

FINDING JUDI

An incredible family journey



BARRY ROSENBERG

*Author of **Dialogues with a Dead Friend***

The Author



Barry Rosenberg has gone through a few changes in his life. Born in Philadelphia in 1938, he grew up rather conventionally...school, college, work, marriage. Then at age 30 he somehow got involved in the hippie thing. *POW!* Since then, he has traveled to over 50 countries, taught Alpha Mind Control to thousands of people and written two books: *FEARBUSTING – Backpacking the World Past 60* and *Dialogues with a Dead Friend*.



He now lives with his wonderful cat, Shayna, on a seven mile New Zealand beach where he is the lone Jewish American vegan.

He claims to be extraordinarily happy.

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FINDING JUDI

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(Tookus bookus)

for the GALZ

PRE-WORD

Another exquisite day on my seven mile beach. I laced up the ancient sneakers, strolled out to the white sands fifty yards from the house. Did a few stretches, began the jog.

This was 1988, and I'd been jogging on this same New Zealand beach, doing the same run – two and a half miles to the West End hills, two and a half back, with a sprint the last two, three hundred yards – every day for a few years now.

To my right, the north, the magnificent Pacific, diamonds dancing on the surface beyond the waves, which today were hardly a ripple. Thirty miles straight out was White Island, an active volcano that often puffs out great mushroom clouds but this morning just a wisp of smoke was visible. To the northwest, Whale Island, which looked more like a snail or a camel's back, except the original Maori who first came this way never heard of camels, so Whale it was. To my left, just past the dunes, a long row of quarter-acre sections with their beach-facing timber homes

Peace; utter and total peace.

I must have been running ten minutes, halfway to the turnaround, when it happened: Out of the blue, I got hit in the face by a fist.

There wasn't a soul around. No, the fist came from the deepest recesses of my own mind – a moment of truth, a mille-second of recognition of something that had been denied for a considerable long time.

I stopped. Bent over, breathing hard, peering down at the sand in front of my old runners. Stayed that way for, I don't know, minutes, I suppose.

Finally I straightened up and continued the run, but my heart wasn't in it. The standard final sprint was a slow jog. I came in off the beach without the customary plunge in the sea.

Inside, I took off the shoes, peeled off the stinking socks. Didn't bother with the sweaty T-shirt and shorts. Sat on an old chair with my legs straight out. Mister Futties came in, took one look, went back outside. If a cat could shake its head...

Thought: I'm fifty (almost). I've had untold fascinating experiences, a jumble of jobs and not-really-jobs. A bunch of relationships with beautiful women. Somehow, I've landed in this wonderful old wooden house with a huge tree-filled garden sitting in absolute paradise, and have no idea how I got here. I don't work, don't need to. Live on my own (preferably so), have more money than at any time in my life. I have traveled to untold foreign lands, met any number of delightful people there who accepted me as one of their own. Can all this be luck? Good karma? Me, the most irresponsible doofus between the poles?

I finally slid out of my shirt and shorts, continued to sit there, naked.

The universe had been unbelievably good to me, and I didn't deserve it, no way. Now it was time to give back; to get off my fifty year old (almost) tuches and do something I should have done ages and ages ago.

I knew what I had to do, I just had no idea how to go by doing it. Somehow, though, whatever the cost, whatever the effort, I was going to find my daughter.

PART I

**Finding
Judi**

FINDING JESSIE

1987

She was in the dream again.

Familiar, yet unknown to me. When she would first appear, she'd look like my sister as she was in her mid-twenties. But the dream-she would quickly morph into someone else, or leave the scene completely.

I was closing in on fifty at the time, in the third year of a relationship that wasn't going well. I had a bizarre history of attracting younger women – in the present instance, fifteen years younger. Personally, I preferred women my own age, who'd been through many of the life experiences I had, whose kids were grown and gone and we could engage in a full-time sharing, just the two of us. For whatever reason, it never seemed to work out that way. My appearance or my manner, something, tended to attract women who saw in me a sort of new age father figure. I saw myself as anything but. I had little patience for my own shenanigans, but I had learned to understand them, accommodate them, deal with them. Other people's? Not so much. So what frequently began as differences leading to argument leading to enervating frustration, most commonly I performed what I called the Barry Backstep – giving ground, conceding my position, walking away. In this relationship, a most unusual occurrence prompted me to toss aside this awkward dance and become assertive: Love for another human being.

Jessie was eight when I met them on the beach in Devonport, a North Shore burb of Auckland, not long after I'd arrived in New Zealand. Jess was tiny and smart and sickly: the worst case of eczema, and its corollary asthma, I'd ever seen. I was a hippie on the road, had been for years, savoring the

movement, the freedom. Two firm rules marked my kind: never move in with a woman's got a sickly kid. Second, don't under any circumstances break the first rule.

But Jessie'd grabbed my heart. She hadn't intended to. Over her brief lifetime her 'mum' had had as many boyfriends as I'd had female. Well before I showed up Jessie had developed a routine defense common to solo kids of solo mothers: you're not going to hang around so I'll reject you before you can abandon me. In my case, such an attitude was entirely justified, at least in the beginning. I saw her as a rather unnecessary footnote to her mother's and my relationship. I was nice to her, but my niceness had little depth, and we both knew it.

When did it change? It happened of a moment. Chris had gone off to a meeting after putting Jessie to bed. I was sitting in the living room, reading. All of a sudden, a blood-curdling scream came from the bedroom. I leapt up and rushed through the flat. What I saw from the doorway to Jessie's room was my own worst nightmare.

Jessie's skin itched. Never stopped. Day and night. Problem was, the itching came from *inside* the skin. When she was awake, this knowledge kept the scratching to a minimum. Asleep, she would scratch through the skin to get to the source. Each morning her sheets were a Rorschach of blood. It was enough to keep a confirmed roadie eyeing the front door.

This particular evening, the itching/scratching horror reached into her dreams and erupted in screams and tears. I stood there, watching. Wanting to flee. Flee I could not – at least not till the mother came home.

I sat down on the bed and timidly reached out my hand. Making certain not to touch an affected area – not only because it made me queasy to do so, but because any touch exacerbated the condition.

"It's okay, babe. It's okay." Yeah, right: okay. No, it wasn't okay, it was totally fucked. That this small being, pretty when you looked past the scabs, super bright, should suffer like this, and had been since the age of three months...

I stroked her more gently than I had any human being, spoke soothingly. In time, she quieted down and fell back to full sleep. I kept my hand on one of the few areas of unblemished skin. And stared at her. And felt myself losing it. Oh shit, I thought. Oh, shit!

For eight years Chris had been mother, father, doctor, nurse. No help,

just one-on-one. Whether guilt or duty, whatever, mother became smother. And Jess took full advantage. “Mu-u-um!” would come the opening sing-song to a request/demand. Get me this, get me that, I’m hungry, how do you spell –. And the mother would be there in an instant.

Critical moment number two: we were sitting on the sofa, Chris and I, cheek to cheek, Jessie on the floor, the three of us reading. “Mu-u-um, make me some tea.” Whereupon Chris made ready to jump.

“Wait a minute. She’s got eczema, she’s not crippled.” I held on tightly.

“But she’s never made tea by herself.”

“At age eight? Jessie, c’mon, off the floor. We’re gonna make a cuppa together.”

Stunned, Jessie looked pleadingly at her mum. “Uh-uh,” I said. “Just you and me. One time only. After this you make your own tea.” And when Chris began to complain, “Look, you’re no longer a single mother –!” The words just fell off my tongue. All life came to a standstill. Shock, the three of us. Me most of all.

I slowly led Jessie into the kitchen. “Right. Fill up the jug. Cold water. Flick the switch. Don’t watch it, it won’t boil! You don’t know that? Christ, what a dumb kid, doesn’t know a watched jug won’t boil! Now it’s boiling? Right: be very careful. Don’t look at me – keep your eyes glued on what you’re doing. Pour it slowly into the cup. Slooow-ly! Good, good.” Jessie in tears throughout. Until the jug was back on the table. She stared at the cup. Just stared at it. Then up at me. World record grin. Then to the doorway where the mother looked on, wringing her hands.

From then on, Jessie was easy. “Yo, dude,” I would say whenever she would ask her mother the spelling of a word. “That big fat book on the shelf? Called a dick-inary. Not much of a story line, but great cast of characters.” And she’d amble over and look it up, often saying, “Wow, it’s got ten different meanings!”

I’d never had fun with a kid before. Never. They were a different species, alien. That changed.

One cold winter morning I peeked into her room. Awake but not awake, awaiting the inevitable call for school. “Pssst! You don’t really want to go this morning, do you?”

She sat up. “I don’t have to go to school?”

“Wellll, I did have a thought about hitching up to Auckland, having an ice cream at Swensen’s.” Two hundred miles away, this was.

She near catapulted out of bed. Now I had to work on Chris.

“She should be going to school. How are you going to hitch? That’s not –”

“Just drive us to the Kawerau turnoff.” Which, finally, she did. Kvetching all the way.

I had taught Jessie the basics of the Alpha Mind Control course I had been teaching since 1972 and now ran on a freelance basis at Auckland University. What I did, I rented the student union cafeteria on successive weekends, hung up posters around the city, did an interview or two on local radio. And filled the place, two, three hundred people. Fee was a donation. Being this was New Zealand, where people were known to squeeze a farthing, I didn’t make a lot of money, but then, money wasn’t the point. After paying the room rent, I gave the money away, usually to groups like Greenpeace or Amnesty. The hippie ethic.

Every evening when Jessie went to bed, I’d be in there telling her a made-up story. Generally the stories were imagery guidings, not much different from what I did in class. Plus we’d play mind games. Visualize a tree. Reach out and feel the bark. When I snap my fingers, project yourself into the tree. You’ll actually be *inside* it. You can change your size anyway you want to, move around freely. And all the while you are perfectly safe. Okay? Ready? *Snap*. And I’d have her tell me what she saw, what she was doing.

She not only was an apt student, she loved it.

Every class I had at the university during those back-to-back weekends, thirty-six hours in all, I’d have the group push back the chairs, form a huge circle and sit on the floor. Whereupon I would lead them in performing psychic healings. A subject might be part of the group but didn’t have to be and most times weren’t. The only descriptions I provided (reading off the note handed me by a class person who knew the subject) were name, age, town or city of residence and malady that required healing. I would then direct the group to imagine the person in the middle of the circle alongside where I was sitting, then send light, beautiful healing light, into and around the healee. Jessie was always the final subject.

The healing exercise was done on a Saturday. By Monday her skin would be like ivory; she’d be totally free of the eczema. The clear skin would

last a few weeks. Then gradually the eczema would return. Problem was, I normally taught a class every six months. So for the next five months she'd suffer. But what the whole thing showed me was her receptivity.

When Chris dropped us at the turnoff, I let Jessie babble and prance around a few minutes, let the crazy energy dissipate. Then: "Okay, kiddo. Pull up your knickers and get to work."

She closed her eyes. Took a few deep breaths. Very few cars were going by, and those that did I made no appeal for a ride. "All right: whatta ya got?"

"A station wagon. Holden. Old one. Blue. No, green. No, blue."

"Who's driving?"

"Old guy. Wearing glasses. Red checked flannel shirt." Pause. "Has a hat, but not wearing it. It's on the seat beside him."

A few more cars whizzed by. Then an old Holden station wagon cruised to a stop. Blue, with one green door. The aged driver with glasses and red checked flannel shirt smiled as he leaned across and opened the passenger door, tossing the hat that was sitting on the seat into the back.

We got nine rides that morning. But the last, which we had hoped, had *programmed*, to take us directly to Swensen's in Parnell, dropped us instead in a suburb at the southern edge of the city. We got out just as a bus headed into town was pulling away from the curb. We gave chase but just missed it.

We stood just outside a bank waiting for the next one. A car pulled up, parked. A woman got out. She walked past towards the bank, stopped, retraced her steps. "Barry?" I didn't recognize her. "I did your last class at uni. What are you doing here?" I introduced Jess, said we were waiting for a bus.

"Well, I'm headed for Parnell soon as I do my banking. Can I give you a ride?"

I winked at Jess. She winked back at me.

*

The last time I'd 'worked', that is, had a job I commuted to on a steady basis, was 1965. I got fired. Again. Actually tried to get another job. No luck. Or good luck, as it turned out. Because a few years later I got into the hippie thing, acquired a sense of minimalist living, began to travel. I wouldn't say

it was easy following a lifetime of creature comforts, but a couple years of calling home a VW bus, outfitted as a camper by friends far handier than I, provided a strength I had never known before. I became far more comfortable in my body, could feel at home anywhere, in any situation.

By the mid-1980s, when I met and fell in love, first with a thirty-three year old Kiwi female, then (as though there was room in my heart for but a single being) replacing her with the nine year old daughter, I had a lot of time on my hands

I got my New Zealand permanent residence, then citizenship, in 1982. Not easy by any means – this was during the heaviest part of the cold war, when people in central Europe, situated between the two megalomaniacal super powers, made a beeline for NZ, the only country, according to a report, that might survive nuclear war. But I got it. The way I got it, well, it was weird.

Years before, 1964, I was in the Air Force Reserve. Sixty-one had been the Berlin crisis, '62 the Cuban crisis and now in 1964 the Gulf of Tonkin. Each time, my unit was put on standby, then stood down. Tonkin was the scariest. The unit was actually called up, then in typical military procedure, told to go home the very next day. To me, it just a matter of time. So I decided to run off to Canada.

I applied for what the Canadians called Landed Emigrant status. Way it worked, you could get fifty points max for background – education, work experience – and another fifty max on assessment by the person interviewing you. If memory served, you needed a total of seventy points to get LE. I got forty-five out of fifty in the first category. I got zero in the second. Bastard didn't like me.

I cannot tell you why. I dressed in a suit, had no beard then, my hair was cut short, I was nice as pie. He just didn't like me.

Eighteen years later I was in New Zealand, trying to stay permanently. By this time I had hair past my shoulders and a long beard. My standard attire was sweatshirt and jeans. I trimmed the beard, pony-tailed the hair, bought me a two dollar Harris tweed jacket at the Sally Army.

The lobby of the Immigration center in Auckland was filled with tension. It was always like that. Every time I had visited, the place would be full of anxious Pacific Islanders fearful of being kicked out of the country.

I sat there waiting. I did deep breathing. I did meditation. I did visualizations where I covered myself with beautiful protective and healing light. I saw myself, *knew* myself, to be a permanent resident of this land I had come to love.

Case worker after case worker emerged from a closed door, papers in hand, looking around at those of us seated there. A woman who looked nice. May she be the one. Nope. A gentle looking male. Take me! Take me! Uh-uh. Door opened and a tall, wide-shouldered, straight-backed male came out. Reeked of ex-military. Not him, *puleeze*!!

“Mister Rosenberg.” I rose slowly. Without another word he led me to a cubicle. I sat down with all the aplomb of a day old piss puddle.

The interview was going poorly. Oh, very poorly. I wanted it to lean one way, how I’d be an asset to the country; having none of it, he yanked it back and led me down a different path, the one reading What-makes-you-think-we-want-you-here, fella. I sighed. Prepared myself to get up and leave.

“And what hobbies do you have, Mr. Rosenberg?”

Wha? Hobbies. Hobbies? What was this character looking for – stamp collecting? Model trains? *Hobbies*!!

I raced down the long dark corridor of my life, searching for the hobby drawer of the myriad ancient green metal filing cabinets overflowing with yellowing paper detailing my existence as a professional loser. Finally, time passing in silence, nothing else to say: “Uh, well, I run, I suppose.”

“Run. What kind of running?”

It’d been some years since I’d done any real running, but I still jogged every day. I mean, I knew how to run.

“You know. Long distance. Well, not really LONG distance. Ultras and stuff. Just marathons, half marathons...” (I’d done three of the 26 milers, maybe six or seven halves in the early and mid-’70s. Before my knees said, Uh-uh, screw this shit.)

“Marathons? Really?” He sat up, his entire demeanor changing. “What was your best time.” And I knew I had him.

Dude was about to run his first ’thon that weekend. Was nervous. Wanted pointers. The next half hour, more, I regaled him with marathon yarns. The carbohydrate loading parties on Friday night, skinny as matchstick babes gorging on mountain-size portions of spaghetti, ending up looking like

inverted question marks. The post-race party Saturday night where people limped, staggered and damn near crawled in, bodies creaking and groaning. And yes, The Wall! The notorious, always-to-be-feared Wall!

I gave him any number of tips on how to use creative visualizations. (Imagine a beam of light coming out of your third eye. Wrap it around the next tree or lamppost and use it to pull yourself along. Create a huge globe of mercury around your feet, cutting out all friction with the ground. Chant a mantra, such as ‘I am finishing this race. I am finishing this race.’” See yourself handed a finisher’s T-shirt at the end. Try it on. How great you look and feel!

Dude’s eyes were positively sparkling.

Did I actually walk out of that cubicle with this guy, our arms wrapped around one another’s shoulders? Dunno, but it sure as hell felt that way.

After I wished him luck in his maiden run, we shook hands and I grabbed the elevator (lift, actually) down to the ground floor. Stepped outside. Worked the band off my pony tail and shook my hair free. Peeled off the Harris tweed, folded it neatly and placed it on a park bench. And let out a gigantic whewwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww that measured a force eleven in the Azores.

FINDING BARRY (I)

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

The difference between the two countries to which I held passport: in America the guy would’ve been selling me insurance or telling me his life story. New Zealand, they’re friendly once they got to know you, but until then... Native-borns were known by the title of one of the most popular self-descriptive books ever penned here: *The Passionless People*. “Well, we are a colony, after all,” was how it once was explained.

How odd I should be here – *here* both in this clinic and in this country. Back in the mid-'70s I had lived in Israel, first on a kibbutz for five months and then mostly just hitching around. The place was insane, but boy, was it ever pulsating with energy. When I left to return home to Philly, I made a vow to one day come back and live. Instead, here I was, The Land Where Nothing Ever Happens.

1980 I was headed back to India, where I'd lived for a year before returning to Philly to sell my house there. Dead broke, unable to score a loan to hire help, I worked for the months fixing up the house, a huge, old, three-story job. Then the agony of selling it. Finally it went. I grabbed a flight to San Francisco where I would wait out the subcontinent's monsoon season before taking off for that magical land. There, I ran into a friend who published a sporting magazine I'd written a number of things for.

"Where you headed next, traveler?" he wondered as we were dipping into our lunch at the fancy restaurant he had taken me to. "Back to India," I said, shifting a mouthful of sourdough bread to get better vocal traction. And then a strange thing happened. A voice came out of me: "But I've also had a thought about heading off to New Zealand." I had? Really? A year back, while in Kandy, Sri Lanka, I'd run into an Australian guy I had originally met while doing a month-long Buddhist course at the Kopan monastery outside Kathmandu. We hung out together for a month in Kandy, an absolutely gorgeous town except the beggars and street sharks were relentless. Following one particular hassling day, I heard myself moan, "Y'know what I'd like to find? An already developed country where they speak English, that's as beautiful as here, that's cheap and easy to move around, and most important, hassle-free."

My friend looked at me. "You've just described New Zealand to a T." So was that where the notion came from as I sat there with my publisher friend?

"New Zealand, huh. Well, I've got a contact at their tourist office here in the city." Dude always had contacts. "You want, I'll give him a call."

A few days later, not having heard from the guy, I rang him. "Yeah, I talked to the man. What he said was they normally get together a bunch of media travel writers, put them on a plane, booze them up and whisk them around the country down there for a week or so, the major tourist spots, fly

them home. Didn't sound interested in sending a solo. But here's his name and contact data, talk to him yourself if you like."

I dutifully wrote the information down, then immediately crumpled the paper and tossed it in the waste basket in the room I was staying. If he couldn't, certainly I couldn't. Besides, I was headed back to India, right?

A few days later I was sitting on the floor meditating. A voice came into my head. Said sit down and write the guy a letter. So I scrambled through the waste basket till I found it, wrote a letter. It was my standard 'I'm going that way anyhow, I really don't need you, but if you'd care to pay my way for sure it'd make a difference when I set out to write my piece.' I listed the places I intended to be over the next few months, Portland, Seattle, Vancouver, as I made my way up the coast visiting friends.

I stuffed the letter in an envelope, stuck on a fifteen cent stamp, all the while thinking: This is stupid, I'm going back to India. Walked out to the mailbox, thinking: I mean, *really* stupid. I was about to turn around, go back inside and peel off the stamp, when the mailman came by. "I'll take that," he smiled, removing the envelope from my hand.

August 16 I was in Vancouver. The friend I was staying with was also a writer, a real one. A writer who wrote. Every day. Eight hours every day.

I'd leave his apartment early, wander around the city. August 16 I came back, grabbed a drink from the fridge, went into the tiny living room where my friend sat on the floor typing. Normally, he'd stop and ask about my day, where I had gone, what I'd seen. Now, nothing. Kept on pounding the keys of his ancient Remington.

Then he glanced up. "You got a phone call." I looked at him. "Nobody knows I'm here," I said. "Oh, somebody knows. Message next to the phone." As I got up to check: "Y'know, you're amazing. You really are."

"What? What?" He nodded towards the phone. I studied the writing pad. The New Zealand Tourist Office in San Francisco. Call back.

"How do you do it? I mean, I know you've got these special powers from that shit you teach, but please, let me in on it: how the fuck do you do it."

I didn't want to make the call. I was headed back to India. The Big I. Land of mystery and total meshuga. Had no intention of going Down Under. Nothing there for me.

I made the call. “We’ve decided to send you,” the man told me. “This is the first time we’ve ever done this – send somebody solo. Now, give me a date.”

And how do I now remember all this happened on August 16, 1980? My birthday. Swell present, I suppose. Then why didn’t I feel happy?

*

I tried to find something in New Zealand, something that provided a clue as to what I was doing here.

Oh, the people were nice, if not particularly outgoing. Always with the cups of tea. I hated tea. Couldn’t stand the taste. But y’gotta be nice to folk who were nice to you, I suppose.

After several months, I had this idea. There had to be a Jewish population here. Maybe I could reach out and make contact there. Strange in that I never related to Jews anywhere I might be. Not in the States. Hell, not in Israel.

Looking for some Jewishness? Start with food. But there was not a thing in Auckland, largest city of the country. Not even a Jewish deli. What place didn’t have at least one Jewish deli?

A woman who owned a bookshop heard my plea. “You are joking, of course. Look, I was born and raised in Edinburgh, which had a very tiny Jewish population. I lived in London, Toronto and Montreal, and have traveled extensively in America,” this non-Jew said. “Every place I’ve been there was always Jewish food, to me the most delicious ethnic eating in the world. Except here. Can you imagine a city the size of Auckland and not a single Jewish restaurant? The only bagels you can buy here are made by a commune of shiksa lesbians!”

Oh, there were Jews in the country, five-six thousand, I’d discovered, half in Auckland. The two congregations, one orthodox, the other liberal, didn’t talk to one another. What a surprise. Another thing, the great majority of Jews in NZ were British. They’d fled from Germany, Russia, Eastern Europe before the war and settled temporarily in the UK. Where they were whitewashed in the manner the British scrub clean the souls of all outsiders. Jews that I did meet, whose families had been in England less than two generations before taking off for NZ, *looked* English! They had turned-up noses and ruddy complexions that proclaimed they’d seen the sun no more than a day or two in their beings. I quickly gave up on the Jewish thing.

In time, I did find people, of course. I learned that NZ women generally liked American males of the somewhat softer variety. I had a few relationships before I met Chris and Jessie. And because of Jessie I was trying to keep this one going. Which was why I now sat in a clinic across from a Very Serious Male who refused to acknowledge my humanity.

Chris was having problems with her IUD. Prior to being fitted, she had tried pills, but they made her nauseas. Tried foam, but that was horrible. And me, I don't do condoms. Safe sex? Forget it. I knew I was clean; I had a full medical twice a year. If by some quirk a woman I found attractive consented to merging with me I simply trusted my karma. With Chris, she couldn't and I wouldn't. What to do? Answer was pretty obvious.

“Mr. Rosenberg?”

I hated to leave the other male by himself. As I stood up and followed the nurse I glanced back. Still stiff-backed in his chair, staring straight ahead. “Good luck,” I called over to him. Not a blink.

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

She kindly offered me a Valium; I refused. For sure I hated pain, but I was pretty much anti-drugs, and besides, I didn't believe vitamin V could possibly anesthetise my system in the few minutes before the knife appeared. Instead I searched through my bag for my Bach flower rescue remedy – to be taken before to calm me – and arnica, to reduce shock after. They were not in there. I'd put them out that morning, could swear I'd stuffed them in the bag on the way out.

Naked from the waist down, I slid onto the operating table. The nurse moved to one side of the table and peered down at my genitalia as though looking for a message. It was awkward, and I felt embarrassed as hell. But I wasn't going to show it, uh-uh, not me. I smiled at her. For the longest time did she stand there, staring, just staring.

Vasectomy is known as permanent surgical contraception. Underline permanent. I was forty-six. Had a son in America, now sixteen. Didn't want any more of my own kids. But that was now. Future? Who could say. Yeah, sure, I knew it could be undone. I also knew it was somewhat excruciating, and considerably more expensive, to do so.

When I had made up my mind to go through with the snipping, I checked out other males who'd had it done. Asked about the procedure, about the pain. From each I got: piece of cake, mate. An English guy I knew said he felt nothing during or after. "When I left the clinic I went to the movies. No worries." But then, he was British. Stiff upper nut.

The doctor I had met at the initial appointment was sixties, thinning white hair, rimless specs. He had a high raspy voice. Sitting at a desk he asked a few pertinent questions to make sure I knew what I was letting myself in for. With the aid of a cartoony cross-section illustration labeled The Male Pelvic Organs, he'd proceeded to explain the actual op. I'd heard of speed reading, but this was the first I'd ever encountered speed talking. He spoke so quickly, pointing with his pen to body parts on the card, that I simply gave up after the first few sentences. When he asked if I understood I nodded dumbly, whereupon he presented me a release to sign and out the door.

Of all the discrepancies between American and New Zealand usages of English, the most puzzling applied to the medical profession. In NZ, there was no such thing as THE doctor, THE hospital. You made an appointment to see doctor, and he put you in hospital. Did you run into accountant at pharmacy? See prime minister at political rally? In this country, only quacks, and their holy edifices, were free from need of the definite article.

Two weeks before the appointment I began having reservations, and a week before I was positive I would not go through with it. Why? No shit, what was I *really* afraid of?

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

By the time the doc – oops – *doctor* made his entrance, those balls had shrivelled to where a pink prune was peeking out from beneath my already retracted pecker. Doctor and nurse (did she qualify as *sans* definite article?) both got into their masks and rubber gloves. Again I tried a bit of levity; again it came out forced and schmucky. The doctor, to show the human side

of his nature, proceeded to tell a little story. (“My greatest faux pas.”) It was as funny as I felt.

“Would you care to watch this?” he asked. Sure, second only to watching my cat get run over by a bus. I grinned and nodded, rose up on my elbows, but all I could see was a gloved hand. He pinched the skin around the right side vas and poked in a needle. “Uhhhhhhh!” I heard myself cry. Still grinning.

I began using Alpha Mind Control. I was very good with this stuff that I’d taught to the masses for a dozen years, having disciplined myself to take a considerable amount of pain, even tooth extractions, by focusing the mind elsewhere.

Forget it.

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

“Nyahhhhhhhhh!!”

I tried rhythmic breathing: long, slow, connected ins and outs.

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

“Yaaaaaaaaffffffff!!”

I switched to mantra.

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

“*Om mani padme hoooooooooooooooooooo!!!*”

My teeth were clenched so hard I thought I heard enamel crack. My toes were bent at a ninety degree angle, pointed straight back. My right shoulder felt like it’d popped from its socket. Three more needles, three more vas severings, three more knots tied. There could’ve been Coca Cola in that syringe for all the good it was doing me.

The procedure lasted nearly an hour. Say this for the doc: he was efficient, knew his business. Say this for me: ever enemy terrorists wanted to extract state security secrets (if ever I had any), I knew just how they could do it. I’d tell them shit they never thought to ask, didn’t care to know.

The nurse applied a sterile bandage and large cotton swab over my bloodied and battered gonads. I swung my legs slowly off the table and sat up, dazed. Had to work to keep down an impending ralph. My face, I knew for a certainty, was the color of porridge.

The nurse stepped over, holding my jeans before her and staring curiously inside them. “Where – where are you underpants?” she wondered.

“Don’t wear any,” I mumbled. Hadn’t since my hippie days. Just another garment to wash (or stuff dirty into my backpack). She looked at me, blinked. Over at the doc, now peeling off his gloves. Back to me.

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

The doctor shrugged and left the room. No longer his affair. The nurse followed shortly, returning a minute later with what looked to be a small table cloth and giant safety pin. “Okay, back on the table, Mabel,” she giggled, enjoying this enormously. “I’ve put on many a nappy,” she said as she folded the cloth around me,” but this is the first on anyone with a beard.”

I paid the bill and slowly, cautiously, feeling like I’d just got off the lead horse at the end of the Joplin to Cheyenne Pony Express run, made my way out onto the heavily trafficked street. I seemed to have passed through a time warp. Everything around me was moving so fast.

Pain shot up into my head and for a moment I was convinced I would pass out. But that wasn’t the biggest of my worries. The diaper had slid off. At a snail’s pace – hell, a snail would leave me in its slime trail – I shuffled into a nearby department store, sought out the men’s undies section, selected the cheapest pair I could find and stepped uncertainly to the cashier.

“Um, might I try these on now?” I asked stupidly, upon paying. She nodded, without a flinch. No doubt got such requests several times a day. She pointed to a tiny cubicle; in I shuffled. Stepping daintily out of my jeans, the useless cloth and now fully-bloodied dressing and bandage slipped to the floor. Somehow the bandage skidded under the knee-length door and outside the booth. Carefully, I reached out a foot and used my toe to bring it back in. How it looked from outside was not my current concern. More I was wondering just how sterile was my sterile dressing now that it sported the front half of a size nine and a half footprint.

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

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

I had grown up with an angry, bitter mother and had inherited many of those negative emotional traits. Over the years I had learned to deal with my anger, to diffuse it without denying its existing capacity. Mainly I would separate myself from it, observe it from across the room, play with it. When it ran its course, I'd let it go: finito. The week that followed the vasectomy I could not do that. That week I experienced anger I could not detach from, in no way could diffuse. I had patches of red. Absolute *red*. Like an acid trip when sounds might transmute into color, only those I had learned to enjoy. Largely these were directed at Chris, but really they weren't. They went far, far deeper. Stuff I had thought long dead and buried became resurrected and saturated me. I was wholly at its mercy.

It had me worried. My sister in Philly recently had a hysterectomy, and wrote of the battle she was having, and losing, to control her emotions. Somewhere, I remembered hearing, a similar, though lower-scaled, hormonal imbalance could result from a vasectomy. I called the English guy who'd given me the piece of cake line. "Would you have done it if I'd told you the truth?" he asked.

When I returned to the clinic to have the stitches removed I wondered whether the problem I'd been having, the pain and extensive mental anguish, were normal. Or was I making an undue fuss. He poo-pooed the pain.

"Scrotal tissue is hardly that sensitive. Now, your fingertips – those are sensitive!" I knew where I'd love to shove those fingertips. In his standard rapidspeak, the doctor informed me I needed thirty to forty ejaculations over the next three months to empty the sacs. "One fella did it in ten days!" he noted. An Italian, most likely.

In a sense, I did make out well. People pay thousands for primal therapy in California. I paid a hundred bucks in Auckland.

*

Chris and I decided to leave Auckland and go on the road, tooling yet another VW bus-cum-camper around the country. I taught meditation seminars wherever we decamped, and we met some lovely people in each of those places. Life was a dream, right? Uhh, no.

The strain, the fuss over tiny crap between us was taking its toll. When we got to a gorgeous seven mile beach, population just over a couple thousand,

I decided to come in off the road. With every last cent I had, I bought a house right on that beach, a lovely old timber thing surrounded by scores of native trees. This was exactly what was needed to mend the ripped-apart weld in our relationship's fabric, right? Uhh, no.

The shit continued. We argued, we fought. I yelled, she wept. Every now and then I wished we might swap rolls. But she couldn't yell and I only wept in darkened movie theatres. All along, the relationship between Jessie and me got stronger.

She was a remarkable reader. A social outcast due to her skin, she escaped into books. At ten, she could read faster than me... and with as much comprehension. Because I had loads of time, we'd read together. We'd sit up close on the ancient sofa, a book between us. Jess would read the left page and I the right. In this way we went through Tolkien. ALL of Tolkien.

I weaned her off television. "That stuff is crap, kiddo." She didn't understand. I showed her. "See? Bad plot, bad dialogue, crummy acting." And she saw. We came to an arrangement. She could watch if I, the Grand Exalted TV Potentate, vetted and approved.

"Is Doctor Who crap?"

"Jess, Doctor Who is the ultimate in quality. In fact, I demand you watch it."

I did give her a smidgeon of rope. She could watch one 'shit show' of her choosing per week. For a few weeks she did this. Then she grew bored and turned to her first love, reading fantasy.

Through all of this, I tried not to neglect Chris. But of course I did. She very much approved the relationship Jessie and I had, still she couldn't help take it as my wresting away a major part of her life. She was a remarkably talented craftsperson. Any medium, wood, sea shells, wild flowers, cloth, a combination: Chris could make something spectacular, jewelry, greeting cards, mobiles. But she missed the super-mothering role. The control.

All the time we were together, whenever I would get into an argument, a debate, a situation, with another person, she always took the other side. "But you're smarter than they are. And stronger. It's just not fair!" When we went to look at the house I was about to buy, she pulled a stunt even I couldn't believe.

The house had been on the market over a year. The old woman had

already moved into a small apartment in town. Her son-in-law, who was handling the sale, said he wanted the same amount for the house his mother-in-law had paid for her unit. He named the price. I made a counter offer ten percent lower. My partner interjected. In favor of the seller. Sandbagged by the woman I was supporting.

And when later I yelled myself hoarse, she couldn't understand why. "But it's only fair we pay the same price the old lady paid!" she wept. Oi.

This cataclysm paled next to what went down a year after we'd moved in.

I was living in a trademen's village. Every able male went off in the morning to be a chippy, a sparky, a fitter and turner. (Kiwi names for things often sounded like Snow White's tiny henchmen.) Well, not every able male. Me, I jogged the beach, rode my ten speed, walked five miles through the bush into town for coffee.

New Zealanders were extremely polite. They were also (especially in a village) extremely curious. When the subject of my presence during the day did come up, I might say, "Well, ever since my inheritance –. Look, if you don't mind I really don't want to talk about it." Or, "Yeah, after the insurance settlement following the accident –. We really need some rain for the gardens, don't you think?" Telling them I practised Alpha Mind Control and had tapped into the Universal Abundance Source somehow mightn't cut it with these nice, simple folk.

Not only was I very visible during times when men my age should be out doing the nine to five, but Jessie and I were frequently seen walking, talking, laughing together. Saturday night was our date night. We'd go into town, have a pizza, then amble off to the movies where we'd sit in the same seats each week, heads together, sharing a box of popcorn. New Zealand movie houses, until not all that long ago, used to break up the showing of films with an 'interval', during which you could trot down to the 'nibble nook' and buy yourself some poison. One such evening Jess came back with a box of Jaffas, giggling.

"The lady at the counter said how nice it is to see me and my dad snuggled up together every week."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. So I told her: Barry's not my dad. He's my friend."

"Je-e-essie! Je-e-ezuss!!"

"What?"

A buddy showed up one evening. Talked about this and that. I sensed he had something on his mind, his creaky marriage no doubt, and let him blather on. Finally:

“Have you heard what they’re saying about you?”

“Me? No. What?”

He slammed his hand against the wall. “Those bloody cows!! They’re saying – oh, hell. They’re –.” He took a breath. “They’re saying you’re, y’know.

“Talk, for chrissake!”

“Doing it to Jessie.”

“Wha-a-a?? Oh. My. God!” I’d recently heard about two area males, my age, who’d been so accused. One by local women, the other by his ex-partner. Both cases, complaints had been laid to the police. The former, fortunately, was known by the cops as a gentle, harmless sort who was fond of kids. Often he’d baby sit, with full knowledge and consent of the parents. Forced to take action, they went to his house, explained the situation, and apologetically suggested he not play host to kids anymore.

The other man was not so fortunate. He was arrested, taken to jail. The next morning he was found hanging in his cell.

Nothing of the sort happened with me. No cops, no bricks through the window. No remake of the Wicker Man. Just a number of glares, and how strange that the chatter in shops would come to a screeching halt soon as I walked in.

One day I saw one of the prime perpetrators in town. All smiles. Comment about the weather. I called her over. “Say, Fiona, have you heard what they’re saying about me?”

“Saying? No. Um.” Glance at her watch.

“Well, it’s pretty damn sick. So know what I did yesterday? Went up to the Smoke (Auckland), had me a pow-wow with the number one libel and slander lawyer in the country. He’s really hot to trot. Said once we find out who’s behind this, we’re gonna own some houses in your little town.” The woman turned alabaster.

Despite my bravado towards her, hundred percent bullshit of course, the whole thing had me pretty shook. Oddly, if half the women in the village were against me, half were on my side.

The gas station owner's wife when I pulled in to fill the tank: "Barry, don't let those hens bother you, not one bit. I know you didn't do anything wrong, and I'm telling everybody who drives in here."

Postmistress of our little local P.O. the same. "They're just bored. But I set them straight soon as they begin gossiping about you." *Vey iz mir.*

Two weeks after it began, the fishwives' non-benevolent society dropped me like a steaming dog turd. They'd found themselves another monkey: a somewhat effeminate café owner who had a wife and three kids. He was gay, doncha know.

Main thing about the entire episode was that Chris, for the very first time, took my side in a fracas. She went and had a talk with Jessie's teacher (who'd already heard). She fronted up to all those we knew and some we didn't. She wrote a beautiful letter praising my relationship with Jess that was published in a local periodical.

When I asked why she'd never stood up for me before, she looked surprised. "You were never the underdog before."

And then she delivered another piece of news. She and Jessie had found a place to live.

FINDING ELISABETH

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

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

"Do you want these?" Every now and then. Certain books. The Dylan tapes. Mutually acquired commodities. Say yes, there'd be a fuss. No, I was a wimp. My ride was late. I decided to wait outside, where there was a shade less gloom.

A week before, at Pat's house, I spoke of the dilemma, and the sadness that pervaded it. I didn't want to live with the mother anymore. I didn't want

to part from Jessie. One thought I'd had was to leave the house myself, let them stay there. Pat quickly talked me out of that one.

A woman in her late 60s, Pat would describe herself as "just a housewife." Sure. And the Buddha was just a monk. Pat was as spiritually attuned as any yogi, lama or guru I'd encountered in my Asian travels. Ask her a question, present a confounding situation, her immediate reaction was silence. I had learned to wait. Because her response, her advice, was always brief, non-judgmental and smack on the money. Don't force the issue, she told me this time. Stand back and let what must, happen.

"Do you know Elisabeth Kubler-Ross will be in Tauranga next Saturday?" she noted 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."

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

Introducing myself as a freelance writer, I claimed to be doing an article on Kubler-Ross and requested press accommodation. I could not tell you why I did that. To save twelve bucks? Surely I had no intention of writing anything on the then most written-about woman south of Maggie Thatcher.

I forgot about the letter moments after it was posted. For that same day I got the news a lease had been signed, they were moving out. As though the situation were too overwhelming to process, I focused on trivial. Who would feed the Mister Futties when I went to Auckland to teach my seminars. How best to plant a winter garden for one.

Ten thirty Friday night a man rang from Tauranga, claiming he had just discovered my letter, which had been misplaced. I had a time figuring out what the hell he was on 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."

Sure, pal. I'll scoop up the ten thousand shards of my being and toodle off sixty miles for a half hour press conference.

The next day we were involved in a garage sale with some neighbors. We showed up with our wares, your Typical Happy Suburban Family. There was a marked reluctance to tell people. Why, they're leaving me, I'm a failure

(again)? I pushed them out, I'm a brute? The Town Outcast makes (more) backyard headlines?

Actually, the biggest dread was the barrage of sympathy I'd get. Mournful faces and shoulder-clapping condolences from professional families who'd been stuck together like crinkling scotch tape to mildewed wallpaper since the year one.

Is there anything we can do? Yes, please. Piss off.

The morning was lovely, it was only when we returned home the rain began. Normally, I liked walking in the rain, but the motivation just wasn't there. (Self-punishment: sit there and pretend not to watch. Sit there and die a little.)

Mister Futties came in and checked out the situation, 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, curled up and went to sleep.

Four o'clock I decided to go to Tauranga. Or Buenos Aires: anywhere. I rang 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 the most precious thing I had ever known was being taken from me.

Finally, a yellow station wagon slowed down, beeped twice and stopped. Pat was driving, a woman whom I knew alongside. Another woman, one 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 now made like the rain-slicked Bay of Plenty roads were the Indy 500. I buckled myself in, held tight to the upholstery. The woman 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 wreck 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 of Bay Court. They looked over-dressed 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 always seemed like walking cardboard cutouts, or baboons wearing bowties: everything fit but somehow lacked conviction.

Four women were seated behind a long table near the theater doors. There seemed to be no reason for being there since tickets weren't on sale, 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, eventually all four, for the man I had talked to the night before, the chap running the affair. Not a one knew where he was or had even heard of him.

I found him at last. He looked as happy as a hangnail. He said he did not know where the press conference was, where the honored guest might be. He promised me a 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. Tried a door; it was open. Broom closet. Another led to a projection room, a third to a set or stairs going up. I opened yet another door and was immediately set upon by a wall of tobacco stink. I was about to close it when a voice called out: "Come in, come in."

I took half a step in, holding my breath. A woman in her thirties stood in a windowless room the size of a large wardrobe. Behind her, seated in a chair, was a tiny person in his/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 as to the wearer's sex. Who was doing an ample portrayal of a chimney in a blizzard.

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

*

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

I would sit there and watch the doctor, who five years before had removed a malignant tumor and told her she'd live to see a hundred, and nurses when they came in. They would look at the walls, the ceiling, the floor, but not at the patient. Nor did relatives who came to visit. And we told her she was not dying, that she did not have cancer and soon would recover from her minor travails and come home. I trailed along this conspiracy of lies and silence until I could stand it no more.

“I’m going to tell her,” I said one day to my father. I thought he would have a stroke. His face growing progressively scarlet, he bellowed: “You’ll break her heart! You want to kill your own mother?”

At this same time, mid-1960s, a successful, very straight Swiss psychiatrist named Elisabeth Kubler-Ross was asked to address a group of smug, bored med students in a Denver hospital. She decided on a topic which had been on her mind for a while, that of death and dying. Not only did she break a major medical taboo – the subject was verboten, especially with patients – but she had the chutzpah to bring with her a beautiful teenage leukemia patient, who was only too happy to discuss her imminent death. Together they blew an auditorium 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 patients. Lesson two: do not lie to them.)

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

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross seemed to have the approval of everyone except her fellow medical professionals, but after a time even they reluctantly hopped aboard. Then she became involved in what happened *after death*. An entire planet’s population, force fed fear-pap for eons, seemed to be awaiting her newest revelations with open ears and hearts. The star emerged into a Milky Way.

And then, late ’70s, Kubler-Ross ventured a little further afield. She got involved with a Southern California spiritual huckster who espoused, among other curious activities, engaging in sexual relations with one’s own materialized spirit guides. Word was, the old girl had gone loopy; over the edge. As she had before with counseling the dying and discussing life after death, Kubler-Ross stood up for her beliefs. But this was too much even for her staunchest fans to handle – Mother Teresa in a thong and six-inch heels pumping an exercycle. K-R’s credibility as a living saint suffered enormously.

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 painfully uncomfortable silence. The Universe had picked me up by the nape of the neck and plopped me before this fascinating and remarkable woman. Now what? I needn't have worried.

"Yes, I smoke," she said, answering a question I never would have 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 twenty-three hours a day. Those who do don't get much accomplished, do they. My life is my work. Sitting talking to some beautiful, open person who soon is to die, who knows it and is very much at peace about it – that is my meditation. Do you understand?"

She had a thick Germanic accent which 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 here in New Zealand. And people grabbing at me all the time. But I'm learning to say no." To Joan: "Didn't I say no to that lady tonight?" Joan smiled, nodded, then quietly stepped out, leaving us alone.

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

"Oh my God! A lot of what I do is with AIDS people. It's the new social scourge. If you support AIDS patients you're equally guilty, you're promiscuous, homosexual. 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 claimed never to have been with another woman let alone a man, was forced to quit his job and sell their home as result of all the community pressure. We tried to start an AIDS hospice in Virginia where I live. We were very nearly lynched. I mean that literally. If the police hadn't come to our rescue they would have killed us. It's incredible!"

And the media?

"Ach! One day I open 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 curious to

know: does she or doesn't she? I'm nervous, which is unusual for me. So I ask my spirit guides for help. I'm standing just off-stage and the MC is introducing me like I'm Johnny Carson. 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 stone! I have to walk twenty feet to the microphone and I can only move by placing both my hands in back of each leg and dragging it in front of the other. I thought: What the hell are you doing to me? (Laughing.) 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, and then 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 how difficult it is to walk when you have venereal disease.' There's dead silence for a solid minute. Then as one the audience get to their feet and applaud for two, three minutes. And like that, the feeling comes back to my legs. I mean, you ask, you get help. I get super help!"

The lady was one mean raver. You got the feeling she had told each story a thousand times, and it got meatier 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 forty 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 organizer asked how the press conference went, and when I told him no one else showed, his face dropped. "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, how I adore thee.

Kubler-Ross appeared even tinier than when I'd been standing next to her. She shaded her eyes from the spotlights' glare, took the mike in her hand, creating screeching and thumping noises.

The woman had no stage presence. Nor was she in any way as animated as she had been upstairs. She spoke softly, almost timidly, and yet within a minute her casual, intimate delivery had the audience enrapt. She did not talk of death and dying, not at first. Rather life and living. Babies are born, she

said, with only two fears, falling and loud noise. All the rest are 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. We don’t allow our kids to express their emotions, their rage. 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 began a string of stories of life after death, each one fantastic, yet in her delivery wholly believable. She was so sure, so positive, that it no longer was a matter of belief, or faith, or hope. *She knew*, and sitting there listening to her you knew she knew.

Just before the end of the lecture she held up what looked to be an oval pillow. It was black, and not in the least attractive.

“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 didn’t even remember the drive through the night. I was stoned from the evening, tripping. So were the three women with me. Not a word among us until a chorused good night as I stepped out of the car.

I opened the door, unprepared for what greeted me inside. The house was dark, yes, but there was a void I felt soon as I stepped inside. I walked through slowly, reaching out for something, anything, to hold onto. I noticed my favorite muesli bowl was gone. The place on the living room floor where normally rested the oversize pillow I liked to sit on to meditate was vacant, a gaping cavity.

I entered Jessie’s room, turned on the light. The room I referred to as the piggery, an eleven 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 budge when I called over. Wouldn't open an eye.

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

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

"You're all alone, asshole!" it screamed. *"You're all alone and there's nobody to take care of you when you're old and sickly. Alone alone alone!!"*

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

it stopped.

And from somewhere came: *Alone? Boychik, you've been alone all your goddam life. You like being alone, remember? Re-mem-ber!?*

And I felt...

the capsule – the cocoon – that so precariously had been holding me together of late was in shreds all around me, and I was –
a butterfly.

A big-ass motherfucking butterfly, spectacular in color and form.

And I filled the room. And I filled the house. And I filled the beach outside, and the ocean, and the sky, and...

Mister Futties raised his head. What he saw was

his buddy Barry, tears streaming down my face. No more words, no thoughts. Tears.

I was free.

FINDING DRY LAND

The very first time I had the dream in which appeared the woman who was familiar yet unknown to me came in the city of Suzhou, China. And I didn't remember it. Woke up at 6am when, as every morning, two cleaning women standing just outside my hotel room door were talking at the standard volume of six thousand decibels. Whatever drama might have been playing in my somni-cinema was wiped clean immediately and totally.

Jessie and Chris had moved just a couple miles down the road, and though I saw Jess once or twice a week, her absence from the house created a huge hole that needed to be filled, quicker the better. It had been seven years since I'd slung on the ancient pack, grabbed a piece of driftwood to serve as walking (and protection) stick and ambled off to a truly foreign locale. Mid-1980s, China was as truly foreign as you could get.

I wanted someplace where I had to focus fully on my environment, so much so there would be no room in the dummy box for self-pity. China had just opened to foreign travel where you didn't have to go on an organized tour visiting fascinating widget production communes. But it wasn't easy. Impossible to find any signs in English, forget about streets laid out in a grid system (and my sense of direction was practically non-existent), and the government tourist agency was a bureaucratic joke to be avoided at all cost. Worst thing of all were the people. They were too damn nice.

On certain New Zealand beaches there existed a tiny bug called the sandfly. The sandfly would bite and leave you itching like mad for up to twenty minutes. If you were walking on one of these beaches and stopped to study a shell or rock pool, they gotcha. So you kept on walking.

In China, mid-'80s, you were walking through a city, especially a 'peoples park', you stopped to admire a tree or watch a bunch of old bubbas doing tai chi in the morning, they gotcha.

The Chinese didn't know about space. They were born crammers. Meant no harm, but to be squashed in the center of a clot of humans desperate to

practice their English on you, or ask you the standard questions (country, age, profession), or, worst of all, just silently *stare* at you as though you'd just stepped out of a UFO, literally could be breathtaking.

I didn't know beforehand about Suzhou's existence; had never heard of the place. I knew Shanghai and I knew Beijing (which until corrected I was still calling Peking). A kindly soul on the train from Guanzhou (which until corrected I was still calling Canton) suggested I skip the biggies and go instead to the far smaller twin cities of Hangzhou and Suzhou.

Hangzhou was beautiful, but it didn't grab me, and that first time I stayed no more than a few days. Suzhou also didn't grab me, not right away. More, it grew on me, day by day by day. And I ended up staying six months.

So this was where I had the first dream, the one I didn't remember upon being screamed out of bed at 6am, until some months after. I recalled that I'd dreamt of her only when it happened a second time, when it came following more screaming – mine – at the tail end of a nightmare.

I'd left China, taking an ocean liner from Shanghai to Hong Kong, and from there flying to Bangkok. Mooched around Thailand for a month and had just booked a flight to Siem Reap in Cambodia, home of the amazing Angkor Wat. I was sitting in a Khao Sarn Road travel agency, Visa card in hand, about to finalize my deal when a young female entered the tiny shop, sat down alongside me and requested a coach ticket to the same place.

“Two hundred and eighty baht,” said the agent.

I sat straight up. Two eighty? Nine dollars? My flight was costing me twenty times that! Smartly, I stuffed the Visa back in my wallet, cancelled the booking and purchased a coach pass. Little did I realize I was setting myself up for one of the most shit-scary ordeals in my four hundred years of traveling.

The journey, they said, would take seven or eight hours, during which time I would get to see the beautiful countryside of these two picturesque lands. The only catch, a small one, would be the need to change buses at the border.

I boarded the coach at 8am, the oldest by a few decades of a score of backpackers. It took a good hour to pass through the ugly urban sprawl of Bangkok. But soon as we did, we hit the ugly rural sprawl of eastern

Thailand. And why it was the driver stopped halfway to the border, got out without a word, and left us roasting in the bus for forty-five minutes remained to this day a mystery.

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

In straggly line we marched, bearing packs of varying size, shape and color, through Thai immigration, where men in ill-fitting uniforms armed with rubber stamps and thoroughly bored expressions took an age to pass us through. Then we crossed an open space that at once became five degrees hotter, ten degrees filthier, and peopled with age-old child beggars and hawkers offering limp, fly-infested alleged foodstuffs. More slow motion passport stamping by tired, unhappy men seated behind tiny windows, and we officially entered the Kingdom of Cambodia. Where we were immediately greeted by Central Casting character #4063.

He existed in every country in Asia. He was early twenties, handsome behind wraparound sunglasses, wore a perpetual smile and spoke excellent English. He was street savvy to the max. His name was Asia Slick and he exuded sincerity, even when you knew he was lying through those gleaming teeth.

As in: the coach that was to pick us up? Well, normally, AS beamed, there would be a coach, sure. But due to the severe flooding, buses could not get through, so instead there would be a spanking new, extremely comfortable pickup truck to carry us across the wet roads as safely as Noah's ark. Until it arrived, he would be most happy to escort us to his cousin-brother's nearby shop where we might exchange currencies at a most generous black market rate...

The pickup was ancient, caked with mud, and bore hardly a square inch of fender that wasn't crushed, crinkled or riddled with rusted holes. The dirty open bed was loaded with our packs, whereupon we climbed the majority of our group's young travelers plus two teenage locals. Me, I quickly claimed the inside passenger seat. Just behind, squashed cheek to cheek on the narrow rear bench, were four lovely young women from, l. to r., Poland, UK, Norway and Japan.

“Everything okay, Papa?” inquired the grinning AS through the window.

“It’s all sweet, pal!” I replied. Remember those words.

Asia Slick then disappeared, replaced by a driver. Definitely of a different mold: small, wiry, scarred face, heavily tattooed, wisp of a goatee. He was hung over, grumpy and looked as though a misplaced word, an innocent sidelong glance, might well bring about a lightning-quick throat slashing.

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

And then it got bad.

The first inland sea appeared. It extended for hundreds of feet of road. It looked deep. The driver lowered the window and yelled out. The two teenage locals jumped down off the bed and began wading through the water, ankle-deep, shin-deep, thigh-deep, searching for a navigable pathway. But the driver didn’t trust them; he, too, got out and semi-immersed. Then back in the truck and away we went, streaming through water that rose up to, and now and then above, the headlights.

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

The first time the driver and his young scouts were swept off their feet, and then off the road completely, by the swiftly moving flood waters, I was aghast. But they recovered quickly, reappeared in the vehicle’s lights, and somehow the driver navigated us through.

Several times was this video rerun, and we grew to accept it. What was somewhat more harrowing was the first time, and third and fifth and tenth times, the pickup itself was swept off its tire-bottoms and sideways sailing we did go.

I couldn’t recall ever using the word lurch. But that’s what I experienced

every time the truck was swept off its moorings. As in my stomach. What made these escapades especially terrifying were the several vehicles we passed, barely visible in the night, which lay on their sides just off the road like beached whale carcasses. And then the motor conked out, quickly followed by the extinguishing of all lights. Totally dark and eerily silent except for the occasional gigantic fork of lightning followed by a deafening crash of thunder.

Now, I have never been one of those males who had need to lend a hand when a vehicle is in disrepair. And those few of our team who felt so called were quickly shooed away by the driver. Face saving time.

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

While all this was happening, a witch's claw of lightning lit up the sky, revealing the sudden appearance of dark figures standing silently, stealthily, alongside the vehicle. Not speaking. Not moving. Watching. Waiting. There were, I reckoned, a dozen men, shirtless. Wherever had they come from, here in the middle of nowhere?

From the glimpses I got in the shadowy available light, they appeared hard, these men; tough. I thought: among the twenty of us, we were carrying more money than these people earned in their lifetimes. I thought: who knew, really, that we were here. I thought: we could so easily disappear, not a trace. Later I would learn that nineteen others owned notions perfectly matching my own.

The truck's lights finally went on. The vehicle still refused to start by key, but our visitors obliged by getting behind and pushing until the motor kicked over. And off we went, leaving behind our audience, moving at a snail's pace in the perfect snail's environment.

Sometimes with the wheels maintaining traction upon the ground, sometimes being swept drunkenly off course, the truck twisted about, first one way, then the other, listing precariously before regaining equilibrium. Muddy waters sloshed in from under the doors, filling the foot wells. Behind me, the four women were chalk white, especially the young Japanese,

who either was battling severe bouts of hyperventilation or suffering a monumental asthma attack.

And then the truck stopped. We were ordered out. The water here was so deep, the truck now had to be winch-towed by a waiting tractor. A boat appeared, long and low and mud-encrusted, bearing tiny outboard motor, kerosene lantern and a bandito-mustachioed man who demanded three hundred baht to carry us over this particular sea. Little recourse, we counted out our money.

Nine of us went on the first hundred and fifty foot sail, nine more on the second. Two young French guys, however, followed the truck on foot, packs held high over their heads. I watched as they waded through water up to their chests.

We made it to the other side, where sloppy, slippery mud replaced the temporary lake. Then back in the truck and off we went. And if I had been unnerved before...

Obviously I must have fallen asleep because I suddenly woke with a start. The vehicle was weaving all over the road, headed now for a fat-trunked tree. And there alongside me – I let out a yelp, reached across and swatted a shoulder. The driver, his dream rudely shattered, muttered loudly, shook his head a few times, stopped, got out of the truck, splashed water on his face. Back inside, he put on a cassette tape. Khmer heavy metal. Top volume. Nerve-shatteringly awful. “No prob-rum!” He grinned for the very first time.

It was past one-thirty when the road finally cleared of water, and half an hour later that light appeared faintly in the distance. “Siem Reap!” announced the driver-conductor. The promised city. Eighteen hours after we’d set out.

At a roadside guesthouse, nineteen backpackers jumped out of the vehicle and made immediately for an illuminated outdoor dining area, demanding cold beers. The one other was led to a room, an air-con room with bath, you’d best believe, where covered in mud and grime, not a bone, muscle nor joint untouched by fatigue and ache, he set down his pack and crawled into bed, asleep in seconds.

Which is where I had the dreams. The first, rushing brown waters gave forth creatures with tattooed tentacles reaching out, reaching out, until –. It was the lovely Norwegian woman, who been assigned a bed opposite

mine, who shook me until I finally stopped screaming. The second, far more pleasant, a woman, so familiar yet I couldn't for the life of me –

And that's when I remembered seeing her on my sleep-screen in a hotel room in Suzhou, China.

FINDING SANDY

I still hadn't thought much about the mystery woman when I got home. Dreams were dreams, and mine were as weird as anyone's. More, I was focused on turning fifty. A very scary number, fifty.

In my small beach town, I had witnessed a number of strong, strapping males turn fifty...and lose it. Heart attacks, cancer, a couple of suicides. A few other guys just sort of aged perceptively not long after hitting the big five oh. It was like suddenly they saw themselves as useless. Fifty. Old. I figured I had an advantage. I'd been useless for years. After being fired in 1965 I never again held down a job. If that didn't define useless...

Funny thing though, I was in the best shape of my life. Every morning I ran five miles on the beach outside my home, kicking the final two or three hundred yards. I'd recently competed in a couple of 10 km runs, surprising myself by catching the young bucks in the final mile and passing them easily. So when the dream came a third time, then a fourth the following month, curious, sure. Still, hardly more than that. Until one day I was out on my morning run, just jogging along, mundane thoughts. No special occasion, your typical gorgeous day on the world's most beautiful beach. Suddenly I hit The Wall. Or should I say The Wall cocked a fist and slammed it into my kisser, stopping me dead. I just stood there looking down at the sand. Didn't move for an age. Felt a chill creep up the spine. I knew who she was.

*

Roll it back twenty-five years. Another woman: this one very real.

I had a job driving an Inquirer truck from 6pm till around 2.30 in the morning. I found from the start that if I went straight home to bed, I couldn't

fall asleep for hours. So I began visiting the all-night Melrose Diner in South Philly, a known mob hangout. I'd bring half a dozen Inkies and hand them out to the staff there, sit at the counter and nurse a bagel and coffee while reading the paper I had just been delivering. I'd get home around four, grab a few hours' sleep, then race to Temple for my 8am class in general semantics, which mostly I'd sleep through.

A couple weeks after I'd started going to the Melrose I was sitting on my customary stool when suddenly the lights went out on my left side. I looked up to see a tank wearing black suit, black shirt and white tie with the fattest knot on record. The tank leaned over, his face inches from mine.

"Mr. B requires you's presence."

He stepped aside, bringing back the light and revealing a table where three other tanks in similar uniform sat with a dapper older man, far smaller than the others, silver hair.

"Sit, Sit," Mr. B said softly as I nervously approached. I sat. "You drive for the Inky?" I nodded. "Yeah, you coming in handing out free papers. I like that. Nice touch. Bet you're working your way through college, right?" I nodded again. "Penn?"

"Huh. I should be so lucky."

"Temple, then."

"Yes sir. Studying journalism."

"Journalism. Good, good. Now, young man, I'm going to give you some advice. And I want you to listen carefully." I leaned in a little closer. "Whatever happens, you stay in school. Get your degree. Then go on and get another degree, what is it, masters? Education," he said with a quiet reverence. "Otherwise, you'll end up like these dumb goombahs here. Can barely write their name."

"Aw, Mr. B!"

I'd see Mr. B and his goombahs on other occasions, but no more words. Some years later Bruce Springsteen would write a song about him.

I'd come home from the Melrose, fall into bed, get a few hours' sleep, then up, drive like crazy to Temple. This one morning I arrived in class, which was held in a large radio broadcasting studio in the basement of a church on Temple's middle-of-the-ghetto campus. Seats were wooden folding chairs, around forty of them. The only vacancy was in the back row,

in the middle. I staggered over, flopped down, immediately fell asleep. I woke maybe half an hour later. My head was leaning on a woman's chest. First thing I saw when I opened my eyes was thigh. A lot of thigh, right up to the very short shorts.

I took my head off her chest, mumbled apologies. I stayed awake for the remainder of the session. Not once did I take my eyes off those thighs.

This was Sandy. Sandra Lee. Who would become Mrs. Rosenberg in a couple years' time.

*

I graduated mid-term, continuing to drive for the Inquirer until May, when, with the army breathing heavily down my neck, the air force reserve I'd signed up for months back finally came through and sent me to Lackland AFB in San Antonio for basic. Following eight weeks of fun and games I got assigned to Maguire AFB, an hour's drive from Philly. Except the air force didn't want me to take that drive on a daily basis. This was during what had become known as the Berlin crisis, when two extremely overly-testosteroned megalomaniacal jingoistic nations were threatening to toss nuclear bombs at one another's civilian populations.

"You're on active duty, airman!" a large, thick-hipped master sergeant bellowed at me one day. "You're a medic," she went on, "an important cog in the wheel of this base. You realize how important your role is? What if there's a nuclear attack and we need all the medics we can lay hands on? How're we gonna contact you? How are you even going to get here to do your sworn duty?"

A nuke attack on Jersey? And you're worried how will I get here? Shit, lady, I'll be under the desk with the rest of the kids.

Basic training had been a lark. Like summer camp. Though not at first. First ten days, when they did everything possible to rip from your psyche the cushy existence you'd just come from, I could feel myself losing it. Ill-fitting uniforms, marching everywhere, the dumb guys telling the smart ones what to do. Loudly.

The tenth day was a Sunday. I had already broken the rules by secreting away a few garments of civilian clothes when we were ordered to ship everything back home. I didn't know why, but on Sunday the tenth day of

absurdity, I figured to use them. I was going to desert. Run off to Mexico. Never to be heard from again.

I reached into the back of my foot locker and began dragging out my T-shirt and jeans when I heard a disturbance down the corridor. Peered out the door of my four-man room.

“Didja hear?” a fellow basic said as he raced by. “Airman Quill went over the hill, ha-ha. Seems he’d stashed away some civvies, put them on and just took off. The sergeants just went after him, see if they can grab hold before he gets picked up by the apes (air police).” I went back to my room, tucked T-shirt and jeans back into the foot locker. Half an hour later I looked out the window and saw our training instructors gently frog marching a dazed Quill back into our barracks. They went into the day room, closed the door. I tiptoed over, pressed an ear to the door.

“Quill, for god’s sake. You played basketball in college, right? You played a game, and from what I’ve heard, you were damn good at it. Well, what do you think basic is? It’s a game too! Just play the damn game!”

At age twenty-two, I had just heard the most sound advice of my young life.

My young life at Maguire AFB, though, was a different kettle. It wasn’t a game. It was real. Too real. What might be described as a very minor event pushed me over the edge to do whatever I could to get the hell away from the place.

My ever-so-essential role as a cog in Maguire’s wheel? I worked in the dispensary giving shots to people who were departing on overseas assignment. They came in the morning, eight to noon. Needles in the arm, sometimes in the backside. They’d made me practice shooting up oranges for the first week. Produced some of the biggest, healthiest oranges ever. Then came the real thing.

First person I jabbed was a huge, muscular black captain. He rolled up his sleeve, I took aim, fired. But when I pulled back the syringe...no needle. What the—? It was still in his arm. “Hang on, sir,” I called, running after him, holding out an alcohol-soaked cotton ball. “Let me wipe the area.” I did so, tugging out the needle. Guy never felt a thing. Just looked at me funny.

Came noon, my staff sergeant and I spent a few minutes filing the burrs off the needles – they were the old, reusable kind. Then I would place them

in an autoclave for sterilization. Around one I drove home. I wasn't supposed to. What I was supposed to do was wait till five. But my sergeant, who might vanish well before noon if it wasn't busy, hinted that since there wasn't a blessed thing to do in the afternoon, he wouldn't mind if I disappeared. "Just don't get caught."

One morning he had to take care of some family business and the office sent a pretty, sweet-faced young WAF two-striper to help with the jabs. She and I got along great. Life stories and lots of laughs. Following the cleaning and placement in the autoclave, I said, quietly, Hey, why not take the rest of the day off, there's really nothing to do.

"Really?" she cooed. "It's okay? I'd really like to do some shopping at the BX. Thanks so much. And what about you?" she asked. I gave her a wink. "See you tomorrow maybe."

Got in my car and drove off base. Couple miles down the road, I realized I'd left my cap on the counter next to the 'clave. I debated going back. Yes, no, yes, no. If I got caught without it by the apes... Ah, screw it. Turned around and went back to the base.

The dispensary shared its facility with a two man veterinary unit. As I walked in, one of the vets leaned out the door. "Hey, Rosey. Sergeant Bulldyke's been calling you," he called. "Sounds pissed."

I picked up the phone, called her. "Ma'am?"

"Where are you, Airman?"

"Uh, right here in the dispensary, ma'am. Where, ah, I'm supposed to be."

"Hang up, I'll call you right back." The phone rang. "It's just that we heard you'd skipped out and gone home."

I felt my face flush. "Uh, how could I have gone home – I'm on duty till, uh, five. You need me for something, ma'am?"

"No, no. It's just that we were told –"

The pretty sweet-faced WAF. Why this hit me harder than all the rest of the bullshit I couldn't say. It just did.

My reserve unit's headquarters was on the second floor of a woman's clothing sweat shop in North Philly. I went there to see the head sergeant, said how about we go out for a drink. Had three hundred dollars in my pocket. Was going to bribe him.

I took him to a nearby bar. Grabbed a table. Bought him a couple drinks. Then I laid out a sad story that my father was sick, he really needed me at home to make his breakfast in the morning and cook dinner in the evening.

“If I’m not there, he won’t eat. Been that way ever since my mother died. The doc says his condition, he’s gotta eat. When I was in basic, my sister came over and did his meals every day. But she’s moved away.” I sighed and shook my head.

The sergeant got up to hit the toilet. I placed the money squarely on his chair. He came back, didn’t see it, actually sat down on the bills. Then proceeded to give me a this-man’s-army talk, we all gotta do what we gotta do.

When we got up to go, I quick snatched the money from his chair. All the way out to the parking lot I tried to slip it in his pocket. No chance. He shook my hand, wished me luck. Drove away.

The following weekend I was rostered for duty at the base. I didn’t go. Stayed in bed till noon, got up, lazed around. Monday I was ready for the worst.

My sergeant in the dispensary gave me a pitying look. “You’re wanted over there,” he said with a headshake in the general direction of the master sergeant’s office. “Pronto.”

“Ma’am?” From behind her desk, eyes blazing, she stared up at me for more than a minute.

“Airman, you must the luckiest bastard on this base. I was gonna fry your Jew ass so hard you’d never sit on it again. Then this came in an hour ago.” She chucked some papers at me. A transfer to my reserve unit’s head office in North Philly. Effective immediately. “Now get the hell out of my sight.”

*

When I blessedly got reassigned to spend the rest of my active duty tour, which was six months total, upstairs from the sweat shop, Sandy and I began going out, then began not going out with anyone else, then became a couple. She’d had a boyfriend before, but me, this was my first real relationship. It felt weird: somebody this good looking would want to be with...me? I did all I could to prove my unworthiness, but she wasn’t having a bit of it.

Sandy and I saw each other most days, slept together whenever possible. I could not tell you how it happened. We were so careful. We thought.

“I missed my period” was followed by “I missed my period again” was followed by...

The subject of abortion came up, but neither of us wanted it.

Abortion. To this day I got in trouble with women friends over this. See, I didn't like it. Only reason I'd vote in favor is look at who were voting against.

I had this belief, seemingly had it as far back as my pre-hippie days when I'd never even heard the word karma. Picture: a long line of souls waiting to be reborn. They each had, for some specific reason, a womb picked out to be born into. I didn't believe they jumped right in soon as the wee round thingie with the arrow pointed at one o'clock collided with the wee round thingie with the cross hanging straight down. More, it might happen at any time during the nine months. Abortion prior to the soul's parachuting down into the fetus, okay, go ahead cut. After all, it wasn't sentient yet. After the osmotic landing, uhh, not all that terrific. Problem was, how did you know when contact was made. Some day, for sure, we'd be able to work it out. Not right now, and certainly not back in 1961.

Scratch abortion.

Sandy wanted to have the kid; I wanted no part.

“I can't do this,” I pleaded. “The air national guard unit, the one I just missed out on before the reserves took me? Just shipped out to Berlin. Berlin! I hear two things: The guys there have been housed in barracks that haven't been used since the war. Germany's having the coldest winter on record and the barracks aren't insulated, aren't heated. Guys are deserting or doing other shit just so they can be put in prison, get away from the place. Second thing. Word is my unit's in the on-deck circle. So how can I possibly be a father with this hanging over me?”

It's called fear. It's called cowardice.

I figured Sandy would say, See the door? See your feet? Fo-ward march!! But no. She capitulated. Agreed to have the baby and immediately we'd give it up for adoption. It was an act she would regret the rest of her life.

My tour of active duty ended early in '62. For the next five and a half years (if I were lucky and there was no callup) I'd be doing a weekend a month (8am to 5pm, then home) upstairs from the sweat shop, plus a couple weeks at some base in the Midwest every summer. Except I wouldn't be doing five and a half years, I'd be doing around half that time. But that's another story.

Sandy and I moved into a small, inexpensive apartment. I'd got a job doing PR for yet another air force project, the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System, and Sandy was still working as a case worker for social welfare. One morning, this was in April, I said let's play hooky.

"And do what?" she wondered.

"Dunno. We've seen all the decent movies. Bit of a drizzle so a walk in the park is out. Hey, I have an idea. Whattaya say we get married." What a romantic, me.

We drove to Elkton, Maryland, then a renowned marriage mill town. Ugly little place. Strange looking people. We found the marriage licence office in the town hall. Ever so coincidentally, the office directly next door was a marine recruiting center. We bought us a licence for five dollars. On the way back to the street, stopped at a vendor's tiny stall, got a ring for two dollars. What a big spender, me.

Every shop window, the lawn of every house, had the same sign: Marriages Performed Here. One sign, Performed had been reworked into Perforated.

We walked the length of the main drag, ignoring the pleas, suggestions, demands of touts. No one place looked exceptionally inviting. Finally we picked one, walked up to a screen door, rang. A girl who looked no more than thirteen, no more than four foot-six, belly further gone than Sandy's, peered out.

"Can we get married here?"

"The man ain't in but I kin git 'im."

"Uh, maybe we'll try --"

A woman appeared, shoved the pregnant teenager roughly aside, opened the door. She was the wife in American Gothic. Said something to the girl, who immediately shunted off. We stepped into a large room which held the Guinness record of kitsch: doilies, glass spheres which when turned upside

down snowed on Heidelberg, satin cushion covers with the lord's prayer on one side, Battle Hymn of the Republic on the back. Plus half dozen ornate crosses and as many plates with the Big Bopper's kid looking thoroughly bored.

Sandy (whispering): "We died and went to goyim heaven?"

Which started the giggles. They died down after a while, then would start up again. A man suddenly appeared. He stood no more than five feet tall, gray hair combed over the ears. Shirt sleeves pulled up and held in place with rubber bands.

"Howdy, folks! Sorry to make you wait. I had a man in the chair."

"Don't even think about what you're thinking," I side-mouthed to my bride. Which brought on another wave of the titters.

"Would you like the full shebang?" he asked. "Twenty dollars includes pitchers and a snack." When he saw we were hesitating, "Four dollars for pitchers, four for the snack. That's for both of you. No? Oh, you must want pitchers. Good camera, missus a good pitcher taker."

"Just the basic ceremony, please. And if you don't mind, we're Jewish, so no mention of—" I looked around at the pitchers of The Big Guy.

"Oh, don't you worry none," he cackled. "I've performed ceremonies for lots of Jewish people. I've even married two rabbis."

"To each other?" Sandy wondered. I let fly one of those awful sounds between a snort and a strangle. Which triggered a new bout from Sandy.

The reverend, or whatever, was not pleased. He opened the bible and began to read. Next to him, nearly a foot taller, stood his wife. I glanced into the next room and noted the pregnant dwarf peeking out from behind a set of curtains. I was biting the inside of my mouth so hard I tasted blood. Sandy was doubled over, tears running down her face. I was afraid she'd drop the kid right there.

Obviously piqued at our lack of appreciation of such a serious and spiritual event, he stopped three times to glare. Finally, snapping the bible shut:

"...in the eyes of our lord Jesus Christ amen twelve dollars please!"

We left there man and wife, woman and husband, the best entertainment a dozen bucks could buy.

The doctor recommended a lawyer. The lawyer was a schmuck. He talked only to me. Was Sandy invisible? And I, apparently, was only partly visible, and on a much lower level of being.

He told us that to go through the adoption process we'd have to use a phony name. I wondered why. "Because you never use your real name in these matters." I said I had nothing to be ashamed of. Which was a colossal lie, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing.

"The birth parents and the adopting parents are never to know each other's identity," he said. "It's not proper, and besides, it's against the law."

Somehow, we chose the name Klein.

He set up an interview for us with an adoption agency. We were assigned a case worker who had been stood down from the SS for being overly mean. If the lawyer-schmuck had talked down to us and wouldn't recognize Sandy, the case worker-nazi considered us matter to be scraped off the bottoms of her shoes and would not under any circumstance look at me. What she did do, whenever I said anything, was in turn scorn, snarl, snap and smirk. It was like: They give this loser junk that works, a seed that's fertile, and he's giving away the product of that junk-launched seed! I felt three inches high.

"Un vut iss your name?" she asked. Well, not like that. In my head.

"Klein," I replied.

"Spell it." Without looking at me.

"K-L-I-N-E." She began to write it out.

"K-L-E-I-N," Sandy corrected. Brunhilda shook her head, snorted, scratched out Kline and rewrote it as Klein. I shrunk to half a centimeter and crawled into my own navel.

At the end of an hour's grilling, she finally looked my way. Not at me, my way. "You are absolutely never, and I mean *never*, to attempt to contact the adopting parents. Understand?"

"*Jawohl, mein feuhreress!*" I got up and slunk out, careful not to slip down a drain or crack in the sidewalk. It was weeks before I could manage an erection again.

One day, late August, I got a call at work. "I'm ready." Rushed home – we were now living in a one bedroom garden apartment in South Jersey

– bundled Sandy into the car and rushed over the Ben Franklin Bridge to the hospital. There, they plopped her into a wheelchair, and made off to the elevator. I stood alone at the reception counter.

“Uh –”

“You can go.” Not even a glance.

Next morning, a call from the hospital. “Mr. Rosenberg, this is Dr. _____. I’m happy to tell you your wife has had a healthy baby girl!”

Pause.

“Why are you telling me?”

Long pause.

“Isn’t this Barry Rosenberg, whose wife –”

“Excuse me, I hope you don’t take this personally. But you’re an idiot.”
Slam.

Oh Jesus, did I actually say that? The guy didn’t know, he meant well –. I was such a cock.

Next day Sandy called asking me to fetch her some clean underwear. So after work I drove home, parked, opened the door and was instantly whacked by an unbelievable miasma.

We had a beautiful collie, name of Zero. As was his IQ. Ever so lovable, but. Besides being not all that well clued in, Zero the collie was high strung neurotic. Distressed, he could work up a Niagara of diarrhea. When Sandy hadn’t returned overnight he sensed something was amiss, grew super-distressed. Before leaving that morning I had closed the bedroom door, papered the living room carpet and floor, covered all the furniture. Zero the collie scratched all the paper into balls and crapped...everywhere.

I scooped up all the papers, rag-wiped the carpet and floor with Mister Clean, sprayed two cans of bathroom deodorizer. I stuffed everything into a paper bag. Then I grabbed some of Sandy’s undies and tossed them in another paper bag. Dashed out, slam dunked one of the bags into the communal dumpster, flipped the other on the back seat, tore off for the hospital. What is that smell? I kept wondering as I sped over the Ben Franklin into Philly.

I didn’t stay long. Kissed the wife, lay the bag on a chair, made some small talk, rushed home to walk Zero. Got a call. “If this is some kind of sick joke –!” Having already established my rep with the hospital staff, this kind of rubber stamped it.

Two days later I went to pick her up. Waited in the lobby for the elevator. Elevator came, doors parted. Two males inside, one in his sixties. The lawyer-schmuck. The other a guy was a few years older than me. He wore glasses. He was beaming. The lawyer-schmuck was anything but beaming. His mouth dropped open. A gargling sound came out. I stepped in, quickly turned around facing the doors. The adopting father's beaming face was a soft silk cloth that wrapped itself gently around my heart. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Did neither. Just closed my eyes and thanked whichever source it was I didn't believe in.

She was going to good people, my baby; a good home. Surely better than anything I could provide. Maybe, just maybe, I wasn't a total prick after all.

Sandy wondered about the smile on my face. I told her I was happy everything had turned out all right.

Finding Greenland

When I left active duty, I was somewhat shattered to discover the universe was not going to support me the rest of my life. I had to find a job.

Others who had graduated from Temple's journalism and communications curriculum normally took a crap gig and even crappier pay with a newspaper or radio station in places like Scranton or Hazleton or Reading. Typical salary, I'd heard, was fifty bucks a week. They would hang out there a few years, waiting for an opening in a Philly paper or station. Right off, I said screw that. I set a minimum of a hundred a week, and it had to be within daily commuting distance of the city.

Getting nowhere on my own, I registered with a placement agency. The person in charge was a lovely woman in her fifties. For some reason she took a shine to me. Told me that she rarely took on young job seekers; her placements were in the more lofty circles of executive positions. For me she made an exception.

She would call every morning. Usually around nine or ten when I was still in bed (Sandy having gone off to work much earlier). Check the want

ads, she would tell me. Knock on doors. And make sure to present yourself well. I had a new momma.

Months went by. I'd interview for advertising jobs, PR jobs, engineering writing jobs (I'd gone to engineering school for a couple years before transferring over to J school). Nothing.

One morning she rang with sure news. A really good job had opened with RCA, in one of their military contract facilities in South Jersey. I drove over for an interview. The long, low-slung building housed a thousand employees. The program had built anti-missile detection sites in the arctic – Alaska, Greenland and England – and was now in the maintenance phase. Welcome to the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System, the most costly defense project in history.

The man who would be my immediate boss was Jewish. He liked me. He sent me over to an interviewer who was Italian. He didn't like me. Half hour of stupid questions, he finally said: "And if you get the position, how much would you expect to start?"

I sat up straight and announced: "One hundred dollars a week!" And immediately realized I had made a major mistake.

"You did say" – he grinned viciously – "one hundred dollars a week, is that right?"

"Uh, well, uh."

"Yes, I believe we can meet that number." Was later I discovered I could have asked one-fifty. Fifty a week was a lot of money back then. Still, I had learned something infinitely more valuable from the experience.

So I had a job. Employee Services Administrator. Not to be confused with Personnel Services Administrator, which was rated on a higher pay scale and was held down by a sad man in his fifties with alcohol breath that no amount of mint chewing might neutralize.

I put out a weekly newsletter carrying employee for sale ads and detailing upcoming BMEWS Recreation Association (yes, BRA!) events. Which I was in charge of planning. I produced a glossy monthly house organ (the 'BMEWS News') for all 3000 workers of the system. I had constant satellite phone contact with the respective employee services administrators at Thule, Greenland (Site I) and Clear, Alaska (Site II). Exhilarating stuff for a young fella like me.

As well as all the in-house promo, I was in charge of sending releases to the media assuring all that this example of superior American hi tech engineering was keeping the Russians from sending their ballistic missiles over the north pole into our back yards. BMEWS, I told them, was the Free World's first line of defense against commie terrorism. The three radar stations were hooked in to NORAD, SAC and, of course, the Pentagon. How the system worked was this:

An unidentified missile was tracked by radar. The data was sent through the most advanced computer network known to man, which confirmed its authenticity as a missile (and not space junk – broken-up satellites or comets, airliners, flocks of birds) and plotted time and destination of impact. NORAD, SAC and the Pentagon went on green alert. The president was called. Allied missile centers notified. The missile kept coming. Yellow alert. All SAC jets were scrambled. Underground missile silos were activated. Nuclear subs readied. The Soviet premier was contacted. He confirmed or denied. The missile kept coming. It reached a certain pre-set distance from projected impact. Red alert. Western ICBMs were launched. Nuclear war.

In truth, none of this had anything to do with defense. There was no actual defense. There was only pre-strike retaliatory offense. Neither side, you see, cared to be caught with its panties down.

An additional task for the new employee services administrator was writing arctic survival manuals for all workers going north. I wrote them quite authoritatively, copying verbatim from journals taken out of the local public library.

Greenland especially fascinated me. Thule Air Force Base had eight thousand men, of whom a thousand were civilians working for BMEWS. No, not a sexist comment. Men. No women.

In my survival manual I wrote about 'phases', freak windstorms that came on suddenly and blew fine snow in off the polar ice cap. The phases were rated I, II and III. Three was a hundred mile an hour-plus howler; a white out. When this happened, all work, all activity, on base stopped, and people – uh, men – dug in wherever they might be. For a solid year I lobbied to get a tour of the site. Finally, May '63, the brass caved in.

The air force plane was an ancient C-130: the notorious flying coffin. The one I was on left from Maguire AFB. Loud engine clatter. Very loud.

Ear plug loud. The plane climbed slowly to thirty thousand feet. Then it dropped very, very quickly to ten thousand feet. Like, plummeted.

We returned to Maguire, where, no explanation as to the twenty thousand feet sink, we were ordered to board another C-130. I noticed that less than half those from the original craft got on. They simply walked, or staggered, away, quit their jobs.

Upon landing at Thule, we were issued heavy arctic gear even though at 8pm it was still sunny and rather balmy. I was given a room, where I dropped my bags, and followed a photographer I knew from Jersey to the mess hall. As we sat eating and talking, an announcement was made: a phase I was upon us. I stepped outside. The wind was blowing, yes, but nothing extraordinary. Which I explained to the men sitting around when I returned to my table.

“This is it? This is the terrible phase I’ve heard so much about?” An hour later, phase II was declared. The men began moving to the exits, as a phase III would keep them stuck in the mess hall till all-clear was called. Outside, I was immediately blown over. I couldn’t see my gloved hand in front of my face.

“Nothing extraordinary, eh, seagull (somebody who flew in for a look-see, flew right out again, as opposed to a long-termer!)” the photographer yelled over the roar of the wind. He handed me a pair of glasses made of cardboard with dozens of tiny pinpricks. “Put these on, grab hold my coattail and don’t let go.” Blindly, we made it to the dorms. Miss a building by inches, I was later informed, you just might walk on for miles, or till you froze to death.

Totally fatigued, I lay down on my cot, fell instantly asleep. What felt like minutes later, I felt somebody shaking me. “Rosey, get the hell up, man. It’s almost twelve o’clock. You’re way late for work!”

My clock indeed read ten to twelve. Shit. I scrambled out of bed, slipped into some clothes, dashed outside. A bunch of them stood there laughing like hell. Almost twelve o’clock, yeah. Bright and sunny, right. Arctic summer night. I’d been asleep for less than an hour. Ha-ha.

The actual BMEWS tech site, a few miles off by bus, was composed above ground of four stationary parabolic tracking radars, each roughly one and a half times the size of a football field, facing northerly in a semi-circle.

In their midst stood a single twelve story high ‘golf ball’, the interior of which resided “the most sophisticated movable detection radar in the world”. (I’d written that.) Underground, beehives of technical and administrative activity were connected by a miniature railroad.

My very first day I made two curious discoveries on my orientation tour. The detection radar, “operable twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year, scanning the skies so the Free World may sleep in peace” (I wrote that), had not been functioning for some months. Reason? The BMEWS parent company (which also recorded Elvis) and the sub-contractor that designed and built the main gear (they also made many of the tires Americans drove on) were locked in litigation as to who was at fault over the gear’s failure nine and a half years shy of its ten year warranty.

Second point of interest was the tracking radars’ having spotted three unidentified (= Russian) missiles headed for Salt Lake City, Utah just the day before. Two months prior, five missiles appeared destined to level Las Vegas. And six weeks before that...

These spottings, which the computer clearly had identified as the genuine articles, in every case (and apparently there had been several over the few years of BMEWS’s existence) would mysteriously disappear from the screens minutes, sometimes moments, prior to the red alert point. The Soviets angrily denied having any part in these foul-ups, though they were obviously laughing their heads off. An air force colonel I got on friendly terms with told me, “Way this crappy system is run, the damn Russkies could bring their missiles over the pole on dog sleds, we’d be the last to know.”

Before I left to return to the States, the site personnel manager asked would I like to come back as a five-tenner. Five hundred and ten days was the standard hitch at Sites I and III, reason being that if you worked outside the US for eighteen months you paid no tax. So, with an appropriate raise, I’d take home around fifteen thou, considerable sweet gelt in 1963. Home, I talked it over with Sandy. She said, Absolutely not. I said, Thank god.

*

I was sitting at my desk when a head popped around the side of my cubicle. Major Sam McCartney, one of the air force brass assigned to oversee BMEWS’s follies.

“Pssst, Rosey. Whattaya say we sneak out for a round?”

“Yo!”

I kept clubs, clothes and shoes in my trunk for just such occasions. Grabbed my stuff and jumped into his wagon.

Major Sam and I often argued politics. A drawling Southerner, he'd been a Nixon man, had little use for Kennedy, whom I idolized. (General David Sarnoff, RCA's CEO, had also been a devoted Nixon supporter, so much so that he'd foolishly shoveled all his company's weight and money behind him. As result, since the 1960 election BMEWS was being piece by piece taken away from RCA and handed over to competitors.)

It was an unseasonably warm November morning when we hit the club. Neither of us was exactly a ten handicap golfer, but we enjoyed a leisurely game.

We'd just finished nine holes and were cruising over to the back nine when we passed a red faced man carrying his bag.

“Didja hear?” he called over. “Jack Kennedy's been assassinated.”

I thought: You bastard! South Jersey was a heavy redneck area; even so, a pretty rotten thing to say. We noted people headed from all directions to the clubhouse. “We just better check and see what's up,” Sam said, solemnly.

TV was on, not a peep out of a few dozen men standing round watching. Sam: “Let's head on back to the office.”

In the car, I went through all five of Kubler-Ross's phases of grief in a hurry, went back and began trawling through them again. Got snagged on anger. All of a sudden, the man sitting next to me embodied everything I hated. Southern rightwing military asshole. Kennedy dies and this guy lives. I turned in my seat, face contorted, about to say something totally stupid. I stopped.

Tears were running slowly down Major Sam McCartney's craggy leathered face.

*

1964. My cozy reserve unit was disbanded. I was reassigned to a larger outfit stationed, of all places, at Maguire Air Force Base. My old unit was strictly medical, a doctor who posed as a colonel at its head. The new unit had an honest to Christ general. Just a single star, still, a general.

I saw a guy I knew slightly, sidled up to him. “Hey man, what kind of outfit is this?” He looked at me. Up and down. New blood. “A crack outfit!” He walked away. I knew I was in trouble.

Everything went okay the first few weekends. Then the Gulf of Tonkin exploded, and we were activated. Well, not all of us. Instead of going to Maguire to be on active duty, I drove to Canada to become a Landed Emigrant. Failed miserably.

The military being what it is, my unit was deactivated the day following its activation. But it was recorded that I hadn’t shown. I was called on the carpet. Told by an ugly pockmarked lieutenant that one more missed session and I’d be put on active duty for forty-five days. Mess up again, two years.

“And we’re giving you a new assignment,” he grinned maliciously. “From now on, you’re in the reg room.” Translation: volumes of military regulations in hard-bound loose-leaf books were stored in a closet-size office. No windows. You sat there alone all day following morning assembly just in case a reg had to be looked up. And you guarded these regs with your very soul in case commie infiltrators tried to sneak in and make off with them. This was the worst duty the outfit had, shunned by everyone.

First day I near went out of my skull. Time did not pass. Every once in a while someone of rank would drop by to make sure I wasn’t thinking or jerking off. Didn’t even get a lunch break, I suppose in case somebody requested the reg on whether mash potatoes could be served with chicken wings in the mess hall.

One day, spotting no decent place to hang myself, I pulled one of the regulation books off the shelf. Could barely lift the damn thing. Opened it and began reading. And discovered a whole new world. This stuff was so absurd as to be beyond unbelievable. Later I would realize where Monty Python got their material. I mean, who the hell came up with these things? And wrote them in such a manner? The intent, of course, was that nothing was left to interpretation. Except Talmudic scholars were more clear in meaning than this stuff.

I became a reg junkie. Actually looked forward to spending a weekend alone with these gems of wisdom. And then one day I found it: the solution to my career as a military man.

“How about a few weeks in Europe?” I asked Sandy one day.

“Really? Sure! Any place in particular?”

“Well, we can hit the usual high spots, London, Paris, Venice. But I do want to spend a couple days in Belgium.”

See, the reg I had found stated that if you were in the reserves, and it wasn't wartime, and your civilian job relocated you out of the USA, and there was no military base for you to report to within three hundred miles, you didn't have to play part-time soldier anymore. RCA had divisions and offices and plants all over the Western world. Military bases were also all over the Western world, but a small RCA division then located in Belgium was – and I must have gone over this a dozen times – exactly three hundred and nine miles from the nearest American base.

A letter written on that division's stationery (pilfered by me, written by me and posted by me) claimed that Mr. Barry Rosenberg had been transferred to said division as of _____. And following our return home, I never again attended a meeting. (I did get an honorable discharge though.)

Truth was, there was no question I would've been better off staying in the reserves, going to meetings and spending one weekend a month enjoying the Holy Book of Regs rather than endure the palpable paranoia I experienced over the next couple of years that I'd somehow be discovered. To this day, I cannot explain why I do some of the crazy shit I do.

*

Back at BMEWS headquarters, I got two interesting pieces of mail one day. First was from head office in New York, a plaque commemorating my winning the competition of best house organ (of twenty-some) in the corporation. The second was in-house, two weeks' notice of layoff. I held them in my hands. Plaque in the left, termination in the right. I packed both in a carton I found in the mail room, along with a brief note:

“Dear General Sarnoff: This is the reward your corporation gives for outstanding performance. Please take this plaque and shove it up your ass sideways. Respectfully.”

I showed it to a couple of the mail room guys. “You sure you want us to send this?”

“What are they gonna do, fire me?”

A few days later two interesting pieces of mail: the plaque, returned, no comment whatsoever. And a terse note informing me that my layoff had been rescinded. I knew it was just temporary, of course. In the meantime, left to my own devices (I was shunned by everybody but the secretaries), I embarked on a project which would nail me the best job in the world.

FINDING JERRY WOLMAN

An unknown in the sporting world had just bought the Philadelphia Eagles for five and a half mill. The media were climbing all over themselves extolling the miracle of thirty-six year old Jerry Wolman, dead broke ten years before in upstate Pennsylvania, who'd packed up his family one day and drove to Washington DC, where he proceeded to make as many millions in the contracting business as he had years. Just a nice guy who'd gone from rags to riches to proud owner of a National Football League franchise.

Me, I set a bead on Jerry Wolman. Using the facilities of the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System, the photo lab, the printing presses, the mail room, I spent half my remaining time creating clever propaganda for myself (a mock-up of an Inquirer front page: "Rosey leads Birds to NFL crown; Jerry says we couldn't have done it without him!"), the other half quietly writing resumes for fellow employees looking to bail out of what had become a dying enterprise. In the few minutes a week left over, I put out the company newsletter. One time the print room guys got a little confused and ran two of my jobs together, so that on back of the first page of the weekly newsletter was the CV of one of the more prominent managers. These were rounded up and dumped in a hurry.

I made many calls to Wolman's office in Washington, occasionally identifying myself as a reporter, but the guy was never in. I talked Sandy into taking a day off and accompanying me to DC to try and catch up with the guy. No Wolman.

I read that he'd be in New York for an owners' conference, and we actually saw him getting into an elevator at his hotel, but he brushed me off.

I squeezed into the elevator with him, then realized Sandy hadn't made it. I jumped out and tried to pull her in with me but the doors closed.

Obsessed? You think I was obsessed?

I finally got a letter from him. Hands shaking, I ripped open the envelope.

"Ed Snider does the office hiring, not me. See him. Jerry."

At BMEWS, when someone was laid off, or was moving on in the corporation, they'd hold a luncheon the final day. But I'd broken the rules. So one morning some weeks following my correspondence with General Sarnoff, two security men showed up at my desk. I'd always got along with the security guys, gave them little presents, talked sports. Not today. It was: clear everything out of your desk. Now. Right, come with us. One in front, one behind.

"It's okay, guys. I know you're only doing your job." But if this was so, why act so ugly? Out to the parking lot, right up to my car. "Have a nice day, fellas." Stone faces as I drove out, no response to my final wave.

Three weeks into my forced vacation I got a phone call. Ed Snider. Could I come in sometime to see him about a project. No hurry. "Um, half an hour be okay for you, Ed?"

It was a ten week deal to promote a benefit exhibition game for the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library, which included publication of a commemorative book. My salary was nearly twice what I was getting at RCA. So far as anything longer, "We'll see what happens between now and the game," Snider told me.

I was in. I was working for the Eagles.

*

The Eagles had long been run by an Irish mafia. Their office was a crummy little dump in town. You didn't want to have to use the toilet there.

Wolman rented a huge space on the first floor of the Evening Bulletin building at 30th and Market. All the furnishings were new and first class. The longest conference table I'd ever seen took up half the floor.

Wolman came and went. He had a private plane and trailing entourage. One day, I didn't even know he'd come in, I was walking past the conference table on way to the toilet when I heard my name yelled out. I turned to see a

football headed for my face. I put up my hands more to keep my nose intact than anything else; somehow the ball landed in my palms and stuck there.

“Hey, we drafted a receiver!” And when I winged it back, “And second string QB!”

As Wolman had written me, Snider, not he, was the office boss. A few years older than me, word had followed him up from DC that he had made a bundle in the record business. Also, he was the brother-in-law of Wolman’s business partner. I saw the guy as a class act. Sandy, when she first met him at a club function, told me later: “Barry, he’s a phony. A slick, greasy Jew. The kind you can’t stand.”

“Aw, c’mon, babe!”

“Your have your head in the clouds. You do. Just be careful. Don’t trust him.”

Bah: women.

The exhibition game came, the commemorative book was a winner. Later I would get autographs and nice comments from Jackie, Bobby and Teddy.

At the time, the public relations man was a friendly sort name of Eddie Hogan, pal to all the writers, but who couldn’t write a lick. Everyone knew he was soon out the door. When Snider called me into his office, I figured the job was mine.

“We’re keeping you on. I know you want Ed’s job, but that can’t happen. The writers love him, and just wouldn’t tolerate you taking his place. (One of the weekly gossip sheets had reported that Wolman had brought ‘Alan Rosenberger’ with him from Washington to replace Hogan.) When Ed retires, Jimmy Gallagher will take over.” Gallagher? Sweet guy. Till now a glorified office clerk.

“But he can’t write!”

“Don’t you think I know that? But you can. So part of your duties will be writing the press releases for him.”

In other words, in addition to putting out the game programs, creating ticket sales promo and overseeing the halftime entertainment, I was now a ghost writer. So what was different between this and what I had been doing at BMEWS? Answer: Prestige. And when they bought everyone on the team Kelly green sports jackets with a silver eagle snaring a football on the left tit, I got one as well. I practically swooned first time I tried it on.

“This is such cheap crap,” sneered Timmy Brown, one of the finest running backs in the game, when handed his. “Ain’t putting this on my body!” He went out and had one tailor made.

*

Joe Kuharich had been hugely successful for three of his four years as head football coach at the University of San Francisco, 1949-51. His final year there USF went 9-0. Perhaps he should’ve quit at that point, found himself another career.

Because of this brief winning run, Kuharich was gobbled up by the pros. He coached the Chicago Cardinals (one year) and the Washington Redskins (five). He had but a single winning season.

As things frequently happened in sports and corporations, when you screwed up big time one place, you were quickly hired on by another to do likewise. Kuharich went from the pros back to college, which ninety-nine percent of the time was anything but a move up the ladder. But the college gig he got was Notre Dame.

From its inception as the Fighting Irish in 1887 (and continuing to the writing of this book), Notre Dame employed a huge number of coaches. Only one such coach in this one hundred and twenty-seven year span did not have a winning record. Just one coach did not, in fact, have a single winning season during his tenure there. Yep.

While at USF, Kuharich had taken under wing a young sports PRO guy name of Pete Rozelle. Flash forward thirteen years. Rozelle was now commissioner of the National Football League. His old boss was now the lamest of lame ducks.

Following Kuharich’s dismissal at ND, Rozelle kindly reversed roles with his humiliated, and now-unemployed, former mentor and created a job for him as head of NFL officials, the idea being that some team, somewhere, college or pro, would surely snap him up. But it quickly became evident the man was considered a dodo and nobody wanted him. After a year in the league’s front office, this included Rozelle.

Wolman, the freshman owner, entered the sports biz scene wearing Lake Michigan behind one ear and Huron behind the other. And Rozelle, a sharp and very persuasive fella, took no time sizing up this innocent slab of fresh

millionaire meat. They had a meeting in New York. And another. And yet another. Then against media and fan wishes (all of Philly wanted Norm Van Brocklin, practically a god in town since he'd led the Eagles to the championship in 1960), Wolman named Kuharich both coach and general manager.

After they had won it in '60, the Eagles slipped a bit the following year, then turned to custard in '62 (three wins in fourteen games) and even worse in '63 (two). Kuharich, the new broom, swept clean. Unfortunately, a number of those swept away were top players like quarterback Sonny Jurgensen and the most popular man on the team, receiver Tommy McDonald, replacing them with far inferior players. Others, like Tim Brown, were relegated to the bench.

It didn't seem to matter in the season opener. Playing the New York Giants, who'd lost last season's championship game by less than a touchdown, and were led by the league's MVP, quarterback Y. A. Tittle, the Eagles used a then-unheard of defense called the blitz, where on obvious passing plays they would rush six, seven, sometimes nine players. Unprepared, Tittle got sacked untold times, and the Eagles won huge, 38-7.

And there was me, wearing with magnanimous pride my official team jacket, prancing up and down the sideline. I had found heaven.

*

Things were still going well halfway through the season. The team had already won twice as many games as the year before. I shared a small office with one of my heroes, Bobby Walston, the wide receiver who had retired in '61. A notorious party guy, Walston spent little time becoming dead broke and a sympathetic Wolman had given him a job. Nobody quite knew what the job was, and he was rarely around. Which was okay with me as I had an office mostly to myself.

Walston would come in now and then, sit behind a typewriter and painfully compose what appeared to be love letters. "Barrih, how many r's in sorry?" Unlike young Jessica, Bobby had never learned the use of a dictionary.

One day I said how much I admired his car, a fire engine red T-Bird convertible, gift from his admiring fans upon his final game.

"Wanna buy it? he asked.

“Oh yeah, sure.”

“I mean it. I’ve got another car, and besides, I could use the cash.”

We agreed on a price. So there was me, green Eagles jacket driving a red T-Bird soft-top. Oh, and since there was always a stash of them on the conference table, I’d taken to smoking cigars. We’d show up at home games, top down no matter what the weather, my beautiful wife alongside, being waved into the special club-only parking lot.

The club took me along when we flew out to LA to play the Rams. The evening following the game – we lost – I got a call in my hotel room. Jerry and his entourage were off to see the town, come join us. I really didn’t want to. I just wanted to lie in my room and read a book.

I went.

There were maybe ten of us, me trailing at the back as we moved through Hollywood. There was a set act: somebody would look in the window of a clothing boutique or jewelry store.

Entourager: Ooh, isn’t that gorgeous!

Jerry: You like it? Come on, I’ll get it for you.

Oh, Jerry, no!

Hey, you like it, you’re my friend, let’s go.

And in we went.

At one point we were in a men’s clothing emporium. Prices of things made me gasp. Wolman: “Who’s left? Barry! Barry hasn’t got a damn thing! Pick out something, c’mon!”

“Jer, please. I’m a simple Jewish boy from Wynnefield. There’s nothing here I would wear. Besides, look at these prices!”

“What do you care about the prices? We’ll put it down as a travel expense.” Laughter. “Go grab yourself something. How about a sweater?”

“It’s okay. Thanks. I appreciate it. Really. But I don’t need anything. I’m fine.”

The dialogue went on a bit longer. I held out. Suddenly, silence. I felt the energy change. Did I imagine it, or did everyone take a step back from me. Then Wolman made a little joke and we all moved out of the store.

“Jesus, Bar, least you could’ve done was let him buy you something,” one of the gang whispered in my ear. “Give it away if you don’t want. It’s something he loves doing. Jesus.”

From 4-3 in the first seven games, the season went quickly downhill. Worst of all, we lost two to the Washington Redskins. This was the team Kuharich had traded Jurgenson and McDonald and got in return a far inferior quarterback in Norm Snead. In the first game between the two, Jurgensen threw five touchdown passes. Just as bad, perhaps, Timmy Brown, whom Kuharich had benched, came into the game late and score all three Eagles' TDs. Then did not start the following game. The media, the fans, who'd been pretty civil through the first half, were back spitting the familiar Philly venom.

You could feel the change in the office as well. Not often did a day pass without some cat-snarling among the secretaries. They were a mob, all right. There was the office drama queen, the office victim, the office snitch, the office top dog. Only one wasn't involved in the politics; this was Wolman/Snider's private sec, a lovely, 30something, single Catholic who lived with her mother and went to mass every morning before work. She became my buddy and confidant.

Snider, she revealed, not only hadn't sold his music business for millions prior to joining Wolman, as claimed, he'd gone bust. His manner, as opposed to Wolman's likeable guy-next-door demeanor, was hard, she said, sometimes bordering on outright nasty. "He plays dirty, Barry. Watch out for him."

One day she appeared, in a quandary.

"Barry, he's signing checks for himself," she whispered. "That's stealing! I don't know what to do. I'm afraid if I tell Jerry he'll get mad and I'll lose my job."

"Leave it to me," said the streetwise guy from Jersey. Next time Wolman was in, I waited till he was alone in the office. "Hey Jer, can I have a word?"

He was standing behind the desk, reading mail. "Sure, what's up."

"It's about Ed."

"Uh-huh." Tossed out one read letter, picked up another.

"It's just that, well, I think you might want to, ah, maybe –." I stammered on for a bit, awkwardly weaving my way in and around a subject I had no clue how to broach. Wolman suddenly looked over at me. He reached into his pocket, took out a wallet fat with banknotes.

“Barry, I would put this wallet down – it’s got several thousand dollars in it – and go away, come back an hour later, pick it up and put it back in my pocket without even looking at it. That’s how much I trust Ed. All my friends, same way. Some day you’ll learn what true friends are about.” And back to his letters.

Tail between legs, I made my way back to my own private cell.

A few years later, Wolman’s most trustworthy friends would screw him so bad, and Snider would screw him so royally, he’d lose everything, would be forced to sell the team, and his gentle, warm wife would become so overcome by the stress she’d take on a long debilitating illness which eventually killed her. Snider meanwhile would become hugely wealthy and be voted the number one all-time ‘shaker and mover’ of the Philadelphia sporting scene.

I made a few friends among the players. Sam Baker, the veteran punter and kicker, was a prime character. Sam liked a drink. So did his missus. Now and then following a drink or two or twelve, they’d get stuck into each other. I mean, really stuck, waffling one another, Missus Sam giving as good as her man. Then they’d break down, hugging and crying, go off holding onto one another, telling the other how much they loved him/her.

One Sunday, Baker showed up so wrecked he could hardly stand. Eagles lost the toss. Sam lined up for the opening kickoff. Ran up...and missed the ball. But not completely. The ball dribbled off the side of his foot, went ten yards and was pounced on by his own team.

“Sam, brilliant play!” Coach Kuharich exclaimed when Sam staggered back to the bench. (I was standing directly behind.) And when the Eagles scored their first touchdown, Baker kicked the extra point – straight into center Jim Ringo’s ass.

One of my favourites was Timmy Brown. A good-looking, fun-loving guy, he tried to make out he wasn’t bothered by not being played much by Kuharich. I knew he was feeling it, but never saw any outward sign. Not long after the season, Tim Brown, star football player, became Timothy Brown, film actor. His first gig was in Mash (the movie).

Riley Gunnels was somewhat more miserably hurt by his benching. A good defensive tackle. Not great, never all-pro. Good. His great sin? He was one of the leftovers from the prior regime. Meaning Kuharich benched him

in favor of one of the guys he'd picked up from Washington in the Jurgensen trade, a player who wasn't half Gunnels' calibre. Riley, who lived nearby, would come over the apartment, plop himself down and cry. Literally, cry.

"I'm sitting on the bench watching this fat slug get pushed around, knowing I'm so much better than him, but if I say a word to Kuharich or Evans (defensive line coach and Kuharich's right-hand man) I won't get to play at all. It doesn't make any sense. His stubbornness is not just hurting me, it's killing the team! Barry, what can I do?"

Two holdovers who did play were Irv Cross, a brilliant cornerback, and linebacker Maxie Baughan. Maxie, a supremely decorated player, all-pro most every year he played for the Eagles. Quietly they told me that the team was on the verge of walking out. "We almost did it against the Cardinals," Baughan said. "We just can't take this guy. We lose games because of his stupidity and arrogance and he won't listen to a word."

Baughan, Cross and another top player, call him the Jack Armstrong because if ever there was an all-American boy this guy was it, decided to force the issue and present the team's complaints to Kuharich. But the coach/general manager refused to see them all together. So Baughan went in and told his story. When he came out, Cross said his piece. Finally JA. When he emerged, Kuharich called in the other two.

"What you two told me was a rotten lie," he said, "because (Jack Armstrong) denies every charge you made. You're both just troublemakers. Now get the hell out of here!"

It was Cross who later told me, "The three of us went out for a drink after. (JA) looked down at the table the whole time we're sitting there, shaking his head. What he said was that if he'd confirmed what we had told Kuharich, coach'd make certain he never got behind a mike once he retired." Jack the all-American boy was said to be up for a plum TV contract when he permanently took off the pads. A couple years later Baughan and Cross were traded to the Rams in yet another ludicrous deal.

And what did Barry do with this information? I kept it to myself for quite a while. Was it any of my business? Really, was it? Do I go against my employers, show disloyalty to those paying me a wage? Hey, I'm a Philly sports fan. Eagles, Phillies, Sixers. I love my teams! I had to do something. I picked up the phone.

One of the more popular reporters (not the one I had begun leaking

tidbits to) popped into the office regularly. He'd waddle into Wolman/Snider's corner sanctum, the door would close, out he'd come a few minutes later. One time I was in there, noted an envelope with money sitting on the desk. Thought nothing of it. A little later the reporter came in. After he left I walked in the office. The envelope with the money was gone.

*

The second half ended with the team winning just two of seven. Wolman, as stubborn a fella as you'd want to meet despite his laid-back aw-shucks nature, responded to the media/fan clamor to turf out Kuharich by giving him the biggest contract ever offered a coach or manager in the history of American professional sports, fifteen years. Usually, I would write the press releases (and Gallagher would claim credit). Not this time. The bought-and-paid-for reporter did it. The eye-rolling look he gave me when he emerged from Wolman's office on that occasion said it all.

1964 became 1965. And things got worse. I naively got caught in a political squeeze where I was forced to fire the director of the Eagles new marching band, a dear soul I was extremely fond of. Snider stood right by my desk, listening in on the telephone conversation.

"Don't let it get to you," he smirked afterward. "I've fired plenty of people. It's what you do in business. You'll get used to it" When he left, I got up, walked to the toilet and puked my guts out.

Still I stayed on. Sandy could not understand it.

"Look at you! You're a wreck. You have so many ticks on the right side of your face it's like you're beating out a tune! Your health is more important than this lousy job, can't you see that"

Yes, finally I could see it. Then why did I stay on? Once again: prestige! I mean, for how long, even before I'd left Temple, had I tried to get in to see people at the top, or even the middle, of local media for an interview. I'd send tapes to the radio stations. Never hear back. Send samples of writing into the three local papers. Nada. Now?

"Hi, I'd like to speak to _____." (Station manager of the biggest sports radio-TV outlet in town.)

"I'm sorry, Mr. _____'s in a meeting/out of town/humping his secretary."

“Tell him it’s Barry Rosenberg...of the Philadelphia Eagles.”

“BARRY!!! How’s it look for the Steelers game?”

A stumblebum my entire young life, I was now somebody.

*

Turned out I didn’t have to quit.

“Barry, finish what you’re doing then come in and see me.” This the club treasurer, a short, chubby man named Joe King. Joe often would call me in, say close the door, and proceed to tell me inside stuff that was going on higher up.

King now motioned from the phone to close the door, have a chair. I noticed that he, too, had developed a running series of facial tics, only on his left side. We were mirror images of each other. On his desk sat a check made out in my name, the equivalent of two weeks’ pay. A bonus? Off the phone, he picked up the check, handed it over.

“Okay, clear everything out of your desk and be outta here in fifteen minutes. You’re fired.”

“Very funny, Joe.”

“Barry, I mean it. You think I wanna do this? I like you. I really do. It’s my goddamn job. Fifteen minutes or I call security.”

There was a joke around the league: the Eagles had fired so many people the past several months, and each time somebody left they would change the locks, we were the only club in football with a team locksmith.

“Is Jerry in? How about Ed. At least let me talk to somebody.”

“Do you expect them to be in? You know how this works. They leave and I’m the bad guy. Jews who own businesses always hire a dumb goy like me to do their books and take care of the shittiest details. Now please. Don’t make it ugly.”

I put my forehead on his desk. Stayed that way for a minute. What, exactly, was I being fired for? Okay, I had a mouth, big deal. My work was terrific. Then what? Because I didn’t let Wolman buy me a sweater? I was friends with some of the ‘out’ players? I jolted my head up.

“You’ve got the goddamn phones tapped!” King sighed, turned away. “Look at me, Joe! C’mon, look me in my eye, you putz! You bastards’re tapping the phones, aren’t you!”

“Barry.”

“Fuck you, man.”

I swiped the check off his desk, stuffed it in a pocket.

“And Joe.” He turned my way. I leaned in. Bad German accent: “I vuss only following orderss, Herrr Rrossenbaigr!”

I left him, went outside, got my car from the parking lot, drove it around to the back door. And began a frantic dance. Over the next fifteen minutes I raced through the office like a madman, grabbing stuff, souvenirs, anything I could get my hands on, shlepping them out to the car. A '61 T-Bird convertible had no trunk space, so despite the frosty weather I put the top down and began building a pyramid: ugly lamps with grotesque eagles on them, ashtrays bearing more of the team's emblem, hundreds of copies of my Kennedy Library book that hadn't sold, my goddamn office chair, for chrissake!

Driving across the Ben Franklin, hardly any room to move in the car. the chair I'd sat on the past ten months jammed upside down on the front seat next to me, its five still-spinning wheels pointed skywards, a mountain of useless dreck spilling out all over the bridge...

Twice in one year. Déjà vu all over again.

*

The Eagles job was the last I was ever fired from. That's because I never worked for anybody again. (Writing this in 2014 at the age of 76, I'd say this statement was a fairly safe bet.)

If memory served, every job I ever had I'd got the sack. As far back as my early teen years, when I got fired from my job as a soda jerk for giving Rita Feingold two extra scoops of ice cream in her milk shake (god, was I ever in love with her!), and a Bulletin paper route, when the branch manager discovered I was selling the Information Please Almanac, which was published by the opposition Inquirer, to my regular customers.

I didn't like getting fired. I always felt disgraced. I also felt that I hadn't done anything to deserve it, not really. But I always sought revenge.

At the ice cream parlor, I went back a few weeks later with two friends and stood lookout as they stole a two gallon tub of butter pecan from the freezer in the shop's basement. It was only after we'd run half a mile, tossing

the frosty tub from one to the other, that a thought struck: What are we going to do with it? We have no place to store it. It was late at night, we couldn't call all our friends to come share our booty. So we did what we had to. Following morning three thirteen year olds cut school, lying in our respective beds with the most unreal tummy aches.

My favourite revenge bit was when I was in engineering school at Drexel. Dreck Tech, as we knew it, had this cooperative program where you went to class six months, then went out and worked in a school-assigned job six months. My first year I got sent to an aircraft switch factory just outside Philly. For three months I was a draftsman, getting to know the ins and outs of switch design. Last three months I did actual designs. Did some nice stuff too.

For what would not be the first time in my illustrious career(s), I got involved in a political squabble. The chief engineer was a gentle sort in his late fifties who'd never gone to college, rather had worked his way up in the field. He was also an alcoholic. The company downgraded him, and brought in as chief a young buck fresh out of engineering school who did everything by the book. And when you pointed out that the book didn't always work; in fact, it seemed whenever you did something by the book you then had to apply what we commonly called a 'fudge factor' to get the damn thing off the ground, you were accused of insubordination.

I sided with the old alcoholic. Quite loudly. So when it came time to return to Drexel, I was informed by the new chief that due to my attitude I was being given a poor rating for my work experience, as well as specifically being requested to find another employer for my next period of school-related job time. The school was not happy.

One night, a few months after returning to class, I made my way back to the company's office. Climbed through a window and, using a head-lamp in the dark, extracted the drawings of every single job I had designed, a couple dozen, and changed the penciled dimensions thereof. I made certain that the switches, when actually manufactured, would fall apart before getting anywhere near an aircraft. Sometimes the casings might be so thin they would crinkle like cellophane when touched. Others I would make the inner dimension larger than the outer so nothing existed to fall apart. And I erased my name as engineer from each drawing, signing instead A. Einstein, or

E. A. Poe, or C. Dickens. Or C. Gable, J. DiMaggio, D. D. Eisenhower. Oh, how good it felt as I slipped back out the window and jogged to my waiting car.

My revenge on the last two firings was, in each case, far less harmful yet more effective.

I strode into BMEWS one day wearing my Kelly green Eagles jacket and handed out copies of my Kennedy Library book. Eat your heart out, people.

And so far as the Eagles, my revenge took a bit longer, but was ever so much sweeter: Happiness, contentment and a home on a seven mile beach in New Zealand.

FINDING ALAN HALPERN

I tried to get another job. I really did. Answered ads, used the phone, went into town for interviews wearing my monkey suite and carrying a briefcase. I told everybody my Eagles job had been a short term hire, that the team had extended it because I'd done such a wonderful job. Mostly the reaction was: you worked for the Eagles and you want to work here?

One interview, the man I'd be working for if accepted told me he was a St. Joesph's grad. Loved Hawks basketball.

"You've heard of Barry Ross?"

"The broadcaster? Man, I loved listening to him do our games. And that interview with Jack Ramsay after we –. Wait. You? You're Barry Ross?" He rubbed his hands together. "Oh, are we gonna have some fun times here!"

Following day I got a reject letter. Two lines. No reason. I figured the club had to be blackballing me.

Went on like this for a couple months. Then one evening after dinner we had a talk, my wife and I. (Sandy came home from a full day's work at the Camden County Welfare Board where she was now second in command, cooked our meals, washed up after. Me, I sat there looking at the walls and feeling sorry for myself.)

“I’m making good money now,” she said. “And it’s not like we’re big spenders. We can live on my salary. Why not take a year off and write. You’ve said you always wanted to do that.”

So I stayed home and wrote. And when I finished writing something, I’d send it away. Wait two months and get it back again. And another. And another.

A year became two. I hadn’t sold a word. I was getting fat. From my standard one sixty, I ballooned to over two hundred. And didn’t stop there. Wasn’t my fault. I had a gland condition. The gland was my mouth and the condition was I kept shoveling crap in there to fuel my depression.

Philadelphia Magazine was one of the journals I had sent articles to. Phillymag was one of the finest books in the country then: a terrific staff of writers, timely stuff, hard-hitting and topical. I had sent half dozen pieces there; all had been returned. Then I picked up the latest issue to see a long piece on Jerry Wolman. It was garbage. The writer, Gaeton Fonzi, normally one of the finest essayists in America, had phoned this one in. Hadn’t even got to see the guy. I wrote a long letter to the editor. Made it funny, but also serious. Oughta be ashamed, fella.

Got a quick reply. What a great letter! he wrote. Why not write some stuff for us. Yeah, why not. Jesus.

So I sat down at the old Underwood and pounded out two pieces, one around five thousand words, the other half that. The long piece was a satire on the Cherry Hill Apartments, where Sandy and Zero the collie and I had been living the past year. Once a prestige residence, the place by the time we got there had become a run-down joke. The short piece was another tongue-in-cheek job, this on the local American Civil Liberties Union office, which had performed a classic face-fall in defense of my quest to stop department stores from photographing people at their return counters.

Two months passed, not a word. I called the editor, Alan Halpern. No, he hadn’t got around to them, he said. He would though. Promise. “Um, how much do you pay for articles?” I wondered. For major articles, two hundred; smaller pieces one twenty-five, he replied.

A few days later I got a letter. Loved both! Happy to buy them. I rejoiced! I’m gonna be a published writer! Then I read the rest of the letter. Upon publication I would receive one twenty-five for the apartment story

and seventy-five for the ACLU. I called Halpern. "I thought you said two hundred and one twenty-five when we talked the other day."

"Right. But that's if we use them in the front of the book. If we run them as department articles in the back, it's the numbers I quoted you."

I paced around the apartment. Took the elevator down to the lobby and paced around there. Stepped outside and paced around the grounds.

"Look, this is bullshit," I yelled into the phone. "You give me one set of numbers, now you low-ball me with another set. What the hell do I care where you run them. Pay what you promised or send the damn things back!" Slam.

Oh, shit. Ohhh, shit. I sat there, face in my hands. I could not believe I'd done that. I had just sabotaged my career as a writer. Arrrrggggghh!!! I picked up the phone, punched out the numbers. Hung up before it could ring. What would I say? I'm sorry, I'm a grade A dick? He already knew that. I couldn't tell Sandy. Nor could I sleep that night.

Next day, a letter from Phillymag. Didn't want to open it. I opened it. Apologies from Halpern. That was a terrible way to treat a new young writer. To atone, I'll give you two fifty and one fifty. Hope that's all right with you.

My god, you can bluff in the bigs!!

*

For the next year, I did an article a month for Philly. Worked my way up to five hundred, then a thousand, then fifteen hundred. How did I do this? I had some great teachers, starting with the little Italian twerp who first interviewed me at RCA. What he taught me was to figure what you were worth, then double (or triple if you had real chutzpah) the number. They wanted, they would ease you down.

As things went (a couple years later I'd be using words like coz-mic), at the same time I connected with Halpern and Philly, the floodgates opened and everything I sent out to anybody got bought.

I did a couple pieces for Playboy. At the time, Hef was paying a couple thou an article. Plus expenses. I did a piece on sports hustlers, this on the heels of Jackie Gleason's grand portrayal of Minnesota Fats. Talk about phoning in an article. I might have left the house once or twice. All the rest was through the auspices of Ma Bell.

I sent it in, got word it was accepted (which meant it would make its way through no less than six editors, each one performing sizable slice-and-dicing to justify his/her existence, until all I recognized were my name in the byline and pic in front of the book). Also got a note: please submit your expense account. I called Playboy and fibbed that I'd lost all my receipts. Don't worry about it, the editor I worked with told me. Just send us the accounting.

Somehow I worked up a bill between five and six hundred dollars, simply to justify the lie that I'd gone out and done some spade work. I was ashamed to submit it. Finally did so, and a couple days later received an irate phone call.

"What the hell are you trying to do? Five hundred and sixty bucks! You bastard!"

"Sorry, sorry. Send it back and –"

"Don't have to send it back. I already ripped it up. Do you know what the *average* expense bill is on a freelance article here? Six thousand dollars!! If I'd sent this through to the accountants you would've had fifty writers kicking your door down and then kicking in your head. Now do it again, and do it proper!"

The expense check, when I got it, paid for a new car. With all the trimmings.

*

I learned. And as I did the Barry cockiness began asserting itself.

"Sorry, Alan, I can't work for that kind of money," I nonchalantly told him one day. Phillymag was my prime outlet. I loved Halpern, owed him big-time for opening the door to a career as a freelance. Nonetheless I was putting into practise one of life's major lessons. "I'm not asking Playboy rates," I told him. "Just be fair with me."

"But that's our top freelance rate."

"Not my problem. I do one article a month, your staff writers do one article a month, they get five times what I get."

"But they have to come in every day."

"So you pay them to sit in their little cubicles and pass gas? Nah."

"Okay, okay – three hundred (or five hundred, or a thousand)."

"Nope. Five hundred (or a thousand or fifteen hundred.)"

Once I even took back a piece already slotted for the next issue. “But you can’t sell that anywhere else. It’s specifically a Philadelphia Magazine article!”

“Alan, you just don’t get it. Screw the money. It’s a matter of integrity.” As though I had any. Turned around and walked out. Slowly. Wincing, gritting my teeth. Had I taken this one too far?

“Okay, okay, get back in here. I don’t know how I’m going to work it in my budget.” Ahhhhh.

Once I ran into another freelance, a woman who was quite good.

“YOU’RE Barry Rosenberg!” she exclaimed. “You’re the one keeping all the other freelancers from making decent money at Philly!”

“How do you figure that?”

“Halpern says he’s paying you so much he can’t afford to pay the rest of us!” I felt so terribly awful that from then on I cut my rates in half. Yeahhhh, riiight.

It was Halpern who was responsible for curing me of the biggest fault of a newly-minted writer. “You overwrite. You’re trying to show how clever you are. You are clever. And creative and have a fresh voice and a wonderful kick-ass style. So if anything, you should be underwriting. Leaving things up to the reader to work out.”

He went through the manuscript I had just finished. “You want to show this guy is a phony, a real bastard, right? But you sledgehammer him. And readers are going to sense this and feel sorry for him, want to defend him. Don’t sledgehammer. Use a feather. Stand back and let the man himself show us he’s a momzer.

“By the way, we’ve never done a piece on the city of Camden. You live over there, you know people.”

“I live in Cherry Hill, not Camden. Place is a shithole.”

“Okay, write about it. Tell us why with Philly a river’s breadth away the place is so bad.”

So I went out and interviewed maybe twenty people. And hated doing it. What kind of story could I get out of this? I sat down the evening before my deadline and stared at the typewriter. And stared. And then my fingers began flashing.

Philadelphia's geographical shape is such that when you study the map it appears as a limbless goddess leaning rearward, the curvature of her spine resting on the west bank of the flowing Delaware, her empty sleeves extended out in greeting to her state. If you study the map and can picture her, you will no doubt be struck by the prodigiousness of the Philadelphia goddess's afterdeck, and too, that attached to it is an excrescence nearly as large as the fundament itself. Compounding the uniqueness of this condition is the fact that the growth, attached as it is by two narrow arteries, is really not part of the goddess's buttocal area, nor of her anatomy in general, nor even of the state she so gracefully embraces. Rather it belongs to a separate state, bordering on the east bank of the flowing Delaware, the state of New Jersey. Thus:

Camden is not dead.

It is alive and hiding as a boil on Philadelphia's ass.

*

“All right, no more of this kind of crap. I’ve done my apprenticeship, paid my dues. I want to do one-on-one with people who interest me. Sports people, people in the arts or business or politics who I myself want to know more about. And I want to do them in my personal voice, first person.”

“But our readers don’t —”

“Horseshit, Alan. Really, what do you know about your readers, sitting here in your twelfth floor tower? What, you get half a dozen letters from people? You have dinner at fancy restaurants with the hotsy-totsies of the city? Hey, I’m down there on the street. That’s where I am, where I live. I know what the people want coz I’m one of them!”

“Okay, okay already. God, you’re hard to work with!”

So what I would do, I’d pick a subject, hang out with them, sometimes for days. Took no notes, didn’t use a recorder. Right off I would say, “I’m not here to do interview, okay? I’m not a reporter, I’m not a journalist. I’m an artist and I’m gonna paint a picture of you with words.”

Brash and bravado, aw yeah. But while it seemed to work, and somehow I got through to people who had stated that in no way, absolutely none, would they have anything to do with Philly Magazine (which had a rep for slamming people, making them look the fool), this was my mouth talking,

not my gut. I would come home following a session with one of these high rollers and slump into a chair, deflated. What a phony, a character out of a bad tough-guy novel. Came time to write the article, I'd put it off, put it off, agonizing for days, then leave my bed after tossing and turning for hours, sit down at 3am of my deadline date and pound the keys ten, twelve hours without letup, waltz into the magazine and casually drop it on Halpern's desk as though this were the third or fourth most important act of my day.

When I first began these one-on-ones, I'd wear a suit, brush my hair, look my best. One day I was going to see the Pennsylvania governor, one Milton Shapp. Night before, Sandy and I had a row. And I woke up next morning with a serious fuck-the-world attitude. Wore sweat shirt and jeans. Didn't brush my hair. Or shave. Hell with Shapp, I thought. Strode into his office in Harrisburg, plopped down on a chair facing his formidable desk. Glared at him.

Shapp was a classic calculating type. I knew he'd researched me, or at least his man Friday (now standing off to his side) had. Also, when with the press, Shapp spoke in complete sentences. Extremely measured. Totally formal. Now here sat this slob – a slob with *credentials* – no notebook, no recorder...glaring.

“You're not taking notes?” he wondered.

“Nah. What are you gonna tell me that I haven't heard or read from you before? Besides, everything that happens here is being recorded in fine detail” – I pointed to my temple – “right here.” Winked.

His eyes grew wide for just a split second. Despite himself, he cast a glance over to his man. Then back. And began talking. Haltingly, then bursts of words. Every once in a while, when he gave forth some typical bureaucratic balderdash, I'd let out a giggle. He'd stop, repeat himself, step all over himself.

Milton Shapp? Governor Control? I sat there fascinated.

From then on, I began using this role of you-don't-impress-me, babe: dressing down, appearing practically dishevelled at times. The higher up the person in the scheme of things, the grottier I would look. Every time did it work to shake some realness out of an ego in hiding.

Once the magazine's publisher, a pumped-up little man who hobnobbed with the cream of Philadelphia society, complained he'd got a call about my appearance.

“You’re representing this magazine, you know. Why can’t you go looking like a mensch?” he wondered. Next time I had to see a VIP I went barefoot. Maybe I’ll roll in dog poop some day.

And then I took on an assignment that changed my entire life. Forever.

FINDING BARRY (II)

1968

She said her name was Petulia, but more likely it was Cindi or Mindi or Suzie or Marcie. This was late Monday afternoon and as she sat there under the trees in Lincoln Park and the sun at its low angle cast yellow-white light upon her face she did look Julie Christie, or how Julie might have looked when she was sixteen. Cover-girl clean, smooth, milk-white skin, straight blond hair, perfect features, lovely slim body. The body was clothed in an official hippie uniform, \$249.50 at Lord and Taylor, but Petulia, or whoever, was not really a hippie. Nor was she a yippie. Nor a commie agitator. Nor even a radical.

What she was was a very pretty almost-woman here in Chicago for the ride. It was the place to be for a sixteen year old who looked like Julie Christie. Of course, her mother didn’t know she was there. Her mother thought she was in the Catskills. The Catskills, Petulia repeated. Like, yicch.

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

But this week was the storm before the lull. This week she was Petulia, and she was doing her thing in Chicago, where it was happening. Before the week was over she’d have worn a Free Huey button, smoked some primo weed, taunted the cops, taken in their tear gas, padded with a guy or two, hopefully a gorgeous black stud, and when the following week she reverted back to Cindi or Mindi or Suzie or Marcie and the great white middleclass, at least she’d hold a memory of the bitchin week that was.

There were a lot of Petulias in Chicago that last week in August, kids from various suburbs taking in the scene. A short-lived cut-out from parentally nurtured establishmentitis. Petulia stood out in my mind because she was so darn gorgeous.

I had arrived in Chicago Sunday afternoon and that evening went out to Lincoln Park to observe. To satisfy my craving for safety I looked around for a couple of good, secure people to flank myself with. I found them. Not that these guys were very large. Or strong. Or learned in the various forms of Oriental hand combat. They were, in fact, somewhat unimpressive looking: stoop-shouldered, mushy-bellied. The safety I saw in their numbers stemmed from their hand-held cameras and the small laminated badges affixed to their lapels. One badge, for example, read Associated Press. Another read New York Times. I couldn't have felt more secure had I been standing in a Green Bay Packers huddle.

The AP and Times guys, as well as several other veteran members of the establishment media, talked among themselves, recalling past civil wars they had been witness to – old Russians rehashing the Battle of Leningrad. It was a very calm scene.

Eleven o'clock was curfew time and the first attempt was made shortly thereafter to clear the park. The cop on the bullhorn was booed into submission. A squad of police then came on with their clubs; the crowd scattered. And then, like air seeking and finding a vacuum, quickly refilled the area. Another and yet another charge dispersed the crowd, each with a little more efficiency than the last, until some of the kids remained in the park while others had crossed over to Clark Street. When the numbers still in the park had become small enough, a whistle was blown and from the foot of South Lagoon came the cops in full dress and scale.

Lincoln Park became a veritable Gettysburg, the kids retreating, the police pursuing. And in the middle of all this was the press, shutters clicking, lenses recording, eyes and ears observing, minds composing leads for tomorrow's story that would be diluted, deleted, revised, revamped and finally rejected by two-fisted, hard-hitting city editors and network vice presidents.

I admired the guts of the people I was standing amidst, all the while working to convince myself that their continued presence was prompted by past experience and not death wish recklessness. Then a funny thing

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

Photographers and cameramen constituted a strange breed. Came a crisis and the thing that concerned them most were those Japanese lenses bouncing off their bellies. It was odd as hell to see man cradle both arms around his Nikons and bow his bared head to the assailant. But that's what was happening. And the heads were getting cracked.

The AP and Times guys were now visibly ruffled by the strangeness of it all. They each took one step back, then another, then two. Me, I turned and broke barrel-ass into full gallop, and none too soon, as a shiny wooden nightstick, no doubt intended for other areas of my anatomy, made contact with my left calf. And as I was moving, faster than I'd moved in years, I heard from behind me a network man's familiar voice, strained and emotion-filled:

"Hey, do you know who I –. Look, you can't do that to –. Wait a goddamn minute here, who do you think you –. *MOTHERFUUU –!!!*"

*

Tuesday night the cops once again struck a little after eleven. They gassed the Lincoln Park area, as they had the two nights before, and herded everyone out of the park and across Clark Street. Then they regrouped, the kids took their places across the street and yelled over nasty things at them, and that's the way it remained, an impasse. When it appeared pretty much as though the action had finished for the night, I started back to my car, which I'd left in a metered parking area between Clark and Stockton Drive. As I reached the edge of the lot, a cop called out to me. Better not go in there, buddy, he warned. No malice. Just trying to be helpful.

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

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

I knew where to go. The Theater at 1848 N. Wells, which a year back served as home base for the Second City and now functioned as an underground playhouse for anti-war works, had been converted for the week into a first aid station and shelter. The Medical Committee for Human Rights, an alternative physicians' fraternity with a strong East Coast membership, was working with the Student Health Organization, a body of concerned med, dental and nursing students and interns, treating people attacked by the police. The medical station was located in the basement; upstairs in a sort of truncated theater in the round, slept nightly hundreds of kids with otherwise no sources of shelter.

Damage to my skin was minimal and an application of cream erased all pain within minutes. I decided to hang around and spent time chatting with the staff, headed up by a miniskirted MD from New York and a former navy corpsman from Alabama. The casualties brought in were largely severe gassings, macings and clubbing/kickings. Those who had really been worked over were given first aid there at The Theater, then taken by volunteer-driven ambulances to one of the few hospitals which had consented to tend to the kids. Most had declined outright, claiming they had been so ordered, and the penalties to go against orders would be severe. At others, only a single or perhaps two ballsy docs were attending the cases – on their own – and falsifying records.

About 1am a real bad case was brought in. A young guy who accompanied the victim said he had witnessed two teenage girls walking by themselves down a side street when an unmarked car came cruising by. The car stopped and without warning the front doors flew open and out jumped a couple of

helmeted cops. One girl broke away and ran down an alley, the young guy said, but this one just seemed to freeze. The cops went to work on her, he stammered, clubs crashing down on her face and head like hammers on an anvil. What could I do? he sobbed. I mean, what the hell could I do?

Nothing. He could do nothing.

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

One of the interns stood up and for the first time I got a decent look at the girl. A sudden chill swept me. Quickly I stepped across the floor and planted myself directly behind the remaining attendant intern. I stared at the face on the mat. Must have held the stare a full five minutes.

Petulia.

*

When I returned home, Sandy didn't believe my stories. Alan Halpern refused to take my article. (I wound up giving it to a new alternative paper, the Temple Free Press.) My closest friends, the few neighbors who knew I'd been and asked...

Barry, this is America. Shit like that doesn't happen here. Come on.

By this time, I was making, while not exactly a living wage, certainly a nice add-on to Sandy's salary. We now had a son, Jason, born the past March. Were contemplating buying a house.

First, I quit shaving. Didn't think about it, no plan. Just stopped. Same with getting haircuts. Ran into an old schooldays friend who was now in the live rock business. Started going to the Electric Factory to catch the bands. (First time I walked in, pitch black except for the light show on stage, band playing loud enough to dent eardrums, sweet smell of dope. Unable to see, I stood there trying to get my bearings. Few minutes went by, I saw what looked like two orange eyes coming at me, maybe waist high. The hell? Got

to within ten feet, I could just make out a girl. Fourteen? Fifteen? Naked. Her nipples painted day-glo orange. *The next sound you hear is Rosenberg's mind doing its impression of an old rag ripping.*)

The T-Bird went. Just gave the damn thing away. Bought a year old VW bus, which a friend helped me outfit as a camper. When my schooldays bud left the live rock biz and started a hippie-type drop-in center in town I followed him there, became a volunteer telephone counselor. Smoked my first joint. (Didn't even catch a buzz. Next time, though – hoo!)

Now, for most of my life I had been a depressive. No docs, no drugs, no fancy three- or four-initial title. I was fucked up, period. I'd fall in, eventually I would climb out. Life. But nothing ever like this. The two or three months post-Chicago were the worst I could recall. I wasn't afraid of dying. I was already dead, inside.

For the second time in our marriage, I showed top-grade cowardice. Instead of talking it over with my wife (a social worker!), I kept everything within. And when of a moment I knew full well I could stay not a minute longer, I wrote a long letter while she was at work, left it on the kitchen table and took off in the VW bus.

1968

The VW bus broke down in Austin, Minnesota, home of Hormell meats. I holed up there four days while the motor was being overhauled. The town smelled like a giant pig fart, and I couldn't help wonder whether this was an omen as to my new existence.

I got to Oregon, made my way to Portland and the campus of Reed College, which looked remarkably like the set of the original Prisoner series, the one with Patrick McGoohan. Beautiful landscape but just a bit creepy.

I met a lovely seventeen year old woman – definitely not a 'girl'. This babe just out of high school was of the new breed; in many ways older than I was at thirty.

She approached me my first day there as I was sitting on the edge of the camper's floor, my feet on the ground. I had fired up the old Coleman stove and was waiting for my brown rice to cook.

“I have a room of my own,” she said right off. “When your meal is finished do you want to bring it over and combine it with a nice salad that I’ll make?”

Well, shit.

I stayed with her for a month. When she was in class I’d mooch around the campus, sit in on a course or two of my choosing, shoot baskets in the gym. My own college days were nothing like this, believe it.

There were parts of her that were spoiled teenage princess, as there were parts of me that were confused, lost, uptight Jewish prince. So when we parted I slept in the VW for a few days, then decided to work a mild con to get better accommodation. I had dinner with the college’s dean and his wife, plus the assistant dean and his missus. This was what I laid out: I had worked with a non-profit, non-affiliated drug crisis agency in Philly. I understood how the dooper game worked. I looked like a hippie – I suppose I was one – so I could walk around and sniff out what was going on without any of the students getting suspicious or paranoid. You’ve got a great college here, and the last thing you’d want is a bad scene where the police have to be called in.

“We know there’s marijuana on campus –” the dean began.

I waved that away. “Weed, sure. No problem. Not what I’m referring to.”

They all leaned forward. “You’ve seen heroin then?”

I shook my head. “Haven’t seen any smack, no.” Four people went ahhh. “I have seen works, though.” Four people went awww.

What I proposed was I be given private quarters, nothing fancy, a small stipend, free meals. I would report periodically to the dean. Everything would be hush-hush. They liked it. The dean ran it upstairs. Upstairs wouldn’t buy it. If they took me on, upstairs said, word had to get out, in which case they’d be admitting there was in fact a drug problem. The dean was extremely apologetic, but I really didn’t care. Staying on at Reed would’ve been sweet, but this wasn’t my prime motive for leaving Sandy and Jason and heading west. I wanted to be where the real action was.

I made friends fast in San Francisco. For starters, with the new beard and longish hair surrounding a premature expanse of baldness to go with my horn rim glasses, I looked startlingly like an SF icon. Several times I was taken for him. The most bizarre occasion occurred one night across the Bay.

I'd met a guy who claimed he could get me in to see the Stones at the Oakland Coliseum. Meet me at the press gate at eight, he said. By nine he hadn't shown. For an hour I had stood maybe twenty feet from the press gate watching the security crew bounce an array of wannabe crashers. Truly bounce. Anybody wasn't kosher or gave lip and they flew through the air. Following one such trapeze act, this monster of a security type looked my way. He craned his head forward and frowned. I took a step back, showed him my palms. He walked halfway between us, as if to get a better look. Then he smiled, a hockey goalie mouth.

"Allen! You waiting for somebody out there?"

I looked around. Nobody near me. Looked back. He'd taken another couple steps my way. "Chrissakes, Allen, you don't have to stand out there. C'mon inside."

My eyebrows elevated, I pointed at my chest, shrugged. Which made him laugh. "Come awwwn!"

"Ah, look –"

"No ticket? No problem." He dug into a pocket, came out with a cardboard strip. "I gotta tell ya, I really enjoyed Airplane Dreams. Your best yet, man. Hey, dig Mick and the lads, okay?"

I took the ticket and practically ran past him into the crowd just as a thought struck: what would happen if the real Ginsberg showed?

I got me a dog. A stray which I thought might be a collie pup, but turned out he was a full grown runt with a bit of collie in him. He was the friendliest, doggiest dog I'd ever known. I took him with when I went to see some people I'd recently met. My new pooch, I said. Farout! a woman exclaimed. His ears went up and he seemed to smile. Everybody laughed. Farout! somebody else called out. Again, the ears shot up and a grand grin split his face. Guess what his name became.

Farout the doggie went with me everywhere. No leash; no need. I was invited to parties. I learned early on not to show up without Farout. "Oh, what a cute dog, can I pet him?" A babe magnet.

Every Sunday there were be-ins in Golden Gate Park. Fifty thousand people, nearly all of them naked. One such Sunday, a woman approached. "Hey man, what a great lookin' dog." Texas twang. She was kind of dumpy, pendulous breasts, zits. I didn't pay her much attention at first. "Why doncha

take your clothes off,” she asked. “It’s cool, man. Keep em on, take em off, up to you. But you’ll feel better. Really you will.”

I began a slow strip. I noticed there were clothes scattered haphazardly everywhere. I took off my shirt, folded it neatly, placed it on the ground next to a tree. My pants, two equal-size folds, directly on top. T-shirt, shoes, socks. The woman was giggling.

“I won’t look,” she tittered. And covered her eyes. Moment of truth. I turned around, faced the tree. Slipped out of my underpants, folded them, placed them on top the small perfect pile.

“Hey, that’s the way. I’m Janice, by the way. Capricorn.”

“Barry. Uh, I’m a Leo.”

“Cool, I get on with Leo dudes.”

Eventually I moved away from her, began scanning the area for better looking women. Later that week I would spot a huge poster outside the Fillmore theater. A band calling themselves Big Brother and the Holding Company. The lead singer looked very familiar. Except in this picture she had all her clothes on.

See? Stories. Famous people or those who one day would become. They were all there hanging out and we were all brothers and sisters. Sort of.

I lived in the VW. Me and Farout. Had to find a different place to park every night as it was illegal to sleep in a vehicle, and since I had Jersey plates the odds were high I’d be checked on if I hung around the same area more than a night or two.

Winter came, and the rain. And the early nights. During the day I’d walk around the city, a different nabe each day. Really got to know that town. Around five, I’d make it back to the van, drive around looking for a suitable place to park. I would crawl into my smelly sleeping bag, read with the aid of a flashlight, crash out around eight. Sleep for maybe twenty minutes, then lie awake for hours wondering whether there’d ever come a time I wasn’t broke, lonely and miserable. Such fun, hippiedom.

I learned a lot about survival in the city – where to crap, where to shower, where to cadge a free meal. Only things I really had to pay for were gas now and then and Farout’s food, and sometimes I could scrounge scraps and a bone from a dog-loving butcher.

I spent two years there. By this time my hair was down past my shoulders

and beard halfway to my belt. But while I looked okay — I'd lost all the weight I had put on after leaving the Eagles and was now back to one sixty — I was becoming less and less able to convince myself that this was the life for me. My son was growing up and I wasn't around to see it happen. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer. I drove back across the country.

After two days of steady driving, stopping only to get gas, have a pee, walk Farout and sleep for a few hours in the van before heading off again, I stopped at a roadside diner. Locking Farout in the VW, I passed several huge trucks and pickups in the lot as I stepped inside toting a small shoulder bag housing two books, both for easing the congestion in my whirlygig head, though in entirely different manners. Place was packed. I found a stool by the long counter, took out one of the books, began to read. Minutes passed. More minutes passed. Still, no one had come to serve me. Behind the counter to the left, several feet away, a waitress stood doing nothing.

"Hello," I smiled. "May I order some breakfast, please?" The waitress gave me a look, turned away. Did not move. Said not a word. "Um, I'd like to order if I may."

"Looks like she don't wanna serve you, pal." This a large gruff male seated to my right. "Think it'd be obvious."

Another patron came up behind me. Thick chest, thick arms, buzz cut. "What he's telling you, maybe you should take your business somewhere else."

I spun halfway round on the stool. There must have been twenty people there, mostly truckers. Every eye was on me. I noted that a few had begun to move out from their tables. I turned back to the counter. A large mirror was affixed to the wall before me. I could see a number of the truckers now, gathered around. In their midst was a guy with shoulder-length hair, long beard, a book in his hand. *Which one of these is not like the others...*

I affected a defensive smile. "Look, I just want —" They grew closer around me. In one of those moments where action came more as a reflex than from thought, I slowly placed the book back into my bag, and just as slowly pulled out the other. Held it aloft. A bible. As though it might well contain a hippie death ray, the crowd pressing in on me took a step back. I opened my eyes wide, glanced around at the many faces.

"Exodus 8!" I announced at the top of my voice. "The Plague of Frogs,

Lice and Flies: Whosoever liveth in glass houses, let him cast the first stone!”

Louder: “Seek not vengeance against thy stranger, for thy stranger may well be thine brother!”

I squiggled down off the stool, noticed that practically all of these men were taller than my five-ten. Yet the crowd retreated a little more. I took a step towards the door, another. The bible held out at arm’s length: “Treat the beggar with kindness, for he may be Satan or he may be the Lord!” Bellowing now.

I was at the door, then out, walking slowly. For a moment I forgot where I had parked the bus, searched with my eyes, couldn’t find it. Panic. Then I spotted it between two eighteen-wheelers. I told myself don’t look back. Just keep walking and don’t look back. I looked back. Faces were pressed against the plate glass windows, more confounded than angry. I flashed the bible one more time. In the bus I stuck in the key, held it a moment. Occasionally the VW would fail to start, especially following a long drive and brief shutdown. Closed my eyes, took a deep breath, turned the key. The lovely music of a VW engine catching life.

I pulled out of the lot, onto the highway. Got up as much speed as a 1500cc engine could muster. A mile down the road I spotted a dirt path, slowed and turned in. After maybe a hundred yards I maneuvered behind a tree, turned off the motor. Picked up the bible, flipped to Exodus 8, The Plague of Frogs, Lice and Flies. Not a problem finding it as all the pages beyond were glued together. In the center of the first page of Exodus 8, within a cutout two by three inches by an inch and a half deep, nestled a 35mm film canister. I opened it, pinched out a clump of herb. Closed my eyes, ran it under my nose and sighed. Extracted a pack of rolling papers from the glove box. My hands were shaking perceptibly as I tried, and failed, to form a joint. Again, same thing. Scored on the third try. Lit up, had a toke, another. And another. Down to the roach. Which I popped into my mouth, swallowed. Started the vehicle and once more headed home.

*

Sheepishly, I went to see Sandy and Jason. Sandy now had a boyfriend, a guy from her office. Jason didn’t know me. Zero the collie took one look at Farout and thought, What the f—?

I did spend time with Jason. He was a great kid. He loved music and he knew music. Play a record one time, tell him who it was, then put it on again a month later and after the opening few bars he'd flash a smile and yell, "Ten Years After!" And he would dance to it!

Once we took him to a be-in in Fairmount Park. Slightly different from those events in San Francisco: bands, yes; good vibes, you bet. Except in Philly everybody kept their clothes on and maybe no more than a small percentage were popping psychedelics. I found an old friend there, and we stood yakking for a bit, when I noticed people rushing to a growing circle of humanity. We went over to look. I spotted Sandy and she was wearing a watermelon-slice grin. In the center of this huge circle, all by himself, was this curly-headed three year old, eyes closed, head back, magnificent smile, dancing his little tush off. M'boy.

1988

Just how the hell did you go about finding someone whose name you didn't know, nor city of residence, nor anything else. Especially when that someone was living in a country thousands of miles off.

I'd heard that the Salvation Army had a program where they linked up such people anywhere in the world. I went to see the head man – a 'captain' – in my town. He was useless.

A church claimed they were in the business. Wanted money up front for a search. I was all set to toss in the cash when the minister asked whether I was saved. I turned round and walked out.

Somebody said there were agencies in America that connected adopted out children with their birth parents. I wrote to a friend in Philly. She replied giving the name and address of such an agency there. I wrote a long passionate letter. Two weeks later I received a terse reply from a female official: We only search for birth parents; we are not in the business of locating a child that you have given away. This information is absolutely forbidden to divulge.

I had such a wonderful history with adoption agencies.

And then, a few days later, I got another post from Philly, a long one, written by hand.

FINDING JUDI

Dear Mr. Rosenberg,

I work as a volunteer at the adoption-link agency you recently wrote to. I had the privilege of reading your letter, one of the most passionate pleas I have ever come across from a man wishing to find his adopted-out child. I was literally moved to tears.

I asked the officers of the agency, begged them truth be told, to respond positively to your plea which obviously came so strongly from the heart. I was told in no uncertain terms that their action was policy, in fact was the law, and as a volunteer I had no right to intervene. In other words, mind my own business.

I must tell you I am a very stubborn woman. I have talked this over with my husband. I had to do a great deal of persuading as he is as stubborn as I am, but in the end I got him to agree. And this is what we are going to do. We are going to find the information that will lead you to finding your daughter.

I beg you not to reveal this letter, or my name, to anyone. I might be breaking with agency policy, might even be breaking the law, but I cannot sit still on this matter.

You will be hearing from me soon. In the meantime I shall be praying for you.

Well, this is all very nice, lady, and I thank you for your kind words, I thought. From what I had recently learned, however, locating someone in the witness protection program would be a cinch compared to breaking into the vaults of adoption agencies. Less than a week later, another hand written letter arrived, this postmarked Washington DC. Again strongly requesting that I divulge the following information to no one, nor say where it had come from...

And there were the names of three people: my daughter (with date of birth and name of hospital), the adopting father (the beaming guy I had seen in the elevator twenty-five years prior) and the adopting mother. No other information. The last line read: I wish you the best of luck finding her, and may your relationship be most blessed.

Cynic that I am, I might not have believed what I was reading were not the birth date and hospital as I knew it. As it was, I had a damn hard time

buying that this woman, a total stranger, had gone so far out of her way to find data kept in such strict secrecy. I thought about writing her and asking a thousand questions. But no. An angel had touched me with her magic scepter; now shut up and do something with it.

I did not put that letter down more than ten minutes without picking it up and reading it again.

My daughter's name was Judith Susan.

I couldn't have done better had I named her myself.

*

All this, of course, was before commercial internet got off the ground. So how did you find a person, any one of the three whose names I'd been given, in 1988?

I read the parents names again and again. The mother's last name was different from the father's. By law, they had to be married in order to adopt at the time, so she must be an independent woman. But it was the father's name which I focused on, a traditional Jewish name, although spelled a bit unconventionally. I repeated it over and over. Where had I heard that name before?

Another letter to my friend in Philly: does this name sound familiar to you? (I didn't tell her who he was or why I was asking.)

She replied immediately. "Bar, you've been away too long. He's one of the most famous journalists in the country!" And she supplied the name of the publication he worked for.

Oh, man, I thought: all I have to do is call the guy, tell him who I am, let him understand Judith Susan is *his* daughter, all I want to so is reach out and make contact. At that point it would be up to her whether she wanted anything further to do with me. Piece of cake, right?

I was nervous as hell when I made the call. I was told he was not in the office. I left my name and number, asked to have him to call me collect. I was positive he didn't know me by name. Just a crazy guy halfway across the world who wanted to talk about something he'd written, maybe.

A week went by; two. I made another call. Was told he worked mostly outside the office, came in only now and again. So I wrote a letter.

You may remember me, I wrote. We were face to face for only a moment,

but I so vividly recall your face, your smile, the beam you sent out in that elevator, and how just seeing that beam for a split second did so much to relieve untold guilt I was having over the adoption. For sure I'm not trying to take Judith away from you. I've enclosed a letter to her. As you can see, the envelope isn't sealed, so go ahead and read it. Please forward it to her. If she wants nothing to do with me, I'll never again try to contact either of you.

A month passed. Nothing. I sent another letter. I explained that she had a full-blood brother, six years younger. A year ago he came here to New Zealand to spend some time with me. After a lot of deliberation, I told him he had a sister, and that his mom and I gave her up for adoption at birth. He was stunned. I asked him to please not discuss it with his mother – *Judith's* mother – when he got home, but I'm certain he did. I don't know what her response was, but soon after he hit a massive wall of depression. I really believe if he could hear from her, maybe meet her, it would help solve a few problems he's had.

This time, more than a month went by. In desperation I wrote a friend in New York, an author. I told her the story, said the guy wouldn't return my calls or reply to my letters. Do me a favor, please. Make contact with him. For sure he'll get back to you if you leave word. Let me know what's what.

Weeks later, I received a response. Barry, this guy is not at all amenable to your request. I mean, really not (underlined twice). Made threats if you continue to pursue. Look, dear friend, you and Sandy were young when you had her. A whole generation has passed, you've got a great life in New Zealand. Let this go. And then she told me that she had had a similar experience when she was young.

"It hurt at first to realize I would never see my child," she wrote. "But I got over it. So will you. Time to move on."

She was right, of course. And, in truth, by this time the quest had dropped from the very top of my to-do list to pretty close to the bottom. I hadn't had a dream in ages. Plus, what did I really want out of this? If I had need of a daughter there was Jessie. (She and her mother had moved to Australia but we still kept in close touch.) Was my real need here that I was a lonely fifty year old? But I liked living alone. (Didn't I?) And most of my friends were women. Besides, my own birth family was as meshuga and dysfunctional as

can be, and since my hippie days I'd always had the sense that family came from the heart, not blood. So, yeah, tossing this weird penchant behind me did not look to be a problem.

There was just one thing that niggled at me. Why had I been led through such a tortuous path, so many pieces of the puzzle falling in my lap, right to the steps of the church...only to be abandoned there?

FINDING UNCLE SYDNEY

1971

What was ironic was how that very morning I had called a house meeting to discuss the subject. The house, a huge old ten-room row home in the Germantown section of Philly, consisted of the six of us: four men, two women. Our ages ranged from Mike and Gerri's twenty to my thirty-two. Being the oldest had kept me from calling a meeting till now.

My first attempt at communal living was proving so, so awkward. We'd moved in five weeks before and still stuff was cluttered all about the place, unpacked cartons sitting in the living room, cat shit all over, a madhouse. It was not my home. What made it livable – just – was that all of us there were really fond of one another. If it hadn't been for that, my head, which was pretty unraveled now, would have been shredded wheat.

I found myself staying away till late, coming home and going to bed, getting up early and leaving. My own room had been set up the first day, typical Barry style. Underwear neatly folded and stacked in the dresser, shirts and trousers hung in the closet (all the hanger heads facing the same way), shoes lined up under the bed. When I was there I locked myself in and read or listened to music. I was reluctant to talk to the others about the state of the house because, being the oldest, I felt myself an outsider to this way of life. Nobody there was born a hippie, or freak as we called ourselves; we were all raised traditional middleclass. But the others seemed to take the change so much more easily than I. There were times I could not believe this was

me, that I was here. Living in the VW bus in San Francisco had been one thing. I could more or less write it off as a transition, my metamorphosis, an extended *vacation*. Philly was home, always had been, but now there wasn't any home home.

"Ah, listen, I want to talk about the dope situation in the house." The words sounded authoritarian, parental, precisely what I did not wish to be. I tried to relax my tone.

We were out of the house now, at HELP, the twenty-four hour hotline crisis center where all six of us worked as volunteer counselors. There were only three of us at the meeting, Mark and Inga besides myself. Mike and Gerri were in bed sleeping until three, their normal wakeup hour, and Larry the schoolteacher was in his fifth grade ghetto classroom.

"What I mean is, every time I come home late I find dope on the kitchen table. Now wait – I know what you're going to say. And maybe it's true and I am paranoid. I don't care. The other morning the exterminator and plumber both were in there and the stuff was right out in the open. And then last night. Last night not only was the dope out on the table, but the cats got into it and knocked it all over the floor. And there's something else that bothers me. We sure have a lot of weed in the house for just the six of us."

"Well, y'know," said Inga.

"Y'know," said Mark.

"Yeah, I know," I grumbled. Three days before we had bought a pound. It was to be house smoke, communally enjoyed, but I complained because I used far less than the others and didn't think it fair I had to pay an equal share. So we each bought our own. I did buy two ounces, not for myself, rather as presents. I carried the two baggies in my VW anticipating to see my two friends shortly, but the night before I got a bit nervous and transferred them to my dresser. My own private stash consisted of what I could squash into the film canister secreted in my cut-out bible. I'd purchased it primarily as social dope, same as I used to buy bottles of Kahlua even though I rarely drank any. Following the experience at the diner while drive cross-country, I hadn't touched any because since moving in people kept dropping by and laying joints on me.

The hundred or so young people (plus me) who were part of HELP drew a fat line down the middle of the drug culture. On our side you had dope –

marijuana and hash – and psychedelics, though by '71 hardly any of us were dropping acid on more than a very occasional basis. I'd done maybe a dozen trips while on the Coast, evenly split among LSD, mescaline and peyote. Grand education, thank ye very much, but no more, no need. On the other side of the druggie ledger were the bad guys: heroin, methamphetamines, cocaine: shit you got addicted to. Shit you used needles for.

“Mark, do you still have the acid?” Inga now wondered.

“Acid? *What acid!*” I cried. Just the thought it might be in the house gave me tremors.

Mark flipped his long, wire-like hair with the backs of his fingers. “Umm, that’s right, I do. The Libra dude stayed with us on Spruce Street asked me to hold it for him till he got back from trial in Florida.”

“When was that,” I asked nervously.

“Ummm, just before Labor Day.” It was now March.

“And you’re still holding? Aw, man, get rid of it. Please? I just don’t feel comfortable with it in the house, okay? Inga, am I right? Nobody’s doing, why keep it around? How much, by the way. A hit? Two? (Pause) Ten?”

“Ummmm, hundred and fifty, maybe two hundred hits.”

All this took place in the morning. That night when we got home I would deliver my two gifts and Mark would throw out his acid, albeit with great sorrow because a freak, a true freak, did not willingly dispose of his stash, ever, under any circumstance, except by ingestion. But he would throw it out because Inga and I would make damn well sure he threw it out.

Only he wouldn’t throw it out because in just a few hours some men were going to pay a surprise visit to our happy home.

*

“Your house has been popped!”

Ferkin, HELP’s office manager, screamed it for the second time. I looked at him. An ex-greaser who had mellowed markedly from his post-navy street fighting days, Ferkin now and then suffered lapses. His jaw was jutted in my face. His eyes were wide, wild.

My brain slowly turned over his words. My house had been...popped. Only thing I could think of was the ancient oil burner had exploded. I silently cursed the real estate agent who five weeks before had promised to put in

a new one. But no, as Ferkin finally slowed down enough to explain: our house had been ‘popped’, ‘visited’, ‘busted’ – *raided* by narcotics agents an hour before. He’d got a call, as he had gotten a thousand calls before from young people who’d been nabbed and were seeking free legal assistance. The caller, a young woman, said there had been a raid and Ferkin automatically began jotting down the names of those arrested when it occurred the names all sounded familiar.

“Who’d they get,” I wondered. I was, in contrast to him, disturbingly calm. The reality hadn’t sunk in yet.

“Mike and Gerri, four others. They’re all in the tank now and both George and Dick (HELP’s most active drug lawyers) are working on it. George says it’s really a heavy because the DA and cops both were in on it, and that’s never happened before. He tried to make the usual deal but this one is so big they won’t even talk to him. And get this: the warrant’s in *your* name!”

Inga, Mark and I spent the night at Ferkin’s, where we waited word on the six people who’d been arrested. Everyone in Philly, it seemed, had heard of the bust. People I had never met came by to wish us luck, me in particular.

“Barry, hey brother.” Murray the acid-head. Following the never-ending handshake: “Now don’t get upset, man, but this friend of mine? Works at KYW, y’know? He read on the news wire that the cops are looking for you.”

“For me? Why?”

“They say they’re rounding up people in connection with a major drug op in Zionsville, and you’re codenamed Mister Big.”

“Jesus Christ, I’ve never been to Zionsville. I don’t even know where it is.”

“I dig it, brother, I dig it. Just don’t let it upset you, man. Don’t let them get to you.”

Upset? Last night somebody had come around with a huge bag of spare ribs, and I scoffed down half a dozen before I remembered I’d been vegan for nearly two years. Then a pipe was passed around. Suddenly it dawned: We were having a party. Get three freaks together at a wake and one of them will light up a doobie.

Then Dick called. He’d managed to get the six nabbed at our house

released on three hundred dollars bail each, an unusually low sum. “Plus I made a deal with the DA that you’ll turn yourself in within a few days. If you don’t they’ll come after you and it’ll be that much harder.”

It was then Friday. “Okay if I wait till Monday?” I wanted to savor my last weekend as a free man.

“Yeah, no problem. By the way, have you seen today’s Daily News?”

I rushed down to the corner and bought a copy. There on page eight was the picture. District Attorney Arlen Specter (yep: inventor of the Kennedy assassination superbullet theory, who would later become Pennsylvania’s longest running senator) sitting at his desk. Behind him, two on each side, stood four aides. All grim-faced. On the desk was the booty. Shortly before the bust, Mike had gone down to the local co-op and collected our combined week’s food supply, which the cops had taken, and there it now sat on Specter’s desk – lentils, sesame seeds, unhulled buckwheat: hard droogs, mon. Also on the desk was a hash pipe. *My* hash pipe, purchased the summer before at Cost-Plus in San Francisco for a dollar sixty-nine.

“Among the drugs confiscated were cocaine caps (which turned out to be chick peas) and methadrine (alfalfa seeds).” One of six inaccuracies in the six inch article. Nowhere was there mention of my name.

*

The Honorable J. Sydney Hoffman took one look at my beard and spent the next five minutes discussing it. He’d never seen so much hair, he said. He just couldn’t believe someone would go around with all that hair, he said. Why would anybody want to have such a thing growing out his face? he asked. He addressed this last to the person sitting alongside me.

Dick had said it would go better if Sandy would come and sit with me at the special court. This had been designed by Dick and a young assistant DA not long before. The program gave a first-time minor offender the right to forego the standard trial procedure, admit his guilt and receive a pre-indictment probation of six months to two years. “Get her to come,” he had told me. “Hoffman is a family sort of judge. It’ll really help him go easy on you.”

At first Sandy had said no way. Then she said maybe. I’d called her just that morning and she was still undecided. When I saw her outside the courtroom I went to hug her. She turned her back and walked away.

“Do you like him with all that hair?” the judge now wondered.

She shrugged, smiled. “It’s up to him how he looks. Really, it’s just hair. I expect one day he’ll just get tired of it and shave it off.”

There was another bizarre element working here. Sydney Hoffman was a distant relation by marriage, something like my mother’s brother’s wife’s cousin. When I was but a tad I knew him as Uncle Sydney, and he used to bounce me on his knee in a boardwalk pavilion in Atlantic City. As I was growing up the revered name of Judge Hoffman frequently would be tossed my way as *the* success story in the family. He was the model to whom I was to look when mapping out my future. And now as we sat there in the city hall courtroom, an incredulous Judge Hoffman, who did not in any way tie me in with the chubby little kid of thirty years before, continued to pummel away at my appearance. And I sat there with a knotted hanky on my head, grinning, bowing and scraping and going yahsuh.

Of all the goofy aspects of the whole Kafkaesque affair, what intrigued the most was why the DA’s office, after such a vigorous effort to bust me and soak up the resultant publicity, had allowed the case to dissipate to this. Dick didn’t know. “I’d love to take credit,” he said. “But it’s not because of anything I did. One day they were going to hammer you, the next they all but let it go.”

Hoffman railed on. And then he looked over my head, beyond me. His jaw slung down comically. “I don’t believe this. A man just came in who must have ten times the beard you’ve got. I just don’t believe it.” Dick leaned in and whispered in my ear: “Don’t turn around. It’s probably Steak. Just keep grinning and nodding.”

The judge gave forth a great sigh. To Sandy: “Thank you for coming, Mrs. Rosenberg. And best of luck to you with...your husband.” To me: “Right, case discharged. Get out of here.”

“What? I can go? I’m free?”

I felt a knuckle digging into my back. “Get out!” Dick whispered, pushing me out of the chair. “Go! Now!”

I stumbled to my feet, walked in a daze to the back of the courtroom. I saw an ex-HELP staffer who was now Hoffman’s aide. “Chuck, what the fuck happened?”

“Get the hell outta here for chrissake!” he side-mouthed. I walked out

to the corridor laughing. I was immediately surrounded by a dozen freaks, more. Hugs and kisses. Somebody dropped something in my pocket.

A joint, of course.

1992

I had the dream again. Three, four years, and I don't think she had entered my head half a dozen times. I did tell my older sister. Rosalie lived in Atlantic City, in a four bedroom house no one was allowed to sleep over. She was five feet tall and four and a half wide and spent her days visiting various casinos. Not to play. To steal.

Sister Rosalie bought a huge old imitation rabbit coat that had last been worn by a Kodiak bear. She cut a yard off the bottom and sewed maybe twenty-five pockets onto the inner lining. She'd walk into a casino and proceed to lift ashtrays, coffee mugs, glasses. This in a place had better surveillance security than the White House. Rosalie had the greenest thumb in history. She could take a cutting and in a week produce a dozen plants. The downstairs of her house (I never saw the upstairs) was a jungle. Creepers, vines, things that reached out and snared you. You had to do a Groucho Marx duck walk to get from room to room. Also, she had a piece of masking tape bearing a scribbled name on every stick of her Salvation Army furniture. When she died, the named person would get that piece. Except he wouldn't because every time somebody pissed her off she changed the tape. People pissed her off a lot.

"I saw your Judith Susan today," she wrote. "A really swank sports car drove up to the house. I thought she was coming in, but she must've got cold feet because she quickly backed up and went the other way. If she does get her courage up to visit I'll be sure to tell her to get in touch."

Most of my dreams had me in a situation where I was homeless and trying to cadge a bed in someone's home or in a guesthouse. This particular dream had a woman who resembled my other sister, Myrna, as she'd looked around thirty, running a backpackers somewhere. She gave me a bed in a dorm room with several other beds, but I was the only one in there. I went to look for the bathroom, couldn't find it, a rabbit warren of rooms and hallways, but no toilet. I got back to my room and all the beds were now taken, including the

one I had. I went to see the woman who looked like a thirty year old Myrna. Told her my bed had been taken. You shouldn't have left the room, she said. But I had to pee! Still, she told me, that's what happens when you leave your assigned place. Jung wrote that the number one symbol in life is the home. It was the representational equivalent of the self. He knew me well.

This would be my very last dream about her. Something happened to my dreaming/thinking process around this time whereby instead of her coming to me when I was asleep, she began to appear now and then when I was awake. And no longer did I think of her as 'my daughter', rather a real person, flesh and blood and personality of her own. Had she enjoyed her childhood, I wondered, growing up with the beaming guy I saw for just a moment in the elevator? Was she happy? Healthy? There having been first cousin marriages in the recent Rosenberg family line, my mother and both sisters had to shave every day. In secret, in shame. I hoped that particular gene hadn't been foisted on her. I also hoped that despite my dreams of a woman who resembled my sister that she looked like Sandy, as did Jason, and not me. She was probably married now, had kids. My grandkids! I tried to picture their living situation. What was her husband like? Did they have a good, wholesome relationship? Did she ever think about me? About Sandy? Curious whether she had sibs?

A while back I had written Sandy that I'd like to mount a serious search and wondered whether she would care to join me in the effort. I'll pay for whatever costs might be involved, I told her, but it'd be great to know you were in this with me. I didn't hear anything for several weeks, then one day got a letter. A single word: No.

I could hardly blame her. Two husbands – her only two lovers ever, she claimed – had abandoned her, one in a VW bus and the other via a coronary at age forty-two. If she had been somewhat in denial on Judith Susan's existence prior to the second guy's heart attack, she certainly would have closed the book completely following his death.

So on my own I retained a private detective in Philly. Right off, he sent me a photocopy of his license. I replied, Thanks, I'm already aware you have a license, now might you please show me something that proves you've earned it. The only other correspondence I got from the guy was a bill. That was it. A bill. I might pay it some day.

*

“What’s your daughter’s name again?” This was an acquaintance who lived in my town, one of the early dabblers on the internet. “I’ll see what I can do,” he said. Following day he handed me an address in Massachusetts.

“You found where she lives? Really? How?”

“Phone directory.”

“Which phone directory? How did you know which one to look in?” He sighed. “You go to the website of White Pages USA. Okay? In the box at the top of the page, you type in a name. Got it? Only one person with those three names is listed in all of America.”

“But, but, how does the computer –?”

“Piss off, mate!”

I wrote a long letter telling her who I was. Tore it up and dashed off a brief note. If you were born August 27, 1962 in Philadelphia, I’d very much like to get in touch with you. No salesman will call, honest. I enclosed a self-addressed envelope with international postage. Two weeks later the envelope arrived back. “Not me. Sorry. Judith Susan.” Later I learned this woman was just a few years younger than me.

Again I was left with nary a breeze in my sails.

FINDING ALPHA

1972

I went to see a friend, Irwin, who’d been one of those busted in my Germantown house. He lived in Chester County, an hour’s drive. We were raving and smoking when this woman came in. Mid-thirties, short and tubby. Irwin introduced her as his mind control teacher.

“Your what?” I laughed.

“Yeah, really. It’s good shit, man. Oughta try it.”

The woman said she charged two hundred for the course. I told her I was

down to my last twenty dollars' worth of food stamps. She said, I'll take it, pay me the rest when you get flush.

Over the next few weeks I did a few hours with her almost every day. Mostly I lay on the floor of her living room while she led me on a series of imagery exercises. Or at least she said she did. Might've been twirling my chest hairs for all I knew because as soon as she said, Close your eyes –, I was gone. She had told me it was perfectly okay to fall asleep, don't be concerned, you're still getting it. Getting what? I kept asking. To which she would give me this annoying Cheshire cat smile.

Well, I got it. When we'd finished, not only could I do psychic readings almost perfectly, not only was I 'programming' for stuff to happen and it would happen, often in the most unexpected ways, but of far greater significance I was feeling better than I could ever remember.

I hadn't written in three years. Not a word. I'd tried, but nothing came out. I was convinced my creative storage tank had been of limited size. Now I started writing again. Better than ever. Then one day I read about this alternative university over at Penn. Anybody could teach anything, anybody could attend, no money changed hands. Penn provided the classroom space. I had no notion to do so, but one day I was driving by the campus, parked, went in and signed up to teach. Called it Alpha Mind Control. I expected a dozen people at most. Two hundred registered.

I didn't know what the hell to do. I couldn't recall anything my teacher had covered, had no notes or reference material, not a single thing prepared, had never taught at any level, in fact it was the first time I'd stood before more than ten people in my life. I went to the front of the auditorium to tell them this. I'd say, Sorry, it's all been a mistake. I opened my mouth to say this and magic flowed out. Not *my* magic, heck no. Stuff came out of me I'd never heard of. Class was scheduled from seven till eight twenty, and at quarter to eleven I was still going. And they were still sitting. Then I heard myself say, Oh by the way, before you leave would you like me to do some psychic readings? I'd done a number of these before, right, but only for friends and certainly never in such a setting. Two hundred people to witness me fall on my hairy face.

I did the readings. Three of them. One after another. All perfect.

When I finished the course I thought: that's it, fooled everybody, myself

included, just do not try to push it. Penn's next semester began and I had me a new class, three hundred strong.

And so it went. Year two, instead of teaching a single class each semester, so many people wanted to sit in that I began a fresh one every month. And still the numbers kept escalating. Penn ran out of auditoriums big enough to hold all the people. Where next, the Palestra? Franklin Field?

I was now an ordained guru. In addition, I was writing a lot. In addition to gurning and writing, I was balling my tuches off. Maybe they mistook me for Jerry Garcia. All this joyful activity must have changed my mental/emotional outlook on life, then, made of me a happy fella, yes? Actually, what it did was underscore my conviction that I was the world's biggest fake. If these people – students, readers, women who allowed me into their beds or climbed into mine – only knew the truth: if they only realized I was hollow inside.

FINDING JOEL DORN

= FINDING BARRY (III)

Amsterdam

August, 1976

Mr. Alan Halpern

Editor

Philadelphia Magazine

Philadelphia, PA. 19102

Dear Alan,

What was it – six months ago? – that I talked you into letting me do a piece on Joel Dorn. You'll recall you knew nothing of Dorn, not even his name, and I explained the guy was Roberta Flack's record producer as well

as Rondo H. Slade, the masked announcer who sold plastic slipcovers on late night TV, that I'd known him since college and he was an extraordinarily funny individual. You agreed to let me do the piece and I was pretty happy because the assignment appeared to be a snap, just follow Dorn around for a few days and record all the zany things he did and shortly thereafter I would hand you a manuscript chock full of warmth and humor, breaking up the somber tone of dirty politics, super lawyers and high society gossip. Well, it's now half a year later and you've been after me every month, begging, cajoling, demanding, where the hell is Joel Dorn? And thus it is with much regret and embarrassment that I inform you the project has created within me a mental block of such proportion that after untold hours sitting at my typewriter staring blankly at an immobile carriage there is no Joel Dorn story. Apologies are one thing, but apologies alone seem hardly adequate, so I shall try to explain the circumstances in full, with hope you'll understand.

To begin, I must relate some history of myself. Yeah I know, I can hear the groans – all this guy does anymore is write about himself. But as I've told you, it's my belief that everything every writer writes about is a reflection of himself, that there is no such thing as objective reporting, and the duty of any artist is to learn about himself by learning about others. (It suddenly occurs that perhaps while learning about Dorn I learned a little too much about myself, and that's what's caused the block. Duh!)

Anyway, the point I'm trying to make is that I am somewhat crazy, of which you are well aware, but what you may not be aware is that I have been crazy all my life. Now please understand, I don't mean bad crazy, malevolent; not even mischievous, really. Just crazy in that I have always lived in two worlds, the 'normal' outside sphere and a whole different universe inside. From the very beginning I have favored the inside world, a boundless reservoir of pictures and events so fascinating and entertaining that it could not help but leak out into 'reality'. And whenever this has happened, it's got me in trouble.

First it was my parents who got on me about my fantasies, exhorting me to 'grow up' and 'come down to earth'. Later teachers and fellow students would advise me to contain my thought-pictures, structure them more to fit with the accepted outside-world norm.

After high school I followed some bad advice and enrolled at Drexel, enduring three grueling years as an engineering student. Not a day went

by that I wasn't reminded how different I was from everyone else at that science factory, and being different meant being wrong. In exasperation I transferred to Temple where, I had assumed, the class mentality would be a bit more flexible. Was I ever mistaken. My ever-leaking inner world got me in more trouble that first year than it had in three at Drexel, the most notable event being my permanent banishment from the staff of the school paper.

By this time I was finally convinced that something was truly the matter with me. Why couldn't I be like everyone else with ordinary thoughts and perceptions? I carried this notion into a third semester at Temple, down the steps of the campus radio station, then housed in the basement of a church. And there I was struck by the sight of a most blessed event. Standing before me was a young man as crazy as I.

Joel Dorn (he was Dornblum then) came from suburban Yeadon, where for many years he'd been immersed in a sea of blindness. Since the day he was born, almost, there had been people around to tell him that the pictures and images leaking out of his head did not concur with society's manual of regulations, and he had better shape up and begin pouring out stuff that made more sense. It was like two veteran tricks meeting for the first time. We checked each other out from top to bottom. I was ecstatic. Never had I met anyone whose powers of observation and perception were so downright keen as this eighteen year old freshman's. And he was quick; oh how he was quick. By the end of the day Joel and I had formed an alliance that would create a ton of unforgettable moments over the next couple of years.

Dorn and I spent much time at the radio station, an airwave kindergarten with an atmosphere as unimaginative and artless as the communications department itself, a scholastic inanity staffed by talentless instructors who taught mediocre students the rudiments of constructing headlines for upstate weekly newspapers and manning the console boards at five hundred watt radio outlets in Iowa. There was a single door leading in and out of the old church basement and Joel and I would station ourselves by it like the queen's guards. Few escaped our scrutiny. In no time at all this mob of little-league Cronkites was reduced to pallid, squirming psyches by our surgical minds and rapid-fire mouths. Our craziness, heretofore restricted by a universal lack of appreciation, ranneth over. For the two of us it was like dancing naked through the woods of our dreams. Free at last, baby; free at last.

Having conquered the radio station we expanded our front, first to the rest of the campus, and then beyond. We often borrowed equipment from the station and produced our own unscheduled remote broadcasts. Like the time we toted a microphone and station banner into the old Harvey House and interviewed ‘live’ a host of fully bedecked Lulu Temple Shriners, the performance staged so impeccably that our masquerade went undetected despite the fact that the plug end of the mike was nestled snugly in Dorn’s ear.

We loved to watch people, their self-conscious quirks and nuances, and play to them like concert virtuosos. We hung out a lot at the Horn & Hardart’s on City Line, then the prime place-to-be for the Wynnefield-Merion Jewish princess marry-a-doctor set. This was the height of the Ben Casey era, and Joel and I, clad in stolen air force para-med smocks smeared with cows’ liver blood, would report in periodically to discuss – at voice-top, naturally – our latest operations, pausing frequently to examine one another with stethoscopes and tongue depressors. Drove the girls wild.

We were both angry young men then, our pet hates very much in common. We hated school because it was stifling, authority because it was ignorant, our peer group because it was dull and narrow-minded and so willing to accept without question the law laid down by the first two. We hated any number of types and people, but mainly, as I recall, we hated most the people of means and power who pushed their way to desired position by bullying or buying off anything in their way. They were unfeeling, insensitive hulks of protoplasm. We would remain apart from their brutish ways; we would be different.

While at Temple, each of us broke into professional radio, me following my keenest interest then, sports, and Joel his in jazz. I remember his very first night. It was a disaster. His voice quavered so and he made so many mistakes that in embarrassment for him I tuned him out after an hour. He felt certain he had blown his chance. Only his father, he told me later, kept him on top of it. The two of them had a great relationship, probably the best father-son rapport I’ve ever come across. The elder Dorn(blum) simply told his son to forget it, that if this is what you want to do, get your act together and try it again. Which Joel did beginning the very next night. Soon he developed a strong following of jazz people, eventually becoming the top radio man among the hardcore jazz set in the city.

We remained close after my graduation, but as he got more and more into his trip and began hanging with the mostly-black jazz crowd, the two of us began to drift. Once, right after a couple of Temple people were busted for grass, Joel asked what I thought. In a diatribe straight out of Reefer Madness – this was '61, remember – I laid out my ideas on marijuana and the kind of people who used it. I didn't see or hear from him for a hell of a long time after that.

I did run into him a couple years later. We were both married, me living and working a straight job in Jersey and Joel commuting daily to New York in his role as a minor jazz producer for Atlantic Records. We went through one of those weren't-the-old-days-just-great riffs, and then I invited him and his wife to our place for dinner that Sunday night. Sunday night came, dinner for four was on the stove, the table was set...no Joel. Worried, I called their place several times, then phoned his parents. Oh, they're over at _____'s, his mother said. Was he supposed to get in touch with you tonight?

The next time I saw Joel Dorn was eight years later. I was lying in bed, stoned, watching TV when suddenly a man appeared wearing a mask and shouting something about clear plastic slipcovers. I sat up and looked closely at the screen. The masked man had a beard and he was a lot heavier, still I could swear...

Anyway, Alan, I'm sure none of this gives you any insight as to why you are now receiving a lengthy letter of apology from Amsterdam. Why Amsterdam? Well, I find the place extremely conducive to the outpouring of thoughts and feelings; furthermore, I strongly suggest you send your staff people over here whenever they get hung up on a story.

What really happened is that I just couldn't get anything down on paper in Philly, that mental block was so imposing that I simply gave up on the project, and I just didn't have the chutzpah to tell you. Here – what, 4,000 miles away? – the block has been considerably reduced and I'm free enough to at least write you an explanation. I am living out of the pack on my back, sleeping in Vondelpark with freaks of several nations and tongues; detoxing from the uptightness experienced from the assignment, and, too, from the mania that passes for civilized living in Philadelphia. The park is magnificent, the people in this city are simply beautiful, and the women, ahhhhh, Rittenhouse Square was never like this.

Ah yes, Joel Dorn.

Like a lot of us, Joel had changed in those eight insane years. He used to be trim, impeccably dressed at all times. Now he was heavy, his hair shaggy and graying, an unkempt beard, the neatly pressed, expensive clothes a thing of the past. Basically, though, the guy appeared much the same when I first saw him again. He was crazy. Witness the scene I walked in on after nearly a decade of absence:

Earlier in the day a mutual friend who'd run the gamut from rock promoter to Guru Maharaj Ji devotee during the past couple of years had called Joel with an urgent request. The perfect master himself was coming to town and the devotee, still the promoter, wanted to give the exalted one the very best. Dorn, now into some big bucks, had the very best, a pair of hand-carved antique chairs that would serve as perfect thrones for the guru and his mother. As I came upon the premises of Joel's extremely middle-class suburban home, four blissed-out premies were loading the chairs into a pickup under the concerned scrutiny of Joel's wife, while inside Joel was screaming into the phone: "I don't care if he's the bloody Dalai Lama, your little deity puts one scratch on my chairs I'll kick his fat head in!"

Welcome back.

It was obvious right off that Joel was still having a lot of fun, and most of it centered around Rondo Slade. Following the great tradition of masked men everywhere, the development of Slade is a heartwarming tale.

Back at Temple, shortly after he and I split up, Joel teamed up with a neighbor who called himself the Duck, not nearly so crazy but a guy who'd journey to the end of the earth in search of a laugh. After Temple, the Duck went into business with his brother schlocking plastic slipcovers and related merchandise. Joel cut a commercial for the business which ran late at night. It was very straight and very bad. Several years later they decided to try it again. Together with a bunch of friends they tried to work something funny, but everything they did came out a corpse. Around two in the morning they left the studio, and on the way home it was decided that what they should have done was not a commercial but an uncommercial. The ideas began flying and out of it all came Rondo H. Slade.

Slade was the epitome of the flimflam man, so sly and deceitful he wore a black mask. He didn't sell the product, he jammed it down your throat.

He practically came out and told you you were getting fleeced, but what the hell, you're gonna get fleeced anywhere, right? Slade was the unhero doing the uncommercial.

The initial spots were ragged and lacked real direction. But Joel developed the character along with a strong sense of timing. With such stalwart supporting casters as Alan the Singing Telephone, Wanda LaRue and Bernard the Rooster, Joel ad-libbed the spots with little more to go on than a floor plan. Slade took on all the finest traditions: the flag (the Slade emblem is a rag with a dollar sign crayoned in), motherhood ("Don't do it for me, do it for my mother, Mrs. Slade!"), religion (a background chorus of Handel's Messiah on one spot brought such an angry response the stations had to kill it), democracy ("We're as honest as the United States Government" – Slade sitting on a sofa with his arms around Nixon and Agnew cut-outs prompted a response from no less a personage than John W. Dean III).

When Slade would hold up the product's ten-year guarantee, then crumple the paper and toss it behind him, he was extolling the highest virtue of American free enterprise – greed. And the good citizens were not about to stand for that. In large numbers they called and wrote into the stations demanding Slade's banishment (sometimes in the form of lynching) from the airwaves. The area youth, meantime, already led astray by drugs and decadent music, responded in equally large numbers demanding more of the masked announcer. From the early response, Joel and the Duck knew they had something going. (Ironically, those who normally buy clear plastic slipcovers, blacks and Kensington-type whites, didn't know what the hell to make of Slade. They simply went along with their electronic programming, and the Duck's business varied pretty much according to Slade's exposure on the tube.)

Basically, Dorn was doing through Slade what he and I had done for two years at Temple: putting the people on and having himself a ball. As I spent more time with him, though, I saw another side developing, something that hadn't been there during our previous round. He now had his serious moments, all having to do with his work as a record producer.

For several years Joel produced mostly black jazz people, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Yusef Lateef, Les McCann, Fathead Newman, Oscar Brown Jr. Big names in jazz, but jazz had been laid to rest around the time the Liverpool

sound caught on, and even the most popular jazz names sold relatively few records. Then around six years ago Joel was tipped off by Roland Kirk about a woman vocalist then singing in a small club in Washington. Roberta Flack had a magnificent voice, perfect pitch and, like most of those Joel was working with, she was a musical genius. But who would buy her was the question, and Joel turned down Kirk's tip. A year later Les McCann urged him to record her and finally Joel did. Their first album sold well, and the second did even better. There was no explanation for it, really, but people were buying and that, when you get down to it, was the music biz.

When I met Joel again, Flack was on her way to becoming the number one female vocalist in the world. And the world, rushing headlong back to the fifties, soon would demand more non-rocker, non-screamer talents. Too, Joel had just taken on another woman artist, an unknown temperamental redhead named Bette Midler. Things were happening for the guy.

During his early days at Atlantic, Joel had learned a lot about art from Nesuhi Ertegun, head of the record company and a man heavy into surrealism. Ertegun taught him about converting pictures, images and colors into music, which wasn't very tough in Joel's case because these things were floating around in his head anyway. Now he was an authority on art, and in his own case the word was spelled with a capital A. I listened incredulously as he would compare himself with Bergman and Fellini. Once the artist has mastered his craft, he would say, everything that comes out is Art. Everything.

"Right now I'm one of the best producers in the world," he told me several times. "I know how to make records like Don Shula knows how to put together and coach a winning football team. Take Shula out of Miami and give him a bare franchise and in three years he's back on top. It's the same with me. I can make great records because I know how to; I've got the formula."

On one hand it sounded like an outrageous ego riff, but on the other, well, I'll tell you how it was. Joel and I had started out the same time and place. He went directly into his thing and worked his butt off, eating tons of shit on the way up. I messed around at a couple of straight PR jobs, then began writing around '67. Within a year I was beginning to sprout a national reputation. At this point, in order to grow, I had to take my talent out of

Philadelphia and hit the big apple trail, for such are the rules of making it. So up to New York I trucked.

Right off, I hated the place. Mostly I hated the New York-slick people, the fast-talking agents, editors, publishers, all the way down to the seventy-five dollars a week copy editors fresh out of Radcliffe whose published works to date ended with a fifteen hundred word essay in some quarterly literary magazine, and who now were hot on stuffing my submitted efforts into their shredders. There was an awe at the bigness of it all, sure, but mainly I felt a dirtyness there, a your-art-for-our-dollars crassness that I neither wished to nor had the stomach to tolerate. So what I did, I endured a bunch of this crap, then tucked tail and ran, ran so fast and so far that by the time I gathered myself together I was on the verge of falling off the edge of the earth.

When I remet Dorn in 1972 he was carving a national reputation, earning a mint, living with his family out in the suburbs and had just added an elegant Mercedes to the Caddy already in the driveway. He was making it, living the impossible dream. I was in the throes of a deep, sustained depression, broke, lost, lonely, living in a Volkswagen bus. I had strayed off the accepted route to success and now I was floundering. So when Joel talked about his capital-A Art, I sat up and listened.

I didn't see him very often, two-three times a month. On those occasions he went back and forth between his old craziness and new seriousness. It was a strange mixture: whenever he got into the Art riff his whole demeanor seemed to change. His eyes, his expression, his tone of voice, everything appeared to be coming from a different channel than the Joel Dorn I'd known in college.

His words began to have an effect on me. I would hear myself using them as my very own in conversation with others. Joel has that way. He has a commanding presence, a strong, positive manner of asserting himself. Often I've heard his philosophies parroted by the people around him.

At the time I was feeling incredible guilt over my lack of creative production; the more I heard about Joel's Art, both from him and my own echo, the more I began to reassess my trip. Knowing I was broke, he offered me money to get back on my feet. At first, out of pride, I refused. Then one day I relented and hit him for a couple hundred. We drove to a local branch of his bank, where he had some other business to attend to. It was a

hot summer day, and we were two longhaired, bearded freaks in sleeveless shirts and shorts.

“Watch how they treat me at first,” he whispered as we entered the bank, “then watch what they do when they find out how much gelt I’ve got in here.” We sat for half an hour. Nobody save the security guard even laid an eye on us. When finally they got around to recognizing us, and then checked his bank statement, it was like King Faisal had reincarnated in Joel’s body. They did everything but brush the crumbs out of his beard. Inside, I was a little kid jumping up and down. It was the old days at H&H all over again.

The following year a lot of things happened to us both. Me, I felt like a dead flower reblooming, each decayed petal taking on new life daily. I began writing after a three-year layoff, I began teaching – a wholly new trip for me – and most important, I began to unravel and understand the thread of the wayward path I had taken. Joel – well, the career of Joel Dorn hit full tilt during this time. But where there were roses, there were thorns.

On the positive side, Joel won a Grammy for the best single record of the year, Roberta Flack’s *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*. He was now making the kind of money that enabled him to trade in the Caddy for a brand new Mercedes to sit in the drive next to the other one.

We continued to talk. Or rather he did. I still listened.

He was so sure of himself, so direct in his self-analysis. Once I mentioned that it still bothered me some to be rejected, whether by a publisher or a woman. “I can’t be rejected,” he said. “I was rejected by the goyim in Yeadon every day when I was growing up so I know what that’s all about. Now I know who I am and where I’m going, and there’s no way I can ever be rejected.”

Another time we were discussing some people in the music business, the star types. It seemed everyone we mentioned was in some way screwed up, mentally, socially, on drugs, something. I noted that my own experience with jock stars was similar: once they hit a certain plateau the ego just seemed to rip open like a ruptured bladder, pouring out fear, insecurity, paranoia, hostility. I wonder, I said, if it’s at all possible for a traditionally-raised human being to become a star and still maintain a balanced perspective. Joel’s eyes grew into that odd glint I’d become accustomed to of late. “We’ll soon find out, won’t we?”

When I happened to make mention of the editing that normally was done to my submitted manuscripts, Joel looked puzzled.

“How can you let anybody edit your Art?” he asked. Before I could reply: “You let some fucking hack editor, who’s an editor only because he can’t write as good as you, touch your Art? How can you do that, man? Look, when I produce a record I work at it until every sound is exactly the way I want it. Then I give it to them. ‘Here, this is my Art. Now go out and sell it, which is what you know how to do. You don’t know how to make records, I do, so keep your fucking hands off.’”

Joel was then producing the first Midler album. I saw him sporadically during this time and he would alternate between how great a talent she was and how agonizing it was to work with her. To illustrate, he told me this story. They’d finished recording around three this one morning. A bunch of them went to Joel’s apartment, ordered coffee and Danish. Knock at the door, there’s this skinny Puerto Rican kid, eighteen at most. They figured out who got which coffee. When Midler took hers, she lifted off the lid, took a sip, let out a shriek. “It’s got sugar! You put sugar in it!” she screeched at the dumfounded delivery kid. He tried to say something, didn’t have a chance. Midler tossed the hot coffee in the kid’s face, stomped off into the bathroom, slammed the door. They attended to the kid, now on the floor holding his face and crying. Wet towels and soft talk. And a hundred dollars from Dorn’s pocket.

When the production was over he told me two things: first, he would never work with Midler again, under any circumstance, for any amount of money. And second, this album was the best piece of work he’d ever done, that it would serve as a monument to catapult his career to the heavens. That was before they raped it.

Joel claimed to have both Midler’s and Atlantic’s okay that his final version was the one to be released, then he left for Europe to record a jazz festival in Switzerland. He didn’t find out about the rape until he got back.

He’d made the album as the story of Midler’s life; it had continuity, a theme throughout. After he left they tore it apart, recut a number of the songs and haphazardly slapped it back together. And when they finished they told him what they had done. He got full credit and the full producer’s share. But they could not give him back his Art.

“Till now there have been three great tragedies in my life,” he told me some time later. “The death of my father, the death of my infant daughter, and the Bette Midler album. This is no lie – when I found out what they’d done, I cried myself to sleep every night for a week.”

It was then that I asked him a funny question. I asked how he could let them get away with what they did. Why didn’t he say no, this is my Art, you can’t touch it – period. He replied with that look, that strange tone.

“I made the sacrifice,” he said, “because I have bigger things in mind for the future.”

Shortly thereafter, Atlantic Records, which is owned by Warner communications, which is owned by the Kinney Corporation, which owns everything in the world ITT doesn’t, promoted Joel Dorn to vice president. They also awarded him a new contract which, he said, gave him full control over his Art. “I gave up dollars for this. The Midler thing can never happen to me again.”

Around this same time, Joel was also having difficulties with Roberta Flack. People I’ve talked to say that once she became established, Flack turned into a horror to work with. Their relationship was strange, hers and Joel’s – to me anyway. I’d be at this house and she’d call. And Joel would sit and listen to her. Right: listen, which for Joel was just a bit off-character. She would call any time of day or night, from any place in the world. And sometimes for hours he’d sit there with the receiver nestled between his ear and shoulder, toying listlessly with the phone in his lap, an occasional remark, a brotherly pat on the head. Listening. Once she called from Europe to ask, among other important points, what color dress he thought she should wear. Often she would call in the middle of the night. Four o’clock one morning she phoned from Phoenix to say she felt sick, would Joel get her a doctor. Which he did.

“She doesn’t have a manager?” I asked.

“Yeah, she has a manager.”

“Then –?”

“I’m her producer,” is all he would say.

A few times I heard, through friends in other avenues of the business, that Flack was telling people Joel had practically nothing to do with her records, that all the arrangements were here own. When I mentioned this to

him, he replied: “Don’t you think I’m aware of the situation?”

Anyway, early in ’73 they came out with the single *Killing Me Softly*. It was an instant smash, hitting the charts immediately and staying there until more than three million copies were sold. For some reason, though, Flack held back release of the finished album for nearly eight months.

“Why’s she doing it?” I wondered.

“She’s changing a bell from a ding to a dong,” he grumbled, and turned to another subject.

Things were going well for me when I telephoned to say I had contracted to do a piece on him for *Philly Magazine*. The guy had helped me, I was feeling my way back on top and now was in a position to do something for him. I knew he liked publicity and the opportunity to broadcast his ideas. And, oddly enough, though he’d been a Philadelphian all his life, few in Philly knew anything about him.

His first question was how much would I be getting for the story (about as much as he was then earning per day). Then he said, “I’m gonna give you the best interview you ever had.” I said, Joel, I’m not doing an interview, I’m doing a magazine piece, there’s a hell of a difference. I guess the words never penetrated because several times after that he repeated the line about giving me my greatest interview. After a while I just let it go.

Before starting out I told him to be sure to let me know when anything he said or did was off the record. “Listen, write anything you want to, nothing can hurt me, understand?”

We drove to New York in the new Mercedes, parking in a mid-Manhattan lot. Soon as he pulled in, two attendants practically jumped to the side of the car.

“When I first came around I gave everybody who works here a ten and told them, ‘Look, I don’t ever want to wait for my car, understand?’ You gotta do that here or else you’ll never get anybody to do anything for you.”

We walked to the Warner building. Joel walks fast, much faster than he did ten years ago, a man intent on getting where he’s going, and I had to half-jog to maintain a pace I’m not used to. Also, when you’re with him, you have to keep on his right because he is almost totally deaf in his left ear. It’s something I’d forgotten, and several times I placed myself on the deaf side and he’d maneuver to my left.

Joel's younger brother Jonathon was already in the office when we got there. Jon, an accomplished tuba player and part-time temperance league crusader (heh heh), is also quite crazy, but in a considerably more mellow fashion. Jon collects things. Old bowling shirts. And World War II hand-painted ties. And autographed pictures of Clarabell the clown. Jon has Joel's voice, many of his mannerisms, most of his opinions. Also, he adores his older brother.

"Hey man, how ya feelin'?" Jon's first words to his brother. Joel sat low on the posh white leather sofa with his chin resting on his chest, legs stretched out before him. He'd been to the doctor the day before. The report was a faulty prostate and an overall fagged-out condition. He looked tired, extremely weary. "A little better," he replied.

"You gotta change, man. You really can't go on like this, you'll burn yourself out."

Around us the office was gaudily decked out in fecal-flavored suedette wallpaper and shaded windows looking out onto a brick wall interrupted by an occasional burglar-proofed window. There was a huge stereo in the room, and crap cluttered all about. And there in the middle of it all was my old buddy Joel, who sees beautiful pictures in his head and has learned to convert them to music, a pure art form. And here he was working for the Kinney Corporation, which was paying him considerably more than a livable income to put those beautiful sounds on a slab of vinyl.

We left the office an hour later and took a cab several blocks to Atlantic's recording studio near Columbus Circle. The place was a freak's haven, long hair and beards and tons of hip posters of rock and pop stars. Joel asked one young guy if a certain tape he'd given him had been completed.

"Yeah, and I made it right."

"Whattaya mean?"

"I cleaned up that sound in there. Y'know, the didididowdow thing."

Joel looked at me, then back at the kid. Calmly, he said, "That's great. I only worked two weeks to get that effect and you made it right. Look, just for the hell of it put it back in, okay? After that, you can make another one for yourself that's right." When the kid had left: "Everybody's a fucking producer."

The week I was with him, Joel was recording two female singers, both of

whom had once been top names in the industry and who now were coming out of retirement to make records produced by Joel Dorn. The first was Jackie DeShannon, who'd done a lot of bubblegum rock in the '60s. She hadn't worked in some years and word had it in recording circles she was washed up as a talent.

"What bullshit that is," Joel said that night as we headed to the Regent Sound Studio on West 56th Street. "Real talent never dies. Wait'll you hear the album we're doing with her. It's all fuck music. Everything I do is fuck music, sounds you can really ball behind. DeShannon's stuff is sad women's music that Jon and me spent a lot of time picking out. Every woman, every gay for that matter, in the twenty to thirty-five age bracket will really understand this sound."

The Regent looked like it was converted from an ancient ghetto school basement: dingy and totally depressing.

"How do you like it?" he chuckled as he showed me through. "Let me tell you about this place. When I started using it around five years ago everybody laughed at me. 'What the hell are you using a dump like that for?' They soon found out why. The sounds you bring out of here you can't duplicate anywhere. It's like Bergman's camera. Bergman uses a forty year old camera that makes so much noise he has to wrap blankets around it. But you've seen what he gets out of it. How many directors would sell their mothers to get it? Now they hear the sounds we're getting here and they want it. Only they can't have it."

We moved into a control room. "See that machine up there?" He pointed to a large black box atop a shelf. "It's a thirty-track tape machine that costs twelve thousand dollars. I asked Atlantic to get it for me and they couldn't understand why I didn't want to use the regular sixteen tracks. 'Because I need more tracks to record what I hear in my head.' They still couldn't understand so I figured the hell with it and bought it myself. I'll make it back in one shot."

DeShannon came in, a slight bleached blonde with slacks hugging her little butt and blouse open to reveal tiny boobs. She wore a lot of makeup but wore it well and could've been anywhere from twenty-five to forty. Four black musicians were there to accompany her. Once more, Joel ran a parallel to the master. "These guys are the best in New York; nobody can touch

them. I use them in everything I do, just like Bergman has his own repertory group for every film he makes. The engineer, everybody connected with me is the best in the business. I've worked years putting this team together." He took it further.

"It's like this, man. The producer in recording is like the director in film. He is the boss, everything goes through him, the Art is his Art. Actors understand this because that's the way it's been in film for years, but as yet musicians are unfamiliar with this type thinking. What we're doing is gonna change all that. As the producer I select the music, tell the artist what I want, what I see, where the Art should go. The artist has to have total confidence in me or it won't work. Midler was afraid to give me that confidence, but DeShannon isn't. That's why this album is going great."

Once things began, a Joel Dorn I had never seen emerged. This was his show, all right, and the vibration emanated totally from him. Things were loose but professional – a lot of laughs and messing around but the team did work together as he'd promised. They did take after take, DeShannon belting out the songs in her raspy, sultry voice, the musicians responding virtually without instruction. "Make it honest," Joel instructed over the control room mike. The engineer, a smiling, mellow man in his late 30s, played back each take, pushing buttons, flipping knobs, mixing the tracks. "Gimme some more red, man," Joel told him. The engineer flashed a toothy grin, played it back. "No man, red. Bright red!" Another remix and the producer seemed satisfied.

There were two early-twenties New York Jewish females sitting nervously in the control room. They'd written a song called 'Jimmy' which DeShannon was now doing. They'd never had a song recorded before and were living sheer ecstasy. We watched together through the glass as DeShannon humped-sang 'Jimmy' onto tape.

"It's incredible," one of them said to me, her eyes wet. "The tape we sent Joel was fast, you know, and we wanted to tell him but were a little, well, I mean, he's Joel *Dorn*. So we didn't say anything, but God, they're playing it exactly the way we wrote it. It's as if he knew."

As the night wore on the intensity grew steadily. There was an incredible, exciting natural high in the place. It was all coming together, and they could feel it. I could feel it. Once I stepped out into the hall for a Coke, was out there

twenty minutes when Joel came out and dragged me into the control room. “You gotta hear this. Do I have a hit record or do I have a hit record! Listen to the way she says ‘any headlines’,” he directed as the tape came blasting through the control room. Besides DeShannon and the musicians, a dozen people who had nothing to do with the production were in there now. Everybody got quiet and when the tape came around to...*any headlines*, it was like a spark setting off a fire. Joel picked up the phone resting on the console board.

“Operator, give me the number of an all-night accountant,” he yelled. “Wait a minute. Fuck the accountant. Get me an all-night Mercedes dealer.” Everybody laughed. “We’re in the bucks, gang!”

“Joel really loves money,” DeShannon said to me. Throughout the session, she appeared to get hornier and hornier. I know that feeling. When I get into writing, really get into it, I have a hard-on that lasts till the final period is typed. One time she approached, reached over my shoulder from behind and began running hand down my shirt, then over my thighs. I felt like a groupie.

We got a lift to Joel’s apartment. When he began working at night a few years ago, daily commuting from Philly became too great a hassle. First Atlantic rented a hotel suite for him, but it was cold and lifeless. A year ago he rented an apartment with another man from Atlantic, and here he spent four days a week.

Next morning we got up around eleven and headed out for breakfast. In two hours he would begin recording another former top female singer, a young lady by the name of Kate Smith. As we ate, Joel asked me what I thought of the DeShannon stuff.

“Well, I don’t think I know enough about music to be a good critic.”

“I don’t care about that. How do you like it?”

I shrugged. “It makes me feel good, so I guess that means I like it.”

He appreciated that. “The whole album will be hits, every cut. I can’t make a bad record. Everything I do from here out has to be good. I’ve really got my Art perfected.” By this time, having grown a trifle tired of this rave, I tried to change the subject. I brought up that part of Joel I considered the most fun, the masked announcer.

“Do you know where that dude’s at?” he suddenly asked. The look and tone appeared. “Slade knows Art. He’s the best in the world at music. He has

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's and Kate Smith's home phone numbers and can call them both." This knocked me a little off-balance. Till now I'd looked upon Rondo H. Slade as Dorn's outlet, the chance to get away from the New York pressure cooker and laugh. "How far do you think he can go?" Joel asked, his eyes somewhere else.

We left to go to the Regent. Recording Kate Smith was a personal coup for him. First it had been an ambition, a dream. Take the best-selling, best-loved woman vocalist of all time and do a contemporary pop single with her. He told enough people about his dream that one day the word filtered down to the woman herself. She had her manager check Joel out, then issued him an audience. I was at his house on the day before he went to see her. I'd never seen the guy so high-strung. He was telling everybody who called or came over that he was going to see Kate Smith. Lord Fauntleroy had an audience with the queen.

Around one o'clock we were passing around a joint. Twenty minutes later we could hear the outside door opening. Joel suddenly began whipping around the room scooping up loose joints, roaches, ashtrays, then trying to hand-brush away the tell-tale aroma. "Mandrake the Magician never made anything disappear faster," he whispered.

Kate Smith entered the studio accompanied by a short, thickset man whom she introduced as Sal, her bodyguard, announcing proudly that he carried three guns. Smith had lost a hundred pounds since the last time I'd seen her – maybe twenty-five years before, on TV – and although sixty-five looked not a minute over fifty. She wore platinum blonde hair, clear plastic frame glasses, a simple repeat-design print dress and bead necklace with matching earrings. Had I passed her on the street never would I have guessed this was the same woman millions the world over once considered America's ultimate weapon in defeating fascism. But when she opened her mouth to speak, ah, there was no chance for error.

"When I first saw Joel," she said in that booming voice, "he was so clean, his hair and beard were brushed and he was wearing a suit and his shoes were shined. Why, he looked just like a young Jesus Christ."

She talked about her home on an island she owned in upstate New York, and how she loved nature. "I built a wood shed and all the animals come

around to feed. They're so beautiful, why, I just love them all. Except the red squirrels. They're vermin and I shoot them, right, Sal?"

"That's right," offered the man with three guns. "You oughta see Miss Smith handle a rifle. She can knock an eye outta one a them squirrels a hundred yards off."

It was now after two, but the session couldn't begin until one added member of the troupe arrived. Joel had hoped to get John Lennon to play piano for Kate, but when he couldn't get through to Lennon, he settled for Dr. John, one of the most accomplished musicians on the pop scene.

At three o'clock Dr. John entered. He was late, he explained in a slow Louisiana drawl, because after leaving the methadone clinic he spent an hour looking for the studio on Seventy-Fourth Street. Now, if you've never seen Dr. John (real name Mac Rebennack), the best word to describe the man would have to be, ah, bizarre, but even that does the man a vast injustice. Dr. John is like nothing else you have ever seen. The best part of it is that he is real, nothing put on.

Earlier in the day, the good doctor's wife and roadie worked on him, considerably toning down his appearance so that he would not bend the mind of the woman he'd be accompanying, and standing in the doorway of the studio now was perhaps the most conservatively dressed Dr. John ever: beret, ornate dark glasses, long ponytail, beard, shark-skin vest, earrings a foot long, hand-carved walking stick with feathers sticking out, his body dripping leather, ivory, beaded embroidery, metals and several dozen more feathers. On his feet were Danish clogs.

Joel ushered him in slowly, which is the only way Dr. John was able to move, and there in the old, dank studio a historic bridge between cultures took place. Kate Smith extended her hand and Dr. John took it in his own and slowly bent forward to kiss it. Smith, who had been tipped off that Dr. John was a little, eh, different, was obviously thrilled.

"A pleasure to meechee, Miz Smif," he drawled.

"The same here, Dr. John. By the way, what should I call you – John? Doc? Mac?"

"Eenythin you call me will be jes fine, ma'am."

They were escorted to the piano, where Kate had been doing a little warmup with Joel, Jon and Bill Eaton, crew chief of Dorn's sidemen, prior

to the doctor's arrival. It seems Kate has never learned to read music and they had to go over every note to give her an idea how the tune went. Dr. John took his seat, then leaned over to Eaton: "What kinda beat's the lady into?"

"A-when the moooooooooooooooooon..."

"Gotcha."

"What I want here is Paul McCartney," Joel directed.

"Gotcha."

The session started slow but ended well, a scaled-down version of the previous night's action, but equally as high, especially for the lady. Kate Smith lost fifty years that afternoon; she was a teenager whose joy bubbled over. On the way out she kissed everybody in the place.

Joel was feeling equally elated when he left the studio some minutes later. He had all but forgotten his prostate, Bette Midler, Roberta Flack. "They think I'm crazy for recording Kate Smith," he said as we stepped briskly through the traffic. "What can you do with her?" they want to know. "I can sell a shitload of records, that's what I can do!" he laughed. "Tonight you'll meet Richard Perry. He produces Carly Simon, Ringo, people like that. Me and him are the two best producers in the country. Sometime I want to get a picture of the two of us arm wrestling."

He had with him now two of the DeShannon cuts. These would constitute the single that preceded the album, and Joel was on his way to play it for Jerry Wexler, one of Atlantic's top executives, and the man who had given him DeShannon to record in the first place. Wexler was a top name producer in his own right (Aretha Franklin), and from what Joel had told me, Wexler had never been overly kind to him. Whenever he spoke of the higher-ups at Atlantic, his favorable words were always directed to Nesuhi Ertegun, no one else.

"Nesuhi was the only one who gave me a break," he said frequently. "He let me make mistakes with his money. He reamed my ass a lot, but it was always constructive, to make me a better producer. The others used to laugh at me, disregard anything I had to say. Now that I'm selling they're nice to me."

Jerry Wexler lived in the very lap of luxury. His apartment high up overlooking Central Park was Hollywood East, the figment of a film set designer's run-amuck imagination. It screamed: here lives a scion of the

recording industry. We entered a large, elegant living room, all white with rare original art covering the walls, coned ceiling lamps fingering each work and calling attention to it.

Three women, all young and attractive, one a wife, one a sister-in-law, one a secretary, were there along with a man in his twenties whom Joel knew. Wexler himself looked like Edward G. Robinson in his last films – a small distinguished man, tiny glasses sitting on the end of his nose, brief salt-and-pepper beard.

While Joel and he discussed the tape, I made my way to a picture window overlooking the park. The view was grand, and I stood there transfixed, gazing out upon a New York of a century past, upon a time before the cancer set in and began rotting minds and stealing souls. I was there maybe five minutes when I felt a tug at my shoulder. Joel, and once more I saw a totally new personality. He was extremely nervous.

“C’mon away from there, Wexler’s gonna put the tape on,” he said in a low tone, as if my being by the window was a social faux pas and would detract some points from the upcoming rating. I followed him to the inside archway and sat down on the steps leading out.

As Wexler planted the tape in what must have been the most elaborate stereo unit invented, Joel, his eyes glazed like that of a first grader handing over to a particularly critical father what he feels to be an outstanding report card, sunk down to his knees a few feet from the tape player. I sat there watching, mesmerized. Joel Dorn, one of the two best producers in America; the man who can only make hits; Rondo H. Slade for chrissake – on his knees!

*

After I left new York, in the month or two that followed, several unrelated events were to take place which would completely schizophrenize me on the subject of Joel Dorn and bring about the trouble I’ve experienced trying to write his story. Here are some of them:

One Saturday afternoon I accompanied him to the Greater Zion Church on North Seventh Street in Philly to record a group of black gospel singers. I asked him why he bothered to do this when it was obvious such a record would never sell.

“Listen, all pop music derives from this, and it’s dying out. I have to come down here and get this. What do I care if it sells or not?”

A few days before, I had walked in on a small-scale art show at the Dorn household. Spread out on the dining room table and nearby floor were perhaps two dozen original works and numbered prints of a German artist named Paul Wunderlich, an abstract surrealist. Joel and a friend have a non-existent art gallery called Fields-Marx (for W.C. and Groucho) through which they purchase Wunderlich’s works like Irish hoarders storing up potatoes before the famine. The reasoning is faultless: there’s a depression around the bend and art is always a good investment in such event.

Around this same time I was present while Joel cut some Slade videotapes. The guy was absolutely incredible. Something happens on those occasions when he puts on the mask, the old wrinkled gray suit and battered fedora...and is loose. For four hours, on camera and off, he talked, joked, yelled, sang, totally controlled the situation, stamping out spot after brilliant hilarious spot, all off the cuff. Another time at the same studio he was tense, jittery and the entire session was a wipeout.

The same week, Joel conducted a three-hour taped interview with me in his bedroom. I say he conducted it because that’s exactly how it was, the Joel Dorn show, produced and directed by the capital-A Artist. He was anxious, pulling nervously on cigarettes throughout, stating and restating all his homilies and self-declarations for posterity. That special look and voice were there in force the whole time. Once the Duck walked in, hung around a minute and left. “I couldn’t believe what I was hearing,” he said later. “Boy, I just had to get out of there.”

Some things Joel said were indeed enlightening, such as his views on the Slade character. Till now I had assumed the masked announcer was mainly Fieldsian, since that’s where Joel’s heart is. “Fields, sure, but mainly Slade is Clarabell. If you remember, Clarabell was always doing bad things, yet you couldn’t help love him for it. You always forgave Clarabell.”

Overall, though, so many things he said sounded like contrived crap, Joel Dorn giving meaning to his Art after the fact. Like his statement that every piece of music he produces is completely worked out in his head beforehand.

Finished art, I’ve come to realize, is mainly the result of one’s working

at it: once you begin to groove, the channels connecting the artist's mind with the deep and mysterious energies of the universe open up and pure art gushes through, structured then by the ego of the artist. I know for myself, writing often is like defecating a pineapple. I can squeeze for days with nothing but agony, and then all of a sudden the aperture springs open and out pours pineapple juice by the buckets. At those times I am simply a vehicle, a machine working in conjunction with the pen or typewriter. Quite often I'm amazed by what comes out on paper. I've learned to accept this as a fact of artistic life and pride myself on being a competent vehicle for the pure art that exists in nature. Joel says he plans his Art, works it all out in his head first and then puts it on tape. To hear him explain it, only a genius can truly appreciate his work. Hey, I'm no genius; still, I find myself playing his albums a lot. There is a mellow tenor to what he does – definitely good fuck music – the result, I'm sure, of his early and heavy indoctrination into jazz.

A few months ago the Duck lent me his copy of the original Midler album. I must have played that record fifty times in a space of two weeks. It really knocked me out.

I do have two complaints about Dorn's music. First, there is a sameness to a lot of his work. A few other people whom I've turned on to Joel – none of them geniuses – have reported the same feeling. Second, he tends to be overly gimmicky. This worked well with the Midler album because of where she's at, but I think his philosophy that anything-the-Artist-does-is-Art has caused him to stick in sounds and little tricks that have nothing to do with the natural flow of the music. He spends a lot of time orchestrating and mixing long after the artist has finished recording. He works hard at manufacturing sounds, using live voices to imitate strings and such. Which is fine if it comes off natural. To me, a lot of times it is more a strained attempt to be clever.

But these complaints are minor. I know many people in the industry feel he has shown little outside his work in jazz and that he is riding solely on Roberta Flack's success wagon and his big mouth. But I honestly feel the guy's a huge talent; he's just trying too damn hard to force it out.

This haste to make it, to prove to the world he is one of the best or perhaps the very best, would appear to be the root behind the Joel Dorn I came to recognize but not know. Aside from the ego rants which, true or not,

became just plain boring after a while, the guy still has a lot of bitterness in him, something I don't think could exist were he as secure in himself as he so frequently claims. Someone who has known him several years put it this way: "It almost seems that deep inside he's scared he'll wake up one morning and find himself back in Yeadon."

A month or so after my stay in New York I went to the Electric Factory ticket office on Lombard Street to cop a couple of concert freebies from Alan Spivak, an old friend. Now, Joel on a couple of occasions had expressed a disdain for both Spivak and Larry Magid, another Factory concert promoter. Spivak invited me in for coffee, and I mentioned I was doing a story on Joel.

"Hey," I laughed, "how come you guys don't get along?" Spivak was nonplussed. "What are you talking about, we get along." I thought: all right, what's this about? Spivak pressed me and I told him that a couple of times when I'd mentioned his or Magid's name in conversation, Joel's reaction was a sneer and a few words of disgust. Spivak called Magid over. Magid, who's known Joel longer than I have, contested Joel's self-stated position as a top-level producer. "What's he ever done? What's his track record? He's never even produced a decent rock album."

That night I called Joel in New York. I'd planned to go back for another three or four days and now wanted to make arrangements with him. Over the phone I told him I'd spoken with Spivak and Magid. Joel giggled. "What'd Magid have to say?" I repeated what went down that afternoon. When I stopped talking there was a very long pause. Then:

"What are you trying to do, hurt me?"

The line was a wet towel flung across my face.

"I thought you were more professional than that," he said. For the next forty-five minutes the conversation was completely his, about how he'd trusted me, how he'd told his team not to be on guard, this is my old buddy Barry, he certainly isn't gonna do anything to stick it to us. The only thing I could grab hold of as he talked were the words of a fellow writer who once told me: never write about a friend if you want him to remain a friend. Now I know.

And so, Alan old man, as I sit here in this outdoor café overlooking a tiny crescent-shaped lake and the green of the park beyond, a cold bottle of

Heineken on the table before me, all around dogs running free and old black bicycles pedaled by beautiful people, a band of Krishna crazies dancing, playing and chanting somewhere off to the left, I seem to be quite free of the guilt attached to missing all those monthly deadlines with my Joel Dorn story. I guess you might say Dorn and I are now oceans apart, ha ha.

You know, the odd thing about this whole experience with Dorn is that by being around him the past two years, I've come to know myself better, I really have. By observing his trip in New York I lost whatever jealousy I had of his success when I reacquainted myself with him. I realized that my dropping out was a circuitous but definitely proper route for me to get where my own artistic sense lies. That the remarkable experiences I'd had on the road and in my mind provided me much better insight and opened the channels to the well of my creativity with infinitely greater effect than a million all-night sessions pent up in a recording studio might have done. For me, this is. There have been times when I tried to tell this to Joel, to get him to understand my trip. But the way things developed the last six months, well, I just couldn't talk to the guy. We'd be sitting there in his living room and I'd work to get out a sentence – and Christ, you know I have very little trouble expressing myself – but before the sentence was half completed, already Joel's head would be shaking. “No man, you don't get it,” whereupon he'd tell me what was right, because he'd gone through it all.

My trips to his house became rarer and briefer. The few occasions I did go I spent most of my time talking with his wife. I just don't relish sitting at the feet of a messiah. Also, I began experiencing periods of anger – toward Joel for (in my mind) letting me down, depriving me of the fun kind of kinship I had expected of him, then at myself for allowing such petty emotions to develop. The Duck, also experiencing a less-fun-with-brother breakdown in his relationship with Joel, arranged a patchup session at his house. It was something we all wanted.

“When you first called,” Joel began, “and said you were going to do a story on me, you said it was to be a fun piece, Rondo H. Slade meets Kate Smith, that sort of thing. I thought, great, here's a chance for Barry to start moving again with his writing and make some bucks too. Then, holy shit, you suddenly become William Allen White, a fucking expose on Joel Dorn. Why me?”

“It certainly wasn’t intended that way. Just that the more I got into the piece, and into you, the more I saw things I didn’t like. It got to a point where a Rondo meets Kate piece would’ve been just a lie, a whitewash. Joel, you’ve really changed, man, and some of the things I started seeing were devastating.”

“I’ve changed?” He roared. “What about you? The last I saw you, you were the Carrie Nation of dope, the straightest middle-class Jew in the universe. Then I catch your act ten years later and you’ve done LSD, have a beard down to your balls, you’ve left your wife and you’re living in a fucking truck. Sure I’ve changed. We all have.” He got up, walked across the room. “Look, I have two main goals now. The first is to break away from Atlantic and become an independent producer. The second is to direct and produce my own film. Everything I’m doing now is working toward these two goals. I know what I’m doing.”

Okay, look, Alan. I’ve got a whole steno pad of scribbling before me, a fifteen thousand word letter to my editor. Tell you what. Tomorrow I’ll go into town here and find a typewriter and transpose this whole thing onto plain white bond, double-spaced with the proper slug atop each page just like they taught me at Temple. Maybe you can run it as an unstory on Joel Dorn. If you do, though, let me fill you in on some of the things that’ve happened to the guy professionally the past six months.

He won a second Grammy for best song of the year, Flack’s Killing Me Softly. (Flack gave this pretty speech on how she never ever could’ve got to where she is today without her kind and wonderful producer, Joel Dorn.) In addition, two of his albums, Flack’s Killing Me Softly and, ironically, the ripped-apart, slapped-back-together Midler thing, were among the five finalists for album of the year.

The Smith and DeShannon works were another story. Kate’s single was released over the summer and made like a watermelon dropped from a plane. Not even enough sales to cover the cost of the vinyl. More depressing, because he spent so much time and energy on it, was the DeShannon album. It never got released.

After running up an eighty thousand dollar production bill, more than twice the normal budget for a major album, both DeShannon and Jerry Wexler decided to recut it. Now, I heard most of that album and I really

liked it, but on many of the cuts DeShannon's voice blended in so well with the orchestration that it came off as just another instrument, which is what Joel wanted. But DeShannon sure as hell didn't. When the album was pulled, Joel quit Atlantic, moved into the Regent studios and started the Masked Announcer Company, with himself executive president and brother Jonathon president. (Mrs. Dorn must be awfully proud.) He still has ties to Atlantic, which far as I can tell is footing a considerable portion of the tab, and last I spoke with him Joel sounded very happy with the arrangement. That's a plus, as is his apparent severing of ties with Roberta Flack. On the minus side again, Joel blew an excellent chance to produce Johnny Mathis. I talked to him one day and he said the Mathis people wanted him and the deal was ninety-nine percent closed; a week later it had fallen through. May I assume why? May I assume that when Dorn began laying on his capital-A Art speech, his here's-what-I-can-do-for-you-Johnny line, Mathis made like roadrunner? More on the plus side, Joel completed an album with Don McLean, about which he was extremely enthusiastic, and he's presently hard at work on a number of other projects with as yet unknown talents who, he assures me, are destined for stardom.

Then just before I left the States, he told me, rather excitedly, that he was involved in negotiations with a very big established talent, a woman currently on top of the hit parade. Her name? Bette Midler.

There is no real conclusion to an unstory, no cute or clever statement that will tie a ribbon to a neat package of words and send the reader happily onto the next page. What I would like to do here is end up with a small vignette, a real-life-slice which does not assess Joel Dorn, nor give him a plus-minus rating as a human being. What it will do, I hope, is present an indication of how I feel about the guy after all the crap that has happened between us. It goes like this:

"The giggles just aren't there anymore." The Duck pokes his way through a slice of layer cake. Around us conventioners roam through the Marriott coffee shop looking for the Philadelphia night life. "There used to be giggles all the time. From the minute we got up till we went to sleep there were laughs." He forks a chunk of institutional sweet poison aimlessly into his mouth.

"It seemed to stop when he got the apartment in New York and started

staying over four days a week. And the Midler thing. He really was different after that. Aw, maybe it's me. I just let business go around that time. I haven't been into action with Slade for almost a year now, and that's got me down too." He pushes away half the cake. "There just haven't been the giggles, though, and that really hurts."

We leave the Marriott, get in the Duck's Mercedes and tool the short distance to his Merion home. He parks in the drive and we are about to enter the house. We stop. There's something we both want to do. The Duck says it first, making it sound like a last-ditch thought. "Hey, whattaya say we run over and see if he's still up." So we drive to the blackened, tree-lined street. It's two months since I've been inside.

Joel is watching TV. Every time I've been there the last three years he's been watching the tube. Mention that to him and hear what he says: "You're crazy. I never watch television."

"Hey, what's doin'," he says, getting up from the couch and flicking off the set. "I'll make coffee."

We sit down at the round kitchen table. At first it's a little stiff, his two closest friends from different times now close with each other but a little distant from him. Then he begins. First one little story, then another, flowing together so it's really one continuous yarn. His eyes flash as he recounts past adventures. Not the eyes of the world's greatest record producer. Nor the tone. Joel Dorn is away for the night. In his place is that mischievous Dornblum kid from Yeadon doing things others wouldn't dream of doing because they aren't capable of such dreams.

The Duck is giggling away. Half an hour passes. An hour. We've gone through four cups of bad coffee and two dozen Twinkies, the favorite foodstuff of this class, sophisticated entertainment world magnate. And as Joel Dorn has disappeared, so too has Rondo H. Slade and whoever else lives inside his body these days. Instead, sitting there between the Duck and me, just for the crack of an instant, is a clown wearing full regalia and a rubber-bulb squeeze horn. And no matter what he does, how 'bad' he is, there's one thing for certain: You always forgive him.

FINDING LAKSHMI

“And what do *you do*?” The inevitable question.

“About what?” The inevitable wiseass answer.

I knew what they wanted, I just have never known how to answer in terms they might understand. What they sought was how I earned my bean. But that wasn't *me*. I'd made money as a soda jerk, paper boy, post office worker, truck driver, sports broadcaster, public relations hack, magazine writer, Alpha Mind Control teacher (donations; I never charged a fee). In none of these endeavors save the PR gigs did I actually earn enough to live on.

I did make a bundle in the stock market, but wasn't me who did it, rather a savvy Auckland broker who took a liking to me and invested in companies he knew about. At one time, he had my numbers up to fifteen times the original investment. Often I would call him, ask whether it was time to sell, take my profits and run. And each time he'd talk me out of it. Then, October '87, the world markets crashed. I was on my way to China at the time. What I learned when I got there was the New Zealand market, having been so bloated, was the worst hit of all. I had thoughts of rushing back and strangling the guy. When I did return, nearly a year later, I heard stories how people I knew had lost their shirts. Finally, I went to see my broker. Hey, welcome back. Got your postcards. Must've had a great trip. Screw my trip, I almost sobbed. What about my money – do I have anything left? He gave me this funny look. Opened a folder and ran his finger down the top page to the bottom line. I stared at it in shock. The number was considerably higher than when I'd left!

I had tried making money on my own. Stocks, currency spec – all flops. I was personally responsible for the only devaluation of the Swiss franc in that nation's history. Happened a week after I'd converted some Kiwi dollars. The only times I actually made money I wasn't even trying.

In my first seventy-six years I have owned the grand total of two houses, one in each hemisphere. The first I'd bought was in Philly, primarily to

house the center I'd started. Old brick three-story in a rough blue collar nabe. Half dozen years went by, the nabe gentrified, the center folded and I sold for five times what I'd paid. What a genius! A few years later I bought an old native timber house on a seven mile beach in New Zealand for US\$37,400. By twenty years later New Zealanders had finally got the message that beachfront property was a premium and the lovely old woody was now worth just shy of a million. (Actually, it was worth nothing until I sold it, and why would I wish to sell a piece of paradise?) Again, a genius. So, might I be classified as a wise investor by proxy? Property manager extraordinaire? Nope, just a schlumiel who'd got lucky a few times.

Tell you just how lucky. Late 1990s, I ran into a tourist from New York in my local café-hang. He began telling me about this financial wizard who had doubled his investment in five years, then doubled that the following four. He asked what I was doing with my gelt. Savings account in a local bank, I replied sheepishly. That's awful! he scolded. Look, when I get back to New York, I'll call him, see if he'll take you on. He doesn't take just anybody, but I think I can twist his arm in your case. Oh, thank you, thank you, I slobbered. Not having heard from him in the next few months, I got in touch. Ah, sorry, he said, bit of a snigger. My man said no deal for you. I guess you're supposed to keep what you have in your local bank. What're you getting (chuckles), a whole three percent? Uh, four and a half, actually, I mumbled. It was a while later that I read about this financial wizard in New York being arrested for running some kind of Ponzi scheme in which his clients had lost mega millions...

So back to the question what do I do. The true answer, coming from my mind, heart and gut, was this: I traveled. Oh, a bit of travel *writing*, yes. But mostly of late I wrote for publications which paid peanuts, just to keep my hand in. I was, I am, I shall be, foremost a traveler.

It was Joel Dorn who got me on the road. Odd in that beyond his one trip to Switzerland, Dorn himself hardly ever traveled beyond the ninety mile commute to New York. What happened was this:

Mid-'70s. I was dead broke. And depressed. The two sure states of my existence. Then I recalled a car accident I had been involved in as a passenger some years before. Nobody had got hurt, and my friend who was driving was fully insured, so really not a problem. Except we were both

annoyed that the other driver was a drunken teacher. My friend filed with a lawyer and convinced me to do likewise. Not having heard from him in ages, I now phoned the lawyer.

“Actually, I spoke with their people a few days back,” he said. “No deal. They’re not going to settle, and I don’t think you’d want me to sue. Your kids would be old before it came to trial. Even then, my fees might be more than any pay-out.”

A week later, a letter from the same lawyer. About to throw it in the bin when out of curiosity I ripped it open. A check for \$4,500.

“I couldn’t believe it!” he laughed on the phone “They called out of the blue, and just days after they’d told me nothing doing. I was so stunned I completely neglected to hike them up. I just don’t understand it.”

I did. After speaking with him the first time, nothing else in sight, I sat down and did a load of alpha programming. I visualized money. Lots of it. Not from any particular source. Just a way out of my mess. I would receive a letter in the mail, rip it open and hundred dollar bills would spout forth like clowns leaping from an old jalopy in a carnival act. I repeated the imagery untold times. (In the alpha ‘biz’, to satisfy unbelievers who would demand scientific proof of cause and effect, we always referred to such an event as ABC: Another Beautiful Coincidence.)

So now I had a bunch of money. I called Dorn to tell him. “What should I do with it?” I wondered. Dorn, who probably had that much in a roll in his pocket, uttered a single word: “Travel.”

My first trip I did everything wrong. Bought a backpack fit for LeBron James, sleeping bag which rolled to the size of a forty-four gallon drum, hiking boots that gave me blisters the first time I put them on and every time after. Flew to Amsterdam, only because it was the cheapest ticket over the Atlantic at the time. Still depressed, only now four thousand miles from anyone I knew, desperation speed-crawling towards panic, I nearly hopped on the next flight back. Instead I hung out in Vondelpark in the middle of the city. Actually slept there, along with backpackers from a dozen countries. They graciously shared with me their food, dope, music, laughter. The anxiety I had been toting around like an anvil began slowly melting off me. One day I sat down at a tiny café in the park, took from my pack a pad and pen and began a letter to Alan

Halpern explaining why I wasn't able to write the article on Joel Dorn I'd promised six months back. The anvil by the time I had finished was reduced to a bag of doves which lifted me floating above the treetops and southward until I reached the Greek island of Paros (actually, I hitched all the way). Spent the next three months living on the beach. I lost a bunch of weight, my body hardened and browned and I was officially confirmed as a born-again traveler.

Back in Philly some time later I met a woman in her twenties. She told me she hitched around America often, only not the thumb-out-by-the-side-of-the-road variety. She flew in private planes.

"Business types are flying all over the place in corporate jets," she said. "If they fly from, say, Dallas to Philly, the plane and pilot don't wait around. They return to Dallas to fly another suit somewhere. What I do is go down to the airport, mosey on over to the private area, talk to people. Pilots get lonely too and like company for a few hours in the air. Never have to wait long."

"You gotta put out?"

"Never. I make that clear right off. Hand up to the knee, no further."

Her trick gave me an idea. There was a special area at Philly International for charter flights. What I would do, I'd sidle over, case the various check-in counters looking for a person who'd be 1) sympathetic to my cause, 2) susceptible to a wee backhander.

Charters were generic airlines strictly licensed to carry clubs or groups that had booked many months in advance. Their craft flew mostly to Europe, Amsterdam and Frankfurt being the main arrival points back then. Many of the booking organizations were comprised of older people. Between the times of booking and flying, older people might take sick. Or get cold feet about flying. Or, god forbid... So there were always available seats. Except that charters were not permitted to sell those seats to non-clubbers because that would mean competing with the brand name lines.

So Rosenberg, during the period from my thirties until just slightly into my forties, long hair and beard, faded jeans and T-shirt, ancient, rather ratty pack, would spot a type – I became expert – at one of the counters, put on a sad face and stroll on over.

"Look," I'd begin, soft pleading voice, "I gotta get to Amsterdam (or

Frankfurt, or wherever, so long as I landed beyond the surf). It's urgent, man!" I'd take from my scuffed wallet a picture of a very attractive young woman, show it to the charter chap. "This is my sweetie. Her name is Ann (or Jan or Nan. How would I know, having found the pic in the lobby of a movie theater?). She's vacationing in Europe. But she's met this Italian guy, right? Says he's sooo good looking and dashing. And he's making a major play. For *my* babe! Funny-looking guy like me, I'm so lucky to have a woman this beautiful, but if I don't get to her soon, I'm gonna lose her. Aw, man, I love her so much!" I'd lean in a little closer, voice a few decibels softer. "Hey man, have a heart. Get me on your plane. Please?"

It took a little more haranguing than that, of course. And every once in a while I'd get turned away. But that was rare, and when it did happen I'd just waltz on over to another counter. I figured nobody ever bought the ruse, but it was good natured and not a victim in sight. When I did connect, I'd be instructed to wait until all the clubbies had checked in, then be given a hardly discernible nod. I'd rush over. He'd ask for a hundred. I'd plead poverty (my one truthful statement of the play), offer fifty.

"Okay, okay," he'd roll his eyes and quietly moan, and minutes later I'd be lowering myself onto a seat next to an overly dressed, heavily scented (and thoroughly horrified) dowager who likely as not was Grand Dame of the Wives Auxiliary to the Ku Klux Klan and paid ten times what I had for the journey.

Ah, how different things were back then. Yet there was one area where, for me, nothing had changed over the years. From my earliest days as a roadie, whenever there was a stampede *away* from some destination, I took it as sign it was a place to go.

I long had wondered about the sagacity of those who periodically shifted themselves briefly to another part of the world in hope of enhancing their spiritual wellbeing. They went to Bangkok to shop, Bali for an unbelievably overpriced yoga retreat, Greece to slather on Nivea cream and lie out by the pool at a five star. Known as tourists, they had grown into a vast colony of soldier ants devouring the best parts of our poor struggling planet, trampling down the cultures where the last bits of civilization's natural integrity were stored. But these same people, I found, also tended to use a singular event *not* to go to a favored place, or even weirder, pack up and flee if said event,

whether an act of the Big Bopper or supposed terrorism, occurred while they were already there. I called such action (or non-action) the Chicken Little Syndrome.

And while I found such behavior wholly peculiar, and despite ranking myself an eleven on the ten-scale of cowardice, I frequently took advantage of such situations. Whether it was a tornado in Toronto, bombing in Bombay or assassination in Abyssinia, wherever I happened to be when a one-off ‘disaster’ struck, quite often I would rush to grab a flight and head off to the source.

So there I was, smack in the middle of high peak season, on the beachfront terrace of the world famous five-star Peponi Hotel on the magical island of Lamu, off the coast of Kenya. A typical gorgeous day. A dozen or so sleepy dhows bobbed on the waters before me. A few locals strolled the beach below in the typical manner of nowhere-to-go-and-all-the-time-in-the-world-to-get-there. Ever-present donkeys, perhaps Lamu’s most populous ethnic, clip-clopped along. The delicious aroma of frangipani wafted in all around me. I sipped my espresso. Utter peace, a virtual parody of tranquillity. And how many souls of the tourist or ex-pat genres were present to share the experience? Not a one.

See, a short while back an event took place on Manda Island, a few hundred meters across the channel. In no way would I attempt to underplay the horror of what went down: a home was invaded, an invalid woman dragged out of bed and spirited away by goons with guns. (Deprived of her medication, she died in captivity.)

The world’s media, hardly needing an excuse to spew their traditional bile, cried Kidnapping! By! Pirates! A radical religious group from nearby Somalia claimed responsibility. (These nutcakes had claimed credit for every untoward, heinous act since the demise of Cock Robin.) It was later determined that the kidnappers were not Somalis, not religious crazies, but a handful of thugs from nearby. No matter. Bookings were cancelled and those turistas already in attendance shot out like ground to air missiles.

I wasn’t staying at the Peponi (although that wouldn’t have been a problem, they had so many cancellations and departures). Rather at a magical place not far off called the Banana House, run by a woman who would become a dear friend. Normally she charged two hundred dollars per

day for a room. My rate, since I'd be the only one there, was one-tenth that. Including breakfast and dinner.

With the advent of mindless terrorism, plus, I suppose, an advance in my age, travel had become slightly altered from the early days of hitching a ride on a charter, then thumbing across a continent. Now I bought a legitimate ticket (plus insurance), left from Auckland and traveled mostly to Asia, now and then Africa. But the idea was still the same: get off the plane, move through customs and immigration, exchange some currency, exit the airport, look left, look right, *go!* No plan, no itinerary. A whole lot of alpha for protection and guidance, and try not to do anything dumb until The Muse found me. Which she would. Coz she always had. And when that happened, she would pick me up in her loving arms and carry me to wherever it was I was supposed to go. Right place, right people, only the grandest of experiences: The Muse of the Road had yet to fail me. And that was how I had acquired my one true family. Permit me to introduce you.

Ronald Wagner, born in nazi Germany during the early stages of WWII. His father, a German soldier on furlough, made boom-boom with a pretty young fraulein, returned to the front lines and was never heard from again. Years later Wagner shaved his head, put on robes and became the Venerable Santittito, whom I met at a Buddhist monastery outside Chiang Mai, Thailand. My dearest brother.

Wayan, my Balinese daughter, met in the town of Ubud when she was nineteen. Now married to an American and living in Tucson.

Hari, a silversmith in Pushkar, India. A brother.

Dam, mother of four and the world's most amazing vegan cook. My sister in Hoi An, Vietnam.

Dierk, a German met at Hangzhou University in China, when he was a student of Mandarin and I was staying in the dorms there. My brother.

My beautiful sister Bori, from Budapest, initially encountered in Siem Reap, Cambodia, where she was working for an NGO.

Boris the Swiss, one of the few humans I had met even more meshuga than me, who owned the number one rated restaurant in all of Myanmar. A brother.

Yeka, who knew me as Uncle, and his daughter Anusha, who early on took to calling me Grandfather (it sometimes got a little complicated, this family business). They lived in Kathmandu.

Ko Zaw and Myo Myo, husband and wife to one another, brother and sister to me. Taunggyi, capital of the Shan State, Myanmar.

Then there was Monika, the Dutch woman who ran Banana House in Lamu: sister. Ivo, an Italian met in India, now living in Java: brother. Lina, from Vladivostok, a sister/daughter met at Inle Lake in Myanmar. My wonderful brother Seffi, an Israeli, whom I also had the pleasure of first meeting in Myanmar. Stanzin, my lovely granddaughter from Ladakh, 11,500 feet up in the Indian Himalayas. Dave and Kajul, a couple, both nurses, met in Hampi, India, and who now were living five miles along the road from my NZ beach. Bro and sis.

People often would tell me, Oh, they're just friends. Uh-uh. Friends I got. These folk were my family. A number had come to visit me on my seven mile beach: Santi the monk, Wayan (twice), Dierk, Bori, Yeka, Ivo and, naturally, Dave and Kajul. How many of *your* family had flown thousands of miles to come play with you, hm?

So really, it wasn't loneliness that caused me to become obsessed with finding my only blood daughter. More, I reckoned, it was the flip-flop of moments of ecstasy mixed in with periods of boredom that cropped up in the experience of solo traveling. When either of these states got close to the bone, I'd talk to her. Not very often. And never planned. It just happened.

"Babe, look at that – isn't it magnificent?" Sunset behind Sarovar Lake in Pushkar. "I can't believe I'm here, in the middle of all this!" Sitting cross-legged on the floor, the only foreigner in a packed Buddhist monastery during the high holidays in Laos. "Can you believe that? Can you *believe* that!" Ogling for the first time the amazing leg rowers on Inle Lake in Myanmar. Usually, when something struck me as so extraordinary to the conditioned senses, so spectacular beyond the norm of my traditional Western experience, and I just had to share the joy with a life force beyond my own self, she would appear, an apparition with legs.

*

At the very beginning of my journeying, fearing the out-there unknown, I would beg friends, strangers encountered at a bus stop, anybody, to strap on a backpack and join me on the dusty trail. To which incredulous looks often were accompanied by something like, "Well, Fred and I are booked to

spend ten days touring Europe. Staying at top hotels all the way, of course.” Ironically, a few years traveling by myself and I hardly even considered hitting the road with anyone.

On my own I would feel so free, so flexible. Wake up one morning with an itch to check out Timbuktu, I didn’t have to convince anybody it made sense. Sure it made no sense, now get on with it. The down side was the boredom factor, which invariably crept up on long-term journeyers.

In the early days, this frequently led to my taking up with a fellow roadie. Now here was a coincidence: on every single occasion that other traveler turned out to be female. Two reasons: more women journey solo than males. And, look, I just preferred female company.

But it wasn’t what stay-at-homers probably thought. There was a road code, especially for more, ah, mature travelers. Experience taught that sharing cramped quarters in hostels and a seat (if you were lucky enough to get one) on a twenty-hour local bus ride in China were hard enough without the fuss that can accompany a relationship. And I actually found it quite refreshing to share a platonic bed when necessary with a woman roadie, our bodies spooned together, and if during the night the wee fella did begin to move up, up and away, I had no problem whistling him back home before anything started.

Still, living out of rucksacks (not rollies; oh god, never rollies) twenty-four/seven took its toll, and in time the good moments frequently became overlaid with not so good. What would I do when the laughs faded? The Barry Two-Step (a first cousin to the Barry Backstep): 1. Pack the sack; 2. Skedaddle. Where to? India. Always. Because in this craziest of countries chances of growing bored ran from scant to none.

India was a full-frontal assault on the senses. You were constantly bombarded with totally new sights, sounds, smells, tastes, situations. Initially, the place grabbed you by the ankles, flipped you upside down and shook until the preconceived notions regarding life tumbled out of your head. Then, if you hadn’t fled to a more comfortable land nearby (Nepal, Sri Lanka) or scooted back to the safety and reason of ‘civilization’ (many did), India set you down gently, brushed off your clothes, kissed you on both cheeks and whispered: Welcome to the world’s greatest show...have a lovely time.

Insanity did exist, hell yeah. A country that ranged geographically from the high Himalayas to steamy tropics, had a billion-plus citizens who spoke a myriad of languages, were born into untold castes and sub-castes, and followed an even greater array of religions, sects, cults and dogmas (and yet every single Indian wagged her/his head side to side to indicate yes) was a mystery that confounded the British for four centuries. Travel lesson 4063: Don't try to figure India. Just dig it.

Saying this, I did have a couple problems with the place. It began changing in the mid-1990s. Some thought for the better. Spanking new airports, clean modern hotels, far more efficient railway and domestic flight systems. No longer were you dropped into the country middle of the night, spent hours wading through immigration and customs, then be attacked by a mad horde of taxi drivers, none of whom had any intention of delivering you to the place you wished to go. ("But sir, my cousin-brother's hotel is so much better. And cheaper!" Head-wag, head-wag.)

India of late was far better organized. Which was why I hated all the new-fangled crap. For me, chaos was a major part of the act. The moment I had learned to unravel this great ball of tangles, to deal with the absurdities which formed the norm, was when I truly experienced the sheer pleasure of traveling. But India's move to modernize wasn't the reason I recently took early leave from my once-favorite town of Pushkar, in the Rajasthani desert. It was the second gripe that pushed me out. According to recent statistics, in the past decade three hundred million Indians had been upgraded to middleclass status. And every single one seemed to be holidaying when I was there. Krishna save us.

Local hoteliers and merchants, quietly voicing disdain for these rude, pushy, boorish invaders (who frequently treated them like untouchables), nonetheless seemed to be inflating their prices by the hour since the upwardly mobiles were too proud to engage in India's premier pastime, bargaining. Because I had stayed in their tiny town (pop.12,000) many times, and for several weeks each visit, often I got huge discounts without asking, sometimes meals or garments for free. "You are family, Baba!" How often had I heard that. No longer. Plus those who had been my friends were looking frazzled. Complained about falling behind on payments for the new car, the fancy home entertainment system, the daughter's over-the-top wedding.

So I bailed out of Pushkar after a week. Grabbed a train. Forty hours later switched to a bus. Finally a life-periling nocturnal trishaw ride through treacherously winding country roads until I came to the tourist-free village I'd heard about from a fellow roadie. And where scant hours later I fell absolutely, totally and madly in love.

Her name was Lakshmi, and my first glimpse of her she was having her morning bath. There she was in all her naked splendor, reveling in the warm waters of the village's shallow river. My heart near leapt out of my chest. I couldn't help myself. Within minutes I was stroking her. Nuzzling. Cooing sweet nothings.

"Look," I whispered to Judith Susan, who appeared as if summoned by all this enamored energy I was exuding, "I admit we have no chance. I'm seventy. She's twenty. I'm Jewish, she's Hindu. I'm five-foot-ten, hundred sixty pounds. She's eight feet high and weighs two and a half tons. Still –" I laid my head against her trunk – "I can't help what I'm feeling."

Every morning Lakshmi's carer would lead my darling from her home in the village temple slowly, ponderously, down a long set of steps to the river. Once in, upon his command she would flop onto her side, whereupon he spent an hour, more, scrubbing her stem to stern. How I despised him.

When the mood struck she'd be ever so playful, snorting water up her trunk then showering those around her. And when she stepped out of the river you were encouraged to approach, offer up a coin to her extended trunk. After turning it over to her handler (the blighter!) she'd place the trunk ever so softly on top your head as a blessing. I could not express the unbridled joy I felt whenever this happened.

Over the next several weeks I must have gone through a mountain of coins getting her to trunk-kiss me. But so many performed this act with her, how could I honestly report she favored me. It happened quite unexpectedly.

I approached one morning as usual, coin extended, speaking softly, sweetly, to my beauty. Oddly, Lakshmi ignored the coin. Instead, she dipped her trunk past my extended hand down into my shoulder bag...and plucked out an open pack of digestives. Wrapper and all, she made those biscuits disappear in a finger snap. From then on, I was her man and she was my elephant. For I alone had discovered the true path to this elegant lady's heart.

FINDING MALIK

I was staying at my friend Kathy's three-story row home in North Philly. This was the fourth recent visit to Philly – every odd-numbered year beginning 2005.

Kathy and I first met in Eugene, Oregon in 1977. Her younger sister Laura had been in my very first Alpha Mind Control class five years before. Laura was fifteen then, remarkably mature, delightfully centered. Now she was visiting Kathy in Eugene, but wouldn't stay long. Within the year she'd be off to Africa, where she would marry a Kenyan fisherman who had a bunch of other wives and a slew of kids. Laura would change her name to Naima, become fluent in Swahili, and twenty years later return to Philly with some of these kids, one of whom was to become instrumental in my quarter century quest to find Judith Susan.

Kathy would also return to Philadelphia, become a prime shaker and mover in the largest union in the city. I frequently referred to the sisters as the foremost and second-most amazing persons I knew. As well, along with three brothers and absolutely wonderful parents in their eighties, they comprised the most loving, caring bunch I knew. Considering my own meshuga, dysfunctional, scratch-each-other's-eyes-out clan, being around these people, sharing their genuine feeling for one another, was like taking a brief journey to family heaven.

My initial trip back to Philly in '05 had been somewhat shaky. It'd been over twenty years since I last visited the land of my birth. I still had American citizenship, although I had let my US passport lapse once I became a nationalized New Zealander and began traveling exclusively on my Kiwi passport, one of the safest in the world. (There's a war somewhere, and NZ is 'asked' by America to join in, often they'll send a tiny ground force and two or three veterinarians. Don't ask.)

When in 2005 I decided to return to Philadelphia to meet up with friends I hadn't seen in a generation, I tried to renew my American passport to save any hassle entering the country. But the US embassy said issuance of a new passport would take sixty days, or forever and a half, whichever came first.

I was worried. I'd heard all kinds of horrific tales how, following 9/11, security agents at LAX were searching, scrutinizing, even stripping foreigners entering the country. My luck, they'd pick on me – packs turned inside out, my smelly shoes examined, the dreaded bend-over-and-spread-em ordeal. But in truth, this wasn't the real fear that prompted my damn-fool action. The real fear? I was afraid America wouldn't let me in. Bounce me out before I even set foot back on Yankee soil.

Lately I'd been having these nightmares: as I handed over my NZ passport I would get this icy glare, a siren would go off, a platoon of huge, thick-neck marines would suddenly appear and I'd be frog-marched back onto the plane. Or worse, whisked off to that delightful Caribbean resort next to Cuba with its guard dogs and razor wire and special bathing facility.

Then I heard about a way around all this, a means to have them take pity on me. "Yeah, sure, he's a traitor, switching allegiances to a foreign power, but look at him: he's a pathetic old fart now. Okay you, get in here."

It was another American ex-pat who unwittingly planted the seed. He'd gone back for a visit a year before. I questioned him on procedure at LAX.

"Not a problem," the eighty year old replied. "I simply asked for wheelchair assistance and got pushed to the front of the line." *Ding!* So during check-in at Auckland, I put in my request and the clerk typed it into her computer. I was set.

I awoke as the plane was descending over the Southern California coastline. Not just from a fitful, long-distance airliner sleep, I aroused myself out of my hibernation from good sense as well. Wheeled into America? After all these years? What had I been thinking?

They were waiting for me. As I joined the shuffle of tired humanity and clumsy bags, the cabin crew pulled me aside. I tried to protest. All I received in return were courteous, we-know-best smiles. The small uniformed woman – Latina? Philippina? – standing behind a well-used wheelchair was anything but smiling. This was serious business and together grinning attendants and somber airport worker stuffed me into the chair. And away we went.

As I sat slumped in the chair, daypack on my lap, tooling along at a rapid pace past the walkers, worst thing was the embarrassment. On long-distance flights (plus, as I was flying Air Tahiti, a few hours mid-journey hanging out at the tiny airport in Papeete) fliers became a sort of loose, we're-all-in-this-

together community. You saw the same faces, got to know idiosyncrasies. And here I was, the picture of good health, being wheeled past the gang like Riff Raff the butler in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Passing the lovely university student who had sat next to me for fifteen hours, her mouth now slung open at the sight of me, was especially mortifying. I avoided eye contact.

I was pushed directly to the front of the snaking line to the ‘aliens’ counter, where I was promptly mugshot, electronically fingerprinted, a note stapled into my passport. And that was it.

My ancient, scuffed, red backpack arrived at the baggage pickup moments after I did. I stepped off the chair, dragged it from the belt and strapped it on. “Thanks very much,” I said with gleaming grin to my pusher-woman. “I can walk from here. It’s not far and I’ll just take it slow. You know, small steps.”

“I’m supposed to take you through customs, then outside to a special shuttle bus for people like you,” she announced tersely.

“Oh.”

“But I have a problem. There’s a small ramp between here and customs. With your heavy bag it’s too much for me to push you up the ramp.”

“Right. That settles it. Thanks ever so much. Well, bye now.”

The stern-faced little woman, barely five feet tall, fiftyish, reached up and placed a hand on my shoulder with the force of Thor’s hammer and yanked me back into the chair. “You just wait right here. I’ll get someone to help. Don’t move!”

I waited. Sat in that wheelchair and waited. A minute. Two. Five. No sign of her. Just as I made to get up she reappeared, towing behind a very unhappy man in porter’s garb.

“I’m gonna miss out carrying bags!” he said, loudly.

“Your contract says you have to do this.” The pusher.

“Hell with the damn contract, you’re taking away my livin’.”

“Look, I’m really sorry about this.” Wheelchair sitter.

“Ain’t you, man, It’s this here bee-utch!”

“I’m putting you on report!”

“Look, I’m happy to walk. Really.”

“You stay in that chair!”

“But...”

“But...”

“But...”

The porter got behind the chair and began pushing at close to warp speed. “Omigod! Omigod! Omigodomigodomi—!” Me, knowing with total certainty I was headed *ker-splat* into a wall. Somehow, God Bless America, we made it to customs, cracking the existing world record by several seconds. The porter stalked off, swearing loudly. The cursory inspection of my bags took less than a minute. I wanted in the worst way to get off the chair and walk out to the street. I didn’t dare.

She pushed me to the door. One man, in uniform, stood before it, looking tough. He brusquely asked for my passport, examined it thoroughly, was about to hand it back. “Wait a minute,” he said, opening it again and having another look. “Wait just a minute.” I felt my face getting hot. So close. So awfully close.

“It says here you were born in Pennsylvania. Far as I know, Pennsylvania’s in America, right?”

“Yes sir.”

“Making you an American citizen.”

“Yes sir. And proud to be.” Don’t push it, schmuck.

“Then why, may I ask, are you coming here on a *foreign* passport?”

I took a breath. “Look, it’s my grandson’s bar mitzvah. My *only* grandson. Now, nothing against American bureaucracy, okay. My US passport had expired. I thought I had plenty of time, but they said sixty days to issue a new one. I said can’t you fast-track me, I’ll pay whatever it costs. Sixty days. Final. I really want to be there to watch my only grandson...” My voice tailed off. I was coming close to hyperventilating. I knew it would be on the computer: No Known Grandchildren!

He glared at me. Looked behind me at the woman. A thought passed between them. Two word balloons rose simultaneously from their heads: BULLSH—. He thrust the passport back at me. “Remember you have ninety days in the country. Not ninety-one. Ninety. Don’t get sick or in an accident and think you can stay longer.” Gave a head nod to my pusher person.

Outside the terminal, the woman navigated me to the curb where another wheelchair had already been placed. A Japanese woman in her sixties. Behind her a man in uniform similar to my own pusher’s.

And that's when it hit me. The reason for the pusher's insistence on my remaining in the chair. I'd been away so long I'd forgotten what it was that made America the great power she is, the most sought-after country for refugees the world over. Freedom? Liberty? Justice?

Tipping.

I had no American currency. Wait, that was a lie. I did have American money: two dozen hundred-dollar bills. Plus a crumbled piece of tan paper bearing a washed-out likeness of a very young Ed Hillary. I certainly wasn't going to hand over one of the former, and I could just imagine the reaction should I give her a New Zealand five-dollar note.

The special shuttle bus for 'people like me', destination the domestic terminal where I would catch my flight to Philly, pulled to the curb. The door opened. Backpack in one hand and daypack in the other, I propelled myself off the wheelchair.

"Thank you so much," I announced in a groveling broken voice to the small woman standing behind my chair. "Really, thank you, thank you." And like an Olympic high hurdler I leapt onto the shuttle. I glanced back briefly and saw two things. The Japanese woman handing two bills to her pusher man, at least one of which was a twenty. And the look of shock, horror and utter dismay on the face of the tiny woman who had, with a little help, pushed me through the entire city of insanity called LA International.

I flopped down heavily, slackly, in the furthest seat from the door, my eyes cast solidly on the floor. Did not move a muscle, probably didn't take a breath, until the Japanese woman had been settled in her seat and the shuttle started up and moved off, taking me into America.

*

The next three entries, '07, '09 and '11, went considerably smoother. I enjoyed staying at Kathy's place. We went to baseball games, often to one of the untold nearby restaurants, or we had dinner at home in her comfortable, tastefully furnished living/dining area. And I would see quite a bit of my son Jason.

That first day back in 2011 he'd told me on the phone he had things to do when he got home from work, he'd be late coming over. He got there around nine, and we walked over to a nearby pizza place. Talked about this

and that. He seemed a bit reserved. Girlfriend problems? Work problems? I didn't ask. He'd tell me if and when. When came as we were walking back to Kathy's in the dark.

He stopped on the sidewalk, turned to face me. "There's something I have to tell you." I waited. "Mom has cancer. She's dying." I felt my shoulders sag, the air flow out of me. My last partner, the absolutely beautiful Anita, eighteen years younger than me, fellow traveler, great diet, a triathlete, had lost the battle with ovarian cancer five years before. Now this. Despite being just six months my junior, Sandy had always looked much younger, and until she began to put on the pounds, a slim, fine-looking woman.

"You remember how heavy she'd got?" my son now asked. "She's down to ninety pounds. She doesn't eat. Can't eat, doesn't eat, dunno. Cancer started out in the liver, now it's all through her body. That's why I was late. I go over there every evening, spend a few hours, do what I can."

"Ah, man, I'm so sorry. She doesn't deserve..." Doesn't deserve to go through this hell while I'm still here traipsing around the planet. Didn't say it, but he could read the thought, I was sure.

"How long?"

"Doc says six months."

A week later I got a call. "She's gone."

"How you doing, man?"

"I'm so medicated I really couldn't tell you."

"Yeah, that's cool." Thank you, Big Pharma, for favors received.

It was a couple days later, a Sunday. Kathy was sitting at the dining table, sewing some things for a friend who was doing work for a South American charity. I was on the sofa, reading. Malik was sitting on the floor diddling his laptop.

Malik was Laura's son, Kathy's nephew. Tall, slim, good-looking guy of twenty-two. He was ten when Laura had returned from Kenya with a number of kids, her own and a few of her ex-husband's. For a time they'd all lived in a huge old house just off the Penn campus. A trip over there was... a trip. The kids had had their own kids, and the place was always full of people of various hues and religious affiliations. Normally I didn't like being around big extended families, kids all over, but this place was the most laid-back, good-feeling home I had ever been in. I'd just sit there and let the kind of

vibes I had never experienced wash over me. Now, Malik lived with Kathy, worked in a restaurant in another part of the city.

I looked up from my book. “Whatcha doing?”

“I’m finding Darryn’s grandmother. He’s never known her.”

“You know how to do that?”

“Man, I can find *anybody!*” Oh, how many times had I heard that line over the past twenty-five years? All the king’s nerds and all the king’s geeks had time and again delivered the very same words. But not the goods. Never the goods.

“Care to try finding someone for me?” I asked. “When you’re done Darryn’s granny?”

“S’okay. I’ve got time now. Give.” I provided a name, date of birth, hospital.

“Who’s this,” he asked. “One of your ex-girlfriends?”

“My daughter.”

“*Whaaaaat!?*” This from Kathy. “*Whaaaaaaaaaaaaat!?!?*” Her sewing machine had gone mute.

“I told you about her. Didn’t I? I’m sure I did, way back.”

“*Baaaarrrrrr!!!!?*”

“Well, I thought I did. Or maybe that was —”

“Details! Details!”

I expounded. The more I would explain, the more questions she had. I recounted the dreams, dreams that had segued into awakening thoughts. Conversations I’d had with her in my head. How, especially the past ten years, maybe more, she always seemed to be hovering just behind me. The efforts I’d gone to in my search, and the frustrations over untold times I felt to be getting close and then the door would be slammed in my face. Every once in a while Malik would look over, ask for another fact. When I revealed her adopting father’s name, his face lit up. His mouse was all over the place, clicking, clicking.

“Kath, don’t you remember when I wrote and asked for an adoption-link agency, and you wrote back with the name and address?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. And when I wrote and asked if the father’s name sounded familiar and you replied —”

“Got her.” Malik.

We both turned to stare at him, still on the floor.

“Please don’t shit me.”

“Well, I’ve got her name. Her married name. There’s one final step, and I think you should go through this online agency to get her address. I’ve checked them out and they seem legit.”

“Not a problem. How much?”

He peered at his screen. “If you just want her address, twenty bucks.”

I began laughing. Twenty-five years and it had come down to twenty dollars!

I handed him my credit card and he began typing in the numbers. In a few minutes his printer began cranking out a page. He handed it over. Were my hands really shaking?

“I don’t understand. There’s a dozen addresses here.”

“The one at the top is supposed to be current.”

I looked at the addresses. Top one was San Antonio, Texas. Next one was Pensacola, Florida.

“San Antonio’s military,” I said. “Pensacola is Navy air. And there are a number of APO’s.” Army Post Office. When American military personnel were assigned overseas, their location was supposed to be hush-hush. Mail was sent to an APO box number, forwarded on. “And it says the house in San Antone is in the names of Frances and Judith –.”

“Her married name.”

“Yeah, but Frances here is spelled with an e. Which means a female Frances.” We looked at one another. “My daughter’s a lesbian navy pilot?” I shrugged. “Ah, well.” I was giddy. Words fell out my mouth. Finally slowing down: “Look, do you mind telling me exactly how you got this?”

Malik stepped into the kitchen, came back with a Coke and some day-old meatloaf. “First I went on Facebook and looked up the adopting father’s page. Which took a while because he’s set his to private, meaning only friends can view his pictures. So I began going through his list of friends, figuring I’d scroll through until I found a Judith or Judy. Nothing. Then I searched Google for all articles published by him, hoping there would be some sort of mention of his family. Y’know, weddings, birthdays, graduations, deaths. Again I was stumped as none of the articles seemed to contain personal information.”

“Not like what *you* write,” Kathy quipped, to which we all shared a laugh.

“Then,” he continued, “I used the white pages to look up his address and cross reference it with the name Judy. Why do I feel it’s spelled Judi?” He gave a shrug. “Anyway, that didn’t turn up anything. So I went on the New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania motor vehicles sites and searched for licenses and license plates with her name. Again, nothing.” He got up, again walked into the kitchen, stared at the open fridge a while, grabbed a slice of cold pizza and came back. Guy ate like a horse and was built like a pipe cleaner.

“Finally I looked at a site that provides marriage license and death certificate information for free. Not sure how legit this is, but I assume the freedom of information act allows it. That’s when I first saw her married name, Free. Kinda strange name, and I wondered whether it was one of those hippie names, or the name an activist takes, like the guy used to play for the Sixers a while back, World B. Free. Or like Metta World Peace now plays for the Lakers. To get her exact address I found the site you just sent your twenty bucks to. I saw they guaranteed a mailing address and phone number that’s as recent as two years old. I did a bit of checking on them, and they seemed okay, not a scam. By the way, after I got the list of addresses I canceled your website subscription with them. I was now eighty percent sure I had found her. If it wasn’t her, I would have started the search again. Without finding her married name, I don’t know how much longer it would’ve taken. My next idea was going to be to look up all area high schools in the same three state area and call each one, pretending to have some legal-sounding reason to find her. Schools are pretty lax and usually will at least give you a contact number. They keep alumni numbers for high school reunions and stuff.”

“My daughter’s a hippie activist lesbian navy pilot?” Whatever. I was silent for a time. Kathy, though still intrigued, had gone back to her sewing. “You know,” I said finally, “what you did, what you’ve just told me, sounds more like common sense than geekocity. Except all the geeks who’ve tried till now not only couldn’t find her, but weren’t even able to explain in plain English what they’d done.”

The following day, Kathy and Malik both at work, I sat in the living

room and tried to work out why? Why not for twenty-five years, and why now? A thought struck. What kind of weird cosmic coincidence would it be that I wasn't supposed to find her while Sandy was alive. Sandy who had denied Judith Susan's very existence, never told a soul, not her sons (she'd had another from her second marriage), not her family, refused to have a part in my search. Aw, I hated that kind of thinking. And yet, the synchronicity was somewhat shocking.

I picked up the phone. Dialed the number on the printout. It rang once. I quick hung up. What the hell was I thinking! What the hell was I gonna say? Hi, I'm your daddy. No, not that one – your *real* daddy. Okay if I come visit? Idiot.

A few days later, Kathy had a few women friends around for dinner. Like her, they were all successful, high-powered, leftwing machine-fighters. Kathy prompted me to tell the story again. They sat there in silence. Then one of them asked: "What if she doesn't know she's adopted?"

"Oh, that's impossible," I replied.

"Really? Why?"

"I don't know. Her adopting father is a known lefty. This is 2011. Y'know?"

That started the barrage. First one, then another, then the other. I took in what they were saying, although I still didn't believe it possible.

"So are you telling me I should drop this, not try to make contact?"

"*No!*" they chorused.

"Barry," Kathy now said, "you *have* to make contact. What we're saying is, look at it from her side. Can you just imagine? She's forty-eight, almost forty-nine. If she doesn't know, consider the shock when she finds out. It'll turn her whole world upside down." Head nods all round.

I made no mention of the aborted phone call.

FINDING PEGGY

The very last rung of the ladder, the one that finally pushed me over the seemingly insurmountable wall that for just shy of a quarter century had stood in my way to finding Judith Susan, was named Peggy. One night in early 2012 as I was lying in bed having a conversation with her came a swift, hard kick right in my apathetic heart. Without her doing so, I never would've found my daughter.

Peggy when I'd met her back in 1976 claimed to be forty-seven. She looked to be a hunched-over, white haired sixty. Then her size. She weighed two hundred and seventy pounds on a five-foot-four frame.

The way we met? I was guruing then. I had recently left the warm and fuzzy auspices of Penn and started Relax For Survival. Peggy during this time was sitting in a chair in her living room, looking out the window. How did I know this? Because Peggy had sat in that chair looking out that window every day of the past decade. During the course of an average day-sit, she smoked two packs of cigs and drank a fifth of gin. Times between smoking and drinking, she smoked dope. A lot of dope.

She had two means of earning a living. First as an Avon lady. The image of this huge old (looking) babe going door to door selling cosmetics...

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

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

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

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

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

Relax For Survival was eminently successful in accomplishing its stated aims as an 'adult re-education college' which offered, in addition to my own course, around thirty classes per semester. These included everything from airy-fairy stuff like astrology and tarot card reading to ultra-practical courses such as car maintenance for women and solar panel installation, all on a shoestring basis. Successful in regards to re-educating the populace, indeed; however, the center was pounding me into the ground like a tent peg.

I was the guru, the administrator, fund raiser, newsletter writer, promotion person and, the role I liked least, playing mother hen to a score of volunteers who were supposed to be my support crew. What they were, in truth, were well-meaning but generally can't-get-it-together no-hopers. While Werner Erhard, also a Philly boy whose true name also was Rosenberg (albeit a goyische one), was bringing in the president of Harvard and CEO of Coca-Cola to operate erhard seminars training – *est* – I had a mob of loners and losers. Fair enough, for wasn't I one myself? To run Relax I couldn't do without them. Neither could I do with them. They were driving me bananas.

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

"Peggy," I said, getting her attention. "I hereby appoint you director of the Relax For Survival Foundation, Incorporated. By, oh, say, two weeks from today, you are to move in here and take over all administrative duties. The guru has spoken." (When first she'd heard that word, she asked, seriously: "Is that short for gruesome?")

She near shit a brick over my edict, mainly because her entire forty-seven (or whatever) years had been spent in the same house in South Philadelphia.

Born there, grew up there, married there, popped out her kids there, divorced there, had been all set to die there. Two weeks after I pointed the gurdy sceptre, her two husky sons were schlepping cartons up the stairs to Peggy's new residence.

She was incredible. She actually got the people doing things. Not just promising, then disappearing. Doing! She was great on the phone, terrific in person. The Philly CBS outlet, WCAU-TV, did a half hour documentary on her entitled 'From Avon to Alpha'.

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

For me, her truest value was in our friendship. Often we would talk far into the night. About everything. How could someone who'd never been anywhere, hadn't finished high school, know so much about life?

"Raising five kids on my own with no money," was how she put it.

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

In late '77 I left Relax For Survival. I'd had enough. Before slinging on the pack and hitting the road, I bequeathed the house, the program and a few thou in the kitty to her and the gang. Six months later the center folded. Which I suppose I knew it would.

In 1980 I found my way to New Zealand. Fell in love with the place. Five years later I bought me a lovely patch right on the world's most beautiful beach. Before I did, I returned home, and Peggy and I saw one another a few times. She had scored herself a tiny one bedroom house in another North Philly nabe, and I would visit her there. But we never got into those from-the-heart talks. And since she wasn't much of a writer, my attempts at trans-oceanic correspondence when I returned to NZ went nowhere. Years went by, not a murmur.

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

There was just one small curiosity.

Peggy had died fifteen years before.

*

Nah, I didn't have her remains shipped from Philadelphia to a seven mile beach in New Zealand, and, like the Balinese do when they can't afford a cremation for grandma, stuff her corpse in a backyard hole filled with hay till they can accumulate the scratch for a ceremonial firing. (That would be infinitely more plausible than the actual story I'm about to tell.)

When I was the guru, people would show me all kinds of things they figured gurus were supposed to know about. Tarot cards, astrology, numerology, reflexology, bumps on the head. Never got into any of them. Then somebody explained the workings of the pendulum, and I was away.

Following a knee op, my leg in plaster from the ankle to the crotch thus rendering me immobile, I fashioned a pendulum from a coin with a hole drilled at the top and affixed to a length of thread.

How this worked: I established 'yes' and 'no' answers from the swing of the coin. Initially, I simply held the thread between my thumb and forefinger so that the coin dangled free, then planted my elbow on the surface of my desk to keep the coin steady. I then asked, Which direction is yes? And repeated the question until I got a little movement. Not easy. For a hell of a while the damn coin refused to budge. I was all set to give it up when I detected a bit of movement. "Come on, come on, give out with my yes direction!" (Paid to show it who was boss.) Took a bit of time, but finally a swing of a couple inches.

My yes direction turned out to be a back-and-forth linear movement; no was side to side. Subsequently I learned that most people had the same directional movements. Most but not all. For some, the coin would swing in a large circle. I was envious of them.

I would start out a session with a simple question to which I knew the answer. Called warmup. "Is today Sunday?" "Am I Richard Nixon?" Then I would get into it.

"Do I have any hang-ups?" You could almost here the pendulum

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

Most answers were as I had expected them to be, although others took me by surprise. I tried to rephrase these questions in hopes of attaining more, ah, positive results. The coin would not be fooled.

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

In a very short time I was communicating with the pendulum. Each question I put forth evoked an immediate response and each response brought about a new question. I abandoned all reluctance, tore off my blinders and ear plugs and plunged into the thick of myself. I asked questions I’d never before had the courage to verbalize, matters I long ago had submerged beyond my conscious reach with layers of intellectualized baloney. The layers were being peeled away.

For a solid month everything I asked was self-contained. Either the question had an answer that I knew consciously or it pertained to a personal emotion, and my subconscious took care of that. But what about questions that didn’t relate to me?

In the classes I was teaching at Penn, when we finished all the imagery exercises that constituted the main thrust of the Alpha Mind Control course, I had people break off into groups of three and do psychic readings for one another. Not long before, this would have struck me as the most preposterous form of new age wankery imaginable. But now I could do them with around ninety percent proficiency, and all but a handful of those who went through my course could as well. Often I would get ‘information’, generally no more than a gut feeling, a hunch, sometimes an image, that even the subject-giver had no knowledge of. (One woman, a dental tech, could make up teeth charts of people she’d never heard of, who might live thousands of miles away. The few times I checked with their dentists, the tech’s readings were one hundred percent accurate. If only she could’ve done psychic root and canal.)

An explanation of this phenomenon, one that I strongly adhered to,

was the concept of a universal mind bank. Composed of all the existing energies, the ‘Universal Bank of Infinite Knowledge and Wisdom’®© was a boundless ocean of data, with a branch office in the brain of every one of us. All knowledge is memory, sayeth a certain Mr. Einstein.

Psychics, real ones, did their thing, I reasoned, by somehow opening the lines of communication between their minds and the Big *Big* Computer. If the pendulum were an extension of my own subconscious, which theoretically was a mini-universal energy storage tank, could I perhaps get answers to questions totally beyond my personal realm?

Some friends came over and the one-legged performing pendulum poodle put on an exhibition. “What’s my father’s oldest brother’s name?” someone asked, issuing a list of possibles. The pendulum picked the right one.

Somebody else wrote down a number from one to ten where I couldn’t see it. The pendulum got it. What sign am I? inquired a woman I hadn’t met before. Gemini, said the coin, after I’d narrowed it down from twelve signs to six to three to one.

The pendulum was not infallible. Far from it. The coin itself claimed a seventy percent accuracy rate. I couldn’t get it to explain further simply because I was unable to come up with the proper questions.

I learned how to get the yes-no thing to spell out actual words. “Is the first letter between A and M?” I would ask, having split the alphabet into halves. If yes, I would ask if between A and G; then A to D, and so on. I could usually get a letter in four or five tries. Sure, it took a while, but I was sort of between jobs for this particular half-century of my being and had me a bit of time.

When I became more mobile, I went to see a woman I knew. Andi was gorgeous, oh god yes, but every ham-fisted attempt I’d made to dive into her knickers had been batted away. Since she was into reincarnation and astrology and the I Ching...

I got that in her most recent incarnation she’d been born in 1887 to wealthy parents, became a singer and actress of considerable note, that the first letter of her last name was E (the rest of the name was garbled), and she had died on November 4, 1947.

This information impressed her no end; still, no end was what I wound up getting. But what I did get out of the experience was lorry-load of

curiosity. The following morning I dragged my stone limb to the Philly main library and signed out the reel of New York Times microfilm for the month of November, '47. Placed it on the viewing machine and turned the crank quickly until I saw the front page of the fifth. Slowly, I worked my way to the obituary page.

And let out a yelp.

Eleanor Painter, Singer, Actress, the caption read.

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

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

Andi got there fifteen minutes later, moaning that this was cutting into her lunch hour and she was planning to go shopping and just what was going on here anyway. I led her into the theatrical room, opened the folder and showed her the daguerreotype. She peered down, then pointed directly to one of the seven women.

“Is this supposed to be me?” she asked, wholly dispassionate. The image beneath her finger bore a most remarkable resemblance in every aspect save hair style. Eleanor Painter.

Impressed? Oh, some. But it still didn't get me laid. Women.

A short while later I grew tired of the pendulum. One day I put it down and didn't pick it up again for thirty years.

*

When my dearly beloved Mister Futties died of cancer, I shook my fist at the sky and declared, NO MORE CATS!! The sky in turn cackled its ass off and maybe a week later a gorgeous four year old tabby showed up.

“No, you can’t live here!” I cried. I loved cats, but they lived only a small portion of my life and then they left me, and I didn’t take it well. Timothy, as he later let me know was his name, simply sat down on the terrace, licked his nether parts for half an hour then walked in the door.

It was a few years later, 2002, I was sitting on the terrace and noted Timothy under the avocado tree, squatting. He stayed that way the longest time, moved to the feijoa tree and squatted again. Curious, I went over to look. No liquid on the ground either place. Same when he tried once more. And with each attempt a small mew of discomfort. Next day I took him to see Sally the vet. Problems, she said. Major.

She operated straight away. “He had crystals in his urine. I cleaned out the bladder, but this is a serious condition. I have to tell you, he may not make it.”

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

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

Every day I would visit. Say this for Sally: she provided him the very best service. She moved him out of the post-op cage and into an entire room to himself. I’d go there, sit on the floor, pull him onto my lap. Talk to him. Perform psychic healings. And cry inside. For him. For me.

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

I went to the room in my house where I kept things I could never throw out. Ransacked through an unbelievable assortment of dreck. Boxes, dresser drawers, under the bed, walk-in closet. And then I found it. A ziplock plastic bag full of old coins from a dozen countries. One had a small hole drilled into some dead king’s head with a length of black thread knotted through it.

Thirty years. Would it be like riding a bicycle?

I put the pendulum through a warm-up drill. Took a time, but finally some movement. Yes was still a straight line back and forth. No, side to side. I switched gears and took off.

–Will Timothy survive this current situation?

–Yes.

–You’re sure.

–Yes.

–Absolutely positive.

–Yes.

–Will he recover completely?

–Yes.

–Am I doing all I can for him?

–Yes.

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

I used the pendulum every day. And every day it told me the same thing: don’t worry, be happy. Well, in general I was happy. The lifelong depression was gone, and whether it was my beautiful environment or I’d finally grown sick and tired of being a downer, I now enjoyed the silly character that was me. Still, I was by nature a worrier. Try changing that at age sixty-three.

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

For a few weeks I had to give him a series of antibiotic and anti-inflammatory pills. During this time his appetite suffered, he was losing weight and carried a general appearance of not terrific health. But the coin kept telling me all was well. When the pills ran their course he began eating again. And looking better.

One day, sitting at my desk, the coin dangling before me, I took to wondering where, exactly, the answers were coming from. Thirty years previous I hadn’t thought to ask.

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

–Yes.

–True?

–Yes.

–Am I, um, in touch with some sort of, eh, spirit force or energy?

–Yes.

–No shit!

–Yes (no shit).

Thirty years of guring, thousands of graduates of my Alpha Mind Control course in a number of different countries, playing Answer Man to a

zillion questions from people during this time, and here I get whacked out of left field.

–So, er, you’re a spirit.

–*Yes.*

–Were you ever a person?

–*Yes.*

–Here on Earth?

–*Yes.*

–Did you live during my lifetime?

–*Yes.*

–Any chance we might have met?

–*Yes.*

–We met? I mean as people?

–*Yes.*

–So I knew you.

–*Yes.*

–Well?

–*Yes.*

–Here in New Zealand?

–*No.*

–America?

–*Yes.*

–Wow. Were we related?

–*No.*

I reeled off a few names of departed friends. Lou? No. Norman? Margy? No, no. I felt like one of the blindfolded panel in the old What’s My Line guest segments.

–Were we close?

–*Yes.*

–Really close?

–*Yes.*

–Are you –. Were you female?

–*Yes.*

–A lover maybe?

–*No.*

I was stumped. Couldn't for the life of me –. Oh, shit. Ohhh, shit!

–Peggy!

–Yes.

–You're Peggy!!

–Yes.

–Momma, is it really you!? (Jokingly, we'd call each other Momma and Poppa – of the Alpha House barefoot sunshine children.)

–Yes.

I experienced a hit of pure joy. Over and over I kept asking: it is you, Peggy? Is this truly you? I'm not having an acid flashback? And all the time a thought peeking over my mental shoulder: are you out of your fucking mind? Like, over the cliff, down the drain, lost it? But that voice never emerged from the background. Peggy and I were back together.

*

A guy in his sixties, living alone with a cat: I was already talking to a daughter I had never met, now I was communing with a dead friend. And yet, whenever I would mention this to somebody, not often, just now and again might the subject arise, not once did anyone show the slightest inkling of skepticism. “Of course, I believe it. Why wouldn't I?”

Peggy and I talked for hours a day. For weeks, months, years. Early on, I would ask untold silly questions. This was before I got a computer, so had no access to the internet. What was the score of the Eagles game played today? I remember asking. (For some reason, while she got both the winner and perfect point spread – the Eagles had lost in a major upset – the score was just a bit off.) Diddily-crap like that. After a while, she closed off to such nonsense. She didn't exactly tell me so. But her answers would be so far off as to say, Stop wasting my non-time with this junk.

I asked about life, about death, life after death. I asked about forces of energy, life on other galaxies, had we been visited by aliens, alternative universes. All fascinating stuff. (I even wrote a book about it.)

About things future, she said she could provide no more than, at most, seventy percent probability. With one exception. Early in 2008 she told me that Barack Obama would win the Democrat nomination, would win the election, would be in office two full terms. This was one hundred percent,

she said. How many times did I ask, always with the same response. She even gave me the number of electoral votes he would get in both elections. (She was perfect in '08, off by two in '12.)

As it had thirty years before, the novelty gradually thinned and eventually I put down the pendulum. Now and again, mostly when I was bored or felt a bit lonely, I'd pick it up again. But it wasn't the same. The thrill was gone. For both of us, I suspect.

*

My relationship with the gorgeous Anita, whom I'd first met in Pushkar, was, to say the least, volatile. A Jewboy from Philly, a shiksa from Yorkshire. If I felt the English were strange, they felt the Yorkies were stranger. Talk about a clash of cultures.

When we first met, she told me she'd been married twenty-seven years, "and we never had a cross word in all that time!" Within ten minutes she and I had our first tiff. And virtually every ten minutes after. But there was so much love there. So much love. We went on the road together, my first travel mate in years. We loved, we fought, we split, we reconciled.

How it went was this: In the middle of a typical, standard, workaday argument, she'd suddenly say, "I can't cope. I'm leaving!" I never met anybody who could pack and be out the door that fast. Too fast for me – like an old car with an ailing gearbox, I was getting slower and slower initiating the Barry Backstep. Not a worry. Forty-eight hours later she was back. Not forty-seven; not forty-nine. I'd watch the second hand sweep towards twelve: ten...nine...eight... Knock-knock. "Oh, I missed you so much! Oh, I love you so!"

Things actually were going well when we returned from Myanmar to Bangkok in 2005. Days went by, a week, another – no hassles. Then one day she complained about a lump in her groin. Took my hand and laid it on. Felt like a rock. I requested, suggested, *demanded* she go to the hospital immediately, as Bangkok had some top-notch medical facilities. They said they weren't sure, ovarian cyst or ovarian tumor. If they weren't sure, they were sure.

She returned to England. Wanted me to come. Instead I came back home and began an intense and unobstructed program of alpha. We spoke on the

phone daily. She had chemo, which we both hated. Mostly the alpha I did was to relieve the pain and discomfort of that awful process and fill her with protecting, healing light. After some months she was declared cancer-free.

We tried to get back together, but it was futile. Whatever it was we'd had, that pure magic, was gone. We broke up in Australia and I never saw her again. A year later her daughter called to say mum had died.

A couple years after that, another death. Dear Timothy, age sixteen. Again I made a no-more-cats! proclamation to the heavens. Again the heavens haw-hawed down at me. And sent my way a most gorgeous ginger male. He obviously was Jewish for he told me his name was Shayna (Yiddish for beautiful).

Had either of these two wholly unrelated deaths led me to take up with Peggy once more in 2012?

Almost always did I begin the daily dialogue while lying in bed, just before crashing out. Most times it lasted just a few minutes, once in a while longer. At the conclusion of each session I would ask: You have a message for me? Quite often she did. On a number of occasions she spelled out A-B-A-N-D-O-N. As in abandon your doubts, your negativity, your cynicism, your worrying. Good luck with that.

It was one warm night in late January, Down Under summer. Still twilight at 9.30 when I got into bed and initiated a conversation. I was tired and so was the conversation.

–You have a message for me? (I hoped not; just let me fall asleep.)

–*Yes.*

–Oh, all right. Does the first letter fall between A and M?

–*No.*

–Okay. N and T?

–*Yes.*

Slowly, the pendulum spelled out O-T-H-E-R.

–Other?

–*Yes.*

–Other what? (No answer.)

–I should have other thoughts?

–*No.*

–Do other stuff than what I'm now doing?

–*No.*

Oi. I was ready to put the coin away and turn out the light. But I was intrigued. In all the years I had never got a message like this.

Other, other, other.

–Another person?

–Yes.

–Oh. So it's about a person then.

–*Yes.*

–Somebody I know.

–*Yes.*

–Living?

–*Yes.*

–Here in New Zealand?

–*No.*

–In the States?

–*Yes.*

–What, you want me to get in touch with this person?

–*Yes!* (The pendulum swinging stronger.)

–Jason?

–*No.*

–Myrna? (My only living sister had told me the year before, out of the blue, that she wanted nothing more to do with me.)

–*No.*

I ploughed through a dozen names. Nothing. By this time I was so wiped out that finally I put the coin down and hit the pillow. Whenever Peggy would give me a message I couldn't grasp, by the next day I'd forgotten about it. But for some reason this particular following day the OTHER stuck in my mind.

–You still insist on this OTHER business? (That night.)

–*Yes.*

–Must be important I contact this person.

–*Yes!*

–Okay, okay, calm down.

I took a deep breath, let it go. Tried to work my way through the people carton in my overloaded storage vault.

FINDING JUDI

And then it hit me. Wow, what a dunce. Twenty-five years I had been searching, at last I had got some concrete information...and seven months had passed without my doing a blessed thing. I knew why, too. I'd come to the very end of the string, and it was quite probable one of two things would happen: the information, once again, was faulty, and none of the addresses I'd got from Malik's efforts would pan out. Or, and this unquestionably was the killer that'd caused me to yank down the blinds – I'd connect and get rejected. Your classic double bind.

–You want me to contact her.

–Yes!

–Should I call?

–No!

–Write.

–Yes!

–And this time, this time, it'll get to her.

–Yes!

–Ah, Peggy. You know I'm scared to death.

–Yes.

–Feel the fear and –

–Yes.

The next morning I wrote the letter.

FINDING JUDI

Dear Judith,

I have no idea whether the letters I've sent over the years in attempt to make contact ever reach you. The way it works, every now and then, no discernible pattern, you show up on my inner monitor. (Of course, I have no idea what you look like; nonetheless, it's you I 'see'.) Somehow I grab an address (they're always different), then a few minutes' effort and a couple dollars in postage, I give it a shot. Some time after, no reply, life's

next chapter supersedes the current and the image slowly fades. Recently you've appeared once again, so...

It's with sadness I inform you that your birth mother, my ex-wife, Sandra Lee Mayers, died a few months back, age 72. Cancer. She is survived by our son, Jason, your full brother, and another son, Nathaniel, your half-brother. Jason has moved into Sandy's house in New Jersey, while Nate still lives with his wife outside Philly.

And me, your birth poppa, I'm still here after 32 years in beautiful New Zealand, fit and healthy, jogging or walking daily the 7 mile beach just yonder, reading, writing, gardening, conversing with my closest friend, Shayna (a ginger cat), and, once or twice every year, pack on back, traipsing around the world. The state of my contentment carries an AAA S&P rating: not too bad for a classic stumblebum.

Since I have no idea whether this will find its way to your hands and eyes, I shall keep it brief. Should you receive this and care to respond, please know that hearing from you will be ever so welcome. All the best to you.

Barry Rosenberg

January 30, 2012

*

On the morning of February 8, following the standard hour-long pre-sunrise walk on the beach followed by a plunge in the Pacific, I had a coffee at a nearby café, then drove five miles over the hill into town. I was going to meet my friend Robyn a little past nine at the local library.

I stopped in, noted one of the computers was free, sat down to check my emails and see what off-season baseball news might have occurred overnight. There were two emails from the same person, spaced hours apart. I didn't recognize the name at first and was about to delete them, thinking they were spam. Then...*pow!*

Email No. 1. *"What are you trying to pull? I was raised by my birth parents; this smells of some kind of scam or a really sick practical joke. Don't write me again!"*

Email No. 2. *"Oh my god, I just learned at age 49 that I'm adopted. Holy crap!"*

FINDING JUDI

It was at that moment Robyn appeared by my side.

“Read them! Read them!” I squealed. Robyn knew of virtually every attempt I had made in my quarter-century pursuit. As she slowly read the two brief e-notes, I read them along with her, especially that last line, over and over. I was laughing like a loon. I had tears in my eyes.

I had found my baby.

PART II

Judi Found

FINDING JUDI

THE STORY OF ME

PART 1

I was born on a summer's day, 1962....Oh wait, you know that part.

Until I was 8, I lived in a little house in Maplewood, NJ with my father, my mother and my older brother and an assortment of dogs. Did all the usual stuff, dance lessons, nursery school, elementary school, summer camp. I was a tomboy and a very active kid, always running, jumping, climbing trees, riding my bike and would rather be outside playing with the neighborhood kids more than anything. My folks said they knew spring was here when I had scabs on my knees. My best friend lived across the driveway. Unfortunately, our mothers hated each other, and she wasn't allowed in my house. My mom could be rather...difficult.

My parents met at college, where my dad was editor of the school paper and my mother attempted to write an article for it. It was evidently so bad that he tore it up in front of her. An auspicious start to their relationship, no? They dated in college, and then when my dad was drafted, just before shipping out to Korea, he married her. He claims the only reason they got married was because she wanted to, and he didn't believe he would come back alive. Sound familiar? After he did indeed return, he wrote for a string of newspapers and she was a teacher. They tried to have children and could not, so they adopted my brother in 1959, through your favorite lawyer. According to my dad, my mom didn't want any more children, but he thought she was "ruining" their son by being insanely overprotective, and believed adding another child to the family would rein in the spoiling. He also wanted a girl, although I guess he didn't know my sex until I arrived.

FINDING JUDI

My dad is a dyed in the wool workaholic, and was and always will be completely focused on his career (even now in semi-retirement). I think my mom was overwhelmed trying to raise 2 kids and felt left behind while he was gallivanting around the country. While my dad's career was budding she became increasingly jealous of his success. They argued loudly and often, and my mother was sometimes violent. My brother called the police once because she was wailing on my dad, and he wouldn't hit her back even after she broke his glasses into his eye. But they also had many friends and threw parties, and drank lots of martinis, and seemed to love each other, at least some of the time.

The summer I turned 9 we moved into a grander house in "the country" out in Warren Township. Not long afterward, my mom's father got sick and died a few months later. In her grief the evening martini turned into 3 or 4 or 5, and she spiraled quickly into alcoholism. Interestingly, her mother was also an alcoholic, and one of the reasons she wanted to marry was to get out of the house and away from her. By the following summer, my parents had split. My dad was living with his sister and would see my brother and I on Sunday afternoons. It was very uncomfortable, because he worked so much, I didn't feel like I really knew him. He would pump us for information about my mother's drinking, but we felt protective of her, even though she would have drunken rages and behave horribly. She was furious with my dad, for what I'm not sure, and destroyed all his things and spent hours screaming about what a horrible person he was and making disparaging remarks about Jews. She would show up at my school smashed and embarrass the crap out of me. She once woke me up at 2:30 a.m., certain that I was late for school, and threw me out of the house in my pajamas screaming to go to school. It was February and very cold and she had locked all the doors. I threw pebbles at my brother's window for 30 minutes until he woke up and let me in. She sold the house for a pittance just to screw my dad over, even though she was of course screwing herself in the process. We rented a house in Livingston, which she completely destroyed. She had gone completely off the deep end, yet I still was too scared to rat her out to my dad. We lived like that for over a year. Finally, enough social workers had come to the house on my dad's behalf and seen the disgusting

conditions we were living in, and took us away. It was summer, and I was sent packing to my old camp in the Catskills, while my dad and brother got the house cleaned up, and moved in using my Grandma Sadie's furniture, as she had died a few months before. I came back and started 6th grade in Livingston...my third school in four years. My mom visited with us a few times on weekends once my dad got custody, but then took off and moved to Denver. I never saw her again. When she died in 2003 we found that all her bank accounts listed no living relatives. Harsh!

Once the lease was up on that dump in Livingston, we bought a house in Montclair, and I enrolled in school #4, Montclair Kimberly Academy, the private school my brother had been attending (he needed more specialized attention than could be given in the public schools, and was later diagnosed as bipolar). A few months later my dad married my first step-mother, a thirty-something receptionist who had no children. He travelled constantly, and poor thing, she was left to attempt to raise a 12 and 15 year old. I spent one year at MKA, but it was very expensive, and was subsequently sent to public middle school for 8th grade...school #5 in 6 years. The next year I was a freshman at Montclair High. School # 6. Thankfully, I stayed there through graduation. I got decent grades, played drums in the band, and pitched for the softball team. I blew my knee out freshman year running for a fly ball, had surgery to fix it, and then proceeded to repeat that pattern two more times during high school. Still managed to pitch for my final two years...I am stubborn. I made wonderful friends in high school...some I'm still close to. Dad and his wife split in my junior year...thank God...it was a bad fit for everyone. If you asked my dad if he and I were close at that time, he'd say yes. But he was so busy chasing news and dealing with my difficult brother that we spent almost no time together. Maybe that's as close as he really gets to anyone. Don't get me wrong, I love the man with all my heart. He is my DAD. But he's not an easy person to be close to, and our relationship has never really been a satisfying one. I didn't realize what families were really supposed to be like until I started spending time at my friends' houses. Sure they argued and had issues, but were always there for each other when it counted. When my dad realized half way through my senior year that I'd be leaving for college soon, he suddenly wanted to hug me every time we

passed on the stairs or in the hallway. It felt so forced, I couldn't stand it, but didn't want to hurt his feelings, so I just stood there. He even wrote a beautiful column about me "Watching Judy Grow" that made me cry, and that people still remember 30 years later. But that's my dad...terrific at the grand gestures, lousy at the everyday stuff that's truly important.

I graduated in MHS in 1980 and headed to Rutgers...Douglass really... that fall. I studied communications with an emphasis in public relations and advertising, and minored in history and photography. During the summer before my junior year I rented a beach house in Point Pleasant Beach with friends for the season and worked as a waitress at Nealy's Long Bar. One of the bartenders was a student at Seton Hall, and his best friend from high school was a midshipman at Annapolis who would visit often. He's the guy I married, Frank Free III. We dated through the rest of college, and when he went off to flight school in Pensacola, I followed as soon as I graduated.

Barry

The story I'm about to tell is true and real, every word. Except I've heard it so many times, told it myself just as many, that I sometimes tend to get the timing a bit mixed up. But since I've never been one to let inconsequential 'facts' mar a good yarn...

Judith Susan Free arrives home late at night from a few days' business on the road with husband Paul, who is still out there. Stack of mail on the floor just inside the front door. She gathers up the post, places it on the kitchen table. Takes a shower, changes clothes, returns to the kitchen, begins going through the letters on top the table. Most are junk, a few she will tend to, and one...who does she know in New Zealand? She reckons it's a woman friend who travels a great deal. Odd, though, it's addressed to Judi's *maiden* name, when her friend surely knows she'd abandoned that years back. A joke, most likely. She puts it aside unopened, goes through the rest. Then she picks up the envelope bearing the New Zealand stamp.

She reads the letter through. It makes no sense whatsoever. She reads it again, grows angry. She's dead tired, doesn't need garbage like this. Chucks

it in the bin. Takes it out, reads it again. What the hell!?! Back in the bin, back out of the bin.

Writes an angry email to the letter's author:

What are you trying to pull? I was raised by my birth parents; this smells of some sort of scam or a really sick practical joke. Don't write me again! She half expects the return email address in the letter to prove non-existent and she would be getting the immediate standard automatic reply that the address could not be found. But such a reply is not forthcoming.

Completely exhausted, she should be crawling into bed, but doesn't. Something about the letter, false as it is. It reads like it should be addressed to another person, not her. Maybe the writer stuck it in the wrong envelope—. But then why is her name, her maiden name, and the correct address on this envelope? It doesn't read like a scam. Perhaps one of her dad's enemies – he's certainly got a few from his writing over the years – getting back at him in this weird manner?

She knows she should leave it till morning, but no way she's going to fall asleep with this on her mind. She picks up her mobile and makes a call.

Her dad is just getting off the plane from New Orleans. A football nut, worse, a New York Giants football nut. The Giants have just won the Superbowl, and he must be going crazy. He sounds over the moon to hear her voice. He expects congratulations from his daughter. But what he gets is: I just got this strange letter from a man in New Zealand who says the most unbelievable stuff. What she anticipates hearing is Oh, it's just some nut, doesn't mean a thing, *and besides, the Giants won!!*

But that's not what she gets from her dad. What she gets from him is a sharp intake of breath, a stutter, and, Look, we're just getting off the plane, I'll call you back. And she realizes something is wrong; *very* wrong.

She calls him again a short while later, and still he is fumbling his words, not making a lot of sense. And that's when she knows. What she knows is... her whole life has been a lie.

Well, yes, a bit dramatic, sure. But isn't that the case, really? She's *adopted??* At age forty-nine, she learns that she's ADOPTED!! For the first time in her life, these past few years, everything is going well. Her marriage the year before to a man she loves deeply, and who loves her the same, is going gloriously. The business they started only recently is humming along

absolutely amazingly. The kids are healthy and happy. She's got love, peace and money. Maybe the first time for each of those, and to suddenly have all three together: Life is...wonderful!

And she's *ADOPTED!?!*

She tries to get some sleep. Not easy. Early morning, very early, she calls her dear friend and shrink, a woman she now sees only on occasion, everything going so well. Delivers the news. And the dear friend and shrink listens, and listens some more. Now, for sure I wasn't privy to the conversation, but I imagine the shrink's message went something like this: Well, you're still you, aren't you? Your life is still wonderful, isn't it? And your dad is still your dad, and he still loves you, doesn't he? All right, embrace your new family. I think it's all so exciting!

She has to tell people. She calls Paul, her beloved husband. She calls Frank, her not-so-beloved ex-husband. She tells the kids. She calls her dad again and reams him. All these years, how could you not tell me? How could you! I already apologized! he yells. What more do you want?

She sends another email to New Zealand. *Oh my god, she writes, I just learned at age 49 that I'm adopted. Holy crap!*

*

From the start, nothing was easy. Pretty much straightaway, Judi emailed me a pic of her and her new husband at their wedding six months before, as well as a lovely photo of her with her son and daughter. Yes, my grandkids, eighteen and twenty-one!

And the twenty-five year accumulation of hopes and frustrations now burst forth like a thousand rose petals cannon-shot into the air. But though I subsequently sent a ton of stuff, I heard nothing more from her, nothing at all. I must have checked my email a dozen times a day. Not a thing.

But I had a phone number. (Did I ever. When I worked it out about the timing of her wedding day the year before, the phone call I'd made, and hung up following the first ring, was just a few weeks prior. With all the stress and fuss of planning and arranging the festivities, a phone call from an unknown birth father for sure would have been a sheer delight.) I called her now. A male answered. I asked for Judi. He asked who was calling. Barry, I said. The phone was passed to my daughter. I heard her voice for the very first time. She

asked what had happened to me, that following my letter, and her replies, she hadn't heard a thing. Had I made contact with her only to disappear? When I said I hadn't heard from her, she said she'd been sending messages every day. A bit of background talk and I heard the male – her husband Paul – say my messages were there, they'd all gone directly to her spam, so she hadn't seen them. So far as her emails to me, they must have got stuck in the ether over the Pacific. Ah, cyber technology: however did we cope before you?

She told me she had found her half-brother on Facebook, and they had been in daily communication. About a week later, I received a stinging letter from her, rebuking me heavily for my treatment of Jason. My...*what?* Seems Sandy's other son had written Judi that she shouldn't trust me as I was a notorious liar and had been neglectful and generally awful to Jason. Which was just a tad curious in that the last contact I had with the-half brother was when he was nine years old – thirty years back. I doubted he had come up with this stuff on his own, however. When the week before I had written Jason that I had at long last found his sister, he'd angrily replied, I don't hear from you for months and now you send me a two line email telling me you've found *your daughter*. Okay, he had been really close to Sandy and her passing was causing him a tough time. Still, it seemed odd. Back there in Philly we had got along better than we'd ever had. Our final time together I made arrangements for a lawyer friend to take over the handling of Sandy's will, and we had us a long hug upon parting.

Now, eight months later, this strange event appeared to pass quickly as cause for strife between Judi and me. Still, it left me with two big understandings: one, my son was not going to accept the sudden appearance of his sister very readily. And two, my daughter had a major set of cojones on her. I liked that.

At the gym where I go three, four times a week to slog my guts out in an effort to preserve my mortality, I happened to mention finding Judi to a couple of women friends. The result was screeching and squealing throughout the gym. "I just happen to have her pic on a flash drive," I said. Whereupon I was virtually yanked off the particular death machine I was on at the moment and frog-marched over to the gym's computer. When the pic appeared on the screen, there was dead silence for several seconds. It was Kerry, the gym's manager and one of my closest friends, who said it first: "Barry, she looks just like you!" A chorus of concurrence followed.

FINDING JUDI

“No way,” I said, bending forward to examine my daughter’s face.

“You must be joking!” they all cried. “The eyes, the nose...” Everyone’s neck seemed on swivels, peering first at me, then at the screen, back to me. “*Exactly* like you!”

I know I made a silly remark or two, like, Oh, the poor woman. But inside I experienced a rush I had never known outside a handful of psychedelic episodes a lifetime ago. This person is not only of my seed, she’s, she’s – part of me! The best of me! There were chirps and cuddles from those around me, but I was only faintly aware. For a moment I had to steady myself against the wall.

When I got home I began poking it with a stick. Had I been hit with the full realization that a search of twenty-five years was finally, successfully, over? Or did it actually have to do with viscera? And if so, was I a classic hypocrite for proclaiming all these years that I didn’t believe in family related by blood, that my true family was composed instead of those who lived within my heart?

The inner debate lasted over several days. During which time Judi and I continued daily installments of the getting-to-know-you process.

PART 2

I was thrilled to head to Florida to be with Frank, but he was completely focused on flight school. Our three months of cohabitation were a disaster, and I moved out and into an apartment with a roommate. He was irritated that I didn’t go back home...he didn’t want the pressure of an ex-girlfriend hanging around. But I had scored a good job doing PR for United Way, a job I never would’ve gotten in New York because there were so many more qualified people there, so I stuck around. I saw Frank occasionally, enjoyed the beautiful Florida beaches, dated, made friends. A year later Frank finished training and headed to California, right about the same time that my job “reorganized” into no job. I spent 5 glorious weeks collecting unemployment and spending the day working out and going to the beach. And then I got another job, which shockingly had received 500 applications for one position, as the PR director for a public

radio station. I'm still not sure why they chose me, but I was thrilled they did. I worked at WUWF for one year. Halfway through my tenure there, out of the blue one night, I tracked down Frank in California and called him up to say hi and see how he was doing. After that, he started calling me. First weekly, then daily. The day I told him to stop and leave me alone, he asked me to marry him. HA! No way. But somehow he wormed his way back into my good graces, and I consented to meeting up with him when I went to a conference on the West Coast. One look at him when I got off the plane...and I was a goner. So I went back to Florida, gave my notice, and few months later was in Huntington Beach, CA in a crappy garden apartment. And a month after that, his helicopter squadron shipped out for 8 months in the Philippines. Timing IS everything!

We got married after he came back, and spent the next 4 years living in CA. Well, I lived there...he was home something like 18 months of the 5 years we were there, and spent the rest of the time deployed around the globe. Not an easy way to begin a marriage. It was really exhausting, all his coming and going. During that time I worked in marketing for GTE and then for UC Irvine. He got orders in 1990 to Beeville, TX, population 7. Well, maybe I exaggerate, but it wasn't more than 1000. Tough to go from the WC to Beeville. Frank was once again in flight school, "retreading" from being a helicopter pilot to a jet pilot. I decided since there were no jobs in Beeville and I was 28, it would be a good time to start a family, and got instantly pregnant with Elizabeth. Two months after giving birth we headed to Cherry Point, NC for Frank to join a Harrier squadron there. We bought a nice house 30 minutes from the base and got pregnant again 2 years later with Jonathan. I think the day I got pregnant was the day he left for his fourth 6 months+ deployment in 4 years. Elizabeth and pregnant Judi travelled to Japan for two months while he was there, and three months after his return along came Jonathan.

My dad adored the idea of being papa to my kids, but wasn't so hot for the reality of it. He didn't make it to see Elizabeth until 4 months after her birth, and he only showed up because his wife made him. This was his first grandchild...who he had been gushing about since he learned I was pregnant, yet he was always too busy. He did show up two weeks after Jon

FINDING JUDI

was born, but insisted on leaving three-quarters through a 5 day visit to chase a story. I was pretty hurt. He loved seeing the kids when I schlepped them to NJ (in small doses, anyway). But when they were 5 and 2 I said enough. I told him my door is always open, please come and visit, but I'm not going to spend 1500 bucks and go through all the hassles involved in flying us there anymore. He has only visited a handful of times since then. Pretty amazing for a guy who flies around the country as much as he does.

A year after Jonathan was born we were in Monterey, CA (my favorite of all the places the USMC sent us) where Frank attended the Naval Postgraduate School to get a degree in computer science. I LOVED Monterey. What a gorgeous place. I spent most of my time chasing after two toddlers, but also got back into photography when I found that the community college down the street from our house had a great program. I took two classes and then did independent study for 2 years with a man who had worked and studied with Ansel Adams. There are so many wonderful things to photograph in that beautiful part of the country. It was also here my marriage started to crumble. We initially thought this would be a wonderful change for Frank, being a pilot was so stressful and it had become about "not killing myself" by crashing a plane (I can't tell you the number of wonderful young men I knew who died in military plane crashes...it's dangerous!). We thought this would be a relief from the stress, but school was something he just couldn't turn off. He had always been a huge workaholic (yup...married a man just like Daddy), but he now took it to new heights. I was going stir crazy home with two little ones, and he was little help. We were beginning to come apart at the seams.

Frank got his degree in 2 ½ years and we thought we would be off to Europe or DC, but instead got orders in 1996 to Albany, GA. Where? Exactly. I went from loving where I lived to hating it. Frank was stationed at a logistics base to make use of his computer skills, and we lived in crappy base housing in a literal ghetto area. I got started teaching fitness and aerobics classes at a little gym, mostly because I couldn't find a teacher I liked, so I started my own classes. I got the kids enrolled in local schools and swim lessons and girl scouts and soccer, etc...and did a

bunch of volunteer work. And my marriage was further disintegrating... Frank was becoming less and less happy, but couldn't say why. Turns out later we found out that he suffers from extreme clinical depression that manifested itself as frustration and anger. Fun! I spent more and more time trying to figure out how to extricate myself from my marriage, but felt I had no place to go with two young children. Couldn't crash at my folks' house, they had moved into a small two-bedroom place at the Jersey shore that was very unfriendly for young kids. I had been out of work for 5 years taking care of my children, and didn't know if I'd be able to find a job to support us. Plus, my parents' divorce made me promise myself that I could make anything work...I was determined not to end up like them. Not to do to my kids what my parents' split had done to me. Plus, love conquers all, right? Frank got orders to Japan in 1999, and once again we were off.

Barry

She wrote: *“This is like a crazy jigsaw puzzle and I’m trying to put all the pieces together and get a good look at the picture. I’m still kinda fuzzy on some of the details. I am a perennially curious person...always have been. My nickname as a young girl was H.C., for How Come.*

“Once I began to process this whole situation (WHAT! I’m adopted?!) and realized I would never get to meet Sandy, I was so sad. I really have missed out on having a mother figure in my life. Then I realized she may not have wanted to meet me, even if I had found her earlier. I’m sure she was a good and kind person, but people that deep in denial sometimes just can’t face reality...it’s too startling and shocking. I think having her be disinterested in me would’ve been terribly painful. And I think having me reappear may have been terribly painful for her. It would have brought her face to face, literally, with a past decision she was probably conflicted about and ashamed of.

“As for the circumstances around my adoption...I know it was 50 long years ago...but I still don’t feel I have it down. Why did you two elope if

you had planned on giving me up? If you thought you were going off to war and possibly to your end, why would you bother to give Sandy an ultimatum...what difference would it had made to you if she kept me since you weren't going to be there anyway? When you wound up not shipping out, did you regret the decision?

"I'll be honest, your 'me or the baby' seemed horribly cold hearted, self-centered, and uncaring about Sandy's feelings or needs. If I were Sandy, I would've been terribly resentful that you made me make an impossible decision. What do you think you would've done if she had chosen baby over Barry...would you really have just walked away forever?"

*

Well, I hadn't expected her to come rushing up to me, arms out wide, crying, *Poppa!!* Combined with her half-brother's devastating letter about me and Jason's initial rejection of her, her pointed questions and accusations made me realize I had a bit of work cut out for myself. Having led a life of considerable leisure free of the standard familial encumbrances and the need to explain my actions to anyone but my cat, there were a few occasions where I could hear the inner voice whispering, Uhh, I need this? And there were times when I felt like crying out to her: Doesn't the fact I spent twenty-five years searching for you count for anything!? Didn't, though. Nor did I feel an iota of guilt. Which was interesting in that all my relationships with women from the year dot, whenever anything went wrong I blamed Barry and would feel like crap for ages. Indeed, what I felt most now was a sense of pride, for two reasons. First, I have a strong belief in karma. Not in any way as punishment for past bad deeds – I've always seen that notion as pure religious control pap. Karma to my understanding is a process of working out stuff through experience: *working out*, not falling down battered and bloody. And when the full cycle of lifetimes as a human comes to a close, the final go-round generally entails a shitload of stuff to work out. Which brings about my second sense of pride in this person: from her 'story of me' accounts, man, has she ever been put through the wringer! But she seems to have battled through each and every dilemma amazingly well until finally her life has run up the situational and emotional scale and, in a most positive

way, flatlined there. And I suspected it was more than coincidence that I couldn't find her until such time as her life became pleasant and positive and blissful.

I had corroboration here from a most astute source.

*

–Okay, my big question: you like her?

–*Yes!* (Pendulum swinging like crazy.)

–All right, all right, settle down. I'm thinking maybe I wasn't able to find her until all was finally going well in her life. Yes? No?

–*Yes.*

–You've told me I've had something like two hundred lifetimes and that this one'll be my last, right?

–*Yes.*

–And on a ten scale I'm a nine – yes?

–*Yes.*

–How about Judi? Her last time around as well?

–*Yes.*

–Which is why all this stuff has happened to her – empty the house of karma before the final leap over the magic curtain.

–*Yes.*

–Sure, makes sense. She a nine as well?

–*No.*

–Oh. Lower, huh.

–*No.*

–Eh? She's a ten?

–*No.*

–Wait. There's something between a nine and a ten?

–*Yes.*

–You never told me there are decimals.

–*Yes.* (She never did.)

–So...nine-point-one?

–*No.* (Long story short: my dead friend revealed my daughter to be a nine-point-five.)

–Then...I suppose she's had more lifetimes than me?

–No.

–Really? She’s a higher soul even though she’s had fewer lifetimes?

–Yes.

–Um, is that a tinge of jealousy I’m feeling here?

–Yes.

–Yeah, well. Is it possible she’s had to work out some extra heavy stuff with the being who adopted her?

–Yes.

–Meaning they’ve been together before.

–Yes.

–More than once?

–Yes. (Long story short: three times before.)

–Were they in the same configuration every time? She daughter, he poppa?

–Yes.

–And her adopting mother: were they together prior?

–No.

–And Judi and me?

–No.

–So the adopting poppa – the guy loves her?

–Yes.

–But in ways we klutzy males fall all over ourselves expressing.

–Yes.

–Like not telling her she’s adopted.

–Yes.

–Was it pride that kept him from telling his kids?

–No.

–Then what, they’ll love him more if they believe they’re from his seed?

–Yes.

–And he couldn’t have kids, so in Judi’s case Barry was selected as designated dick.

–Yes.

–First you deadheads use my seed without asking, then you string me along for a third of my life before you let me find her?

–*Yes.*

–You bodiless bods are ever so thoughtful.

–*Yes.*

Again, as always with Peggy’s pronouncements, I take them with a grain of kelp. And, again, those I’ve related this to buy it all one hundred percent. Go figure.

PART 3

I was truly puzzled by this time about what happened to the man I had fallen in love with. The first time I laid eyes on Frank was in 1982, when he stopped by the Pt. Pleasant Beach bar where all my friends worked (and hung out), looking for his old high school buddy Billy (who would later be the best man at our wedding). He was a strapping, baby-faced 21 year old and I was a 19, had bangs just a bit in my eyes, and wore tight size 3 Calvin Klein jeans. A match made in heaven. I was waitressing when he walked in, and when Billy introduced Frank around, he left me out, either because I was working or because he was being a jerk. This annoyed me, so I marched up to Frank, stuck my hand out, and said “Hi, I’m Judi.” For some reason he was instantly smitten. At the time I had a boyfriend at Rutgers, was casually dating a musclebound lifeguard/law student in Pt. Pleasant, and still hung around with my ex-boyfriend from Montclair, who often drove down-the-shore on weekends. I wasn’t looking...or interested...in anyone new, and didn’t really notice that Frank kept showing up at the bar when I was working. He even got Billy to throw a party just so he could get to know me—but I brought along the lifeguard. Frank spent the entire night chatting my date up, just to keep him away from me. I still didn’t notice. It took a whole lot of collusion between Frank and my friends one night, for him to get me alone as we kept “trying” to meet up with them in various places around the Jersey shore. I have the worst radar when it comes to detecting that men are interested in me. But that night I finally figured it out! He was smart, funny, cute...and I was quickly hooked. Once I noticed him, it was love at first sight. By the time he left to go on his 6 week “summer cruise” on the U.S.S. Tautog nuclear submarine, I was

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blaming him for ruining my summer because I would miss him so much. He got back in time to help me pack up my beach apartment and get to school before he headed back down to Annapolis.

Frank was the antithesis of my image of a stuffy, rigid midshipman. In high school he was even famous for being able to roll two joints at once...one in each hand. At Annapolis he claimed to be “captain of the varsity apathy team.” His only other extracurricular activity was field ball, a club sport played only at service academies...and prisons. He would try to catch a ride up to Rutgers nearly every weekend, and managed to find me at whatever bar, club, or party I might happen to be at on each Friday night when he hit town. He was relaxed and fun and we had a great time together. When he graduated from the Naval Academy and chose to enter the Marine Corps, he was sent to the USMC Basic School in Quantico, VA...which he described as 6 weeks of material stretched painfully into 6 months. He was never really “into” the military stuff, it was just a conduit that he hoped would allow him to fly jets someday. The big change began when he got to flight school. For the first time in his life, he wasn’t naturally good at what he was trying to master. It turns out that some people have a built in ability to fly, just like some have innate musical talent. Frank wasn’t one of these people, and he became supremely focused on learning everything about the T34-Charlie trainer and how to make it go. By the time I joined him in Pensacola he could do little else aside from study. When he joined his first real squadron (HMH-462 in Tustin, CA) he had turned into a bonafide workaholic who was at the office (OK, it was really a helicopter hangar) 12 hours+ every day, even on Saturdays. It was a fairly short trip from the apathy team to the workaholic world series, and it just continued to get worse. Initially he got a lot of joy out of flying and the squadron camaraderie. But after a few years, I think working so hard became a habit he couldn’t quit, even though the fun was long drained out of it. Add to that the stress of everyday life...young children, marriage, mortgage...and he just became more and more miserable as time went on.

It’s amazing to think back about how our marriage failed an inch at a time until it was virtually unrecognizable. I was starting to feel practically

invisible to him, and that the importance of my feelings and perspectives was shrinking by the day. By the time we embarked for Okinawa, much of the wind had gone out of the sails of our relationship, and the thought of a trans-continental relocation was overwhelming. It didn't help that Frank was sent back to flight school for a 12 week brush-up course, and I had to manage the complicated packing and moving alone (1000 lbs sent by plane so it would arrive quickly, 25% of our household goods sent by ship to arrive in 3 months, and the rest had to go into storage), while taking care of young children.

We decided to visit family before we left, so I made the 1500 mile drive with the kids up to New Jersey (Frank flew in from flight school), put the car in storage, and departed from Newark Airport. It was an omen when the pilot failed to show up and we sat on the tarmac on a 95 degree July day for two hours with waiting for awful Continental Airlines to find us one. Then we got further delayed in LAX. It took 39 hours to get to Okinawa, and we were travelling with a 5 and 8 year old. Between the long trip and the 14 hour time difference, I couldn't have told you if we were in Japan or on Mars when we arrived.

Okinawa is a beautiful sub-tropical island that's home to 80,000 Americans and about 1.4 million Ruyukans (most don't appreciate being called Japanese, since they were their own kingdom until the late 19th century and have a distinctive culture and language). It is a favorite vacation destination because of its gorgeous beaches and laid back lifestyle, but is also the poorest prefecture in Japan. Okinawa has the world's lowest death rates from cancer, heart disease and stroke and the highest life expectancy—with the largest population over 100 years old anywhere on the planet. The people are lovely, friendly, and welcoming, especially if you take an interest in their culture. They also suffer from the worst alcoholism rates in Asia. Interesting place! The worst part was living in a tiny 1000 square foot cinder block base housing duplex with two kids and generally angry husband. The best part was nearly everything else. I quickly got very involved, volunteering with the Officer's Wives Gift Shop as the marketing manager (we made \$1,000,000 annually with all profits going to local charities), was elected to the board of the kids' school, and

got a job teaching group daily fitness classes at the base gym. Within a year I was also hired as the photographer/photo editor for an English language lifestyle magazine that was distributed all over the island, called Okinawa Living, and was elected vice president of the USMC Officer's Wives Club—a job that entailed determining what organizations would receive all that money we raised each year. On top of taking care of the kids and getting them to soccer practice, dental visits, baseball games, piano lessons, etc., I was constantly on the move.

Being cooped up in that little house with Frank wasn't much fun. There was no privacy and personal phone calls had to be made from the only place where I could close the door and generally be left alone—the bathroom. He was sinking further into despair, partly because for the first time in his career he was stuck in a desk job. He was spending more and more time with his head in hands complaining of how unhappy he was. He needed constant movement to distract him from his depression. We spent lots of time exploring the island, snorkeling, scuba diving. He golfed and ran and went to the gym. He could put off his demons during these activities, but they returned to haunt him nightly. Like a closet drunk who only imbibes behind closed doors, Frank was closet depressed...his coworkers and our friends would never have guessed how his behavior changed once he was at home.

I was thoroughly miserable in my marriage, but didn't know how to escape it. I could pack up the kids and go...where exactly? My parents' 2 bedroom house wasn't an option. I'd moved around so much over the past 10 years, no place seemed like home. I was half afraid to be on my own and half unwilling to put my kids through something similar to what I faced as a child. I felt completely trapped. Luckily, I was incredibly busy with work and volunteering and parenting. I travelled around Asia with friends and sometimes the kids. We decided to stay an extra fourth year in Japan (most military tours of duty are 3 years) because it would allow Frank to retire immediately after that year (2003). If we moved back as scheduled, he would have to fulfill a full three year tour and couldn't retire until 2005. Frank hated his job so much that he volunteered that last year to serve as a member of a 3 month long promotion board in

Virginia. His excuse was that it would be easier to start looking for a post retirement job stateside than it would be from Japan. It was fine with me to have him gone...except that both of our cars broke down simultaneously the week after he left. But it was nothing new to have to negotiate everything without him. When you retire from overseas, the military will move you to any destination you request. Frank unilaterally decided Texas would be the best place. This came as a shock, because he hated it previously. When I suggested we look into other locations, he became difficult. By that point, I spent so much walking on eggshells around him that I just decided San Antonio would be just fine.

Frank put in his retirement request (officers “serve at the pleasure of the President of the United States” and aren’t necessarily allowed to retire when desired) in the spring. It was accepted and we were slated to move in June. We had already packed up the house and moved into a hotel for our final two weeks in Japan when he got word that his orders had been rescinded because they couldn’t find a replacement for him. So the kids and I left for San Antonio without him.

Barry

She wrote:

“I am incredibly glad that I found out about my true history. My dad is an idiot about a few things...and I can't believe he didn't tell me I was adopted. It's unfortunately rather typical of him to not consider what others may feel or need and to try to control everything. He came to Austin (where my bro lives) to tell him in person last weekend, and he got an earful from me before I allowed him to treat the kids, Paul, and I to dinner.

“Instead of growing angry as I get older, I've become much less judgmental (although I'm still working on that), more open, and I'm the happiest I've ever been. A big reason for all the happiness is Paul...he's amazing and wonderful.

“Hmmm...I'm not sure about the karma thing. I definitely believe in the ‘what goes around, comes around’ idea...but I'm not sure it extends past

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the life you're currently living...especially since I'm not sure what I think about reincarnation.

"I'm not presently in agony. Really discombobulated. Working on sorting this out—wrapping my head around it all—but I know it'll take awhile. I'm glad you found me too. I believe the truth will set you free, even if it makes you uncomfortable for awhile. I've never been big on family either, but I'm amazed at how many things you and I have in common, and how many things are completely opposite. So interesting! I really sense your excitement at having found me, and that feels nice."

PART 4

Moving back to the States with two kids meant buying a car, beginning a house hunt, and finding a furnished apartment to live in until we could close on a house...FAST. I'd done a bunch of research before we left and had chosen a realtor and school district to live in. I had two weeks to find a house before the cut-off date to register the kids for school (can't register without a permanent address). Check. Check. Check. Check. Oh, and I did all this without a real budget, since Frank was retiring and neither one of us had job lined up in San Antonio, and all we had to rely on was his retirement pay.

The kids were not happy about leaving Okinawa...they had grown connected to friends and school and enjoyed the local culture and food. Elizabeth had an especially rough time, it's hard for a 12 year old girl to up and leave her friends—even though all those friends were military kids too, and would be moving away in the near future as well. I tried to take them to see the sights in San Antonio, but didn't have a lot of cash to spend, and everything is very expensive in a tourist town.

We stayed in a cramped, expensive furnished apartment for 6 weeks while we waited to close on our house, and everyone was miserable and bored. On August 14 we moved into our new house. "Moved" is probably not the right word, since none of our furniture or household goods had made it back from Japan yet, but the house was at least ours.

I had seen every 4 bedroom house for sale in our chosen school district, and although this one needed a lot of work, it had good bones and was huge—it gave me the space I craved after living in our tiny Japanese house for four years. A week later, Frank finally arrived—just a few days before he had to start his new teaching job. So it was me who took the kids to get their required school physicals, got them registered, and made sure they were where they were supposed to be for the new school year. And it was me who took delivery of our three shipments (express, main, and all the stuff that went into storage before we left) of stuff, and started to unpack. The first floor of the house was wall to wall boxes! In between all the mom stuff that takes so much time, I painted nearly every room in the house, made curtains, and tried to make it a livable space. Oh, and I was sending out resumes and trying to find a job of my own.

I found a part time job as an editor and writer with *San Antonio Weddings* magazine. I knew something was fishy, however, when I realized they hired me without having read any of my clippings. I lasted about 4 months there...it turned out the entire publication was solely about ad revenues...they weren't even pretending to care about editorial content. I eventually found a job at Trinity University running their admissions and financial aid marketing and communications. Spent 7 years there with a great bunch of co-workers, and it's how I met Paul.

Barry

Paul is a superstar in his field, which is designing enrollment programs for universities across America. He is by trade a statistician, but he's one of these people with peripheral vision professionally. Meaning he can crunch numbers, sure, but as well project them into insightful and practical agendas in the highly competitive world of university recruitment. He worked for a firm in Chicago, and flew around the country administering their accounts. One of these happened to be Trinity University.

He and Judi got together on admissions business a few times a year. They became friends, which suited both because each of their marriages was

falling apart, and it was great to have somebody to talk to who understood what the other was going through.

Paul's wife eventually left him for a football player. A *female* football player. And not the kind of football where people wear colorful jerseys and shorts and spend half a day kicking a round black and white ball around a field until somebody figures out how to propel it into a netted goal. Uh-uh, the kind of football where people wear crash helmets and huge pads and spend a few hours smashing the shit out of one another.

One day, or rather, one night after they'd been friends for some long time, both their marriages now in the bin, Judi and Paul, who is eleven years her junior, became more than just friends. Their relationship had grown organically from business associates to friends to lovers.

Paul quit his lucrative job in Chicago and moved to San Antonio, and together they set up their own business in enrollment research. Their office when I first made contact was in their home, but they had just rented space in a hi-rise office building in town. As well they were in the process of moving into a new house in a much preferred nabe. A lot was happening in their lives when a letter arrived from some character in New Zealand.

All this I heard, or read on my laptop, during the weeks following our formal introduction. Now it was time to meet face to face.

*

The plane landed, I anxiously made my way into the waiting area. Nobody I recognized was there to meet me. Stepped outside the airport. Like walking into a furnace. Still no familiar faces. Five minutes passed, ten, fifteen. The only person around was a woman talking on her mobile. I wandered over, and when she'd finished her conversation I wondered whether she might place a call for me. As she was tapping the numbers I read off to her, I noticed two people approaching from behind, their expressions like they'd been caught in class doing something naughty and I was the principal to whom they'd been sent.

Paul was taller than me, six-one, movie actor looks. I'm thinking a little bit Channing Tatum. Behind him, half-hidden, Judi was nearly a foot shorter. Sure, I'd seen a million pictures of her the past few months, but in the flesh – good lord, before me now was a very pretty Barry-clone. Unreal.

Paul extended a hand. "I'm Paul."

“Aw, for Pete sakes!” I laughed, putting down my pack and giving him a hug. Judi’s face read: He’s not. Omigod, he’s not! I damn well was. And did. An empty vessel. Nobody home. I remembered what she’d written about her dad hugging her every chance he got in the days prior to her going off to college, so I made it brief.

We walked to the parking lot, got in a thankfully air-con SUV, took off.

“From our office we can see the planes coming and going,” he said. “We fly so much with our business we know every plane coming in. Soon as we saw your flight we left to come get you. Took a little longer than we intended.”

Their new home was on a quiet, tree-lined street. It was open-planned, high ceiling, tastefully elegant, delightfully cool. Jonathon was sitting on a sofa next to a young woman. I figured a girlfriend, but rather she was a cousin of Paul’s now-gay ex, herself gay, staying with them in an outside cottage. Jonathan rose off the couch...and kept on rising. Eighteen, almost nineteen, taller even than Paul. My grandson. We hugged. I hoped he wouldn’t crush me.

Paul was friendly right off, Judi far more reserved. Understandable. The revelation that she was not who she’d always believed herself to be was a highly traumatic and transformative experience the shock of which, even after four months, she’d still not completely recovered from. Before I’d left home, friends had cautioned me: Go slow with her, mate. Who, me? Whambam, boots-and-all Barry? Slow? It would take effort.

I was shown the house. Surely not my style, me who loves old exposed wood and basic simplicity, but it felt good. My room was more than adequate, queen bed, books in a tall bookcase, in-room vanity. Shared a walk-through bathroom with Jon, whose room at the other end called out A Teenager Resides Here!

After much discussion we got in two separate cars and headed out to an Indian restaurant in a strip mall. Service good, food fair. I insisted on paying.

“Ah, I come from a non-tipping country, so...” I said quietly, my eyes asking a question. “Twenty percent would be good,” my daughter whispered.

We drove over to their office building, took the elevator up to spacious quarters. Paul explained their business. They had twenty clients, mostly

small colleges spread around the country. Actually too many, he noted, because the business was, in effect, his brain. But it was hard turning clients away. Judi, having been in the enrollment game for some years at Trinity, was the brains behind the brain; it was she who steered the ship.

“It’s all Paul,” she said. “He knows the mechanics inside and out. He does all the numbers, comes up with the best program to attract the best kids at each college. Then he takes it to them. A lot of people in high positions at universities have no idea what’s going on down on the ground. Except they think they do. Getting around their egos can be a real problem. That’s the second thing he excels at. You ought to see him run a room. He’s amazing.”

Paul mentioned a college back East. “Just as an example, they’re a specialized women’s school, but the enrollment’s been sagging the past few years. So first thing we thought was make it co-ed, bring the boys in, bulk up admissions. But when we read the questionnaires we sent out, both their own students and to high school women considering going there, then fed the numbers into our blender, we got a surprise. A lot of them didn’t want co-ed, felt it would distract them from their prime purpose of study. As a statistician, you learn to trust the numbers and how you interpret them, not necessarily your intuition.”

And then home, and day one was over. It all felt right. They love one another, they’re making a ton of gelt doing what they like doing. Sweet. As for me, well, go slow like I’d been told, and hopefully the walls around her would come down over the next 11 days.

From Barry’s journal

June 8. Finally crashed out around midnight. Me, who usually hits the pillow around 9 at home. Sleep of the dead for a couple hours, then wake, stay awake for some time. Up at 8, only one in the house. Do my exercises on the bare floor in the living room. Paul comes in, goes back in their room, fetches me a yoga mat. Then out the door. Much of the day spend with J. She’s my daughter, yeah, but for now only biologically. Impressions: chatty, nervous movements; quick, short bursts, touching her hair often as she sits on the

sofa (me on a love seat at 90 degrees so we can face-to-face) and raves on. As I sit there listening, watching, it strikes that as she's talking a blue streak, she's a nose puller. Once, twice, there, a third time. I giggle inside. Coz I'm a nose puller! Guys, you know what they say, you pull your nose. With a babe, it's more like sometimes a nose is just a nose. But can this sort of thing be transmitted through the gene pool? At some point sitting there I realize I like her. Not coz she's my kid – I just...*like* her! Her smarts, her energy, her realness. She's a Jersey girl, after all! Later the three of us have lunch at a Mideastern place, nice food, cheap. Paul pays. 'Biz expense,' he says. Tells me he likes my lifestyle, wants it, but has to have 2 mill in the bank before he can let go. Two mill! 'So we can live on 10 thou/month interest.' Meantime he needs a few things cost money. Beamer ('cheapest model'), swimming pool for when he comes home from work. Me: 'Can I give you a piece of advice?' They look at me. 'Don't hurt yourself getting there. Really. Your pace is a killer, man. Just be aware.' Then I shut up.

June 10. J drives me to her gym on her way to the office, signs me in. Morning crowd – gorgeous babes and old codgers. Place is humongous. Can put my tiny gym back home in one of the changing rooms here. (Later, Judi: 'You think the gym's big? Really?') Plus the machines are frightening. WTF are these monster things! Do 18 minutes on a Tim Duncan-size cross-trainer, bit of time on weight machines I got no idea how to use. Scared to death I'll get one of the wire pulleys wrapped around my neck, the counter-weights'll hoist me to the ceiling, face turning purple as everybody below ignores me while admiring themselves in the wall mirrors. Then I notice they have free internet; now that I can handle. (Later) After dinner (at home), J mentions she has to buy a father's day card (Sunday), to which I say TWO father's day cards. Paul says Yeah! She only makes a face. There are moments I look at her and think: My Daughter!! But no way is she ready to lower the barrier she's set up between us. So okay, I'm Barry the Friend From New Zealand. Have to do for now. That evening, I see another side of Paul. J heads off to bed to read, he and I hang out in the living room watching the playoff game, Miami-Celtics. He's from Mass., supports all the Boston teams. Celtics are trying hard, but LeBron is awesome tonight. Paul is pacing the floor with a nine iron in his hand. Yelling at the TV. Well, shit, I yell at the TV when I

watch the Phillies, but nothing like this. Screams the refs are making calls against Boston on orders from the league! I figure if he starts a backswing, I'll jump in, make a grab for the club before it hits the screen.

June 12. Midday, sitting at the Whole Foods Market munching a huge delicious salad, sipping a supersize and tasty latte: \$10. The healthy guy's McDonald's. This morn long session at the kitchen nook with J and Jon. She talks so fast, and he so loud. They flip from topic to topic, I have to keep focused. He reminds me a lot of Jason – the little kid inside the big body just wanting to be accepted and liked. Well, I both accept and like him. And too, I like the connection between mom and teenage son. Prior to Jon emerging from his digital cave, J and I talked about Elizabeth. Apparently, my granddaughter had been a problem, a big one. Not hard to see why, all the moving around, strife between the M & D. But J says she seems to be coming right. I'll meet her in a couple days when she comes down from Austin for a visit. Part of me, as J quick-spoke on (flipping her hair repeatedly), thinks: I've missed all this: my kid growing up, having her own kids, having to handle it alone when she split from Free. (Or, when he became invisible.) And the dad-in-charge was trying harder to be a contenda than a poppa. J says he was up for a Pulitzer some years back but got assed out and is still pissed about it. Kee-ryst. This guy has accomplished everything I had set out to do/be when I left Temple and was a colossal flop at. (And yet wind up the happiest camper of my graduating class. So, schmuck, which would you rather, successful or happy? Choose one. Got it. Now shut up, eat your salad and write!) On the other hand, had I hung in there, stayed with Sandy and played poppa myself, would I have been any different/better? (Except dear dead Peggy says the choice wasn't mine. Still, interesting to play the what-if game.) Paul is off East on one of his frequent meets with academic balabusses. Says he does a hundred thou air miles a year. Guy is easy to like, whereas J so far a bit of hard work; again I get it, I get it. I suppose at some point she'll make a decision – am I a good guy or baddie in this movie. (Later) We were yakking together on the sofa around 11 when Paul calls from his car. His dumb GPS didn't know there was major road construction, so following untold flights and renting the car, he's lost in the dark somewhere in the middle of Ohio. J puts the phone on speaker, gets out her laptop and

googles up a map, gives him directions. I call out, 'Hi, son-in-law!' into the phone during a moment of quiet as she's digging out road signs. 'Hey,' he calls back. At the end of their conversation, he says, Love you, babe! And I love you, she replies. Gives me heart flutters. After they hang up, she sighs. 'Son-in-law, huh. That's so weird.' Isn't it, tho.

June 13. The 'attack' came, as I knew it would eventually. Rather soft, and I think I handled it ok. Mostly (on the surface) it had to do with Jason, my alleged indifference towards him, but really it had to do with her. The question I'd answered before, but it's the big one between us, or of us, so it's gonna repeat on itself: like, why did I do it? She doesn't seem to accept the obvious – I was young and an asshole. (For sure I'm not gonna tell her that her dad is right when he refers to me as her 'sperm donor' – though I do prefer designated dick – coz Peggy told me so, and what I did had to be done, blah-blah.) J had a date with her shrink lady earlier in the day, so stuff was stirring. Said the shrink asked her what I think of her. Replied that a couple months ago when she asked how I felt about finally finding her, and I replied it's the best thing ever happened to me, she jumped down my throat, claiming this put a lot of pressure on her. That's coz you hadn't met me yet, she says now. Ok, so now I've met you and yours, lived a few days in your home, you want an honest one-to-ten? She nodded, waiting. '9½. And that's only coz I want to leave you a little room for improvement. Now, are you gonna give me shit about that?' She smiled. And my answer was from my head and heart both. She's primo, my kiddo. And I'm kinda glad I didn't find her 10 years ago. She must've been a mess, and it woulda been sheer hell had I appeared at her doorstep one day.

June 14. Flag day. As if Texas needs a special day to fly their gigantic S&S's. This morn she had the landscape architect, a fem, plus two interior decorators, both fem, show up. I sat there reading *The Art of Fielding*, wondering how this dreck got such amazing reviews, while J and the two interior babes, one tiny and narrow, the other taller and round, were doing Valley Girl impressions. J introduces me as 'Barry'. Nothing else. Later: 'I didn't know what to say. They all know me, know my dad.' Poor baby. Later got some bad news. Paul Heatley died. He was at Waikato Hospital about to

undergo dialysis, and his tired heart just gave out. Ah, Paul, know that I've never loved any male more than I did you, mate. You were – are – as good a human being as I've known this time round. Rest in peace, brother. Fucking hell. Aside from this (as I sit once more at Whole Foods, pumpernickel bagel and coffee before me), I wanna proclaim here and now how relaxed I feel, I am. Left NZ rather a nervous wreck, what-if, what-if, and here I be, cool, calm, collected. Good talk earlier with J about Jason. For the first time she presented her perspective without making me feel the irresponsible putz I most likely am. And she was wearing the very first t-shirt I'd sent her wayyy back. It fit well and looked terrific on her. And I took it as – acceptance? I may not be IN, but I'm no longer a walking WMD. Paul arrived home. He had a wretched 24 hrs, lousy flight, getting lost on the dark roads, crappy motel, all-day meetings, flight back here diverted to Little Rock coz of hail storm in Dallas...jay-zuss. Two mill, huh. Maybe if I sell the wonderful beach house and cash in all my term deposits –. Only kidding! Now to shlep back 'home' in 98 degree heat. Well, Robyn reports from NZ that the water in the garden bird bath was frozen this morning...

June 15. Mid-aft, again at Whole Foods. Worker walks by. 'I like that shirt!' Reads: It's a Big Boy Game, the O in boy a basketball. J bought it for me yesterday (along with two pairs of shorts, so I wouldn't look like a refugee when I work out at her gym). Apparently the shirt inscription is a line of Gregg Popovich's, who is slightly higher than god here. This morning was beautiful. She took me to the McNay museum. Told me a very rich lady lived in a very big house on a very big and beautifully landscaped parcel of land and collected a very impressive and pricey array of art, and now it's a very classy museum. We walked around for a couple hours. Is it coincidence that we liked the same stuff, disliked the same stuff? Our favorite artist – we were both knocked out by his work – was a guy named Carl Rice Embrey. Mostly stark, dramatic, detailed interiors of old wooden houses and barn-like workshops, with open doors or windows through which the grassless brown landscapes of rural Texas can be seen. You couldn't help but feel you were right there, inside those old buildings. At the museum shop I bought her a book of Embrey's work. It was a lovely sharing. After, we went to the Bagel Factory, got a bunch of stuff, took it to the office, shared it around.

Paul was watching the PGA Open, same 9 iron in his hand. I said I have to remind myself now and then that J is my daughter, that the whole reason I came here was to meet her, coz it feels you two characters have been dear friends for life. Said I had high expectations before coming here and they've been exceeded. J said whenever she introduces me to someone, she doesn't know what to say. I know, sez I, but where it mattered supremely just a week ago, now it don't mean diddily. Later at home Elizabeth showed up with her boyfriend. Gorgeous babe, wearing very short shorts, and a couple times I had to remind myself, Keep your eyes off her legs, dude, she's your granddaughter!! Then there was a moment, everybody talking at once as folks do, when it hit me: this is my family! Nothing to do with whose seed three of these beings had partially sprung from, family in the Barry sense of the word. The moment passed quickly, but the warm feeling hung on.

June 16. 11.18pm, sitting up in bed. This morn the three of us walked to the gym, a mile and a half, J says. Me, 15 min on the cross, 10 on the tread, a few weight things. Then walk home. They walk a lot. Night before we walked a couple hours around the nabe. Nice quiet streets, trees, houses with people in them leading 'normal' lives. Wondered how many had scenarios like ours. Around 5.30 today drove to the river, 4 mile walk, sat and gabbed on the grass above the river. Then around 8.30 drove to Dough, an amazing Italian restaurant. These two are an interesting couple. Together 24/7, argue a lot, tho more like friendly debating. So much feeling between them. And me and Paul are buddies. J and me? I do believe I've come through the thickest part of the forest. Feel she's holding back, scared to commit. But to what? I call myself her DD, deputy daddy. The other bloke did all the work, he gets top billing, no problem. Been here 10 days, 2½ to go. Feels like I just got here, feels like I've been here forever.

June 19. Final day, 6.30am, in bed. Have spent much time with the dotter past couple days as Paul away on biz. She can't resist getting in digs, asking barbed questions, about Jason, my clothes, my lifestyle. Has talked about some of her friends from the past who've suffered depression, turned to religion, rightwing politics. Yesterday said she still has a hard time getting her head around the whole thing of *us*, especially considering my

‘extremeness’. All her friends’ parents, her own parents, are straight citizens living conventional lives, etc. etc. Well, I yam what I yam, Judi me gorl. And her. Funny little thing who continually plays with her hair, yanks her nose, has a duck walk, doesn’t let things go (her dad, her ex, me and Jason). Always presenting options (provided no less than four for lunch yesterday; we wound up going where I wanted – where d’ya think?). And she’s whip-smart; boy, is she ever. (Later. Just past midnight, flying over the Pacific) J said she’d drive me to the airport. Figure she’s gonna let me off at the curb, but no, she parks and comes in with me. I check in. She’s still alongside. At the security area, I put down my bag, reach out. She comes into my arms. ‘I love you, babe,’ I whisper to my daughter. ‘And I love you,’ she says for the very first time, a voice that comes from deep within. We hold the hug for the longest time. Then we part, going opposite ways. During the past 50 years I’ve made untold journeys to dozens of distant lands, but not one nearly so joyful, and for certain never before have I passed through airport security with tears rolling down my cheeks.

*

It was three months later, and another historic meet involving product of my seed. Me, I was in Myanmar when it happened, but through one of the many miracles of our time I read all about it, from both sides. Judi and Paul make an annual pilgrimage to Philly to service one of their clients. Jason, who’d steadfastly been denying his sister’s existence, had little choice. I gather his half-brother was instrumental here. Or maybe he’d simply decided to become a grownup in the matter. I got emails from her: “I’m so nervous.” I got emails from him: “This is going to be so awkward.” And how did it work out?

Jason and Nate met their sister at Philly airport late morning. The boys took her and Paul to lunch at Chickie’s and Pete’s. They were still there come dinnertime. All told, eight hours sitting and yakking and laughing and eating. Yep, they loved one another. Another visit East, they met Sandy’s relatives, who, until quite recently, had never known of her. They loved her. And some time after that, Judi and Paul flew the lads, plus Nate’s wife, to San Antonio for a four-day weekend. Stuck somewhere in the middle of all this, Judi and Paul took a trip over the Pacific to visit her second-seeded

poppa. In the ‘sunshine capital of New Zealand’ it rained every day they were here. They flew south to Queenstown for a few days before heading home. It poured the whole time they were there. The day they left the sun came out and it didn’t rain again in New Zealand for the next three months. I’ve tried, without much success, to get the local chamber of commerce to bring them down here every year as an antidote to our seasonal drought.

Judi and Paul have dug deep into their pockets and sent Elizabeth to one of the best art colleges in Texas and Jonathan to what is supposed to be the finest chef school in the country, outside New York. J and P themselves travel to Europe every summer for brief vacations, staying at five star accommodation the entire time. They seem to think they deserve it. I do, too.

On another delightful note: Judi and my friend Kathy, at whose home in Philly her nephew Malik geeked out the very last step of my twenty-five year search, have become close buds. So Judi not only has two fathers and one and a half new brothers, she now has a big sister who’s as sharp and sassy as she herself.

FINDING JUDI

AFTER WORD

Jennifer's marriage was not going well. They already had two small children, and when she became pregnant again, she made a decision. A single mother with three kids being a daunting proposition, she made arrangements to have the third child adopted out at birth. A daughter was born, taken immediately from her at the hospital, handed over to unseen adopting parents, and that was that. This was in the early 1950s.

As it happened, Jenny's husband got offered a good position as an engineer in Canada. He accepted, the four of them moved from New Zealand to Toronto, and the relationship went on the upswing. They had three more children, and for some years all was good. Then her husband took sick. His condition worsened and eventually, mid-1970s, he passed away.

Her children now grown, three already out of the house and the remaining two about to go off on their own, Jennifer took a job teaching. As well, she remarried a few years later, to a divorcee with grown children of his own. Philip was a good man, and all was now well in her life. But through all of this, Jennifer never stopped thinking of her adopted-out daughter back in New Zealand: what did she look like, how was she doing, was she happy.

Mid-1980s, an opportunity for a year's teacher exchange came up between her school and one back in NZ. She grabbed it for one single reason: it would provide the opportunity to look for her daughter.

New Zealand by this time has relaxed its rules considerably in the matter of adoption-reunion, and Jennifer was able to secure from social welfare her daughter's name. But not where the family was located. It was a fairly common family name, but Jenny was a woman on a mission. Equipped with

no more than a pile of local telephone directories, she made dozens of phone calls over a period of several months. Finally she hit on the woman she was looking for. Her daughter.

She was extremely nervous when she made the call. So afraid was she that her adopted-out daughter would reject her, Jenny made up a story. Over the phone, she told the woman she was a Canadian teacher here in New Zealand on an exchange program, which was true, but then she embellished it by claiming a teacher friend back in Toronto had requested that she look up this person if she got the chance. There was silence for quite some time after this explanation, and Jen thought the woman might have hung up. Then the voice said: “I know who you are.”

Red-faced, Jennifer apologized profoundly for the deception, and the woman – her daughter – pleasantly laughed. “When are you coming to see me?” she asked.

Their meeting was delightful. The daughter, whose name is Beverly, was excited to discover she had five brothers and sisters. “When can I meet them?” she wondered excitedly.

Eventually she did meet them all, plus Philip, who happens to be one of my dearest friends, and who related this warm tale one day while we were having coffee at a favourite café. “The remarkable thing,” he said, “is there are so many similarities between mother and daughter. Appearance, okay, that you expect. But mannerisms, speech, interests, ideas. Even the food they like and don’t like. And, of course, they’re both teachers.”

What prompted him to relate the story, years after I had first come to know him, was a 1200 word article about my finding Judi which I wrote for the local paper shortly after returning home. The response to the piece was a complete surprise. Sure, people were moved by the recounting of my long search’s success, but it was far more than that. Friends like Philip, other people whom I knew only slightly, a bunch I recognized from living here twenty-five years but had never spoken to, and any number I had not previously encountered, would approach me on the street, in supermarkets, by phone. To tell me *their* stories.

One of the most delicious accounts was related by an eighty-four year old retired yoga teacher. Kath and her husband Jim have for donkey’s years run a homestay outside town. One visitor, an English woman, let it be known she was

adopted and would love to find her biological progenitors, whom she had never known, not even their names, nor were they still alive. A few nights later, Kath had a dream: the woman's birth grandfather was a farmer in the Waikato region of New Zealand. Waikato being a fairly extensive area, she had the foresight to dream the actually locality where this chap supposedly farmed.

Now, Kath is quite heavy into genealogy. To her, it's more than a hobby, perhaps just short of obsession. And she's quite accomplished at tracking down ancestors. While her practical sense told her what the chance was of the dream being reality, she pushed that aside, followed her nocturnal vid's road signs and, yep, found grandpa, right where the dream had placed him.

I believe strongly in synchronicity. Things happen in big bunches at a certain time for a reason, even if I'm too thick to grasp such reason. By the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, all kinds of taboos and mass prejudices are cracking, peeling, turning to dust. Sure, there are still huge biases and resentments when, say, an African American is elected POTUS (twice), but such an event was totally unfathomable just a decade back. And it appears likely that in the decade to follow him, America, the most conservative and reactive of nations, will see a woman, possibly a Hispanic, in the Oval Office. Too, same-sex marriage is becoming a reality, and the world is beginning to accept that smoking marijuana does not automatically lead to heroin addiction, genital warts and knocking over old ladies for their handbags. Um, did I say the world? What I meant to say was *whitey's* world. Which brings me to the most kicked-around of all minority elements, and the newest to proclaim liberation: those who adopt-out and those who've been adopted-out.

This extreme prejudice has never made the published top ten list of discriminated peoples simply because, till just lately, all was hush-hush. A teenage girl became pregnant, she suddenly disappeared from school and was said to be living with an aunt upstate or upcountry. And the episode, and what it produced, was never spoken of again. We heard whispered terms like 'unwed mother' and 'bastard child'. A woman acquaintance here in NZ confided that she grew up with a fifteen-year-older sister and a cold, stern mother, and the truth was revealed only when her *husband* informed her a few years into their marriage that 'sis' was actually mum, and 'mum', her grandmother. Following a generation of knowing the truth, she still can't

break through what she calls the ‘ultimate rejection’ to speak about it to her elders, and whenever the grandmum/mum calls, she will subconsciously curl into a fetal pose. Nice ordeal to pass on to your kid.

I say whitey’s world because I live in a bi-racial country, and many of the people I’m close to here are Maori. NZ Maori have no problems with any of the above. Girl gets pregnant, she stays in school full term, has the baby, baby is passed on to auntie to raise, everything’s open and everyone’s cool. Doesn’t have to be a teen, plenty of older women, married, partnered or none of the above, bear a child, and for one reason or another can’t/don’t want to raise it. No worries. Just give the kid over to the *whanau*, extended family, where she/he will be cared for, along with actual blood children, without biological distinction. Contrast this, if you will, with the following true story:

Forty years back, the patriarch of one of the wealthiest families in America lay on his deathbed. The man had seven grown children and a slew of grandkids. Three of the grandchildren had been adopted at birth (by three different sets of parents). They were never told they were not of the blood, were, in fact, raised in equal status with their siblings and cousins. The patriarch’s will, however, cut them out flat. He wished only those of his seed to benefit from his huge fortune. The seven sets of parents convened in secret meeting to discuss the possibility of voiding this codicil following the old boy’s death. They took a vote. The vote was fourteen-zip in favor of cutting out the kids who’d been adopted. Meaning even their own parents, who’d previously made no distinction amongst their progeny, concurred that they didn’t deserve. And how did I learn of this when not a peep was heard by the media? The estate attorney was a graduate of my Alpha Mind Control course and loved nothing more than blowing my mind with what absurdities human beings get up to.

Western societies have set up such taboos on adoption that when secrets within families eventually spill out of the vaults, the results of such stealthy reticence often translate into tranquilizers, anti-depressants, costly (and often needless) therapy and occasionally suicide.

New Zealand, the first country where women secured the vote, first nation to declare itself nuclear-free (and was forced to play Bambi to America’s Godzilla for doing so), and recently, its Parliament, under strong

National (= Republican) dominance, nonetheless voted overwhelmingly (77-44) to legalize same-sex marriage, seems to take a mature ‘whatever’ attitude towards social notions the larger, wealthier states yet find terrifying. As Jennifer discovered just about the same time I got jack-booted by the adoption-reunion agency in America, all you need do here is apply to social welfare, present your case, and information on your adopted-out kid is yours.

A short while back, a wonderful factual British movie called *Philomena* (any movie starring Judi Dench *has* to be wonderful) created a worldwide stir. *Philomena*, Dench’s character, didn’t voluntarily adopt out her toddler son, he was wrested away by nuns who ran the Catholic single mother facility where she was resident and sold without her consent or immediate knowledge. *Philomena* spent years agonizing over the loss. Later circumstances prompted her to begin a search, only to find he had died in his thirties. The film created what has become known as the ‘*Philomena Syndrome*’, where birth parents and their adopted-out children have come out of the closet en masse and are seeking, and to some measure as I write, *demanding* information that will lead to eventual contact.

I do not believe this is a fashion that will pass. From my own experience, and what I have read extensively on the subject, a mini-universe of good sense is just beginning to prevail, and will continue to despite wholesale (but declining) narrow-mindedness in the white Christian (and Jewish – oh, yeah!) world, simply because it is *natural* – you may wish to read that word again – to be connected with one’s closest biological kin. The various avenues of instant electronic communication and social networking have facilitated the process of reconnection. (This doesn’t say you will be readily accepted by your birth kid or parent. Please read the fine print on the side of the package before proceeding.)

So when the fifty year old guy in San Antonio whose name I don’t recall claimed he was ecstatic upon locating his birth father not long after I’d found Judi there; or over-the-moon Joseph Shuffit, a thirty-four year old in Kennett, Missouri, who’d learned only two years before that he was, in fact, adopted, then spent another two years searching for his birth parents, and when he found them discovered his father had spent *thirty-two* years looking for Joe, or Katheryn Deprill of Allentown, PA., who was abandoned as a

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newborn in the bathroom of a Burger King, said she felt ‘pure joy’ when at twenty-seven she tracked down her biological mother on Facebook...

Better yet, click on YouTube and type in ‘adoption reunion’. Go through a bunch and observe first-hand the visceral reactions of these people. (Caution: do not attempt this without a box of Kleenex close at hand. If you can watch more than a few of these segments without becoming teary-eyed, you are in desperate need of an ophthalmologist. Better yet, a cardiologist.)

I know exactly how these people felt.

Do I ever.