! my

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mind said.

I devised a plan. At home, I run on the beach every morning: five miles – two and a half out, two and a half back. I pass over three streams. I know every house, every partly buried piece of driftwood. I would divide my beach run mentally into tenths. Each day, I'd run a segment. If I could stay on the beach, I reasoned, I would stay on the course.

That first evening, a videotaped discourse was presented. Goenka noted how Vipassana had been around for thousands of years. It got lost for a while, then was revived by the Buddha, who found it under his bodhi tree. Some time later it was lost again in India, for centuries this time, but was preserved in Burma, where Goenka was born and lived as a wealthy businessman.

He'd suffered for years from migraines. The only treatment that worked was morphine, to which he became virtually addicted. When he did a Vipassana course, the migraines disappeared. Enthused, Goenka began teaching the techniques in India, near Bombay.

Word of mouth brought more and more people, he said. People from all walks of life, from every religion. From India, Vipassana had slowly spread throughout the world. Centers existed in several countries, as well as programs in prisons.

Much of the discourse was serious, but every now and then the man let loose with some brilliantly droll observation. Laughter in the hall was a welcomed sound amidst the silence.

On the fourth day, the taped Goenka taught the actual Vipassana technique. The breathing exercises, he explained, were simply for focusing the mind, to strengthen concentration.

Just as for three days we had fixed attention on the triangle of nose and lip, with Vipassana we would henceforth explore the entire surface of the body, bit by bit, starting with the top of the head. We were to concentrate on a tiny part of the body – one inch square – and be aware of the sensations there. Just observe, no more.

The idea sounded ridiculous, but when I began to focus, I could actually detect sensations on the skin – sometimes light and subtle, sometimes more pronounced. In this manner, I slowly covered the body from top to bottom and back up again. Every patch of me had sensations, and I could experience them all.

As the hours and days passed (I'd already made my turn on the beach and was

jogging homeward), I found I could cover the body in larger and larger patches; and then, not in patches at all but simply as a scan, taking in the sensations of greater chunks of me.

There came a moment, on the seventh day, when my scanning was roughly shoved aside and I encountered a feeling of dread. I mean, absolute *dread*. I saw myself as totally useless, unloved and unlovable, and all the meditation and Vipassana in the world would do nothing to change that. I was a chronic liar, a con artist. I had hurt people, so many people, and just walked away. A growing panic was rising, rising, and then: just as I felt my head would blow apart, the dread vanished, a humongous boulder had been dislodged from the bottom of a well. Sort of like an inverted colonic.

At this point, everything seemed to change. Sitting wasn't uncomfortable. My back and joints no longer ached, or even were stiff. At mealtimes, instead of gulping down large quantities of food, I ate sparingly, and took my time.

The last few days flew by. On the tenth day, we were allowed to talk. Amazingly, the talk was your standard everyday banal chit-chat. How could this be? But what do you say after such a powerful experience? I preferred to say nothing. I thanked the assistant teacher and the food servers, left a donation ("dana", as the Budes call it) and headed off.

I won't say that I bought Goenka's trip completely. Having for 30 years practiced a mindpower system where the object is to assert positive mental energies to manifest desired change, I find it somewhat difficult to simply observe, without acting on my sensations. Yet that brief spasm of dread did come unhooked from some deep, deep cranny, rose up and passed away on its own.

As I left, I glanced back and saw that most of the people were still hanging around. Sure, who wanted to leave this glorious womb and go...Out There!

Well I did, if not with the brashness of Quixote, surely with the timidity of a Panza.

## FEAR-BUSTER #2

### Vitamin O ... breathing your way to anxiety relief & improved health

Question: What is the one most important thing in your life?

Answer: Your family? Friends? Job? Readers Digest subscription?

How about your next breath. Oh, that!

Vitamin O is oxygen. If you think it's not the most important thing in life, try going a minute without...and watch all your other concerns quickly pale.

A few thousand times each day you take in this most vital resource, and you are totally unaware. Your mind, your focus, are elsewhere. On, um, important issues.

Vitamin O therapy simply is this: take time, a few minutes every day, to OBSERVE this precious stuff doing its thing. That's all. Nothing fancy. No clubs, teams, certificates or letters of commendation from the guru. Just watch your breath. In and out. And what happens while it's in the body. In time you will learn to use breath -- Vitamin O -- to relax, de-stress, even heal yourself. It's legal, and can't (yet) be taxed or registered on your secret anti-patriot personal data base.

What follows is a plain and straightforward, very effective five day instruction to Vitamin O therapeutic proficiency.

DAY 1. Focus your attention on the nostrils. Take a long, slow, deep breath, "watch" the air as it comes IN through the nostrils. Without pausing, or holding the breath, watch the air as it comes OUT. Keep your

full attention on the nose-holes.

Now silently begin a breath count: breath in, breath out: 10; breath in, breath out: 9. And so on. Breathe slowly and deeply. When you get to 1, reverse the count: in/out: 2...in/out: 3. Until you return to 10.

Sound easy? Wait. If you lose count, find your mind has gone off with the fairies, NOT focused on the nostrils observing every part of every inhale/exhale, *go back to the beginning and start counting again*.

Don't let the breathing/observing/counting become automatic. Hey, this is the most important deal of your existence, show some interest! See, it is not meant to be a mechanical process. Rather a pleasant, powerful, fully attentive exercise.

When you finish a complete set of 19 (10+9) observed breaths, Day 1's deal is over. Please do continue breathing, however.

DAY 2. Imagine a corridor, a tunnel, from your nostrils to the brain. Follow each breath through the nostrils, along the corridor to the brain, and back out again. As you did on Day 1, count your observed breaths, 10 to 1, then back to 10. Nineteen consecutive long, slow, full observed breaths. Yo, you there - stop cheating!

DAY 3. Basically a repeat of DAY 2, with this new twist: picture a beautiful ball of light sitting on the bridge of your nose. Size of your fist. Sparkling, glowing, your most favorite color. As you breathe in, imagine light from your wee and wonderful sun being swept along with the Vitamin O. Observe, and *feel*, air and light moving from nose-station to brain-station. The light fills your brain with its positive, powerful, wholesome goodness.

When you breathe out, imagine any negativity - unwanted thoughts, anger, anxiety, stress, pain, bad habits - as a dark, ugly gas. Follow the path of this yecch gas as it accompanies the out-breath. Picture a long funnel several inches from your nose. Direct the gas into this funnel, which leads to the very center of the earth...out of your body and life forever!

So: air and light in, relaxing you, healing you; air and dark out, cleansing and purifying you. Once again, count your in/out breaths, 10 to 1 and back to 10.



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DAY 4. The corridor of air and healing-light in, air and dark-rubbish out, lengthens now: from nostrils *through* the brain and down to your heart; reverse it, heart to brain to nostrils and out to the funnel. The light is washing away all brain-pain, every last bit of heart-ache; the unwanted dark stuff is being permanently flushed away to the center of the world (where by alchemical magic it becomes glorious notions of peace and love and doing good for all fellow creatures, which are then beamed into the thoughts of politicians everywhere). Question: are you really and truly observing, and feeling (and feeling good about), every single breath? If not, back to the beginning.

DAY 5. Extend your imaginary corridor to the center of the abdomen. Welcome the powerful-yet-gentle light, carried by the flow of Vitamin O, through the four stations of your body. And sense the body's relief upon exhausting the negative dark gas. Again, please: you are not a robot. Honor your precious self by being fully attentive to this loving work.

BEYOND DAY 5. Simply extend the duration of observed in/out breaths. Instead of one set of 19 full breaths, do two sets (10 to 1 and back to 10, then again 10-1-10). Or, if counting becomes a bore, merely time yourself. There's no "safe" limit to breathing.

VARIATION. Close the right nostril and breathe in through the left. Then close the left and breath out through the right. All the time, of course, closely observing the journeys of light and dark to/from the abdomen. Do this for one full set (or for a few minutes if not counting), then switch nostrils for the next period.

SPECIFIC BODY AREAS. If you have pain or localized ill-health, be it anything from tennis elbow to tumor, treat it with Vitamin O in this manner: following a good session of DAY 5 work, breathe air-plus-light from nostrils to brain, then *directly into the area in question*. See/feel/KNOW the light to be penetrating, healing the problem by breaking down the mass of unnatural dark stuff (which could well be solid, it's so concentrated), then breathing it as a gas out of your body with the exhale...into the funnel and gone for good. Do this until you sense the area has no more dark, rather only light and the complete absence of pain. Then breathe light around the area for future protection. Do this as a joyful exercise,

and try not to look for results. Most cases, it takes a considerable time, weeks, perhaps months, before the mind/body gets the message and begins to give up the yecch. Look on it this way: what's the worst case scenario here? None. There are no side effects to Vitamin O.

A FINAL WORD. Your imagination is of utmost importance in this work. It is not only oxygen but as well your power of mind that make Vitamin O therapy happen. Focusing on breath, and the accompanying light and dark, keeps your mind on the "now". What has caused you stress and/or ill health is too much concentration on "mistakes" of the past and fears of the future. "Now" is the only time when you can actually create well-being. So work on your future good health by focusing on the most important moment of your life - this one! Each breath is life...life is the sum-total of all the breaths you have ever taken.

### 3

I might well have been invisible. The pub was full, energy was high, a lot of loud camaraderie. All males. Dripping with leather, denim, chains, muscles with tattoos. The aroma was a heady mix of stale beer, armpit sweat and aftershave. No one acknowledged my humanity, and for that I was grateful.

What was I doing in a gay pub on Oxford Street in Paddington? Certainly not cruising. I was here because, well, I was looking for a few answers.

When I'd got back to Sydney from the Blue Mountains, I saw the city in a different light. I still thought it largely was ugly, inhospitable; it just didn't bother me now. And Hyde Park, The Domain and Royal Botanic Gardens seemed to carry special beauty, and significance.

I made a phone call. One of the Vipassana people with whom I'd briefly talked with was a tall, lean, gentle man in his mid-50s. Frank had invited me to a birthday party, his partner's.

Far from being a social creature, especially among total strangers, I normally would've declined. But I thought, If this were India, or China, or someplace truly exotic, I would never turn down such an opportunity to meet and check out the locals. Freshly Vipassana'd, I agreed.

Their house was in fashionable Bellevue Hill, where a shack cost minimum high-six figures. It was, indeed, a lovely place. The first to arrive, I was coaxed into a glass of champagne to celebrate Vicki's birthday. A refill I turned down, even when they persisted.

People started filling the place. I didn't know what I expected, but Vipassana types these were not. Mainly friends, and customers Frank and Vicki knew from their shop selling Asian clothes and jewelry. Drinkers all.

Australia is an alcoholic culture. (As is New Zealand.) You imbibe, therefore you are. Mostly, with the blokes, it's beer. In Bellevue Hill, champagne, wine and sherry.

I was introduced to Frank's married daughter Rhonda, a university lecturer who'd spent some years in America. We connected on several bases, and she, too, was not a drinker.

A female couple was the last to arrive. One was a burr-headed Australian, the other a tall, enchantingly lovely Taiwanese with long black tresses. Both were acupuncturists, I was informed.

Rhonda and I retreated to an outside deck to continue our talk. It was a cool, clear night. From inside I could hear snatches of conversation. Politics, sports, the inner workings of cars and computers. Speech was getting more and more slurred.

Rhonda got up and stepped inside. Soon, the female couple wandered out to where I was sitting, now alone.

"You know a friend of ours," the Australian said, naming a woman I'd known for years. The Taiwanese stood off to the side, silent.

"Yeah, that's right," I said. "Hey, have a seat." I motioned to a nearby chair. Instead, the woman continued to stand, only closer. We exchanged information about our mutual acquaintance.

"Actually, I haven't had touch with her in a couple years," I told her. "The older she gets, the more afraid she's becoming." I mentioned that I'd given her a private Alpha Mind Control course some years back. The only payment I asked was a promise she'd finish a paper for her counseling diploma and begin doing work. Six years later, the paper was still unfinished. "She's an avoider."

"That's a judgment," the woman said harshly.

"Well, sure, but a pretty learned one, don't you think?"

"Only in your opinion." She moved closer. Our knees were almost touching, and I had to crane my neck to retain eye contact. The gorgeous Taiwanese was barely visible in the shadows.

"Of course in my opinion. Who else's opinion would I have?" I could feel myself growing testy.

"She's a very fine person," the acupuncturist said. "What right do you have to abuse her?"

"Abuse —? Jesus Christ!"

## FEARBUSTING

“Why do you need to resort to that kind of language. And just look at your body!”

My leg had been crossed over the other knee, and now my arms were folded. I could say it was because the night air was chilly, but the fact was I had unconsciously moved to protect myself from assault.

“She talks about you a great deal,” she said, seeming to get closer, if that were possible. “Always positive. I’ve heard her numerous times. Always positive. You’re the one talking her down. She’s always been positive about you. Always.”

And then it hit me: chapter one of the lesbo-nazi instruction manual for intimidating senior straight white males.

I clamped my mouth shut. I pasted on a grand smile and simply stared at her. She glared back. The Taiwanese had not made a sound. I wondered whether she were breathing.

We stayed locked in this ridiculous manner for some time, the woman repeating the contention that our acquaintance spoke only endearing words about me. Four times, five, six.

“You realize,” I said softly, “that you’ve repeated yourself six times now. What do you think that means?”

She maintained her glare, then moved away, the Taiwanese following her inside.

I let out a whe-e-e-ew. In my present emotional state, nerve-ends hovering around the skin level, it was a wonder I hadn’t begun blubbing.

I was now in a gay pub in Paddington – for what purpose? Well, I wanted to know about this increased belligerence on the part of gays and lesbians I had lately noticed. Often, their politics bordered on the lunatic fringe, especially gay men. Power and control were the game’s name. Why so?

When I was teaching in Philly, I’d made the acquaintance of a large number of gays, especially women. Word had got out in their community that I was an okay “het”, that despite my raving mouth and occasional digs – at all sub-groups, actually – what I had on offer was of benefit to all. Gays in America, even then, appeared to have graduated from the need of hating *them*, and were getting on with it. Was what I observed and experienced lately simply the human condition? The fact that the repressed, given the opportunity, seemed always to become repressors? And how did I intend to get answers in a Sydney gay pub, hand out questionnaires?

I had spent 20 minutes nursing a Seven Up, and was about to leave when I

noticed a man looking at me from across the large room. Since I'm not exactly your standard pickup material, nor was I making any attempt to move in on the young studs in tight pants and exposed biceps, I felt easy smiling and giving a tiny nod. He moved through the pack of bodies my way, asked where I was from. By this time I had grown tired of explaining that Philadelphia was *near* New York, and no, it was *not* the city of steel mills in western Pennsylvania. Lot easier just to say New York, be done with it.

"New York, huh. Well, New York, I've been trying to suss you out for the past half hour."

"And?" I laughed.

"Dunno, mate. You don't fit in any category I'd normally place a straight coming in here. You're not a tourist, your clothes say that. You're not standing on the edge of the closet, waiting to become a screaming poofter. Getting background material for a book or something?"

He told me his name was Clifford. "Not Cliff. Not Clifton. Okay?" He said he was 42, although the tanned, coarse skin made him look older, as did his graying hair. His clothes were only moderately tight. He had a single small earring, left lobe.

"Oh yeah, the lezzies," he said when I told him of my episode at Frank's party. "In their favor, they get it from all sides.

"These blokes," he nodded at the leather set around us, "they give the gay birds as much stick as anybody. Think they're really strange. So I guess they reckon they've got to be more in-your-face than what they oughta be."

His own story was a bit unusual. He'd grown up in a small town, played rugby, drank beer. One of the boys. But he'd always felt...different.

"Never for a minute faced up to it. Hell, anybody said it to me, I'd've thump 'em sure."

When he was 18 he came to Sydney for his first look at the Big Smoke. "Christ, did I get jumped on. Naïve hick from the outback." He shook his head. "Christ."

"Now these guys. Well, look at 'em, mate. Everything's sex. See, you straights, you got to play the game. Feed the sheila, buy her trinkets, and even then you might not get any. Know what I mean? Here, there's no question. Except who with. Problem is, we age faster than you guys. Even if, by dumb luck, we escape The Virus. The fast lifestyle, all the damn drugs we do. I mean, it's an ongoing

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party, pop an E or F or whatever the hell, shag your lights out, then go to the gym, pump iron, scoff down the protein powder. You don't reckon there's a price to pay?

"So look around. They're not even 40, some of them, they wake up one morning, look in the mirror and see...*barnacles!* On their artificially suntanned face! What chance now of picking up some delectable 18 year old stud? This happens, a few rejections, some younger hunter jumping in on their action, they get mean. Downright bloody mean. Sheilas are just as bad. Can you imagine some old lez, hits 40, she's ugly as sin anyway, short, build like a cannon, birds' nest for a haircut, what shot does she have picking up a spiffy young babe. Shit, she looks like the doll's mother, only uglier.

"Not all, you know. Some of us, and pray God I'm right in including myself here, we've grown tired of the intense rogering scene. And being part of the Church of the Sacred Queer. I mean, go eavesdrop: 99 percent of the gab is girl talk. That's all it is. I mean, who gives a stuff about your new nipple studs, for Christ's sake? Get a bloody life!"

"So why're you here?" I ventured.

He shrugged. "Cause no one questions my right. Nobody looks at me funny. I want to come here dressed in a tutu, no worries. I go back home, it's an act from the moment I set foot out of the car. 'When're you gonna get married, Clifford?' 'Are we ever gonna get grandchildren from you?' I come back here, I need half a dozen sessions at my chiropractor to loosen up the neck muscles."

He moved to the bar, got us both refills.

"Thing is, I got straight friends, but I always feel I'm their token, know what I mean? Plus, truth be known, I'm nervous around a guy like you. Fact. Cause, face it, mate, there's always a thought hanging around the back of your head: is he gonna make a move on me? Even an old bugger like you. Am I right? So I hang with these brain-deads. And put up with their blah-de-blah about what they're gonna wear in the bloody parade.

"So if this sheila acupuncturist was sticking in the needle, I don't say it's right. But I have a fair idea why."

\*

It happened in a bank in Sydney, but it could've happened anywhere in Australia,

I suppose. I was asking a woman, a very stout, thick-legged blond bank person, about currency conversions from US to Aussie dollars. I thought the question was rather straightforward: I wanted to know the recent trend, say, the past few days, before I changed money.

The blond looked nonplussed.

“Look, it’s simple. Just tell me the daily rate for the past three days.”

“Why don’t you stop hassling her!” came a loud, no-nonsense voice. Another female, the same body style, brown hair this time.

“I’m not hassling her. I just asked —”

“Yes you are! Now just leave her alone!!”

I noticed the other people working in the bank were all looking the other way. My face burning, I uttered a few monosyllables of apology and walked out.

Aussie birds. Ask any male who’s visited the country, and he’ll have stories to tell. They’re a breed.

Most Australian females are overweight. This is no big deal, so are the men. Even the ones who aren’t, or not yet, are wide-bodied. All that beef and dairy, I suppose.

But there’s a special sort. I call them beshemoths.

They are hugely fat. Backsides six axe-handles across and legs like albino redwood stumps. They wear tight skirts. They are loud. They cuss. They smoke. And they are mean as hell. Do not, repeat, do not get on their wrong side.

One time, at a café in Brisbane, four sat at a table, smoking. The smoke was going into my face. I had been there before they’d arrived. I asked if there was any possibility they might try directing their smoke some other way. Mistake.

Fire-breathing dragons would’ve turned tail and fled at the onslaught of ugly that came my way.

Of interest, there was a breed of similar looking females in New Zealand, the diets of the two countries being virtually the same (substitute mutton for beef). But the New Zealand beshemoths were more abashed about their unfashionable forms. The Aussies flaunted their girth. These women belonged to a Take No Shit Club the likes of which a puny male like me would get his face slammed in the door ever I made attempt at entry.

And yet, from Australia came the likes of your Kidmans and Minogues: gorgeous faces, bodies slim as snow peas, and a hell of a lot curvier.



## FEARBUSTING

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Really funny folks, the Aussies. There's no clear sense of national identity. They were English for ever so long, now they're Almost Americans. They will deny this to the point of death, but believe it: there was a major Yank worship going on here.

"Oh, are you from California?" the woman behind the counter of a shop wondered.

"From New York," I replied. "But actually, I've been living in New Zealand for some time."

"It's so good to meet Americans."

"Yes, well, as I say, I've been living in NZ long enough, I almost consider myself —"

"My husband and I plan to go next year. Hawaii and Disneyland. And Universal Studios, of course. We can't wait."

And so it went. Way back I realized that, although everywhere else I traveled it paid to be known as a Kiwi (they didn't start wars, and if there was one, they generally sent medics), in Australia I was now and henceforth a Yank.

Australia also may have been the only country in history that voted *against* being a free and independent state. A few years back the Aussies held an election to see whether they'd remain under the British wing (the queen's picture was everywhere), or be a republic, and 55% voted to stay British subjects. (People would tell you it all had to do with the confusing wording of the proposition. Sure. Right.)

The one area of Australian identity that's absolute "Strine" is sports (called "sport" in the antipodes). And admittedly, the Aussies seemed always to be highly proficient for a country of less than 20 million. But the emphasis was a joke. International swimming meets are banner headline stuff, top of the TV news. (Only when Australians win. Lose, and the front page is back to political junk and movie star scandals.)

\*

The idea had been to rent a car, drive slowly down the Princes Highway, the coast road from Sydney to Melbourne. This had been a priority ever since I'd got my New Zealand passport, and thus free entry into Australia, 18 years back.

It rained three straight days in Sydney. And was raining all along the coast. I hate rain. I cannot tell you why this is, but rain does funny things to me, especially when I'm on the road. I know there are people who claim they love it. Nothing like slipping on the gear and galoshes and taking a long walk in a downpour. Not me, babe.

So the lie was: I really wanted to get to Perth before winter set in. The truth was: once again I capitulated to an inexplicable fear.

I had made arrangements by phone to stay in Melbourne with a woman Raewyn and I had met a few years before. She'd been traveling in Asia then with her 15 year old son, who was one of the neatest kids I ever recalled meeting.

The son was now 19, going to university and living with his South American girlfriend. The mother had gone back to what is known as TAFE, the national community college setup. She was finishing a degree and teaching part-time.

Marie was a tiny thing, almost 50, with a small person's bearing and energy. She lived in a small, cozy house in an eastern suburb of the city. I had taken the bus from the airport, then the train to her station, where she drove over and met me. I'd never have recognized her otherwise, nor, I'm certain, she me.

I had the feeling she was a little uneasy with my staying there, but not to the degree it made me want to leave. She told me she had a boyfriend, a musician, although in the week I was there I neither saw him, nor evidence of his existence.

Marie rolled cigarets and drank tea and coffee throughout the day. When we went someplace together, she was like a torpedo with feet; I had to maintain a hurried pace to keep up.

Once when I came back from a day's meander, I entered a house occupied solely by the ragmop of a dog and the ancient, always-asleep cat. The back door was open, and I could see her in the tiny garden, reading and taking notes. I made two cups of tea and carried them out there, the dog preceding my way. Marie didn't acknowledge me, so I sat down about ten feet away and waited. Suddenly she glanced up, and let out an ear-piercing scream.

"It's me!" I yelled.

"Oh my God!" She clutched her heart. "Oh my God!"

Marie was into astrology. Really into it. Normally, I shun women who try to size me up according to star signs and planetary houses. No question there's a science to the stuff, somewhere, but I've yet to meet a practicing scientist in the

## *FEARBUSTING*

field. This one surprised me.

I was telling her how my life was so unpatterned, so crazy. How many times had I been moving in one direction, or no direction at all, then suddenly found myself in a totally new situation, without knowing how I got there. Like becoming a mindpower teacher.

“You must have a moon in Aries,” she said. “What time of day were you born?”

“3.43pm,” I said. I knew this not because my memory of the event was so hot, rather I’d had to produce a birth certificate for my NZ citizenship some years back, and the time was on there.

Marie began counting on her fingers. “Aries!” she said, triumphantly.

One evening, she slotted my birth information into her computer. Immediately, a chart appeared on the monitor, with lots of tiny Greek symbols.

“Mm,” she said. “Mmmm,” she said. “Isn’t that interesting!”

“What? What??” I clamored.

“Look, I don’t do fortune telling, okay? All I can tell you are the trends I pick up in your chart. For instance, money comes easily to you. Not a lot, but you haven’t had to go out and work for it in the conventional way.” Yeah, I could buy that one. “You could be headed for a relationship in the near future.” I felt my heart ping and stomach twist at the same time.

As I stood behind her, peering over a shoulder at what, I hadn’t the slightest idea, I knew she wasn’t telling all, or nearly all. I felt naked, stripped bare before this virtual stranger – exposed as an X-ray. It was not a particularly comforting feeling.

My week in Melbourne I walked, rode trains, grabbed trams. If I hadn’t liked Sydney, I absolutely loved this town. It didn’t have a single “pretty part” where the tourists were directed, but lots of pocket parks (“Gardens” and “Domains”) scattered about. Plus a delightful walk along the Yarra River.

Despite its highly changeable weather – Melbournians were forever telling you about having all four seasons in a single day, reciting the fact like a mantra – the city had an easier tempo than Sydney. Same population, around four million, but it didn’t possess the arrogance, the hard crust.

There existed a definite café culture here, with several neighborhoods where an entire street was a virtual string of outdoor, sit-down nosh emporia. Even the

downtown proper was more laid back than the city I'd just come from.

I thought about moving here. Giving up the beach and getting back into the city. I thought about living with Marie, a person of definite good value. Yeah, she was a nicotine and caffeine hound, and ate meat. And a definite fruitcake. But I supposed there were worse habits a person could have, and hell, all women were fruitcakes! (All men were dickheads. Me, I'd rather be the latter. That I understood, was comfortable with.) But these notions never passed below the neck, and then one morning she was driving me to the train station. And back on the road I did go.

\*

Every once in a while I voluntarily become one of THEM. A tourist. Oh, what the hell, I think, and dive right in.

Such a day was a May Monday. This was a holiday in South Australia known as Adelaide Cup Day.

The only reason for the Adelaide Cup was that Melbourne had the Melbourne Cup, first week of November. Adelaide was to Melbourne as Philly was to New York, except this being Australia, the distance was vast.

The Cup is a horse race, and people who never go to the races do so because it's the Adelaide Cup. I knew the Cup was on, at a track somewhere in the city, because the people I was crashing with, a couple met 14 years before in China and who now had two young sons, well, all of them were staying home from work/school/preschool, and this was a Monday.

They, too, were going to the Cup, they said. (When the time came, they wisely decided not to put the boys, and themselves, through the hassle of crowds.)

Me, I just did the standard thing I do when I'm on the road and crashing with people.

I got up before them, tiptoed into the bathroom. If I was a guest, or even the host at home, I always lit incense in the bathroom. I don't know if my shit-stink is worse than anybody else's, but I just cannot subject another human being to that discomfort. Perhaps this was one more fear of aging, that the older you get, the more odor to your ordure.

So my bathroom ritual was on the toilet, off the toilet, wash the hands, brush the teeth (the ones that are still mine), shave the cheeks above the beard – three swipes each side, brush the hair. Even though there wasn't any on top I had long

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strands that fell down the sides and back, only they didn't fall down the sides and back, they curled up and stuck out, so I brushed to *try* to get them flat, and flat they indeed went, for 30 seconds.

One of my morning ablution functions is The Blowing Of The Nose. At home I simply cup some water in my hand, snort it up, and let fly. When I am staying with people and using the bathroom they use, I feel funny doing this. I've read somewhere that there are more germs in the bathroom sink than in the toilet. So what I did, I blew my nose *quietly*. There was me, bent over a sink that was barely above my knees, holding my honker with thumb and first two fingers, and blowing out the previous 24 hours' boogers...*quietly*. Try it sometime. It might well be the one act of life where grace does you no good whatsoever.

More than considering hygiene, I'm certain, is the sound; it is not a happy sound. Also, many years back a friend told me that his father made "old man" noises in the bathroom – hawking, spitting, nose blowing. So I am particularly conscious of avoiding loudness in a lav not my own.

Back now in the room where I was sleeping, in this case on a mattress of the floor in the living room. I have no problem with this. There are some, I know, who would not even consider providing me a mattress-on-floor situation. I'd met a couple in Thailand some time ago. Stayed at their place twice. I should say places. The first was a tiny house in a young mobilely upward neighborhood, and there sleeping on the floor was fine. Second occasion, a few years later, was in a nabe the young mobilely ups had mobilely-upped to. There was a spare bedroom, and that was where they put me. I would have preferred to sleep on the floor of their luxurious lounge, but that was not in the equation. A third time didn't happen. They had people already staying in the spare room, they said. I didn't even mention a mattress on the floor for the two nights I would be in their city. People change.

I did my meditation sitting on the mattress, then ventured out into the dining/kitchen area where Giles in his bathrobe was tending to the boys. This was always the most awkward moment when staying with people. My inclination was to grab my bag and hit the streets, but I felt I should spend some time with my hosts.

He was a nine foot tall lawyer, skinny as an incense stick, she a teacher, short and perky. By rights, they should've been snotty yuppies: right age bracket, right professions. Instead, they were the nicest, most down-to-earth people I have ever met. They were kind, gentle, and seemed to fill one another's needs perfectly.

The boys I found interesting. At first sight, Patrick, the two and a half year old, and I fell in love. Lachlan, the five year old, made a point of ignoring me. So I would play with Patrick, then try to give Lachlan equal time. But it was phony, and he knew it.

When I did leave the house, I meandered, tried to find interesting streets, nice houses, gardens, trees. I'd follow my eye, my heart. Often I'd think: This is a good feeling new street, get partway down before realizing I'd been there a few days before.

At Unley Street I found a café that looked a bit sterile, but it was called Papparazzi, so either it was run by Italians or part of a franchise owned by Italians. And the coffee was good.

Adelaide had yet to discover good nosh. It was basically still an eggs-and-bacon-with-white-bread-toast breakfast town, unable, like Melbourne, to offer a variety of good cakes and muffins. So I sipped the coffee and sneaked the cookies I'd bought the day before.

I continued walking north on Unley and was pulled, practically vacuum-sucked, into a secondhand bookshop called Bookends. I made for two sections – detective novels and travel books.

I love both. Finding on the road an unread Burke, Crais, Donald James' Vadim series, Faye Kellerman, Lawrence Sanders' Mathew Scudder books, the Parkers, Robert B. and T. Jefferson, Ian Rankin, Henning Mankell, Donna Leon, Michael Connolly, Walter Mosley (a black man who writes about black detectives), James Sallis (a white man who writes even better about black detectives), even a long-ago-read Ed McBain, the master... it's like running into an old and dear friend. Nothing on the shelves here, however, so I passed on to the Travel Section.

Guide books are out. If I hate anything in this life, it is this genre, and the ones I loathe most are Lonely Planet. These books have put more idiots on the road than the Crusades. If there's truly such a thing as karma, Tony Wheeler just might be spending eternity on a very hot, very long road leading nowhere.

Now, travel writers. The problem is, they move around too fast. How can they possibly absorb anything? Theroux was one of these: his mind snaps the picture, whistle blows and he's off to the next stop. And though a brilliant writer, the guy had a major boil on his ass. He was lickety-split judgmental, unforgiving...at times cruel. If I were in his company, I'd clock the bastard inside ten minutes, I know it.

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Bryson. Well, Bill wrote this absolutely wonderful book, one of the few of several thousand read in this lifetime where I laughed so hard, so often, I had to stop to catch breath. Then Bryson wrote the same book again...and again...and again; each time it got worse. Less funny, more contrived. The guy was now a full-bloomed industry, and you had to ask why. He needed the gelt? He liked being an industry? Yet him I would love to have come and stay.

Pico Iyer was one of the rare writers who tended to hang out for a while in a place. A soft, eloquent writer, and I could understand nearly half the words he used.

Then there was the Rollicking Republican. He'd made a career taking the piss (as they said Down Under) out of impoverished countries, comparing them, most unfavorably of course, to good old rightwing corporate USA. The RR – and he was funny – also had written reams on what utter schmucks liberals were, somehow overlooking the fact that the far left had done all that 20 years before, and with considerably more insight.

I happened to like Ted Simon's outlook, Nick Danziger's ability to ingratiate himself with what normally would be extremely hostile elements, Geoffrey Moorhouse's observation of people, especially in *Om*, Peter Moore's delightfully goofy Aussie humor. But the best travel writer of them all never wrote a travel book, not really.

Bruce Chatwin was a marvelous story teller before he died of Aids at age 49. Even more than *Danziger's Travels*, a spellbinding account, or *The Gypsy In Me*, Simon's perceptive search for his roots, Chatwin's *The Songlines* is the one book that gives heart and soul and purpose to the apparent lunacy of being a roadie.

Over the years I had given this book to untold people to read, and I found the division of reaction drawn along the lines of travelers vs. non-travelers. The latter just did not understand why halfway through his trying to make sense of the Australian aboriginals' relationship to their land, Chatwin veered off at a seeming tangent to his tale in order to present a hundred pages of journeying "notes" he had made over years.

The traveler, meanwhile, not only understood the connection, but knew that Chatwin had gotten to the absolute heart of our chosen insanity.

Some of his bits and pieces are intoxicating. I've read the book four times, and each time I went into the "notes" section I could heard myself cry, "Yes! Yes!

That's it!!" over and over. As when he quoted Pascal: "Our nature lies in movement; complete calm is death." Or this from Rimbaud (writing home from Ethiopia): "What am I doing here?" Christ, that line had practically been a litany for me over the past 30 years. Even tiny life-slices such as this in Cameroon: "There are two hotels in Djang: the Hotel Windsor and, across the street, the Hotel Anti-Windsor." But of course!

I was relating all this to the Bookends' owner, an old hippie type named Rob. It was like we'd known one another for an age.

He made me a cup of coffee and told me about his life. The marriage broke up, the two daughters, 12 and 14, were with the ex but he saw them often. Had a girlfriend, a mortgage, bills to pay.

"I can't remember the last time I had a holiday," he said.

Seven days a week, even open on Adelaide Cup Day. Plus he played in two bands.

While he fantasized a life like mine, I was doing the same with his. It's long been a dream – one that will never happen – of owning a secondhand bookshop just like this. Old wooden shelves, lots of room, tables and chairs for people to sit and read. His selection of books was good, prices were decent. ( I'd have free coffee and herbal teas, bagels.)

Half an hour of raving, talking politics, talking life, I went back Out There and Rob sat at his computer behind the counter. Sometimes you were where you were supposed to be.

I continued to jig-jog over to the Greenhill tramway station, hopped on the ancient (or was it just ancient-looking?) tram, surprised to see how crowded it was. All these people were going to Glenelg? And dressed as they were, in highly fashionable black?

I wondered whether I could get away with paying concession price. Australia is a funny country: not only didn't they honor senior citizens from overseas on their public transport, they didn't even give the standard discount to seniors from their own other states. Sometimes it feels as though you ought to have a visa to pass from one Aussie state to another.

I did some mind work, and either it was effective or simply a coincidence (who cared?), because the conductor passed right by, me clutching my wallet and silently mouthing: "I'm paying senior price, I'm paying senior price..."



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Halfway to Glenelg I saw why the tram was so packed. The racetrack sat just off the tramway.

People piled off. There were mobs waiting to get in the grounds, more milling around just outside the entrances. Across the aisle from me, an old Greek woman nudged an even older Chinese couple. “That’s the racetrack! Where they’re running the Cup! That’s the racetrack right there!” To which the male Chinese replied, “Oh! Oh!”

Glenelg. There were few spots in the world more touristy in the old, pre-Disneyland sense. The main shopping street, today bustling with overweight Australians, led to a promenade paralleling the beach. On the left just as you approached the promenade was the elegant old Stamford Hotel, giving the place its old-time air.

People, families, fast food emporia – things I normally loathed, but here, now, in the beautiful sunny late autumn midday, it was all right. No, it was better than all right; it was delightful. It was Atlantic City in my youth, the only times I could recall any happiness at all, the seashore, the boardwalk and shops and beach that stretched forever.

I now sat on the pier, on the only bench I could find. I was grinning.

I’m alone, all alone, my woman has dumped me, *I’m 63 years old for chrissake!!* And I’m grinning. As though on cue, two young teenage girls come trotting up, one yelling, “There it is! There it is!” I get up and move to where they’re leaning over the rail and pointing. A dolphin. The most wonderful of all creatures, a solo this one, scooting just under the surface. It disappears beneath us, and we race to the other side. Where is it? We look down with anticipation. No dolphin. Then it appears, and I feel a warmth, almost a tear, for that beautiful being in the water, and for me. As long as there’s a single dolphin, I can’t be alone, not really.

## FEAR-BUSTER #3

To sleep, perchance to dream...  
And doin' what comes naturally

I read some time back there were something like 70 million insomniacs in America. Meaning there were as many people who can't sleep properly in the USofA as there were sheep in New Zealand, a rather fascinating correlation to the two lands I hold passport to.

Well, wherever there's a buck to be made: New Zealand peddles mutton and America pushes sleeping pills. Of the two, it's hard to say which is worse for you. Probably the pills because (are you hearing this?) *there's no such thing as a sleeping pill!*

I've talked a bit about brain waves. They run along a scale of cycles per second, or hertz (audio freaks know well the term). These are:

Delta - 0 to 4 hz.

Theta - 4-7 hz.

Alpha - 7-13 hz.

Beta - 13 - 30 hz (approx).

When we sleep, we run through the first three, 0 to 13 and back again, in a time frame of about an hour and a half. Alpha is the dream (or REM, if you will) state. Some people will tell you they don't dream. But they do; they just don't have recall of their dreams. Because dreaming is a biological necessity. Only the dead don't dream (that we know of).

Sleeping pills, or what purport to be, generally send you directly into Delta, which, as far as is known with the scant research that's been done

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(as I write) on this brain-state, is...unconsciousness. Meaning you do not experience vital Alpha/REM time, nor go through the natural sleep cycle.

Better than popping a pill tonight, do this: line up about ten feet from a wall. Brick or concrete is best. Bow your head towards the wall. Then run as fast as you can. Do not lift your head.

This is a natural means of falling asleep.

There is a softer natural approach, but there's a danger involved. I realized this shortly after arriving in New Zealand late in 1980.

I was asked to appear on a late night radio talk show. There were three of us, the moderator, a psychiatrist who was a regular, and me, the guest. People would call in with questions, and the shrink and I would have a go at answering.

This woman phoned in. Said she was an insomniac and took sleeping pills, but she would always be groggy the following day. The shrink, bless him, admonished her to toss out the pills as they were doing her far more harm than good.

"But how do I fall asleep at night?" she wondered.

The psychiatrist was honest enough to say he didn't have a clue. The moderator turned to me.

"Well, I do have a method," I said, "but I've only demonstrated it before a live audience, never on radio." Well, have a try, he said.

So I closed my eyes, imagined a whiteboard in front of me and began to write the method, describing aloud what I was doing. When I had finished, I opened my eyes...to see the moderator and shrink nodding! I thought: Oh God, those poor souls listening to this in their car!

So before I get into the Alpha Mind Control Sleep Technique, I want a promise you won't try it while driving. Right then.

You're about to go to sleep. There you are in bed, your stocking cap on, ear plugs in, hot water bottle on your tummy. Try to put away thoughts of the day just ended. Do a few minutes of Vitamin O.

In your mind, imagine taking hold of a thick felt-tipped pen, and drawing a large circle on a whiteboard. Inside the circle, draw a light X. Outside the circle, write, and silently pronounce as you write, the word DEEPER (or its equivalent in your first language). Write it slowly, and be

mindful, as scripted it has many loops. D E E P E R.

Now back inside the magic circle. Erase the X from the center out, making sure not to touch the circle itself. In its place within the circle, write slowly and boldly the number 100, saying it subvocally as you do. Back outside the circle, over the original DEEPER, once again write and silently say the word: D E E P E R.

Once more, back inside the circle. Rub out the 100. Write 99, stating it in silence. Outside the circle, again write the word DEEPER directly over the existing DEEPER, even slower than you have up till now. Say it as you write.

D E E P E R.

Back inside the black circle, erase 99 and write 98. Make sure you do this slowly, and are saying it in silence. Outside the circle: write and pronounce DEEPER. (Make it sound like DEEEEEEPERRR.)

Only those with at least one PhD may answer this: What is the next step? (Actually, from my experience, PhDs, and MDs, frequently get it wrong.)

So, what is happening here? Three things. Counting backwards, a sleep method as old as Rome's hills. Focusing (the circle). And issuing to your mind the familiar, and non-threatening, word DEEPER. You'll notice we're not using SLEEP. Sleep is a confrontational word to certain non-convivial aspects of the mind. (Sleep? Sleep? Who are you to tell me to sleep! I won't let you go to sleep. Never! TARARA-BOOM-DE-AY, TARARA —) Deeper is, well, it's a nice word; a stroking, soothing word.

As with all these tools and techniques, the secret of success is not to go searching for success. Play with it. Enjoy it. Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

## 4

People had marveled, people had exclaimed the virtues of. (Some of them had actually done it.)

I had done extensive rail travel through India and China, and once, ages back, I'd gone from Philly to Oakland on Amtrak. But crossing the Nullarbor, they said, was magic. Nothing in the world like it, they said. (Some of them had actually done it.) Then I met a chap who knew a chap who said it was a colossal bore, and I had me a twinge of doubt.

To begin with, I made a mistake: I trusted a travel agent. He wasn't being dishonest. Ignorant, I believe is the word. He talked me into buying an unlimited 15 day Austrail pass. Why I went along with the agent was that individual sectors of rail travel in Australia were prohibitively expensive. If you wanted to sleep horizontal, that was extra. A lot extra. That's economy. First class, where automatically did you get to sleep horizontal, sell the house and cash in the kids' insurance.

Because I wanted to break the journey across the bottom of Aus in Adelaide to see my friends the nine foot lawyer and three-foot-six teacher, it wasn't until I got to the station in Melbourne that I learned this initial leg, eleven hours total, would run two hours on a train, nine on a coach. It was that word which tripped me up. Coach. To an American this is the guy who directs a gang of grunts running around a synthetic field padded like Michelin men, or a band of seven foot African Americans in underwear. At the extreme, a cheap train carriage. In the Anglo world, "coach" is a goddamn bus! I did so loathe long distance bus rides.

But the main run, of course, was Adelaide to Perth: the "Indian Pacific".

*Passenger capacity: total – 276. Gold Kangaroo Service – 88.*

*Red Kangaroo Service – 64. Red Kangaroo Daynighter Seat – 124.*

Guess which one I was in. I had a shock when I stepped into Carriage R. The seats looked snugly tight. Mine was the final row of two/aisle/two. First thing I did was move the seat back far as it would go. “Nearly horizontal,” one of the marveling people had informed me. “Far better than airline seats.” The seat back slid to a 60-degree angle – not far short of absolute vertical. I thought it was stuck. So I tried the seat across the aisle. Sigh.

*Average length of train: 16 carriages + locomotive = 498m*

Just behind the sitting-sleeping (at a 60-degree angle) carriage was a lounge. Already packed by the time we got moving. Lots of young people. Talking. Loudly. I went back to R.

Seated next to me, by the window, sat Brian. Retired Western Australia school principal. Very softly spoken, and I had to lean in to hear, still missing much of what he was saying. He had made the journey before, which was reassuring. He was still alive.

Brian was 70. Across the aisle sat an ancient couple, Roald Dahl’s *The Twits* come to life. He had a mouth in permanent downturn; she had a voice straight out of Python.

Everything was a battle. Sometimes a small war. This was when they heard one another. Which was curious since both could be heard in Carriage A. When another oldie, out of kindness, offered the male help getting luggage onto the rack – he was doing a classic fumble – he brusquely pushed away the proffered hand. “Need your bloody help, I’ll bloody ask for it!”

“They always seem to group passengers by age,” Brian said. Ah, me: yet another reminder.

Train personnel, uniformed to distinguish them from civilians, strolled through often, calling out messages that seemed obvious. The same obvious messages then were repeated over the public address.

Then came music. Loud music. Creedence Clearwater Revival. Now, I’ve always liked CCR. But I was on a train, it was evening, some soft Mozart would’ve been delightful. A conductor came by. His name tag read Rennie.

“Is it possible to cut down the sound?” I wondered.

“Oh. Well. I don’t see why not. If you can get a majority to agree.”

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“I suppose I don’t have much choice then.”

“You always have a choice on the Indian Pacific, sir,” Rennie smiled.

*Average weight of train: 733 tonnes excluding locomotive and motorail.*

I levered the seat as far back as it would go. Sixty degrees. I always carry a hunk of foam for a lumbar roll. First I used it to support my lower back. Then as a pillow. Facing my right, facing my left. Next to me, Brian looked comfortably asleep, his head resting on the window.

I shifted restlessly a few more times, then got up, grabbed my sleeping bag and headed to the lounge. A notice on the connecting door read, among several things (“Proper Dress Required”), no sleeping in the lounge. I tried it anyway. A uniform soon came by.

“This is not done, sir,” he said.

A space of perhaps three feet existed behind the double seat across the aisle. I lay the bag on the floor, crawled in, stuck in my ear plugs, slipped on the blindfold. For a pillow I used the removable headrest from my seat-back. By pushing my feet under the seats before me, I could stretch to a length of about four feet. I formed an elongated S, and fell asleep immediately.

I woke several times during the night, each time when the train had come to a stop. I found this intriguing. Was there some inner mechanism that sent out a warning alarm: No motion! Danger! Wake up! I felt curiously well rested when I slithered out at first light.

Carriage R had a single toilet, a single shower – for more than 60 people. I hurried into the toilet – to find no toilet. Trains in India and China, at least there’s a hole in the floor. Somehow, pushing and prodding, I discovered a foldout commode. The stainless steel pan was no more than three inches below the seat. As luck would have it, I had me a healthy release. The stools were piled higher than the seat level, making wiping a major problem. I had to get up into a squat. That accomplished – how did you flush the thing? A lever simply poured water into the pan, didn’t remove anything. There was no drainage, none. It took some time to work out that by folding the toilet into its untoilet position, gravity removed all. Well, most all. Fortunately, a brush existed for such contingencies. I would later discover that not everyone was as concerned about obliterating trace of their presence here.

*Average speed of train: 85km/hour; maximum speed: 115km/hour.*

“It’s surprising how slow this thing is,” Brain said. And it was. Out the window there was nothing. Well, a pinkish soil and sparse scrub. No danger of colliding with anything, why not just whip across the desert?

During the day, personalities began emerging. There was the twentysomething with the cell phone. A lot of people had cell phones, this guy made it a drama.

“Fan-tas-tic!” Silence. “Fan-tas-tic!!” Some major deal, no doubt. Working out well. “Just fan-*tas*-tic!” He democratically managed to be in various places in the seating and lounge cars to make his calls that we might all benefit from his joy.

Another twentysomething, from Auckland. “I own five clubs for bikies on K Road. Got a bunch of coconuts working for me. This one guy, six-foot-seven, 20 stone, follows me around like a puppy. They never give me trouble. They love me.”

A fortysomething moved around, getting into conversations with whomever showed availability. “Yeah, a lot of travel. Been everywhere, mate, you name it. Worked on oil rigs, in the Amazon, Asia, Africa.” To me: “I’m coming back from Brisbane. A mate and I drove across from Perth last week. Four days! Beauty of a trip. Been everywhere in this country.”

The Japanese young people, eight of them – six females – all in pairs. Slowly, timidly, like strange dogs sniffing bums, wagging tails, one pair would approach another. Cautiously, a few words. Then a few more. Soon, the giggles. Out came the deck of cards.

In Carriage R, the olds talked. Prime topics: 1) didn’t sleep a wink last night; you neither, eh; 2) visiting the grandchildren – care to see their snaps? 3) comparison of all-itinerated tours they’d been on.

The old Roald couple continued to bicker. Loudly. Constantly. Over everything.

The attendants came through periodically, standing in the middle of the carriage, turning this way and that, making announcements. Which would be repeated, word for word, on the loudspeaker moments later.

Movies were shown on the tiny TV screens hanging from the ceiling. Movies for all ages. And IQ levels. The screen nearest us kept flickering off. An attendant would wander by, bang the side of the set with his fist. On again. Then flicker off. It was a better show than any of the films being displayed.



## *FEARBUSTING*

*The name Indian Pacific was derived from the oceans on the opposite sides of Australia that are linked by this service.*

We stopped at a place called Cook. Following several announcements to make sure to grasp the handrail upon disembarking, we got off onto a moonscape. “Cook: population 2 – one of the world’s most isolated locations,” read the sign. A few derelict buildings, a couple of ancient vehicles, long abandoned. The Japanese took pictures.

More desert. More scrub vegetation. Endless.

Early evening we pulled into Kargoolie, WA’s second biggest city. Once, a mining town with brothels. Now, no longer a mining town. Two tour buses – sorry, coaches – waited outside the station for those who had heeded the many calls, both loudspeaker and loud mouth, to sign up for this major event. Amazingly, both buses were filled.

We were given three hours to walk around a dead town in the dark. I did a quick turn of a mile or so, then returned to the train. A little after nine, I unrolled my bag on the bit of floor I had occupied the night before. Ear plugs, blindfold and the now familiar S. I slept well, awakening, again, only when the train was still.

*The Indian Pacific’s emblem is the wedge-tailed eagle. Its magnificent wingspan symbolizes the achievement of the Indian Pacific in spanning the continent.*

I shook hands with Brian as I strapped on the pack. This was one of the fine moments of roading. We didn’t swap addresses, or emails; he didn’t ask whether I needed a place to stay in Perth, and I didn’t offer him a bed if he ever made it to New Zealand. Yet, I had enjoyed his company, his gentleness and soft manner. He helped make the 40 hour ordeal less of one.

In the slow-moving line I heard a line oft-repeated: “How’d you sleep?” “Awful. Just awful. And my back and legs ...”

On the platform, travelers were being met by friends and families.

“Oh yes, it was the most wonderful trip, isn’t that right, dear?”

“First rate. Absolutely smashing.”

\*

I stood under the eaves, just out of the rain. Behind me, in the house, my life was being taken apart.

This was 1987. The relationship that was going to see me through the remainder of this lifetime. And they were packing up, mother and daughter.

I had sat in the house making like I wasn't aware, didn't really care, the two of them moving back and forth, stacking, lifting, removing.

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

My ride was late. I decided to wait outside, where there was a shade less gloom.

Two and a half years. An eternity. A late-forties rambling man with a backpack, 15 years on the road, coming "home", wherever home was, to teach, to hang out, to do battle with – and mostly lose to – El Scrunch. How many relationships had there been along the way? For 15 years I had never once completely emptied that scarred and scuffed yellow pack. A chest of drawers was a foreign element in my life.

"Don't you ever get lonely?" The perennial question. Yes, I got lonely. I got so lonely every cell, molecule and atom of my body screamed out. But I'd get over it. Somehow, I'd snap out. How about you, pal – don't you ever get bored to tears with the same partner, same kids, same house, job, role?

I never said it out loud. Why bother. Why try to hurt.

I kicked a pebble out into the wet, peered anxiously down the road.

A chance meeting on a beach on Auckland's North Shore. Single mother with single daughter. Number nine oh nine.

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

After some months together two things happened, almost simultaneously. One, I fell in love with Jessie. That was the kid. It happened like this:

I was baby-sitting; Chris, that was the mother, was over at a friend's. Jessie was nine then, a child with a lifetime of horrors. Eczema, asthma, scratching, bleeding, coughing. Torture every single day, beginning when she was three months old. As a rambling man, there were two firm rules: 1) don't ever get involved with a woman with a sickly kid; 2) never break rule one. And I was cool. I knew the ropes of the road.

## *FEARBUSTING*

Suddenly the house exploded. Shrieking, pounding of walls. I jumped up, ran to the bedroom, flicked on the light.

Jessie was a mess. Her skin was scratched raw, blood was streaked on the pillow, on the sheets, blankets, everywhere.

I stood there, transfixed. I had seen Jessie in a bad way before, but nothing like this. I wanted to run; pack the bag and get the hell out of there. Instead I sank down slowly onto the edge of the bed, staring, as she continued to holler and kick violently. I began massaging her feet – virtually the only part of her not scaly or bloody – and talked soothingly as she gradually calmed down and began returning to sleep. And at that moment, I was a goner.

Neither of us had experienced much in the way of touch till then, and it seemed we tried to make up for our personal neglect every chance we got. We hugged and kissed and wrestled and tickled. We took baths together, we lay in bed making up stories and reading Tolkien to one another. And this almost caused a calamity.

When we moved into the house, which was on a magnificent beach in an area that otherwise was Straightsville, we stood out. Guy with a beard and Yank accent, didn't (appear to) work, younger woman, her kid. Yank and the kid always together, always...together. One day, a fire started. The fire's name was Small Town Gossip. Barry was diddling his de facto daughter.

Call a guy queer, call him a commie. Big goddamn deal. Say a guy was diddling his kid – wow. The fire near burned the town down.

Chris and a few friends stood up for me. A few "friends" didn't. Stuff like this, you got to know who your real friends were.

The uproar lasted two weeks, and then, like that, the fire went out. The witches had found somebody else to attach to the stake.

Jessie was cool through it all. It was like she were the adult, I the child. If I had loved her before, did I ever treasure her after.

And she got better. She grew, she blossomed; her skin cleared up measurably. Love healed. It darn well did.

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

We worked at fixing up the newly bought house just like couples were supposed to. And like couples were supposed to, we argued, we fought, we made up, we made love. A rollercoaster.

*I can still remember  
packed together  
like a can of sardines.  
Push and shovin'  
that's when lovin'  
starts to come apart at the seams.  
Yes we all need a room of our own.*

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

We didn't. Every conversation became a Gaza Strip. Nobody was wrong, everybody was right. You said -. But *you* said -.

Hesaidshesaidwesaid.

Our pattern became entrenched: I yelled, she wept. Not cried, not sobbed. Wept, like a drip from a tap. We became living clichés of ourselves. Once, just once, I'd have loved that she should yell and I weep.

And through it all Jessie and I got stronger. Our love had no limits.

At Pat's house I had talked of the dilemma, and the sadness that pervaded it. I didn't want to live with Chris anymore. I didn't want to part from Jessie. I sure as hell didn't want to leave my new home.

Pat, one of my dearest friends then, a woman in her late sixties, as spiritually attuned as anyone I'd known, gave her counsel as always: brief, non-judgmental and right on the money. Don't force the issue, she'd said. Stand back and let what must, happen.

"Do you know Elisabeth Kubler-Ross will be in Tauranga next Saturday?" she asked as I was leaving. "She's only going to be in the North Island one evening. I've already sent for tickets. If you'd like, I'll give you the address to write to."

At home, I automatically stuffed twelve dollars into an envelope. Then, just as automatically, I took it out of the envelope, sat down and composed a letter.

Introducing myself as a freelance writer, I claimed I wanted to do an article on Kubler-Ross and requested press accommodation. I didn't know why I did this. I had no intention of writing anything on the then most written about woman south of Maggie Thatcher.

## *FEARBUSTING*

I forgot about it as soon as the letter was posted. For that very same day I got the news. Chris and Jessie were moving out.

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

Ten-thirty Friday night a man rang from Tauranga, claiming he'd just discovered my letter, which had been misplaced. I had a time figuring out what he was talking about.

"I'm afraid tickets have been sold out for two weeks," he said. "But there will be a half-hour press conference before. You're welcome to attend."

It did not sound appealing.

Next day we were involved in a garage sale with some neighbors. We showed up with our wares like your Happy Suburban Family. There was a marked reluctance to tell people – why? She's leaving me, I'm a failure? I pushed her out, I'm a brute? The Town Weird makes (more) back-fence headlines? No, I honestly believed the biggest fear was the barrage of sympathy I'd get. Mournful faces and shoulder-clapping condolences from professional couples who'd stuck together like yellowed Scotch tape to mildewed wallpaper since the year one. "Is there anything we can do?" Yeah, piss off.

The morning was lovely, it was only when we returned home the rain began. So I couldn't even go for a long walk (me, the rain-hater). Self-punishment: sit there and watch. Sit there and die a little.

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

Four o'clock I decided to go to Tauranga. (Or Timbuktu: anywhere.) I called Pat, who said she'd be by in half an hour. At five I stepped out into the rain, stood under the eaves and away from the house where my life was being taken apart.

Finally, a yellow station wagon slowed down, beeped twice and stopped. Pat was driving, Narelle alongside. A woman I hadn't met was in back. I got in beside her, and the car began slowly to pull away.

"You're not going to drive like a little old lady, are you, Pat?" I said, rather loudly. The words echoed back to me, ugly. How could I have said that? I slumped down in my seat.

Normally a painfully slow driver, Pat made like the rain-slicked road was the Indy 500. I buckled myself in, held tight to the upholstery. Louise, alongside me, looked over and giggled. The thought that was tickling her crawled over and invaded my head. The irony of being totaled in a car crash en route to hear the world's foremost authority on death and dying was too much. We broke out laughing.

People were piling into the lobby. They looked overdressed for a lecture on dying. Then I realized a wedding was happening in another part of the large, modern hall. Small town folk dressing up for an occasion always seemed like walking cardboard cutouts, or baboons wearing bowties: everything fit, but somehow lacked conviction.

Four older women were seated behind a long table near the theater doors. There seemed to be no reason for them since there were no tickets to sell, but these were the same four women behind tables in lobbies catering to every function held since the beginning of time. I asked one, then another, finally all four, for the man I had spoken to by phone, the chap running the affair. Not a one had a clue who he was.

I found him at last. He looked as happy as a hangnail. He said he didn't know where the press conference was, where the honored guest might be. He promised me standing room at the rear of the theater later on. He said he was sorry for the inconvenience. I believed him.

I walked up a set of stairs and leaned over the balcony rail, watching the goings-on below. Quickly bored, I began nosing around. I tried a door. Broom closet. Another led to a projection room, a third to a set of stairs going up. I opened yet another door and immediately was set upon by a wall of tobacco stink. I was about to close it when a voice called out: "Come in, come in."

I took half a step in, holding my breath. A woman in her thirties stood in a windowless room the size of a walk-in closet. Behind her, seated in a chair, was a tiny person in her sixties, short silver-white hair combed over the forehead of a lined, androgynous face. Rumpled green blouse, baggy jeans and sandals. Only the blouse, which might've been slept in, gave hint to the wearer's sex. She was doing an ample portrayal of a chimney in a blizzard.

"I'm Joan," announced the younger woman. "And this is Elisabeth."

\*

## FEARBUSTING

My mother lay rotting in the Philadelphia hospital. She was sallow and weighed 85 pounds. She smelled like a compost heap.

I would sit there, totally ignored by her, and watch the doctor, who five years before had removed a malignant tumor and told her she'd live to a hundred, and the nurses when they came in. They'd look at the chart, the walls, the floor, the ceiling. But never at the patient. Nor did relatives who came to visit. And they all told her she was not dying, that she did not have – you know, *that* – and she soon would recover from her little malady and go home. I trailed along this conspiracy of lies and silence until I could stand it no longer.

“I’m going to tell her,” I said one day to my father. (Maybe I just wanted a little attention from her.) I thought he would have a stroke. Red in the face, he bellowed: “You’ll break her heart! You want to kill your own mother?”

At this same time, mid-1960s, in the city of Denver, a successful, very straight Swiss psychiatrist named Elisabeth Kubler-Ross was asked to lecture before a group of smug, bored med students. She decided on a topic which had been on her mind for a while. Not only did she break a major medical taboo – the subject was *verboten*, especially with patients – but she had the audacity to bring into the lecture hall with her a beautiful teenage leukemia victim, who was only too happy to discuss her imminent death.

Together they blew a room full of minds.

The lecture became so well known that requests for printed copies poured in. Soon after, Kubler-Ross moved to Chicago, where she began lecturing on the subject of how to administer to the dying with understanding and compassion. (Lesson one: do not be afraid of the patient. Lesson two: do not lie to them.)

She soon became a star in the field she herself had created. She began conducting workshops and setting up programs and hospices for the terminally ill as well as for grieving next of kin. Her 1969 book *On Death and Dying* at once became the bible in the field.

\*

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross lit up another cig, blew the smoke above our heads. I took the only other seat in the room. There were a few moments of uncomfortable

silence. The Universe had plucked me up by the nape of the neck and plopped me before this utterly fascinating and remarkable human being. Now that I was here, what to do? Conduct an interview? Sit and wait?

“Yes, I smoke,” she said, answering a question I hadn’t thought to ask. “And drink lots of coffee. I live a very unhealthy life. I don’t eat brown rice and vegetables three times a day. I don’t meditate 23 hours a day. Those who do don’t get much accomplished, do they? My life is my work. Sitting talking to some beautiful, open person who soon is to die, who knows it and is so very much at peace about it – that is my meditation. Do you understand?”

She spoke with a thick Germanic accent that she used like a spatula working a stir-fry.

“It takes a Swiss workaholic to do this. I’ve had four weeks of non-stop workshops in New Zealand. People grabbing at me all the time. But I’m learning to say no.” To the woman Joan: “Didn’t I say no to this lady tonight?”

Joan smiled, nodded, then stepped out, leaving us alone.

“Are you still getting flak in your work?” I wondered.

“Oh my God! Listen. There was a woman not long ago who needed a blood transfusion following a dental operation. She got Aids from the blood, and her husband, a very conventional middleclass type who had never been with another woman let alone a homosexual, was forced to quit his job and sell their home as result of all the pressure.

“After that, we tried to start an Aids hospice in Virginia where I live. We were very nearly lynched. I mean that literally. If the police hadn’t come to our rescue, they would have killed us. Incredible!

“And the media. I mean, a doctor talking honestly to a dying patient! At first they spit in my face. Ten years later they put me on a pedestal. Then when I started talking about life *after* death, again down came the axe. But I didn’t mind what they said, really I didn’t. Then one day I opened the paper and read: Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has venereal disease! I was so angered: how can they say this?

“Shortly after, I had a lecture in New York. Five thousand people in the audience, all curious to know: does she or doesn’t she? I’m nervous. So I ask my spirit guides for help. I’m standing just off-stage and the MC is introducing me like I’m Madonna. You know New York. Then he turns to me, the audience applauds politely, and suddenly – I am paralyzed from the waist down! I mean, my legs are gone!! I



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have to walk twenty feet to the microphone and I can only move by placing both my hands on each leg and dragging it in front of the other.

“I thought: What the hell are you doing to me? (A smoker’s laugh.) It took me three minutes to get to the microphone. They’re all staring at me, of course. Well, I stand there, not knowing what to say, when a voice comes out of me. It’s my voice, but I don’t know where it comes from, do you understand? And I say: ‘You’ll have to excuse me, but I suppose you know it’s somewhat difficult to walk when you have venereal disease.’

“There’s dead silence for a solid minute. Then as one, the audience gets to their feet and applauds for two, three minutes. And like that, the feeling comes back to my legs! I mean, you ask, you get help. Eh?”

Good God, the lady was a raver! You got the feeling she’d told each story a thousand times, and it got better with each telling. The good, the bad, the adulation, the condemnation: she enjoyed it all, and you could not help but enjoy it with her.

It was 40 minutes before Joan returned to break us up, to escort Kubler-Ross downstairs to the stage. We shook hands and parted, and I walked out of the smoky cell and down to the lobby. The theater was filled, more than a thousand strong, an amazing turnout for a town of 75,000.

The lecture organizer asked how the press conference went, and when I told him no one else showed, his face dropped even more.

“But they said they’d come. Reporters, photographers. They said they’d be here!”

As my reward, he guided me not to a position at the rear of the hall, but down an aisle practically to the stage, where he seated me on a step.

A woman appeared on the stage and led everyone in two choruses of *Sailing Away*. Ah, New Zealand. Then Kubler-Ross.

She looked even tinier than when I was standing right next to her. She shaded her eyes from the spotlights’ glare, took the mike in hand.

Kubler-Ross did not have stage presence. Nor was she in any way as animated as she’d been upstairs. She spoke softly, almost timidly, and yet within minutes her casual, intimate delivery had her audience spellbound.

She did not talk of death and dying, not at first.

Babies were born, she said, with only two fears, falling and loud noise. All the rest were projected onto them. By us.

“We raise our kids to be prostitutes. ‘I love you IF.’ If you do the dishes, clean up your room, get good grades. These ifs cause their fears, and eventually they feel everything they do is to please us, to get our love. In the United States, suicide is the third highest cause of adolescent death. It’s their way of getting back at those who’ve laid all those ifs on them.

“We don’t allow our kids to express their emotions, their rage. Either we punish them for any outward show of frustration or we band-aid them: ‘There, there, everything will be all right.’

“The proper way to deal with kids is to give them unconditional love. Kids raised in this manner have no fears whatsoever. They become totally self-sufficient early, with peace within.”

Then she began talking about after-death experiences – the reports of her patients who had clinically died and come back to life. She held up a crayon drawing made by one such nine year old boy. It showed a rainbow, a castle, the sun.

“The rainbow, he explained, was the side view of the bridge to God’s castle. The sun, he said, was so bright, brighter than he had ever imagined, and yet it didn’t hurt his eyes. And this was a boy without any religious upbringing to speak of.”

And on, and on. True to life experiences of the momentarily dead. An hour went by, more. Nobody so much as coughed.

Then she held up what looked to be an oval pillow. It was black, and not at all pretty.

“This is your body. It is a cocoon. When you die, this is what happens.”

She fumbled around a bit, finally had to set down the microphone to free her other hand. This she stuck into the pillow/cocoon and pulled out...a huge, magnificently colored butterfly.

“You are free,” she said quietly. “You fly.”

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

I stepped into Jessie’s room and turned on the light. The room I referred to as

## *FEARBUSTING*

the Piggery, an 11 year old's expression of independence, was barren. Open drawers stuck out of the desk and dresser, empty as starving mouths. Except one. Mister Futties, an intrepid nocturnal prowler, still lay curled up in the drawer on the bed. He refused to move when I called over. Would not even open an eye.

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

And then it happened. Somewhere in the wood shavings of my brain a worm began wriggling to the surface. I tried to push it down, plug the hole.

"You're all alone, loser!" it screamed. "Been here before, you'll be here again. Admit it, you live here!! You're all alone and there's nobody for you, and won't be when you're oldoldoldoldOLD!!!"

Aaaaaaaah, shit! Go away go away please go away.

*OLDOLDOLDOLDOLLLLLLLDDD!!!!!!*

Cracking was a hair's breadth away. And then.

And then, it stopped.

And from somewhere came: Alone? Boychik, you came in alone, you'll go out alone, what's the big *tsimmes* you're alone now? You like being alone, remember? Remember??

And I felt...

The capsule – the cocoon – that so precariously had been holding me together of late was in shards all around me. And I was –

A butterfly.

A big-ass butterfly, spectacular in color and form.

Holy honeysuckle, I'm a goddamn butterfly!! I thought.

Tears were streaming down my face. Because...

For the lifespan of a butterfly, I was free.

\*

F words. So many of life's essential words in the English language began with F: Free. Fight. Flee. Fail. Fair. Feel. Friend. Foe. Family.

Fear.

I remembered that the happiest days of my life had been those with Jessie. Telling her made-up stories as I sat on her bed at night massaging her back (through

her T-shirt; her super-sensitive skin could not take direct touch). Going to the movies together. Bicycle rides. Letting her play hooky and the two of us hitching 200 miles to Auckland just to get an ice cream cone at Swenson's.

I was good with young people. When I gave talks at schools, the kids saw me not as authority figure, an adversary, but one of themselves. ("You're like a big bald kid with a beard," one 14 year old girl told me.)

I had met Jude in Bali one day when Raewyn had something else to do and I went off alone. I was sitting at a *warung* having a coffee. She came right up and sat down. A good looking woman, late 40s, long graying hair, no makeup. Nice body.

"Something said to me, Go over and talk to that guy, he's interesting," was the first thing out of her mouth.

We spent some hours together. She lived in Perth, had two kids, one of each, late teens. If you're ever down our way, she said.

She met me at the station, drove me in her little Holden to her place just north of the city. The first few days all was fine. I had my own room. We spent most all of the evenings together. Except when her mobile rang. Then she'd go off to her bedroom, close the door, and be there for hours, talking. I'd wait, and wait. Then go off to bed.

She would drive me to one of the many city beaches to walk the dog, or over to Fremantle to sit at an outdoor café on South Terrace — "Cappuccino Road" — and talk.

Jude seemed to have untold friends. Few appeared to work. (She herself pulled an 8 to 5.) A few were musicians, some made jewelry, one or two dealt dope. Superannuated hippie types.

The kids. The son was 19, extremely handsome with long stringy hair. He didn't work. He didn't go to school. He didn't do much of anything — save sit in his room most of the day and play on the Net. When he appeared, it was: "What's to eat?" Then he would lie on the sofa, stereo pumping grunge, TV on at blast. And he would mutter. Snidely. When Jude asked him to do something, all too politely, he paid no attention.

"Aw, come on," she'd beg. "Please?" Mutter.

The daughter was a year younger. She'd finish her waitressing job around ten, then drink until two or three, come home stumbling, banging into things. My second night there, she came into my room, turned on the light, looked nonplussed

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to see me in bed. Stepped out, slammed the door.

Jude thought all this was wonderful, hilarious. She told all her friends of the bedroom-barging number. I figured she was just letting people know we weren't sleeping together.

Otherwise, things went well those first few days. Whenever she went off, in the morning to work, or to bed at night, she'd give me a smile, a kiss. Be patient, old fella, I told myself. If it's gonna happen, it'll happen. No rush.

The daughter brought home a boyfriend. A musician. I'd never seen anyone with as many things plugged into the face. Pieces of metal, stones, bone carvings. Eyebrows, ears, cheeks, nose, lip, chin. He rattled.

The son, the daughter, the boyfriend paid no attention to me. I was not there. When I said something, I was ignored. Asked a question, a mutter, a mumble. No eye contact. Dog liked me, though.

My fifth day, Jude joined the Barry Doesn't Exist Club. Not a hundred percent. Eighty-five. I'd be sitting there at the dining room table, ear plugs in, reading. She'd come home from work. Greet the three young ones. I wasn't there.

"Hi, Barry, how was your day? Oh, great, thanks. Pushed a peanut up Wellington Street with my nose, swam naked in the Swan. Kicked a few old ladies. You know, the usual."

"I said hello," she said. "You just didn't hear me."

I didn't like Perth. Even more than I didn't like Sydney. It was a cold, reserved city, one that had little going for it. Fremantle, though, was grand. Twenty years before it had been a sleepy fishing village full of old Italian men. Then the America's Cup was held there. The Italian fishermen were paid megabucks for their properties, and the entire town was modernized, prettified. In truth, not too badly. It now had a wonderful feel, festive but laid back, more a part of Melbourne than Perth.

So each morning I took the half hour train ride from Perth, and just wandered.

One evening, Jude met me at Franco's, one of the featured Cappuccino Road hangouts. We sat talking, and for the first time in days she was back into us. Looking me in the eyes. Laughing.

Then a friend came by, a male her age, and she jumped up from the table and gave him a hug. They stood there talking, her back to me. Five minutes, ten. She did not introduce us. I was not there.

I felt like a spanked bottom. And then, as often happens to me (my Sagittarius

rising), I had a total change-around. Hey, this was her. This was who she was. She had a batting order, and she would pitch only to whoever was at bat at the moment. Which had been me. But I'd got lifted for a pinch-hitter.

My thoughts, sitting there in ignore-ance: 1. If in fact Marie from Melbourne's star gazing had been right, Jude was definitely not the one. 2. I could leave her place, find my own accommodation, guest house, backpackers, whatever. 3. Rent/buy a car, explore the state. (Western Australia is huge and diverse: about the size of America from the Rockies to the Pacific.) 4. I could stay at Jude's house, have my own room, live in my own peaceful micro-environment, do my daily wander and, most important, not be bothered by this woman's odd quirks.

One was in, two was out. Three I would do, eventually. But first I'd continue on with four. That settled, I felt wonderfully clean, perhaps for the first time since a fatal evening in Brisbane weeks before.

Those F words. I had come searching for Family. Obviously not to be. But a few days later, I did find Friends.

The Wray Street café. I discovered it in my meander one day. Like the Bookends bookshop in Adelaide, the Wray pulled me in like suction. Good coffee, superb nosh, even a free online computer to send emails and check Phillies scores (you can take the boy outta Philly).

One Saturday morning, my third week in Perth, I walked in, greeted the owner, ordered my usual (strong flat white, large cup, huge slice of carrot cake, yogurt on the side). Problem: no unoccupied table. A woman was sitting alone at a two-seater. She had a bunch of papers spread out, was busily writing. I asked if I might sit across from her. She nodded, continued writing.

"Poetry," I said on reflex, looking at her notebook upside down. "Whoops, sorry. I know what it is to be disturbed when you're creating."

She looked up. "You're a writer?"

"Now and then," I smiled.

"Published?"

"Here and there." We both laughed. She put away the notebook, cleared off the table.

Suzanne. Early fifties. Built like a small tank. Right off, she let me know she was gay, a schoolteacher, a fighter for the rights of lesbians and young people in general in a starched, narrow educational system.

## *FEARBUSTING*

The principal of her school was an ass, she said, angrily. Some of the parents were equally as bad. But the kids – ah, how she had time for the kids in her classes.

“I’m a fighter, darling. You don’t push Suzanne around. And I’ll keep on fighting. They can’t shut me up, and they can’t fire me because I’m too damn good.”

I told her about my confrontation with the lesbian at the Sydney party. She waved it away.

“Sounds like she has no compassion, darling. That’s not limited to us, you know. The people I’m around, they’ve got heaps of compassion. Hey, we’re just like normal people, only better!”

I nodded. “But so many gays I meet are to the right of Vlad the Impaler. Males, that is. The women – well, to tell you the truth, the lesbian movement just bores the hell out of me. All the rhetoric and sloganeering. Christ, hire a spin doctor! Another thing. Those of us with superior awareness – not smarter, necessarily; just more aware – we need our individuality as much as we need acceptance of our genre by *them*. The two elements together comprise the core of our personal growth, you know what I mean? What I see, all too often, is the club. It’s so cozy, so comfortable. So safe. And it excludes me. Why? What if I think you have something of interest and I want to come listen in. Well I can’t cause I don’t have a membership card. Plus —”

I saw tears forming in Suzanne’s eyes. Oh hell, I thought. I didn’t mean to do this. Thanks, Mighty Mouth.

“Darling, I’ve been in the fight three years,” she said softly. “Every single day, three whole years. I’m completely surrounded by lesbians. I do need to hear an intelligent voice, a male voice. It’s so refreshing.”

Next thing I knew, we were in Suzanne’s car. “My partner’s got to meet you. She’s really been clamoring for male input. She’s an artist, works at home, so she doesn’t get out and about much. ‘I’m so damn tired of all these lesbians!’ she keeps saying.”

We pulled into a driveway. Over a high wooden fence, she yelled, “Darling! Look what I’ve brought you! A man! A Jewboy from New York, yet!”

And so now I met Dassy – Hadass – an Israeli also early fifties. The yin to Suzanne’s yang. She showed me her work. All with lesbian motif. Talked about her life. In the Israeli army, of course. Ten years a teacher of Toyota Meditation for

the little brown man. So was her partner then, a male. Lived in New York, with a Jewish partner. Female. Sometimes around people who swing both ways, I feel like such a novice in life.

Being around them was like having two Jewish mothers, one of them a *shiksa*. They fed me at home. They took me out for cheap eats in Fremantle. Introduced me to their hangout.

“The waiter here is our favorite Arab,” Suzanne said as we sat at an outdoor table on Cappuccino Road. “Hey, you Arab!!” she yelled over. “Come over here and meet a Jew from New York!”

Suzanne had a daughter, around 30. An attractive woman. But it was not Suzanne’s daughter who buzzed my heart, it was her granddaughter, a precocious gem of ten. Under 12 and over 50, I thought: it’s the ones in the middle I can’t get along with.

One evening we all went to a smokefree live music venue called the Fly By Night. I felt so at home. I danced a lot. By myself. It’s the only way I know how. Very likely I struck a ridiculous figure, legs and arms and head moving to their own heard beat. Grace? Form? Nah, old dude just enjoying himself.

When not dancing I just sat around with these four females, feeling like I was part, you’ll forgive the expression, of family. A family with real, unforced feelings for one another.

Suzanne and Hadass offered the spare room in their home. “Why stay where it doesn’t feel good? You’re most welcome here.”

But I didn’t move. I stayed put. Why? I knew I was proving something, I just couldn’t figure out what.

One evening Jude told me: “I feel bad you’re not comfortable here.”

“Actually, I’m quite comfortable. Do you feel I’m intruding on your space?”

“No, not at all.”

On another occasion, she brought home a small parcel. “One of the subsidiaries of the company I work for makes them.” She opened the carton to reveal a gross of condoms of varied shapes, configurations and colors.

“Look at these,” she said. “All these burrs. And these ones. Funny looking things, aren’t they?”

I just sat there smiling. I hadn’t a clue what was going on, and frankly, didn’t care. Play your games, woman. You can’t touch me.



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I told her I'd made some close friends in Fremantle.

"You see them every day?" was all she asked.

"Most days," I said.

Winter was on us now, and the weather had changed. Colder, and many days were wet. It was time to get on the road.

I checked out car prices. Rentals were ridiculous. And I disliked buying a vehicle. I'm not good with cars. They break down, I call the automobile club. But WA was so huge: the outback, roads requiring four wheel drive. You really had to be a mechanic to properly see this state.

Then one moment I made a decision. Once again it had nothing to do with what I'd been planning. It just came out of the blue and took a bite. (Planets in Jupiter.)

I went to tell Hadass and Suzanne. It was Saturday afternoon, and I knew they'd be home. I walked to their place. The car was there. But no sign of life. I went up to the door, was all set to knock. Had my fist cocked in front of my face. Then something pulled me over to the front window. Mistakenly, I thought this was the living room. It wasn't the living room. It was their bedroom. The two women were curled up under the duvet, fast asleep in each other's arms. I stayed at the window no more than a moment, but it was all the shutter speed time I needed. I knew these two were really, really friends because, only recently denied love myself, I tiptoed away from there feeling so warm, ever so happy, for the two of them.

# FEAR-BUSTER #4

## Waking up naturally (and happily)

Name the worst inventions of all time. Television, easy. Telephone? Yeah, maybe. Okay, what about the alarm clock? But, you say, how else am I going to —?

Remember those brain waves? And what you do with them when you sleep? How you go from high Alpha down through Theta into lowest Delta and back up again in around 90 minutes? Now what happens if you are at, say, 2 hz when the alarm goes off and the waking state begins at 13? *Ba-zooook!!!* Like being shot out of a cannon. Or getting the mental bends. Good morning, campers!

You've learned how to fall asleep naturally, yes? Now you will learn how to wake up according to your own personal rhythms.

In bed. Stocking cap on your head. Ear plugs, blindfold, whatever. The day that has passed is just that: past. Your head is clear. Good. Good.

Say it's 10.30. And say you wish to awaken at 6.

In your mind, create a large clock face. Analog, please. No glass in front. Set the time at 10.30 (or whatever the time is at that moment).

Imagine placing your finger on the minute hand of the clock. Begin to slowly move the minute hand, saying to yourself as you do: I am waking up at six o'clock. I am waking up at six o'clock. I am waking...

The minute hand continues to be guided by your finger and, of course, the hour hand follows closely. I am waking up at six o'clock. I am waking up at six o'clock.

Two suggestions here. You just don't want to wake up at six o'clock.

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No indeed, you want to wake up at six o'clock and get your sweet tookie out of bed! (How many people forget that little fact, wake up promptly at 6, and the next thing they know it's twenty to eleven. They're late for their job, get fired, go on unemployment...and I get blamed!)

Okay, the other detail to keep in mind, and to recite silently as you are turning the clock hands, is this: who wants to wake up at six o'clock and have a lousy day? So, how about this: "I am waking up at six o'clock and immediately getting out of the bed to the best day I can recall having!" Get the picture?

Right. The clock is now at 6. Actually see yourself when it will be that time...waking up, getting happily out of bed, stretching and feeling extra terrific! That's it.

Did you catch on that I didn't tell you to recite: "I *will be* getting up at six o'clock"? See, what we're doing here is telling the brain a little white lie. The lie is a time-lie. We are saying, Yo, Brain! (Brain goes, Duh, yeah?) Brain, it is NOW six o'clock. And you are waking me and we're getting out of bed. Got it?

Now, brain (or Base Mind) ain't all that swift. Reliable, sure. Swift, well... So sometimes it takes a bit of repetition to get the message across. Once the message is received (the *aha!* moment), brain henceforth will have no problem getting you up at precisely the moment you desire, even though you may change wakeup times daily.

So...present tense and repetition are what makes this work.

Having a bit of trouble with trust? No problem: set your real alarm clock for five minutes later as a backup.

Brain-wave-wise, what's happening is this: you are programming your sleep cycle to do its thing in such a manner that at six o'clock you'll be right at 13 hz and ready to push upwards into the awakened state of Beta.

Variation: I'm an intrepid mid-afternoon nap taker. (Catching kip, as they say in Australia.) But I know about naps. Too long, and you get up groggy. Can't remember where you are, or even who. I time my naps for 15 minutes, using a stop watch instead of a clock in my imaging. One knob, I set the hand at 15 minutes, the other knob I push in. I am waking

up in 15 minutes, I am waking up in 15 minutes...

When you become proficient (and it doesn't take very long to train the brain to tell time, really), you can do timing acknowledgement without even knowing the time desired. Say, for instance, you're making dinner. Chop up the vegetables, dump them in the pot of boiling water along with the rice or buckwheat or lentils. Go into the next room (or several rooms away, doesn't matter), sit down to read or meditate, and tell your brain this: at the exact moment the food is cooked just the way I like it, *I will become attentive to its completion*. Or words to that effect.

Hey, now, just wait a minute! How can my brain know such a thing when my eyes can't even see into that pot? Aw, c'mon. Your brain can do anything you set your mind to do (with proper instruction and practice). Your "sight" is not limited to your eyes, nor is any other sense limited to its physical tool. Those notions are ceilings that have been placed over you by silly and largely inept educational systems. Well, here's a bit of news: ain't no ceiling up there. Nor walls around you. Illusions, is what they are. They are only there if you believe them to be. Believe yourself to be wholly free of all restraints whatsoever, and there is no limit to what you can do, where you can go.

Now, here's a question that can be answered only by people with an IQ over 200. Ready?

If you wish to use BOTH the going-to-sleep technique AND the waking-up technique, which *must* you do first?

Uhhhhh.

## 5

When I'm on the road, I take two bags: a small backpack and my standard daypack. If it don't fit in one or the other, it ain't mine: Barry's first law of roading.

I see people with suitcases, and those carriers with little wheels on the bottom. Cute. But not for a roadie.

The back is the strongest part of the body. Even one such as mine, with lumbar disks possessing all the vitality of the rubber around the windshield of a '49 Dodge. Granted, a single large pack is easier to walk with than two smaller ones. But when I'm on public transport in Third World countries, two small bags are better. If I have to stand, as is often the case, the larger bag stays on my back, the daypack on my chest; when I can grab a seat, the daypack fits on my lap

Used to be, you were allowed two packs under a certain size on planes. Then that was cut down to one. What I'd do when I checked in, I showed them the larger bag, hid the smaller. Then carried both packs in the passenger section with me. No time wasted when I got off, no paranoia that the 23-IQ airport baggage workers might send my spare underwear to Peru.

First time I got nabbed hiding a pack was way back in the early '70s. This was at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. No sooner had I parked the daypack behind a pillar and moved toward the check-in line than the entire Mossad jumped out, Uzis in my face. "Hey, I'm Jewish!" I yelled. Not a claim I'd make in many of the world's airports. Didn't work for me here, either.

Seems they had been watching me, a suspicious character, on closed circuit. Frog marched me back to the bag and, giving me a wide berth – still with guns drawn – made me slowly open the pack and daintily remove every item. On the other hand, last visited, the domestic airport in Luang Prabang, Laos, had this sign on the check-in counter: Please Show All Weapons. You didn't have to turn them

in; they just wanted to know.

Packing. I had terrific teachers: The US Air Force basic training at Lackland AFB, Texas. We had to roll one of every issued garment and place them precisely in a display drawer of our foot locker. Upon inspection, the brass might take out a garment or two, check how tightly they were rolled. Not absolutely tight, you got a demerit. A single demerit meant no leave time; enough of them, you were held back a week when the rest of the flight finished basic and moved on to their first assignments. You did not get demerits at Lackland.

I was exceptionally poor at rolling clothing. Finish with a T-shirt, it looked like a flabby beer barrel. What I did, I got the best roller in the barracks to do mine. Then I *glued* the things. Like rocks, they were.

Everybody in the flight knew what I'd done, of course. So when a brand new, straight-out-of-OTS second looey came by one day – we're all standing at ramrod attention for the guy – and plucked out a pair of my new boxer shorts (guaranteed to have a gaping hole at the fly when worn), bounced it around in his hand, then *threw* the thing against the wall, you could hear 50 breaths being sucked in. Did the same with a T-shirt. Pair of socks. Fifty word balloons silently rose up, reading: ROSEY'S SCREWED!!

Instead of smelling rodent, the loo broke into this grand wide grin. He had us all gather round. "Airmen, *this* is how you roll clothing!"

Forty years on, I am still rolling clothes in this manner. (Without the glue, however.)

What, then, do I put in my packs for half a year's journeying? An absolute minimum. Which, I always find, is far too much once I'm Out There.

For starters, I take a sleeping bag. Many travelers don't. It takes up a lot of room, and I've gone on more than a few journeys where I haven't used it once. For me, it's a Just In Case – I absolutely hate being cold at night.

The one I carry is down filled, rectangular (which means it opens full, serving also as a blanket, which the mummy bags don't), and stuffs into an unbelievably small sack. Weighs next to nothing.

I also have a silk sleeping sheet as a precaution against bugs. (It doesn't work, but the silk feels lovely.) It folds so tiny, it can double as a plug in case of nose bleed. (Only kidding, folks, ha-ha.)

Other essentials: World's greatest invention, the Swiss army knife. A *Swiss*

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Swiss army knife, with umpteen gadgets. I've had this one 25 years. I've sewn a tiny pouch into the daypack, so it goes with me everywhere. Unfortunately, aircraft security being what it has become, I now have to stuff it in the pack goes in the hold. I wrap it in a pair of old, smelly socks to keep it out of the straying hands of the baggage handlers.

The Lumberman? Too big, too bulky, and what do I need it for, really.

Ear plugs. The best money can buy. I've sewn loops of thread into the bases, result of not being able to get one of the little bastards out of an ear hole a while back. (A pair of tiny tweezers, following several aborted attempts, finally succeeded.)

The plugs are used mainly, but not exclusively, for sleeping in noisy places. Quite often in my travels I have been captive audience to the uncouth. Loud, large, and frequently drunken uncouth. (See Lonely Planet Behavior Guide For Assholes, \$19.95.)

In some places, however, noise is simply your local style. Chinese who stand outside your hotel room door at 5am having conversations at volumes that crack glaciers in the Arctic. Indian religious fanatics broadcasting all-night babble – complete with firecrackers, naturally – over scratchy loudspeakers at 400 decibels. Balinese roosters waking on the terrace of your losman at 2am. Nocturnal barking dogs, mating geckos, the PA system at the Bangkok Airport when I'm trying to sleep on the floor between flights, the marathon yakking woman in the adjoining family compound in Sumatra doing her best Marge Simpson on nitrous oxide impersonation...

Another product I'm never without is Tiger Balm. I honestly cannot say whether the gunk actually works on aches and pains – I've never used it for that. Tiger Balm, you see, is ear plugs for the nose. There are times in Third World travel when you just do not wish to inhale the local olfactory ambience. Public toilets, for example. A fingertip's worth of balm up the nostrils works absolute wonders to keep you from issuing forth from the usual incoming orifice as you issue forth from the standard outgoing. And if, like me, you're just a bit too old and decrepit to karate chop the jugular of every mindless smoker whose fumes make a beeline your way (even with a Force 12 behind you), the Tiger can be a godsend.

Dental floss. So strong, sooo many uses. (And for those fortunates still with teeth, you can even clean 'em with the stuff.)

Umbrellas. Never used to carry one. Nowadays it's an essential part of the kit. I use one of those fold up jobs with a strong curved handle. I can loop the handle into my waistband, ready for a quick draw. In case of rain? No, dogs. Developing countries are clusters of villages. Even the cities. Villages have dogs. They are small, scrawny, mangy and you do not pet them. Or speak to them. They are not friendly to any stranger, but most specifically not friendly to me, a prime benefactor of my local SPCA. The umbrella is not for actually whacking an aggressive cur. Just for warning off.

These dogs are smart. And sneaky. True survival of the fittest here. When they hear (smell? sight?) you coming, they start the warning howl. Soon the screechy bellow is taken up all down the line, like high volume Chinese whispers. (Although you don't have to worry about the dogs in China. Except for those passing as beef in your chow mein.)

What you do, you eyeball the nasty bugger. Do a DeNiro. He knows you're bigger, so gives ground and moves behind you. You swing the umbrella to the rear a few times as you continue to walk. Out the corner of your eye you see him stop. Chalk up another small step for man. Until the son of a bitch (or the bitch herself) pads silently up to your heels and takes a bite.

I've only been bitten once, in India. And thankfully I was wearing jeans that day, and the bite did no more than graze the skin. I don't know which is worse, rabies or the shots they administer in Third World countries.

The closed umbrella, turned around so the spokes are in your hand, is also a decent weapon. (An AK47 is better, but harder to get through security.) In truth, I've never used a weapon in my first 30 years of travel. I've been in a share of fixes, but always managed to talk my way out. But it's good to have something, anything, to provide even a tiny sense of roadie well-being. NOTE: umbrella smacking of obnoxious tourists (American females, German males, young Israelis of any gender) is not recommended.

Other essentials that I carry: a down vest. Even if it doesn't have its own stuff sack, it fits into the smallest of bum bags and is a good defense against cold.

First aid. At home, I never, ever, use antibiotics. Whatever it is that brings me down, I bombard it with vitamin C, garlic, mindpower, rest and other natural remedies. On the road I'll carry an all-purpose antibiotic and a small tube of antibiotic cream. I don't dose immediately; wait a couple of days, see if it clears



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up without. Really, I can't imagine anything worse for the human body than this stuff. Yes I can: being laid up in a filthy Asian hospital with a microscopic bug that's chewing up my insides.

So I take along powerful doses of acidophilus pills for balance. If I have to take antibiotic, I counter with these. In places where hygiene and sanitation are really bad, I'll pop a couple tabs daily just as preventive. I also take a strong, natural multi-vitamin every day.

A small bottle of clove oil in case of toothache, plastic eyewash cup, elastic ankle brace (I'm constantly twisting one or the other). And maybe two or three no-shit pills. I take these only in extreme cases, say if diarrhea persists for a few days and I sense myself dehydrating. Even then I'll take half dosage. They're deadly, these wee beasties.

For the other extreme, I carry a small supply of psyllium husks (generic name: *isopgol*). This is for when my body thinks I've swallowed half dozen no-shit pills. Some people put a spoonful of the psyllium flakes in water, stir and drink. Slightly better tasting than wheatgrass juice, but not much. I just sprinkle a couple teaspoons' worth on whatever I'm eating.

I do not take anti-malarial tablets. Again, it's a matter of which is worse. Well, malaria is worse, no question, but there's a decent chance you won't get. Best antidote is to cover up in designated malarial areas.

For first aid, I take the standard, plus arnica cream for bruises, calendula for cuts, a few natural throat lozenges. And that's the medicine chest.

Basics: small toothbrush, handle-less hairbrush, Q-tips (buds). Small bottle natural shampoo. Maybe a quarter roll of toilet paper, squashed flat and minus the cardboard insert. Small plastic pill bottle of washing detergent. All of this fits into a small toilet bag. A small sewing kit in an English tobacco tin. A spool of black thread, no matter what color the garment I'm sewing, and a smaller spool of dental floss for those extra-heavy jobs, like straps that come loose on backpacks. (See? Told you it'd come in handy.) Lastly, another grand invention, a maglite. How small. How wonderful.

Clothing: A single change of T-shirt, underpants, socks. Long and shortsleeve sweatshirts, shorts, trousers, one of each. Sandals. I wear a good pair of running shoes with orthopedic inserts. Not Nike. Never Nike. Baseball cap and woolen pulldown cap. Silk shirt in case I'm invited to dine with royalty. Anorak, notebooks,

foam lumbar support. Half a towel (I use both sides). Plastic clothesline, eight clothes pins. If there's any room left – there always is – that gets filled with books.

My entire assemblage for six, seven months, all varieties of weather, weighs around 20 pounds.

I am totally organized. My daypack has all kinds of things sewn in: elastic bands for pens, outside mini-pocket for toothpicks. In both bags, I am thoroughly systematic. I know where everything is, can dip my hand in blind and come up with whatever I want. Sound anal? Only on the road. At home I'm helter skelter, but when I'm living out of two small packs, it's essential. I'm forever amazed how many extended-period travelers aren't. I've watched people take every single item out of a huge pack to find a map, a matching sock. And then refill the pack in the same disorder. Amateurs. (Worse, *tourists!*)

Money. Years ago I made a passport pouch out of a strip of cotton – eight inches long, 4-1/2 high, with a flap. I sewed Velcro on the flap and an elastic band from an old pair of underpants as a waistband. Then I cut out a second pouch, just slightly smaller than the first, from an old shower curtain, and sewed this one inside the original. I now had a waterproof passport-and-money carrier, which I tuck inside my trousers for the entire length of the journey. I've had the same pouch about as long as my Swiss army knife. Only difference being, the knife is immune to my sweat. Meaning that, for years now, the pouch has been disintegrating. I've repaired it so many times, it's safe to call it my passport patch.

The patch/pouch is closer to me, to a most important part of me, for six months each year than my beard. I sleep with it only when I'm traveling at night. Otherwise it's stashed in my pillow case. I take it off to shower, always hanging it within reach. On the road I am careful not to get soap in my eyes when I shower. Paranoid? No, habit. Just once in memory did I leave my guesthouse without it. I walked off the property, down the street, back up the street, onto the property: 60 seconds at most. Didn't even think about it. My consciousness was on my gut, and it guided me like an errant missile back to the launching pad.

Inside the pouch are: passport, stuffed inside a ziplock plastic coin bag, and a plastic folder inside two piggyback, taped-together ziplock plastic coin bags. Inside the plastic folder are my gelt, Visa and ATM cards, driver's license and all plane tickets. I keep a separate listing not only of travelers checks serial numbers, but banknote numbers as well. Plus photocopies of the tickets. Overly fussy? All this

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organizing, and backup, takes just a few minutes, one time only.

Okay, we're on the subject of money, so let's get serious. Every year, I telegraph-transfer a sum of money from my bank in New Zealand to a student I'm sponsoring in a very poor far-off land. Because the far-off land accepts only the greenback as foreign currency, in past years I would hand the bank people NZ dollars, which they then converted to US dollars prior to transfer, taking a sizeable conversion fee in the process. Last year I thought I'd be clever. I had some US dollars left over from my journey just completed, and using these I figured to save the bank's standard exchange grab.

"You have to change your US into NZ," said the teller, "and then back to US before we can send it." Meaning I'd lose not once, but twice. Dumbfounded, I explained how patently preposterous this was. To no avail. I stormed out and tried another bank. Then another. And another. All with the same nonsensical and moronic results.

I tell this tale simply to point out what happens to your money whenever you travel. Sure, it pays to carry USD, coz love us or hate us, our bucks, still, reign supreme. Except it doesn't pay, it costs, because international banking is based on a single, solitary premise, that being to skewer you on every currency transaction.

Use an ATM or credit card and you really get slammed. Travelers checks? Well, you pay a conversion fee, a commission fee, get no interest between time of purchase and cashing (while the check company lends your money out at high interest rates), then get soaked again when you convert to rupee or rupiah or rial or ringgit. Cash is best, but of course should you lose it you're out the bundle. What do I carry when I go roadie? All three, actually. Plus a crying towel.

But banks and official currency changers are by no means the only vehicles whereby you can be fiscally flayed while traveling. Following, three true stories illustrating creative ways by which you can be separated from your money Out There.

*Story No. 1.* I've had my money stolen once in 30 years on the road, and it was my own fault. I trusted a stranger, in the case a 60 year old New York woman living in Tel Aviv, her name given me by her son, met in Athens.

I phoned her from the airport, and she gave me instructions on what buses to take. It was nearly midnight when I got there. Up five flights of steps. Knocked. She opened the door, took one look at a man with eight inch beard, rumpled T-shirt

and cutoff jeans, and promptly slammed it.

“My son would never have a friend who looked like you!” she cried through the door. Her son, clean-cut looking soul, was the biggest acid dealer in Europe.

I pleaded. I begged. I’d been living on a Greek Island the past three months, I said. I just want a bath and a night’s sleep. Then I’ll be gone.

“Don’t you at least have a suit?” In my backpack?

She relented. Once inside, I calmed her down. She made me a sandwich, and as I sat there eating she got out an album of her grandkids’ pictures. I dutifully looked through, made the right noises. Happy, she placed it back on a shelf. No more than a minute later, her eyes lit up. “Let me show you my grandchildren’s pictures!” she chirped. The same album.

Following a delightful bath, I went into the spare bedroom and laid everything out on a dresser: passport, half a dozen small visa pictures, the \$250 in travelers checks I had remaining and the \$20 worth of Israeli currency I’d changed at the airport. I looked at the bed, remembered that I hadn’t slept in one, or inside a building, the past three months. The apartment had a balcony. That’s where I slept.

In the morning I woke. The sun was shining. My first day in the home country!

I had a peaceful meditation, did my stretches, got up, walked into the spare room and...and...

The top of the dresser was bare.

I looked all around. On the floor. Behind the dresser. Nada.

I walked into the kitchen on the way to her bedroom. On the floor I saw a small square of paper, torn. Picked it up. One of my visa pictures. Then another, also ripped. And another. I followed a trail to the wastebasket. The other three, all torn, plus my passport, turned inside out. No money. No checks.

Three deadbolts on the door, no fire escape, no other way in.

“I’ve been robbed!” I cried frantically to the sleeping figure on the bed. The figure opened her eyes. “Oh no, you must’ve lost all your money on the way here last night.” Calm as you like.

“You mean to say,” demanded the tough looking cop who towered over me at the police station, “this nice old lady robbed you?” For once, I had the smarts to keep my mouth firmly shut.

The guy at American Express asked the same question. I gave the same reply. Then he said the whole deal sounded suspicious and he refused to authorize a

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refund. Now, I know from experience it's impossible to intimidate an Israeli. (Especially the women: sheesh!) So what I did was this. I pulled my chair close. Looked him square in the eye. With lunatic grin and my best – and softest – Christopher Walken voice, I told him this: One, I am Jewish, and have the same rights as you in this country. Two, I am going to wait outside the office, follow you home and camp on your doorstep. I will use that doorstep as my bed and toilet. Come morning I shall follow you back to American Express and do the same there. Three, I am a travel writer. Take your time authorizing payment, I said. Have a nice day.

You can check the Guinness Book. Fastest repayment of lost travelers checks ever.

Soon as I hit the Asian continent, my wallet, now empty, goes deep in the backpack. A clear plastic Ziploc coin bag holds the local bills I anticipate needing for each day, and a small material pouch the coins. I have already sewn an extension on the left front pocket of all pants I might be wearing, plus a Velcro strip on the opening. Bill-bag goes here, coins right side.

Why all this precaution? Third world people are poor. I am looked upon as wealthy. (I'm there, aren't I?) I am looked upon as a walking cottage industry for poor and crafty folk.

*Story No. 2.* I knew it was a squeeze the moment the guy approached. I should've taken off, but I was like a moth transfixed by the flame, rabbit by a stoat. So when he beckoned I followed willingly, knowing full well in the next few minutes I was going to be done in.

This was in Guangzhou, the city in southern China which used to be called Canton. Early '90s.

At the time, China still had two currencies – theirs, and ours. Ours was called Federal Exchange Currency, FEC. Theirs was Renminbi, or people's money. You changed US bills or travelers checks at a bank for FEC. Then went out on the street and exchanged FEC for Renminbi. Or, the street guys would do a straight swap, renminbi for dollars. Two steps out of your hotel and you'd hear the chant: "Change-a money?"

What I hadn't counted on was getting caught in a squeeze.

The guy was mid-20s, good looking, fairly well dressed, with a passable knowledge of English. I stopped.

“How much?”

“One twenty.”

“Uh-uh.”

“Okay, 130. And for 100 American dollar I give you 700 renminbi.”

And there it was, the certainty. No one was offering those rates.

Why did I go for it? I'd been traveling Asia 20 years. Except for the crazy old lady in Tel Aviv, I had never been scammed, ripped off, drugged or mugged. I tell stories for a living. What kind of story comes from relating how clever I've been to avoid skullduggery?

That was on the one hand. On the other, my fear nodes were standing on tiptoes. In this brief moment of hesitation, the guy knew he had me.

He led me across a footbridge over a narrow waterway, up a set of steps, down a set of steps. A few people on the stairways watched as we passed. They knew.

“Come on, pal,” I said finally. “Let's get on with it.”

“Not here,” he said over his shoulder. “Too many people.”

We came to a footpath beneath a motorway overpass. “Here okay,” he said. Then out of nowhere materialized a second man, same age, on a bicycle.

The squeeze was on.

The man on the bike got off. The two of them stood to either side of me. My back was against a wall. There was no one else in sight.

“How much FEC?” the first man asked.

“One hundred.”

“Two hundred,” the second man countered. “Plus US dollar.”

“Okay, okay.” I dug into my pocket, took out my ziplock bag, peeked in. “Thirty US is all I have.”

They spoke in rapid Cantonese.

“Four hundred seventy renminbi,” the first man said.

“In my hand,” I told him. “I count it. Then I give you the FEC and US.”

The first man handed me a wad of ten-yuan bills. They were old, dirty. I began to count. “Thirty short,” I said.

“Thirty! No!”

“Come on, give or I walk.” If I don't get my throat slit first.

The first man asked for the roll back. I refused. Eyeballed him a few moments. Pure bluff, of course. Reluctantly he handed me three more tens. This surprised

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me, but I put them in my pocket. Then I reached in my plastic bag, took out two 100-yuan FECs, a 20 US and a 10 US. I handed them over. The second man took them, began to carefully fold them in thirds.

It was going too smooth. I slowly began to panic. Really, though, my escalating fear wasn't for life or limb. The police in China do not muck around with crims, especially those preying on tourists. No trial. A bullet to the back of the head. Cuts down measurably on violent crime.

More, my fear was concerned with my belly pouch. I had passport, airline tickets and \$2000 in there. I could foresee a hand down my pants, a snatch and run, me being dragged along behind. The bureaucratic hassles trying to get everything replaced in China were unfathomable.

The first man said, "You give more US dollar."

"What for?"

"Give you 510 renminbi, you give only 200 FEC, 30 dollar."

"Five ten! Oh, good Christ. Look, your act's grown stale. Here's your damn renminbi. Give me back my money."

Amazingly, the second man made no fuss handing back the four folded notes. Then he cried, "Police!" Whereupon the two of them took off in a hurry, one on foot, the other on his bike.

There were no police, or anyone else around. I took a deep breath, turned and began to walk away. I was shaking, but also I was pissed off that nothing had happened, no deal, no squeeze. No story. I tucked the four folded notes in my pocket.

I took half a dozen steps when something began to gnaw at me. Another dozen and I stopped cold. There was a picture in my head, the face of a man. He had a large nose, high forehead and long, silky-looking white hair. A very familiar face. George Washington.

*George Washington??*

But brother George, father of my country, wasn't on a twenty dollar bill. Wasn't on a ten.

My fingers plunged into my pocket, pulled out the four folded bills. I opened them flat.

In my hand were two one-dollar bills and two 10-yuan FEC.

"You... *crooks!*" I yelled.

Then I stuffed them back in my pocket and walked slowly to my hotel, grinning.

*Story No. 3.* I was traveling across Asia with the American guy and the feminist met at the Pudding Shop in Istanbul. We were heading to India.

Afghanistan was then known as the biggest money market in Asia. And Kabul was the Wall Street of the country.

The American guy, who kept telling us how well he knew all the Asian tricks, had gone out of our seedy hotel that morning to buy Indian rupees. “Got 9.3 (to the dollar),” he smiled upon his return. Official rate was just under nine.

The feminist and I walked from the hotel to the money market. This was a street market much like any other, except instead of food or bangles, currencies of several nations were stacked on tables, right out in the open.

The feminist was just average looking, but she did have, as we used to say pre-PC, a wicked set of knockers. When we sat down at the table, the poor sex-starved young Muslim males crowded around, eyes on stalks, frozen to her formidable bosom.

They were very polite – not a trace of testosterone or threat. But each of them was practically swooning.

Not only did they give us a fantastic rate – 9.9 – they put on a show. It was a performance I shall never forget. Every sleight of hand known to man. Even when they would do a trick in slo-mo instant replay, with accompanying voice-over, there was no way we could catch what really was happening. They short-changed us, fast-counted, picked our pockets, slipped off our watches. Lord, they were good. We just sat there, mystified: kids at the carnival.

They asked politely could they hug my friend and kiss her on the cheek. She smiled, blushed (blushed? Yes!), said sure. Then we shook everyone’s hand and began the walk back to our hotel. A few streets along, she suddenly stopped, clutched her chest, mouth hung open.

“It’s gone!” she cried.

“Your money?”

“My goddamn *bra!*!”

\*

Being vegetarian on the road can be a bit of a dance. The way I see it, if I happen to unwittingly eat a bit of dead animal disguised as something else, I’m not going



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to die. I've taken no vows, and I'm not a fanatic.

Initially, mid-'70s, I chose to go vegetarian because I've always been fond of animals. You like animals, you shouldn't eat them. But I didn't understand the logistics of suddenly abandoning my prime form of energy foodstuff, and suffered for it. Cutting out meat and doubling up on the potatoes and peas doesn't get you there. Plus I was eating a small mountain of eggs, pasta and cheese. Don't know how I lived through it. My energy flagged, I became lethargic and constantly felt lousy. Not really sick. Just lousy.

In time the message got through. I started eating brown rice and vegetables every day. Soon, other grains – millet, buckwheat, couscous.

Then at the Hippocrates Health Institute I discovered raw food, and switched almost exclusively to salads. I went through a period where I ate nothing cooked for almost a year. As well I fasted a few days every other month. I felt fantastic. Now when I'm home, the main source of energy food is leafy greens straight out of my own garden.

On the road is a different story. I try to eat balanced, but I acknowledge this is close to impossible. Asia, especially, because there you just don't want to eat raw. They fertilize their vegetables a funny way, and it's always smart to eat only cooked.

(Still, my philosophy on health is that diet comes third in importance. First is state of mind, second aerobic exercise – walking, jogging, swimming, cycling, rowing).

Most countries it isn't hard to find non-carnivorous food. But some places it's virtually impossible to decipher the ingredients.

My first time in China I had someone make me a card, in Chinese characters: "I am a vegetarian. I eat no meat or fish." (Checking it twice with other Chinese to make sure they hadn't written, "Give this white devil rat meat!")

Soon after arriving in the city of Suzhou (where I would stay several months, I loved the place so), I was strolling down a narrow street when I came to a tiny eatery that served only dumplings. Five rickety wooden tables, concrete floor. The sounds of slurping and spitting.

I love dumplings, but figured the filling most likely used was piggy. Is there, I wondered, such a thing as meatless dumplings in China?

I handed the card to the woman behind the stove. She wiped the flour from her hands onto her filthy apron, took the card, turned it this way and that. Oh dear. Not

only couldn't she read, but here I'd caused her to lose face.

Another woman came over, snatched the card and read it out loud. Handed me back the card, pointed to the lone unoccupied table and stalked away. I slinked over and sat down.

One by one the diners finished. This was usually signified by slamming the empty bowl on the table and hawking a major loogie onto the wall.

I was now the only person beside the cook. Then she put on her coat and without a sign opened the door and left.

What now? I drummed the table. I hummed a tune. Got out my tin whistle, carried everywhere. And played the tune I had been humming. Put away the whistle, took out a book and tried to read. Put the book away, got up to leave. At the same moment the door opened: the cook, her arms full of fresh vegetables. I gawked: she had gone off to the market to buy vegetables...just for me!

She made me a bowl of soup I could've soaked my feet in. Biggest, juiciest, best tasting vegetarian dumplings in history. Cost: one yuan, or 18 cents at the time.

Based on this experience I knew I just had to learn a bit of their language. Enough, at least, to be able to ask for a meal without the card. But I am terrible with languages.

The best way to learn a language is by ear. I use eye. I break the sounds into phonetics and see them on my screen. So I memorized *wo shi*, um, *wo shi*, what the hell's that word for vegetarian again? Looked it up in my dictionary. Wrote it down. Memorized it. Threw away the paper.

And off I went.

I'd spot a restaurant, look in. If it met my criteria – no tablecloths, no whiteys, a small family-run operation – in I'd go. And recite my line: "*Wo shi*, um, er, *shucai!*"

And they'd laugh like hell.

Well, of course. To begin with, my pronunciation was pathetic. All those tones: up, down, up *and* down. Then, here's this rich Yank, can easily afford meat, orders vegetarian, for Mao's sake!

Still, they'd sit me down, bring me a meal, stare and giggle as I manhandled the chopsticks. Always they were friendly. And never charged me more than they did the locals.

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A month of this, different restaurants, same response. Furthering Sino-American relationships by providing mirth throughout China: me.

One day, while visiting the city of Hangzhou, a man came up to my table and sat down. He spoke almost perfect English. Gave me a synopsis of his life story: university teacher, pulled out of class one day by the red guard, sent off to the country to shovel manure for 25 years. I'd heard it before, many, many times. But still I listened. And made the proper sounds and headshakes.

Then he asked: "Do you know what you said when you first came in?"

"Sure. I said I'm a vegetarian. See, I don't eat meat and because a lot of the time Chinese food isn't familiar to me I want to make certain—"

His look made me stop.

"Pardon, sir," he smiled politely, patiently. "You didn't say you are a vegetarian. That would have been, '*Wo shi sushizhe.*' What you said was, '*Wo shi shucai.*'"

"Oh. Well, what does that mean?"

He was biting back the smile.

"I am a vegetable."

# FEAR-BUSTER #5

## The amazing double screen technique

You've learned two methods of meditation, how to fall asleep naturally within minutes, and how to awaken without an alarm. Now it's time to get serious. (Serious faces, please.)

The basis of all work in the realm of mindpower, or psycho-cybernetics (psycho=having to do with the mind, cybernetics=the science of computers), is this statement: your brain is simply a computer, albeit one of amazing potential. Until now, your brain-computer has been programmed largely, if not wholly, externally. You now have the right, freedom, duty and power, if you so desire, to program it yourself.

Before you do anything, it's helpful to read over that statement and see whether you are in agreement. Many people, when first they hear it, not only don't agree, they sometimes become adamant in their denial. To admit this would mean they're no better than a robot, have been for a lifetime. What an insult! (Then the news comes on TV and automatically they're sitting there, gaping. Believing. Um.)

Well, not only have we been programmed from the moment of birth, so that our thoughts, speech and actions are reactions, knee-jerks, yessir-yessir-three-bags-full-sir, but to a major extent our programming has been negative. Why else would we be so full of self-doubts? And using, as Einstein told us, no more than a tenth of our mental capacities? Perhaps because there are those who have not wanted us to go further. Whether well-meaning but unaware types such as parents, teachers and religious leaders,

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or smirking, mustache-stroking villains, it matters not. It's called control. And it is implemented through fear. And lies. Robots? Certainly not. Oh, Robbie, pour me a drink, and do be quick about it!

So before we get down to the technique, it's important to decide whether you are now the absolute best YOU possible, and if not, would you like to be? Look at it this way: as an automaton you've done pretty well to be where you are. As a free-thinking, free-spirited human being, there's a decent chance you'll go even further.

Okay...past, present and future. Past has shaped the present. But not as you might think. See, we in the West are both limited and linear in our perception. Something happens, we say, Ah, there must be a cause. And root back through the past for a singular event.

The ancients looked on it another way. They knew that every moment leads directly to the next moment, and the next. Meaning we are the sum-total of all we have been. So when we were at the most recent moment prior to this one, we could not avoid coming to the present. No one moment back there caused or created the now; they *all* did. And no one moment was any more important than any other, despite all the cause-and-effect nonsense. This is the philosophy behind the *I Ching*, the Book of Changes developed in China a zillion years ago, and which is still applicable today.

Same as all those moments of the past brought us to the present, all the moments from here on will lead us to future doings. This is what we can control...ourselves. We can manipulate the moments between now and then. Not radically. No sharp corners. But gradually, gently.

A psychic, real or phony, tells you you're going to get whacked by a green Buick in three weeks. What very well might happen is that you worry so much about this, you actually cause it to happen. Oh, the power of mind!

But if you're cool, even if the psychic is "right" in her reading, you can use this same mind power to *avoid* the predicted accident by gradually bending the line of moments away from the Buick. In other words, turn "bad" news to your advantage.

The Amazing Double Screen Technique is a tool. Its premise is based

on two time zones, two conditions. Time zone/condition one: there is a situation in your life at present which is unfavorable. Two: you can visualize a goal in which the situation is changed to one you prefer. You are broke; you have money. Have a crummy job; get yourself a good one (or no job at all and still have an income). Got a horrific golf slice; straighten out your drives. And - ready for this? Present case: you have cancer. Future: you are healthy.

Any limits here? Yes. What you can accomplish through double screen is limited *only by your imagination*...which, in potential, is limitless.

There must be some kind of trick to all this. Indeed, there is. The trick is a sleight of mind. And it entails the telling of a little white lie. Oo.

Here's the lie: that positive/future goal you wish to achieve? That isn't in the future, that's NOW! This is what you must convince your mind.

Yo, mind, listen here. The picture I'm presenting you *has already happened!*

That's it. Once mind buys the white lie, it sends out the energy to actually create it. So what you must do is get mind to believe it. Depends, I suppose, on how convincing a liar you are. Most of us are stupendous; we've been doing it all our lives, telling ourselves, and believing, we're not worthy of health, wealth, happiness and success.

**Conditions for ideal double screen use:**

1. A relaxed state of mind - the Alpha state (or in the neighborhood). Please remember, whatever you can do in Beta (the "normal" waking state), you can do better in Alpha -- where you are relaxed and focused. Note: it is unimportant that you know for sure whether you are in Alpha. Feel good? Calm? Concentration okay? You got it.
2. A good, sharp picture in your mind of the achieved goal. If you are a sort who has difficulty "seeing" with your eyes closed, no problem. Can you feel? Sense? Pretend? Some of the most accomplished double screen users I've taught were persons blind since birth.
3. A positive attitude. The goal IS going to happen, no question. The

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flip side of this is that you not be attached to the goal's achievement. It's like having a hose through which energy is flowing. Positiveness sends the energy gushing through, but attachment crimps the hose and impedes the flow. It's tricky, I know.

4. The absolute certainty that the achievement of your goal, no matter how "selfish" it might appear, is in the highest good of one and all. This is a judgment only you can make.
5. Double screen is NOT a mechanical process. You are not a doctor here, treating a symptom. You are a feeling human being. Get your heart and soul, as well as your mind, into this work.

**Preparation.** Find a comfortable spot. Sit or lie down. Close your eyes. Perhaps see yourself in an ideal setting. A log cabin in Maine. Deserted Beach in Mexico. Auto body shop in Gary, Indiana. Whatever suits.

If you meditate, a minute or two of your meditative method is excellent. Otherwise, simply take half dozen long, slow, deep breaths, being aware of the air traveling into, and out of, your nostrils. Count down from ten to one, slowly. Silently tell yourself: "I am relaxed...I am relaxed..."

**Negative screen.** Picture in your mind's eye a large, white screen. (One woman told me she was unable to do this. When I asked could she visualize a large white sheet hanging from her clothesline, she replied, "Well of course!" Don't be afraid to improvise.)

Now place a frame around the screen. Color this frame a negative color -- that is, a color you find yecch. (First class I taught at the U of Penn I suggested they all surround their screens with a black frame. Until a black woman straightened me out. Your personal perception is what counts.)

Once you have established this color, use it in all future screen work to denote negativity. Don't confuse Base Mind; it's working hard enough.

On your negative screen picture the present situation, the one you are going to alleviate. State the problem silently, once only, as you view the picture on your screen. "My car won't start;" "I smoke;" "I am about to take an exam and I'm scared shitless."

Then erase the picture, dissolve the screen, and never again image, or think, or say the problem. Here's a little trick: if the problem does come up (the old "don't think of a carrot" number), immediately identify it by saying aloud the word MUD. Why mud? Well, I don't believe that word in itself has any significance, but when I first taught this sub-technique, I asked the large assemblage to come up with a key negative-identification word. People bandied about all sorts of words. Nobody could agree on anybody else's suggestion. Until some chap yelled out MUD! and everybody shouted, That's it! Go figure.

The idea of the negative screen is simply to identify to the mind what it is you have, but don't want. Understand that Base Mind, like any computer, doesn't really understand good from bad, and does only what it's told. Keep telling yourself you're a failure, Base will attract to you whatever it takes to keep you one. Repetition re-enforces. So...once, then quit.

**Positive screen.** A new white screen (or white sheet on the line), this time with a frame colored a positive color. Again, once established, keep the same color for positive every single time.

Best you can, portray on the screen a picture, a slide, of *the achieved goal*. Don't worry about how you're going to get there. And don't limit yourself by practicalities. You want \$100, program for \$1000. (Send me the difference, you feel guilty.) Now tell yourself the little white lie: state the achievement of the goal as if it has already happened! "I *am* living in the perfect house for me...I *am* living in the perfect house for me..."

As you view your achieved goal as a slide projected onto your screen (you, smiling, having a house-warming party in your new digs, for example), keep silently repeating the simple fact of your goal achievement. If it makes you feel better to do so, you might wish to add: "...and I deserve it!" Remember, present tense. You're not hoping, you're not wishing for. You got it!

Do this for a minute or two. You really see it. You really believe it.

Now give the picture movement; change from a slide to film, or video. Observe the movement of yourself and whoever might be with you.



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Embellish: bring in people who are congratulating you; new furniture, carpets, stereo. And continue to state the simple fact of your achievements while you watch the movie in which you are the star. Do this for a few minutes. (As you get more familiar with the technique, and better at it, you can cut down the duration of the slide and film.)

This time, project yourself into the screen. Be right there in your house. No more are you detached from it, it's all around you. Move around. Touch things. Run your fingers along the walls, on the carpet. Knock on things with your knuckles, listen to the sounds that come off. *Feel your goal!* Not just with your fingers, but every last cell of your being. Know that you have achieved this goal, and it is good for you. Continue to recite as you joyfully fuss about.

Maintain this sense of goal achievement for, oh, five minutes. Just so long as you are utilizing the five requisites stated above. It's so important that you do this work not out of dire need nor desperation, rather fun and joy.

You might want to set a time reference. Picture a daily calendar, perhaps, turned to the date of your being here. Please, please: do not be afraid of using your imagination.

When you feel you've had enough, bring yourself back to your true state of reality. I like to count slowly from 1 to 10, imagining myself carrying the experience back within me. At 10 open the eyes. And do your best to not dwell on the goal while in the normal wakened state. You've set the mechanism in motion, now get on with your life.

Following the very first venture into a new goal, eliminate the negative screen and *go directly into the positive screen*. Remember, this wonderful stuff works through repetition, so negative screen, once; positive, as frequently as you wish.

Work on just one situation at a time. If you want to improve your tennis game, get a new Mercedes, cure your goldfish of the croup and score tops in the bar exam, do four separate screenings in their order of importance to you.

At the beginning of every new day's session at Penn and Auckland University, I'd always ask the class if they had experienced any miracles

using double screen. Some of their reports were astounding. Then, without fail, someone would cry, "But that's just a coincidence!" An accountant or engineer every time. Well, maybe it was: who knows? So we began calling these goal achievements ABC: Another Beautiful Coincidence. And continued to do double screen to make them happen.

There were two such achievements, however, that I know, absolutely and positively, were not any coincidence.

I was in Israel, slaving away at the Degania Aleph kibbutz (truly slaving - hardest physical work I'd ever done, and at no pay whatsoever). Mid-'70s, this was. Got a telegram from a friend in Philly: do you know your classes at Penn start next week? Actually, no. I'd completely forgot.

I flew to Amsterdam to discover the charter organization on whose flight I'd come to Europe on had gone belly-up. But the woman at the agency was very kind. She phoned around a bit, then told me, "There's a flight to New York out of Frankfurt tomorrow afternoon. They've agreed to take you on."

An all-night train, taxi to the airport. Got there around noon. The man behind the counter looked like Adolf Eichmann. He took one look at me, at my beard, my scraggly appearance, and made a sound like stifling back a puke.

"There are eleven stand-bys ahead of you," he noted Germanically, nodding at people sitting around looking very anxious. I asked when the next flight might be. In a week, he said, then turned away.

I slumped off. A pretty young thing was sitting alone. I sat down alongside.

"You too?"

"Number seven," she said.

"Twelve. Pleased to meet you," I sighed.

She said she was a student at Michigan State. We talked about this and that, then she told me how last semester she'd done a course in mindpower...with the mob that had sued me.

"You what!?" I cried. She began telling me all about it, but I cut her off.

"Look, that's it! Here's what we do." I outlined some basic double

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screen. Negative, see us as we are: no hope. Positive, we're stepping onto the plane, boarding passes in hand. We sit down in our seats, strap on the belt. Smiling. Always smiling.

"You think it'll work?"

"We have anything to lose?"

We're on the plane, boarding passes in hand, smiling. We're on the plane, boarding passes in hand, smiling. Laughing our asses off, actually.

Every now and again, we'd approach the desk. "Wait!" The old nazi admonished us. "Can't do anything until everybody with tickets is processed."

We had three hours, and we used every minute. Then the people with tickets began pouring in. A hell of a lot of 'em.

The lines thinned out, then to nothing. We went up to the counter, stood behind the others clamoring to be allowed on.

The old boy, I saw, had two envelopes in his hand. He peered around. Saw me, and the Michigan Stater beside me. Broke into wide smile. He stood up, reached out and handed one envelope to me, one to the young woman. Our names had been carefully typed on the front of each.

"Hey, I was here before them!" came a cry.

"Me too!!"

"What the hell is this!!!"

My friend was in semi-shock. "But - but—"

I grabbed her by the elbow, practically yanked the arm out of her shoulder socket.

"Somehow it doesn't seem fair," she said as we raced to the appropriate gate.

"Damn unfair," I agreed.

We got on board, boarding passes in hand. Sat in our assigned seats, buckled up. Grinning like mad.

I've mentioned that at one time I weighed over 215 pounds. Running and change of diet surely had a hand in getting me down below 150, and keeping me there. But it was double screen that got the ball rolling.

There was me, after ages putting it off (such a positive fellow, the mindpower teacher), finally sitting down and doing. Negative screen, no

problem. Projected the positive, me slim and gorgeous. (Well, I didn't want to lose all that weight only to be ugly.) Immediately, I began to fatten, as though somebody had stuck an air hose in my bellybutton. I forced it back to slim. Sssssss. Then, woooooo - back again to el blimpo.

Finally I succeeded in convincing my mind, and myself, that this swell looking slender dude in the picture was me. The words, though, were tougher. "I am thin, I am thin, I am thin." "No you're not, no you're not, no you're not." I might have had just a teensy-weensy negative image of myself.

Eventually I moved through that one as well. In fact, I got a pretty good sense of my impending new body. There I'd be, walking on a beach somewhere, wearing one of these skinny jocks barely covering the pube. Feeling the warm sand beneath my feet. Hearing and smelling the surf, occasionally stepping in up to the ankles. Absolutely breathtaking babes in bikinis lined up oohing and aahing as I strolled by. (I ignored them, of course.)

Did this four times a day. Every day. I am thin, healthy and happy. Yes I am.

Couple weeks went by. A month.

Every morning I'd tumble out of bed, walk into the bathroom, step on the scale. Not a goddamn gram, Sam.

Two months. Three. I jogged. I dieted. I fasted. Nil. Naught

Ninety-first day. Onto the scale. Down a pound. I got on my knees, banged it on the side. Must be broken.

Next day, down a pound.

Next day, down a pound.

I thought: Christ, maybe it's AIDS!

The short story: I lost 20 pounds in three weeks. Like somebody unzipped the piggy-me and took out the real me.

The weight loss slowed down after that: still, two or three pounds a week. See, I'd had such a negative mind-set here, was so fixed in my Barry-as-fat self-pity, it took three months before I was able to dislodge that self and replace it with one I knew was positive. Once that happened, the weight just melted off. Which still amazes me in that I am not, never

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have been, a person with much stick-to-itiveness. I suppose I must've really, truly, wanted this one.

Even when I went back to a full food regimen, I continued to lose. Then I got cocky about my newfound talent. If I can convince my mind to lose weight without in any way physically trying, maybe I could convince my mind that *the more I ate the more I'd lose!* Hey, why not?

I began eating for three. And the pounds still rolled off.

One day I was visiting a friend. He hadn't seen me in a while and was amazed at the change. "Look, I just bought a dozen jelly donuts," he said, sheepishly. "I don't suppose you'd be into those now, huh."

"Are you kidding? I love those suckers! Where are they?"

He brought out this huge white box, opened it to reveal what I now know to be the most sickening edible ever created. White flour, white sugar, dandruff on top and red goo in the middle. Back then, well, I still had a bit of consciousness to gain.

Pop. Pop. Pop. Prattling on as I chewed, swallowed, chewed, swallowed.

I ate nine. My friend had two. He just watched me jam them down, his eyes like saucers.

"Uh, aren't you gonna have the last one?" he wondered.

"Nah. I've lost enough weight today, thanks."

The one aspect of double screen that, to me, is the most beautiful is its use in healing, both one's self and others. In doing this (or any work, really), the more people focusing their energies on the goal, the better.

Jessie. My defacto daughter. Light of my life. Jessie never came to any of my classes. But we did group healings using double screen, everybody in the class concentrating their positive energies onto a subject, whether that subject was in attendance or not. In every class I taught at Auckland University, I always brought up Jessie's name.

We would perform the healings on the second Sunday morning of the two-weekend course. By Tuesday, Jessie's skin would be completely free of her dreaded eczema. And it would remain that way for a few weeks before it began to reappear. After a month it was back in full. Since I was

teaching just two courses a year then, it wasn't possible to sustain her recoveries. But for her, even a few weeks without was a godsend.

But it was Marian's story I like best. Woman in her late fifties. Cancer of the cervix, terminal. (The idiot savants of the medical profession had given her a 30% chance of survival. What's that mean, they polled ten quacks, seven showed thumbs down, the other three up?)

We did group healings at Penn. Everybody focusing on Marian. Two, three hundred people: that's a lot of energy.

Marian went in for her periodic checkup. The doc examined her. The Big C was...gone. She was clean; she'd beat it!

She came to the next class I did, got up and told a teary crowd her story. More as a reflex than anything else, I said: "What are you going to do for an encore, Marian?"

Quickly she replied, "I'm going to change my hair"-- it was white -- "back to its original brown. Do you think I can do it, Barry?"

I was all set to say, No, of course not. Medical science knows you can't --. And then I thought: Dummy, she's cured herself of cancer! You're gonna tell her she can't do something like this?

Yes, Marian, I said. By all means.

Ran into Marian on the street in Philly some months later. She came up to about here on me. I caught myself staring. About an inch of brown hair was coming out of her scalp. The rest was white.

"Uh, Marian. Have you been dying your hair?"

"Oh no!" she smiled grandly. "I've been using double screen every single day, sometimes five, six times!"

Sudden thought. Me, with hair! I mean...hair!!! A full head. A mountain.

Every day. Several times a day. Hair. Snaking out of my scalp. Medusa never had it so good. Hair. H A I R.

And then, one day in the middle of yanking thick black strands up out of my pate, my eyes popped open. Wha-a-a??? I mean, what the hell was I doing? And for what purpose?

*Aha!*

Marian went brown. All of it. Swear. It began graying again a couple years later, but what the hell. See, Marian didn't know, didn't believe,

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she *couldn't* do it. So she did it.

You tell me what can't be done and I'll tell you somebody I've known who's done it. Again, we're not talking big numbers. No mass miracles. But sure in hell well beyond the so-called law of averages.

While writing this chapter, I happened to catch a squib in the New Zealand *Herald*. American scientists claim you can change physical characteristics -- gain better musculature, for example -- without actually doing any physical effort. Simply by -- get this, now -- *thinking* about it. Whoaaaaa!!! Didn't take 'em long, eh? Welcome to the world, folks!

Now look here. What if you FAIL? Yeah, so? Have I ever FAILED to achieve a goal via double screen? Yeah, so? What's the meaning here? Dunno, don't care. Sometimes, down the line, I've realized that the goal, if achieved, wouldn't have been all that terrific for me. Sometimes I have gotten what I programmed for, then saw that, really, I might've done better without. But what's the worst case scenario here? Any side effects? (One woman's doctor warned her not to do double screen because it might give her false hope.)

Double screen in itself is a meditation. Good for focusing, visualizing, de-stressing. However, the old saw that you had better be careful what you "ask" for because you just might get it, applies here as in all facets of life. Except don't be careful. Be mindful.

Let me tell you about Crazy Rosie. Lady, sixties, lived in center city Philly, in a tiny one-bedroom apartment. With seven dogs and God knows how many cats. Get the picture?

Rosie came to my free class at Penn, and her whole life changed. Crazy Rosie became -- ta-*taaaaa*: a healer!

Crazy Rosie used to visit the local hospital, do bedside healings on patients, mostly without their being aware. The hospital staff, all of whom knew her, and knew her to be harmless, would drag her out of the wards and admonish her. So she asked could she do her healings from outside the rooms. And they said, Well...okay.

One night Crazy Rosie was deep in Alpha performing a double screen healing on a man around her own age, who was in a coma. The following evening, in class, Crazy Rosie stood up and, looking quite shaken, told

this story:

In the middle of healing the chap, he woke up (in her mind), looked her in the eye and said, Just who are you and what the hell d'you think you're doing? Crazy Rosie replied: I'm Crazy Rosie and I'm healing you!

Who asked you to? said the man.

Well, no one. But --

Right. No one asked. And no one will. Y'know why? Because I've worked out my *karma* (Rosie, who'd never heard the word before, thought he said *carmel*) with the bitch I've been married to for 40 years. I'm done. Thank Christ! So don't you dare try to bring me out of this lovely coma and make me better. I'm outta here!!

Another story. Guy named John. Commercial artist, single, maybe 50. Played the lottery every week. Had never won. Asked in class could he use double screen. I thought about it. Sure, I said. Negative screen, see yourself with the ticket you just bought. Positive, see the edition of the *Inquirer* that has the winning numbers. Yours is at the top.

John hit the lottery six times in less than a year. The lower prizes. Fifty bucks, a hundred. Once \$500. He did come close a couple times to the biggie. Had all the numbers, except two were transposed. In Pennsylvania, this is. State of, what, twelve million?

This is not the story I wish to relate, however. Here's the story.

I ran into John about a year later.

"Hey, John," I said, "you win any more lotteries since I saw you last?"

"Nah." Shrugged. "Well, see, I just got tired of using that thing -- what did you call it?"

I shall leave it up to you to figure out why.



## 6

### August, 2001

The moment I got outside the airport, I felt at home.

What had I been doing in Australia for three months? What was the logic that said I'd be safer in a white English speaking country? Here I was a firm adherent of the Eleventh Commandment, and I'd been breaking it daily in Aus: believing my own lies.

One cold, wet day in Perth, nothing to do, nowhere to go...hands in my pockets, eyes on my shoes, I heard a voice that said, Enough! Go home!

But it's even colder in New Zealand than it is here, I said to the voice. The voice was silent. Ahh, you mean —!

I bought the first ticket I could lay my hands on.

Bali. Fifty miles from top to bottom, around eighty-five side to side. The most beautiful island, perhaps, in the world. Beaches, mountains, volcanoes, tropical forests so lush as to defy imagining. And nice people. Really nice people.

And now a word about the seamy side of Bali.

Oh, not Kuta Beach. That wasn't seamy, that was sleazy-creepy: what happened when the lowest element of Western society (the grunts of Australia) were let loose on a spectacular patch of real estate by the obliging and unbelievably tolerant natives. (Keep in mind it wasn't the Balinese who set the bombs off in '02.)

Nor do I refer to the antiseptic five-star hotel camps of Nusa Dua, Sanur, and like a festering pustule virtually every acre in proximity to the airport. These landscape blots provided mindless tourists with the fantasy they were in a foreign country and made jobs for locals, but Bali they were not.

Bali was all the rest of the island. And since I base myself in Ubud when there, this was an area I could speak of with a measure of insight.

More than any place I spend my roading time, Bali is strictly a be-polite-don't-confront society. At least, on the surface. Emotion, and often "honesty" (Western definition of it, anyway) are not high on the list of visible characteristics.

A Balinese would rather smile than call you the imbecile he knew you to be, "lie" to maintain face. Got a major problem? Smile, deny and tuck it away inside. At the very least, keep it in the family.

But times, ah, were they ever a-changin'. The gap between rich and poor grew chasm-like. Stress and turmoil, which whiteys flocked to Bali to escape, had become rampant among the Balinese. Added to this the standard stew of political unrest that was Indonesia, and you have some idea why the seams had begun showing through the façade. And again, I'm speaking pre-terrorists.

Take the situation of a close neighbor to the homestay where Raewyn and I had camped a few times. The head of family was a wife-beater: regularly and savagely. If her cries were heard, one or more of the males at our place might rush over and console her. But that was it. No police involvement, no social workers, no women's refuge. And, because she married down in caste, her family had disowned her, so she couldn't go back to them.

In a society where men are permitted multiple wives, it was her karma, her destiny. It happened a lot.

The real Bali invasion comes not nearly so much from the West as other parts of Indonesia, mainly the neighboring island of Java. No less than half dozen new billionaires had emerged in this part of the country in the past few years, plus several more closing in. All of them Chinese, resident in Jakarta. To say nothing of what the Suharto family had been allowed to get away with for a generation and more. (Backed by Guess Who.)

Giant tracts of once scenic and productive Balinese rice paddies had been transformed into hotels catering to the ultra fat set. And virtually all the profits went west to Java.

Javanese insurgence came from the opposite end of the economic spectrum as well. That island had a population more than Japan's. Most were poor beyond any peoples outside, other than perhaps India and Afghanistan. A bod had to survive. Bali was seen as the land of (coconut) milk and honey.

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Javanese would take any job offered. They worked hard. They could be, by Balinese standards, a mite pushy.

Anti-Javanese feeling, even before the blasts, was very strong in Bali. Occasionally this resentment burst through the politeness barrier. When it did, an eruption was inevitable. A crime as minor as a handbag snatch by a Javanese had been known to result in a public stomping to death.

Only you didn't read about it in tomorrow's paper. As a matter of note, the biggest bit of violence in recent generations was never mentioned – in the media, in history books, in travel guides.

In the early 1960s a change in government in Jakarta (instigated by Guess Who) led to a fear of communist takeover in Bali. The fear spread to full-scale panic. The number of people killed is hard to accurately assess. Thousands, surely. And this was Balinese against Balinese, villager killing villager.

All this talk, I haven't even touched on my own biggest gripe about the place. No, it wasn't the hordes of males standing in the street holding their fistful hands around an invisible steering wheel and calling out to every passing tourist: "Hello, trrrransport?"

Not the people who invited you into their homes to "see" their paintings. (Try to leave without buying.) Not the constant bargaining, bargaining, bargaining that had to be done, for everything, all the time (and no matter how adept you think you are, you still pay double or triple the local price).

Nah, these laments were part of the game. My main moan about Bali was the plastic. Bags and empty water bottles. Everywhere. Well, certainly not on the family compounds, nor the sidewalks in front of the shops. These were swept daily. Twice daily, in ritual, by people holding in the right hand a short-handled whisk, bent over at the waist, left hand resting on the small of the back. Want to advance civilization 200 years in Bali? Bring a broom.

And what did they do with all this crap they've whisked away? Oh, yes. Yo, people – this shit ain't banana leaves, it's goddamn plastic, white fellas' contribution to your material well-being, only it doesn't decompose, see, and besides, it's ugly as sin! Response? Smiles. Grins. Giggles.

Bali. Over-touristed, commercial beyond cliché. And here it was the very middle of the season. What traveler in his right mind wanted to be here?

Me, I did. I needed home, and Bali was the closest thing I had at the moment.

The flight was full. As I looked around from my seat over the wing (always; without fail), I noted the categories of humanity aboard:

57% were going for ten days or less, would spend their entire time in a/c hotels, except when they went shopping;

25-1/2% would hire an a/c car and whiz around the island, taking 300 rolls of pictures of native women carrying baskets on their heads;

17% would visit a dozen places in Bali, plus Lombok (the Gillies), Flores, Komodo and several sites in Java, staying no longer than two days in any one spot;

0.5% would plop his bottom down in one place, stay a month or two, take long walks every day, get to know the locals better, eat at tiny family *warungs*, read a lot.

Outside the airport, I breathed in the warmth. Oh, heat, delightful, beloved heat: why have I been avoiding you?

As I walked past the throng of hotel touts and taxi drivers, I could feel myself standing straighter. I grew three inches, my beard turned black, muscles formed inside my T-shirt's sleeves.

I began a good-natured haggling session with a gang of freelance transport hustlers.

"Where you go?"

"New York."

"Okay, I take you.

"*Berapa harga?*" How much?

"You speak Indonesian?"

"*Tidak.*" No. "Only Chinese."

"You look like Chinese!"

Continuing to walk on, I yelled out to every passing bemo: "Kuta? Kuta?" Until one stopped and I squeezed on.

I thought I'd stay a night or two in Kuta. Each time I went to Bali I did this at some point. I hated Kuta. One of the most beautiful beaches in creation had become over the past quarter century one of the biggest pits of living hell. So might as well get it over with right off.

I stayed 20 minutes. That was all I could handle. I got hold of a driver. He wasn't looking for business, which was why I gave him mine. I bargained him down to a reasonable price. He said Okay, but on one condition. We would stop at a silver

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shop. I didn't have to buy. He'd get a commission regardless.

I grinned all the way. Yep, more big cars, more hotels, a huge new KFC. Didn't bother me. The narrow, winding roads, no sidewalks, full of antique bemo-van, motorcycle, bicycle, street peddler, pedestrian and chicken traffic, everything expertly, effortlessly and by a hair's breadth avoiding collision with everything else, including the mangy dogs sleeping in the middle of all this mayhem.

Sights: an ancient crone, topless, rising suddenly from the high grass of a rice field, the low late afternoon sun painting gold her wrinkled face and body...

Two men, smoking, struggling to lift a 50kg sack of cement, placing it on the head of a tiny middle-aged woman who walks gracefully off with it, the men returning to their conversation...

A passing procession: a hundred people in ceremonial dress – sarong, sash, lace blouse, and towering piles of fruit perfectly balanced atop the head for the women and girls; men wearing sarong, clean shirt with collar, the white headband; the gamelan players performing a cacophony of sound...

Men and boys bathing naked in a stream...an old man dressed only in straw conical hat and filthy sarong, yoke-carrying across his stooped shoulders an enormous load of coconuts...a woman, perhaps 30, barefoot and bursting with child, balancing on her head a huge, old wooden table bearing pots, food, kerosene burner – the neighborhood meals on heels...

And the kids, those absolutely gorgeous kids with their huge eyes and smiles that light up the city.

I did my deed at the silver shop, for which the driver thanked me profusely. When we got to Ubud, I had him drop me off in the center of town, and walked a hundred yards to the gallery. I was so very anxious to see her, sure. But this was Bali: no show of affection. I took several deep breaths then walked up the steps and through the door.

I'd met my Balinese daughter nine years ago, shortly after the Seniwati Gallery opened. Ubud was full of galleries, and with few exceptions all paintings looked like all other paintings.

Ubud has always been the art center of the island, but it used to be different. Paintings were done by families. That is, an entire family would work on a single painting. Assembly-line art.

This wasn't any attempt to rip off the turistas; it was just the way things were

done here.

When the strange, large white people began pouring in, first thing they asked was: who did it? The answer *We all did* simply didn't work with the strange gringos. So head of family would sign each family effort.

Then the tourists wanted one person only to paint a picture. One person only? *Buduh!* (Crazy) Ah, well...

Every kid growing up in Ubud learned two things: painting and Balinese dancing. Both were really craft forms, painting especially. Pretty pictures, but in truth copying, drafting: hardly art.

Now, there were in Ubud lots of expats. Mostly women, mostly American. And most of them takers.

These women would build lovely houses in the rice fields, then go about their business hanging out with other expats, eating overly sweet cakes at the Casa Luna, drinking to excess and moaning about the narrow-mindedness of the locals. Every now and then, however, one would appear who gave.

An English woman by the name of Mary Northmore, ten years my junior, fell in love with Bali some years ago. Shortly after that, she fell in love with a Javanese artist-musician who lived there. Married the guy, even converted to Islam. Just a formality – she didn't wear the uniform.

Mary Northmore wanted to be more than just another expat wife.

Using personal funds, and cajoling for the purpose a small property from her husband (who, until his death in 2002, was probably Indonesia's most distinguished living painter), she opened the first all-women's art gallery in Southeast Asia.

Each time I hit Bali, she seemed to have wrought yet another miracle in behalf of the women artists here. Seniwati, in its ninth year, now boasted the works of 40 locals; there was an exhibition hall, workshop, crafts outlet and a school for young girls to learn art.

A few years ago an American woman who owned a small gallery made two claims against Mary Northmore. One, said the American, the art was crap. Two, Northmore was skimming off what was supposed to be a one hundred percent non-profit, community-based enterprise.

The art, well, it wasn't terrific. A few of the artists were exceptionally talented, the rest were no better than passing. Foreign artists living in Bali had their works there too. They were decidedly more advanced than the majority of Balinese.

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My feeling is that this, in effect, was the first generation of women artists on the island. Prior, remember, women had painted the tails on the water buffalo, combs on the roosters. Or whatever they were told to. Getting Balinese, any Balinese, to think original was not an easy feat. And besides, how many of these young women artists were now the sole support of their families?

The skimming? All I know is the same thing had been said about me when I ran Relax For Survival in Philly. I taught thousands of people how to meditate and use their minds better and got free room, board and gas. Northmore had provided an arena of expression to a heretofore hopelessly repressed Third World population of women. I cannot spot a single other human being who'd come close to such an undertaking in Bali. I hope to hell she was getting a few perks from all she'd accomplished.

Another thing Mary Northmore had done which I felt pretty darn good about was to provide me, now with Raewyn gone from the picture, the prime person in my life.

Bali has four Hindu castes. These are Brahmana, Ksatriya, Wesya (or Vaisya) and Sudra. Maybe 85% of the island's 3 million population belong to the lowest. Sudra people have a choice of but four names: Wayan (first-born), Made (second), Nyoman (third) and Ketut. Both sexes. Fifth born starts over with Wayan. Confusing? Not to them.

Perhaps to give us half a chance, the Sudra place an *I* before male names and *Ni* in front of female. My darling surrogate daughter is Ni Wayan. If you stand on a corner in Ubud and yell, "Ni Wayan!" half the town turns to look.

As a girl growing up in a tiny village in the center of Bali, Wayan did not fit in. From the start she was somehow...different.

Rather than face life as a village wife and rice field worker, Wayan at 15 left and came to Ubud. She got a job in a tourist restaurant. She began work at 5 each morning and quit at midnight. No days off. Her salary was \$15 a month.

Her intelligence and spark attracted the attention of a visiting woman artist from Hawaii. She talked Wayan into leaving the restaurant, and together they returned to Wayan's village, where the American lived for several months, employing Wayan and teaching her English.

After the woman left Bali, Wayan came back to Ubud, where an Australian couple paid for her to study further, this time in Denpasar, Bali's capital. When the

Hawaiian returned from the US, she again employed Wayan, in Ubud now.

(All this help – there were others – was clean. No hanky panky. Wayan was a virgin until she was 26.)

It was at this time Wayan met Mary Northmore, and began working at Seniwati. Her resourcefulness impressed Northmore, and Wayan's responsibilities and wages kept moving up. In a short time, she became the gallery's manager.

I met Wayan not long after she had started at Seniwati. Actually, I met quite a few Wayans at the gallery, all short, all pretty, all with thick black hair down to the waist.

I was returning from a long walk through the rice fields this one day when I heard my name called. I looked around. Nobody. Again, my name. I looked up, and there she was, standing on an embankment fifteen feet above me. She was smiling and waving in the fingers-pointed-down manner of Third World folk. I hadn't a clue who she was.

"Wayan," she said. "From the gallery." That narrowed it down.

I found a set of steps crafted in the Balinese style: constructed for giants, and not two the same height. On top the embankment was part family compound, part dream world.

"You live here?" I asked, in awe.

"Come, I show you around."

She had a tiny room, next to the kitchen.

"Is there any place here for tourists?" I wondered.

She pointed out two bungalows, "Both are empty now." Not for long they weren't.

For some years I made her home my home. Wayan would make and serve me breakfast on the terrace every morning, and we would talk. I got to know her, and I got a rare insight into Balinese life. It wasn't all pretty postcard scenes and smiles.

I also got to know the guys pursuing her over the years. The Jewish guy from Philly. The young Dutchman. Boy, did they chase her. But it was the Korean who caught her. After three years of constant pursuit.

During all this, two things happened to bring us even closer. Raewyn and I brought her to New Zealand – twice. It was like watching an innocent child reacting to things we had long taken for granted.

There she'd be, on a day in the low eighties, wearing track pants, shawl, gloves



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(and high heels) on the beach. “It’s so cold!” she would moan.

When she saw a man hitting tennis balls, and three dogs chasing and retrieving them, she thought it was the most astounding sight she’d ever witnessed.

One day, after nearly a month, she actually went into the ocean. Wearing Raewyn’s wetsuit, of course.

I don’t remember exactly when it was we began calling each other Poppa and Daughter. It just happened. And it felt so right.

Wayan’s true father lived in her village (her mother died some years back). So, until his death in ’01, she had two Poppas.

She was never a physically well person. Early on, she had problems with her cranial bone, and could not carry the fruit offerings all Balinese women did in processions and ceremonies. Which probably helped push her out of the village at 15: you can’t carry fruit offerings on your head, how can you be proper Balinese.

She had kidney problems and stomach problems and heart problems. Then, last year, she became pregnant.

In her seventh month, her blood pressure shot up to 180/120. Mary Northmore “retired” Wayan from the gallery and moved her into her own home outside town. When Raewyn and I got there in December, she was in her ninth month, and in a major bad way. Mary had got her the best possible care. Still, the fetus was so strong, everyone feared for her life.

Then one day, the not-yet-born baby, a girl, died. There was no reason for it, yet it happened. Well, I knew why. I had spent enough time in Bali to understand at least some things Balinese.

Balinese Hinduism is far, far different from the brand practiced in India. It’s a unique blend of Hindu, Buddhist, Javanese and ancient indigenous beliefs, and has its very own customs. It is big into reincarnation, though not higgledy-piggledy. People were reborn to family members from the last lives. Wayan’s baby was to have been her grandmother.

You scoff? Your religion explains better this mystery called life, perhaps?

Wayan’s baby died because she (the returning grandmother) knew Wayan could not survive the birth. I love you, I would so like to spend life with you again, but I will not risk killing you. *Selamat tinggal*. (Good-by.)

Wayan’s one and only shot at motherhood wiped – this a young woman who absolutely adored kids.

Inside the gallery I caught her eye. She smiled, but there was nothing behind it. I might have been a delivery man. My heart sank, but I put on the mask.

“You don’t say hello to your Poppa?” I asked, making a joke.

“Yes, of course. I just confused. I thought you be coming tomorrow.” So we both had masks.

Later she told me: “I feel so bad. I see my Poppa and I want to be so happy for you to be here. But I feel nothing. All the time, for everything, I feel nothing. I so sad, all the time.”

She told me she was going to Sulawesi for two weeks, to take a young niece back to see her family there. The niece had taken care of her when she’d been sick at Mary’s house, and this was a return present. I said, “You mind if I come with?”

“You want to come?” She showed some spark for the first time. “Of course, you can come!”

She’d arranged for my accommodation in Ubud, a simple, clean room with adjoining bath in a nearby guesthouse. \$2.50 a day. Breakfast included.

I began my routine. Up at 6. Meditate. Out on the street. I had several walks to choose from, and tried to vary them. An hour-fifteen through the rice fields to an hour-forty-five on a loop through nearby villages. If lucky, the sky would be clear and I’d see Mt Agung – the “grandmother” of Balinese mountains.

Breakfast after my shower. Then read, or stroll, or sit on the terrace and write. Then lunch at Dewa’s.

When I travel Third World I don’t concern myself with what people termed hygiene. I find it curious that those obsessed with the need for clean tablecloths and linen napkins will shovel into their maws rubbish that is processed, shot up with preservatives, additives, sugar and salt, then fried into a concoction I wouldn’t pump into a sewer.

Me, I’ve eaten from stalls on the streets and up-an-alley dives from Istanbul to Shanghai. Have I ever got sick? Now and then. About the same frequency as those who eat exclusively at five-stars in Asia. (You wouldn’t believe what went on in those kitchens.)

I first ran into Dewa at the night market in Ubud some years back. In all the time I’d spent in Bali, before and since, I had yet to savor food of such quality and taste.

When the night market was paved over and replaced with a nightmare – yet

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another assemblage of shops and stalls selling tourist junk – I searched all Ubud for the guy. Found him in a tiny spot a mile’s walk from town center.

Dewa was a tiny chap, around 40. Face that smiled from hairline to the chin. And he was a magician. He could take the same basic foodstuffs that passed through a thousand other chefs’ hands, and turn it into a culinary masterpiece.

He labored seven days a week. Left his village at 7. Used to walk the two miles to town – and back – but now he had a small motorcycle, on which he’d transport the missus, and at least two of his four kids. Shopped at the morning market, did prep, then opened the doors to his garage-size eatery around 10. There he remained until 11pm.

It wasn’t just the food. The place attracted a fascinating array of sorts: all ages, several countries, the spectrum of political thought. You didn’t just dine at Dewa’s. You got into fascinating raves that might last till closing. Then picked up again the following evening.

Dewa had moved shop again, a slightly larger place, and closer to town. The food was the same (he hadn’t changed menus in ten years), and the prices no different than a decade ago save for devaluation of the rupiah. Something was different, though. And it didn’t feel good.

There were young Japanese. Lots of them. They smoked. They giggled. They did not interact with anybody else. In general, the crowd was younger than I remembered. Which was to be expected: older bods stayed in hotels, ate at the upmarket places. But these were really younger. Babies. And there were those who preyed on them. On the Japanese and Western young females.

The Balinese called them gigolos. When was the last time you heard that one used? Handsome dudes. Strong, virile looking. Long hair. Usually played guitar. Had motorcycles. And lots of spare time.

“That guy over there?” my companion at the long table covered in cheap plastic this day was a 17 year old Australian named Symon. “Name’s Gusti. Last month a Japanese girl bought him a motorbike. A good one, Yamaha 400cc. Next day, he sold it. Shows up here, Japanese girl says, Where’s your bike? ‘Oh, terrible thing,’ he tells her. ‘I lend it to my cousin to return to his village for ceremony. He have bad crash. Bike finish. No insurance.’ Guess what she does? Gives him money for the cousin’s hospital bill, then goes out and buys him another Yamaha!”

I became friends with five French Canadian women in their early twenties, in

Ubud to learn Balinese dancing. Silvie, who probably spoke the best English, and I would talk a lot. She had a boyfriend back in Montreal, seemed very down to earth. One day a gigolo type, a gorgeous looking guy, mind, sat down next to her, close. Arm around her, laughing, whispering in her ear. I thought: doesn't she see? Or, guy this good-looking, maybe she doesn't care.

"Oh, no, Ketut's not a gigalo," she told me a few days later.

"Aw, c' mon!"

"No, really. He's married, two children." Pause. "Well, he does have a sort of girlfriend. A Canadian woman, around 40. Do you really think so?"

"It is business, my friend." This was another Dewa. He, too, was married, kids. Handsome, played guitar, rode a 250cc. "Plain and simple. If I fail nine times and succeed on number ten, I am doing good business. Much, much, better business than if I worked in a shop or stood on the street calling out, Transport! to passing tourists who ignore me."

Dewa II spoke several languages: Indonesian, of course. And the various dialects of Balinese. Plus English, Japanese, and a smattering of German, French and enough Scandian to get by. This did not mean Dewa was a brain surgeon. But he was a survivor.

"How much do you figure you make?" I asked. "Say in a year."

"A lot more than that Dewa," he laughed, nodding his head toward the enclosed kitchen, to the unseen owner of the *warung*, probably sweating over one of his woks and two kerosene cookers. "And I never make girls unhappy. Never."

"And your wife?"

He shrugged. "Is business. Home is home."

Mostly, I ate lunch there. In the evening I would walk to Ni Wayan's small home in a family compound and share dinner on the terrace. That is, when her Korean husband wasn't there.

The Korean husband. Little guy, always grinning. Former officer in the army. A dreamer. A loser. Always proffering advice. Never taking any.

He was a wheeler dealer. Bought fish in Indonesia, had it frozen, shipped it to Korea. Sounded fine. Except every deal, he lost money.

"Balinese very shrewd business people," he once told me.

Which well I knew. How many stories had I heard. Foreigner came in, set up a business. For purposes of convenience, took on a local partner. Business got good,

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Balinese partner kicked him out, took over the biz. If the foreigner put up a fuss, the police showed up at his door. “But my visa’s good for another year yet!” Right. Sure. Next plane home.

This hadn’t happened to Wayan’s man. It didn’t need to. He didn’t need any help in getting screwed.

Wayan was forever giving him money, bailing him out. And he was forever giving her advice.

Most likely I wasn’t the first poppa in history to want to strangle his son-in-law. Toughest thing was keeping my mouth shut.

“My husband will meet us in Sulawesi,” she told me a few days before we were to depart.

“He’s going with us!”

“He’s there already. On business.”

I went for a walk. I wanted to go to Sulawesi, where I’d never been. I wanted to go with my daughter. I did not want to be with them. It wasn’t just him. The two together ran an Ike and Mike show that’d drive Carl Jung batty.

“I’ve changed my mind about Sulawesi,” I said to her later in the gallery. Before she could reply – and she was about to – I quickly added, “And look, I don’t want you and your niece going by ship. You’re still not well, and it’s a long, hard journey. I want you to fly.”

“It costs too much.” She quoted a number in rupiah. I reached under my belt and pulled out the pouch. I took out two hundred dollar bills.

“No!” she cried. “You have given me so much. I can’t take more from you.”

“I’m not giving this to you. Why would I want to give you money? I hate you.” I placed the bills on the floor between us, got up and walked away.

“Poppa!”

I turned around. “Hm?”

“Your money! Take it! Please!!”

“Money? Oh, you found some money. You lucky devil. See you in two weeks.”

I had moments during the time she was away where I felt, I don’t know – stupid? A coward?? Had I used her fool of a husband as an excuse to wimp out? Had I lost all sense of adventure?

The day she was scheduled to be back, I went looking for her. No Wayan. The following day, same. I began to worry. Sulawesi was full of Muslims on political

rampage. Then she turned up.

“Oh, Poppa!” she cried. “The worst trip! The very worst!” She described two weeks in hell. Everything had gone wrong. Twelve hour bus rides on terrible roads. Floods and landslides. Hot beyond relief. Rats where they slept.

On and on. When they returned to the airport, no seats for five days, this despite their reconfirmations. They came back by ship. Two days. Absolutely packed with humanity. Sleeping on deck. Vomit and feces all over.

“The only thing keep me from dying, I keep saying, Thank God my Poppa did not come. Thank You, God, for telling him to stay in Bali.”

God? Truth? And here I’d been pointing the finger at Asshole Mind.

Over the next few days I met three people of interest at Dewa’s. All males. All older than me.

Nigel was proper English. He traveled frequently and he traveled alone. His mouth had a downward curve like the corners were too heavy for his cheek muscles, and his nostrils were constantly flared as though from a forever bad smell. Nothing was right for Nigel. He did so much for these little brown people, and in return they ripped him off unmercifully. Normally I gave one such as this a wide berth, but I was fascinated by his manner of speech. He used “bloody” often and as every form of speech except preposition. I was sure if I hung around him long enough he’d find a way to manage that.

Ben was a Dutchman, although he’d been living in New Zealand 40 years. A little too loud, a little too friendly, but as good natured as Nigel was not. Like me, Ben traveled half the year split between Australia and Asia. And like me, when he found a place that suited, he built a nest, hung out a while, got to know the locals.

Both Nigel and Ben were just shy of their seventieth. I saw a bit of Barry in both. I could be a grump, I could be kind and outgoing. I wouldn’t care to be either of these two fellas, but for sure it was the me in Ben that I preferred.

Michael was a sweet little chap, barely five feet tall. “How old do you think I am?” he asked, quite early on in our initial conversation. I never knew how to answer this. Should I get into his game and peg him down some years? Joke and say something like, Oh, around 90? (I also thought: do *I* do this? Throw out the number and wait – hope – for them to say, “Gosh, I didn’t think you were older than—?”) The ultimate in vanity.

He was 81, was Michael. Also originally from Holland, but had traveled and

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lived all over the world. He'd had a small cottage built on locally-owned property here a few years back, and lived there now ten months a year. The other two he visited family in Europe.

Not long after he told me his age, Michael announced he was a Freudian. Generally I found devotees of the Great Sig boring as hell.

"When I was four years old, my father had me in his arms. He went to hand me to my mother, and she refused to take me!" For this he had been in analysis 20 years and talked about it for 40 more.

Our discussion segued into debate, into argument. My contention was who among us hadn't been through stuff like this, so why dwell – just get on with it. Michael, who didn't hear all that well, became more and more deaf as the talking went on. I was shouting now. Even the giggling Japanese glanced over at us.

Then I saw his hands shaking. And I thought: my father! That was the game he played. His hearing would get worse, he'd affect pitiful signs of the downtrodden victim. Okay, Michael was 81; did I pull back because of his age? We were just having a friendly gab, for chrissake.

I said good-bye and left the *warung*, feeling the dunce. That night I had a dream. I was sleeping in a trailer next to a young woman who looked like Iris B, whom I lusted after back in college. Upon awakening (in the dream), she said she didn't want to have sex with me. So I decided to take a shower. The water began soaking the carpeted floor. Outside, a cat – presumably my cat, although I didn't recognize it – was hassling some birds in a small clump of trees. The birds didn't move, nor was the cat very aggressive towards them.

I woke up with a feeling of guilt. Instead of one of my usual walks, all of them heading north, I decided to go south. There was more initial traffic this way, which was why I normally shunned the southern side of Ubud.

I walked along Jalan Hanoman, then cut across to the west. I came to the Monkey Forest. My idea was simply to cut through and keep walking, but at this hour of the morning the Forest was quiet, free of humanity, and sort of primordial. I slowed down and stopped several places. The small monkeys were in the trees overhead, chattering, jumping from branch to branch. Mommas with babies hanging on beneath them, riding upside down; big old poppas... They could be natural now; no silly tourists with loud shirts, baggy shorts and cameras invading their wonderful space. A sign read: "Forbidden to feed the monkeys supposing you

have some food for them please leave it to our monkeys expert. If there is no monkeys expert with you toss food to them from a safe distance.”

I sat for an hour, spellbound. When the first “monkeys expert” showed up wearing the standard green uniform, I left the Monkey Forest and went to find where Michael lived. I located the address, was directed by some Balinese to the rear of the compound. Nice little place. I rapped on the door, then again, louder. A third time. Finally I heard shuffling on the other side. He asked who it was, and I yelled loud as I could. The door opened. Michael in a bathrobe, his few wisps of white hair standing straight up.

“Uh, you told me I could drop over anytime,” I said, awkwardly. It was 8.30, and he’d said he was an early riser.

“Not this morning. I have an appointment at ten o’clock and I must get ready.” Ten o’clock? An hour and a half from now and he couldn’t ask me in for a coffee? Then I heard a sound from behind him. Someone else was in there. He had talked about sex a lot, had Michael, but I figured he was a Freudian, he’d have to. But somebody was in there and I was dying to find out who. Gorgeous Balinese maiden? Young boy? Monkey?

I apologized and said I’d see him later at Dewa’s. Eighty-one, I mused as I walked away. Goddamn.

We went to Wayan’s village on my birthday. It wasn’t my conventional birthday. Rather, my 23,000<sup>th</sup> day alive. A lot of days to fill when you had nothing much to do.

For me, the problem always came when presented with the line that read: occupation. For years I’d put down writer. Then I began writing teacher. Sometimes therapist. Of late I found myself noting retired.

All were incorrect.

My true calling the past 30 years had been *passatempist*. I had learned of the word *passatempo* early in my travels. In both Italian and Greek it meant, literally, passing time. That’s what we’re all here to do, pass time; what’s important is how you did it.

You can blob, hang out, work, workahol: but does it give you pleasure? People say, What do you do? What they mean is, how do you earn your bagel?

Money? A mere currency, a bridge from here to there. When I did PR for RCA, one of my assignments was to set up house organ photos for people getting their



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“longevity awards” – a lapel pin for 20 or 25 or more years with the company. Handshake from the project boss, grins all around. Scary.

When I got fired from the Eagles in 1965, I became determined never to let my means of income determine what I did. What I did was pass the time. When Cap’n Scunch had me in his clutches, I did no more than exist. When my head is on straight (I’m getting there; I’m getting there), whatever I do, I try my damndest to do with heart. To be a *creative* passatempist. Sometimes I succeed.

Wayan’s family home was Bali. Or what Bali used to be. A small village which fed the rest of the island. Something magic about what grew here. Rice, for example. Red rice. I’ve never seen, nor tasted, anything like it anywhere else. It is so good, you can drop a handful of grains in a cup of hot water and get the best, tastiest tea you’ve ever had. Vegetables so sweet they’re like fruit.

There were low mountains all around. And fields of rice. The people were relaxed. No pressure on me, the lone whitey in the village, to do, to buy, anything. People smiled.

Wayan’s brother had built a small house since I’d visited last. Just two rooms, kitchen the size of a shed, and large veranda. Wayan’s 68 year old father, a small, delightful soul, lived here with them. We were all on the veranda at the present.

Wayan, her father, and her four year old niece were playing cards. Day before, I’d seen the father playing for hours with the kid. They would talk, like equals. Sometimes it seemed the girl was older than grandpa. He glowed, this little man.

He’d had an operation some months back, and for the first time in 60 years he couldn’t work. At first it drove him *buduh*, Wayan said. He would sneak out to do things, and they’d catch him, bring him back. Now he attended to a dozen chickens, the one remaining cow. (The second had been sold to pay for his op.)

Wayan’s brother, who sold his crops in the town market not far off, was figuring out the day’s earnings in a small note pad. His wife was in the kitchen. Wayan’s husband, the Korean, was eating greasy potato chips from a plastic bag and mouthing off how he could sell his brother-in-law’s tomatoes in Lombok, make everybody rich. Nobody paid him the slightest attention. They knew.

And then there was me. The only one who didn’t speak the lingo. (The Korean spoke Indonesian; everybody else Balinese.) And it didn’t matter. Not a bit. Shortly after we’d arrived, Wayan’s father and I had an hour-long conversation. He knew as much English as I knew Indonesian, about a dozen words. And we had an hour-

long conversation filled with such belly laughs as I hadn't known since, well, since before an event back in Brisbane.

I got up and went for a meander. Could I live here? I wondered. Could I really? Not a hell of a lot to do. This was true passatempo country.

There was a piece of land for sale, just down the dirt road from Wayan's brother's place. Ten-twelve thousand could buy it, around the same to build a lovely two story dwelling in the Balinese fashion. Two small apartments: downstairs for Wayan, upstairs for me. Great view from up there. Wrap-around veranda, I could even sleep out. No other house for a hundred yards. Total peace.

The problem was the Korean. He'd have to live there too. Or was I the problem. Would I go bonkers after a few weeks' time.

I slept in Wayan's father's tiny room, in his bed with a mattress so old and worn it was shaped like a canoe. It was cold at night, and I huddled inside my sleeping bag, even threw a blanket on top.

In the morning, I sought out Wayan. "Darling, what do you use for a toilet?"

"You just have to make water?"

"Uh-uh."

She shrugged. "We use the irrigation channel."

Bali has more of these channels running through it than an extended family of Smiths had arteries and veins. I'd seen the people use them, of course. For everything. Bathe, brush the teeth, do the dishes.

To poo, they simply slipped off their flip-flops, stepped in, lifted up the sarong, and squatted, their bottoms actually in the water. I thought of just walking off and using the rice fields, but maybe this was taboo: shitting where you grew your food.

I stepped over to the channel, which ran just alongside the property. I looked around. Nobody in sight. Still, I walked about 50 feet from the house.

I was wearing my running shoes. To take them off, socks too, seemed an unnecessary ordeal.

First I placed my feet together on one side of the channel and tried to squat over it. No way. My balance was such I knew I'd wind up sitting in it, jeans and all.

I straddled the channel. It was only two feet across, so I put right foot on one bank, left on the other. Dropped the jeans and underpants, squatted. Except with

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my legs spread that far apart, I couldn't do nearly a full squat. Didn't matter. I let go all that wonderful red rice and spiced and herbed vegetables from the night before.

Time to wipe. No paper, just water like the natives. I wet my fingers, reached back. It was awkward in my half-squat. It was very awkward.

So I stood up and repositioned my feet as I'd had them originally – both on one side of the channel. Now I could squat full. One swipe, two. Third go, I sensed myself losing balance, falling back. I quickly thrust both arms out behind me and broke my fall into the water. My center of gravity was back around my elbows. I was virtually doing a yogic bridge. With my pants down around my ankles.

That's when half the village decided to walk by.

In the West, I suppose, people would look the other way, walk past and pretend you didn't exist. Not here. Smiles, laughs, giggles. Nothing derisive. But good holy Brahma.

I thought: haven't I been here before? Wheatgrass juice implants, colonics, now this. Do I have some kind of obsession? Mom didn't let me play with my shit, so now...? I mean, I had recurring dreams, half dozen times a year I suppose, of toilets overflowing. Somebody trying to tell me something?

Somehow, I threw myself back onto firm ground. Pulled up my pants. Kneeled down, washed my hands. Walked back to the house to have my breakfast.

## FEAR-BUSTER #6

### Scrubba-dub-dub...cleansing the chakras

Go to your family doc and say, "I've been feeling really lousy lately; I think some of my chakras are blocked up. Got anything for that?" Chances are he/she'll look at you like it's commitment papers time.

Unless your doctor is from India.

People from that part of the world have known about chakras for a few thousand years, at least. The body's energy centers. Off of which come meridians, which run through your entire system. Just how do you think acupuncture works? You go with a sore shoulder and the acu may jam needles into your kneecap. Makes no sense in the way we dummies have of making sense. But if the acupuncturist knows her/his stuff, a blockage has been picked up along the energy meridian at the particular spot.

All your organs, in fact everything, is related to the chakras. But since an X-ray won't pick them up and cutting you open doesn't show them, the allo-pathetics simply deny their existence.

I've heard different numbers of these centers from different sources, but the general consensus says seven. They run along a straight line from the crown of your head down the rear part of the head, down the neck, along the spinal column about an inch in front of it to the very base of your abdominal cavity. Actually, that's the ass-backwards way of putting it, as the chakra system normally is described from the bottom north.

The chakras, in a sense, connect you with the universal energy source.

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This is more or less what the overused (and not very well understood) term *holistic* is all about. You are me and I am you and we are all together. Except that we're not. Bad head, unwholesome food, lack of proper exercise...we just ain't with it.

You've seen that cute little yin-yang symbol. How many wearing it have a clue what it really means? It stands for balance, harmony. When you are out of balance, you become ill. Go to the doc and you are given a synthetic substance that is meant to eliminate a symptom. Zit on the end of your nose? No problem: here's an end-of-the-nose zit pill. Next!

You know that halo on top of the baby Jesus's head? That kid was so high, his chakras were blossoming. The halo represents his seventh chakra beaming. Some depictions of the Buddha, he's wearing this big bonbon on top of his bald pate. Same deal.

In my Alpha courses, I conducted around 20 imaging exercises. (Students were permitted to, and frequently did, fall asleep. If a stranger happened to peek in, he would've seen this wild man talking semi-nonsense to a few hundred snorers.) The exercises ran from about 20 minutes in the beginning to around three-quarters of an hour towards the seminar's end.

My personal favorite -- as well as lead them, I performed each along with the class -- was the chakra cleansing. The intensity of preparing each course, promoting it, then being up in front while an auditorium full of your standard stressed-out humans were giving up their negativity in large doses often had me frazzled. The chakra cleansing gig would make a new man out of me. Felt like I needed weighted boots to keep me on the floor.

While it's preferable to have someone lead you in this, I'll be damned if I'm going to do house calls at this late stage. A good idea, then, might be to participate with a friend. Or, if you're clubby, lots of friends. One person can lead, the rest follow. It's good to have someone with a pleasing voice and a nice, slow (but not too slow) cadence of speech. Work it out between/among you. For sure you can wing it solo. I do, always.

Okay...find a nice, comfortable place, somewhere you won't be disturbed. No people coming in, no phones ringing. Sit in a meditative

position, or lie down. Important thing with positioning is that your head, neck and back are in a straight line. Lightly close your eyes. Some long, slow, deep breaths, watching and sensing the air coming into your nostrils...and back out. Put away everything from your mind but this very moment. Relax. Just let go and relax.

Picture the number 3. Large, bold, dark numeral 3. Say it to yourself. Then let it fade away. Take a deep breath. Now the number 2. Same as before: acknowledge its presence, then let it go. Breath. Finally number 1. Good.

Now slowly picture the number 10. And 9. 8. Long, slow breath, observing the air in, the air out. 7. 6. 5. Breath. Take it slow. 4...3...2...1. And relax. Perfect.

Visualize your body as though it's hollow inside. Scan your hollow body from the top of your head slowly down the inside of your head, down your neck, into the chest cavity. Slowly down the midsection into the abdomen and all the way to the very bottom of your torso. Hollow...and relaxed.

Imagine this now, if you will: a transparent tube, about the thickness of a common drinking straw, running in a straight line from the crown of your head all the way down to your buttocks, about an inch in front of your spine. See it? This is sometimes known as a *shushuma* - although that's really not important. It's simply there: a transparent tube from the crown of your head to the bottom of your abdomen.

Focus all your attention on the base of the tube. And there you can see a tiny pinpoint of light. This is your first chakra.

As you continue to focus here, the light begins to grow from a pinpoint outward, very slowly. See, and feel, this happening. The light is warm. It is powerful, yet ever so gentle. Does it have a color?

The ball of light continues to expand outward, and everywhere it goes, whatever it comes in contact with, that part of your body -- even if it's only a molecule of air -- is filled with the light, and totally relaxed by it. Wherever the light goes as it continues its outward expansion, it penetrates and permeates, it cleanses and, wherever needed, heals. Feel it. Really feel this expanding ball of positive energy, strong, peaceful, delightful.

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Allow the ball of light to continue its slow, steady growth until it gets to the size of, say, a soccer ball. Some of the light is inside your body, some of it out. The light stays there for some moments, and everything that's touched by it becomes clean, and at peace, and perfectly healthy. Can you feel the difference between this soccer ball-size part of your body and the rest of you?

All right, the beautiful, powerful light now begins to fade, slowly, leaving behind its essence, and what it has brought to you. Fading...fading...until the light is completely gone from your sight. Now take a deep breath, and breathe the air into this part of your body. And let go, and relax.

Moving up the *shushuma*, or transparent tube, to the very center of your abdomen. And here, a second tiny pinpoint of light appears. What color is it? Same, or different from, the first light? Again, as you focus all of your attention on the tiny speck of light, it begins to expand outward from its pinpoint-center, slowly. Once more, you can feel the light, its warmth, its power, its gentleness. Remember, whatever it touches, this light, it immediately fills and relaxes, cleanses and heals. Allow this ball of light to slowly grow...and grow...and grow. Some of the light fills the area the first ball of light just occupied, some it finds new areas. Everything touched by the still-expanding ball of light feels absolutely wonderful.

Once more, to the size of a soccer ball. At that point its growth stops. Focus on this part of your body. Sense its change from just a minute or two before. Cleaner. Healthier. Any negative energy that might have been in this sphere is gone, completely absorbed and dissolved by the positive energy of this ball of light.

And as before, this second ball of light now begins to fade, to dissipate, yet leaving behind all of its power, its strength. Not only has the light cleansed and healed this area of your body, the essence that remains behind as the light fades will continue to protect you here, keep out all negative energy that may seek to come in. Okay, the light is now gone. Take a deep breath, and send it down your body into this area. And once again, relax.

In this manner, slowly proceed up the *shushuma* through chakras three, four, five and six. These are located as follows: about an inch above your waistline; in the center of your chest where the heart is situated; in your throat; and between your eyes and slightly above them -- the point sometimes referred to as the third eye. Simply repeat the process you experienced with the light in chakras one and two: a tiny pinpoint of light (note its color) expanding slowly to the size of a soccer ball, filling the area with its radiance, its strength, its healing prowess. Remember, this is not a mechanical function. Feel every single thing, every single moment. When each ball of light fades, sense the retention of positive energies in that part of your body. Take it slow. Enjoy.

When it's time for your seventh and final chakra to be cleansed, focus in on the very top of the *shushuma*, the crown of your head. Your entire body, from the buttock/genital area on up to here, has been cleansed, purified, relaxed. Now home in on the last pinpoint of light. Observe and feel...and feel good about...the expanding light. Again, note its color: how does it compare with the other six?

Part of the expanding light goes down into your head, filling your brain, cleansing your brain of all negativity: bad memories from the past, fears of the future, and replacing them with peace, total peace. And some of the light extends beyond your skull bone and skin, forming a sort of halo around the top of your head. Can you see it? Feel it?

Now, unlike the other six lights, this one doesn't stop growing when it reaches soccer-ball size; it continues to expand. Moving slowly down through your head and neck, out to your shoulders and slowly down the arms. Feel the slow surge of wonderful warm light moving down to your elbows and then beyond, down your forearms, past the wrists and into your hands. The light not only cleanses, absorbs whatever tensions and tightness may exist, as well it makes your palms, the backs of your hands, and now the fingers actually tingle.

The light begins moving ever so slowly down the top of your chest cavity, down your back, filling everything in its descent. Most of the body already has experienced the light, but perhaps a few parts missed out. Either way, the warm, gentle yet powerful light fills you everywhere.



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Past the waist into the abdomen, cleansing, purifying, healing all in its path.

Then the light splits into two and begins moving down the thighs, relaxing bone and muscle, nerves, tendons, ligaments. Slowly, slowly. Into the lower legs, filling the calf muscles, moving down the shin bones. Past the ankles and finally into the feet, back into the heels and forward to the tips of your toes. So that your body is now absolutely, one hundred percent filled with the light of the universe, of wholly positive energy.

Light continues to pour forth from your crown chakra, and since there's no room left inside your body, the light penetrates the skeletal and skin levels and begins to form around you a great, beautiful bubble of light, protecting you, keeping you relaxed and strong no matter what's around you, or where you are.

All right, at this point the light ceases its growth. Take this time to really feel the light inside, the light all around you. Where does the light end and you begin? Impossible to tell because, in truth, you are the light, and the light is you. No separation: you are, you really are, a light-body!

This is your highest state of being. It's not a gift someone has given you; this is your natural birthright. You are not merely a physical body, limited by physical laws. That body is but one element of your being. You are far, far more than that. Don't just take my word for it: feel. Feel the truth of your Self. You know, you surely know, that this is the real you. Take some time to savor your total being. In more than just words, bask in the light that is you.

When you feel you are ready to return to the reality you were part of when you began this exercise, begin to slowly count from one to ten. As the numbers move higher, tell yourself something like: I am a perfect being. I am getting better and better with each passing moment. And bring the light back up with you.

At ten, open your eyes. Take in your surroundings. Use your physical senses: run your fingertips along the floor, or carpet, or ground if you are out of doors. Knock on something, listen to the sound. Smell something, anything. Take your time. When you're ready, stand up slowly, and get back into your day. You won't need a lamp to guide your way.

7

The understanding that what I was doing might possibly be a mistake came at the Denpasar airport. I found the proper waiting area and took a seat. As I looked around me, I thought: Fellini? Bergman? John Waters?

I had been in Bali a month and a half. The Balinese, well, they're beautiful looking people. Not drop-dead gorgeous; just beautiful. Slim, small, good skin, handsome faces. Both sexes. That's what I'd become used to.

Around me now sat the most unwholesome appearing humans I had ever laid eyes on. Enormously fat. Bad skin. A lot of the young females had their hair in those awful beaded cornrows the old Javanese women did for you on Kuta Beach, serving to accent big noses, lantern jaws, rugby player necks.

We weren't talking ugly here. This had to be serious chromosome damage.

And the speech they called Strine. "Emma Chitzit." (How much is it.) "Eggnishna." (Air conditioner.) "Emsemich." (Ham sandwich.) The nasal vowels. "Oi kyme heah tidoy."

Not that all Australians were like this, by any stretch. Some of the best looking females in the world, and until they put on the standard beer gut, the blokes weren't bad either. Maybe this was a special group.

Why was I going back to Australia? Why was I not going on to Thailand, to Vietnam, to India? The voices.

One day I sat down with them. All right, what should I do, guys? Now I'd have to say this for Asshole Mind. If the voice was, in fact, his, the dude's a great actor. And a brilliant ventriloquist. At times he sounded so sincere, so calm and...right. He sounded, in fact, just as I imagined High Mind would.

"How many times have you been to Asia? What's the big number in going there? To prove you can? Really now." There was no dissenting voice. "Why not

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go someplace you feel good. No challenge. Just enjoy yourself. Spend a hassle-free month on the beach, eat well, ogle the babes, then go back home and convalesce.”

Not a murmur of disagreement. Yes! I thought. Yes!

It was only at the airport I began to feel this wasn't such a terrific idea.

I flew into Brisbane, spent a couple days with Joe. Elena was gone from his life. Joe was into a normal relationship. With an Australian woman. Good, good.

But Brisbane wasn't what I had in mind. I jumped on a bus – a coach – and headed south.

One of the most beautiful beach towns in the civilized world, and I have to admit I even prefer it over my magic little place in New Zealand, is Byron Bay. But it's not just the geography that captivated me here. The people, too.

Initially, 20-25 years back, young people, fed up with the ugly and arrogance of the politics and corporations and crime that cities like Sydney and Melbourne manifested, came north and settled. The weather was infinitely better here as well. But as people tended to, the escapees brought with them their citified craziness. Which was why Byron Bay wasn't Byron Bay at all. It was Silly Upon The Sea: the psychobabble capital of the Southern Hemisphere.

Silly was Australia's easternmost point, a fact you were constantly reminded of. It jutted out into the ocean like a well-muscled shoulder. At the point stood a majestic lighthouse; lovely beaches ran west and south for miles and miles.

You could swim and surf here all year 'round. I liked it best in winter because often you would be paddling along, glance up, and there was a friendly dolphin or ten checking you out. And the humpback whales, so amazing, would frequently be hugging the coastline as they headed south to cooler waters about now.

But Silly Upon The Sea was far more than physical beauty. It was the lifestyle it attracted, and for this one needed thank the pioneering Syd/Mel refugees. (Except the pioneer Sillies of this five-to-six thousand permanent population town no longer were around. When the subsequent waves of city escapees began migrating in, the originals escaped from here as well, and went inland, mainly onto communes.)

Still, a tradition the pioneers had founded lingered on, and for me this was one of the two major attractions. To this day, there was not a McDonald's or a KFC or Wendy's or Burger King or the Aussie equivalent, Hungry Jack's. The people simply would not let them in. Even gas stations had to keep their signs small, and

down low.

Club Med tried as well. Tried damn hard. No dice. Developers from the Big Smokes drooled over the place. But whenever word got out of a move to build up, the resident dopers, the surfies, the struggling artists, the single mothers, the Osho freaks and New Age nutters and born-again and Krishna Crazies and Beautiful People got together and protested, demonstrated (usually in fashionable retro garb) and did whatever else might be necessary to keep the town free of corporate crass.

Because of the presence of these types, Silly Upon The Sea had one of the best classes of nosh emporia for its size anywhere on earth. So there was craziness, sure, but also a consciousness. If I didn't hang around too long – a month was about right – I could enjoy one without growing overly annoyed by the other.

The second major attraction of Silly/Byron was its standing as a dirty old man's paradise. This small town was absolutely loaded with the best looking females of all ages I'd ever seen. Comparing the eye candy scene here with the grotesque experience in the airport waiting area, one simply had to wonder.

I stayed with Bruce and Joan. That is, I rented the three-room apartment in the basement of their home that sat on a bit of a rise just off high tide. You could sit in the living room and count the dolphins going by.

Raewyn and I had stayed here a few times in the past. I knew Bruce and Joan, a lovely couple in their seventies, were fond of Raewyn. Which caused me to tell them a fib.

Raewyn and I were still together, see. It was just that, well, she had this big project at work, and um. Ah, ego, ego. I felt a right fool.

As luck might have it (karma, the Sillies would tell you, nodding sagaciously), I ran into an old friend my second day in town. I was sitting at an outdoor café when he appeared. Didn't even have time to put together a story.

"Heard you're back to being single," he said. News traveled.

I started running again. It had been months, and the first couple days I really felt the muscles complain. As did my aching heels. Hell with 'em. By the third day I was doing a comfortable five miles, followed by a plunge in the sea.

That was earliest morning. Then a shower, a bit of writing, and off to town. It struck me that this was the first time since I had left New Zealand I was really on my own. Before, every stop in Australia, I had stayed with people. And in Bali, even though I had my own place, I was with Wayan a lot. Then I thought: this was

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the first time in five *years* I'd been alone. Couldn't even remember what it was like.

I occupied my days as I normally did. Mooch around town following my coffee and nosh, do a bit of food shopping, visit the bookstores and library. A little after noon I'd wander home along the beach. A swim, a nap, some reading, and it was time to make dinner. Life as a single wasn't bad at all.

Friday evening I walked back into town just before sunset. At the bottom of Silly's main street, Jonson, was a parking lot, generally packed with ancient vans. Just off the lot a short, elevated walkway went out past the water line.

In the evenings a group of characters would assemble, smoking dope, drinking beer and playing percussion instruments. There were Rasta types with yard-long dreadlocks, Aborigines, ferals, a handful of women. Anybody could join in. The musicality of these people was unreal. As they played the sun down to the west, in the other direction the lighthouse would turn on, the beacon sweeping 360 degrees through the night.

Me, I stood there amongst the crowd soaking it all in. No one I knew, nobody spoke to me. Yet this was, in a sense, family. Maybe in the best sense because no one gave me hassles, and I wasn't obligated to any of them.

When the drumming broke up I went and sat down at an outdoor café. Friday night – party night – and everybody was out. The young females were even more beautiful tonight than normally. All walking past beaming their exposed navels at me like gun barrels. The joys of being a professional voyeur.

Then something happened. At some moment I stopped looking and enjoying, and began wanting. Wanting became craving. And since there was no way a 63 year old graybeard was going to attract a gorgeous 20 year old, the wonderful feeling I'd had for more than an hour turned in on me. And I could feel the old panic starting to rise. GO AWAY!! Uh-uh.

The dread of being alone, alone because I was unwanted and unwanted, covered me like a falling ash. When it began crawling up my nose and I felt my breathing getting shallower and shallower, I got up, accidentally kicked over my chair, stumbled as I lurched away.

My head reached out in desperation. Home. Go home. New Zealand-home. Go home and curl up and die.

Life had become a never-ending series of jumping from rock to rock over the

rushing river. Only the rocks provided not comfort, certainly not balance, but rather existence, no more. Passatempo? You're joking, mate.

Once again, by the time I got back to my rented apartment, I was okay. I crawled into bed, turned out the light. No problem falling asleep.

Next morning, up well before the sun, a perfect cloudless day, running on the beach. I'm so lucky to be alone! I thought. Look what I've got: Freedom! Freedom to travel and play and run on beaches anywhere in the world. Lucky's the word, all right.

The next few days I began composing a letter to a woman I knew in prison in New Zealand. Mid-30s, she'd been a prostitute from her teens, a junkie for eight years, had married an Egyptian smack dealer in Cairo. Her husband had tried to poison her, and when that failed, attempted to subjugate her into the traditional Muslim female role. Since he'd taken whatever money she had, she was totally at his mercy. One day some friends secretly escorted her to the British Embassy, where passage was arranged to London. I sent her money to return to New Zealand.

That had been years back. I saw her a few times not long after. She took my course, then a Vipassana, and seemed to be coming right. Then I lost all contact. A year ago I got a letter from her, from Mt Eden Women's Prison in Auckland. She was in for some kind of fraud.

Our correspondence was grand. Her letters were straight from the gut: beautiful stuff.

Now I was writing her, hopefully from that same bared and open source. I questioned my aloneness. It's not bad, I wrote. It's just curious.

Trust and loyalty were so important to me, and rarely had I found a person, especially a partner, I really could depend on. As a couples observer for so many years, it seemed to me that most people were together strictly for accommodation. They were two elements that would never form a compound. How can people live like this? I wondered. And how come I can't?

The letter grew to eight pages. I was sitting there in the apartment scribbling following a run, swim and shower, when I looked up to see Bruce approaching the screen door of the ranch slider. He stopped, shaded his eyes and peered in. I said good morning.

"Oh. Uh, look, Barry. I know you don't watch telly or listen to the radio. But I think you better turn it on."

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“How come?”

“They’ve bombed New York and Washington.” His voice broke and he paused a moment. “And they think that’s only the beginning of it.”

I looked at him. A handsome Scotsman, wavy white hair and tanned face, he was a softly speaking, gentle soul. Certainly not the type for this sort of joke.

“What channel?”

“Any one of them,” he said, and walked off.

I debated going back to the letter. I was really into it now. Somehow, talking to this jailbird across the Tasman Sea, I felt I was getting to the core of things, what made Barry tick.

I flicked on the remote, went back to my chair, picked up the pen. The first image on the screen was a tall, tall building. It was collapsing, virtually melting down onto the street.

I watched dumbly. The second plane. Rerun of the collapse. The people in the street. The mayor. The president. The secretary of state. Talking heads, first American, then Australian. The second plane, a new angle this time. The collapse.

At some point – I had no recall – I had moved from the table to the sofa. Time became an accordion, stretched, then squeezed. It occurred that I hadn’t had a single thought in, well, I had no way of knowing how long. Then that thought vanished and I was empty-minded again.

Repeats. Repeats. Each time I would notice something I had not seen before. I’d seen the tiny, tiny black bodies falling, or jumping, down the side of the building. This time I saw – it had to be, because there were three or four pinwheeling legs visible – *two* bodies connected. Holding hands, or arms around each other’s shoulder.

That’s when I heard the sound. It was a soft high-pitched wail, like air seeping out of a tiny opening in the mouth of a balloon. The wail grew louder. The balloon was me. The wail was mine. I lost it. I totally lost it.

I didn’t weep. I didn’t cry. I bawled. I felt my belly and chest palpitate as this force was being released. There would be a huhuhuh, air rushing in, then an explosion of such force that at first it shocked me.

What was this? I was crying for New York? I couldn’t stand New York! You came from Philly (or better yet, Boston) and you hated the place with a passion. Oh, it wasn’t the arrogance, the coldness, the climbing pushiness of the people.

That was any big city. It was, of all things, *baseball!*

As a kid, it was the Giants and Dodgers. Especially the Dodgers. They'd come into Philly and we'd outplay them and they would win. Roberts outpitching Newk and somehow we'd lose, 2-1. They always got the breaks, the calls. Duke Snider trapping Willie Jones's drive against the left-centerfield wall with two out in the ninth and the winning run on base in '52. Everybody in the park saw that ball hit the wall, yet it was called an out. Only the Dodgers. Only a New York team. We finally beat the Dodgers – in the final inning of the final game of 1950. So who did we play in the Series? The Yankees of course! They scored six runs total in the first three games, did the Yanks. And won all three. Each game could've gone either way. Only it couldn't have gone either way, it had to go their way, because we were Philly and they were New York.

That was why telling people I was from there felt so absurd. Now, now...

I couldn't stop crying. I got up, walked around, calmed down, returned to the TV and began bawling again, instantly. That one single image. Two people, linked together in death. Were they co-workers? Friends? Did they love each other? To die like that, not as a single, not alone...

The tears just projected out of me. I could not stop.

I walked into town around ten-thirty. There was an eerie stillness. Yet nothing had changed. Stores were open, cafes served coffee. I passed a hand-made sign stuck in the window of a pub: We Support New York. And lost it again. I had to stand against a wall, facing it, my shoulders heaving.

My eyes had no opportunity to dry. If I had seen my life as jumping from one rock to another, these rocks were now momentary pauses between crying. I thought of this and cried.

Over the next some days, the television was on all the time. Pictures of firefighters. I'd cry. A black woman whose brother was lost. I'd cry. The Queen of England, never a displayed emotion in her life, and here she bursts into tears. I burst into tears with her.

Talk about the people aboard the flight downed in Pennsylvania. How they obviously had fought the hijackers to keep it from Washington. The wife of one of the passengers was interviewed. She said her husband was always telling the kids, "Okay, let's roll." The last words she heard over the mobile, after he said they'd taken a vote and were going to storm the cockpit: Okay, let's roll!



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I cried and cried and cried.

One day in town I passed a guy with tattoos up and down his arms, with earrings, with pure thug attitude. He was wearing a black T-shirt cut off at the shoulders: *I (Heart) NY*. I ducked into an alley, knelt down and cried my eyes out.

Look, if somebody'd said that some terrorist types were going to knock out the New York financial system, put a major dent in the Pentagon, smack America once, twice, three times across the face in front of the entire world, my reaction would have been: Yes! The country with less than five percent of the world's population that used forty percent of the world's energy and then flaunted it – I was going to feel sorry for bastards like these?

But I was. I was so very, very sorry.

Except I wasn't really sorry for them. Oh, sure, some. Quite a bit, maybe. But my sorrow, my buckets of tears and strain on the rib cage, was, of course, for me.

Stage one lasted a week. Stage two began the day they reopened the stock market. Funny, that. Me and the stock market. Half the world starving, people earning fifty cents a day and hoping to feed a family of seven, and in New York, grabbing, grabbing, for how many years now?

The night before I could hardly sleep. Fragmented dreams about the stock market. I was rooting, see. If the market went up that first day, it meant America had changed. It meant the American people had tossed their greed aside and stood shoulder to shoulder and in the face of personal financial disaster...

Right. Right.

The letter to my friend in prison? I read it over after several days' neglect and it was so...unbelievably self-indulgent. I wrote that? I actually, in all seriousness, wrote that pap? I crumpled it into a ball, tossed it.

I arranged to see Jessie. She was living in nearby Lismore. It'd been two years since we'd spoken, and she had stopped writing me. So I stopped writing her.

For years I had been begging her, bribing her: go travel. Here's the gelt, get yourself out on the road. I'll do it when I'm ready, she would say.

And she had. Joined a Volunteer Services Abroad program and spent a year teaching English in Guilin, China. The only Westerner in the entire university. Two hundred-fifty students per semester.

Towards the end I wrote her: be mindful, darling. I've known so many people, they have this great experience in Asia, then return home and just blob. They take

the shape of their containers. Females, many of them, get pregnant 20 minutes after the plane lands.

Jessie hadn't got pregnant. But she sure had blobbed.

She was sitting outside a café with her boyfriend. We hugged and kissed and within three minutes got stuck into each other. You don't write! I said. Because of what *you* write! she said. My letters were so judgmental, so preachy, whenever she got one her hands would shake opening it.

I looked at her as she spoke. She had just a trace of visible eczema, which usually meant there was more on the body. I suspected this had come as a nervous reaction to meeting me. I saw something else. I saw a young person I loved, very deeply, who had given up on herself. And there was not a damn thing I could do. I take that back. I could keep my mouth shut.

We had a good day together. I'll be in touch, she said as we parted. Maybe, I thought. I said nothing.

This, then, was stage two. I saw people as they were, not as I wanted them to be. The people I felt closest to – how many of them were going anywhere? Talking, sure. Going nowhere.

And me: what about me. Whereas I was silent in my judgment and condemnation of them, I went full-bore at Barry.

I could not believe what I'd become. A stiff, a dead man walking.

Why? Because my woman had left me and I was 63 years old. Sixty-three. Divisible by three, seven, nine and twenty-one. A number. Don't mean shit to a tree. But it did, didn't it?

In my home town in New Zealand I had observed people, males anyway, wrap it up when they hit big-five-oh. Forty-eight and they were robust, outdoorsy, gutsy, full of life. Fifty-two, they had shrunk, changed shape, lost color. Sometimes when I returned from a six month journey they looked to have aged five years.

The number of early-to-mid-50s deaths among the males in my area was astounding. Cancer, heart, or they simply went out to the backyard shed and strung up the rope. (No handguns in NZ.) And I knew why, too. They'd bought the lie. The lie said you're 50, you are no longer a person, you're a useless old man: useless and just sucking off the tit of society. Overnight, this was.

I knew this guy Donald. Canadian. He'd come around once a year, do this dance. Why do people live in houses? Don't they realize they're prisons? Why do

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people despise freedom so?

Donald had built a boat many years back, sailed around the world solo. The past several years he lived in a van, kitted out nicely, even a tiny wood-burner. He'd travel up and down New Zealand. Ah, freedom, he would say.

Last time he showed up was maybe five years back. He was looking to buy a house.

"They're pretty pricey here at the beach," I said.

"No, I wouldn't want here. In town. Not far from the hospital, so I can peddle the bike over if I need to."

"Oh. You've got problems, Donald?" He appeared okay.

"No, I'm fine. But I'm gonna be sixty in a few months. Have to be careful now."

A scene out the window of my standard café-hang at home: A touring mini-bus parked just outside. Driver and 18 senior types. The oldies all had name tags, a few of these on upside down. (In case they forgot their names?) Driver, your typical "Kiwi joker" – large gut, shorts, white knee socks, army-green cardigan and a delightful, always-present smile, was attempting to round up the troops for takeoff. In the bus, a head count. Two short. Moved off to track them down. In his absence, two more tottered off. He returned with the original pair, another head count, off he went. Two more got out and sauntered off. This happened three, four times. It was like they hadn't a clue, weren't plugged in. And some of these people were barely older than me.

What happens? What happened to me? I *knew* better. I knew about the media (which I'd had so little touch with in recent years). About advertising, about the insurance companies and the banks and the corpos and pols and religiosos: scaring the shit out of people was their business. I'd known all this for years, therefore I was immune!

Like hell I was.

They had this monthly giveaway publication in Australia. *Senior*, it was called. First I saw it, I grabbed one. Never knew what freebies, discounts, might be available.

I got through twenty pages and wanted to barf. The whole paper was a hype. Pictures of grinning granny and gramps, in the pool of their retirement village. Guided tours – safe trips – every minute itinerated, the cost tenfold what I might

spend doing it on my own. Rubber underpants for the incontinent. Gadgets for arthritics and the infirmed. If you weren't old when you picked up the paper, you sure were when you got through reading it.

I thought of Ben, at 69, and Michael, 81, and a number of senior types I had run into on the road. Mary Northmore in Bali told me about a woman from Arizona, used to come every year to Ubud. Couple years back she announced she wouldn't be coming any more, the flying was a bit much for her. She was 99! (And traveled with a "toy-boy" of 76.)

"She'd swim a mile in the pool every day," Mary said. "She'd sit there at poolside, look down at herself and say, 'Not a bad pair of legs for 99, eh.' Her eyes sparkled, and just a wonderful sense of humor."

If I had felt the pain of the people in New York as my own pain, I now began to feel their anger. What they might have done, the terrorists, what I had hoped they'd someday do, was screw up the cyber system, screw it up so bad that America would be forced to its knees, then forced back up again with everybody becoming Daniel Boones and Davy Crocketts. Or, if they were going to do something like they wound up doing, then steal planes in the wee hours and crash those buildings when nobody, or very, very few, were in them. What good did it do to kill so many people, innocent civilians?

So if stage two was some sort of clarity, stage three was definitely anger. I had this beautiful anger-based vision. Those 19 or 20 nutcases who'd hijacked the planes and did in, not a few buildings I couldn't care less about, not a financial system I didn't believe in, but three thousand innocent people, many of whom were not even American, because of what the afterlife promised – Allah and those black-eyed virgins – here was what I saw: Yes, they did get there, and yes, they did meet up with Allah. And Allah, who could take many forms, was so pissed off at these assholes he decided to be an eight-foot New York radical lesbo with wire brush legs and melon-size muscles and fists of steel and large, extremely sharp teeth, and the young virgins were there too, just slightly smaller copies of The Big One, and have a happy eternity, y'all!

Yes, I was angry as hell at *them*, but more, I felt furious towards myself for having permitted this idiotic, cowardly, hand-wringing metamorphosis over these past few months.

I walked into a bookstore and was virtually wind-blown to a large, coffee-

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table type book. If there'd been a sign *For Barry*, with an arrow, it couldn't have been more me. Page after page of quotes from famous people.

One of the great things about growing old is that you dare to stand on stage and do nothing, and people start to listen and to understand ~ John Gielgud

We do not stop dreaming because we are old; we grow old because we stop dreaming ~ Author unknown

You are only young once, but you can stay immature indefinitely ~ Ogden Nash

Whatever you can do, or dream you can, BEGIN IT. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it ~ Goethe

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars ~ Oscar Wilde

And Wilde again:

Life is too important to take seriously

My favorite:

'There is no use trying,' said Alice; 'one can't believe impossible things.'  
'I dare say you haven't had much practice,' said the queen. 'When I was your age I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.' ~ Lewis Carroll

Every year I kept a travel journal. At some point *Out There*, I gave it a theme. So far in this trip no theme had appeared. Now I had one. I got some hard black art paper, cut out a 9, then a 1, then another 1. Pasted them on the cover.

I cut short my stay in Byron. My ticket back to New Zealand was out of Melbourne, so I booked a flight there, out of Brisbane.

It was on the flight to Melbourne that stage four revealed itself to me. Stage four said this:

Okay, let's roll.

# FEAR-BUSTER #7

## The Alpha tool chest

Those 20 imaging exercises I would conduct during my course served this purpose: they dug the foundation for the new mind-mansion you were going to construct. Deeper you dug down, higher up you might go. But nothing is stopping you from constructing a little shack by the track. Hell, I lived in a Vee-Dub bus for a few years.

I am now going to give you, herewith and henceforth, a number of tools to make life easier. And better. The way to get them to work for you is the same as getting to Carnegie Hall. You gotta practice, man, practice.

Repetition makes it happen. After many a repeat cometh the *aha!*. Sometimes an *aha!* -- the moment when the mind buys a program, then starts to send forth the juice to actually make it happen -- comes quick, sometimes slow. You never know. I've been doing this good stuff 30 years and I never know. But if your outlook is good and positive, it doesn't really matter. If you're climbing a mountain of ice cream, every step you take is vanilla fudge. In this game, the only failure is the failure to try.

### The three-finger technique

At a relaxed (Alpha) state, eyes closed, place your thumb and first two fingers together. Either hand. Tell yourself this: "Whenever I put my three fingers together in this manner, I go immediately to a light state of relaxation (or Alpha)." Take a deep breath, and repeat this initial programming of the three finger method. Remember to use present tense

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here, as in all Alpha programming.

Repeat this as often as you can. Good times to do this are just prior to, and immediately following, your daily meditation. But any time will do. Catch yourself thinking, that is, recycling old, worn-out (and probably negative) thoughts, cut them out, take a few deep breaths, do a bit of a count backwards, and repeat the programming.

The three finger technique is good in situations when you need to keep your eyes open. Driving the car in traffic, or you're stopped by a traffic cop, or have to deal with your idiot of a boss.

Now, what's so special about putting three fingers together? Absolutely nothing. You can program anything to work. Example.

A woman in one of my classes at Penn was teacher in a ghetto school in North Philadelphia. She had the lowest fifth grade in the school. When they took tests, the kids would become extremely nervous. So she taught them some Alpha. Mainly the three finger, and a technique I'll discuss later.

A few weeks went by, and the principal came around. Her class had shot up, was now the best fifth grade in his school. He demanded to know what was going on.

The teacher hadn't figured on her principal being a mini-brain. When she got done explaining about Alpha, the principal was apoplectic.

"But that's cheating!" he sputtered. And sent out a memo that children were to be closely watched during exams. They were NOT to put their three fingers together at any time!

So what this clever teacher did was to re-train her kids. Instead of three fingers, she had them place right hand over the heart. When any authority asked, the kids replied they were silently reciting the Pledge of Allegiance as it made them feel close to God.

### **Finger-to-opposite-palm technique**

This is for going deeper, working with the eyes closed. Index finger of the normal writing hand, pointed across the chest. Opposite palm facing the finger. The opposite palm remains stationary, the finger moves slowly across. As it does, you say: "Whenever I move my finger across to the

opposite palm like so, and once it touches I write the word RELAX, I go immediately to a *deep* state of relaxation (or Alpha)."

Again, the main deal here is repetition, repetition. Whenever you have a few moments to spare.

When I first started out teaching and practicing, I sought out one of the big names in the electro-biofeedback game. He was visiting Philly from his lab in Berkeley. This a guy who, though not always right, for sure never was wrong.

"It's impossible to stay in Alpha for more than a few moments at a time," he told me with authority. "You're in, you pop out, go back in, shoot back out again. This is how it works."

I said that I was pretty sure I could stay in Alpha for pretty long periods.

"How long?"

"As long as I want, I guess."

He laughed. "Come, I'll prove how wrong you are." He sat me in a chair and hooked me up to his machine. Scalp electrodes pasted on, he turned a few dials. "Okay. You'll soon see how right I am."

I closed my eyes, took some breaths, counted three-to-one, then ten-to-one. Then I did finger across to opposite palm. Wrote RELAX on the palm. Soon I heard the buzzer that indicated I had slipped below 13 hz. That was the last thing I heard until he shook me.

"Something's wrong with the machine," he announced as he unceremoniously yanked the electrodes off.

"How long was I in?" I wondered as I massaged my aching scalp.

"Doesn't matter. The machine —. Em, 28 minutes."

Again, there's nothing miraculous about crossing your index finger to the other palm and writing RELAX. You can program putting your knees together and doing the hucklebuck. Just remember, though, once you start a particular program, keep to that program. Changing it will cause confusion to the overworked Base Mind.

### Headache and pain relief

In the Alpha state, say and "see" the problem. A headache can look like a red, pulsating mace, for example; pain an ugly dark mass or gas. Begin



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by saying to yourself, "My headache is going away, the pain is leaving me." Over and over. After a while, don't even mention the problem. "I am feeling so good, so healthy..." Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative. You got it.

Picture the pulsating mace gradually turning from red to orange, then to yellow, then green, finally blue. Red is hot, blue is cool. As the colors are changing, the spikes of the mace are receding, the pulsating becoming slower and slower. When red has become blue, it's no longer a mace, but a ball. A nice, cool, blue ball. Same with the imaged pain: turn it from black yecch to bluish-white light. (The colors are strictly up to you, remember.)

Say to yourself now, "When I count from one to ten and open my eyes, I shall feel better than I can ever recall feeling." Then count slowly to ten.

If the headache, or pain, is not completely gone, wait a few minutes and repeat the process. Then surround yourself with light to prevent the negative energy from returning.

Often I will use this technique just before going to bed. I will program for a beautiful night's sleep, and tell myself that when I awaken not only will I feel perfect, but *there will be no memory of having felt less so.* (Who wants to carry that kind of memory around?)

Ninety-nine percent of headaches are what is termed psychosomatic. Meaning there's no real physical problem. Other forms of bodily pain, however, can signify a physiological imbalance. Make sure you know what the problem is before getting rid of the warning-signal pain.

### **Problem solving**

When the goal cannot be pictured, as it is for the double screen technique, use words. In Alpha, state the problem simply. Then begin to recite, "The answer to \_\_\_\_\_ (the problem) is coming to me, the answer is coming... Keep it up. Be positive. State a time or date when the solution is, in fact, yours. And as with double screen, once you count yourself out of Alpha, do not dwell on the problem or try to figure it out.

### Dream state work

A really good time to solve those annoying problems. Lying in bed, stocking cap in place, the mind free of the day just past. Present the problem and tell yourself that you are dreaming the solution, and that you are remembering this dreamt answer upon awakening.

Dreaming is still such a mysterious state. What actually happens in dreams? Where do they come from? Jung did a lot of work on dream symbols, but still we wallow in a great expanse of ignorance. Nonetheless, you can use dreams to your advantage.

Some people wake up in the middle of the night with the answer. Then go back to sleep and forget it when they fully awaken. A common sense suggestion is to place a pad and pencil (and maybe a flashlight) near you, and write down the answer.

I have a peculiar mechanism on this one. I don't think I have ever remembered my answer upon awakening. Mostly, I forget I've even presented the problem. I get out of bed, go through my day. Then at 2.27pm, usually in a crowded elevator, I'll reflexively yell out, "Lana Turner!!" (Which is odd since the question was who played third base for the '48 Indians...)

### The glass of water technique

Boy, is this one weird! You've got a really tough nut of a problem. What you do is take a glass of water, or juice, to bed. Sitting up (some people have to be told, I swear), slowly sip half the glass, stating the problem, and the fact that the solution is coming to you. Place the glass nearby, and first thing upon waking, repeat the program while sipping slowly the second half.

The theory here is, your question goes out to the center of the universe, where there exists, as every schoolchild knows, the Universal Bank of Infinite Knowledge and Wisdom. The question/problem is processed by the Bank tellers, and the solution sent back to you. The whole deal takes 72 hours.

Or any other explanation you care to believe.

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My very first class, fall of '72. A chubby, frizzy-haired lass of 18 stands up and says her boyfriend is in a rock band. They play a lot of gigs out of town. He tells her he is faithful. She wants to find out if it is so.

I tell her to use the glass of water technique, thinking she'll most likely never get around to it. I mean, she really wants to know?

That was on a Wednesday evening. The next session was a Monday. The lass comes in wearing a hang-dog face. Her story:

She went home, and about midnight she did the glass of water, repeating it as instructed next morning. She waits, counting the hours. Saturday night, midnight. Twelve-fifteen. Twelve-thirty. No solution.

So she calls her man's hotel. She gets the reception, which then somehow plugs her in to an *existing phone conversation between her dude and some babe he is hitting on!* They can't hear her, but she sure can hear them. Moral: um...um...

### **Recall of reading matter**

Go down to Alpha. Tell yourself that you are about to read (or listen to a tape or lecture) about a certain subject in a certain chapter of a certain book by a certain author on this certain date for some certain purpose. All these certainties are indexes. The more you have, the easier it will be to recall.

State that all the information is being filed away in a readily accessible place in your mind, and you are able to recall it totally at any future time.

Return to your normal waking state, read the book or listen to the tape, then return immediately to Alpha and repeat the program using the past tense: "I have just read this book by this author..." When recall time comes, go down to Alpha, present the case situation, giving as many indexes as possible (or, perhaps, simply the subject matter) and direct your mind to provide all the knowledge you have stored.

### **Exam-taking**

What a game: you need to pass an exam to get in, to stay in, to get out.

Of school, of college, of work, of life. Well, if it's a game (oh it is, it is!) then play it by your own rules, not theirs.

Situation: final exam. You've crammed until the wee hours. Coffee and uppers galore. You know the stuff; you're going to blast your way through.

You enter a room full of high-Beta vibes. But you're cool. They pass out the questions. You take one look and think: wrong room. This must be Swahili 205. PANIC!!!

Nope. That used to be you. No longer. Deep breaths, three-to-one count, ten-to-one count. Open your eyes. Look at the questions. Say there are twenty. Say you know for sure the answers to 2,4,5,8,10,14,17 and 19.

Answer those eight. Then go back over the other twelve. Say you're somewhat sure about 1,3,9, 15 and 20. (At least, they're in English.) Answer them.

The other seven may as well be in Swahili for all you know. Still, thou shalt not sweat.

Go down to Alpha. Picture in your mind an *expert or authority on the subject*. Could be your teacher. Could be the author of the book. Could be Aristotle. Doesn't matter.

Say it's Old Aristotle. Picture him standing right before you. Smiling. Helpful. "Ari, babe," you say, like he's your best friend. (And at the moment, he damn well is.) "Here's a question for you." Present it. And *direct him to give you the best possible answer, at once*.

Whatever Aristotle says, even if it's, "Gobble-de-gook, gobble-de-gook," come back up to your normal state and write it down. For sure it makes more sense than whatever you might come up with on your own.

This is the technique the teacher I mentioned taught her "dumb" kids at the ghetto school. But really, how dumb were they if their response to a new form of learning was so successful?

At Penn, even though the free school wasn't part of the university-proper, a large number of Penn students attended. (In fact, for three years Alpha was the highest-enrollment class in Penn's history.) The feedback I got from these people was remarkable. "Like cheating, only

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you can't get caught," a dental student once remarked.

Here's an add-on: Often teachers, being the lazy beggars teachers tend to be, will tell you to hand in a self-addressed postcard. The receipt of the postcard is the manner you receive your exam results. Do this:

Place a box, or square, on back the card. Go down to Alpha and picture yourself getting the card in the mail. Actually sticking your hand in the box and feeling it. Your name and address in your handwriting. Turn it over. Inside the box see the highest grade you can imagine. Not what you deserve to get. Phooey on deserve. What you want.

Okay, it's the electronic age and I'm way out of touch. You'll get notice via email. Do the same thing. Click the mouse, and there's your A. Remember: repetition is what makes this work.

### **Healing.**

Many people are afraid to get into healing work, especially without a guide or leader. What they're afraid of, I suppose, is failure. (Or success, perhaps.) Worst case scenario here is...you are sending someone who needs it light and love. If this is failure, let's all give it a try.

The basic understanding to healing work is that you are merely a channel conducting the loving light from its source through you to one who is in need. I know, I know, this sounds like the ultimate New Age feel-good baloney. It just happens to be true. Think of yourself as a set of cables connecting a weak battery - the person to be healed - to the strongest battery in existence (define this as you wish). Remember to send love/light to the entire person, not just an ailing part. Some guys with funny haircuts once wrote/sang: "The love you take is equal to the love you make."

You betcha.

### **The Alpha temple.**

Go down to Alpha. Imagine yourself walking on a deserted beach, or in the woods, on a mountain - some place which feels terrific and is free of people and noise and clutter. Tell yourself this: "Around the next bend (say) is my Alpha Temple. This is the perfect place for me to do Alpha level work." Take the next bend, and -- what's there? A log cabin? A

castle? Nothing whatsoever? Doesn't matter. This is your place of maximum ability to perform Alpha work.

Explore the temple. (If nothing appeared, then your temple is outdoors. Explore this spot.) Imagine using your physical senses to gather information about the temple. Touch, smell, listen, taste.

Create a few useful tools. A computer. Chair to sit on. A large white screen onto which you can project images from your mind. Medicine chest. VCR/DVD. Whatever. (One hippie type reported a hammock, golden hookah, stack of X vids. Doubt he ever got any work done, but for sure he was happy there.)

Once you have firmly established this place, and feel it's right for you (doesn't feel absolutely perfect, either give it a chance or wipe it and try for another; be your own Alpha architect), use it whenever you go down to Alpha, not only to do work, but just to meditate or even grab a few minutes' peace. And again, do remember this: you are limited in the creation of your temple and its tools same as you are limited by any Alpha work...strictly by your own imagination. Which is limitless.

## 8

Mr. Tavee thrust out his bare, balloon-like belly. In truth, he was not a terribly fat man, so the belly didn't quite fit, as though for a joke he'd stuffed a beach ball down into his skin.

"This my home!" he cried, his arms spread wide around him. "You stay here, you stay in my home. My family and I, we make you welcome. Sometimes people come here, they do drugs." Here he fluttered his eyes, which is no doubt what druggies do. "I know! I always know! And never allow them in my home – never!"

I am in Bangkok. I am here for a couple of reasons. First, it's the hub of Asia for travelers who arrive by plane from some other part of the world. And second, the city has always intimidated me with its size, its noise, its uncertainty, and I have made a vow to the heavens that no longer am I going to allow fear to keep me from doing something I really want to do. So when the flight from Melbourne arrived at 6am, I scrambled around outside the airport until I found the shuttle to Khao San Road, the backpackers' haven, and climbed aboard. I didn't want to stay on Khao San, the immediate area being too crazy for my currently delicate sensibilities, so I dug out the name of Mr. Tavee's guesthouse in the Thewet area which had been provided me by the old chap named Ben in Bali, and hailed a tuk tuk, believing myself clever for bargaining the driver down from 100 baht (around \$2.50 then) to half that. What I didn't realize was that Thewet was but a 20 minute stroll from Khao San. Roadie lesson number...

Tavee owned four guesthouses, all clustered in a hundred-foot radius. They were designed to accommodate all tastes, from your most basic four-walls-and-fan backpacker to the more upmarket traveler who wants his comfort, but doesn't care for sterile hotels. Me, for example.

The small round man obviously had done well. Two sons, he was quick to tell me, were studying in Oregon, and his lovely daughter Ansaya had just returned from a visit there. I noticed a number of Westerners in the small lounge area of the cheapest guesthouse, where the Tavees made their residence. They looked in their thirties, somewhat older than your normal flophouse roadie, and most all were British. As the new kid in town, I introduced myself.

“Yeah, me and Clive – he’s the ugly bugger over there – been here, what is it now, Clive? Six months?”

“Six months! Really? You mean, right here, at Tavee’s?”

“Yeah. Oh, we do the run south for the full moon party every month. But this is home-away-from, know what I mean? Hell do I want to stay in bloody England for when I can hang out here at tenth the price.”

On the walls all around were hand-lettered signs warning of the dangers of Bangkok’s notorious gem scams. “Beware of tuk tuk drivers – many are gangsters!” Indeed, I would later spot Mr. Tavee standing behind certain tuk tuks when a traveler was about to climb aboard, surreptitiously flashing a large card reading, simply, GANGSTER!

My first few days I was hardly adventurous. I’d wander half a mile, a mile, and as though I had a long elastic umbilical cord, reel myself back “home”. Easiest way to navigate the city, or at least the part of it I was in, was to make my way to the river. A ferry terminal existed on the next street over, so I’d jump aboard one of the ancient craft, almost always packed no matter what time of day, ride some ways, jump off and explore some, then back the other way. Maps here seemed to confuse me even more than I was without them.

Twice, three times a day, I would wander south to Khao San Road. Here, you could buy anything you wanted, just about. Half the shops seemed to be travel agencies, the rest selling Asian junk. Stalls hawked clothes during the days, then at night stalls appeared in front of the stalls, selling cheap food. You could buy, at several places, phony International Student ID cards, British drivers licenses, and very authentic appearing degrees from the university of your choice.

As I watched the people, the backpackers from a score of nations, non-conformist conformists all, I remembered Raewyn once telling me: “You shouldn’t generalize!” What she was really saying was: “Being female, I take everything personally, and you’re getting too close to the marrow!” Which, of course, is yet



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another generalization.

It's true generalizing blankets an entire genre: this unfairly splashes slops on the shoes of numerous innocents who just happen to claim membership in a large community. I've found, however, that due to peer pressure people actually aspire to fashionable mass imbecility.

Sometimes, though, social cliché seems almost a natural product of ethnicity or sex. Example: fat white women have no grace and lousy bearing, whereas fat brown and black females comport themselves with a fluid certainty. (And don't get righteous here, chubby – you know I'm right.)

Me, I've been a roadie for five zillion years. I don't get shit-faced at full moon parties nor visit starred sites on tourist maps. And I wouldn't use Lonely Planet to blot-dry the residue of an extreme bout of the Ghandi Gallops. People watching is my game, and as I hung around Khao San Road, a definite pattern began to emerge. Call this, then, "Barry's Book of Backpacking Assholes."

Used to be, the number one national asshole was, hands down, your know-it-all, boastful, swaggering American. Germans were arrogant, Australians loud, drunk and stupid, French dirty opium-headed scam artists, Italians thieves. Times change. And while young American roadies were no less the rectal apertures they were when first I set out on the Asian trail, by 2001 the Yanks had been leapfrogged by a handful of emerging cultures.

Canadians, for one. A time back, young Canadians were merely gauche and nerdy. They said "eh" every fourth word, traveled in clusters, wore tramping boots to the beach, and Mickey Mouse red maple leaf flag-patches covered their packs and every available garment. (Standard practice when you encountered one: "Hi, you American, right?")

Then in the early '90s Toronto twice won the World Series (beating you-know-who in '93), and the Canadian psyche was transformed. The new breed was now the leading backpacker asshole of the Western Hemisphere – talked too damn loud and too damn much while saying too damn little. And the males were just as bad.

The English. Now, here was a race of dilettante degenerates for you. Forget the skinhead soccer subhumans; your standard Brit (as evidenced at Mr. Tavee's) came to Asia, slept till noon, then sat around the GH with his (her?) mates smoking, drinking, swapping Ali G-isms and comparing how pissed he/she got the night before, finally around seven staggered out to the favored pub to source material

for the following day's broadcast. The empire strikes black.

Germans were, well, they're Germans. Teutonic pride always won out over guilt stemming from grandfehrer's sins. How to test a German: show him a product, anything from a camera to a condom. Wait. "Och, dis is okay, but in Chermany is making much better, *ja*." Not bad people, really. Boring.

Another constant was the Australian. He's the big-bellied bloke from the land where the front page of every journal displays either Nicole Kidman's tits or the latest naughty of the currently reigning sporting hero. Barrels of beer, 120-decibel, off-key singing, face down in vomit by 10pm. Thing is, it's hard not to like the Aussies. They were so much fun, so good natured – insecure, overgrown kids craving attention – that it tempered their generally obnoxious conduct.

New Zealanders. An interesting species. To the untrained eye, and ear, my fellow citizens (the native-borns) were Australians on Valium. Living in the shadow of the far more garrulous, cruder, drunker Aussies, New Zealanders carried a leviathan inferiority complex and tried ever so hard to effect a separate, understated national identity. Except there isn't one. Due more to their shyness and reserve than positive traits, Kiwis occupied perhaps the lowest rung on the backpacker asshole ladder.

At the opposite end, we had your winner of the How To Appear Outrageous When You Know With Absolute Certainty You'll Be Wearing A Black Suit, Bowing To The Corporate Logo And Locked In For Life Within Five Minutes Of Returning Home award. Outrageous they may look, but still they hup-two-three-four'd, the males lock-stepping down KS Road, the females giggling and smoking and waiting to get shagged by the gigolos who hovered around them like vultures at Dewa's in Ubud.

Still, the Japanese took second place in the sweepstakes to an even more chosen race.

"You want to know why we act like assholes?" This from a young man from Tel Aviv whose name was Sammi. "Very Simple. If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks, you expect, what, a gorilla? We act like assholes because we are assholes!" Adding: "Look, as kids we grow up loving America. Whatever they wear, we wear. Whatever they do, we do. Then at 18 *they* go to college and *we* go in the goddamn army. Look at me: my knee is screwed, my back is screwed, and what's left of my brain is screwed. I'm 22 with a 75 year old body. And I'm lucky

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– I’m alive! So by the time we get out of the military we’re already 80 percent asshole, then we come here and smoke so much shit we’re soon total. We cling together because we’re paranoid, and treat locals like meat because that’s basically what we ourselves have become.”

The young Israelis (Is-holes?) are a puzzle. How can a people of five million put twice that number, all between 20 and 25, on the road at any one time?

As I moved up and down the 500 yards or so of Khao San (the only places to sit, you had to order overpriced food or drink), a thought struck: all of them, Israelis, Japanese, English, Australians, Canadians, Americans, Germans, were in grave danger of being shaken from their presently secure perches on the Asshole Scale. For rumor has it that within a few years another force may be unleashed to invade backpackers’ haunts with a fury the world has never borne witness to; a threat that sends flutters to the tummy and shivers up the spine. Can you just imagine what’ll happen when THEY arrive?

The Mainland Chinese.

\*

My fourth or fifth day in Bangkok, two wondrous things happened, as though in tandem. First, the city became totally clear to me. I could read the maps, I could walk for miles without getting lost, find wonderful, cheap vegetarian eating places that hadn’t existed when I’d walked right past the day before, grab a bus clear across town and know precisely where I was when I got off. Just like that, Bangkok made total sense. I cannot explain this other than to say I must’ve had a geographical *aha!*

Early morning I would take an air-con bus to Lumpini Park, a magical oasis of grass and trees and ponds and old Chinese people doing tai chi right in the heart of the business district. And when the sun went down I would mosey over to Santichaiprakam Park in Banglumpu to watch as many as 300 people of all ages, sizes and body types do an hour’s worth of very strenuous synchronized aerobics with the backdrop of the river, ferries and darkening sky. In between I’d walk, eat, nap, eat, read, eat. All the standard stuff of the roadie. Except on that same day I became Bangkok-enlightened, I did, for me, a highly unusual roadie thing. I fell in love.

Her name was Stephanie and she was mid-40s and came from the Czech

Republic. And she was tall and beautiful and had the fullest head of long hair I think I've yet seen. And she moved into the room right next to mine, gave me the warmest of smiles as we passed on the stairs, and when later I went to go out and she was sitting in the lounge, an even warmer smile. I sat down.

We talked, and then we walked. And then we had dinner together and walked and talked some more. And when we went back to Mr. Tavee's and were about to enter our respective cells ...

"Would you like to, um, see my room?" I asked, shrugging. We both laughed. So she came in. "It's exactly like my room!" she said, exaggerated surprise. "Except my room has air-conditioning, which I have on all the time. Would you like to see it?"

Stephanie had three kids, all grown and gone, and a couple of ex-husbands. She traveled extensively, buying clothes and jewelry in Asia and Africa, shipping her purchases back home to Prague to sell at vastly inflated prices to the rapidly-expanding middleclass market there. And, she let it be known, she favored men who were, ah, more *mature*.

We slept together in her rather frosty room three nights running. And that's all we did. Sleep. How come? My choice.

Look, not a hell of a lot had gone on with Raewyn our last, oh, 18 months together. And after being dropped... What I had was an advanced case of the Ultimate Male Fear.

I made feeble excuses. We should get to know each other better. I was seriously contemplating monkhood. Or transvestitism. Anything except flaccidus erectus. I expected to get laughed at. Instead, this gorgeous Czech took it as rejection.

While she was off on a buying expedition the fourth morning, I ambled over to a storefront medical center I had noticed before. The doc listened to me for a minute, nodding perfect understanding. "No problem," he said of my problem. "I'll give you a sample. If you like the way it works, come back, I'll write you a prescription."

He actually didn't give me Viagra, as expected, rather Cialis, the proclaimed 36 hour jobbie. And here's how boldly I handled it: stuffed the sealed arrowhead-shaped pebble into my pocket, slinked back to Mr. Tavee's, where Stephanie was waiting.

"How was your day?" she asked.

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“Oh, fine. Took the ferry, walked a lot, watched the people. You know.” She smiled.

I tiptoed into the bathroom, closed the door, turned the tap on full, flushed the toilet. Probably stamped my feet a few times, don't remember. I took out the packet and with shaking hands tore open the plastic, held it up to my mouth. If I'd been nervous before, I was now in dread-zone.

I can only liken it to the fear I had experienced ever so long before when popping my first tab of acid: there was something wrong with my physiology, and the wonder drug just wouldn't take.

In bed, we began to fondle and fumble. My mind on other things, I had to silently shout instructions to my body parts: Fingers, trace her boobs! Gently! Mouth, clamp onto a nipple! Then I heard: “Ooh, you're so hard!”

Wha...? I peered down. Her fingers were wrapped around some sort of Tibetan flagpole. Truly, had it been black I'd've sworn Kobe Bryant was there in bed with us. This is – *me*?

Three hours later – you read that right – the pole showed no sign of wilting. But the Czech did. Finally she asked, well, pleaded, for me to desist.

I slowly crawled off the bed, stood up in that freezing room. Still on the bed, Stephanie's eyes were peeled back as she pointed incredulously at my member. I looked down. There was steam rising off it.

\*

We stayed together just two more nights. Stephanie had a flight to Jaipur to buy silver, and I was woozily recovering from the effects of a chemical marvel that'd provided me, along with the welcomed ego-boost, a splitting headache, nausea and a sense that the world had turned to fuzz. Alone on my last evening in the city I once again was wandering around the Khao San area when I came to a building fronted with huge glass doors atop which was a large metal sign in, of all languages, Hebrew.

I went up the few steps to the glass, peered in. What I saw was a number of young Israelis sitting around with the most hang-dog faces imaginable. No one was talking, even moving. I thought: my God, there's been another al-Qaeda bombing, this time in Tel Aviv!

As I stood there, a young Israeli wearing a yarmulke came up the steps behind

me. "I can help you?"

"Yeah, what's going on in there?"

"This is a *Chabad* center," he said. When I didn't respond, he said, "A bunch of religious crazies, think the messiah's coming. Today is what we call Yom Kippur, our biggest holiday. We've all been fasting since last night and now it's an hour to go before we can smoke."

"Smoke. Not eat."

"Eat. Who cares about eating?"

"*Vey iz mir,*" I said. He looked me over. "*Nu?*"

"*Nu.*"

He asked to see my passport. "You know, you can't be too careful these days." Then he led me inside. The place was huge, three stories, a restaurant downstairs, offices one floor up, and a huge hall on the top. We sat a while talking. ("Sharon? An *angel*...we should wipe out the whole lot of those bastards...") Then a bell was rung and everybody flew out the doors and lit up.

"Hang around," my new friend told me. "In an hour there's the breaking of the fast in the hall upstairs. Food you wouldn't believe. Like your *bubba* used to make." And out the door. I never saw him again.

I waited around, looking for a rare notice in English, paging through a travel guide in a small bookcase. People moved past me up the stairs. Finally, I followed.

The hall was packed, hundreds of young people. Long tables stretched from the back wall to the entrance areas. I spotted a free chair off to the rear, and after putting on a yarmulke handed me (when was the last time I'd worn one of these!), somehow squeezed my way between and around bodies. "Anybody sitting here?" I wondered. Without a word, no eye contact, a woman hand-motioned me to be seated.

I looked around me. Everybody was talking; the hall buzzed. These were happy, healthy looking young people. I glanced at the young woman sitting alongside. My God, she was the spitting image of Linda Kornblum, who I was head over heels about half a century ago! All of them, they looked so...Jewish! I could feel my chest fill with a long-missing emotion. Tears came to my eyes. These are *my* people! I belong!

I said something to the young man on my other side. He stopped what he was doing, which was filling his plate with tidbits from the table. Then he resumed

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piling food on, not a sign of recognition. Food was passed. *Around me!* I had to reach out and grab a plate as it was on its way from my left to my right. I looked in a dozen faces. No one looked back. I'm, what, invisible? I knew everyone of these people spoke English. Of course they did. A word; just a word. I piled food on my plate, stuffed it into my mouth. A rabbi began speaking from the center of the hall. People were smiling at what he said, laughing. I didn't understand a word. I ate all in my plate, filled it a second time.

I twisted around in my chair, searching for someone, anyone, I might relate to. I'm Jewish too! I wanted to yell. I'm one of you! Talk to me! Look at me! Please!!

I could not eat another thing. The hall was so crammed with people it was absolutely impossible to move. I stood. If anybody looked up, smiled, frowned, stuck out a tongue, wiggled their ears, I'd have sat down again and waited until the evening was over. Nobody. Nothing.

I don't know how I did it, but I squeezed my way through. Took me several minutes. Many times I said excuse me. To whom?

I passed through to the corridor, took some deep breaths. Then down the stairs, through the empty restaurant on the main floor, out the glass doors to the darkened street. And slowly made my way back to Mr. Tavee's.

\*

I first met the Monk early in 1988. I was hanging out in Chiang Mai, which was not yet the big, noisy, bustling city it'd become thirteen years later. It was, in 1988, a fine place to spend a month or two of one's life.

I kept running into this English couple, early fifties, good folks. One day the woman said she had an appointment to talk to this German monk, would I care to come along.

I figured I had done my obligatory Buddhist number. Ten years before I had spent six weeks at a monastery outside Kathmandu. Up at 5.40, classes began at 6, continuing through the day. There were 35 of us to start out, but that whittled down as people dropped out. Interesting stuff, but no more than a lot of things I'd become involved in. Yet the others in the group seemed convinced this was the real thing. And because I refused to join the club, prostrating myself forehead-to-floor prior to every session, in time I was shunned by just about everybody there.

Which I found far more fascinating than the teachings.

So when the English woman asked for my company I said sure, but really, I'm not interested in the Buddha except as an ornament on top of my bookcase at home.

The taxi took us a ways west of the city, towards the university, then dipped south a mile. This was Wat Umong, *wat* being Thai for monastery. The grounds were divine, acres and acres: a forest, really.

While she climbed a set of outside steps and eventually disappeared from sight, I walked down to an artificial lake. I saw a few deer, big fluffy white bunnies, a family of large monkeys swinging from tree to tree. Wow, I thought. Not a bad place to hang out for a time.

Half an hour later I saw the English woman descend the steps. Just behind her was a monk in orange robes. He was immense, wide as well as high. "Hey, Professor!" he yelled over in a thick German accent. "Come, we haf a talk!" And that was the beginning of a lifelong friendship between the Monk and the Professor.

I moved onto the campus a few days later, lived in a one room *kuti*, or cottage, a hundred yards from the Monk's up-the-stairs quarters. Two younger German guys were there as well. One of them was dead serious, and would later put on the robes. The other had recently experienced a relationship breakup and was here gluing together the pieces.

Each morning the Monk would go on alms round, leisurely walking a few miles with his large brass bowl strapped to a shoulder. And virtually each morning he'd arrive back in a vehicle, which had stopped to pick him up. The Monk had been at Umong 20 years, was then the only Western monk in residence, and everybody in Chiang Mai knew him. The bowl upon his return would be brimming with parcels of food stuffed into plastic bags and rubber-band tied at the top.

The two German guys and I would climb the stairs, sit out on his bit of veranda. The Monk would go through the plastic bags. "This is for you, Hans. Stefen, here, you take this. Vegetarian for the Professor. And this one —" huge smile "— this one is for the Monk."

We would eat, and we would talk. The three of them were kind enough to converse in English, except when it was personal. Often the raves would last till noon, or time for lunch. I could not recall ever having such deep and fulfilling conversations with other males.



## *FEARBUSTING*

The Monk told me his story. Born in 1940. His father he never knew. A soldier, on furlough. Got the Monk's momma pregnant, back to the war, never heard from again.

The Monk grew up starving. Literally. They never had enough to eat. His mother spent all day scavenging for food just to keep them alive. Any wonder the guy loved his grits so.

When he was 14 the Monk quit school, went to Stockholm and became a beatnik. Some years later, when it became fashionable, he made the migration east. For German males his age then, it was a fairly natural procedure; they were trying to shake off the sins of the fathers.

But whereas most put in a few years then went back to Munich and became bankers, the Monk hung in there. He taught himself to speak Thai, was accepted by the community of monks wherever he went.

Many Western males made the journey. Those who preferred the Theravada branch of the great Buddhism tree went either to Burma, Sri Lanka or here to Thailand. A number became disciples of a well-known teacher by the name of Adjan Chah, a tiny, brilliant man who had a huge following in the northeast of the country. Not the Monk. He found an old monk called Buddhadasa (meaning servant of Buddha), whose philosophy was totally different. While Adjan Chah believed in strictly-by-the-book, Buddhadasa's message was this: once you know the dhamma (the Buddhist law, so to speak), go out and do your thing. No laws, no rules, just apply – and live – what you know. This was what the Monk had done.

When our daily talks finished, I would leave the wat and stroll into Chiang Mai. I had already perfected my pig's meander in the city. Best smoothie here, vegetarian meal there, then stop off at the American consulate to sit in the air-con library and read or watch videos. Back by sundown.

The Theravadas were forbidden to eat after their midday meal, but being this was the tropics, you were permitted to drink liquids throughout. When I mentioned to the Monk about my smoothies, he appeared nonplussed. So I went out and got him a blender. Just across from the wat entrance was a shop where you could buy ice cubes. The Monk became a five-star smoothie jockey. Some of his concoctions were so thick, no way could a spoon, placed straight up in the center, tilt far enough to touch glass. Like hardening concrete.

“Come get your evening drink, Professor!” he'd call. Every game has its

loopholes.

One day during my walk I discovered the local prison. For reasons unknown, I went in. Questioned by a guard, I said I thought a friend might be resident there. His name? Uh, we just call him Fred. Don't know his real name.

They took me to a visiting area. I waited behind a bar, and soon an African American man appeared behind yet another bar, ten feet between us, quite bewildered.

"Look, I just happened to be passing. I'm from Philly."

"DC," he said, then relaxed. He said he was in for a travelers check scam, had been in 18 months and was yet to come to trial. Not only that, he was married to a Thai woman who lived in Bangkok. They'd shipped him here to Chiang Mai, he guessed, just to make it difficult for her to visit.

"Real bad here?"

"Well, it ain't the Hilton, but it's not too rough. The Thai guys are okay, maybe because I speak the language. Thing is, we're 150 in one large room, the beds are four and a half feet long, and there's just two crappers."

"Look, can I do something? Get you a lawyer, go talk to the embassy."

"Oh no. Good God, no. See, Thailand's the only country in the region that isn't commie, so our government is constantly kissing their government's ass. No embassy goon is gonna do shit about me. And if I even tried for a lawyer I'd never see daylight, believe me." There were five other Westerners, all in for drugs. A seventh non-Thai was around for a few days, but he'd been freed.

"He was from Libya. Word got back to Ghadaffi, and he called the prime minister personally. 'You let our man go or we'll bomb the crap out of your little pissant country!'" He shook his head. "But hey, if you're serious about doing something, the food here's shit, we got nothing to read, no cigs. Nobody to talk to. That's what you can do, man."

I promised to come back next visiting day. Later I got an idea. I made up a poster, ran off 50 copies. "One of your brothers is in prison here. He needs..." And put one up in every guesthouse in the city.

Next visiting day the prison was packed with young people carrying bags and waiting to talk to prisoners from their homeland. I noticed in the very back a pale, morbid looking white man whose twin brother once had posed with a pitchfork.

"I'm a minister," he told me, practically in tears. "I come here once a week,

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always the only visitor, and talk to these wretched boys about the Bible. Now look at this mess! Terrible!”

I went back to Wat Umong, beaming. But before I could tell the Monk of my good deed, another Western monk appeared, a visitor.

“I spend most of my time either in Burma or traveling up and down Thailand,” he explained in an East End London accent. “Always stop in to talk philosophy with the Monk here.” Then, as if he knew: “Remember when I was here last year?” he asked the Monk. To me: “There was this Canadian guy. He started rounding up backpackers to visit prisoners at the local jail. The authorities got so pissed off, they planted some heroin on him and in short time he was in the brig himself,” he laughed.

I gulped loud enough to be heard in Siberia.

Henceforth, I avoided the prison. Then, a few days later, returning from my city run, Hans reported that two Thai men had been in my kuti. “Who were they?” I asked.

“I never saw them before. One was a monk, not from here, and the other a civilian.” It was a well-known trick for thieves to dress as monks, sure, but I wasn’t worried about anybody *taking* anything.

I dashed over to my cottage, dove in and inspected everything – sleeping bag, backpack, my clothes. Felt around the seams, opened the back end of my toothpaste tube: panicked. Me, in a Thai prison! Sweet Siddhartha.

I told the Monk I was leaving (though not why I was leaving). We had a big hug, said we’d keep in touch. And we did. Five years later the Monk came to New Zealand. He hadn’t seen the ocean in twenty years, and he was like this great big kid frolicking in the surf.

As was custom, the Monk, being a monk, was supposed to be served. “Look, Brother, this is not a role I’m used to, okay?” I grumbled. “So all right, we’ll do this. I’ll serve you faithfully for a week. Scrape and bow, knuckle to the forelock. Seven days. After that, you’re most welcome to stay, but you’re gonna have to get off your big Buddhist butt and take care of yourself.”

The Monk left after a week. That was 1993. I hadn’t heard from him since, this despite several letters on my part.

He hadn’t been a particularly well person. A man his size, he ate too much and, a monk, exercised hardly at all. There existed the possibility that he might’ve left

that body and gone wherever it is monks go when they go.

So it was that I approached Wat Umong this gray and drizzly late September morning. As I walked though to the Monk's old area, I spotted a young Western monk. Did he know the Monk, I wondered, and was he still here at Umong. Oh, he's gone off to visit a friend, replied the monk, yet another German.

"You mean he still lives here!"

"Oh no. He lives in Australia. But he arrived just yesterday here. He is staying a short while only." I gave him a note to pass on, and said I'd return the following morning.

The Monk when I saw him had aged. Considerably. He was still large, but not the imposing size he had been. And where he always had a grand smile, it appeared that to do so now required effort. We hugged mightily (even though such physical fraternization was not happily looked upon in the *sanga*, or community of monks).

We took shelter under some trees. The Monk dispatched the younger German to fetch us some lemonade.

"I wrote you and wrote you!" I cried.

"Professor, I never got a single letter. That is the truth. And you know I am so bad a writer. (He was dyslexic, was the Monk.) But please believe me, you are always in my heart."

Six, seven years before, he now told me, an opportunity came up for him to be abbot of a large monastery outside Sydney. He had been looking to leave Thailand for some time.

"You know, I am here 25 years, and still they do not grant me citizenship. Every year I have to go and renew my visa, and sometimes they are not very pleasant to me. But okay, that is not bad. What is bad is more and more people are coming to see the Monk. You know what they do, Professor? They put me in the tourist brochures! A map of Chiang Mai and a star where Wat Umong is with a note about the famous Western monk! All the time, people. Bus loads! They think the Monk is a tarot card reader! They ask can I tell them their future? Will I find happiness? Will I be wealthy? I get crazy, I tell you!"

He went to Sydney and found the settlement outside Sydney to be a patch of paradise. "Honest, my friend, these Sydney yuppies had bought themselves such a beautiful place."

Soon, however, it became obvious the members wanted a junior Buddha. "I

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said to them, Please, I am not a guru. I am just the Monk. I teach you the dhamma and how to apply it to your daily lives. But no, they wanted more. The abbot I replaced? *He* was a true guru! He was also kicked out of Australia for some really bad stuffs he got up to. But the yuppies, they loved him and wanted me to be just like him.”

One day there was some manual work to be done, and the Monk stripped off his robes, slipped into overalls, and picked up a shovel. “‘What are you doing!’ they cried. ‘Working,’ I said. A Catholic priest does manual work, why not the Monk? I’m certainly strong enough.”

They called this big meeting, he went on. No one told him, but he noticed all the fancy cars coming into the monastery one morning and went to check.

“They said I wasn’t welcome to their meeting. I’m your abbot, I told them. If there’s a meeting, the abbot attends. So all these people, and nobody is looking at me. Talk, Talk, talk, then they take a vote. To expel the Monk! And the vote is very big to expel me. I said to them, Okay, you don’t want me, I don’t fit in with your expectations, fair enough. But as you know, my Australian residence has not yet been approved. I figure another month at most. Let me remain here until then, in any capacity. And you know what these people said to me, Professor? They said, ‘No. We want you to leave now.’

“My dear Brother, never in my life have I experienced such depression. I am suddenly a man without a country. I thought very, very seriously about suicide. Truly, only my trust in the Buddha carried me through. Then one day I meet a monk who is living on a small monastery also not far from Sydney, this one for refugee monks from Laos, no Westerners. He said, ‘We heard about your situation. It’s terrible. You are most welcome to come live with us. We will help you get your Australian residence.’ And that’s where I have been ever since.”

We went for a stroll. The Monk used an ornately carved walking stick and, moving very, very slowly, led me into a tunnel I had not seen before. Many small statues, many candles. A feeling almost...holy. We sat and shared a meditation. Then outside and up to the highest point of the wat, the ancient stupa.

It was very symbolic to do a walking meditation, the Monk said: three times around the stupa. “Clear your mind of all thoughts. Just focus on each step. When we finish, we will both ring the bell three times. And then we will bow to one another’s highest being and walk away in opposite directions without looking

back.”

In almost a comical exaggerated slow-step, we moved clockwise around the stupa. At first I found it hard to clear my head. I felt such anger towards those bastards in Sydney. I was glad I didn't like their city. But halfway along the first circumambulation, as though a slide had been removed from my personal projector and a blank left in its place, I was taking each step, each portion of each step, with total concentration. I didn't even remember where the starting point was. Nor did I care.

“Okay,” the Monk said, startling me out of my walking reverie. And led me over to the big bell. He picked up a metal rod and hit it once, twice, three times. Then handed it over without looking my way. The first hit of the bell sent a reverberation up my arm and into my body. Twice. Three times. Then I turned to the Monk. And saw the most amazing thing.

He was glowing. Absolutely glowing. Light was just pouring out of him. And I suspected the same was happening with me.

We bowed. Then both of us turned 180 degrees and walked away.

## FEAR-BUSTER #8

### Memory Pegs

1 - A - Anchor	8 - H - Heart
2 - B - Bicycle	9 - I - Iceberg
3 - C - Cat	10 - J - Jockstrap
4 - D - Dog	11 - K - Klansman
5 - E - Elephant	12 - L - Lock
6 - F - Fortune	13 - M - Mickey Mouse
7 - G - Giant	14 - N - Noose
15 - O - Ocean	21 - U - Umbrella
16 - P - Prince	22 - V - Victoria
17 - Q - Queen	23 - W - Wishing well
18 - R - Ring	24 - X - X-ray
19 - S - Shower	25 - Y - Yo-yo
20 - T - Teacup	26 - Z - Zebra

These are memory pegs. What you have to do to make this technique work, you've got to memorize the lot. You get a bonus here: you already know the alphabet.

When you have all 26 pegs, anchor to zebra, locked away, you can amaze your friends and impress your enemies. Or vice-versa.

Here's what I would do with the memory pegs. I'd tell the class we were now going to perform a mass psychological profiling. I jotted on the board the numbers 1 to 26. That's all. I did not tell them the numbers represented the alphabet, nor did I write down the pegs. Just the numbers.

Then I requested they provide me descriptions of toys they had as kids.

It usually began slow. What's this goofy bird up to now? Somebody would call out a toy, I'd write it down. I'd request details. Color. Anything to set it off from others of its ilk. I'd make jokes. "You had what!? You sissy!!" Stuff like that.

What I was doing was a bit of stalling. *Because as I was writing down the toy, I was in my mind placing it on a peg.* Rag doll stuck on the anchor. Erector set on the handlebars of the bicycle. The cat playing with a puppet.

When I had all 26, I would turn around, sit on a stool and announce: "Okay, let's play Stump The Genius. I'll be the genius."

They'd give me a number, I gave them back the toy, in full description. They called out the toy, I'd tell them what number. When they saw how hot I was, they'd try anything. "All toys that are blue," for example. Or, "Everything with wheels."

I taught hundreds of classes over the years. Never blew a show. Not a one. (I did, however, do the gig one time without knowing my fly was open. I'd forgotten to zip it up.) I'm sure that, at Penn, then later Auckland University, had I taken the classes over to the river, or harbor, and done the boogie woogie upon water's surface, they'd've yawned and scratched. But this! A miracle!!

Really, it's a piece of cake.

I honestly have a pathetic memory. Give me two things to recall, I'm fine. Add a third, guaranteed one of the first two gets lost.

But this isn't memory. Not in the dumb way we're taught to memorize. This is simply "looking" at your pegs and reporting what's there.

It's also a terrific tool for improving your powers of visualization.

When I did my act before groups of businessmen, knowing they never had toys to play with, I'd have them give me ten-digit numbers. While I was writing them down I'd actually be inscribing them with a jeweler's engraving tool on the pegs. Then I'd simply go back and read them off.

Once again, there's absolutely nothing special about these particular pegs, or the alphabet itself. One Russian I've read about did this: he went back in his mind to the village where he grew up. He knew each



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building like he knew his fingers. Give him a dozen things to remember, he'd see himself strolling down the main drag of the village with a can of paint and brush. He would paint a key word representing what he wished to recall on each building. When asked to repeat what he had remembered, he'd simply take a walk through the village, read off the words he had painted.

At the end of each of my performances, I would wipe the board clean, at the same time wiping the list from my mind bank. Who wants to carry around a steamer trunk full of some crazy people's toys? If, however, Warren Buffet had been in a class and offered me half a billion to repeat them a year later, this would've caused me no grief. I'd simply index the list before and after, same as the recall of reading matter. Following year I'd retrieve the list, read them off.

Unfortunately, I was working with paupers.

## 9

It was the worst possible time of day to arrive in a new country, especially in that country's principal city of mega-millions.

But the flight was late as usual, and the hour of imbeciligratation at the airport – filling out no less than four forms, all of which asked the same idiotic questions, the line that never seemed to get smaller. Today's lesson: patience.

The Irish kid with long red hair and metal stuck to various parts of his face was nervous to the point of collapse. His Asian girlfriend, Thai I thought, was by contrast totally calm. Probably doing different drugs.

Used to be when I came into a new country, I'd select an immigration line with a female at the counter. No longer. Women in what used to be standard men's jobs can be nasty, often having little sympathy for an old boy with a beard.

I picked the male who looked the most bored. When finally I got there, he took my passport, looked down to his computer situated out of my line of sight, then every once in a while a glance back to my passport. After he'd thuk-thukked several rubber stamp notations in my worn and crumbling book, I stepped past and glanced over his shoulder. His computer screen showed the playing cards of a solitaire game.

So what did you do when you had no hotel reservation, spoke not a word of the language, nor understood local customs, had not a coin of the home currency, and the barrier between you and clean sheets and hot shower was a jungle of mayhem?

You surrendered to the fates.

I grabbed the Irish kid, kept a hand on his elbow and we faced...*them*. Just outside the airport were hundreds, maybe more, yelling at us, pulling at us. "Come

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with me, I know—!” “Here! Over here! My brother’s hotel—” “Where you go? I take you! Cheap!”

I looked around, smiling. Made no move. “Sir! Sir!”

Then I saw him. Forties, in a uniform of sorts. Not saying a word. Making his way toward us, parting the riff-raff like an ice-cutter in the Arctic. We made eye contact. My man.

He took as many bags as he could handle, and led the three of us through the heat and parting sea of humanity. Stacked our bags neatly in the trunk. Opened the front door of his taxi. I got in and the Irish kid and his Thai friend slid in back.

At snail’s pace and with constant horn tooting, the delightfully air/con vehicle proceeded through the most dense, chaotic, the-only-rule-is-survival traffic I’d ever been plonked in the middle of.

Good evening, Vietnam.

Through windshield and side windows we viewed with awe the Battle of Saigon. Like those early 3D movies where they threw everything not riveted down at the screen and you couldn’t help but flinch or cringe, every mode of transport bearing wheels seemed to be headed straight for us, then at the last possible moment miss by whisker’s breadth.

Bicycles, ancient one-speeds; motorcycles that surely had to predate the invention of the combustible; cyclos (“seek-lows”), the Vietnamese trishaw with driver elevated in the rear and as many as five people plus their baggage stacked into passenger space designed for one; cycle-powered carts piled impossibly high with unimaginable junk; prehistoric Russian trucks; fellow taxis; the occasional posh Mercedes, tinted windows...all of the above and more. No lanes, no straight lines of movement, nobody looking right or left, no sense of order whatsoever. Just weaving, bending, braking, blaring. Those white stripes painted in the streets? Decoration.

Numb we were when half an hour later we arrived at a street crammed with tiny hotels. Suddenly touts descended upon us from every building. But the driver knew his stuff.

“Wait,” he said. His first word. He stepped out of the taxi and tried one, then a second, finally connecting at a third of these establishments.

We followed a smiling concierge up three flights of narrow stairs. I jumped in front of the Irish-Thai couple. Pointed at my chest, held up a single finger. Said

only: "Balcony." The concierge nodded.

The room was small, clean, air-con, had its own shower and toilet. A notice on the door listed a dozen regulations. Number 7: "Bi-cycles, motorsikes, fire arms, inflam-mable, stinking things and even prostitutes ark not allow in the hotel." The clincher, what made this small living space my momentary home, was the requested balcony. Not three feet wide, but the perfect observation post of the people, life and energy on the street below.

In Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City as it was known officially but not called such by those who lived there, living space was ultra-cramped and used only to sleep (like sardines).

It began to rain. No, it began to deluge. Me, who did not like rain, I welcomed it. Because below me was the show of shows.

The gutters quickly became fast-moving rivers. Kids, dressed only in tiny shorts and turned-around baseball caps, would gather up water in plastic pails and pour it over anybody who came out of the alleys, whether walking or on motorcycles. Nobody minded. Everybody laughed.

The rain let up as quickly as it had started. Monsoon rains did that. I showered, trotted down the steps and out into the street. The kids, oldies, dogs (surprisingly clean and well fed, not at all like the mangy, scrawny curs of Bali), food hawkers, teenagers playing hackysack, people squatting, talking, and eating everywhere. Could the streets of New York have been any different a hundred years ago?

But the streets of Saigon were not grid-like. They curved, bended and doglegged, and changed names every time they did.

Couple hundred yards along I was hopelessly lost. Found my bearings, lost them again. Came to a major intersection. There were traffic lights. Nobody paid them any attention. No, I lie. Some did. Most didn't. Did the Vietnamese have some kind of system, like your name began A to M you stopped on red Tuesday and Friday?

I stood on the curb twenty minutes. Oh, I tried to cross. Any number of times. I was like the cat in those cheaply made pet food commercials: three steps forward, reverse the film, three steps back. I was beginning to worry. I'd planned just three weeks in the country.

I spotted an ancient crone, wizened and bent under the weight of two huge baskets yoked to her narrow shoulders. Quickly, I sidled up alongside. She took a

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step, so did I. Vehicular things whizzed all around us. I noted that my nails were digging into my palms. Step by step, the two of us fused together. Using granny as my shield I made it to the other side. Cowardice? Yep. Survival? Yep.

There were other problems. Language, for one. A myth I'd heard was that, due to American influence a generation back, virtually everybody in Saigon spoke English. Not exactly. Exactly, nobody in Saigon spoke English. Or it seemed that way.

But no matter, for the Vietnamese used Roman as their alphabet with an accent mark here and there. Just like learning French or Spanish. Uh-huh. Apart from being absolutely impossible to pronounce, Vietnamese had seven speech tones.

The same word for flower – *hoa* – also meant urine, destruction, work of art and, quite likely, don't-look-now-but-your-whatchamacallit-is peeking out, depending on whether you rose, fell, trilled, or yodeled.

And if you cared to greet somebody, which was nice, you had to know the person's sex, age, marital status and brand of toothpaste to stay within the rules of etiquette, the wrong salutation being a grave insult.

One of the most commonly used words, I soon learned, was *phuc*. Meant wonderful, terrific, lucky. Uh-uh. No way. Not with a barge pole.

Then there was the matter of feeding myself. That first night I approached a dozen places before finding one that agreed to serve me vegetarian. And they served me well. Good food, plenty of it. Came the bill.

“AIEEE!!!” I screamed. Forty thousand dong! Then I remembered. Just like Indonesia, only more so. They must love those big numbers. And the currency names this part of the world: dong, kip, baht, ringgit. Just add Sneezzy, Grumpy and Dopey and you have a set.

If the life of Saigon reigned on its streets, it was teeming in the alleyways. Dark, narrow, winding alleys everywhere, full of people doing their daily thing.

The second morning I plunged right in. Fear? Oh, a little, truth. But this was the new Barry. Surrounded myself with light, muttered a few affirmations on the order of, “I am protected, guided and healed by the light to the absolute max...only good, positive, beautiful things can happen to me.” And in I went. Did it work? Well, I'm here.

A smile was the best possible weapon. I wouldn't get one back very often. But mine said, Howdy, how are ya, and ain't I a funny looking git though.

Once I walked past an old soul sitting on a low stool just outside a small, dimly-lit room containing the usual: aquarium full of beautiful tropical fish; huge color TV, on of course; foam mats on the floor. I smiled. She smiled back. "Where you from?" she asked.

"Ah, you speak English."

"Sure I spick English. I smart old lady," she cackled.

I stopped. "Look, can I ask you something? You people have been brutalized by the Americans, the French, the Chinese, Japanese, even North Vietnamese. How come you seem so contented and happy?"

"Happy? Of course happy! No war in 25 year!"

I walked everywhere, and only once did I feel fear. I was down by the filthy river, considering should I take one of the old wooden boats to the other side. A man approached. He was old, bare-chested, a sinewy build. Gave me what I thought was a decent price. I set one foot in his boat, then pulled it out as if the bottom were on fire. Turned and walked away. I could not tell you why. But I was certain it wasn't a bad move.

I found a wonderful vegetarian restaurant operated as a charity by an American Buddhist nun. Or so I was told. Delicious meals and never more than a buck and a half tops. Problem was the kids. They were in there all the time, trying to sell you stuff, sitting at your table, watching you eat. I knew they were getting fed from the kitchen, so their forced pathetic stares and belly pats weren't a bother. And when one lovely girl of – eight? ten? twelve? – decided to braid my hair, why, that was no worry at all. Every now and then, though, you just had your fill. When I watched a German guy lose his cool and scream at them, I thought, Damn Germans. Two days later I did the same thing.

I learned how to combat the "street fleas". These were beggars and street urchins selling postcards or asking for coins of your country (and when you said you had none, they'd ask, "You want to buy some?") and old soldiers moaning about having been deserted by the Americans and left to the cruelties of the Cong. What you did, you kept moving; you never stopped.

I rode the cyclos, once sharing with two buxom young Swedish maidens. Me, sitting sideways across their laps. The travails of the long-distance traveler.

I even learned to cross the frantic intersections. You stepped off the curb. You cared not if the light was red or green. You did not look left or right. You sauntered:

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a very slow saunter. You appeared totally unconcerned about what was going on around you (sometimes inches around you). Helped to whistle.

In a direct line you went. Eventually you reached the other side. Intact. Of course, first few times I played this game of Saigon roulette, undaunted as I may have seemed, my undercheeks were clenched so tight a crowbar mightn't have pried them apart.

My fourth day, I met Cong and Tuan in the vegetarian restaurant. He was an electronics engineer and she taught at the university. A handsome couple. But then, most Vietnamese were handsome. Not drop-dead gorgeous like some Thais. Handsome.

When I said I was from New Zealand (I was no longer in Australia, so no longer from New York), they seemed very impressed. "We've always wanted to go there," Tuan told me.

"We both have the day off tomorrow," Cong said, in perfectly pronounced but somewhat stilted American, like he'd memorized the phonetics. "Would you like to go with us out to the countryside?"

"Well..." I figured this meant hiring a car and my paying. "Okay. Sure."

"Great! We'll pick you up at your hotel at 9."

They showed up right on time in a ten year old Nissan that, interestingly, was their own vehicle. Very few people in Vietnam, outside the party bosses, had a private car.

The first couple of hours were not all that wonderful. The two of them played a well-practiced Frick and Frack.

"Shall we go the left, dear?"

"Well, I do think it's better if we turn right, darling."

"But honeybunch, I really—"

Fingers down the throat.

Nothing seemed to work. The tropical scenery appeared drab, any conversation was strained, they drove in circles looking for the home of relatives, and when finally we found it, no one was there.

It was well past nap time when we coasted into a village and stopped by a dingy-looking outdoor eatery. In my honor, I was informed, this was a vegetarian restaurant. Oh, good— no cats, rats or dogs on the menu.

We took our places on the rickety benches surrounding a table that last saw

cleaning shortly after the French evacuation. Tuan and Cong then did marvelous Jewish mother impersonations, loading my plate to Everest proportion.

I stared at the mound of food. In truth, it didn't look bad. Ah well, when all else failed, pig out.

As I did, savoring the subtle spicing that made my taste buds rise up off the floor and begin to dance, Cong completely altered tack. As though he no longer needed to impress, he engaged, for the first time, in real conversation.

"My father was a devout Buddhist all his life. Me? I suppose I opted for a more modern lifestyle. I went to UCLA. I did! Lived in California nearly ten years."

Now he was doing extremely well in his field, despite the blatant loathing the powers in Hanoi had for all things South.

"But," he added wistfully, "there's something lacking – a void inside me." Tuan merely nodded at this.

"Hey," he perked up. "The monastery Dad belonged to is just down the road. I haven't been since I was a teenager, thirty years or more. Would you like to visit?" More a plea than a suggestion.

From the street, the monastery was anything but elegant. As we passed through a high metal gate I noted four females, two young teenagers and two older women, in robes. The two older nuns were shaving the heads of the girls, the long, black hair giving way to soapy water and the sharp blade of a straight razor.

All four looked up and smiled. One of the girls, spotting my bald head, clutched a handful of her recently departed locks and laughingly offered. So much for the solemnity of sacred initiation rites.

Past the main building we were hit with a wave of heavenly aromas. No one smell I could put a finger on, more a mixed salad that invaded the senses and disarmed all notion of time and place.

"This monastery – I guess you would call it a convent," Cong noted, "is part of an order where they've been practicing Chinese herbal medicine for centuries. They collect scores of different healing herbs and make potions to treat indigent villagers."

Indeed, there were herbs everywhere: drying on the ground and all available roof space. A nun appeared, and following a brief conversation with Cong, led us on a tour, he providing translation. We saw the large kitchen with shelves loaded



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with jars and vials, and several ranges with huge vats boiling away. Then the clinic, where as many as a hundred people were seen every morning.

The atmosphere as we moved through the place was utterly serene. No doctor's office, this.

The feeling actually got better a few minutes later. The nun and Tuan left us and I followed Cong into the temple. I've always loved Buddhist temples: huge statues of various Buddha figures, lots of flowers and incense, gongs and bells. Compare this to your average church or synagogue.

Cong sank to his knees before a favored Buddha and performed a prostration – touching his forehead to the floor. I did likewise – and smacked my forehead on the wood floor. Obviously, not quite spiritually attuned yet.

Shortly after, we met with the mother superior. She was a round woman in her sixties with very thick glasses and a most peaceful air, although in the beginning she was very definitely looking at me funny.

“You're the very first Westerner she's ever seen up close,” Cong said. “Because of the violence and wars they've brought to the country, she's always been terrified of whites. But she says she feels such good things from you that for the first time in her life she realizes her fears are unfounded.”

The drive back to Saigon was infinitely more enjoyable than the one that had taken us away.

\*

Hoi An. Town of 25,000 in the central part of the country.

The place was flooded when I arrived.

The brown river had run its banks for, I was told, the eighth time the past two months, hanging out halfway up the walls inside buildings and shops on the adjacent quay and spilling into side streets, where canoes competed with motorcycles for maneuvering space.

I had a heck of a time finding the right accommodation, although Hoi An, which had grown leaps and bounds' worth as a mini-tourist mecca in recent years, certainly had no dearth of hotels. I even felt sorry for the poor tout who had picked me up at the bus terminal. He led me to no less than five hostels before I settled on one. Which I abandoned the very next morning when on a walk I found a place with a large terrace right on the swollen river.

Most tourists spent a day or two max. I wanted to stay the season. The place felt that good.

Life in Hoi An was around the river. Once it receded to normal, ancient wooden boats of all sizes and shapes were constantly bringing product into the town, and the dawn-till-dusk busy market was pure circus. Virtually all the traders were women, squashed together at tiny stalls or simply squatting, all of them chirping in high-pitched voices, their straw conical hats bobbing as they moved about.

Not far from the river, the center of town had the most wonderful old architecture, quaint and moss-covered and charming to the point of cliché. Some amazing soul (I couldn't accept this was done by committee) had the intelligence to outlaw the criminal act of doing away with such buildings upon their passing functional prime and substituting modern sterile puke-arama. The same amazing soul (I was guessing here) also banned all traffic in this area save two-legged and two-wheeled.

In this relatively tiny commercial region were any number of family restaurants producing excellent food at prices that could only be described, by Western standards, as laughable. Dollar and a half for four courses plus beverage? Must be paradise.

Well, it was, in a way. But what made it so wasn't any of the above. It was the people here. No joke, they were just very, very special.

Not all of them, obviously. This wasn't one of those mystical something-in-the-water-supply numbers. In any Third World spot catering to Western (and Japanese) dumbbells, there had to be your mandatory element of insincerity, greed, broken promises. But in my Hoi An experience these types were far outstripped by the genuines.

There was Kai, a thirty-five year old cripple whose family ran a restaurant on the quay. When he was eight, he told me, he and a few pals used to kick a soccer ball on a field where American soldiers often played. One day the Yanks were off elsewhere, but no matter, a NVN plane bombed the field anyway, killing all of his friends and leaving him with a single leg.

Kai would sit with me whenever I frequented his four-table eating-house, providing details of present-day Nam I'd never read in a guide book (if I read guide books), and risking the wrath of the ever-present secret police and snitches.

No fewer than nine brothers and sisters ran another café called Bobo on LeLoi

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Street. The youngest was a lovely young woman named...Bobo.

“How come your restaurant has such a funny name?” I wondered. She overcame a hiccup of embarrassment to explain.

“That’s the word for what we feed to the pigs,” she laughed. “When I was born, all the family had to eat was...bobo. My parents are very proud and chose not to be ashamed how poor we were. So they gave me that as a nickname, and when we opened the restaurant that’s what we called it.”

I’d sit at a table in the small courtyard and within moments one of the family was at the table, smiling, chatting or, as in the case of one of the brothers, very gay and fascinated by the hair on my limbs, sitting beside me stroking my forearm.

“You monkey,” he’d giggle.

“Me! No, YOU monkey,” I’d reply, pressing my nose flat and pointing at his. And he roared with laughter.

Another place was actually in a family’s living room. The woman who ran it had been principal of a local school. But she’d joined a Buddhist order that was out of favor with the local party boss, and he had her fired. She couldn’t even get a job teaching. As her family’s prime earner, the only thing other than education she knew was cooking.

The restaurant was pure vegetarian. In Vietnam, practicing Buddhists were obliged to go meatless four days a month: two each around new and full moon. So the customers on those times generally were locals. Word of her delicious meals had spread, so travelers, too, now found their way down the narrow alley to her place.

Inside, while you were eating at the table – no menu; you trusted her to feed you whatever she was preparing – the family went on with its business as usual. The husband, a silversmith, sat at his work table in a corner, and his mother, a ninety-some woman with an exquisite lined face, would sit on the end of her bed, fingering her Buddhist beads and watching *Little House on The Prairie* reruns (with a single female voice dubbing all the speaking roles) on the flickering black and white TV.

It was here I met Kim, a tall, extremely good-looking 32 year old wood turner. After a brief conversation – he had the best English of anybody I’d encountered here thus far – he asked me to his place for a cup of tea. He played guitar, self-taught, and had learned a repertoire of Beatles, Bee Gees and Simon and Garfunkel.

He had a lovely soft voice, and we sang together for an hour. Then he invited me to dinner with his family. Invariably, such an invite led to something else – a pitch for funds, generally. Nevertheless, I agreed.

When I arrived at the prescribed hour, instead of Kim I found a note that he would be late. There was a fair amount of discomfort as no less than twelve of his brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces, not a word of English among the dozen, sat around staring and grinning.

I tried to find some common ground. Took out a map of the country, pointed to the places I had been so far. But to people for whom the next village was a major journey, I might have been exhibiting a map of Mozambique.

In desperation, I pointed to myself and made sounds like a ferocious tiger. This was to denote that I was born in the year of same (according to Chinese and Vietnamese astrology). They looked at one another in bewilderment. I continued the tiger takeoff, which might have been an impersonation of one old white loony, losing it, for all the response I got. Then one of the nieces cottoned on. She got down on the floor, nose twitching, jerky head movements, squeaking.

She was a rat. Another was an ox. Snake. Dragon. Each to increasing enthusiasm and laughter. When Kim's old father, who'd been sitting stoically through all this, jumped up, began flapping his arms and running around the room screeching, "*Braaaaaack!!!*", we fell into hysterics. Enter at this moment my young host, jaw slung open. Charades, Vietnamese style.

I met not only locals, but other travelers. All I had to do was sit down at a family restaurant.

Two young Germans, who themselves had just met here.

"You've been to Na Trang?" one of them asked. Neither the other German nor I had. "Very nice place. I like it fine. But crazy place. They build beautiful hotels there, right on the beach. So tourists go outside, sit on chaises. Just like Florida. Except the beach, it is the local toilet! You sit there, this beautiful beach, your five star hotel just behind you, and all these Vietnamese just ten feet away with pants down, shitting."

"I just come from Hue," said the other German. "Very historical city. Now in the book (he held up his Lonely Planet), it says a very good place to eat is this restaurant run by a mute and his daughter. So I go looking. There must be five places, right next to each other, every one with the same sign: 'Mute and his daughter

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as recommended by Lonely Planet.’ How do you know which is the right one? So I go in one and sit down. The man is making like Marcel Marceau, pantomiming everything on the menu. He is really very good. So I give him my order and then he steps back and *yells* it to the kitchen!”

The following morning I went around to all my eating places to say good-by. The only person I didn’t find in was Kai.

As I was walking away from his place, headed back to my hotel, I heard, “Hey, Kiwi!!” Turned around and there was Kai, quick-walking on his crutches, his half-leg performing an imitation of the good one, as he rushed to say good-by to a person he’d known just five days, and might never see again.

Paradise. Not a beach, sparkling blue water, palm trees. A small town that flooded several times a year, where the average earnings was a dollar a day, and people opened their hearts and homes to a stranger.

\*

I stepped out of my large, comfortable room, down the five flights of carpeted stairs, past the soundly sleeping young woman behind the desk and out into the narrow streets of Old Town. It was still dawn, but the neighborhood was fully awake.

No sooner off the curb than I was besieged by the first of a small battalion of women, each bearing on her head a huge wicker tray of freshly baked baguettes. The asking price, as always, was twice – or was it four times? – what the locals paid. I bought a couple and proceeded down the street munching the hard crust into the soft center.

The old French-style buildings to either side, three to five stories topped by roof garden, reached practically to the street itself. What little sidewalk existed was filled with kids and olds and here and there a squatting female furiously fanning a tiny grill over which were cooking a few ears of corn.

There seemed to be an old woman stationed in every doorway. Seated on a miniature stool, she was in charge of both the household behind and an area of the street in front. Nothing, ever, got by her watch.

So accustomed had I become to the geriatric sentries, these stoic ancients with crinkled brown skin and teeth blackened and rotted by a lifetime of tobacco chewing, that a doorway standing empty carried a touch of sadness.

Hawkers of green bananas, stalls with precisely arranged cut flowers, a cart loaded with pig heads, black single-speed bicycles: on the face of it, nothing appeared to have changed for the locals in this part of Hanoi since before Uncle Ho was born.

But change definitely was happening. Huge gangs of work crews in tattered clothes and sandals, or even barefoot, would show up one day, go round the clock dismantling, with hand tools, an elegant old building, working 18 hour shifts and sleeping in hammocks on site while the clanging and banging went on about them, then erect in its stead a sterile chunk of hostelry – all in days.

French colonial decrepit was rapidly giving away to contemporary commie soul-less. One such hotel was actually less than six feet wide. Either it was intended for Asians, or Westerners who preferred to sleep in bunks.

Old Town, too, was where the crafts people labored, and each street was its own closed community. Street names began with “Hang” – street of. So there was Hang metal works, Hang gravestone engravers, Hang millinery, Hang wood turners. And, because of the rapidly mushrooming curiosity called tourism, Hang T-shirt and Hang pirated CDs.

I weaved and curled and pig-walked through these busy streets, generally heading south, until finally I approached my goal.

Hanoi was a city where bodies of water abounded: a major river, a score of lakes. But the city revolved, especially this time of day, around Ho Hoan Kiem, a lake maybe half a mile long and a quarter across, right smack in the middle of town.

Hanoi awoke early, and activity along Ho Hoan Kiem’s tree-lined perimeter walkway, no matter how soon after daybreak I managed to arrive, was always full on.

Mostly, but not exclusively, old folks, doing group calisthenics or a slow form of aerobics or perfectly precision tai chi. A most serious sort (always with smiles though) of badminton as well.

Not all activity was mobile. Old men in berets, squatting, engaged in hotly contested matches of Chinese checkers, never without large scrimmages of aged kibitzers.

All of this was happening through the mist that hung over the lake and would not fully lift until the sun rose over the buildings to the east.

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My daily trek, which began and ended with Ho Hoan Kiem, took in the 252, a coffee house of shabby character but a certain grace, where you sat on low stools, eating the best homemade yogurt east of the Balkans and ogling the blowup black and white pics of Catherine Deneuve in suns, her fabulous French fundament having addressed these very same stools during the filming of *Indochine*.

And of course the French restaurant school Hoasua, where you sat in a lovely courtyard sampling the students' daily product at but a fraction of the cost of such fare elsewhere. And the wonderful vegetarian restaurant that was impossible to find, but when at last you did, equally impossible to avoid.

Sound like all I did in this country was nosh? You wouldn't be far off.

Hanoi was surprising. What I'd imagined, because what I had heard, was largely negative. Saigon was the swinging place, Hanoi cold and reserved. If you couldn't feel and didn't have a heart, probably right. Hanoi knocked me out.

Just seven years before, Hanoi definitely had been an uptight cow town. Only because the bunch of old fart hardliners who ran the country, and thus its capital, had backed the wrong bull. In a silly show of anti-everything West, the old toads had tied in wholly to the Soviet. (Russian was still mandatory in most schools.) When the USSR belly-upped, and the umbilical cord retracted, what then? China? Hardly. They hated each other, these two peoples. With vast reluctance, then, the old bods began to open the creaky, rusted gate to The Enemy. And my, had the world responded.

As Asians streamed in to develop, and Westerners to gawk, Hanoi had emerged in a forward-to-the-past way, back to when the Frenchies were in town and Hanoi was a cosmopolitan class act.

No lie, the place was terrific.

Quality was high, prices still relatively low, the people absolutely grand, and you'd have to struggle to name another city this size you might walk the darkest alley in the dead of night and your only justified fear might be getting blind-sided by an errant Vespa.

\*

It was obvious the five old gentlemen did not want me in their compartment.

That I had got this far on my own could be counted as a middle-of-the-range miracle.

Unknown to me (I didn't consult a guidebook: oooh!), Hanoi had two railroad stations, one for trains going north, one for trains going south. Which made sense, I suppose, and if you were a local there was a chance you could tell one from the other. But to a dummy who was deaf, mute and illiterate, Vietnamese-wise, finding the right compartment followed in the confusion-queue locating the right carriage, train and station.

Added to my state of frenzy, it was night, there was not a sign posted anywhere, the station clock was off by an hour, and the mobs of people with their motley mountains of luggage, both inside and outside the undersized waiting terminal, chose to idle away their pre-boarding time by staring at a particular bewildered foreigner.

I decided to hunt up any other Westerners who might be around. Which was relatively dense: did I think a fellow milk-skin would be any less ignorant of matters than I was? (Or was I hoping she/he had a, er, um, travel guide?) Uncertainty did hate to be stranded on its own.

I saw a thirties female, German perhaps, or Dutch. But there was no way getting to her. She was surrounded by a score of local women, and they were communing and laughing like a sorority reunion. The VN fems even were feeding her! I went back to my base and continued to be stared at in stone-cold silence.

Then, as if some sort of high frequency whistle heard only by Vietnamese had been sounded, the huge crowd grabbed their gear and lit out for the gate. Some people were being turned back, I saw, and a tsunami of paranoia swept over: I'd been sold the wrong ticket! But no, I was passed through, to further confusion: which of the several trains in sight was mine?

Somehow (the gods of the Out There) I located the train, raced alongside checking carriage numbers. Each carriage had at least three numbers, all different. Spotting a sleeper car, I shouldered on, pushed and prodded through the narrow corridor. Halfway along I came to what appeared to be the right compartment.

Five old gentlemen were in there, seated on the lower bunks. They were all well dressed in the local fashion – suit jackets, suit pants, old but clean, none of them matching. The men all were smoking, all had brown, rotten teeth. They looked at me and as one stood and began yelling, wagging their hands, palms out.

I checked my ticket. I indeed had one of the top berths.

I smiled awkwardly. No dice. Held out my ticket for inspection. Forget it. I most



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certainly was a stranger on a train.

Six people standing in the space of a bathtub being somewhat of a tight fit, I began to climb up to my lofty perch. No ladder existed, no seeming way other than to use the lower and middle berths and monkey on up. I placed the tip of my shoe on the very end of the bottom bunk. One of the men rudely pushed it off.

Usually, case like this, I applied a little John Wayne. The Duke would've backed down because he was outnumbered five to one? Never! Ah, yes, except it sort of had been shown, this neck of the woods, Yank aggressiveness sometimes came up a tad short.

Timidly, mouse-like, I shimmied up to my slab. To discover I had about a foot and a half of space to the sloping ceiling. Or just enough to lie on my side, prop my head on an elbow-supported hand. The old gentlemen, far from being overjoyed, did appear resigned to my staying.

A discussion ensued among them. Which one would stab me middle of the night? One man turned to me and let out a string of unintelligible words. I suspected it was the standard questions of identity. In there, somewhere, would be nation of origin. So I said, "Tan tay lan." Which is the Vietnamese name for New Zealand, but when I pronounced it, it sounded like I was describing the result of too much sun in Phuket.

I said it three times: Tan tay LAN. Tan TAY lan! TAN tay lan?

"Ahh – Tan tay lan!" one of the old boys exclaimed and, no lie, the gents suddenly became as chummy as a quintet of doting grandpas.

So in that sense all was well. Only problem now, how to deal with their cig smoke, which rose up to form a stinky cloud around me. On the ceiling was a small fan, not working. I flicked a switch and, remarkably, the blades began to turn, sending the fumes back down. Precisely 26 seconds later there was this awful clashing of metal on metal, and the fan died an honorable death.

The night passed, and I even clocked a fair amount of sleep.

Earliest morning, I peeked down to catch a most unusual show. All five of the gents were awake. All five had their jackets laid out on their beds and were pinning to the breast, carefully, reverently, a host of ribbons and medals.

Just then the door slid open. Another old chap, 75 if a day, with immaculate bearing and wall-to-wall decorations from his shoulders to the waist of his non-matching suit jacket.

My lads stood immediately to attention. The new man looked up at me with piercing eyes. As though stung, I quickly pulled back. Safely hidden, I heard mutterings. Among the incomprehensible I picked out: “Tan tay lan.” Followed by Ahh.

Stealthily returning to viewing position, I realized I was glimpsing a slice of living history. These ancient dudes were obviously very top brass of the old North Vietnamese army. Who had stood shoulder to shoulder with one of the most amazing personages of the last century. Who’d led a gang of ragamuffins in black pajamas that kicked the living stuffing out of the arrogant French, then followed that act by whipping the daylights out of the most powerful military force the world had ever known.

The old chaps in my compartment obviously were headed to a major reunion, and I almost wished I was joining them.

But no. Soon as I got off the train at Lao Cai, I boarded a bus. Well, not quite a bus. There were 30 turistas plus their booty in a minibus built, ages ago, to accommodate 20 without booty.

The mountain road was winding, narrow and had potholes you could store a bedroom suite. The ancient Russian motor was noisy, but the horn, sounded continuously, drowned it out, and the screeching of brakes – which neither stopped nor slowed the vehicle – was noisier than both.

Except for me and a Canadian couple, the female of which was louder than the non-working brakes, sported the IQ of a squirrel and had to’ve had gills as she never paused for breath, the passengers were all French.

The view most likely was spectacular if I could see past the parlez-vooodles who glued themselves to the filthy windows snapping pictures.

It took two and a half hours to make the 21 mile run. Was I happy to reach the destination? Did the pope dine in the Vatican?

Sapa. Northernmost VN, a stone’s toss from the China border. Peering over the shoulder of one of the Frenchies I noted in his guide book that Sapa had two dozen guest houses. Last year’s book. Multiply now by five and add an increment every half hour.

Sapa had been discovered.

The attraction was the hill tribe people. None actually lived in Sapa itself, but on weekends the village became a market, and tribal folk came from all around to

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sell their wares. And French tourists flooded in to buy.

As I strolled the narrow streets of a place that was a film set for Dodge City, I was descended upon by groups of women, all wearing huge circular silver earrings, necklaces and bracelets. Their entire wealth. Each adult female was her family's walking bank.

Holding up similar awful-looking shirts and caps in their dye-stained blue hands, they would sing, "*Tres Jolie? Tres jolie?*" As one large Australian put it (would have to be an Australian): "Luv, I wouldn't wear that on a midnight dash to the dunny."

But you didn't go to Sapa to expand your wardrobe (as the French sadly discovered). You went because the hill tribes were so colorfully fascinating. They looked, and dressed, like no other people.

I'd first encountered them ages back in the Golden Triangle area of northern Thailand. Since they claimed no nationality, they were discriminated against, herded back and forth across unnatural boundaries, and even, in Burma/Myanmar, outright exterminated.

Here, the hill tribes seemed at ease; the fact they were a curiosity to Westerners, a genuine tourist attraction in a land that had few other means of income, contributed to this laid-back state. But while there was no government hassle, there as well was no support: no jobs, no educational facilities, no welfare. A bod's gotta earn a dong, so the women crafted a limited variety of clothing and jewelry to peddle to the strange giant pink-faces.

I write women here because in four days I noted very few males. Either there was a marked chromosome bias, or the chaps astutely avoided contact with foreign travelers.

Several varieties of hill tribe hung out hereabouts; all wore black save for the headdress, which basically was how you told them apart. The Red Dzao women shaved the head halfway back then wore what looked like a red pillow to cover the bald patch. Claimed it made them attractive.

The predominant tribe here was the Hmong. At least they were the most visible and most aggressive hawking their stuff. The young girls especially. How they operated was this:

A girl seeks out a Western female and attaches herself like Velcro. She calls her "momma", holds her hand or walks arm in arm, leaning against her or, if the

girl is tall enough, and the “momma” short enough, will continually rest her head on the woman’s shoulder. She laughs, she sheds tears, she tells tales of woe.

What got me, puzzled me for a long time after, was how a kid like this, never set bare foot in a classroom, spoke such flawless English. And French. And passable German. Not just a few phrases. Perfect sentences, whole conversations. Spinning a delightfully wicked fib. Just from hanging out on the streets each weekend?

And she did math with the speed of an Apple Mac. Hand over a five dollar bill and get the exact change in dong...kid knew the daily exchange rate to the decimal.

I stayed in the oldest guesthouse in town, and the only one, I was told, with a fireplace in the room. Fortuitous because although upon arrival the sun was shining and I went about in T-shirt and shorts, this was obviously a tourism ministry ploy.

Within hours a dense, cold fog rolled in off the hills and hung there, directly overhead, for the duration. So the fireplace was a godsend.

Wrong god, though. This was a Vietnamese fireplace, meaning all the heat went up the chimney and the smoke in my lungs.

Rather than freeze and cough in my room, I got out and walked a lot. And discovered the primary difference between Sapa and Dodge City.

On a trek some miles from the village, approaching a cluster of old wooden huts I came to a bend in the stream. Here, a long, grooved-out bamboo pole, balanced in the middle by a fulcrum, protruded into the stream. Rushing water would run along the groove and into a solid flax bucket at the opposite end. When full, the bucket came crashing down into a shallow concavity filled with grain. Once the bucket had pounded the grain it would tilt, the water spilling down a bank back into the stream, and the whole process repeated itself.

Further along, I was strolling along a dirt road when a huge pig darted across right before me. Closely following was a man in his twenties. The dude at last grabbed porky and began wrestling it back in the direction they’d come. Instead of placing it in a pen, he dragged the animal, arms locked around the bloated midriff, stumbling rearwards, the pig on two skinny back legs trying desperately to propel itself forward, the two combatants eventually disappearing through an open door.

As I passed I peeked in, noting packed-down dirt floor, a wooden table with three and a half legs, plastic chair, seat part missing. A bedroll. And a color TV showing – what else? – Little House on The Prairie, all voices dubbed by one single female. Oh, and the pig, of course, now contentedly stretched out on the

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floor chewing on a corn cob, its rear end prudently pointed at the box.

The indelible stamp of Western tourism on this once-remote part of Vietnam made itself evident my second evening. There was, I had been told, a most quaint tradition here. The Saturday night love market. This was where, for ages, hill tribe teenagers went to find a mate.

Way it worked, boy spots girl he fancies; he sings to her. If she digs his song, she sings back. Presto, they're engaged.

At the love market that Saturday night there must have been a hundred people. All of them Westerners, including a French television crew. Hill tribe kids? Not a one.

"Oh, they stopped doing that a few years ago," a Vietnamese from Hanoi told me on the return bus to Lao Cai. "There were so many foreigners, all taking flashbulb pictures, the young people couldn't find space to do their wooing."

"How do they meet now?"

"Same as us," he shrugged. "In front of the TV or at a cyber-café."

I chose the day train to return to Hanoi, and what an excellent move this turned out. Vietnamese trains were slow; oh, were they ever slow. So for twelve hours on this 200 mile journey, we lumbered through some of the most spectacular countryside I'd yet been privileged to take in.

Except for its cities, Vietnam was a never-ending postcard: tiny villages, mud and timber huts, rivers and lakes, hills, thickets of bamboo, acres of crops. And people, strolling, squatting, on ancient bikes, behind water buffalo in the rice paddies.

Late in the afternoon the setting sun painted a golden sheen on all this, as though in emphasis of its silent power. In fact, the scenery after a time became mesmerizing, and I had to fight being stroked to sleep by its sheer, constant beauty.

I got to Hanoi at night. I exchanged my ticket for right of passage out of the station. No sooner I hit the street, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

At first I didn't recognize the old gentleman with the rotted teeth and mismatched suit. Just behind him were the other four. All smiling broadly, bowing just slightly, as they lined up to shake my hand and wish me continued good journey.

# FEAR-BUSTER #9

## When panic attacks

We talk about being centered, or being on center. Meaning? Well, you're balanced, stable...in harmony. Off-center, therefore, implies the opposite: off-balance, disharmonious. And when you stray really off your center: *panic!*

I believe being centered means you pretty much are living in the present. Sure, past and future are there, and your thoughts bounce around the tenses, but here and now's where you hang out most of the time. It's when you get stuck deep in another time zone, when you take the worst of the past and make that a certainty for your future, that you flip.

When this happens, when you truly run off the rails, can't catch a breath, get the shakes; when the shit hits the fan full-on and you're it, chances are no amount of meditation is going to help. You're just too flummoxed to stay in one spot and chant a mantra or observe your breath without your thoughts whisking you away.

What, then, to do? Your journey now is to return to your center. To the present. A neat trick is to grab hold of an analog timepiece with a second hand. Focus fully on that revolving second hand. Each time it passes a number, call it out. When it goes round full circle, take an exaggerated deep breath. Return to the second hand. Really bear down on its movement: total concentration. Your mind tries to break away, uh-uh: get back here! Grab the big breath every 30 seconds. Then 15. Ten. Five.

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Next, pace off ten steps. Turn around, pace back...slower. Back the other way, even slower. Always ten steps, each time slower than the last. Until steps are being taken in an exaggerated slowness. Now focus on each movement of every step. Do a mental play-by-play: "My right foot is on the ground. Now I am lifting my right foot. An inch. Two inches. Three. Now I am moving my right foot forward. Forward. Forward. Now I am beginning to lower my right foot. Lower. Lower. Lower. Now my right foot makes contact with the ground. First the heel. Now the sole. I focus on my left foot..." Get your movement, and accompanying announcements, so slow it takes you minutes to cover the ten paces. Continue this, back and forth, full concentration on each increment, until you feel back on center, in the present moment.

How long might this take? Who cares? The play is to get your mind back. Because that's exactly what has happened. You have a panic attack, you literally lose your mind.

Even when you feel "normal" again, understand that you've been issued a major warning. Perform the walking meditation, ultra slo-mo, several times a day.

## 10

“Just look at them!” Alison moaned quietly as she plunked her solid, well-rounded 140 pound frame onto a seat. It was after five on a mid-autumn evening in Hong Kong which, climate-wise, was the same as your typical summer’s day in hell.

The air-con ferry was filling up rapidly. Most of the passengers were Chinese, and most of these were talking on mobiles or plugged into Walkmans. All of them seemed to walk like Charlie Chaplin. But the ones to which Alison referred were the women: tiny, slim, immaculately dressed, upwards of a yard of perfect hair, not a strand out of place.

“I must put on a ton of anti-perspirant every morning. Halfway out the door I’m dripping a river. Not them.”

Her eyes combed the ship. “They go all day in this furnace and look like they just stepped out of Vanity Fair. They don’t even sweat!” She sighed. “I feel like a hippo in a city of fashion models.”

As the craft backed from Blake Pier and began its hurried trek across the world’s busiest harbor, she added: “But that’s not the worst of it. Wait till you get a look at our new place.”

Alison, from St. Louis, and Clive, an East-End Londoner I had met years back in Auckland, were a mid-30s couple. Mobile expats, they called themselves. They’d done extended tours in the Middle East, Africa and now going on three years here. He was an engineer, and Alison taught the earliest years. Amazing money, but the life did have its drawbacks.

“We were in a wonderful old neighborhood in Kowloon, 20 minutes’ walk from where both of us work. But when we had Brenda last year I grew worried about pollution. Everybody said I was, you know, just being an over-protective



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first-time mom. Last time home I had her tested. Her blood showed such high lead content the doctor advised us to move straightaway. That's why we're – well, you'll see for yourself."

The ferry docked 25 minutes later. Before it had even drawn level with the pier people were milling by the door. That was your Chinese, all right: slowest moving people in the world when they walked, but they got on and off public vehicles like their socks were on fire.

At the back of the mob we moved through the pier's innards, then out into the open. And there it was.

Lantau had always been an island noted for its lovely walking tracks, picturesque fishing villages, a Buddhist monastery or two, even a Trappist monastery which for years produced the island's dairy.

The first deviation to the longtime policy of keeping things pretty much in their natural setting here was born about 15 years before. They called it Discovery Bay, and first glance informed that the same measure of super-conformity and exactitude your upmarket Chinese woman applied to her appearance, HK's Chinese upmarket male had extended to his landscape.

Then came the new airport and...boom!

On denuded hills stood ticky-tack boxes and rectangular phalli (of precisely equal height) of such remarkable sterility they gave your prototype Southern Cal burb points for artistic flair and individuality.

We boarded one of the five awaiting buses – though really, everything was within easy strolling distance from the pier – and toodled off.

The high-rises, I saw, all had names. I took in Jovial Court, Haven Court, Verdant Court. I made note of Twilight, Crystal and Coral Courts. I checked out Glamour, Elegance, Blossom and Cherish Courts.

I did not make these up. Someone else did.

Street names were somewhat more descriptive. By the water we had Seahorse Lane, Seabee Lane, Seabird Lane. As the bus wound higher you found Caperidge Drive, Capevale Drive, Capedale Drive.

Alison and Clive lived in a lo-rise. These were four apartments apiece, two stories to each. Back to back to back to back.

A notice board greeted us in a tiny, unappealing lobby. Rules and regs. Lots. A map of the dog latrine in your immediate area, with instructions in Chinese and

English. Reports of owners' committee meetings, as exhilarating as a church bake sale.

The apartment itself was not half bad, though the view might definitely have been improved by detonating a low-grade thermonuclear device amongst the flank of white dildos the planners had chosen to place between the apartment's terrace and an otherwise breathtaking harbor.

"What do you think of Alison's dream community?" Clive sniffed, handing me a beer as we stood on the terrace.

"What, no Beamer?" I remembered Clive from his seven-bods-to-a-flat, rusted-out-VW-bus days in Auckland.

"Beamer? You haven't noticed?" When I looked nonplussed, he added: "No cars in Disco, mate."

"What do you use, designer scooters?"

"Ah, you make joking, round-eyed devil! Take a look." He nodded down to the street. A golf cart carrying a Chinese businessman toiled up the hill, turned sharply into a drive and disappeared into an open garage.

"That," he said, "is the prime mode of transport here. For them. We are tenants. Scum of the earth. Only owners are permitted."

"To tell the truth," said Alison, "the place is a little spooky. Like, early Sunday morning a Chinese man took his son down to the beach and put up a kite. Within minutes four security vehicles arrived and made them pull it down."

"Scary thing is," Clive put in, "the people here love it like that. Repression by demand."

After dinner we walked down to the village. There, beyond a parking lot crammed with American-made golf carts, stood the shopping center. A supermarket with Arctic air-con and the highest prices I'd ever seen, anywhere. Plastic fast food establishments. An Aussie pub. Ice cream shop, five bucks for the smallest cone.

And Discovery Bay was still expanding. More and more sub-developments – called phases – going up. As were property prices. No lack of people wanting in, either.

Finally I asked the ultimate question: might the honeymoon between Beijing and Hong Kong one day come to an end and the communist regime put an end to capitalism racing unchecked?

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“Surely you’re not serious!” Clive said, with a laugh. “Hey mate, the Hong Kong Chinese have accomplished what Mao tried so hard to do in China, but failed.” His arm made a sweeping gesture to the environs about.

“They have, right here, this very spot, created a society totally lacking in class.”

\*

Fong had changed in 20 years. Had he ever.

When I knew him in New Zealand, Fong was known as David, a late twenties professional student at Victoria University in Wellington. He smoked lots of dope, wore the same T-shirt until it flaked, and was forever bemoaning the Chinese predilection to greed and what it was doing to his native Singapore.

“Money, money, money!” he’d yell. “For the almighty dollar they’re cutting out my homeland’s heart and turning it into a sanitized, sterile prison camp! I hate them!” (Softer) “Ah, y’couldn’t let me have five till Friday, could you, mate?”

A score of years later Fong was driving me in his late model, middle of the range Jaguar from the airport to his home in the Singapore suburbs.

He was thicker of girth than the rebellious student I once knew. His face wore a street guide of lines and a choreographed dance of tics and twitches moved from his left temple down around the chin and up the other side. He had a further nervous habit of emitting a harsh sound every few sentences, a cross between a german shepard bark and a cat about to bring up a hairball. His speech was riddled with numbers preceded by the dollar sign.

“Car cost just over a hundred thousand,” he volunteered. “Import taxes here are murder. Plus, Singapore, you need a permit just to own a car. They only issue so many, so you got to bid for one, like an auction. *HARK!* Another \$96,000.”

Fong would interrupt his personal price tagging only to point out with obvious pride recent accomplishments of his tiny island-state. “Over there? World’s tallest hotel. That building? World’s largest maternity hospital.” Plus their cost.

We pulled into a driveway past an electronically-controlled iron gate to a cluster of four-story buildings surrounded by carefully manicured tropical gardens.

“The condo cost us \$450,000. That was five years back. Know what’s it’s worth now? *HARK!* Mill and a half.”

“That’s great,” I said, without much enthusiasm.

“Nah. See, if we sell, then what? Move? Where? Nothing in Singapore under

a mill now.”

In the underground garage Fong maneuvered into an empty slot. Motor off, he sat staring at a huge, spanking new Mercedes in the stall alongside.

“Guy who owns that? *HARK!* His company transferred him to KL last year. Low import duties, no car permit in Malaysia. Damn!” he suddenly cried, banging his palm on the steering wheel. “Bet the bastard paid less for that beauty than I paid for this piece of crap.”

Once we’d penetrated three dead-bolts and entered a small but attractively furnished apartment, Fong announced, “Got to show you something.” He produced a scrapbook, opened it to show news clippings. All the articles detailed Singapore’s execution of foreigners for drug trafficking.

“This,” he pointed to one, grinning widely. Six years old, it occupied a page to itself. “Our first Caucasian.”

Fong’s wife appeared early in the evening. She was uncharacteristically wide for a Chinese, and appeared as stressed as her husband. Both worked 60-hour weeks for major export companies.

“Everything’s so expensive here,” she said soon after introductions, continuing Fong’s litany of numbers. I heard about boarding school fees for their two children, domestic help, maintenance of their condo.

“We’re going to Australia next month,” she added, smiling for the first time. “We go every year. Shopping.”

The following morning, after my hosts had left for work, I packed my bags and left a nicely worded note telling the Fongs I wouldn’t be staying with them after all. I didn’t lie, exactly. Neither did I tell them the truth: that the money saved in hotel bills wasn’t worth subjecting myself to their brand of boredom.

I took a local bus into town, then began to walk. This was middle of October, and already the biggest, gaudiest, most gross Christmas displays west of LA were up all over Orchard Road.

I wandered into a few eating places. And wandered right out again. The prices were painful. Singapore was *Sting-ya-poor*.

The place was clean and safe, right. When you had fines of \$1000 for spitting, the same for failing to flush a public toilet, and the unbelievable sum of \$15,000 for possession of that heinous controlled substance, chewing gum, you did tend to clean your act. But in a city that once had the warm blood of multi-cultural Asian

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life coursing through its body, clean and safe had produced a beautiful cadaver lying in state.

At the end of Orchard Road I continued east towards Raffles. I tried a number of hotels that were supposed to be “budget”. Whose budget, for chrissake? Price of a room sent my socks rolling south. Besides which, in my experience, Chinese who ran guesthouses were, as if by mandate, flat-out unfriendly.

I settled for a place in Little India. Which was getting littler and littler each time I came here, as the Chinese were devouring this once-charming area and turning it into their own brand of ugly. Funny thing, though, about the place in Little India that I settled for: it was run by a Chinese. Nicest guy you could imagine.

My dorm – there were no singles available – had a pair of double-bunk beds, walls not quite to the ceiling, no windows. Your basic Asian backpackers’. The price was four times what I had paid for an entire bungalow, plus bath, plus breakfast, in Bali.

The venue as a whole felt fine. The walls were covered with the standard travelers’ notices and graffiti – grand reading.

There was a Danish woman named Annika. In her 40s, I would think. She was staying a couple of nights, as was I...she then heading east to Indonesia and me north to Malaysia and Thailand. We thought it’d be nice to hang out together.

A couple hours at the public Olympic-size pool, a dollar apiece. Then we walked, all over the place.

Meals we took at the Komala Vilas, which was, always would be, my favorite restaurant in Asia. It might be packed, but no one was ever turned away. Waiters would seat you at somebody else’s table, maybe on existing customers’ laps if no free seats were available. Food (100% vegetarian) was unreal, and prices low for Singapore. Run, as true Indian restaurants always were, by an extended family, meaning ten times as many staff as necessary, all shouting at voice-top across the large rooms. You’d just be digging into your absolutely scrumptious food (me using three finger, right hand, like a local) when somebody’d come over, unsolicited, and pile more into your plate.

After eating, we crossed Serangoon Road and took in the Hindu temple, which could match Disneyland for color, sound and splendor.

This was Sunday, and every Sunday evening Little India became a spectacle. The streets, and any vacant spot of ground, were jammed with people, mainly

those who had come from the homeland to earn decent money.

Annika and I strolled the dark back streets. One, an alley really, a series of doors stood open, each giving off soft, pink light. Clusters of males stood around each door, gawking inside. And inside, looking tired and bored, sat a number of females, legs crossed, rather heavy thighs exposed.

“Not very attractive, are they?” Annika remarked.

“Aha, tis the true lovelies of Singapore you wish to sample, eh?” I led her to a nearby street where busty, curvaceous beauties, dressed shiny, tight and scanty, were leaning against walls, giving off quiet come-hithers.

“Wow, you’re right. They’re gorgeous!”

“Um, Annika —” I leaned over, whispered in her ear.

“Reeeally!!” she gasped, ogling the black-haired, smooth-skinned dollies.

As we walked away, Annika eying -- with incredulity? envy? – the extended chorus line, it hit me...the metaphor for Sting-ya-poor. To wit:

What looks good on the outside, folks, ain’t always what it’s cracked up to be.  
Ha ha ha.

\*

The tea puller was about to begin his act.

From my second floor window of the Indian-owned hotel, I looked out to the scene beyond.

To the left, an ultra-ornate Buddhist temple. Far in the background but always visible, the world’s most unnecessary building, called Komtar, a 60-story cylinder poking out of the ground like an angry giant’s middle finger – 57 stories taller than the next tallest building within miles.

Just below my window, the trishaw driver who lived nearby was drunk – again. That he had only recently achieved this state was evident as he was hanging half out of his vehicle, snoring loudly. Shortly he would fall out completely, sleep on the curbside until one of the waiters from the Hindu-Indian restaurant downstairs dragged him onto a sidewalk bench.

But it was the tea-puller of the small Muslim-Indian restaurant directly across the street who had my full attention. He held two cups, one filled with milky tea, the other empty. He poured from half a yard’s distance one cup to the other. Immediately he reversed the process, the gap separating cups lengthening. Then

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back again, the space between cups growing greater. He continued in this manner, back and forth, further and further, faster and faster, until there was this great arc of tea around him, until it looked like the tea was actually *rising* up from the cup held close to his thigh to the cup high over his head, thus “pulling” the tea and giving it a cappuccino-like froth.

Two spunky Chinese teenage girls in tight, tight designer jeans passed left to right; the tea-puller’s eyes followed them. An old, wizened Hindu man in a filthy dhoti and white forehead daubings moved right to left, and the tea-maker traced his path past. The tea still flying. Not a drop spilling.

I was in Georgetown, principal city (the only city, actually) of Penang, an island just off the northwest coast of the Malaysia peninsula.

Malaysia had around 22 million people, many of them – and certainly those in control – fundamentalist Muslims. There were some elements in business and government trying desperately to move the country forward; an equal force was determined to drag it back.

Basically, the east coast of the peninsula was strong Muslim, and the west coast ethnic Chinese. Penang was owned and operated by the latter. Whereas they got a pretty raw deal most everywhere else in the country, here the Chinese had clout. Nobody hassled them, and they were free to focus on where the next fortune was coming from and leave everyone else in peace. So four distinct races, four religions, four languages (in three alphabets) lived side by side in delightful harmony.

And unlike the quadricultural island city-state I had just come from, Penang had only lately begun the uglification process named moderization. Komtar, for one thing. Plus the fact that, where a decade before the prime modes of transport were trishaws and single-speed black bicycles, Georgetown now had, or so I had read, the highest per capita concentration of Mercedes in the world. But still the place had a fair measure of Asian squalor; it yet possessed a heart.

I’d arrived here at a precious hour: dawn. I walked to the Esplanade, at the head of which sat the magnificent Victorian city hall, fronted by a row of palms. In one of history’s oldest stories it was the English who more or less had created the town. They then brought in Chinese and Indians to perform the grunt. Now the only things English were a minor religion and a few choice chunks of architecture.

There was, as I strolled by the sea that first morning, one reminder that, for all

the British and Chinese cultural stamps, Penang nonetheless was Malaysia. A sign on the wall of a small naval installation read, in four languages: No Admittance. On the sign was an illustration showing a soldier with rifle shooting another man in the back.

When the sun was up I made the rounds of cheaper hotels and guest houses. The Chinese chap in Little India had been an anomaly, I was gratified to discover. Here the Chinese who ran lodging establishments were predictably unsmiling, rude, crass and boorish.

Having been insulted enough for the next six incarnations, I walked to Georgetown's own Little India where at the first place I entered, a small, smiling brown man with a red dot between his eyes greeted me warmly. Showed me to a room. It was tiny, it had only a single bed and a bit of orange crate. It was also spotlessly clean and sported a ceiling fan, a window facing out to the street, and a door that shut out the rest of humanity. Eight bucks a day, and well worth it.

When in Georgetown, one went walking. That first morning I passed a mosque, Buddhist temple, Hindu temple and Anglican church on my way to a narrow street cut off from all but pedestrian traffic. This was the morning Chinese market. Alice's Restaurant East. A stall holder sat on a small stool, naked from the waist up. His upper arms were covered in bees. The honey seller, of course. Direct advertising.

I stopped in a Chinese tea room where, I imagined, the biggest deals in Penang were made. No cell phones, no suits. Just your average, everyday, shorts, flip-flops, shirt-out millionaires.

The pot of tea slammed down on the table before me was as ancient as the room itself. A young woman carrying an enormous wicker tray of dumplings and sweet things approached. I smiled; she did not. I said good morning in my very best Mandarin. She remained mute. I thanked her when she banged down my plate with two selected items. She turned and walked away.

A man at the next table hawked and spit on the floor. On the wall, just above his head, sat a sign: NO SPITTING. In four languages. And three alphabets.

The rest of the morning was spent cruising the narrow streets. Every shop bore the proprietor's name, and I assembled a small collection. Yee Fatt Shoe Store. Yu mee. Chiew Fatt. Ewe Lean. My favorite: the Ah Chew Hotel. No doubt, these people found Barry Rosenberg hilarious.

By midday, Georgetown was a sauna. I stood at a bus stand, let a dozen go by



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before I spotted one with all the windows shut. I signaled and jumped aboard, bought a ticket to the end of the line. Seventy cents. Where was it going? How should I know? It was air-con, was all I cared.

Later I grabbed an antiquated ferry across to the mainland. And back again. It was the return that buzzed – approaching this lovely island (using Komtar as a beacon) by sea. Cost was seventy-five cents. Was I thinking now like my ex-friend Fong, in reverse?

At night, Georgetown came alive with street vendors. Maybe the best street-eatin' town in the galaxy. By the second evening I'd marked out my path: first the bean curd drink, followed by vegetable soup, then a bowl of fried noodles with onion and garlic, finally an *ais kacang*, cooked beans and sweets topped by chocolate sauce in a bowl of shaved ice. Ahhh. Four different vendors, four different streets. Total dinner bill (eat your heart out, Fong): just over a buck.

Late the evening of my fourth day I shook hands and said good-by to the concierge (who gave me his mother's address in Madras, ever I should get there), and stepped carefully over the body of the trishaw driver, attached to his vehicle by one thonged foot, the rest of him partly in mid-air, partly curled contortionist-like on the ground.

Already the air conditioning in the bus was turned up full; the damn thing was freezing. The VCR was showing your standard C-grade kung fu/car chase drama, just below eardrum-splitting level. The seat did not recline as it should. The idea here, the old roadie's trick, was to save on room rental by traveling overnight. Eight bucks. Was I crazy, or what?

Out my window, across the street, the Muslim-Indian restaurant was still open. Under a single ceiling light, a magician was making tea rise up from a cup below his hip to another held high over his head. I was the only one on the bus watching.

In with the ear plugs, on with the night shade. Okay, let's roll.

# FEAR-BUSTER #10

## Protection and self-defense

Everybody in Israel knew of Elie Avivi. He was a nationally-known character.

Avivi had a place in the far north, right on the Mediterranean. He disagreed so completely with the policies of his government that he had declared his residence an independent country. Even issued his own passport stamp.

This was 1973 when I got to his place. Four or five other Westerners were staying there. In no time at all, I made myself at home.

One Friday evening Avivi and the other guests went down the road to have dinner and party at a nearby kibbutz. I decided to remain behind.

It was a beautiful night. Chilly, so I thought I'd build a fire. I knew there were some old logs in the woods nearby, and went to retrieve them. I piled them on, returned for a second armload. I was carrying them back when one fell off, making a loud noise as it hit the ground and bounded away. Immediately I heard a yell. In Hebrew. And from a clump of trees came two men. The first was in army uniform, the second, just behind him, civilian. The soldier had an Uzi trained on my heart.

He continued to shout as they approached cautiously.

I knew exactly four words in Hebrew: *ken* and *lo* (yes and no), the all-purpose *sholom* and *biseda* (okay). "*Sholom! Biseda! Ken! Lo!*" I now cried behind eloquent Basil Fawltly grin. I heard my voice crack.

The army type was mid-fifties. He was, I suspected, not military at all, but rather a self-appointed vigilante. These were a breed.

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He came to within a few yards. The Uzi was still pointed directly at my heart. The man behind him was semi-cowering, and the vigilante was playing his macho role for all he had.

"Elie Avivi!" I said, barely able to get the words out. "American. Me. Jew. *Biseda!*"

The vigilante would have none of it. Chances were, he'd experienced someone close who'd been killed by an Arab terrorist. Every Israeli had. I didn't think I looked like an Arab terrorist, but I'd heard they often wore beards and jeans to look like hippie-type travelers. The vigilante continued to holler. Then I noticed his hands were shaking. That's when I knew I was dead.

My first thought was, I don't want to crap my pants. To die with a load, that had to be the worst way to go out. I squeezed my buttocks.

The vigilante yelled some more. The man behind him continued to cower. And then a thought went through my head.

Alpha. Mindpower. I teach it. Well, *use* it!

My three fingers, both hands, already were together. Hell, they were so together my nails were digging into finger pads. I relaxed them. I saw, and felt, light pouring out of my heart chakra. Positive, radiant, all-powerful light. Filling me. Then through the skin to form a bubble of protecting light around me. I heard myself talking through all this, saying the four words I knew in this man's language, plus the name of Elie Avivi.

I extended the light to the vigilante. I saw it fill him, as it had done me, then bubble around him as well. Then his light and my light merged. And while I continued to say aloud the few words of my desperate vocabulary, silently I began saying to him: "You are my brother. I love you. You are my brother. I love you. I feel your pain. But I am not your enemy. I am your brother."

His finger was on the trigger. In the dark I could just make that out. And I now saw more pressure from that finger put on the trigger. It's not working, I thought. I'm dead, I thought. You're my brother, I thought. I love you. I love you.

His trigger finger relaxed. Just a smidgeon, but there it was. And the muzzle of the Uzi dropped about an inch.

You are my dear, dear brother. And I love you so. The light I was sending out would blind a passing satellite.

And his finger came off the trigger completely, and the muzzle dropped a few inches more.

And I knew I had him. I knew I would live. Even when the vigilante shouted, *Passport!* at me, and I remembered it was stored in Avivi's safe, and Avivi had locked the door before they left and taken the key, thus creating another crisis with the brother-I-loved, I was cool. I had not even crapped my pants.

A dozen years later. For some reason which conveniently escapes me, I had decided, for the first (and last) time ever, to co-teach an Alpha course instead of winging it solo. This was at a New Age retreat in a lovely wooded setting outside Auckland. My co-teacher was a radical feminist who taught women's self-defense. The idea was she'd do two hours, then I'd do two. She'd teach them how to kick men in the crotch, I'd show them how to use the light.

Sixteen women signed up, split evenly between nice housewife-types (there for me), and rather hard young single females (for the rad-fem). The eight housewives couldn't understand why they should scream and kick a man in the crotch. The eight younger singles, all of whom, I now learned, had been raped, would be bloody well damned if they'd ever say You're my brother, I love you, to some lout who was about to take from them their most cherished possession.

It looked to be a long, long day.

Somehow, it all worked out in the end. The housewives agreed there might come a time when a boot to the gonads (not to their husbands') might come in handy. And the younger single women settled down to look on the light as just another tool that might save them considerable pain, and perhaps their lives. In fact, the 18 of us got in a big circle at the end, held hands, and chanted for a few minutes. Then they got in their cars and drove off, and the self-defense person and I staggered into the woods. I sat down beneath a tree and did some Vitamin O, and she lit up a doobie the size of an elephant's tampon.

A month later I got a phone call. From the angriest of the eight rapees.

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"I used it. It worked," she said. "Thanks."

You don't have to be in a life-threatening situation. Back in the early '70s I did some volunteer work for a Philadelphia organization called Help, started by a friend. There were two main situations that called for the light. One was when some kid got busted for possession of a joint or two and was due in court before a known hanging judge. A bunch of us would go to the courtroom, sit together in the visitors area. Defendant after defendant would be sent away for possession of a piddling amount. When came our guy, we all immediately closed our eyes. You most likely could see our chests expanding, contracting, expanding, as we did our preliminary deep-breathing. Then the light. Joe goes free, we'd say silently, smothering both the kid and the judge in gorgeous warm light. Joe goes free. And Joe went free. Every single time.

The second situation was draft-resistance, which we did a lot of. A young guy would come in, say something like, "I just got my notice. My parents want me to go to Nam, but I really don't want to. What d'you think?"

Since we weren't permitted to go with him, either to his draft board or to the physical, we'd do our number at the Help center the night before, and again the morning of. We'd visualize him before the board, a walking globe of light. Joe is rejected. Joe is rejected. And on each occasion something would come up that kept Joe out.

For my own personal uses, and what I've taught in my courses, the medium of protection/self-defense work is the light. But the light is merely an extension of my mind's belief system. For sure, you are free to explore and experiment with your own set of brain games.

A couple who frequently sat in on my courses at Auckland University told of this creative, and rather amusing, mind tool:

Their teenage son was student in a somewhat snooty school. He was a good kid, but kept getting into minor difficulties. The headmaster was an old-school type, ex-British military, spit-and-polish and hard-line discipline.

One day the parents were called up before Colonel Blimp. They were nervous, both that their son might be expelled, and that they themselves might have to put on the dunce cap and write 500 lines.

He kept them waiting, of course, the better to intimidate you with, my dears. Once in his office, he began tearing into them, as expected. They used three fingers to maintain calm, they used the light to protect themselves against his huff and puff barrage. Then they did this: each imagined she/he had a huge feather. And began tickling the headmaster. Under his chin, under his arms, up and down the body. All the while maintaining their posture of lower-rank obedience.

It took about a minute, they reported. And then, as though he were indeed being tickled, Sir's heavy demeanor just seemed to melt. His face changed, even his stiff seated position. He broke into smile, then a laugh.

"Oh, your son's a good lad, really," he chuckled. "Quite reminds me of myself when I was young and full of youthful abandon. Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on him for you." And he *winked!*

I was living in Eugene, Oregon. This was around 1978, prior to moving Down Under. I began attending tai chi classes there. The teacher was a little Hong Kong Chinese guy in his thirties. I mean really little - even by Chinese standards.

One evening following class, a few of us went to a café, teacher included. He told us a story.

When he lived in Hong Kong, he got beat up a lot. So he started taking kung fu classes, but didn't like it. Then he got into tai chi, and it fit him perfectly.

A couple years on, he knew he was good enough to take on the guys used to push him around. He'd go looking for them, goad them into fights. And win.

Then he realized he was good enough, he didn't need to do that anymore. So he would consciously avoid situations that might end in conflict.

"One day, I had been doing tai chi about five years by now, I was walking down this street. Suddenly, for no reason, I found myself crossing to the other side. What is this? I thought. Then I saw this guy come out of a building on the side of the street I'd just left. The guy was my enemy. If I had continued on, we would have run into each other, and there would have been a fight, no question. See, I had come to a point in my

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training where I no longer needed to consciously think, or plan, to avoid trouble. It just happened.”

At the time, I hadn't any idea what he was talking about. I certainly do now.

Think of something you know how to do. Drive a stick shift. Swim. Hit a golf ball. Knit. There was a time you didn't know how, right? So by the numbers, you slowly learned. Take driving. Five forward gears, one reverse, three floor pedals, and a million people out there in tanks whose only goal in life is to maim you. Think, do; think, do...until, totally unannounced, came the *aha!* moment; that is, when the mind said, Okay, I've got it now, you're a driver. *Va-room!*

So now you drive, and you survive; most of this done without “thinking”. How many times has it happened, you're driving, maybe you switch lanes or even change roads entirely, no fore-thought, you just do it, and down the line you avoid a collision of some sort that definitely would have happened had you stayed where you were. Lucky? Miracle? The hand of God? Another Beautiful Coincidence? Who cares.

Repetition, repetition, repetition. Whether it's mantra meditation, Vitamin O, finger-across-to-opposite-palm, double screen, healing, or using the light for protection and self-defense, the goodies work for you when you've worked on the goodies long enough, and with enough heart, that it has become an *integral part of your being*.

Look, I'm a dummy. I'm not being modest. (I'm a Leo; I wouldn't know how.) On a scale of ten, I rank myself a five-and-a-half in inherent competence as a human. I've got a relatively decent brain, yes, but from early days I have tended towards depression and self-destruction. If I'm not mindful, vigilant, right back do I slide. Yet I see myself living life as an eight-point-two. How can this be?

Somewhere along the way I obviously made a decision: I don't want to curl up and die, I don't wish to merely exist. I wanna live, dammit!! And I found me a system. Over the years I've added to it, subtracted from it. Made it mine. Like the fossiled sofa in my living room at home, where I lay and read for inordinate periods, and it has taken my shape, my smell. Except my personal Alpha system does not take a shape and

remain that way for the duration. It is constantly changing.

What's this? You're too old to take on something so new and different? Right. The oldest person ever to do my classes was a chap by the name of James Lord of Philadelphia. Mr. Lord was 91 when he did his first course with me. (He did several, became a regular.) When I first learned his age, dope that I am, I said, "Jeez. Ninety-one! What are you doing here?"

"I ain't dead yet," replied James Lord.

Funny thing about fear. When you are hit by an emergency, or sudden crisis, your brain waves shoot up into higher Beta panic mode (normal), instead of down into Alpha (natural), where you can cope and deal with whatever's happening far, far better. In the same way, people tend to develop more fears as they grow older. *This is normal but not natural!* If you are, say, 50 or 60 or 66 (as I am at this moment of writing), or 91, you have already lived most of your life. You're afraid of dying? Well, sure you are, who isn't, except if you die, right now, you've still had, as the cricketers say, a pretty good innings. It's the 20 or 25 or 30 year olds who should be afraid: they've got the most to lose of life.

What I have presented here in the Fear-Buster sections is but a framework for combating fear and living life better. It works. It's been proved to be a phenomenal system. But this is MY system. Oh, feel free to use it if you wish. But please do not be afraid (that word again) of altering Barry's system, of improvising and implementing, adding to and subtracting from as you deem proper, to develop your own personal life program.

Try to keep in mind two things: As previously noted, your system will take you up the ladder of the highest diving board, out to the very end and curl your toes around it. But it won't put you in the water. You've got to *want* to dive. Secondly, be serious with your system, but don't get solemn. Solemn is rigid. Solemn usually means you're spending a lot more time talking (bullshit), and not doing (truth). So play with it, enjoy it, laugh with it, even cry with it when you must. Above all, DO IT!



## 11

The airport waiting area was full of fat Indians. When finally the boarding call came, I got on, found my way to a window seat. Sitting next to me was a holy man, shaved head, very dark, bare chest. He didn't know what to do with his seat belt. I helped him put it on. He didn't acknowledge my assistance. Then he looked past me and saw the shade was down on the window. He made a few rude flips with his hand pointed at the shade.

"You're not talking to me, are you, Baba?" More hand-flips, faster now. "No, no. You're gonna have to say the magic word first!" I smiled as I was saying this. Finally, he got the message. He didn't smile back, exactly. But he did relax. I gave him a wink and slid the shade up. Thinking: did I really say that?

At Varanasi airport I walked into the tiny immigration lounge to find people sitting all over the floor, filling in forms. Carefully, I stepped around them and requested the proper paper. The man behind the counter said brusquely, "You should have them already filled out!" He pushed several at me, most of them falling on the floor.

"Excuse me." I leaned in, placed my nose virtually on his. "See this?" I opened my passport and showed him the Indian visa. "Your country has invited me here as a guest. You are the first person I meet and you talk to me like I'm filth. Why is that?" The official's eyes grew large, and he broke into a grin. "Okay, Baba," he said softly. I took the forms and moved off. I can't believe this, I thought. What the hell's got into me?

I figured on taking the airport bus into the city, bought a pass for 35 rupees. Then I ran into three Israelis, who asked if I wanted to share a taxi. "Yeah, great." I went back to the bus man. Who refused to return my money.

"What kind of person are you? I'm 63 years old, this is my first time in your

country – is this any way for you to treat me?” He gave me my 35 rupes. Barry, *Barry!*

The Israelis bargained the driver down to about half what he had asked. In the van I told them about my strange behavior. They laughed. “It’s not you – it’s India! This country brings out all your aggressions.”

By the time we got into the city it was dark. I was totally lost.

“You want to come with us?” the Israelis asked.

“Well, I thought I’d try to find this place I heard about.”

“Come on with us, we know a really nice place is the Old City.”

I don’t know how they found it. I’d seen a map of Godaulia, the Old City, and it looked pretty straightforward. In reality, it was a nightmare. Narrow, twisting alleys – not streets – full of people, dogs, humongous bulls, monkeys, tiny stalls all lit up, noise, shit everywhere. The Izzies, a couple and a single male, simply powered their way through it all. One moment I was eyeball-deep in sweltering mayhem, the next entering a dark, fan-cooled lobby of a guesthouse.

Nir, the solo, was in the act of bargaining the manager down. “It’s the season,” the manager explained. “No discounts in season.”

“Aw, come on. You can do it if you want to. You’re the boss here.”

Somehow, we decided that rather than take a tiny single each, we’d share the best double. Five bucks a day. Split two ways.

We were on the fifth floor. Great view of the Ganges. Also of the people sleeping on the roof below. There was a cage-like door on the window. “Is this to keep us from falling out?” I wondered.

“Monkeys,” Nir explained. “They’ll come in, steal everything you’ve got.”

I woke at 5.30, did my meditation, tiptoed past a soundly sleeping Nir. Outside the hotel I took half a dozen steps and was lost. I wanted to get down to the river, but there was no way I could find it. Those narrow alleys, tall buildings to either side, everything bending, curling. I just couldn’t get my bearings. I asked directions. Got pointed in practically every direction of the compass. Somehow, Krishna knew how, I found the river, walked along the muddy banks. A young man approached and asked did I want a boat. I said how much. Up to you, Baba. Forget that, give me a price. Bargain, bargain.

We got in the rickety old boat and he took the oars. Sunrise on the Ganges. The ancient buildings painted pink and gold by the day’s earliest rays. Slowly we moved

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on the holy river whose waters purified body and soul. There were turds everywhere. Dead carcasses floated by – dog, goat, human baby. As we passed the Main Ghat there must have been thousands of people taking their morning ritual baths. Into the water, head submerged once, twice, three times. Then the soaping, brushing of teeth with twigs. A spectacle. Awesome.

Varanasi pulsed with energy. Walking the narrow alleys, the mind quickly was overwhelmed with sights, sounds, smells. Everything was happening. Fat men in the tiniest of stalls, squatting or sitting on the floor with their legs curled to the side, selling cloth or silver, grains or fruit. Filthy boys racing back and forth delivering silver trays loaded with glasses of milk chai. All the men seemed to spend the day with their mouths full of betel leaves, spitting the blood red juice onto the alleys. Women in saris so colorful they almost blinded.

I could take no more than an hour before my senses became overloaded and I had to head back to the guest house (which took another hour finding). Up to the room, take a cold shower, nap or read. Then out again.

One young male I got in conversation with put me straight. I made some mention of how everything here in India was so different from any place I'd ever been. He said: "My good sir, this is not India. This is Varanasi."

I went with Nir to the burning ghats. A man approached us there. Hard-looking. "No pictures!" he commanded. Then he put the hit on us for donations. "For the bereaved families." While he and I were talking, I noticed him suddenly look over my shoulder. His face grew red. He hollered something in Hindi. I turned to see Nir putting his camera away. The man made a grab for him. I tried to get between them, but he pushed me aside. We made a run for it, the man chasing, yelling at the top of his voice. Somehow, we got away from him.

"You didn't really take pictures there, did you?" I asked breathlessly when we got back to the hotel.

"No, of course not. Well, not many."

One morning at Main Ghat I noticed something happening on the other side of the river. Where the day before there had been nothing, just unused flat land, no buildings, there were now tents, loudspeakers, and boats loaded with people going across.

"What's going on?" I asked a man in Western clothes.

"Oh, some character claims he's the reincarnation of God," he laughed. "This

place has a bhagwan on every corner. Look at them,” he nodded towards people packing into a boat. “How can they believe such trash. Superstitious fools. Why, when I was over there earlier I —”

“Wait a minute. You went over? All this cynical talk and you went over there too?”

The man looked at me as though at a child. He flung out his hands, palms to the sky.

“Just in case,” he said.

Immediately I left Main Ghat I was lost again. Finally escaping from the Old City, I saw a man with a trishaw. He gave me the head-wag that was the Indian version of a nod. This was the third time I’d somehow found my way out of the Old City, each time from a different street, and each time he was there, as though waiting for me.

“Are you tracking me on radar?” Head-wag, head-wag. So I jumped into his vehicle and away we went, a tour of the city.

That evening on the rooftop restaurant – the views of the river were spectacular – I saw Nir with a few other Izzies. I waved and found my own table nearby, but Nir motioned me over.

I sat down. The discussion, as always, whether amongst themselves or the rare occasions they included someone outside their tight circle, was the situation at home.

“I’ll tell you this,” I said. “It’s gone way beyond who’s right and who’s wrong. Your guys have become, in the eyes of a lot of us long-time Israel supporters, as big a collection of fools and thugs as we’ve always thought of the other side. People like me, who’ve sided with you for so many years, we’re just about to wipe our hands of the whole mess.”

They didn’t argue this. They said they hated Sharon as much as the Palestinians did. “But please don’t believe the other guys are just good-hearted victims,” a young woman named Rachel said. “All of us are very liberal, and have voiced support for the Palestinian cause right along. But what they’re now doing, *we*’re about to wipe our hands of *them!*”

“What bothers me most?” I said. “Jews are supposedly the smartest people on earth. I just can’t believe how stupid the Israelis have been. Just look around here.

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The young Izzies, they've become the ugliest of all young travelers. Worse than Germans, worse than Australians, even worse than the Americans. Don't you realize your young travelers are ambassadors to the world? They couldn't be doing more damage to Israel's image if they were sent out by Hamas. Why can't your military have classes or something before they let these young people out of the army and they go traveling? Teach them how to behave, get world sympathy on your side?"

"Look," another said. "Israel's a democracy. How can we force people to attend classes like that?"

And so it went. A woman asked me: "You're not Jewish, are you?"

"Every drop of blood in my body. Nothing to do with the religion; to me, it's as good or bad, right or wrong, as all other religions. But, yeah, 63 years as a Jew, it's pretty hard to sit back and watch what you guys are doing, both at home and here on the road, and not feel angry."

I booked the night train to Jaipur, through Agra. Nir, who was staying on for a few more days, said, "Let's go down to Assi Ghat, there's a great Middle Eastern restaurant there." So I followed him through the Old City, to an exit street I hadn't been on before. Guess who was waiting there? We climbed aboard his trishaw, and he pedaled off.

The restaurant was called Haifa. Full of Izzies. The owner was a gentle, smiling man. I asked where he was from.

"Palestine," he replied. I guess I gave a start. "No problem," he said. "These people are my friends. That's why I left and came here. Who wants to live with hatred all the time?"

When we left, the trishaw man was outside. My personal Varanasi chauffeur. Nir and I had a farewell hug, and the trishaw man pumped me across the city to the railway station.

As always, I had got myself a top berth. When the train arrived, and after I'd asked half a dozen people whether it was, in fact, going to Jaipur (there was no visible indication of destination or carriage numbers), I located my berth and climbed up. I had, at most, 18 inches of space to the ceiling.

The train run from Varanasi to Agra was reputed to have the highest incidence of theft in all of India. I got out my sleeping bag and unrolled it. Then I tied both packs to the chain supporting the berth. My few valuables, most notably the Swiss army knife, maglite and journal, I placed on my person. Passport pouch, I was

already wearing.

Just before the train began moving, a young Western woman entered the open bay and settled herself on the lowest berth just across. Attractive, blond. Probably English, I thought. I tried to catch her eye, say hello, as we seemed to be the only non-Indians on the carriage. But she was a non-looker. If I were standing six inches in front of her, she still wouldn't acknowledge me. I sighed and crawled into the bag. Ear plugs, blindfold. I was set.

Sometime in the night I was awakened by a scream. I immediately banged my head on the ceiling. Another scream. Whipped off my blindfold and banged my head again. I looked down and on the lower berth across. An Indian man was stretched out full on top of the English woman. She screamed again as she struggled unsuccessfully to throw him off. I yelled. Everybody else was asleep. Or pretended to be.

I didn't know who was making more noise, her screeching or me shouting Help, please somebody, help! Not a movement around us.

Banging my head several more times, I unzipped the bag, strived to swing a leg free. More screams. More shouts from me. The Indian man continued to lie stretched out on top the woman.

I finally got out of the bag. Tried to wriggle my way to the end of the berth and the ladder. My stockinged feet felt around for the first step but I just couldn't find it. I leaned over the side...and tumbled out of the berth onto the floor. I felt some pain, but pretty certain nothing was broken. I stood up. I could smell alcohol coming from the Indian man. He wore T-shirt, jeans. About 20-25.

I grabbed his arm, tried to pull him off. He yanked his arm back and grunted. The woman was screaming hysterically now. Trying to move, but he had her pinned.

I made another attempt at dragging him off, but he was pretty strong. Then, without thinking, I reached down and grabbed his ear, twisted it as far as it would go, and then some. He let out a howl. I twisted it further, pulled it toward me. He had no choice but to follow. I finally got him off the woman, onto the floor.

"Help me!" I yelled to her. Or anybody. I had this dude's ear in my hand, he was young and strong and drunk: now what was I going to do with him? The woman just lay there, screaming.

I dragged the guy into the corridor. I thought, soon as I let go he's going to waffle the hell out of me. I pulled him towards the end of the corridor, both of us

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banging off berths as we moved. Nobody opened an eye. Nobody stirred.

I thought I'd get him to the door, let go and run like mad. Which I did, expecting the drunk to follow, grab me, and turn me into a poppadom. But he didn't. He stood there a while, hand cupped over his offended ear, then opened the door and staggered into the next carriage.

When I returned to my bay, the English woman had turned on her side, facing the wall. Shaking, I climbed up to the top berth and crawled back into the sleeping bag, banging my head no more than half dozen times on the ceiling. It took me a while, but eventually I calmed down and fell asleep.

Came morning, everybody got up, went down to the bottom berths to sit. I was directly across from the English woman. She did not say a word. Nor look my way.

\*

I didn't stop at Agra. I had seen the Taj years ago, and although it was indeed a sight to behold, I neither wished to put up with hassling touts nor pay the new price of twenty dollars to see it again.

At Jaipur I got a taxi to the hotel I had booked from Varanasi. Nice room, and the manager, a corpulent chap about 30, was one of those soft, gentle, convivial Indians, the kind Peter Sellers used to play.

A quick walk around the city convinced me this was not a place I wanted to spend much time. It was fast, unfriendly. Back at the hotel, I met up with two young Italian guys who were staying in the room across the lounge. Christian and Ivo, a couple of waiters from Milan, and what a tale they had to tell.

First trip to Asia. Flew into Delhi, didn't realize it was some sort of holiday, most everything closed. They found a travel agency, and got suckered into taking a trip to Kashmir. Following the 28 hour bus ride, all the hairpin turns, they easily found a houseboat on the lake. They sort of wondered how come the place was so empty of other tourists. And the next morning they sort of wondered what all those explosions were they'd heard during the night.

"Oh, many weddings this time of year," the boat owner informed them. "Kashmiris always making much banging noises at weddings."

It actually took them into their third day before they realized they were smack in the middle of a full-scale war.

“Not just two sides fighting,” Christian said. “Three! Indians, Pakistanis and Kashmir nationals. We were so scared.” Ivo nodded.

They’d tried to leave, but were told there was no transport. It was four more days before they could get on a bus.

“Both the driver and his relief were totally drunk,” Ivo said. “Every curve down those mountains we were certain this was it.”

We talked and talked. When I told them I had not long before got dumped by my woman of four and a half years, they looked at one another. “Do you happen to remember the date this happened?” Date? I got out my journal, flipped through the pages. When I read off the date, both of them laughed out loud. Ivo said: “Christian’s girl dumped him, and my girl dumped me, on that same date! Wait, it gets better. Our two closest friends, *they* got dumped a few days later!”

We spent three days in Jaipur, during which I taught the lads mantra meditation and Vitamin O. The fourth morning we got on a bus and headed south.

It was my intention, and theirs, to stop off at Pushkar en route to Udaipur. We had heard about the town, from different sources. Me, word of mouth; them, their Italian-translation guide book.

We got to Ajmer. Supposedly, a bus connected to nearby Pushkar. At the terminal, we were besieged by taxi drivers. They wanted 300 rupees for the drive. “But there’s a bus to Pushkar,” I said. “Not from here, Baba. You must go to railway station.”

“Okay, how much to the railway station?”

“Three hundred rupees.”

“Hey!” It was Ivo. “I just asked at the kiosk. This is the bus to Pushkar, right here. Eight rupees!” India.

The bus ride out of Ajmer might well have been the bus out of Planet Earth. Up and up, around curves and bends, civilization as we’d known it seeming to fall away. Until we were inside the Rajasthan desert. Half an hour later, we pulled in to a sleepy little town that immediately felt laid-back, easy going and...good.

The Italians took a room at a cheap guesthouse that, from the huge poster of Bob Marley to the smell of ganja on the breath of the manager, was obviously a hangout for young Euro dopers. I said I was going to look for a better place, I’d meet them later. Once again, I had been given a name.

The hotel was fine. Large room, shower and toilet, balcony. Clean. A quite



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loud woman in her fifties was running the place. She said from now until the beginning of the camel fair, the price was 250 rupees a night (just over five dollars). During the six days of the fair it went up to 2500.

“What? Ten times!”

“Always booked out during *Mela*,” she said. “Every place is.”

I met up with Ivo and Christian, and we walked down to the lake. There appeared to be several entrances between buildings to gain lake access. Each had a large green box with a sign that said Donation. The lads paused. I kept walking down the steps.

“Donation! Donation!” a few men who were sitting at the top of the steps cried.

“Why?” I asked.

“This is holy lake.”

“Oh, really! Well, you come to my country, you go to any church, any temple, nobody ever asks you for money. Now I go to talk to God. God never charges to talk with Him – get it?”

“Okay, okay. No problem.”

The lake was not large, perhaps a dozen football fields in size. But the architecture of the buildings surrounding it was ever so grand. People were dunking themselves. People were feeding the pigeons. It had a feel like the Grand Canal in Venice, only better.

A man approached. “You like to have puja?” He took out small flowers, gave them to each of us. “I am Brahmin. Come, I give you puja.”

“And how much does this cost?” I wondered.

“Nothing. However, if you wish to make a donation —”

I took my flower and handed it back.

That evening as the sun was going down, we made our way over to the base of the lake. There on the steps leading to the murky water were about 50 people, all of them young travelers, mostly Israelis. An American black man began playing guitar and singing vintage Marley. He had a beautiful voice. As the sun touched the buildings across the lake, I began to cry. Not like I had cried in Byron Bay. This was a cry of happiness, of peace. I felt like I had come home.

On my way out of the hotel my third morning, the manager stopped me. Her

husband, who looked older, my age, appeared to do nothing but lie on the floor all day.

“How long will you be staying?”

“Right up to the camel fair, like I told you.”

“You give me now all the money for the whole time you stay.”

“How come?”

“I need it. My mother-in-law goes into hospital today and I need money for her bill.”

“Oh. Uh, you’ll give me a discount or something then?”

“No discount. Already I give you discount.”

“Well, um. I’ll have to change some travelers checks, then.”

“My brother has a money changing business near the main street. He’ll give you good rate.”

“Why don’t you just ask your brother for money.”

“Never ask family for money. Very bad.”

When I saw the Italian guys later, I told them about the hotel thing.

“That’s bullshit!” cried Ivo. My sentiments precisely. Still, I felt funny turning her down. I went for a walk. There were a couple of more expensive hotels just off the lake. I went into one and had a look at some rooms. One in particular had a lot of space, two single beds, shower, plus a balcony just overlooking the lake. Down to the right of the balcony was the area where people gathered in the evening to view the sunset. Perfect. Eleven dollars a day, but it would go up sixfold for camel fair. I took it.

Back at my original hotel, I packed my things and went down to pay. I expected a hassle, but none was forthcoming. She tried, she lost. Business.

Life began anew at my new home within a home. Every day did I wander new paths. The town itself had hardly any vehicular traffic. Bicycles, motorcycles, cows, pigs, dogs, and above them all, on the rooftops, monkeys. The only animal not roaming free was the occasional camel, used mainly for haulage.

In Varanasi, in fact in all the rest of India, the word *namaste* was your official greeting. Here, no. Here they said *Ram-ram*, followed by the word *ji*, which sort of meant sir, although you could apply it to either sex. I found that simply by smiling and saying, *Ram-ram, ji*, doors that had been closed suddenly flew open.

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I found the Om Shiva restaurant. There were two Om Shiva restaurants, about 150 yards apart. Both buffets: all you can eat. Both had the same exact menus. Same prices.

“Oh, he used to work for me,” said the boss of the one I found myself going to for most of my meals. “We had a falling out. He left and started up his own place, copying everything from here.”

“And you can’t do anything about it?” He shrugged. “What to do, sir?”

I learned that this was one of the holiest towns in India. Krishna temples abounded in the subcontinent. As did temples honoring Shiva. Pushkar had the only Brahma temple in the entire country. Because of its holified position, Pushkar was, by Hindu law, 100% vegetarian and alcohol-free. (Of course, you often smelled alcohol on the breaths of locals. But then, my father, who had made bathtub gin during Prohibition, once told me when I was a kid, “Whatever people aren’t allowed to have, they want, and they’ll find a way of getting.”)

Every morning I’d rent a single-speed black bike for five rupees an hour and tool off into the desert. Landscape colors were ever so subtle, and each day I grew to love it more. I’d pass men driving camel carts. “*Ram-ram, ji!*” I’d call out. Always a *Ram-ram, ji* in return. Women worked repairing the roads, their sarongs the bright colors of autumn and something that looking like an old-fashioned doorknocker protruding from their left cheeks. When I greeted them in the way I did the men, nothing came back. Well, stares; dark, curious stares.

There were only a few houses along the desert road, but always plenty of kids. They’d see me, they would yell: “One rupees!” Or, “School pen!” Or, “Choco-lot!” I composed a song I would sing out loud whenever I pedaled past: “One rupee (tata-ta), school pen (boh-boh), choco-lot (choco-lot, choco-la-la-lot).” After a while I succeeded in getting them to sing along with me as they raced onto the road, trying to grab the luggage carrier and stop me.

The journey took just over an hour. I knew I was getting fit because each day my hour got me further away from the town.

I was meeting people. Not fellow travelers so much. Locals.

There was Laxmi, who had a tiny shop selling incense sticks. A short, chubby man with a lovely smile and always a few days’ beard. He would beckon me in, we’d sit cross-legged on the floor and he’d send a boy to get us tea (“Cheeny-china!” I’d yell in my horrible Hindi: without sugar).

Laxmi would give me inside information about Pushkar, about India.

“That man who just passed? Richest man in Pushkar. He does his morning prayer at a tiny street temple on Sweets Alley (all the stalls there made and sold Indian sweets). You know why?” I shook my head no. “All the sweets-makers place offerings for the gods there. The richest man in Pushkar has a terrible sweet tooth. When he’s done his prayers, he picks up the sweets and puts them in his pockets.”

He explained once about the caste system. “The four main castes represent the human body,” he said. “The Brahmins, the priest caste, are the head. Ksatriya are soldiers, police, the big landlords. The arms and chest. Vaisya are the merchants and smaller landlords. That’s why they’re so fat – they’re the stomach. And the Sudra are the laborers. They’re the backside. That’s why there’s so much shit on the streets in India.”

I also became friends with Umbrella-head. He was in his fifties, a handsome man with white beard and beautiful smile. He had one leg and rode bare-chested up and down the main street on one of those flat wheelie things mechanics used to slide under cars, propelling himself with wooden blocks. The front of his wheelie was filled with carnations. Plus lighted incense sticks, plastic airplane, a GI Joe and any other toy he could find. I called him Umbrella-head because he wore one of those hats that had a small umbrella attached. I never gave him money, but whenever I saw him I’d buy him a glass of chai. He in turn would give me a flower, which he first would bless. He seemed to know a single word of English, with which he always greeted me: “Good?” he’d say. To which I would reply: “Good!”

Another beggar was a woman I initially figured was in her twenties, but later learned was over forty. She had this lovely face that smiled all the time. Her legs had no use at all. She sat in the same spot of the street every day. She called me Papa. I called her *Bettie* (daughter). She never let me pass without calling me over and taking my hand. Once in a while I’d give her a few rupees, but not regularly. I liked our relationship and didn’t want it to be a money thing.

One morning following my bike run and breakfast at the (original) Om Shiva, I passed her as I headed back to my hotel. She showed me her hands – full of bruises and calluses from using them to propel herself along the street. (What I didn’t know was that some American Samaritan had bought her gloves, which she sold within minutes.)

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I went back to the hotel, got a small jar of arnica cream and a clean hanky, which I wetted. Back to her post, I squatted down alongside, washed her hands and vigorously applied the arnica.

I did this for several days running. Word got out. (There were no secrets in Pushkar; none.) The fourth or fifth morning, I realized I hadn't wet the handkerchief. I looked around for some water, spotted a half-filled plastic bottle belonging to a shopkeeper. I pantomimed I would like some to wet the hanky. He shook his head no and waved me away. Immediately another shopkeeper stormed over and gave him a tongue-lashing. The first shop person quickly handed me the bottle. Take, take, he motioned.

By the end of the week I was drawing crowds. I'd spot her, saunter over. Nobody around. Kneel down, begin to wash, rub in the cream. (She was acting the princess by now, looking off to the distance, an air of ho-hum.) Suddenly I'd have an audience. A big one. Got so, maybe a couple hundred people would instantly gather. This one day after I had finished, I stood up and began to walk off. I heard, "Baba! Baba!" Turned around and saw I was being pursued by a one-legged man on crutches. Yo, guy. Arnica goes just so far, y'know what I mean?

Pushkar. It just kept getting better and better. The Italians told me they'd had enough, wanted to see more of the country. (With a couple a young fems, of course.) We said good-by, and off they went. Five days later they were back. "You were right, Baba," Christian said. "Out there is India. Hoo. We'll stay in Pushkar!"

\*

I opened my eyes and the first thing I saw was a huge orange egg.

Orange egg??

I lay there on my right side, cheek to the pillow, trying to work it out. I knew I was in Pushkar, in a hotel room, but, strangely, not my hotel room. That was all. Ah, but as the moments passed and my mind cleared of sleep, surely the mystery would be solved. Thirty seconds went by, a minute. I was no more enlightened. A huge orange egg.

I shuffled back on the bed. I blinked. I gaped.

The huge orange egg was the back of the head of a sleeping orange haired woman.

Silently I leaned over, gazed at her face. Cheeks puffy near the eyes, mouth

slung open like a guppy. But nice. Gently I lifted the blanket. Took in a magnificently crafted back, flawless round bum. Real nice.

It came back to me now. Sonia. We'd met the day before. I saw her first, a stunner. Slim, early forties, French, I figured. Turned out late forties, Belgian. She was shopping at one of the narrow stalls on the main market street, her hands already full of bulging black and white striped plastic bags. I stared and sighed. Some minutes later, my mind elsewhere, she approached. Did I know this place where everybody goes to watch the sun set over the holy lake? Sure, I'm headed there myself. So we watched the sun set, listened to the percussion guys, us and a thousand young Israelis sitting stoically on the steps or twirling their streamers and the gypsies there to henna their hands or hawk them bangles or just beg.

After, I said, "Care to share dinner?"

"There's a good restaurant here?" She was in Pushkar just for the day, having hired a taxi to see all of Rajasthan in a week.

"The finest in all of India. Five stars."

"Really?"

"Nah. But it's clean, all you can eat for 50 rupes and the people are nice."

"Oh, a true local eatery – that sounds marvelous! Let me drop my bags off at the hotel and shower. Tell me where this wonderful five star place is and I'll meet you."

Which she did. We sat on the Om Shiva's narrow catwalk (monkeywalk, more like it), looking down at the amazing market-street scene. A great muscular bull was loping down the way. He spotted an open door, wandered on in. Moments later he sprinted back out, followed by a tiny, wizened old woman brandishing a broom. Sonia laughed joyously. "This is so much fun!"

Her husband, she told me, was a prominent wheel in the European Union in Brussels. "He likes teenage girls." She looked at me and shrugged. "So I take lots of trips and shop." Another shrug.

After, I walked her back to her hotel, which was the most expensive in the town. Her eyes asked the question. Well...

I now gently kissed the top of the Orange Egg's orange egg, lay back on the pillow, considering my fortunes. Twice in one journey: not bad for a geezer. Plus, confidence restored post-Stephanie the Czech, I no longer had need of chemical assistance. I gazed up at the ceiling, smiling large. Ran my tongue reflexively

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along my teeth. And again. And –

— And sat bolt upright. Frantically began searching the nightstand, all around the bedclothes, the floor. Where was it; where??

Normally at night I take them out, place them in a hard plastic travel alarm case I carry, set it nearby. This I'd done with Stephanie because she was farsighted and never knew I even wore a plate till I told her, fourth day along. I certainly hadn't done that last night, not and risk this most beautiful of women, whose sight was fine, being grossed out. So I had figured to sleep with it in. Obviously, I hadn't. So where was the damn thing?

I slipped my hand under her body, felt around on the sheet. Moved the hand down to her butt, fingers working like an octopus on speed. Sonia the Orange Egg let out a soft moan. I leaned over to search the narrow strip of bed next to her body. And that's when I saw it. Smack in the center of her pube.

How the hell did it get there? Well, I knew how it got *there*, just how did it *get* there?

I reached over and daintily tried to pluck the plate loose. It rose up off the muff (also orange: a natural, this one), fell back again. I leaned closer. The wire clip-ons were wrapped securely around the curlies. I gently pulled. The teeth held fast. The bastards were grinning up at me.

Sudden panic-thought: she's done this herself! Found the plate, twisted it in there, now she's faking sleep and laughing her lovely tush off at me! But no, her breathing was sleep-breathing. If this was a joke, it was God's, not hers.

As I worked the plate, hair at a time, my face inches away, it hit me: the scent. The one aroma mankind has never been able to replicate and bottle. I took a deep breath. Even deeper. Another.

I glanced up at the face of the producer of this heady fragrance. Still soundly sleeping.

The teeth came free.

And so did the next act of the day.

\*

Everything returned to normal. Except Pushkar was hardly normal. Whatever I did, wherever I went, my focus always returned to the lake. The beauty of it, the

sense of power it held.

I watched people get collared by the Brahmins, some garbed as religious sadhus, complete with trident, others in conventional dress. Once I saw a man my age with a white-bearded sadhu. They were sitting barefoot atop a blanket on the walkway extending out into the water. The sadhu was talking and gesturing with his hands. The Westerner sat there nodding. At least half an hour this was. Then the Westerner pushed several banknotes into the hands of the Brahmin. After, I approached the Westerner.

“You don’t look the type,” I said.

“Type, schmype,” he replied. Name was Sid. American, from LA. “Look, ten years ago I came here with my wife. My third wife. For the hell of it I got this guy to do a puja. I mean, what the hell. The wife was always running after psychics, tarot readers, all that drek. Figured I might go for a little more authority. Paid a hell of a lot less, too. He tells me I’ve got a business, which I do, and I’m gonna have my best year ever, but I should watch out for my partner, who’s trying to screw me. A hundred percent, it turns out. Nu? I come back the next year. Again, everything he says is right on the money. So I’ve been every year since. Who knows, maybe the guy’s just lucky. Maybe he’s God. I should care? I’m on a roll. Besides, it’s a tax write-off.”

Another situation wasn’t so happy. I had seen this woman arrive at my hotel the day before. Middle to late twenties, also from California. Traveling alone.

From my balcony I now spotted her by the lake with the sleaziest, creepiest Brahmin working the number. All the time he was talking, eyes on her tits. He finished. She pulled out her money belt. A bill. Then another. Another. From where I sat peering down, I was certain they were hundreds. And she kept forking them over. Now she was crying. Either because she’d given him too much or not enough, I had no idea. A silent voice said, Don’t get involved. Yet another said, Do something!

I raced down to the lobby. Behind the desk was one of the regular clerks. He was of the second caste, a former army sergeant. Sitting writing in a ledger. I told him what I’d seen. He made no sign he had heard me, that I was even there. My weight on one foot, then the other. I repeated myself, louder.

“Look, she’s staying here. At your hotel. That bastard’s taken her to the cleaners. Don’t you have any sense of responsibility for your guests?”

Still no response. I walked around the desk, stuck my face into his.



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“Are you afraid to take on this guy?” I yelled. “He’s higher caste than you, you’re scared of him? I go out there, I’ll kick his Brahmin ass halfway into the lake, then I’ll get kicked out of India. You want this?” Silence. No recognition. “Yo, what am I, a goddamn Harijan (Untouchable)?”

He looked up. In a soft voice he said, “Baba, why like this?”

Then he calmly closed the ledger, stood up and stretched. Slowly stepped around the desk and out the door.

“He’s dressed like a business type, struts around like he’s got a —”

“I know who he is.” He did? How?

The young California woman was still sitting by the lake. The Brahmin was fifty feet away. My man walked slowly up to him; I was a few paces off. When he got up to the Brahmin, he gave me a behind-the-back hand wave. I stopped. He leaned close to the puja man. Said something in his ear. They strolled along together for a ways, like two old friends. Then the Brahmin reached into his sarong and, without a glance, handed over the money. The desk man turned and walked right past me. He sat down next to the woman from California, and talked to her softly. I could see her nodding. Still crying, but now nodding. He handed her the bills.

“What did you say to the guy?” I asked him later at the desk.

“Baba, you listen to me,” he said, ignoring my question. “In Pushkar, you talk to everybody, the cleaning people, beggars, everybody. You are kind to them. Most guests talk to no one on staff, never look at the beggar people. So everybody here agrees: you good man. But please do not think you know India. You do not know India. India has many, many tricks, my friend. And to know India, you must know the tricks.” He gave me the head-wag. Then went back to his ledger.

Being me, I rarely changed my routine. Up early, out on the balcony to watch the colors change until the first sun splash hit the hillside temple off in the distance. Then bike ride, breakfast, long walk, lunch, nap, long walk, dinner. I did change eating places every few days, though. I’d hear of a place, I’d check it out.

There was a street that ran off the main drag where half dozen cheap backpackers’ were located. In the middle was a small restaurant. Owned by an elderly local, but the two guys who cooked and served were from Sikkim. When Ivo, who was shaved totally bald except for a chin-tail, and I first walked in together, one of the Sikkim guys called out, “Hey, look: Full-moon and Half-moon!” Which became our names there.

The place was a hangout for Israelis. There was an area in back where they would go, lie down, smoke ganja and spend the evening having coughing fits. One of them had to be the ugliest young person I'd ever seen. Short, no hair, ears that stuck out like bat's wings. His head bent forward on his neck and his expression was vapid. Eyes red-rimmed. Always stoned.

One of my daily diversions was a secondhand bookstall run by a little man with round glasses. There were a few used bookshops on the main street, but this guy really knew books, they weren't just a commodity, and I liked talking with him. He knew I was a travel book junkie, so often he would slip me one. He didn't seem to care did I buy or not. I would sit and read while he tended to other customers. I got into the habit of noting down quotes pertinent to my situation and present feelings.

“A journey is a series of gambles, and after a while you get to be good at it. They are part of what makes traveling worthwhile. The automatic assumptions of ordinary life don't apply, so awareness and intuition take their place. The more risks you can afford, the more freedom and spontaneity you win. Every traveler chooses differently, every choice is a test of fate, and every fortunate outcome strengthens confidence in the next decision.” That was Ted Simon from *The Gypsy in Me*. So was this:

“There is no lack of people in my journeys, and they are my principal interest. Nor am I a dispassionate voyeur peering into other people's lives. Strong connections are formed rapidly, and they nourish me. What distinguishes them from my relationships at home is the absence of those expectations which I find burdensome and restrictive, demanding that I behave in certain predictable ways. These emotional transactions trade too heavily on guilt and obligation. When I travel, I experience a sense of freedom that occasionally comes close to ecstasy.”

Now and then the little man would hand me a book I found not particularly to my liking, but nonetheless had some lines that spoke to my heart.

“When you travel, you experience the act of rebirth. You confront completely new situations, the day passes more slowly, and on most journeys you don't even understand the language people speak. So you are a child out of the womb. You begin to attach much more importance to the things around you because your survival depends upon them. Since all things are

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new, you see the beauty in them, and you feel happy to be alive.”

From *The Pilgrimage*, by Paulo Coelho. As was:

“When you are moving toward an object, it is very important to pay attention to the road. It is the road that teaches us the best way to get there, and the road enriches us as we travel its length. Same thing when you have an objective in life. It will turn out to be better or worse depending on the route you choose and how you negotiate it. We always know which is the best road to follow, but (unfortunately) we follow only the road that we have become accustomed to.”

Then there was Michael Leunig, the brilliant Australian cartoonist/philosopher:

“How to get there: Go to the end of the path until you get to the gate. Go through the gate and head straight out towards the horizon. Keep going towards the horizon. Sit down and have a rest every now and then. But keep going; just keep on with it. Keep on going as far as you can – that’s how you get there.”

Too simple for you? Then you’d never been on the road. Leunig again:

“Let it go; let it out/ let it all unravel/ Let it free and it can be/ A path on which to travel.”

One evening I was in the bookstore when the world’s ugliest Israeli came in. He wanted to sell a book in Hebrew.

“This good book. Give me good price.”

The little man with the round glasses looked it over, made an offer. Without a word, the Israeli took back the book, shuffled across the road (which was no more than an alley, really) to another bookshop. Two minutes later he was back. He tried to bargain, but the little man wouldn’t budge. The Israeli took the money without a word and moved off.

I made a comment, not all that kind, about him to the bookseller. A man in his thirties was nearby having a read.

“You know his story?” he said. “He was in the army, of course. His group was in the West Bank and some Palestinian kids were throwing rocks. They were ordered to fire on them. You can’t say no, that’s insubordination. So in situations like that they generally fire just over the heads. That’s what he tried to do. But his aim was low and he hit a 13 year old kid. Killed him instantly. This guy totally lost it after that. He was in a psychiatric hospital, but what could they do. What you see now is

a ghost. And I suspect he will always be a ghost.”

It was a couple days later – no connection, I should think – that I got sick. I had escaped it completely on this journey, and now it caught up. Not too bad. Certainly not what I’d seen in others. Just your standard diarrhea, no energy. I went to see the meanest person in Pushkar.

The meanest person in Pushkar was a fat old lady with pink and brown splotched skin, like she’d been in a fire. She sat on the floor of a small, garage-like stall on the main street, chewing what well might have been her cud. She was an ayurvedic practitioner.

I’d been to her once before, for constipation. She didn’t speak English (or pretended not to), so I called in a man from the shop across the way, told him my problem, which he translated. Without a word to him or me, still chewing her cud, she reached around, took a dirty plastic jar off a shelf. Picked up a rusty knife, dug into the jar, pulled out as much brown powder as would stay on the blade. Tapped the powder into a four-inch square section of local newspaper. Folded the paper into a ball and threw it on the floor between us. Then she picked up another dirty plastic jar. Poured out a dozen small brown pellets, put these in another newspaper square, folded it, tossed it on the floor. Said something to the guy, turned away. I should take the powder in water now, he said, then again before bed. Suck on the pellets every three hours.

“How much?” I asked. He translated.

“She says the treatment is free.”

Took the powder, sucked the pellets, and following morning I just made it to the crapper. Look up the Guinness Records for biggest dump by a white man in India.

Now she gave me more powder, more pellets. Chewing her cud. Looking away in disdain. I thought: these things look exactly like the stuff she gave me last time. Did as told nonetheless. By the next morning the diarrhea had quit, but I was still weak, so decided to stay in and fast.

The following morning I felt fine. I was quite impressed. Normally, I didn’t respond to any natural medicine, be it homeopathic, herbal or whatever.

I went out and hired my bicycle. Pedaled through the town towards the desert. The sight that greeted me, just as I approached the apron of desert sand, stopped me short. I just sat there, squeezing the handlebars and gaping like a goof.

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Before me, far as the eye could see across the dunes: camels. There hadn't been a one just days before, and now? Ten thousand? Twenty? And their people. People from deep in the Rajasthan desert. Whom, I had been told, took up to a month driving their beasts in for the annual fair. But the fair was a week off, so I hadn't expected... Jesus, what a scene.

I locked the bike and began walking amongst them. The people were as fascinating as their charges. Tall, dark, slim and stately – not at all like the lighter-skinner and often far more corpulent standard Indians. Many were squatting around small fires, boiling chai or patty-caking chapattis. Others were tending to the camels.

They were grooming them, trimming their facial hair, shearing the bodies, at times actually creating “paintings” in the camel's sides with the shears. Every camel was being fit for a bridle. The way they did this made me wince. (Camel, too.) They had a metal fitting that looking like a golf tee. While someone (or some two) held the non-compliant beast, a man drove the fitting with a small hammer into the side of the camel's nose. The camel screamed, but as soon as the deed was done, the animal became immediately silent and appeared to have forgotten anything of a painful nature ever happened.

From top of a dune I watched as a few of the camels were being raced. The driver sat far back, on the camel's haunches. His legs were straight forward, and he leaned back at about a thirty-degree angle. The camel ran stiff-legged, yet with a sense of elegance.

I was the lone whitey as far as I could see. And I was getting stares from the men. I'd smile, give a bit of a wave and offer: “*Ram-ram, ji!*” Which broke the ice. Often they'd babble a whole string at me. To which I'd increase the smile and give an unnatural head wag.

I meandered in and out, up and down. I was a kid in some fantasyland; I'd stepped through the magic door in back of the wardrobe.

A man approached. He spoke some English. He stood behind a huge camel, smacked it on the rump. Then he moved to the front, opened the camel's mouth, stuck his head in. “Not like horse,” he said. “Camel no kick, no bite. Come, I show.”

I backed off a step, but he grabbed my hand. Into the mouth. The camel's teeth were huge and splayed every which way. Its breath was foul, and my fingers

felt the most awful goo. The man was right, though. The camel did not bite. It did something worse. It heaved projectile vomit at me. I performed a quick sidestep, and most of it shot past. Not all, however. “Aw, yuck!” I yelled. The men all around thought this was the most hilarious sight ever; the fair had not even begun and already I had provided the high point for them.

There were not only camels, but Arabian horses, sleek, often jet black, with ears that stood perfectly vertical. Gorgeous creatures. I thought: how can all these animals look so healthy? I mean, this was desert, what could they feed them. (Hell, what did they feed themselves?)

The women and kids were in clusters by themselves. Never with the men. They, too, while not all that clean, looked healthy.

I was so overwhelmed by the scene in front of me that I didn’t even notice the scene emerging behind. For that’s where the people here, squatting or standing, now were looking. I turned to see, not five yards off, a man. An old man with a white beard very much like my own, except his beard was full of food bits. And his clothes, in contrast to my clean t-shirt and jeans, were torn and filthy. But he himself, dark brown skin gleaming in the hot sun and his bearing stately and erect, had eyes that were clear and sparkling. It was obvious he was a chief of some sort.

Everyone, I think even the camels, had their attention glued to the two old boys.

Slowly, he took a step towards me. Without thought, I did the same towards him. Then another. And another. Like superannuated gunslingers at high noon. Until we were standing face to face.

What happened then, I’m certain, was for the both of us wholly unplanned. For the next thing I knew, this old chap and I were in a heartfelt embrace. Hugging and hugging.

And a mighty cheer went up from all those around us.

East meets West.

A few hours later I returned to the hotel, had me a nap, then back to the camels. This was my routine over the next few days. Then *they* began showing up. Turistas, many with lenses the size of elephant shlongs, poking them everywhere, every which way.

“You like camel ride, sir?” One of the desert men, holding the reins to a squatting dromedary.

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“Not me, pal.”

“Very tame, this camel.”

I watched a 50 year old Norwegian woman get aboard the same camel. As soon as the keeper pulled the camel to its feet, it gave a mighty shrug and the woman fell *floomp!* to the sand. She got to her feet, a bit dazed, climbed back on top. Yeah, I’ll get on one of them things. Right.

More and more people were coming into Pushkar. Yet all the merchants and hotel owners had long faces. “Bad year, Baba,” one man said. “Every year for past three or four, less and less Western tourists. This is worst ever, I feel. In this one week we have to make enough money to last until the beginning of next tourist season.” He shook his head. “Very bad, very bad.”

If the numbers of Yanks, Euros and Japanese were down, I couldn’t imagine the Indians coming in to be fewer than normal. Bus loads, throughout the day and night, poured into Pushkar. I sat in Laxmi’s tiny shop, sipping chai-cheeny-china, as he pointed out the passing hordes.

“These people are from Gujarat, and those over there come from Maharashtra,” he’d say. “And these coming past now are all the way from Calcutta.”

“How can you tell?”

Laxmi merely smiled. “Can you not tell the difference between Americans and Germans and Italians? Their clothes, the colors they wear. Just the way they look and walk?”

Beggars made the scene like dope dealers at a rock festival. And more and more sadhu types, their red robes, tridents, ever-present chillums full of ganja. At night I could hear their coughing from the other side of the lake.

The beggar with the cow that had a shriveled fifth hoof growing out of its neck was doing a fair business. So was the sadhu hanging from a tree. He was harnessed to the tree, his feet barely touching the ground. No matter what time of day or night I walked by, he was there.

The fair itself was strictly low art, what you might expect from Indians. Hundreds of hastily erected canvas shops selling the same boring products (seven different colors of rope? true!). No event was on time, nothing worked as it should. Which was fine because everything scheduled was pure kitsch and camp. The one thing I had hoped to see was the camel race, slated for an early afternoon at the small stadium in the western part of town. Instead, all afternoon was occupied by

an exhilarating cattle judging competition. The only camels I'd seen by the time I left at 5 were a string of about a dozen flea-bitten geriatrics which slowly sauntered through the stadium, each hosting two elderly Western tourists, all 24 of whom looked like they'd bought tickets to hell.

The noise was deafening, especially at night. Indians absolutely loved noise. Loudspeakers at top volume, fireworks that had no sparkling colors shooting forth, just banged idiotically. Thank Vishnu for my earplugs.

The big event, I had been told, came the final morning. This was full moon, and beginning at two or three or four in the morning, depending on who did the telling, the pilgrims came to the lake to bathe. My friend Amrit seemed to be the most clued in here. Every single god in the Hindu pantheon – would you believe 300 *million*? – would be in attendance over the holy lake, he said. Not to be missed.

It was just after 4 when came the knock at my door. I stumbled out of bed to see Amrit standing there smiling.

“How did you get past the hotel guard?” I wondered.

“Sleeping-sleeping,” he grinned.

I put on every garment of clothing I had, including woolly cap, gloves and three pairs of socks. Handed Amrit a blanket and stepped out onto the balcony wrapped in my sleeping bag. The moon was full, it was the holiest of holies. It was also cold as sin.

Only our faces showing, we sat on the balcony just outside my room – my six-times-normal-rate-for-Mela-week room – and watched the moonlit spectacle below.

You had to love the Hindu religion. If earthlings in fact could not exist without some formal code or belief structure in the invisible, this had to be top-seeded. In direct contrast to Judeo-Christianity, so orderly, somber and hushed, Hinduism was chaos at its most magnificent. Gods who were elephants, gods who were monkeys, gods colored blue, gods who'd shagged 16,000 maidens in a single night, gods with limb numbers worthy of a battalion of spiders. Worship pulsed with sound, smell, color and life.

At the moment, hours before dawn, the ghats and footpaths around the lake were choked with humanity. Thousands of people, their bright red and orange saris, robes and turbans just slightly subdued by the moon's eerie glow, sang, chanted and dipped in the freezing waters. I soaked up every frame of this amazing film, for I knew the atmosphere on the balcony wouldn't last.



## *FEARBUSTING*

For days prior, the stubby little manager and his deputies, always unflappable, had become more and more frenetic. Two days back there came a knock on my door. Would I mind changing my room? Not on your life, I said. Would it then be possible not to use the balcony on Mela morning? Are you out of your mind? I cried.

My balcony – and in truth even though it was directly outside my room, it was a common area – was to be occupied by a Very Important Minister that special morning, the manager informed me.

“I shall be most happy to share MY balcony with him,” I said.

The following evening a few heavies in suits paid a visit. “Taking pictures on Mela morning is not possible,” the head heavy informed me.

“I don’t own a camera,” I replied.

“Taking pictures means immediate arrest!” he said.

“Did you hear me, dude? I don’t own a —”

“Sign here!” he ordered. A waiver that I would not take pictures with the camera I didn’t own.

The manager showed me a tapestry he had bought to grace the minister’s table. “Silk,” he said in a whisper. “Eight hundred rupees,” he groaned. “You think the minister will like?”

“How can he not?” I replied. It was ugly as Jabba the Hutt.

The moon had set and dawn was segueing into the first real sign of morning when the minister appeared, followed by an entourage, exploding our peace, our mood, our concentration on the scene around the lake. Amrit quickly made to leave. As a third-caste Vaisya, he was obviously uncomfortable. I restrained him. “You are my guest,” I said quietly. “Please stay.”

Curiously, the manager brought the minister over and introduced me. (Amrit might well have been vapor.) I was, the manager announced, a “most famous architect from America”. Only his pleading eyes kept me from blurting out I was a most unfamous nonentity whose permanent address was a pair of backpacks.

“Such good vibes,” the minister noted, having been schooled in Cool.

He stayed half an hour, sipping chai and munching on cheese and crackers. Then upon his sign, the half dozen who had been standing to attention behind him made to depart. The minister whispered something to his nearest aide, who in a single swift movement scooped the silk tapestry off the table and tucked it inside his sarong.

The manager's immediate dismay quickly gave way to resigned smile. The minister's visit, after all, had been an obvious success. Plus they shared the same taste in tablecloths.

The camels, their people and all but a handful of tourists vanished as suddenly as they had appeared. Pushkar went back to what it was and so did my routine. One day I realized I had not been out of the town for well over a month. I jumped on a bus to Ajmer. Walked around for an hour in this busy, noisy, dirty, hassling city. Got lost half a dozen times. Jumped on the bus back to Pushkar. Whew.

One morning I woke up and...something was different. I lay there looking up at the flaked ceiling. What? And then it hit home: I was happy. I was really, honest-and-truly *happy*! Sixty-three? Bullshit! I was the world's oldest living teenager.

How could this be? India was about to go to war with Pakistan. Israel was about to go to war with Palestine. America was bombing the shit out of the most hapless, pathetic little country on the globe. And I was happy?!

*It's the end of the world as we know it – and I feel fine.*

The little man with the round glasses handed me a book as I stepped into his shop. I glanced at it, then did a double take. I could feel my eyes brighten, a huge grin of recollection appear. *The Teachings of Don Juan*. The hippies' bible, c. 1968. Mandatory reading. And rereading. And talking about. The book had a significance much like an authenticated account of UFOs. We wanted – needed – to believe there was something more than the crap our parents had handed down to us.

Most of the hippie kids, being young, being rather foolish, got into their old VW buses and went to Mexico looking for Don Juan, much as straights would board charter flights to go searching for Babaji in India a decade later. Not me. The whole deal between Carlos and the old sorcerer was an okay yarn, not terribly well written. But one small section leaped out at me and became ingrained in my soul.

The old sorcerer was talking about the four enemies of man. The first three, I now recalled, were fear, clarity and power. The discussion on fear had knocked me out.

When a man started to learn, Don Juan said, he was never clear about his objectives. His purpose was faulty, his intent was vague. Learning was never what he expected.

## FEARBUSTING

“And thus he has tumbled upon the first of his natural enemies: Fear! A terrible enemy – treacherous, and difficult to overcome. It remains concealed at every turn of the way, prowling, waiting. And if the man, terrified in its presence, runs away, his enemy will have put an end to his quest. He will never learn. He will never become a man of knowledge. He will perhaps be a bully or a harmless, scared man; at any rate, he will be a defeated man. To overcome fear he must not run away. He must defy his fear, and in spite of it he must take the next step in learning, and the next, and the next. *He must be fully afraid, and yet he must not stop.* (My italics) That is the rule! And a moment will come when his first enemy retreats. The man begins to feel sure of himself. His intent becomes stronger. Learning is no longer a terrifying task. When this joyful moment comes, the man can say without hesitation that he has defeated his first natural enemy. It happens little by little, and yet the fear is vanquished suddenly and fast.”

Oh, yes! I had thought back then. Oh, yes! I thought now.

I skimmed over clarity (which Don Juan claimed blinded the seeker of knowledge) and power, which had never been a problem. I couldn't remember what the fourth enemy might have been. When I found it, I laughed out loud, causing the few others in the shop to glance over.

“...almost without warning he will come upon the last of his enemies: Old age! This enemy is the cruelest of all, the one he won't be able to defeat completely, but only fight away. This is the time when a man has no more fears, no more impatient clarity of mind – a time when all his power is in check, but also the time when he has an unyielding desire to rest. If he gives in totally to his desire to lie down and forget, if he soothes himself in tiredness, he will have lost his last round, and his enemy will cut him down into a feeble old creature. His desire to retreat will overrule all his clarity, his power, and his knowledge. But if the man sloughs off his tiredness, and lives his fate through, he can then be called a man of knowledge, if only for the brief moment when he succeeds in fighting off his last, invincible enemy.”

\*

It was six weeks to the day when I left Pushkar. I didn't want to say good-bye to people, but they all seemed to know: Amrit, Laxmi, Umbrella-head, the beautiful beggar lady I called daughter. I put on my smiley mask for them all, said I'd be back, and scooted onto the bus to Ajmer. The only seat was on the very last row, next to three young Muslim men who giggled a lot. They would confer, their heads together, and the one closest to me would ask a question in very halting English. My answer, whatever it was, put them back into giggles.

When we got off, they all shook my hand. The one who had asked the questions was obviously working to form words. Finally he said: "I love you!" as the other two giggled. And I love you, friend.

The overnight train ride to Delhi was thankfully uneventful. But coming into the city at 6.30 was a fascination. Miles and miles of tarpaper shanties, people squatting on the adjacent tracks taking their morning dump.

I bargained the taxi driver from 400 to 180 rupees. Along the way, well past the city, a car was pulled off the side of the road. A well dressed man in his twenties and an equally well dressed older woman stood beside it. The taxi driver pulled in front and stopped.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Car broken down. Need help."

"*Chello!*" I yelled. Go! "*Chello* airport!!"

He looked in the rearview at the approaching young man as he slowly, reluctantly, pulled away. A Delhi taxi driver stopping to give assistance to a breakdown? Sure. You betcha. Many tricks in India, Baba.

Delhi to Bangkok, 15 hours at the airport; Bangkok to Auckland with stopover in Sydney, Auckland to my little town. Picked up at the tiny local airport by a friend. Pushkar to home: from 8pm Monday till 6pm Thursday.

The pohutukawa trees were in full red bloom. The sea 60 yards from the property line was crashing onto the beach. Timothy the pussycat took one look and thought: Aw no – he's back!

I was absolutely wiped out. What I wanted was just to crawl between the sheets and sleep for a month. Instead, I rooted around and found my smelly old running shoes. Then out onto the beach.

As I ran, it dawned that my aching heels no longer ached. When had that happened? Probably the same moment my aching heart no longer ached.

## FEAR-BUSTER #11

They've found me. Nearly a quarter century of successfully hiding out, my own witless defection program, I'd grown smug and secure. Who would ever look for me here? For while this isn't the back of beyond, exactly, climb a tree and face south, you're sure to spot it.

But I've been discovered. And they're coming. Are they ever.

See, for years anybody back in the States wanted to know where I was living, my reply was: "Near Sydney." Sure. Fifteen hundred miles near Sydney.

It's not that I've been selfishly hoarding the glory I had discovered in New Zealand. It's just that I haven't wanted things to change. And Americans, aw, you know. If it ain't broke, fix it anyway.

See, Americans like things *big*. And flash. Cars, houses, buildings. Where in the world, the so-called "civilized" world, other than New Zealand, can you find thousands of miles of beaches, uncluttered by hotels, condos and related ugly? The "Kiwi bach" (for bachelor's quarters), a small, simple wooden cottage, has for generations been a mainstay of New Zealand beach architecture. I have loved that downsized, only-what-you-need sense of living, and sought to protect it.

So here I've hid out from all things American. (Well, not all things. I regularly check up on the Phillies via the Net.) But if I was successful for two decades, I suppose I always knew it was just a matter of time. Past few years my camouflage has slowly been falling away, my delightful down-under retreat increasingly in grave danger of mass discovery.

Started with 9/11, and the fear that followed. That's when the trickle began. Then the Yanks decided to invade Iraq and looked around for accomplices. Amazingly, the PM here, a woman known to cozy up to American governmental and corporate big boys, resisted all kinds of pressure and said Uh-uh, we're not playing. Meaning New Zealand was

not, like Coalition of the Willing partners, a target for the crazies (or if it is, way down on the list). That brought more Stars and Stripers running. Then came the 2004 Academy Awards and all those bloody orcs and elves and Oscars spotlighting us, and it's become an all-out assault. I don't mean as tourists. Buying in.

Just look at my lovely little beach town: new construction every third day, it seems. And the houses are getting bigger, more posh. And just recently, apartments, boxes glued together, higgledy-piggledy. No hi-rises or shopping malls yet. But who knows?

Yeah, the world sure has changed since 9/11, growing more insane by the day, seems like. Not only terrorist threats, but SARS and Thai chicken fever and mad cow disease and giant tsunamis - damn, it's *meshuga* out there!

So what's a guy to do? Why, go against the flow, for sure.

Which is what Fear-Buster Number Eleven is all about. Just four words.

And here they are:

Pack Bag.

Go travel.