

The Amazing Adventures  
of  
**SPOOK & GHOST**



THEY  
ONLY  
KILL  
RICH  
BAD  
PEOPLE

**BARRY ROSENBERG**

AUTHOR OF *DIALOGUES WITH A DEAD FRIEND*

*For Jan, who helped me to my feet  
when I was face down in the gutter,  
and  
for Carl, cheese to my chalk, a better  
friend you could never hope to have,  
and  
for my beautiful, wonderful, courageous  
GALZ*

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First published by Tookus Bookus 2016  
Whakatane, New Zealand

[www.barryrosenberg.net](http://www.barryrosenberg.net)

ISBN: 978-0-473-34383-5

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**SPOOK&GHOST**

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(Tookus bookus)



# PRE-WORD

## Suburban Philadelphia, 1975

The black man with the huge Afro and nylon dashiki strode to the front of the room, faced the forty or so women. He glowered silently until they had reached the peak of discomfort.

“My momma was a colored lady,” he said in a soft, raspy voice. “She cleaned white folks’ houses. Scrubbed the toilets. Ten hours a day, six days a week. Got a few dollars plus carfare. Oh, yes. And a sandwich for lunch. My momma the colored lady looked sixty before she was thirty-five.

“I look at you people. I would say, I would say, that the amount of money spent on your makeup alone, forget about your clothes, your jewels, those fancy cars parked outside – just your *makeup*,” he bellowed, causing the women to jump, “is more than my momma the colored lady made in a year. Ain’t nobody in this room gonna look sixty when they’s thirty-five.

“My momma the colored lady had a buncha colored kids. From a buncha good-for-nothing colored men. I,” he looked around the room, long eye-contact with half a dozen in his audience, “I am the only kid she had who is not colored. I,” his eye contact was with half a dozen others, “I am a *black* man!”

\*

Across town, in a suburb with neat lawns and rounded-off intersections, a white man with crew cut, walking stick and starched military uniform stood before the very same number of males. Behind him was a huge American flag, plus flags depicting the national society and the chapter he was now addressing.

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He moved slowly across the small stage to the dais, his limp noticeable but his bearing erect.

“Young people are demonstrating. They are burning draft cards. Burning flags. Smoking marijuana and taking LSD. Halfway across the planet their brothers – my brothers and your sons – are getting killed defending the greatest political system this world has ever known.

“I come back here, to my country, the country I would gladly die for, damn near did die for, and witness this behavior on the part of young people. I cry. I shed tears. The hurt I feel is greater than the hurt I experienced over there. But I do not blame them. They are young, immature, misguided. Their minds are easily led astray. But someone is to blame. Who might that be?” He made eye contact with half a dozen in his audience. “WHO IS TO BLAME!?” There was uncomfortable shuffling in the seats.

“Sunday you’ll go to the Eagles game. They’ll play the Star Spangled Banner. You’ll stand. Hold your hat or hand over your heart. A few of you might even sing the words. Although I would venture that most of you couldn’t tell me all the words to that remarkable song if your families’ lives depended on it. And you will think: ‘I’ve done my bit for America today.’ Sure you have. Who. Is. To. Blame?”

\*

An hour later the black man with the huge Afro and nylon dashiki sped along the dark road in his great black Oldsmobile. Duke Ellington’s Take the A Train was blaring out of the eight-track in the dash. He sang along with.

The white man with the crewcut and military uniform sped along the dark road in his Chevy. Cream was singing In a White Room With Black Curtains on his tape deck. He sang along with.

The Olds and the Chevy were headed towards each other on the same road. They grew closer, and closer. Suddenly the Chevy veered right, and the Olds left, nearly colliding as they took the same dirt lane. Horns sounded. Both men gave the finger.

The Olds followed the Chevy, the cars fishtailing and throwing off stones. Both screeched to a halt outside a large old farmhouse. The car doors flew open, the drivers spilling out. Aggressively they strode up to each other.

“Motherfucker!”

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“Evenin’ to you, too, reverend.” They slapped palms loudly, together walked up the steps and into the house. The lights were on, an unseen stereo blasting away.

In the dining room, the black man reached up and grabbed a fist-full of his own hair, yanked. The huge Afro wig came off, revealing normal black man’s hair. The white man, who now carried no trace of a limp, peeled off his military jacket, tossed it on a chair. Took off his own wig, shook his head and long strands of blond cornrows cascaded past his shoulders. He opened a drawer, took out a bowl of aromatic green herb and a pack of rolling papers. Carefully, he licked two of the papers together, sprinkled in some choice heads and rolled a major number. Lighting it, he took a long toke, a second, a third.

“Yo.”

“Patience, Jack. I’m in need!” Another lung-filling inhale and he handed the joint over.

“Bad one?”

“Don’t fucking ask. Swear I’m gonna get me a nine to five.”

“Yeah, right.” The black man reached over, took the white man’s crewcut wig and placed it rakishly on his head. “Well, I got —”

“Here it comes. And stop bogarting, asshole.”

The black man passed over the joint, half-smoked. “Tore up the first check.”

“As per usual.”

“Almost tore up the second.”

“But.”

“This Jew-babe, man.” The other man groaned. The black man danced around. “She so fahn, I make her mahn.”

“Blowjob in the parking lot.”

“Plus — *plu-u-us* —.” He reached into his dashiki pocket, took out a pair of diamond earrings.

“Real?”

“Bet my dick on it.”

“Don’t do that, man. It is your prime *tool* in our line of employ.”

“Husband’s a big law-ya. House in Mer-ee-yon.”

The white man picked up the Afro wig and placed it on his head. “I think next gig I go as you.”



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“Yo dick too small.”

“I take your wig, I take your dick. What’s the prob?”

“Party upstairs. Let’s stash the loot, Zoot.”

### Near Hue, Viet Nam, 1974

Out on patrol. The stink of the jungle. The itch of the clothes, the chafing everywhere. Hell’d have to be an improvement, large.

As usual, the tall, thin blond man stood off by himself. Smoking, looking out beyond. Once in a while one of the others, most of them squatting in a circle, a few standing, nobody sits on this ground, bugs the size they are here, one would peek over his shoulder at the blond guy. They might’ve been talking about him, but probably not. They’d talked about him amongst themselves, talked and talked. The subject was old, stale.

The Dickwad approached. The Dickwad was short and pear-shaped, walked with a bearing like a large stick lived up his rear. A year or two older than the rest, a single gold bar on each shoulder. He marched up to the blond man.

“Have to investigate that cave.”

The blond man kept his gaze where it had been, drew on the cigarette.

“Did you hear me, soldier?” Silence.

“I just gave you an order!” The blond man squeeze-killed the cigarette, field stripped it, stuffed paper and filter in his pocket. Then he walked away.

“Damn it! Damn it!” The Dickwad looked around to the dozen in their circle. They turned away. “You! What’s your name – Amadio!

“Arangio, sir.” He pronounced it A-rahhhhn-gio.

“Go investigate that mine. On the double!”

With a sigh, the soldier stood up, slung on his rifle.

“Arangio, no.” The blond man, barely more than a whisper. Arangio stopped, looked at the Dickwad, at the blond man, who wore two stripes. The Dickwad strode right up to the blond man.

“Who the hell are you, *corporal*, to countermand my orders?” Shoulders pulled back, half on his toes. The blond man said nothing. “Consider yourself on record!”

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“Suck on this.” A whisper.

“What did you say!?” The blond man walked away. “Hey, get back here, you!”

The Dickwad, face red, veins appearing on the sides of his neck, stared after him five seconds, ten. “Goddamn cowards, all of you!” It came out as a screech. He whipped around and stalked off.

“Yo, Ghost.” One of the platoon. The blond man stopped. The man who called to him gave a nod to his left.

“Oh, shit.” This the blond man. “Hey, lieutenant. Lieutenant!” The Dickwad maintained his rapid stride. “*Lieutenant!* Aw, fuck.” He began to jog after. “Lieutenant!! Don’t go in there!” A dozen quick steps and he stopped abruptly. “Lieut–. Aah, Christ!” He spun around, sprinted back, back to his original spot, throwing himself on the ground. Seeing this, the others did the same. The Dickwad disappeared into the cave, fifty yards away. Several seconds went by. No sound, nothing. One by one, a chorus line, the others lifted their heads, peered back. Then over to where the blond man lay with his hands over his helmet, elbows on the ground. The blast came as a *whoosh*. As always. Powerful enough to take off branches. The heat quickly followed, a wave, passing over.

The blond man remained on his belly long after the others had stood up, looking open-mouthed to where the cave mouth no longer existed. He was muttering something, the blond man. Over and over. Slowly, he picked himself off the ground. They were looking at him, jaws slung low, but he didn’t bother looking back. He walked away.

## Hue, 1974

The black man walked into the bar, stood just inside the doorway, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light. The bar was full, almost, grunts getting drunk, talking loud, laughter. He let his eyes sweep the large room. One of the ho’s smiled, waved, called out something he couldn’t hear. He gave a half wave back. Off in a corner he spotted a man alone. The only table with a solo. He eyed the man, a smile forming on his lips.

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“Hey, man,” he said, approaching the table. The man, blond and lean, did not look up. “Look, y’all mind I sit down?” Nothing. He pulled out a chair, but didn’t sit. “I don’t mean to –. I mean –.” He gathered himself, took a long breath. “Amazing finding you here, bro.” He rolled his shoulders self-consciously. “You the one they call Ghost,” he said, a statement, but a question. Still no acknowledgement. “Well, they call me Spook,” he said with a grin.

The blond man made to stand up.

“No, look, really, man. I don’t mean to shit you. I’m not shitting you, honest. Please don’t go away. Please.” The blond man, half standing, looked up for the first time. No expression. Nothing.

“They do call me Spook. Same reason they call you Ghost. Except, well –” he gave a small laugh “– y’know, me, Spook fits. Sit. Sit. Please, bro.”

The blond man slowly returned to seated. “Lemme buy you a brew, yeah?” The black man nodded, half a wink, stepped quickly to the bar. “Yo, you mere mortals, make way for the Spook!” The black man’s loud voice carried over the raucous din. And they did, in fact, create a pathway. Two minutes later, he returned to the table, setting a brown bottle in front of the blond man, then took the chair opposite. They eyed each other, waiting.

“Thing is,” said the black man, “first I thought I was just lucky. You know? Close calls. Guys around me getting it, never me, never a scratch. Lucky.” He grabbed the bottle by the neck, took a couple of swallows. “But shit, man. I mean, couple times I was asposed to be a certain place, something happens, I’m not there, and *kapow*. Dudes get it. Guys begin to look at me funny. Even black guys. White guys look at you funny, that’s their prob. But black guys?” The blond man continued to stare.

“Soon, I’m beginning to feel weird. Rea-a-ally weird. I get edgy. You know how it is. Instead of, y’know, this gon be the day I get it? Which everyone thinks, ever’ goddamn day? Instead I’m thinking, I *cain’t* get it. I’m imperrrv-i-ous. Now that’s scary. Like, I should be feeling *good* about what’s gon down, whatever the hell it is. I’m not though. I’m feelin, how do I put it –?”

“Guilty as sin.” The first words from the blond man.

“Yeah. I mean, if it’s true, why me? Why my black ass bein looked after like it is? And it is, bro. I tell you that true. Don’t get me wrong,

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I'm no religious dude. Can't even tell you do I believe in the Big Bopper. But somethin, *somethin's* happening to keep me walkin and talkin and breathin."

A long silence, both men sucking on the beer. Staring.

"And then there's this one other thing." Silence. No-blink eyeballing.

"Well, this other thing, I don't, I mean, I can't —"

"You know when there's danger."

"Uh."

"Danger you can't see, can't hear, shouldn't be able to know about."

"Uh."

"Something in your body begins to signal you. Stronger the danger, stronger the signal."

"My fuckin *gums*, man. In the back here." The black man made a gun of his right hand, shoved the index finger into his mouth, towards the molars on the right, then on the left. "Sometimes, sometimes, they rattle so, throb so damn hard, like to loosen the teeth. I never told this to nobody before."

Silence. He looked the question over to the white man.

"I *hear* it. Inside my head. A kind of high-pitch wail, like a siren going off in my ears. When it's bad, and close, I feel my whole head's going to explode."

"And it's always —"

"Al-ways."

"Sheeut." The black man shook his head. "I thought the gums was bad. Sirens? Aw, man." Both men drew on their bottles. "Anyway, longest time, I'm convinced I'm going loopers. I seen it, y'know. You too, f'sure. Guys losing it. Losing it." Pause.

"And then I hear about you. Yo, everybody's heard about you. You're fucking legend, man. Wanted to find you, talk to you, see you got a handle on this shit."

"What kind of handle you looking for?" The blond white man leaned back, tilting the chair a slight rearward angle, off its front legs. "We're, what, the chosen? If I'm the chosen, how come I can't choose to be back home, outta this shithole." He looked hard into the black man's eyes, held it. "Okay, I'm the Ghost and you're the Spook. Big deal. I don't have any friends and don't want any. I want to keep alive and return Stateside, have a long and happy life."

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“Wife and kids and house in the burbs happy?”

“Aw c’mon, man.” They both snickered. “You think, after this, not just being here, that in itself should be enough, but whatever is happening to make us, suddenly, out of nowhere, make us, as you put it, impervious, or immune, or invulnerable, whatever, to getting hit, to being seriously wounded, to death itself, knowing bad shit’s a hair’s breadth away so other guys don’t know should they stick close to you or run the other way, all this makes us either special or flat-out fucking freaks, all this happening, just how in hell can I, me, how’m I gonna go back and be *straight*? Hm?”

He sucked more beer from the bottle, realized it was empty, set it down. The black man made to get up, but the other waved him back down. Stared across at him. Stared.

“There’s something else, isn’t there?” Paused. The black man looked at him curiously. Then became uncomfortable, squirming in his chair. “Something else,” the white man repeated. “Probably from your childhood. Something you’ve never told another soul. A secret about yourself. Something weird as hell. Something that initially scared the crap outta you, made you believe you were totally fucked up. Then later made you feel good. Strong. Special.”

The black man’s eyes now were huge, his mouth hung open. They stared at one another.

“Ah, never mind,” the white guy dismissed with a wave of the hand.

The black man broke into broad grin, his teeth showing large through the pink lips. “Hol-l-ly sheeut,” he said, a whisper. He turned his head, stared out the window for nearly a minute. Then leaned in close, as though anyone else could hear through all the noise.

“Brother, I got this idea. Been thinking on it huge. Thinking when I got back I could work it on my own. Now...” He shook his head. “Lemme lay it on you...”

### Suburban Philadelphia, 1975

The party was a few nights later. That is, there was a party every night. It was during the party the call came. The tall thin man was in bed with a blond

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and a redhead. All three were naked. A small mirror, white powder and a rolled-up Ben Franklin were on the floor next to the waterbed.

“Hey man, call,” a slim naked male with black rasta dreads and wispy beard said from the open doorway. When no answer came from any of the writhing three, he said it again.

“You might have noticed,” said the tall thin man, “that I’m a bit preoccupied.”

“It’s him. Says it’s, like, real urgent, man.”

“Christ.” He slithered across the bed, reached for the phone. “Hey bro, whatsit?”

“Geronimo.”

“Aw, c’maawn.”

“That Jew-babe, man. The earrings? They real diamonds all right. Only, see, she a klepto. Stole em. Apparently she do this, give the shit to niggas she goes down on. Then she tell the lawya husband all about it. He pull a string or two, get her off. Some sick shit, huh.”

“So there’s no problem.”

“*Is* a problem! This time the husband, he don’t wanna play. Maybe his balls dropped, dunno. Still, he ain’t gonna do in his missus. It’s me they comin for!”

“But the name they got is your game name, not your real one.”

“Yeah, but, see, the lawya, he been having her followed. PI dude. She know this, man. They got pictures a her coppin me. Got my license number.” Pause. “How I know this is serious shit?” Big sigh. “Been a long time, but.”

“Wait. Wait. The gums?” It might’ve been a soft assent, it might’ve been just a sound coming over the phone. “Don’t tell me the gums.”

“Like somebody in there playin – whattaya call it? – the Saber Dance on em. Feel like they’s about to tear loose and jump right out my mouth.”

“Shit, shit, shit.” Long pause. “You still there, bro?”

“Unh.”

“The time, I do believe, has come.”

“Hm. Yeah, well. Okay. Yeah.”

“Look, bro, I really think it’s for the best. Act’s grown tired and we’re getting that way. Look at us: it’s become a *job*. What kept us alive before

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was luck or God or the tooth fairy. Right? Well, same thing now. This is a blessing. Enough already – it’s numb!” This last called down to the redhead. “I think Geronimo’s a fine idea.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm.” Silence.

“Plan A?”

“Fuckin A. Got your locker key?”

“Don’t leave home without it.”

“If I don’t see you –”

“Somewhere in the fullness of time, babe.”

“Groovy, dude.”

The tall thin man hung up the phone. “Excuse me, girls,” he said, pulling free from the redhead. “Gotta run.”

“Hurry back!”

“Fraid not. Don’t look so sad. Keep the snow, okay? All yours.”

“Yippie!”

During the next fifteen minutes the tall thin man went about his business. He carried all trace of himself and the black man outside to an incinerator, made sure the fire was strong. He emptied the safe, stuffing large denomination bills in the pockets of a wide money belt, which he strapped inside his trousers. He took from a closet an already filled backpack, placed a few more articles inside, hoisted it on. He made his way through and out the house. Only a few people bothered to look up from what, or who, they were doing. No one said a word.

In the garage, he fastened the pack to the carrier of a big-ass Harley. Kick-started the motor, waited a minute while it warmed, then slowly meandered down the dirt lane and onto the road. The front wheel of the hog lifted slightly, then roared into the night. He did not look back.

## Book One

The first time I became invisible I didn't know I'd become invisible.

I was eight years old, sitting on the lawn outside our house playing with a toy dump truck. Wearing T-shirt and shorts, no shoes. I remember feeling a slight prickle on the back of my neck, reflexively swiping my hand back there to swat away what I assumed was a bug, and continued filling the truck with dirt, rolling it a few feet, then dumping it on a mound I was making. A few minutes went by. A woman passed on the sidewalk. I paid her no attention; just another old person. But when she stopped maybe ten feet in front of me, I looked up. Her eyes were huge, her hand covered her mouth. Suddenly she let out a scream and ran off. It was then I glanced at my hands holding the toy truck. I had no hands. Nor arms, nor feet, nor legs. I could feel them, yes. And could see the sleeves of my T and my shorts. But that's all. Me, my body, just wasn't there!

I dropped the truck and quickly wiggled backwards. I didn't catch on that I had become invisible; my first thought, in fact, was that something had happened to my sight. But why can I see my clothing and not me?

I picked myself off the ground and ran to the house, crying, "Maaaaaa!!!" My mother rushed to the screen door.

"What? What?" she cried in alarm.

"Ma, my body's gone! I lost my whole body!"

Through the screen, my mother gave one of her patented looks of exasperation. Upon which I stuck out my hands to show her there were no hands. Except my hands were back. As were my arms, my legs, my feet.

"Come in and have a glass of milk, my lovely retard." Her favorite word when I did something weird.

The next dose of invisibility came a few weeks later, in my room. I was



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sitting on my bed listening to a broadcast of the Lone Ranger. The same prickling on back the neck. Again, I assumed, a bug. And didn't associate it at all with the fact that no hands protruded from the sleeves of my jammies, nor feet from the jammy legs. This time I sat there holding my breath, listening to the voices of the LR and his faithful companion Tonto. Willing my hands and feet, indeed, as I pulled up the sleeves and jammy bottoms, arms and legs, to return. Again, I could feel them, feel my face with my hands that no longer were hands. I resisted jumping off the bed and looking at myself in the mirror. Arms and legs, yeah, okay. But I didn't want to see myself without a face. A few minutes must have passed (how would I judge time in a state like that?), then suddenly I reappeared in total, my heart pumping madly.

Once it happened in class. Fortunately, I sat at the back of the room, no one took notice. What I saw was a pencil standing upright, point upon the paper flat on the desk. I continued writing – or *it* did, on its own. I actually had a giggle, looked around to see if anybody was paying attention. But they all had their heads down, their own pencils attached to hands, writing. I made sort of a *huh* sound to Joshua, sitting to my right, but he just shook his head and kept on writing. Then I thought maybe it wasn't such a terrific idea sharing my new craziness. And, as before, after a few minutes of having no body that could be seen, I came back from wherever it was the visible part of me had gone.

A considerable time went by where it didn't happen, and I kind of forgot about it. Mentally shrugged and figured it was one of those very strange things that kids went through. I guessed I had outgrown whatever it was that caused me to lose my visible body, at least to my own eyes. Then, shortly following my ninth birthday, it happened again. And a few weeks later, again.

By this time I sensed there was something about me – about ME – that was different from everybody else, and I felt happy about that. There's nothing wrong with me; hell no, there was something *special* about me! Yes, that's it: I'm special, like the comic book heroes I loved. But what good was this special thing if I couldn't do anything with it. Could I use it to stop bad guys? If the city of Gotham shined a great searchlight in the night sky to summon me, what would be inside it? Nothing, that's what. So how would

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I even know it was me they wanted? (And what great feat of strength and cunning could a skinny kid perform anyway?)

It was in my ninth year that I learned to control it. It didn't happen right away. In fact, I tried to bring it on every night as I sat in my room with the door closed. Please, I thought. Make me become invisible! Nothing.

I was about to give up trying when one night, sitting on my bed concentrating, I felt the slight sting on back of my neck. I didn't associate it with anything for a few moments. Then I saw that the exposed parts of me had disappeared. This time I jumped off the bed and ran to the mirror. No face. No neck. No hands, as I waved them in front of me. Even when I placed them on my shirt, the shirt just stayed a shirt, nothing in the way. As before, a few minutes went by, a little longer duration than in the past. Suddenly, there I was again.

So, okay. Concentrate, light back-of-neck sting, invisible. And I worked on it. Oh, you bet I worked on it.

How long, weeks, a month, more? I could control it! Not a hundred percent. But mostly, yes. Both coming and going. And then I got a fright.

When I'd become invisible, I took to peeling off my jammies. Standing there in front of the mirror. Making faces with a face that wasn't, shadow boxing with fists not there. Holding up objects, as though they were defying gravity. I took to taking my weenie in hand, shaking it at the mirror, doing a little dance. Giggling. I was doing this one night when there came a knock at the door. "What's going on in there, I can hear you downstairs through the floor." Ma.

I was about to call out that I wasn't doing anything (my standard response to such questioning) when the door opened.

"Where -? His pajamas are on the floor but no -. What the -?"

I had the presence of mind to scurry under the bed.

"Leave me alone," I croaked. "I'm playing, um, French Foreign Legion. We, ah, we're on patrol in the desert and don't have any clothes on coz it's so hot. Ma? You hear me? I'm naked! Now go away and leave me alone!"

I squeezed my eyes closed and prayed she wouldn't peek under the bed. But my eyelids were invisible! I could see right through them! (With invisible eyes, no less.) I watched her legs as she moved close to the bed.

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Stood there as if deciding something. And then I saw her face, sideways, hair falling to the floor, looking straight at me!

“So, you’re naked. I haven’t seen you naked before? What, you’ve grown another appendage you’re ashamed for me to see? Now crawl out of there, put your pajamas back on and get to bed. Retard.” And walked out of the room. Which is when I saw that I had come back. I was visible. I lay there shaking for several minutes. Why – what had I done bad? Was it some kind of sin I’d committed? The eleventh commandment: thou shalt not become unseen?

The experience kind of sobered me up. I felt that I had been given a gift – yeah, that’s right, a gift. I had no idea what I was supposed to do with this gift, if anything, but it wasn’t a toy to play with. All the same, I was a kid, and what are kids but small people who play.

One day when nobody was home, I came in from playing football in a vacant lot. Had a glass of milk, and focused. In just a few seconds, I was invisible. But when I looked in the mirror, I wasn’t completely invisible. My knees were crusted with dirt, I had a bruise that showed a bit of dried blood, my fingernails were filthy. And all these showed in the reflection. Well, of course! I wondered about another thing. When I ate food during one of these invisible sessions, would the food show after it passed my lips? My mind said yes, most likely. But it didn’t. If I opened my mouth, I could see the food inside. But soon as I shut it, the food became part of me and therefore was as invisible as I was. And when I went to the bathroom, as soon as the pee or poop left me, well, it was no longer part of me, was it. The image of piss coming out of midair was a picture that had me breaking out in guffaws for days in school. Everybody thought I was nuts. And I suppose I was.

I must have read the book of Jules Verne half a dozen times. And of course saw the old black and white movie whenever it was on TV. But that invisible man wasn’t at all like me. It was a machine that made him transparent, and once that way, he was always that way. Wrapped his face in silly bandages to be visible.

As years went by I had less need to use my gift as a means of amusement. When I became an adolescent and discovered girls, a few of my high school friends found a way to peek through the wall separating the boys’ gym locker room from the girls’. Just a tiny crack, and only one of us at a time could squint through the tiny aperture. It occurred that I could just walk right in

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there, perv from up close. There was a problem with that, though. *I'd* have to be naked. And, sure, no one could see me in my nakedness, but I just knew it would happen: the mechanism, if you'd care to think of it as such, would go haywire and there I'd be, jaybird in the middle of the girls' shower. I could imagine the screams and shrieks, some of which my own.

A little later on I made a fascinating discovery. I could not become invisible, no matter how hard I concentrated, if someone were watching. I had never tried to lose my skin (that's how I began thinking of it) when somebody was around, still, it never occurred that I couldn't. One day I was in a park, alone, and thought it'd be nice to walk around naked, but when I tried...and tried...and tried: nothing. Then I noticed an old tramp peering at me through some trees. When he turned and moved off, I tried again. No problem. I did this quite a few times, same thing.

Animals were okay, I could do my deed in front of dogs, cats, cows, birds. But not people. Or cameras. I found this out when I tried to use a new Super 8 movie camera to film myself working the act. Nothing doing until I shut the camera off. Wee-ird.

When I was fifteen or sixteen, I had a scary experience. I was in a neighborhood I shouldn't have been. Some toughs were leaning against a wall across the street. They called out to me. I paid no attention. (Lie: I paid utmost attention, I just didn't look at them.) They called again, and again I kept on walking. Then they crossed the street. I began to run. Four of them started chasing me. My heart pounding, I ran for my life. I saw an alley up ahead, darted into it, and immediately focused on losing my skin. The process took just a few seconds. But there was a problem. I had clothes on.

I began peeling off my t-shirt, slipping out of my trousers and underpants. By then two of the toughs made their way into the alley. I'd discarded my clothing, but still had shoes and socks on!

I was halfway along the alley, but now all four were in there. They'd stopped at the entrance, looking puzzled. Should I reach down and untie my shoes, slip them off? And what about my ankle socks? No time. They were walking slowly along, looking everywhere. I quietly backed against the wall, kept still. There was an old paint-peeled door with a grill in front just past where I stood. They walked slowly by me, noted my clothes on the ground. As they passed within inches, one of them saw my shoes and

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socks. He stopped and continued to look down. I suppose he was thinking about taking them (for sure they were better than the ancient sneakers he was wearing), but one of the others called out to him. They were trying to open the door without success. The one next to me – I could hear his heavy breaths, smell his BO – looked up, looked down, kicked at my shoes (god, I thought he'd broken my foot!) before moving on. Soon as he did I stepped aside and silently tiptoed back out of the alley. When I got back to the street I stopped, turned and yelled, "ASSHOLES!!!" And ran away, delightfully wondering what my shoes and socks might look like running on their own.

You know what struck me most about the experience? Well, yeah, sure, I'd have to work up some plan of taking off and disposing of clothing in a hurry for future moments like this. But more than that, here was my thought: What did Clark Kent do with all the clothes he took off in those telephone booths? Did he just leave them there? Pinned a note If Found Please Return to...? He must've had a wallet with money and ID – what became of them? I mean, you just followed old Clark around, you'd have enough discarded clothes to start your own second-hand men's store.

When I was sixteen, I got in with a bad crowd. That's what you say, you start doing dumb shit, right? Bad crowd? What we did, us demonic dudes, we began breaking into places. Shops, rich people's houses. Security back then was nothing like it is now, of course (although I would later prove that I can pretty much outwit any kind of hi tech surveillance).

Mainly, there were two or three other teenage guys along with me. They knew nothing of my little gift; more, they thought of me as the one with the most guts, who dared go where no man had gone before me.

I always carried a small bag. Actually, a bag inside a bag. One was for discarded clothes, the other to stash whatever booty I found. I couldn't find gloves that were transparent, so began fashioning finger covers out of a new clear plastic product called Saranwrap.

I began growing more and more daring. After tossing the stash out to the others, who beat it away quick, I'd hang around, sit on a chair or sofa waiting for the cops and watching as they sleuthed around. Motion detectors could pick me up, of course – or rather, they could pick up *something*. Cameras, no. When I had enough fun, was certain no one was looking, I'd take my leave, dragging my bag of clothes with.

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My life of crime was cut short when I finally got caught – by dogs. A security guy came into this one house I'd just cleaned out with two huge leashed dobermans. They began tugging on the leather straps, yanking the security dude this way and that as they sniffed around. Then, as though suddenly they could see me, they made a beeline my way. I quick clambered atop a china closet, barely getting the back leg up before my foot was taken off by a snapping set of very sharp teeth. Barking like mad, they were, the security guy yelling himself hoarse for them to cut the shit out. I crouched very still. My heart was pounding so loud I swear it could be heard. The guy was pulling on the straps with all his strength, cursing the dogs, whacking them, kicking their backsides. I felt bad for them. But not all that bad. I had to wait quite a while until the dogs were taken out and locked back in their van. Then I walked out, still shaking, past the van, where I tapped on the back door and quietly growled. The poor crazy animals threw themselves at the door, lusting for my blood.

Okay, enough of that. By the time I graduated high school I hadn't lost my skin more than a handful of occasions since that final burglary. And those for no other reason than, as I thought of it, to keep in practise. I got a series of crap jobs, fired from every one. Bored to death, I needed something else to keep me from going nuts. I found it in Vietnam.

\*

I didn't use my invisibility in Nam more than, say, half dozen times, and never during actual engagement. Two reasons: peeling off the uniform, which, with the constant ninety-five degree heat and ninety-nine percent humidity, was like ungluing it from my body. A body with more sores and rashes than a Harlem crack house. And I would never, ever, take off my boots out there. Never know what you might step on.

When it became evident – and this took me through a long period of doubting and questioning before finally I began to accept it – that somehow, for whatever reason, I seemed to know without knowing I knew when not to be in a place where danger would be, it made no sense to become invisible when I was in fact invincible.

After meeting up with Walter, and accepting that he, too, had a guardian angel working overtime to keep his ass bulletproof, I felt a little easier that

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I wasn't the only grunt immune from death and disaster. Still, I never told him about the invisible shtick, even when he became the closest thing I ever had to a brother. Hell, closer than a brother, the unbelievable shit we shared over there. A few times when we were back in Pennsylvania, scamming the straights and screwing our brains out, I almost let it out. Following a couple very lucrative gigs, high on good bud, I had ideas of scaring the bejezuss out of him by putting on his Afro wig, the rest of me transparent, claiming I was his great grandfather Erastus come back from the dead. Funny it might've been, but also it might've done him in. As it was, hardly a night would go by one or the other of us didn't have a screaming nightmare. Nobody, *nobody*, came back from that goddamn war not severely fucked up.

Something else. It was obvious we both had special, ah, powers, if I may put it that way, that'd kept us alive and got us home with our nuts intact. If I could make myself invisible, what little tricks might Walter have up his sleeve. Dude could levitate? Foresee the stockmarket? I never raised the subject because I wasn't ready to share my funny bit. Don't ask, don't tell.

But Walter did have a trick – oh, yeah. Thing is, it wasn't until much, much later that his little trick made itself known. A trick that he himself never knew about; a trick that would change not only his life, but my own.

\*

After we split the house, Walter and I went separate ways. Me, I tooled around America for the best part of a year. In the beginning I would pull into a new town, check out the local Nam vets, see what they were into. But it was heavily depressing. For a while I became a one-man mobile VA, trying to rouse up the troops to get off their butts and begin leading fruitful lives. Anything, doesn't matter, just get on your feet and quit bitching that nobody loves you. Maybe I just didn't try hard enough. Maybe I came across as too smug coz I had beat both Charlie and the couldn't-give-a-shit American guv. Obviously wasting my time as a modern day Paul Revere, I got back into the two areas of endeavor I was both comfortable and pretty damn good at: getting laid and housebreaking. But the babes began eating into my financial reserves. And the burglary stuff showed me pretty damn quick that in the few years since I'd been doing it as a gig, things had changed in the game, and couple times I just barely got away with my skin. So I figured, can't beat



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em, join em. I went to work for a security agency in a fair-sized Midwestern city.

Top dog was a retired Nam officer name of Colonel Dick. I mean, how could a guy keep a name like that, even if he was the kind of arrogant bastard who loved a confrontation. He was a big-chested brute with tennis ball buzzcut and huge orange colored eyebrows. He had a way of furrowing his brow when he needed to show seriousness, the fuzz-ball hairline sinking down and eyebrows rising up almost to meet it. He was also a starrer. Dude does that to me, I simply slip into neutral, paste a silly smile on my face and look right back at him like I'm Howdy Doody and he's Buffalo Bob. We hung like that during the initial take for the longest damn time, me and Colonel Dick, till finally he looked down at my resume sitting on his oversized desk, back up at me.

“Why is it I think I know your name?”

“Dunno, sir. I never made it above corporal, so I don't think I had a lot to do with losing that war.”

“WE DID NOT GODDAMN LOSE IT!” If anybody *lost* it, was those bastards in Congress.”

During the five minutes his bellowing rant continued I kept it in neutral, homed in on a particularly curvy henna-head I'd wrestled with night before. When he came up for air, he hired me on the spot.

“Still think there's something about your name's familiar.” His hairline and eyebrows barely an inch apart. Yeah, dude, I thought. My name got around. Grunt who always knew where not to be.

The job was a cinch, and I learned a lot. How all the latest hi-tech gadgetry worked. Alarm systems and how to inactivate them without being detected. Motion detectors and just how to avoid setting them off. Where the rich clients keep their safes and how to break into them. Yep, I learned a shitload of good stuff.

The trick here was to come up with new tools to combat the enemy. I made myself some one hundred percent transparent gloves, a pair of booties and shower cap out of a new plastic material. Plus a swag bag from the same stuff. Not much I could do about what went into the bag, but I did discover that if I dragged it slowly along the floor or ground, it was easier to fool the cameras than swinging it over my shoulder.



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I found a trustworthy fence in another city for jewelry and convertible paper, and opened a host of bank accounts from Minnesota to Texas, always depositing less than the alarm-ringing ten thousand dollars in each. Between these accounts and what I kept on me in cash, I accumulated a sweet packet in no time at all.

I had enough sense to plan my expeditions intelligently and to curb my greed, so it wasn't either of those that almost got me nailed. Was my warped sense of justice what nearly did me in.

I was finding more than cash and jewels and negotiable bonds in these heists. I was finding evidence that human beings were not the nicest species going. Now, documentation of others' unsavory doings was one thing, blackmail being the prime avenue to wealth and power. But I could never figure out why bad people insisted on keeping records of their own nasty deeds.

I began taking records I figured wouldn't be missed right off. (Figured wrong, as it turned out.) As well I now carried a miniature camera. Never tried to convert my pilfered evidence into money. Instead I used these to nail the bastards. Anonymous packages began making their way into selected newspaper city rooms.

Poor old Colonel Dick was having apoplexy. It got so, you had a hard time catching any forehead daylight at all between top and lower hairlines. Fortunately, a routine invisible search of the agency's own safes revealed a memo which told me I was under suspicion. Indeed, Dick had checked into my military background and, while nothing had ever been put on paper, word of mouth about my reputed invincibility had worked its way through the grapevine. There was also a report from the suburban Philly police department. They were getting close. Once again, it was time to take the money and run.

I told Dick I'd had an offer to buy into a business on the Coast and wanted to check it out. Flew out to California and sent him a letter of resignation. Then I hired a car and drove back to his city, where I pulled off a few more jobs on the agency's clients. Figured that at least that'd give him pause thinking it was me who did the earlier jobs.

Walter, meanwhile, was getting into trouble of his own. Time after time he scooted out of a jam just in the nick. Finally it caught up with him in

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Mexico, where he got set up on a dope deal by – what else? – a babe. His screaming gums gave him ample warning, unfortunately not as ample as the roundness of her bottom. Damn, Walter!

I had enough gelt to bribe his way out, sure. But it was cheaper, and a hell of a lot more fun, to walk into that ancient jail, steal a set of keys, and unlock his cell door. He was in there with half dozen other guys, ugly looking hombres. He was asleep when I approached, put my hand over his mouth.

“Psst, Walter!” I whispered. His eyes went wide as saucers. “What the fuck! What the fuck! How –?”

“Shhh. Get up and just follow me out the door. On your feet, bro.” I pulled him off the smelly cot to his feet. His hand on my shoulder, we tiptoed past the door, which I then closed and locked. “Don’t rush. Just walk naturally.”

“I don’t believe this shit is happening. I’m drug-dreamin this. I know it. I mean, look at you. You’re balls naked! Oh, god. They drugged me, and when they catch my ass they gonna shoot me, right?” He made a move back to the cell. I turned him around, led him in the other direction.

“Just trust me, bro.”

“Trust. Got it. Just follow your naked white ass and I’m home free.”

We worked our way past the guard I’d coldcocked then tied to a chair and gagged. Out the main door and into the street. I stayed behind him, directed him past an alley where I said for him to wait. I ducked in, slipped into my clothes and shoes.

“Okay,” I said, appearing fully clothed. “Let’s vamoose. I got wheels just round the next corner.”

He didn’t say a word as we got in the car, stayed silent for maybe ten minutes after we drove off. Then: “I wanna make sure I got this straight. You strip off in an alley. Waltz into that jail nude. Find keys to my cell. Get me out. Past the amigo you tied up. Once outside you go into the alley you left your duds and put em back on. You won’t believe this, but I just might have a question or two concernin your technique.”

I giggled. “These new clothes, babe. Look here at the labels. Not cheap, no way. If things get a little rough in there, you want I should bloody up my new stuff? Where’s your priorities!”

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“Yeah, I guess.”

We made for the border.

\*

“There was this one moment over there,” Walter said dreamily as I was driving along the highway between Oceanside and San Clemente. “Was on patrol, got a bit separated from the squad. I was comin out of the denser forest when I seen this Charlie maybe ten yards away. We both spot one another same time, both of us duck behind trees. No time to think, I just aim the rifle at him. I could see him peekin out from his tree, rifle pointin at me. A thought struck: why are we not shootin? Even more, why are my gums not screamin like they should be? My never-fail danger signal’s failin me? I mean, sheeut, ten yards, bro! I’m lookin at him through my sight. He’s lookin same at me. Yet neither of us firin. This stare-me-down goes on, maybe minutes. Then, weirdest thing. He points his piece down and I do the same. No thinking about it, just done it. We look at each other. Black man and yellow man, just lookin. Then he turns and moves away. I do the same.

“Man, I had me some heavy thinkin after that. Know what I think? Fuck I’m doin here, a million miles from home, killin guys who’re doin no more than defendin their homes. Any these dudes ever call me nigga? Give me shit coz I got the skin I got? Kept my ancestors as slaves? I’m in the middle of somebody else’s civil war, hell m’I doin here! Occurs I’m still a slave, no less than my granpappy, doin the white man’s biddin. Killin folk who just want to be free of outside oppressors. Yeah, lotta thinkin. But don’t say a word to nobody. This the first time I ever mention, even to you.

“So I come back here, America, supposedly my home, totally screwed up, no assistance from my government, no admission from them bastards that Agent Orange is eatin up my brain and blood. When we was scammin, getting high alla time and gettin laid most of the time, things was cool. Then we split, law on our ass. Since then, since then, all I do is get in trouble. I do stupid shit, know I’m doin stupid shit, it’s like I’m a junkie, can’t quit. My signals keep me from goin under, but I know it’s only a matter of time. Blew all the money we made real quick, then start playin around with bigger and bigger fires. Like I wanna be dead, but got no balls to do it myself. So I’m doin it the long way. Suicide by stupidity.”

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“You think I’m much different? Breaking in to rich people’s houses, stealing not only money but evidence that will maybe get these evil pricks done in, though truth is very few have, and you know damn well very few will. Am I such a goody-goody, me, a bad ass from the get-go, I suddenly want to right the wrongs of the world? And you can flush that weebegone black fella rap down the gurgler. Me, I’m suburban lily white, growing up protected and pretty much loved before the m and d crashed their wagon and left me to foster homes as a teenager, and often I felt the way you did over there: a puppet doing the man’s ugliest work. When crazy Calley and his brain-dead bastards wiped out all that village, people doing no harm, didn’t even have a single weapon among them, I thought, first time, these little dudes in their black pajamas? Man, they’re not the enemy, I am!”

We drove, I reckon, another fifty miles not a peep between us. Then Walter looks over to where I’m sitting behind the wheel.

“I do believe I know what our next project is.”

## **San Francisco**

We spent three months getting in shape. Serious work, serious shape. After we got ourselves a nice pad in the city, a place where two males, one black, the other white, could fit in and not attract so much as a glance, we joined a gym, got ourselves personal trainers. Busted ass. Weights, bags, cardio, self-defense. Jogging, first level streets, then up all those crazy hills. Walter was really into it, gave me shit when I felt the need to slack off. No booze, no dope, only now and again babes. Was like he was possessed, admitted he’d never had such passion.

We didn’t talk much about what we would set out to do. Yeah, it’d come up, but we wouldn’t let it go far. Later.

One day, we were making dinner together, he said, “This burglary shit. How you get so good at it?” I tried to let it pass. “C’mon, I know you got something up.”

“You wouldn’t believe it.”

“Try me, all right?”

Long, silent pause. “Okay. I make myself invisible.”

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“Got it. And I become Mary Poppins.”

“See? See what I mean?”

“Right. Invisible.” He snorted. “Show me, bro.”

“Can’t. It doesn’t work when anybody’s looking. Not even when there’s a camera on me. No idea why.”

He turned his back. Raised the spatula in his hand. “Am I lookin? Am I? So do it.”

I tossed it around. Well, why the hell not. I whipped off my sweat shirt, the T under it, down with trousers and underpants. Kept the shoes and socks on though.

“Are you reaaady? Can I loook now?” He turned around. “Eh? Dude? Fuck you go, man?”

“I’m right here.”

“Here? Where here?”

I began a little tap dance. Well, the shoes and socks did. Me, I was... invisible.

“Aaaiiiiiieeeeeee!!!! What the fuck! What the fuck!” Hyperventilating.

“And you think white boys can’t dance.”

“Stop it! Whatever the fuck you doin, just stop it. Where the hell are you, man?”

“Reach out your hand.”

“My hand.”

“Stick it out.” He did. I slapped it. He recoiled as from an electric shock.

“Man, this not funny. Fuck are you? C’mon, man!”

“Turn around again.”

“I don’t believe this shit. You’re scarin me, dude.” He turned back as I was pulling up my pants. Looked at me. “This some kinda sleight a hand bullshit, right? Please say I’m right. Hypnosis you doin on me, now I see you, now I don’t?”

“Nope. It’s kosher. Been doing it since I was eight,” zipping up my fly. “How you think I got into that dilapidated old jail, sprung you out?”

He pulled out a kitchen chair, stumbled a step, fell back into it. Not a word, longest while. When his color had returned to normal: “Wasn’t no sleight a hand, was it. You really did it. You *can* do it.” I shrugged.

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“You know, when I was a kid,” he said, “I went to ball games a lot. Football especially. Got so, I knew what they were gonna do before they did it. Callin em to impress the other little guys. Left end run. Off tackle slant. Down and out to the tight end. Fun at first. But I was right too much. Other kids began shying away. And wasn’t just sports. Many things, most things. Wasn’t like I was reading minds or anything. I just knew. Like I was jumpin ahead in time in my mind a little bit. Became confusing, liked I had double vision, half now, half a little ahead of now. What I had to learn, how to *stop* that shit. Put a lid on, control it.”

“Ever try it at cards?”

He grinned. “Jokin? Thing is, like them early days at the games, I didn’t play it smart. Winnin too much. Got greedy. Couple times got my ass whupped, guys say I’m cheatin. Took it to the casinos. Blackjack best. I knew every single time what the dealer had down, what his next card gonna be. And the wheel. Thought I was being smarter. Never played a single number. Just groups or color. Even had nights when I’d lose on purpose. Still, big boys don’t like it, a nigga winnin, reckoned I was card countin, or a fix was in at roulette. Word gets around fast in that league. Soon I couldn’t so much as set foot one a them places.

“Now, I heard about these guys, right. Special talents. Dude name of Ingo Swan?” He was asking had I ever heard of the guy. Shook my head. “This Swan dude, man. You give a map location, longitude, latitude, any place on earth. He tells you *exactly* what’s there. Assholes figured he learned hisself the coordinates of the entire world, but he say no, I just send my mind to that place. Govmint started givin him secret installation coordinates. He’d tell em what they got. They shit. Then they wanted him to do the same in Russia. But the dude’s righteous, tells em he ain’t spyin for them, no way.

“Then I hear about this Uri Geller, Israelite dude, shit he doin. Pisses people off, they say he doin like I figured you be doin, sleight a hand. But he ain’t. One time, over in England, he doin his gig on BBC. Millions watchin. People begin callin in, saying all kindsa shit happenin. Appliances begin workin on they own. Even things not plugged in started up. All this documented.

“And buncha psychic healers I read about. One old Christian lady, she in New England somewhere, name Olga Worrell, could use her powers to

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zap some sick person anywhere in the world, make em better. Scientists cry bullshit, only quacks and chemicals can do that. So to prove the lady lyin, these scientist types arm theyselves with gadgets, set up in a room in California where this sick person lyin in bed. Say to Miss Olga, okay, start your zappin eight o'clock sharp. Eight sharp, well it's five where they are, West Coast and all, suddenly, suddenly, needles on they gadgets start gone shitloose pickin up all this energy. Soon as Miss Olga quit what she doin, those needles go back to sleep."

"How come you know all this stuff?"

"I read, that's how. I'm interested coz of the little bit I can do myself. Wanna know am I some kinda freak? But these books say no, man, I'm just paranormal. Which means --"

"Yeah, yeah, I know what it means."

"Like, this one book, *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain*. Coupla Canadian babes write it. What they do, go over there, Russia, check out a whole buncha straaange stuff they hear about. One lady, she could teleport things, know what I mean? Make em move just by her thinking on it. One day these scientist types come round her place, say, 'We hear what you claimin, girl. Well, we scientist types, we know you can't do that kinda shit.' While they sittin there round her kitchen table, telling her she a fraud, there be this chunk a bread on the table. Suddenly that chunk a bread begins to move cross the table on its own. Faster n faster, towards her, scientist types sittin there bug-eyed. Suddenly the chunk a bread leaps up right into the lady's mouth, she begin to chew on it. Scientist types get up, not a word, walk on outta there. These two Canandian babes document all kinds a weird sh--." He glances over to me. "Uh, no weirder than what you just done, I guess. Still. According to these babes, fuckin Russians been doin this stuff for years, govment behind em."

"I just remembered something else I'm able to do."

"No more super-weird shit, man. I already peed my pants the last one."

"Nah, has to do with sex. Happens sometimes I'm with a babe, not all the time, not even maybe twenty percent. See, I go down on her --"

"Aw, yuk."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Against your principles, you being a real man and all. With me, what happens is, get my nose in the bush, lapping away at the

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honeycomb, all of a sudden I go into, don't know how to describe it, some sort of zone. It's like a wave of total peace sweeps over me. I'm no longer even aware of the physical act. Then I begin seeing images. A movie in my head. They're always different. One time, I remember, I see a handsome older man, tall, stately, white hair, gentle chiseled face. He's wearing an old fashioned green corduroy suit and standing outside a barn. There's an Irish setter with him, dog's name is Sean. I see all this, clear as crystal. After me and the babe get done, just lying there, I tell her about the old gentleman, ask who he is. She just stares at me. When I begin describing the scene in detail, she bursts out crying. 'That's my grandfather!' Was, he's long dead now. 'When I was a girl,' she tells me, 'I used to spend the summers at his farm. I loved that man so. And his setter was named Sean! Hey, how do you know all this? You've been checking up on me?' Women. Can't appreciate true wizardry.

"This has happened with a number of different babes, but like I say, no more than maybe one in five. When I tell them what I've seen, it's a hundred percent spot-on."

"Tough booking an act like that. 'Will the lady in the pink dress sittin in the fifth row please come up onna stage. Thank you, now if you'll drop your panties and sit on the wizard's face...' Only, how you gonna tell the audience what you vidge-you-lyzin, she got her twin moons mashin your kisser?"

Walter rose up off the chair, walked around the kitchen a bit, touching things, wall, stove, fridge, to restore himself to an even keel.

"But, y'know, ol Einstein, he say we use maybe ten percent of our brain. Most people I know, he be damn generous with that number. Still, still, what's the rest of it entail? Even if you just double it, you're using twenty. Mean you can do algebra twice as fast? Nah, man, I think it means you can do all kinds of shit people now think is either sleight a hand or work of the devil. Dudes in India long been able to control their autonomic nervous system, which Western docs say nah, that's impossible. And bury theyselves underground for days, come up alive. Maybe, I don't know, maybe this is stuff we all potentially capable of, and maybe in the future, we don't blow the shit outta ourselves first, everybody be able."

He sat back down and spent several minutes staring at the floor. "But invisible? Dunno I wanna go there, bro. That's some heavy shit. Whew."



## **Amazon Basin, Brazil**

In the jungle. Not the same jungle as before, but a jungle is a jungle. Next to me, virtually invisible in his camouflage amongst the huge leafy trees, Walter with his rifle. I had one as well, but I was second gun here. (I'd walked into a Brazilian military armory, walked out dragging the two plus a bag of ammo. Naked, of course.) Mainly, my job here was manning the fancy special binocs I had stolen. But since he had a 50x sight on his weapon, I was no more than second watch as well.

Walter was in charge here because he had two advantages. He was a far better shooter. And he didn't have to rub black polish on his face to keep it from glowing amongst the trees like a searchlight.

Five hundred meters off, the biggest, ugliest machinery yet invented by the most destructive species in history was ripping up the rainforest, tearing out great trees by their roots like villainous other-worldly terrorists. Which, in a manner, they surely were.

I glanced over. He was supremely focused. But that's not what kept my eyes glued his way. How the man had changed the past some months. He'd got his act together and then some since we busted out of that Mexican shithole jail. He'd done far more and better than me in his body work at the gym and on the streets. Plus he was meditating daily now, sometimes two, three times a day. And he'd gone and become a goddamn vegetarian, for chrissakes! Worse, a *vegan*!

"God didn't put animals on this earth for me to eat em," he said one day when I was kidding him about his new regimen. "Besides, everything I read, they say eating flesh bad for yo ass."

"But eggs? And honey? What the fuck!"

"No bees never call me nigga." His standard reply.

"I've notice you haven't cut out pussy."

"Pussy don't hurt nobody. No damage to the environment. Besides, I make the ladies feel good. Benefits all round." He had, though, cut down measurably on his whoring around. "Jes gettin in shape for our mission."

## Barry Rosenberg

“I reckon we’re ready,” I now whispered over.

“See it.”

He got off three quick shots. “Bingo,” I said quietly. He’d hit the first two machine operators in the arm. The one furthest away screamed and grabbed his ear. Walter’d shot it off. All three were alive, but shaken.

Which was our plan.

We beat it out of there in a hurry. But we’d be back. Soon, the message would be clear: you jockeys are just the donkeys here; you’re not our main target. Still, get in one of those nasty killing machines ever again you’re going to lose blood. This is a warning. Go home. Let the bosses drive the monsters. Them, we might not let off so easy.

## San Francisco

It was on the drive north from Mexico the seed was planted. Started out as a joke that’s not a joke.

“What do we do best in life?” Walter suddenly wondered an hour out of LA. “We seem to know when danger’s in the neighborhood, avoid getting hurt or killed. But that’s jes survivin. What can we do? Actually do?”

I knew where he was going with this, but to be sure waited for him to say it.

“US Army teach us how to kill. Okay, we killers. So?”

I looked over from behind the wheel, nodded just slightly. “So... who?”

“Oh, lotsa folks I got in mind. Bad people. Real bad. Rich, too.”

Long silence.

“Thing is –” Both of us said this the same time, like a sisters singing act.

“Me, I don’t want it personal. That makes me bad as them. ‘Yo, you rich bad muthuh, take that, bang!’ What right I got to play vigilante? Or the big guy.”

We rode an another ten miles, not a sound. Finally, “If I’m gonna take somebody out, it has to be for some good. Lotsa good, not just strokin my own ego.”

## Spook & Ghost

“Pedophiles.”

“Bankers.”

“Rapists”

“Mob bosses.”

“Top dogs at the vilest corporations.”

“Greedy developers.”

“Sleazy televangelists.”

“Rich old white bastards who start wars and then have poor young brothers go fight em and get they asses killed.”

“Well,” I said finally, “I’ve got no problem deleting any of them. My question is, would it do any real good? Kill a big banker, another asshole suit takes his place. We do this, we have to sit down and plan intelligently.”

“We limit this to Americans?”

Good point. We thought about it. “Nah, let’s think big. Go multinational.”

When we’d found our pad in SF, set up house and got comfortable, we discussed it non-stop for a bit.

“Tell you what,” I said one day. “We agree we want to do this. But before we establish the who, we have to get ourselves in the best shape possible to bring it off. Like boot camp, only we carry out our own discipline. Extra-hard grunt. You in?”

I figured this might end it, Walter being even worse than me at the D word. And I was pretty lousy. But he surprised me. Surprised the hell out of me, actual fact.

\*

Whereas in the Amazon we didn’t actually murder anybody, our second gig we did a hell of a lot of killing. More than 50,000, we figured.

Of course, they were chickens. We blew up humongous warehouses of battery chickens, stuffed into tiny cages, their beaks and feet cut off, injected with horrible chemicals to make them grow faster. This in Texas, home of the worst animal depredations on the planet. These poor beings were better off dead. We’d far rather have killed the people who ran these concentration camps, but destroying their profits, we agreed, was enough for the time being.

## Barry Rosenberg

The next deal I took on mainly by myself, Walter serving merely as lookout. Again, nobody was offed. I dragged huge plastic bags of used oil into the corporate headquarters of the largest oil company in America and dumped them on the furniture and plush carpeting of the top executive offices. And for the first time I left our mark, a newly-designed logo: two Casper-like figures side by side, one black, holding up a rifle, one white, waving an AK47. Spook and Ghost were here, motherfuckers.

We had arrived at our company name following a long debate. I thought I, Ghost, should come first. Spook had his own agenda. We flipped for it; he won. (As he knew he would.) Still, we refrained from adding the words Hit Men to the title. It was something we didn't care to talk about, but finally we did.

"Ain't the same as doin it in a war. Even in a war they didn't call a war."

"You afraid?"

"Hell no! Well, yeah, a little. Maybe even more than a little."

"I know. Me too."

"Which means –"

"I'm well aware what it means: we gotta do it."

As it turned out, we didn't have to go looking for a mark. The mark, in a sense, came to us.

While we slackened our early workout pace considerably, we were still going to the gym two or three times a week. Following an hour of grunt and cardio, nobody else in the changing room, I stepped in the shower stall. I heard a couple guys come in, thought nothing of it, about to turn the tap when a bit of their low conversation got to me.

"...says the old guy keeps his stash in a..."

"...so you get the babe and the cash..."

"...is even more into it than I am. He's got her huge in the will..."

"...just be sure she don't find some other schmuck later on to take you out the same..."

"nah, man, babe's hot for my big cock like you wouldn't..."

I quietly opened the stall door and tiptoed out. Stood five feet from where they sat in their jocks. I'd seen them in the gym: big, ugly bastards, especially the one planning to do the deed. Never liked him.

## Spook & Ghost

Later I told Walter. “You mean the racist prick always saying cute things about blacks when I’m around? Bro, I have no problem whatsoever taking him down.”

After a little detective work – first following the gym guy, then the woman he met up at a café – I tracked the flash apartment she and her much older businessman husband lived not far from the Coit Tower. Walter and I staked it out for a few days. The gym guy visited every afternoon, stayed a couple hours. Afraid if we let it go on it might be too late, we decided to act the next time he showed.

I followed him into the elevator, along the corridor to the door. When he entered I slipped in right behind him. They were discussing how they were going to do it, make it look like a robbery gone bad. I thought, maybe we should call the cops. I thought, man, if we don’t take advantage of this perfect opportunity...

When they were bouncing on the bed, I stepped out, stuck a wedge in the door, hurried down and waved Walter in through the service entrance. He carried a medium-size daypack. Up the fire stairs, into the apartment. We stood in the open doorway of the bedroom. On the bed, they were still doing the lunge and plunge. The woman had damn near a perfect body. Her face would’ve been just as beautiful except for the permanently inscribed hard, angry lines. Walter took the 9mm with the home-made suppressor from his bag, cleared his throat loudly. The brute twisted around, his huge erection working free from its fleshy scabbard.

“Wha? What the f–? Oh, Christ, it’s the little roly-poly jigaboo from the gym. You come to sniff it when I’m done here, boy?”

Walter shot him in the left eye. Blood spurted everywhere. The woman began screaming, leapt off the bed and ran with fingers curled, long painted nails out towards Walter. He backed away, bumped into a dresser. The woman tried slaking his face, spitting and screaming. Walter put up an arm, then the other one holding the gun, fending her off as he backed into the wall. I was still invisible. I ran to her, pulled an arm. She looked over, saw nothing, appeared confused for a moment. Which is when Walter punched her. Not hard, just warding her off. But she kept coming at him, a wildcat.

“Bro! Bro!! Get her off me!”

I again tried yanking her arm, but again she shrugged me off. Tried

## Barry Rosenberg

again. No success. I grabbed Walter's daypack, stuck a hand in, frantically felt around. Nothing I could use. I looked at the shoulder strap. I worked the strap over her head, but it got stuck on the bridge of her nose, would go no further down. If anything, she fought fiercer. Walter was yelling at high volume. I tried again. Slipped it over her face, past the chin, around her throat, the bag hanging sideways behind her neck. A length of the strap in each hand, I switched my hands over crosswise, twisted the bag a few times, tightening the noose. Pulled. Was like she didn't even feel it. I yanked her rearwards, stuck a foot on her butt. Pulled harder. I could hear her gagging. She fell back, knocking into me. I lost balance and fell to the floor, the babe on top of me, still fighting. I had a knee in her back now so her head, neck and upper body were at an angle while I was flat beneath her. I kept tugging at the cord.

"Enough, bro!" I could hear Walter calling out. But she still fought, pounding my sides with her fists, ramming her butt hard into my crotch again and again. I didn't stop because I couldn't stop. Walter came around to my side and tried pulling my invisible arms away. It was like they were frozen solid. I was finally about to let go when everything...stopped. She fell back onto me, the back of her head whacking my jaw. And lay there. Walter, who was on his knees now, looked at her, looked at me, then flopped onto his bottom. Total quiet, except for my manic breathing.

"Oh, shit," he said softly. "Just...shit."

None of us moved. The babe, she couldn't move. We could but didn't.

"I guess we done it, man. Spook&Ghost, your friendly neighborhood fuck-up assassins."

We quickly arranged the scene to look like how we'd planned it, or sort of planned it, as the original idea had been just to knock the babe out. I took the suppressor off, wrapped her right hand around the gun, index finger on the trigger, my transparent gloved finger on top of hers, and fired into the chunk of foam rubber we'd brought. Left the gun. We looked around, found a silk stocking, wrapped it around her neck to get some of her on it, then placed it in the guy's hands. We'd made enough of a racket somebody must have called it in. Heard sirens as we were running down a back alley.

Home, we two hardened vets from a prolonged war stood there shaking like we had the palsy and pacing the floor. Walter found some dope I didn't

## Spook & Ghost

even know was in the apartment, rolled a doobie. We smoked it down to nothing in a hurry.

We'd made an unbelievable balls-up, Jesus did we ever. But it proved to be an education. Killing rule number one: never underestimate your enemy, even if – especially if – she has a great ass.

As it turned out, nothing was ever traced to us, or to anyone beyond the villainous couple. The media reported a simple lovers quarrel gone bad, and since both parties had long records, the end they'd come to was hardly surprising. Couple days of news, then nothing. The woman's much older husband cried for the TV cameras.

"I loved her," he said through tears. "Doesn't matter what she'd done, I loved her."

\*

We decided that trying to make things look like an accident, or fudging things to implicate others, was the wrong way to go. Our acts from here on had to make a statement. Which is how we chose our second victim.

A top Wall Street banker, his hedge fund company pouring money into weapons manufacturing, drug smuggling, prostitution, kiddie porn, big oil and pharma. A sweetheart. Never arrested. According to the media, a top contributor to worthy causes. Board member of untold significant organizations. President of Long Island's primo-echelon synagogue, friend to the governor and both senators. In all the pictures, he and his ex-debutante trophy wife, always smiling, but the eyes of an SS commandant.

Trick was to get him away from his battalion of security people. That was my job. Walter, once again, was the smoking gun. This one would be a bit shaky, for no other reason that I'd have to get close enough to the guy to take down one or more of the phalanx of guardians with thick necks and curly black wire spilling out their ears, at the same time far enough out of line not only of the bullet which would be speeding in from hundred of meters off, but the resultant splatter of red that might appear just a little strange hanging in midair. Hopefully, that blood wouldn't be my own.

"Trust me," Walter had said.

"Yeah, babe, that I do. What I don't trust all that much is there's gonna

## Barry Rosenberg

be movement, and no way I can signal you where I'll be. You may have my back, just remember you won't be able to see my back. Or the rest of me."

"God's will, my brother. He knows we're on His mission, and He gonna protect us, see us through."

And though I didn't say it, the fact that Walter had begun talking like this since we killed the woman, like he'd joined the god squad, made me nervous, some.

\*

It was damn chilly for a summer's evening, and I was freezing my naked balls off as I watched all the tux and ball gown-bedecked beautiful people gather. The festivities were taking place amidst the flawlessly landscaped gardens of the Bnai Zion country Club. As it grew dark, the stars popped out as though loathe to disappoint the assembled power below.

All the bigs were judiciously seated at the head table, our handsome target, tall, golden tanned and silver of temple, smack in the center, his gorgeous wife to one side, governor on the other. Speeches by dignitaries. Applause. Awarding of plaques. Louder applause. And then a helicopter came out of the east, circled around and landed with fanfare not far from the main doings. The Prez? Moses? Nope. Billy Joel.

The squat composer/singer/pianist played three numbers perfectly delivered through the world's best sound system, stood for tumultuous applause, sat back down to perform two encores. Please, no more! I thought. Normally I like Joel, but I'd spent the past two hours dancing around trying to get warm, quietly thwacking my body to promote circulation, which appeared to have wholly abandoned me. Thankfully, Joel now jogged back to the helicopter, which blasted off to return the man to his nearby northern shore lair.

A few more short speeches, and finally everybody got up to go. A-frame hugs and air kisses all around. The main man's retinue of muscle quickly gathered around their boss. Time for action.

I could only hope Walter hadn't fallen asleep out there in the surrounding bush. I know he'd brought a large thermos of coffee. But hating cold as he did, he'd also brought sweater, jacket, woolen gloves and hat. So where I had been doing the heavy work, standing around without a stitch, he'd been lying about in warmth.



## Spook & Ghost

The biggest problem of this, and any similar future missions, was the total lack of communication. I couldn't even wave a handkerchief. Someday, technology would come up with earpieces and microphones the size of dingleberries. Not yet. Sigh.

Six black suits now surrounded the man. Every NFL quarterback should have such protection. They moved slowly so the man could pause now and then to shake prominent hands. I chose the guy at his eleven o'clock. When they got free of the mass of assembled, about to quicken pace to the limo, I walked over, kicked behind eleven o'clock's left knee with the side of my foot. When he stumbled, I yanked his left upper arm. Losing balance, he swayed, tried to regain his footing, whereupon I grabbed hold of his collar and pulled with all my might. He fell sideways. I immediately dove away from the huddle to avoid contact with sprawled security guy and/or incoming bullet. I lay there face-down on the short grass, arms over my head. After a few seconds, I peeked over. The other blockers looked over at their fallen comrade, but didn't lose a step. If anything, they squeezed in closer to the target. These guys were good.

Well, shit, Walter. I freeze my ass off out here and you –

I saw nothing, heard nothing, but suddenly the target stopped, bent over slightly, his forward leg buckled and he seemed to melt in his tracks like a pop-up toy refolding. I just got a glimpse of the blood spouting out the right side of his forehead before his twisting body turned away from me.

I jack-in-the-boxed in no time flat, moved away from the confusion fast as I could. I heard myself quietly cry ooh-oooh as I ran with no more than thin plastic foot protection over pebbles, then trying to avoid stonier ground I smacked hard into a white-coated waiter carrying a tray piled high with empty champagne glasses, knocking him on his haunches, glassware flying everywhere. I could feel splashes of liquid land on my back as I scurried off.

We met up several minutes later at the car we'd stashed. No Walter in sight, but the doors were unlocked, as was the trunk. I lifted the lid and grabbed my clothes, spotting the stock of a rifle under a blanket. As I slipped into my welcomed clothing, Walter appeared from wherever he'd hid himself. We stood there staring at one another. Then we both stepped forward and grabbed a quick hug, chest to chest.

No air kisses, though.

Don't want anybody to think we were full-time killers, whether in planning or execution. (Ooh, don't you marvel at *that* word!) We had a life. Lives, rather.

I continued to perform the occasional visit to rich people's homes, leaving them somewhat less rich. Never in the city. Sometimes I'd travel a thousand miles and more, north, south, east. Was need, not greed. We were spending money, no doubt more than average due to our lifestyles and traveling. The money I brought home was intended to be equally divided amongst the shareholders in Spook&Ghost Inc., but early on Walter objected.

"Up to me to find my own way of makin bread," he announced.

"Okay, doing what?"

"Would it offend you if it was somethin legit?"

Walter had vision. Certainly a specific vision. Due mainly to Silicon Valley, housing in the city was booming, and Walter had a knack of sussing out fringe areas which he claimed would soon be gentrifying. We formed a corporation – S&G Associates – with the help of a sharp lawyer we'd met at the gym. The lawyer, Simon, was a born-again yuppie, and in addition to lawyering, he was a prime wheeler dealer. Short, trim, curly hair and startling blue eyes in an almost pretty face, he was always handsomely tailored. He might not have been addicted to the stuff he put up his nose, but for sure he was to the party scene it created.

One night at such a nose candy affair Simon the yuppie lawyer wheeler dealer made a play for a knockout woman. She seemed game; her boyfriend? Not so much. Later, as Simon was assisting this curvy treasure into his sleek Datsun Z, the boyfriend and a couple mates grabbed him, spun him around and proceeded to beat him badly. As the woman stood silently off to the side, they made threats to the bloody body lying on the street concerning his future existence in the city.

"You go to the police, lay a complaint?" I wondered once Walter and I were settled to either side of his hospital bed.

He shook his head. "Told me they'd kill me if I did," he mumbled stiffly through a wired jaw. "Truth is, I'm pretty scared, man."

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh." This from Walter.

## Spook & Ghost

“What uh-huh. You think I’m a pussy? Well, I am!”

“You want the problem to go away, never come back. Am I right?”

“Well, yeah, but what can you do?”

Walter smiled. “I take that for a yes, bro?”

“Jesus, he’s got some thug-ugly friends. I wouldn’t want you to—”

“Two things,” Walter said softly. “Don’t worry bout us. Second, please don’t use the Lord’s name like that.”

Both the lawyer and I looked at him, then at each other. I did a thing with my eyebrows.

Two weeks later, Simon out of the hospital, his jaw unwired, we dropped in at his fashionable office. Had to drag Walter away from the curvy receptionist. “Situation taken care of,” I said.

“Short term or long term?”

“Permanently.”

“Really? Jeez –. Oops, sorry, Walter. Lousy habit. No offense.” He eyed us closely. “You, uh, do this sort of work?”

“Can do,” Walter replied. In a whisper: “Only for very close friends, mind. And totally—” he leaned forward, strung out the word “—on the absolute quiet. Nobody but you to know. Not your partners, not your secretary, not the hot babe receptionist I know you bangin.”

Simon eyed him, then me. He nodded once, then again, ever so slightly. Whereupon he presented two offerings. Since such work as we had performed for him came to his notice on occasion, he’d keep our number prominent in his Rolodex. Plus, we were henceforth to consider him our all-purpose lawyer, at an extremely favorable rate. When we mentioned we had an interest in the housing market, he hooked us up with a real estate woman of his acquaintance. “Nothing she doesn’t know comes to property in the city. And she’s a barracuda. I should talk, right, but has me beat bigtime. You’re gonna buy houses, you want her with you.”

Within two months, S&G had purchased half dozen fixer-uppers in neighborhoods that both the real estate lady, a fox named Ellie, and Walter agreed were up-and-coming. Also up-and-coming was the rod in Walter’s pants. Whether turned on by each other or simply the thrill of biz, they celebrated each new buy with a hard-and-fast roll on the property’s bare floor, kitchen sink, toilet seat, name it.

## Barry Rosenberg

Walter got stuck right into it. Somehow, he got a crew together. They were the motleyest assortment of humanity imaginable: couple huge black guys with do-rags, an even larger, heavily tatted whitey named Shank, who said little and looked like he would eat your Doberman, and three smaller but even nastier looking Mexicans.

“You been hanging outside a prison yard?”

“You makin light of mah staff, yo?” He smiled. “Just watch these dudes work. I pay em good wages, in cash, make sure they show up every day on time, keep em off booze and drugs. They good, they fast and no union goons gone come round, give em shit.”

Walter himself proved even handier a tradesman than I had thought. When we lived in the house outside Philly, he was always doing home improvements (when he wasn’t doping, screwing or scamming). And in our own place here in the city he was constantly pulling down walls, raising ceilings, installing beautifully worked floors.

The two of us spent several hours one morning putting in a magnificent hundred year old window he’d salvaged at a demolition yard. As we were admiring the finished job, he said, “Let’s grab us a coffee.”

It was a Saturday afternoon when we settled in at a crowded, noisy café in the Embarcadero. Something obviously was on his mind. I gave it time.

“Thing is,” he said finally, “I don’t wanna shoot nobody anymore.”

I let it sink in a few moments. “You want to quit what we’re doing.”

“I say that? I say *that*?”

“Well, then.”

“Shootin is, I dunno, kinda a copout. Wait, lemme finish. It has no real meaning. We tryin to prove a point here, remember? Me shootin some rich bad bastard from a tripod-held weapon hundreds of yards away, well, it don’t prove nothin.”

“So you’re saying we should’ve done what, beat the banker to death with stacks of hundred dollar bills?”

“Woulda been better. More significant. Eye-ronic. We need to be more eyyye-ronic.”

Around us, people talking, nobody listening. Me, I was listening with both ears.

## Spook & Ghost

\*

When we did a job, always well away from SF, we traveled separately, put up at different hotels, spent not a lot of time together. And when we did out of necessity, nobody saw me. (Walter had grown used to talking to me when I was invisible, even figuring out exactly where I was.)

We brought on board a silent partner: Simon the lawyer. He showed an immediate flair for the operation.

“What you want to do,” he said, “or rather not do, is repeat yourselves. Be original each time. And creative. Oh, I love this stuff.” Rubbing his hands.

“You deprived on accounta you deprived.”

“Best believe it. Told you my parents were snooty socialites. Forget about climbing trees and playing football. I don’t think I ever scraped a knee or jammed a finger.”

Simon was well informed. He knew what was going on in every aspect of life and big business, legal or otherwise, in America and beyond. At first, though, his coke-inspired scenarios didn’t fit our purposes.

“Too bizarre,” I told him. “Our intent here is serious. We want to teach a lesson; we want people who’re doing similar crap gasping with horror, not falling down laughing. Your ideas aren’t ironic so much as absurd.”

“And weird as hell,” Walter put in.

“You guys really think doing this stuff will scare others away from doing ugly? I mean, really?”

“Most likely not. Most likely if we live through these stunts, come the future we’ll realize it was a hundred percent ego tripping. Or getting back at the bastards who sent us to Nam for their own totally selfish, immoral purposes. Or because I hated my father.”

“But we gotta try,” added Walter. “What else we do, all that wonderful trainin the army give us?”

\*

First up was the biggest weapons dealer in the country. A tall, big-bellied, loud zillionaire Simon had read about in a gun magazine. We thought he’d be in Texas, or maybe Wyoming. Oddly, his setup was in Michigan.

## Barry Rosenberg

After studying his moves for a week, I followed him into his sumptuous office, sat on a leather sofa most of an afternoon into the evening while he made deals on the phone. On three phones, actually, as flunkies dashed in and out, enthusiastically barking out news of shipments and latest orders. This character took no sides in any war. In the space of an hour, he sold huge amounts of weaponry to rival warlords in a central African country. Keep everything in balance, I suppose.

As I was sitting there bareassed on the soft leather, I looked down with my invisible eyes through my invisible body and made a discovery: my invisible backside had created a noticeable concavity in the sofa. I made to stand up, but my naked bottom was stuck to the smooth leather and there was a loud ripping sound during a rare moment of silence. The head man and a subordinate standing just to the other side of the immense desk immediately looked my way. For a moment I was convinced they could see me, or at least what I held in my hand. I thought about stuffing the object behind a cushion, but knew any movement would be foolish. Fortunately, the object was almost completely transparent, and after a few moments their attention was back to business. I drew a deep breath and exhaled it away slowly. Lesson learned: pay attention and don't get cocky.

When his staff all were gone – he frequently stayed late to talk to different time zones – I calmly walked across the thick carpeting, stood behind him and stuck the object I'd been toting around, syringe and needle, into the back of his neck and plunged. He cried out, twisted around, managed to get half out of his chair before dropping heavily back down and slithering to the floor.

I picked up the phone, made an outside call. It rang once. Without a word, I replaced the receiver. Walter appeared not long after wearing the uniform of the company cleaned the executive offices. Wearing two uniforms, actually. He peeled off the top and handed it over.

We stuffed the guy into a huge sack and carried it out to a waiting panel truck bearing the cleaning company logo, shoved him in amongst a number of boxes. Drove to a place in the countryside where Walter had crafted a dunny. We carried him in, took down the guy's pants and sat him over the hole in a bare wooden shelf. It took several more trips to carry in all the boxes of bullets, every size from tiny .22s to shells damn near a handspan

## Spook&Ghost

long, and began dumping them on the floor. We took Polaroid pictures every few minutes, right up to the point where the guy had bullets up to his chin. Then we jammed bullets into his mouth, his nostrils, his ears, the cartridge ends all very visible to the camera's lens. (We'd already plugged the largest shell we could find into another orifice.) Then we filled the dunny to the ceiling, which was not all that easy as shells kept slipping out the door. When we had finished, we slammed the door, forced it in place with a rifle across the front. We stapled the Polaroids, eight of them, to the door, along with a Spook&Ghost logo. And got the hell out of there.

\*

"How did you do it?" This from Simon. "C'mon, guys. How the hell did you pull it off?"

Walter leaned my way as we sat in chairs on the other side of the desk. I was making a mental comparison between Simon's cruise ship-size desk and that of the now-late arms dealer. "Should we let him in on it?"

"Why not? See, Simon, first thing is, I make myself invisible –"

"Aw, you two." Again he studied blowups of photos we'd taken with a conventional Minolta 35mm spread out on his desk. He needn't have bothered, really. A number of the Polaroids had appeared in just about every form of media in the country. Most prominent was the one with bullets up to the man's chin, plus several more sticking out of his facial apertures. "I see nobody's run the one of the shell stuck up the guy's ass."

"Hustler paid us for exclusive rights. Next month."

"Okay, what's next?"

"Couple months in Hawaii would be sweet."

"Not me, slacker. Me and m'boys got houses to work on."

"Uh, by the way, fellas." We turned to the pretty boy behind his monster desk. "I know you said I'm not to –. Wait, wait." Holding up a hand. "Not a soul, believe me! I'm in this as deep as you. Well, maybe not quite that deep. Still, I lose everything this ever gets out. And if there's one thing I'm good at it's self-preservation. It's just, ahh..."

"Nobody!" Both of us at the same time. "Okay," I said. "Who?"

"Ellie." The real estate babe. Walter turned to me, eyebrows raised in question. "She knows you guys are up to something. No, no, not even

## Barry Rosenberg

close. Knows you don't condone drugs, figures it's got to be some high class scamming. She's one woman you can trust to contribute, her conniving mind, at the same time keep mum. Look, it's not a priority. I just thought –" looking at Walter "– y'know."

I cupped my face in my hands, sat shaking my head. Through my fingers: "Maybe we can run ads on KSAN."

"Actually, I do trust the lady," Walter said softly. "And she got some crazy ideas. What?"

"Didn't we agree one time way back –"

"Okay, no big deal, toss it away."

But the more I thought about it...

\*

"Not my idea," I told her. "Matter of fact, I'm considerably nervous about it."

Ellie knew this was something big, though had no idea what. It showed in her appearance. Normally, she was either powered up or cockteased up. Today, no makeup, jeans and jersey, neither garment in any way snug, scuffed running shoes. Ironically, I found her more beautiful this way than when she was decked out. Had to keep my eyes averted. Even back in the all-go Philly suburb days we had a silent pact: first cum, it stayed that way. Even after a break-off, lay off. But Ellie was special. Looks, yeah. Early thirties, passed for twenty-five. Great skin. Almond eyes, high cheekbones, flat cheeks, cupid bow lips. Gym body but no way muscley. She was what we as kids used to call slinky. Slim and tight. Her small but perfectly round ass was so high in her bare feet she appeared from behind to be wearing invisible stilettos. But that wasn't all: she had brains, she had balance. I hoped she wouldn't screw things up by making a play for me. I hoped she would make a play for me.

I ordered my mind to go sit in the corner.

"Babe, thing of it is," Walter began, "we kill people."

"Yeah, I know. Which is why Simon here can still walk the streets and jump on women a mental moron would know to leave alone."

"That's not what Walter means. We kill bad people. Rich bad people."

She looked at the three of us, like eenie, meenie and mynie.



## Spook & Ghost

“Oh, shit. The arms dealer! *You?*”

“Not Simon, but yeah, me and Walter.”

“I had an administrative part,” Simon said quietly. We ignored him.

“And the Long Island banker. And a few other deals involving lesser violence.”

“For money you do this?”

Laughter. “Mah dear, not only don’t we do it for money, it cost us plenty.”

She shook her head, looked up at the ceiling. “You’re blowing my mind, guys. Hoo.” Silence. “I gather you want something from me here. You wanna include me in, is that it?”

Silence.

“Oh my god, I love it! And don’t give me your don’t mention his holier than holy name here, lover. This is bigger than your screwed up religiosity crap. This is, this is...I love it! But what do you want from me? I’m not making you cruds coffee!”

“We want your brain, hot box,” Simon said, giggling. “Your grip on the obtuse and bizarre. We want input in our quest on – what the hell is our quest here?”

“Basically, we want to make these rich bad people look wholly ridiculous, both in life and death. And we want to scare the shit out of those intent on climbing the ladder of the kind of badness that hurts a lot of the little fucked-over people.”

“And you think this kind of thing will accomplish that?”

“Not at all. We are under no illusion that our knocking off rich bad guys is going to make the world a better place. But Walter and I – and Simon here – feel that to sit on our butts and just moan about the state of things is absolutely contrary to our state of being.”

“And you want a woman’s touch. Have I said I love it?” She reached a hand over Simon’s desk, palm down. We each extended our own, placed it over hers. Then she pulled her hand away.

“On one condition.” The office froze solid. Waiting. “If I’m to bring my delightfully devious mind to your grand killing machine, I pay my own way. A quarter share of expenses.” She turned her attention to Simon. “As do you, pretty boy.”

Plenty of action over the next few months, none of it having to do with knocking off bad guys. Walter's crew finished off four houses, and Ellie sold them all in a hurry, at prices far beyond what we had paid. We bought three more, Walter added a few extra staff, these guys even rougher trade than the original dirty half dozen. All of us chipped in, even Simon, although when we noticed him staring at a hammer in his hand, eyeing the head, eyeing the handle, great curiosity, we figured he'd be better off as a gofer. Ellie, well, it was apparent right off that having her in our work gang, even in baggy clothing, was not a terribly good idea. She moaned, called us names, but got the message.

One day, a couple of big dudes showed up, asking questions.

"Union goons?" Walter wondered quietly.

"Maf," I replied. "Think they own the town, everything has to go through them."

"How we deal with it?"

"What Lombardi said: Best defense is a good offense."

"Got it."

After we kicked their asses, four guys showed up a few days later. When they got their asses kicked we debated whether the next visit would increase arithmetically or exponentially, were somewhat disappointed there were seven.

Walter: "Reckoned they only show up in even numbers. Maybe they up to somethin." Five stayed outside while two came in.

"We're only here to talk," they said. And got their asses kicked. The five outside trooped into their vehicles and scrambled.

One evening Walter came into my room. I was with a woman I had recently met at the gym. We had just finished business, were sitting up in bed talking, drinking wine and listening to some soft jazz.

"Hate to break up your party, good people. But I got a feelin. Let's get the boys together and get over to the site."

We arrived in four separate vehicles. Quiet, no movement.

"Hide the wheels and come back with whatever toys y'all's brought." Walter had insisted no guns or knives. Most had ball bats, lengths of chain. One of the Mexicans, Carlos, carried a whip. Nobody asked.

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We waited over an hour. Then a van pulled up. Out tumbled six, seven, eight hard looking bastards. Crow bars and sledge hammers. We waited till they got inside the living area, emerged slowly from other rooms and closets, and in from outside. Then turned the strobes on. The eight hard looking bastard squinted at us, took in the circle we had formed around them, glanced over at one another. Made some threatening noises, which resulted in stern glares from us but not a peep of reaction outside bats thwacking against palms, chains rattling on the floor. Carlos the Mex kept the whip coiled in his hand. The visitors seemed to lose heart, turned around and filed back outside, into their van and gone.

“Thanks, guys,” Walter said. “Consider this overtime pay.”

“Not for me,” Emil, one of the black guys replied. “Jess part of mah gig.” The others agreed.

Not long after, the time had come to carry on with our real work.

\*

London isn't my favorite place in the world, but that's where our mission took us. Besides Walter and me, Ellie was there with us. She had insisted, mainly because the nature of the play was entirely her idea, from the who to the how. Also because she had a skill for the nuts and bolts of the op, which she'd proved to us in rehearsal.

Once again I had to go bare-butt (or bare-bum, as they say here), and it was not the kindest of days to so do. I wondered whether the pale shade of blue I felt myself turning would be visible.

Randolph Muldoon was rather an amazing chap. Born in Sydney to a middleclass family, his cunning, cruelty and chutzpah had catapulted him into the world's richest communications magnate. He owned numerous newspapers, magazines, ad agencies, radio and TV stations in half dozen countries. He owned the British parliament and was on his way to controlling the American congress. But his juggernaut takeover of the English speaking media was not the problem we had with the man. It was the fact that everything he touched turned immediately to garbage. Oh, not financially, certainly not there. Rather in quality, aesthetics. Newspapers that had for generations been top of the line productions in quality research and intelligent reportage, mostly but not exclusively on the left, he'd turned into

the most base, sensationalized tripe geared to the lowest of uncommonly classless denominators. As Ellie had put it, he was a disgrace to the written and spoken word, especially operating in Shakespeare's country.

It was she in red wig, stage nose and teeth and prosthetic torso who approached Muldoon's notorious wicked witch of the north, a woman in her sixties who was known, and feared, as prime guardian of the man's kingdom.

"I know nothing about this," she scowled at Ellie, tossing the work order back across her desk.

"Isn't this your signature?" Ellie exclaimed crossly in what I felt was a pretty darn good English accent. She pointed at the scrawl on bottom of the page. "Listen, you old dragon, my time is valuable, so stop horsing me around here!" She turned around to her assistant, a black man in laborer's costume carrying a large bucket and what looked to be scrolls of wallpaper.

"In we go, Horace," she exclaimed.

"But missy –"

"Wait! You can't –"

Ellie pushed open the big oaken door and led the way into an office the size of an airplane hangar. The three of them eased inside, still miles away from the enormous desk with the tiny whitehaired monarch almost hidden behind it. On the wall behind him were a giant portrait of the queen and a monster-size union jack. Atop the desk sat framed pictures of the royal family. Not the queens, his.

"Sir! Sir!" Her very last words as I plunged the needle into her arm, making sure to squeeze in no more than half the transparent fluid. Walter caught her deftly as she sank to the floor, picked her up and carried her to a corner and placed her gingerly upon thick woven carpeting where she would rest comfortably for a couple hours before waking. By now the man himself sensed something was terribly amiss. He reached for a button on his desk, but I was too quick, pumping the rest of the liquid into his bloodstream.

The next part was tricky. Although he wasn't heavy, Walter and I had to hold his body steady against the wall, feet dangling above the floor. Whereupon Ellie whipped into action, unrolling the scrolls onto the floor then dipping a large brush into the thick goo within the bucket. Back in San Francisco we had timed this part of the operation, using a most reluctant and

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fidgiting Simon as the Muldoon stand-in, at four and a half minutes. Here, working around Walter and me as we held the small body flat against the wall with one hand while helping her unravel scrolls with the other, Ellie sliced nearly a full minute off that mark. When she'd finished tamping down the wet paper, we had an almost-perfectly contoured outline of a vertical spread-eagle small male, spectacles included, covered with stitched together papier mache sheets of front pages of newspapers featuring the ugliest, most vile samples of yellow journalism imaginable. The entire display covered eight by ten square feet of wall space. While Walter and I held everything in place, Ellie then plugged in two small but powerful fan heaters to dry and harden the still dripping montage. When she proudly affixed the Spook&Ghost logo across the figure's chest, the three of us stood back, took several pictures and admired our work. High fives all round.

\*

John J. McBride III had two passions in life. As the number one kingpin in the tobacco industry he had fabulous wealth and vast power. It was he who had banded the disparate corporate elements of Big Tobacco into a unified force to combat the evils of government sanction of their product. He'd also had the vision, when the anti-smoking craze began, to diversify cigarette promotion from its narrow focus on the testosterone image of tattooed cowboys on horseback. Women and children were now the recipient of as many ad dollars as men.

McBride also had the foresight to spend unspeakable amounts of capital to hire hundreds of the best legal minds in America. Now, whenever attempts were made either to sue for damages due to a death allegedly caused by smoking, or to initiate an anti-smoking campaign anywhere in the world, his lawyers swooped down and attacked like a flock of starved falcons. The rare trial or campaign that went against tobacco meant little. McBride's lawyers simply would take the case to the next level. And, upon failing there, to the next. No one, be it an individual or the government of a country, could withstand the forever escalating costs of a pyramid of appeals. Thus the law was on his side, always.

McBride had another passion which, although very few knew it, was actually closer to his heart than Big Tobacco: sports. Despite threats and huge

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bribes to various commission members, however, he had failed in securing ownership of a major sporting franchise in the MLB, NFL, NBA and NHL. “It just wouldn’t look right,” he was informed untold times. And no longer was he even able to have his favorite sporting heroes endorse his products. (Although having them seen in public smoking, the packs conspicuously visible, still went on, how long this might continue considering the current trend he had no idea.) McBride did succeed in gaining the minor league baseball franchise in his home town, however – the Durham Smokes. And since Big Tobacco employed a significant number of locals in all aspects of the industry, any attempt at getting him to change the team’s name fizzled out quickly.

He took great delight combining his dual passions. At every home game, a grand display took place right there on the field. During the seventh inning stretch, a giant cigarette was wheeled like a cannon across the diamond to a position just behind second base. A lovely damsel with long blond hair, toothy smile and a comely figure poured into a miniscule red, white and blue bikini and white high heel boots (his mistress, in truth) accompanied the giant ciggie and, backed by an amplified drumroll, lit it with a blowtorch. It took exactly three minutes, twenty-five seconds for the synthetic cylinder, accompanied by the progressively loud drum roll, to burn all the way to the non-flammable filter, whereupon a clashing of cymbals would signal the standing crowd to erupt in great cheer. It was quite a show.

On this particular night, McBride was curiously absent from his president’s box above the first base side of the field. He hardly ever missed a game, especially against arch-rival Raleigh. His people had no idea of his whereabouts, and all attempts to contact him got nowhere.

Came the middle of inning seven, the giant cigarette was wheeled from beneath the stands across the first base foul line, past the pitcher’s mound, to its standard position twenty feet behind the second base bag. The drumroll began and the lovely damsel lit the blowtorch and applied it to the end of the cigarette. Within several seconds her pasted-on smile was seen to slowly dissipate, replaced by a look of total confusion. She appeared to try to move closer to the burning cylinder, but was forced by the heat to stand back. After a while she turned towards the firemen standing behind the third base foul line and waved. They assumed this was a new wrinkle in the act, and so waved

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back. Then her waving seemed to become a bit frantic and she looked to be yelling something across the infield. The drumroll by now was so intense that no one could hear what she was saying. She placed her hands on the sides of her head and began jumping up and down, thoroughly confounding everyone. The cigarette's demise had less than a minute remaining when firemen, security people, even a number of the players began to move slowly onto the field, then, seeing her obvious panic, race towards where she was standing. They got to within perhaps ten, fifteen feet when they thought they could hear through the drumming noise some sort of horrific high-pitch sound emanating from within the fiery end. And then they saw just what had caused the damsel to distress: charred bones were protruding from the cigarette butt. In the pandemonium that followed, it took some good time before anyone noticed a curious sketch of two figures, one waving a rifle in the air, the other an AK47, painted on the filter. Everyone assumed it to be an impression of Ku Klux Klanners except nobody could work out why one of the figures implausibly was wearing a black hood and robe.

\*

The year that followed we took down the CEO of the world's biggest genetically modified seed outfit (buried alive in a plantation of GM potatoes); top dog of an international petroleum corporation responsible for three gigantic oil spills that wiped out thousands of sea birds, for which they paid fines totaling less than five million dollars (along with the senior-most partner of the representative law firm, they were tarred and feathered, then paddled out and drowned in the company's latest massive oil slick), and finally, the drug lord of a heinous Mexican heroin cartel (overdosed with his own smack).

None of these hits were easy. In the case of the drug lord, we damn near didn't make it out of Mexico alive. Fact was, we'd had two earlier efforts that crapped out due to the efficient security the guy had, and never would have got the deal done had it not been for luck and a little help. We knew we would need a few extra people to do the op. After a lot of discussion, we decided to bring in Emil, Shank and Carlos, our most reliable renovation workers. Carlos, especially, was eager to take the guy down, and we had to rein him in. We told them nothing of our overall Spook&Ghost mission,

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only that this was a solo job we were being paid to do. They were happy to take part, asking no further questions.

For this op we had no choice but to take along guns. (Just on his own big Shank had brought a veritable arsenal.) The idea wasn't to storm the compound, simply to create a diversion to get me the hell out of there once the job was done. Since we couldn't tell our own guys an invisible man would be dashing out, they had to follow Walter's lead to the letter.

Problem, for me, was something I hadn't experienced on a job in several years: dogs. Big ones. Mean and vicious ones.

"Shoot the dogs!" I could hear Walter yelling. "The dogs, kill em all!" The guys figured he was pure wacko, but thankfully followed his orders. I couldn't count how many weapons Shank had – four, at least – but he mowed down all the four-leggeds, then started in on the bipeds.

Carlos was our van's driver, and after they'd piled in Walter ordered him to take off, but not too fast. I caught up a quarter mile down the dusty road. Amazingly, none of the three questioned why I dove into the vehicle without a stitch of clothing on. As I lay there on the floor catching my breath, I noticed blood pooling nearby.

"Shank, man, you were hit!"

A bullet had gone clear through his body just below his left shoulder and no more than an inch from anything vital. The big man looked down at himself, wiped a hand across the wound, examined the blood, held up his big red hand for all to see.

"Souvenir of Meh-hee-co!" he grinned through his half dozen yellowed teeth.

\*

By this time we had been written up in every print journal, talked about endlessly on TV, debated in Congress. The FBI claimed to have scores of agents hot on our trail. Any number of fan clubs had formed across America, scattered through Europe and in Australia. Our Spook-Ghost logo (but without the name, which we had never made public) had become the hottest T-shirt seller in the world. (Simon claimed we could sue for copyright infringement. I assumed he was joking.)

Meanwhile, our other enterprise was coasting along nicely, thanks to



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our loyal crew – now up to eighteen – and Ellie’s marketing talents. Simon’s money people had spread our money over several safe offshore venues. He wasn’t too happy that we had set aside the profits from our last two sales as bonus for the workers. But by now he was accustomed to our strange ways of doing business.

So life was peachy, hm? Not totally.

\*

“Change comin.”

“How so?”

Shrug. “Juss feel it in mah bones, man.”

“Getting tired of what we’re doing?”

“Nah, it’s exhilaratin. Both our gigs, the buildin and the offin. What’s changin is me.”

“Okay.”

“Can’t explain it none.”

“Don’t have to. Been seeing it over the past, dunno, year and a half? Two?”

“How you figurin it?”

“Anybody else, I’d say you were getting religion. I know you better. We both believe religion is a bunch of bullshit old boy fraternities, just another form of big business. At the same time we sense there’s got to be something out there connected to the something that’s in here.”

“Sounds righteous. You know that Buddhist place up near Mendocino. They got some kinda retreat happenin next month. Maybe a good place to chill, learn somethin.”

“Do it. I’ll look after the boys.”

“Juss don’t go scarin they ass with none a yo invisible shit, heah?”

\*

I won’t say he was a completely changed man when he came back three weeks later. Some, sure. More mellow, you’d expect that. But it seemed like he’d had some sort of revelation. Figured this right off because when Walter was on a roll, his talk grew more street.

“This Buddha dude,” he said as we sat at a restaurant near our new

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digs. (We moved around a lot, changed houses every two, three months.) I'd ordered salmon, he was going with pasta. "He one switched-on muthuh."

"Uh-huh."

"Y'know, this Freud character, supposed to be smartest Western head shrink ever? Claimed the mind got three component parts: id, ego and superego, okay? Know how many different parts this Buddha cat said?"

"Unh-uh."

He leaned closer, about to reveal a great secret. "Eighty-five *thousand*, man!"

"Hell of a lot."

"You got it. He sittin there one day under this here bodhi tree in India. Alla sudden, whoosh, enlightenment swoops into his cranium. He know everything. *Everything*. And know what he talk about most? At least according to his teaching, which the Budes call the dharma?"

"Unh-uh."

"Compassion."

"Yeah?"

"Only, compassion according to the Buddha, this ain't no false Christian love yo neighbor's ass, turn yo cheek no matter what the fucker done to you. The Buddha was real. He say, You gotta, you gotta. Juss don't carry any ugly in your heart while you're doin it."

"Tough to do."

"A bitch! And while I'm sittin there, eyes closed, legs crossed till I think my chubby thighs gonna drop off, place in total silence, I'm thinkin. They say you shouldn't think, juss pay attention to yo breath in, breath out. But try shuttin off the noise in yo head."

"Not easy."

"Betcha. But pieces of the puzzle begin slowly comin together, formin a picture."

"And that would be?"

"That what we're doin here is fine. I mean, I went up there pretty convinced what we doin is bad, but it ain't."

"Thank god for that." The salads arrived. I tucked a fancy napkin into my open collar, began to dig in.

"It's just," he continued, chomping down on his greens, "it's just a little out of focus. For me, I'm talkin."

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“How so?”

“You been hearin me lately tellin folk not to use the lord’s name in vain, crap like that. Well, what difference it make, people use words and terms like that? Okay, the Buddha say have right thought, right speech, right action. But whatever you think, what you say and do, you gotta have compassion. You truly believe wastin these rich bad dudes a positive thing, and you not deluded, then go on and do it.”

“With compassion.”

“Absolute.”

“I hear a penny about to fall.”

“My brother, I’m gonna do one more job as the Spook of Spook&Ghost. This became crystal clear as I’m sittin there tryin not to think of my poor thighs burnin so. Then I’m off on my own mission.”

“Can’t say I’m not sorry to hear that, but, y’know, whatever support I can give you. Mind telling me the what and wherefore of your new mission?”

His fork stopped in mid-air. His eyes grew wide and began to sparkle, and his smile lit up the restaurant. Again leaning forward: “After we do this next job – and I got that all laid out – I’m gonna finish up the house renovatin biz and head on over to Africa!”

I leaned back in my chair as though hit by a slow wave. “Yeah?” I thought about it. “Africa. Sounds great. Be glad to, y’know, accompany you.”

“Thank you. But this is mine, my deal, my passion. I need to go back to my roots and try to do some good there. Same kinda good we tryin to do here, at the same time different.”

“Different.”

“I wanna help my brothers and sisters getting screwed over there by they own kind. All these bullshit war lords gettin rich rapin and killin and stealin from they own people, claimin it’s cool coz it’s tribal. Another thing. You know I love animals, right? Well, rich bad dudes, rich bad *white* dudes, go over there, pay biiiig bucks to some ugly black war lord to kill them an elephant. Then they saw off they tusks for souvenirs, leave that elephant’s body just lyin there on the ground. You believe that shit? You *beleeeve* that! Only now, now them wonderful pachyderms got theyselves one very pissed off Spook for an ally!”

“Uh-huh. And you need to do this solo?”

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“See, what we been doin here be mainly you.”

I put down my fork. “Aw, c’mon, man!”

“Hell, yeah. Look, you the one say shazam, go all transparent, walk in places nobody else can get to, pop the rich bad dude with a needle. Without you, we’d a had nothin.”

“So, what, you begrudge me my part in what we’ve been doing?”

“No way! Not in the slightest. We never coulda done any a these evil muthuhs you didn’t have yo thing. But, see, I wanna do my thing. Problem is, I don’t even know what that thing is. Am I just a shooter? Can I zap a laser ray out my butt and bring down whole armies? Do I swing from vines like a *schvartze* Tarzan, knife in my mouth? Wear a tight fitting gray uniform and black mask, ride a white horse with a big-ass dog alongside?”

“I want to see you in a tight fitting uniform, bro.”

“Yeah, well, maybe not that one. But I know I got powers like you.”

“Well of course you do. We’ve talked about that.”

“That’s just it – talked about it. Blah blah blah. I wanna find out exactly who I am, exactly what I got I can use to eliminate some of the evil in this world. And Africa the perfect place for me to do it.”

I pushed away my empty plate, picked up the bottle of chardonnay and poured us both top-ups.

“Whew, that’s some pretty heavy shit. You sure you’re not about to shave your head, put on the robes? Brother Walter, the Avenging Monk.”

“Tell you somethin else I learned past few weeks. After the first few days at that center, I was actually considering goin full Bude. Maybe day four, day five, I go for a walk through the woods there. Beautiful campus they got in the mountains. And what I see, what I see is a buncha yuppie lawyers and hedge fund manager types drivin up from the city in they Beemers and Mercs, playin at bein weekend Budes. And the Asian monks livin there? They just as much bullshit, wearin silk robes, Rolex watches, flyin around the country first class. And drinkin! Man, I never seen so much booze, good booze, the priciest. I say all this to an Oreo brother. Know what he tell me? The monks, they sooo evolved, they karma sooo clean, they can live like they livin, do them no harm. Babe, I’m ready to tell em all to go stick it, get in the car and come home. Then it hit me. We dealin with three separate things here. Numba one thing, the Buddha hissself. He the real deal, man. I’m convinced of that.

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He laid out this here dharma. The capital-t truth. After the Buddha float off to wherever Buddhas go when they body crap out, the cats followin him make a religion outta this dharma. Called it Buddh-ism. Bude hisself had no part in this, last thing he'd ever want to do. Like Jesus. And three, those who sign up for this ism begin callin theyselves *Buddhists*. Hear what I'm sayin?"

"Same shit, different religion."

"So me, Walter a/k/a Spook, I go from skeptic, which I am when I first arrive, to dive-right-in devotee, to full-fledge cynic all in less than a week. Then this moment come while I meditatoin. Like one of them metronome things, I suddenly arrive at my own center, put on the brakes. That's when this clarity kick me in the butt. See, I can take outta this whole Buddhism business – and baby, that's exactly what it is, biz-i-ness – I can take out the good stuff, the Buddha's pure teaching, and leave the phony trappings to the drunken monks and yuppie weekend Budes."

"And the bottom line here is?"

He grinned those great white teeth. "Africa."

"With compassion."

"Now you talkin."

\*

Walter had researched this one thoroughly before laying it out for us. When we heard what he had to say, we flipped. I sat there shaking my head in wonder, Simon was on the floor in hysterics and Ellie jumped into his lap, threw her arms around him and kissed his face in several places.

The victim-to-be was Oklahoma's own Freddy Delahunty, the self-proclaimed most prominent segregationist in America. As a popular televangelist, he had a following of hundreds of thousands of old white loonies, mostly gullible widows who sent him millions of dollars each week to support his yearning for mansions, private jets and hotel penthouses.

Mrs. Freddy was your prototype manufactured silicon-pumped bosomy peroxide blond, botoxed to the degree not a facial muscle might quiver, makeup applied with a spatula, capped teeth the size of rune stones. Her husband never touched her, of course, his preference for young boys reducing her to a stage presence, for which lack she was more than compensated by jewels and clothes, and proudly claimed she could outshoe Imelda Marcos.

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Delahunty made no bones about his hatred for minorities, all minorities who were not white and Protestant, but especially *nigras*. He might've been the only racist left in America who still used the term, and he did so proudly, flaunting to his albino-prune-faced populace the fact that he had been sued for defamation by dozens of groups and establishment churches as well as receiving untold death threats, but here he was, as yet calling a spade a spade (wink).

Walter's investigations had led him into a knowledgeable understanding of certain chemical properties, discarding numerous products as unsuitable until he was convinced he'd found what he was looking for. When he showed up following a cross-country journey with several tightly sealed forty-four gallon drums, he announced that we were ready for Freddy.

Getting past the battalion of security guards around and inside the Delahunty palace was far more simple than separating the man from the three under-ten boys clinging to him in the sunken hot tub. Once performing the standard needle-jab, I lowered him by tied-together sheet strips from his boudoir window to the waiting trio below. Walter, Simon and Ellie quickly wrapped him in blankets, stuffed him in the rented half-tonner, and after picking me up down the road we drove off to our rendezvous.

The site Walter had scoped out was a disused farm along a long and overgrown dirt road. Its one delightful feature was a mighty old oak tree with some interesting branches.

We parked the truck, swiveled the six-foot cylindrical vat onto the hydraulic lift and powered it to the ground. We set the vat under the sturdiest branch of the ancient oak, which stood out almost perfectly horizontal perhaps ten feet above the base of the trunk. Walter then tossed a rope over the branch, the already formed noose dangling just above the cylindrical vat. We got the naked Delahunty out of the vehicle, placed him on the ground alongside the vat and a three-foot-high collapsible wooden platform Walter had constructed, cracked open four cold beers, unwrapped half dozen sandwiches and a jar of dill pickles and sat around on a blanket waiting for our boy to waken. We'd gone through a dozen beers and nearly as many sandwiches by the time he finally came around. We spent a few minutes putting on completely masked full-bodied protective gear, during which, spotting his unfamiliar surroundings,

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Freddy struggled to his feet, staggered, flopped back down, rose up again in panic, took a few steps away before his knees buckled and he fell face-flat, toupee flying off. We went back to our unfinished picnic while he lay there crying and screeching incoherently. When we were done and had placed everything we weren't going to use back in the truck, Ellie and Simon brought out the tripod, video camera and boom mike. Walter and I then pried the lid off the vat, picked up our man, kicking and flailing, carried him onto the platform, then lifted him high as we could above the vat's open mouth. Getting him into the vat was a bit of a hassle, but we had worked that out in days past using Ellie as our practise victim. Her being far stronger than the flabby, slim shouldered, wide bottomed preacher, we already had solved the dilemma of stuffing him feet first into the coal-black liquid the vat contained.

"What is this stuff?" he demanded. "It stings! It's poison, isn't it?"

"Not at all," replied Walter loudly in a very posh middle American accent. "What it is, Freddy, is dye. A very special *black* dye. It will seep into every pore and crack in your lumpy, out-of-shape body. In three minutes it will permanently set into your skin, into every layer of your skin. Do you know, Freddy, that your skin is an organ? Actually, the biggest organ of your entire body. And in three minutes, after we push your head down into it – don't worry, we'll pull your head out every thirty seconds so you won't drown – in three minutes guess who will become a black man! Permanently! Isn't that awesome? But not to worry as you won't be black for very long because if you look up you will see where you're going after we bring you out of the dye. Ready now?"

Together, Walter and I placed our gloved hands atop Delahunty's bald head and pushed. Blustering and bubbling, he went under. The thick black dye flew all over the place as he worked desperately to scramble out.

"Okay," Simon called out. We let Freddy's head rise up, take a breath, another, then slammed him back down. Half a minute later, repeat. Then again. And again.

"Time," Simon informed us.

Freddy's head popped up, his mouth open wide pulling in air. He was absolutely, totally black, ebony black, several shades blacker than Walter, even his lips and part of his tongue where the dye had seeped in.

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We let him catch his breath fully. “Any last words before your lynching, Freddy Delahunty?”

“Yes! Yes!! I’m not a racist. I swear. It’s just a gimmick. A ploy.”

“To get money from silly old ladies.”

“Yes, of course! Please, let me live! I don’t deserve to die this way!”

“You’re perfectly right, Freddy,” replied Walter. “Just as thousands of blacks in the whole history of America didn’t deserve to die this way. But they did die this way. Imagine the irony here, Freddy: first you dye, then you die. Don’t you love it!”

Walter placed the noose over Delahunty’s face and under his jaw, pulled it tight. Together, the two of us dragged him out of the vat, which fell over, spilling the black liquid, rivulets running every which way over the ground.

“My god, Freddy, look at your shriveled up little bitty weenie. You can’t be a real *neee-gra* with a tiny thing like that, now, can you?”

We yanked on the rope until the noose carried Delahunty’s head, and Delahunty along with it, off the platform and into the air, legs kicking frantically, his two-toned tongue hanging out. “Please,” he croaked. “Pleaaaa...”

“You know what?” said Walter, facing now the camera. “Killing this man is wrong. Death would deprive this lying, thieving pedophile the opportunity to experience what it is to be the world’s first born-again black person. That wouldn’t be right, would it, Freddy? Okay, let’s let him down.”

We dropped the rope and Delahunty came crashing awkwardly to the ground. Ellie stepped carefully around a large black puddle to grab a closeup of the gasping man sprawled before her, zooming in on his agonized expression. There was enough movement of limbs to let us know he was alive, if not all that well.

\*

“So what do you think is going to happen?”

“About what?”

“Sure, play games with me. About him, about the housing business. The mission.”

“Mission accomplished. The world has been cleansed of evil for the next



## Spook&Ghost

thousand years. A millennium of peace and prosperity awaits humankind. Thus the curtain comes down on Spook&Ghost's final act, and the band retreats to their dressing room for the very last time. The houses? No idea. See how it flows. If he does go, and if I don't want to continue with it, yours if you want it."

"You say *if* he does go. Think he might not?"

I shrugged, shuffled around in my seat. She was staring into my eyes, giving me that look. She'd been doing this lately. Made me uncomfortable, so I turned my head slightly.

"For sure he's dragging his feet. Wouldn't you? Anybody? Hell of a major life move."

"Getting back to you."

"What, me."

"To begin with, you ever going to tell me how you do it? Wait, don't give that wide-eyed innocent puppy look. When we, Walter and me, did the thing with the newspaper guy, Muldoon? When we first entered his office, the old battleaxe right behind us, you were nowhere to be seen. Suddenly you appeared, not a stitch on, to jab her. I mean, you were fucking naked!"

"Truth is, I was jerking off imaging her. I get off on old battleaxes. Obviously some sort of mother complex. And I'm known to spray when I wank, so —"

"Go ahead, be a dick. Look, nobody else in the world could've got in the places you have. Why can't you tell me how you do it?"

"Aah, okay. See, I go in, immediately turn around backwards. Then I moon dance the rest of the way. Gets em so baffled they think I'm actually leaving."

"Asshole."

"Asshole...dick... You really graduated Stanford or just hang out in the Haight all those years?"

"And what about you and me?"

"Pertaining to?"

"You know Walter and I are just, as they say, friends with benefits."

"Don't even go there, Ellie."

"Want to know what I think?"

"Not really."

**Barry Rosenberg**

“The two of you are so inseparable no woman really has a shot at either one of you. Surprised you and he haven’t done it.”

“We considered. Too scared of AIDS.”

\*

“Getting cold feet?” I asked. We’d left the old Chevy pickup at the shop to have new springs put on, and instead were heading home in Carlos’s Toyota with Saint Chris dangling from the rearview. Carlos and another guy were on overnight watch duty, a move we’d put in since the mob visits. Walter was driving, me in the passenger seat.

“No way!” he replied. “Welll, maybe, a little. How you feel about it.”

“Truth? Torn. You’re my brother, I want for you the best. And I know you want this so bad. But I’ve been shuffling around with head up ass since Freddy. That was such a coup, man. We got more play on that gig than all the rest combined.”

“And had more fun.”

“Stroke of pure genius.”

“But?”

“I feel like some future hall of famer, has one last amazing season, but knows it’s over. The letdown. Then there’s the thing about you and me parting.”

“We done it before.”

“We were snotnose kids.”

“And now we’re grown up?”

We rode in silence the next several minutes.

“I want a promise. You go, and you will, pard, you keep in touch. Mean it. It’s all set up through Simon. And Ellie.”

“Speaking of which.”

“Oh, please. First her, now you.”

“Don’t care for sloppy seconds from yo bro?”

“Charming. She and I, unh-uh. Gorgeous, super-smart babe, but she wants a keeper.”

“Not you.”

“By any means.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” Silence. “Sho is some honey, though.”

## Spook & Ghost

“Uh-huh.”

We were a few blocks from our new home – we’d changed addresses again following release of the Delahunty video.

“Me, I don’t know what I’ll do. Stay, go. Been thinking about – hold on. Holllld. On.”

“What?”

“That van parked down the street.”

“Tinted windows, big ass antennas.”

“And down the other end. black Fairlane, also tinted up, antennas.”

Suddenly, the two of us: “*Arrrrrrggggghhhhh!!!*” Walter reflexively dropped the wheel and clamped both hands on his cheeks, while I did the same over my ears.

“Just keep going,” I said, “but don’t speed up.” I hunkered down into the foot well till my head disappeared from the window line so they wouldn’t see a black guy and white guy together. His teeth clenched, eyes squeezed so tight was a wonder he could see at all, Walter managed to keep his head straight and foot from smashing down on the gas. As we passed the cross street: “Anything?”

“Maybe. Another black Fairlane, halfway down on the right.”

“Steady.”

“Van hasn’t budged. Neither the Ford on our street.”

“I’ll stay down here another few minutes.”

“Wonder they could hear our hearts poundin.”

Three blocks further on I wriggled back onto the seat. “Bound to happen sooner or later. Surprised it’s taken this long.”

“Know what’s even more surprisin? How two brilliant international crims like us can become so totally non-compos. Thank Buddha for our handy-dandy built-in alarm signals.”

“What happens when you’re distracted by life.”

“So,” he said, some time later. “Plan B?”

I sighed. “Sure looks like.”

“Guess I be goin to Africa a bit sooner than expected.”

## **BOOK TWO**

### **New Zealand, very near future**

Was the cat what finally did me in. Oh sure, the curvy little blond was responsible for the biggest chunk of the dissembling, granted. But was the cat applied the final straw.

I had been sliding down the pole of life for the past some years, denying it, this-could-never-happen-to-me, toughest hombre on several continents. On Google, on Wikipedia, the highly sanitized versions of, life had been, should yet be, fucking amazing. Look at all the crazy shit I had done in the early days, never got done in; bedded the best looking babes in both hemispheres; tons of gelt in different accounts in different names in different countries: definitely a sparkling CV. And just gander at my present setup: great house on a lovely patch of grass and trees mere pissing distance from a magnificent seven mile Pacific Ocean beach. Paradise-South.

But there were days I never left that house, and when I did, maybe no further than that magnificent beach, ten minutes stroll at the most, never once looking out at the sea or to the beautiful hills at either end of the beach before trudging back to the house where I would spend hours sitting looking at nothing till time to go to bed. And my dreams! A semi-nightmare every single night with a main event once a week, waking myself with blood-curdling screams.

The curvy little blond was half my age and twice my clever and played me like a yo-yo. So when she dumped me – me, the Grand Exalted Dumper himself! – for the slick Brazilian coke dealer, instead of breathing a great sigh of relief and thanking whatever stars might've counted as lucky, I sank even further into depression.

## Spook & Ghost

My best friend, shit, my only friend, was Trump, my wonderful bedraggled ginger cat. Did I say ‘my’? Yeah, right. Trump wrote his own scenario; at times he condescended to provide me a small part. Still, every morning he would show up through the open window (I’d put a cat door in; he took one look, peered up at me, twisted around, licked his ass, and never once used it), jump onto the bed and paw my face until I dragged myself vertical and opened a can of his favorite jellymeat. In four years since he’d found me and decided I belonged to him, he had yet to miss a morning. The very day after the curvy little blond dumped me for the drug dealer, Trump did not show up. I went looking, calling, banging a spoon on the eighty-gram can of sardine sensation, a never-fail sound. Nothing. It was nearly noon when I sat slumped on the sofa, ready to call it a life. Me, who’d been responsible for more than a few deaths in my time, looking to end my own, contemplating a means. Pills? Nah. Rope? No way. Razor? Hell, no. Was a gun around somewhere, but I couldn’t remember where, and besides, in my present state I couldn’t take the noise.

Besides, wasn’t I dead already?

Which is when Trump sauntered in, parking himself ten feet away, totally ignoring me except for a curious what-the-fuck,-man look.

Which is when I collapsed completely.

## Late 1980s

We kept in touch, Simon the lawyer acting as our pivot-man/clearing house. Dribs and drabs at first because the boy just wasn’t a prolific correspondent. Claimed he was put off early on upon discovering the word they used for him, *mzungu*, meant white man in Swahili. “I didn’t exactly expect them to greet me with open arms,” he wrote, “but white man? Sheeut!”

He moved around slowly, using his head, feeling the lay of the land. First he spent time in cities, then towns, finally villages. The longer he stayed in any one village, the easier it became to communicate with the locals. He was basically a fun guy, and played that card well. People talked to him mainly because in no manner did they take him for more than just another black American with money looking for his roots.

## Barry Rosenberg

His first take-down didn't come about until he'd been on the continent a couple months. Having experience in jungle combat made it all quite simple. In at night, slit a few throats, grab a few weapons, out. A chest-thumping middle-grade war lord and a few cronies, this was. "After a couple years dealing with Charlie, these jokers were like knocking over bowling pins."

Wasn't till after his third hit he got the idea to resurrect our old trademark. Half of it anyway. Actually, I didn't hear this from either Walter or Simon, but happened to catch a news clip on the BBC. Stapled to a rich bad guy's forehead was the Spook holding up a rifle. But that wasn't the main, um, thrust of the news item. The rich bad guy, a German industrialist, also had another symbol of Walter's work on his person. Or rather, *in* his person: an ivory tusk impaled into the right kidney and out the left. There being two tusks per elephant, and our Walter not being one predisposed to waste, the second tusk was discovered through the midsection of the local warlord who had 'sold' the German his elephant kill.

But he did more than kill bad guys, our boy. He talked with oppressed villagers, brought up the Buddha, let them know about the dharma. Nothing heavy. Never any religious stuff. Most of them had had plenty of that being Muslim. Mostly he listened. Dude was always a good listener. In time, word got around, especially when rumors began circulating that the silent warrior offing bad guys and the gentle missionary moving around the continent speaking about compassion, the four noble truths and eight-fold path just might be one and the same. Pretty soon there was a price on his head. He loved that, did our Walter. "Keeps going up and up. Man, I'm finally worth something!"

Meanwhile I was moving around as well. I made my way east, traveling Greyhound through small Southern towns, then flew to Europe on one of the three passports – two Canadian – I carried in three different names. Landed in Amsterdam early spring, moved north through the Scandies till June, then hitched down into Italy, where I criss-crossed the peninsula a few times, finally caught a ship from Brindisi to Greece. First stop was Corfu, stayed at a campground where I had my first hassle.

Lots of young people there, doing nothing. Wake late morning, tell one another how much ouzo they'd drunk the night before, maybe a little snorkeling, dinner, drink, drunk, sleep. Exhilarating stuff.

## Spook & Ghost

Second day I spotted a gorgeous Dutch thing wearing our T-shirt, couple sizes too small. I went over and asked her what it meant. We were having a nice conversation where this longhair blond gorilla comes up, chest the dimensions of an old industrial free-standing safe. “Out of bounds, fella,” he snorted.

“Hey man, I just asked the lady about her interesting T-shirt –”

He stuck his face right into mine. “Piss off. Now!”

I looked over to the babe. “Please,” she said. “He’s insanely jealous. I don’t want any trouble. Sorry.”

“Sure, no problem.” I turned back to the ape. “Apologies for crimping your manhood.” He made a face, a small move, but I walked away. Later I heard he was the camp bully, had broken a guy’s nose, picked on others. That night I peeled off my clothes, waited until he was on his own, a dark spot on the edge of the campground. I followed him some short ways, picked up a heavy fallen branch, whacked him hard across the back of his legs. He stumbled, and off balance reached out and grabbed onto a spindly tree to break his fall, whereupon I hit him again with the branch, this time across his lower back. He looked around, tried to get to his feet.

“Wha? Who the –? Where the f –?”

I slapped his face three times, hard, then punched him in the stomach and when he bent over cracked an elbow in his face. This time he yelled something in Dutch, or maybe Flemish it was. I kned him in the nuts, and when he went down for what obviously was the count dragged him by his long blond hair along the ground and kicked the side of his head a few times. I quit before he could splatter blood on me. “Have a nice night, asshole,” I whispered in his ear.

Back under the artificial lights, shirt and shorts on now, I approached the woman with the Spook&Ghost T-shirt. She didn’t look too happy. I asked might I sit down.

“I’d like that, but you saw what Daan did this afternoon.”

“He’s your boyfriend?”

She gave a snort. “He thinks he is!”

“Strange. I saw him going off into the woods with this Spanish woman before.”

Her eyes grew large. We held the stare maybe fifteen seconds. “Okay,”

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she said finally. Stood up, reached out and took my hand, led me to her cabin.

\*

Ana – her name – and I left the campground and took a nice en suite room nearby. She appeared wholly unbothered that Daan never showed his face again. A few days later we hit the road. Took a boat to the mainland, made it to Athens, where I picked up a some mail from Simon at the poste restante section of American Express. Three rerouted greasy aerogrammes from Walter made beautiful reading. The man was having a ball. Simon reported that ‘certain inquiries’ had been made about us, but whoever was after us appeared to have no further interest. ‘Suggest you stay away, however,’ he wrote. No shit, Sherlock. In other news I couldn’t care a fig about, the boys themselves had taken over the entire operation of buying, renovating and selling, apparently following a major spat with Ellie.

So, so, far behind me, all of that.

Ana and I grabbed a ferry to the islands. She wanted to go to Ios, I said everybody’s going to Ios, let’s try someplace quieter, although I didn’t push it because in truth I just wanted to go wherever her body went, and somehow we wound up on Paros. The first week with her was fantastic, the second pretty good, and by week three when she left to resume her ‘boring, middleclass existence’ in Holland, I made no attempt to convince her otherwise. I watched her gorgeous ass and legs as she made her way onto the ferry wearing her Spook&Ghost T-shirt and shorts, observed her beautiful face framed by her long, lovely hair as she turned to wave, and breathed a small sigh of relief.

This was the first time I had traveled with a woman, ever. I wondered whether it might be the last. Being on the road with a woman pretty much meant you’re together twenty-four-seven. As Billy Joel had put it that night we took out the Wall Street dude, *You like yoghurt, baby; I like beer...we all need a room of our own*. Apparently I needed lots of room.

I moved out of the tiny house we had rented in the village, walked three miles along the horseshoe-shaped coastline to the lighthouse at the very tip of the island. I’d previously spotted a lighthouse keeper’s house there, abandoned, I was told, once the lighthouse became automated. I cleaned



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out a ton of debris and settled in. I found a piece of plywood on which I inscribed PARO-DISE: Prof. Ouzo, Prop. – KEEP OUT! and attached it to the lintel atop the door. The stone house with its high ceiling and huge glassless windows made for a cool escape from the hot midday sun, as well as the dozen or so mindless twentysomething Euros who would motorboat over from the village late each morning, strip to their Speedos, bathe themselves in Nivea cream, place tiny plastic blindfolds over their eyes and baste on a small strip of nearby beach for hours until their inner tourist clocks signaled their return to the village for the standard evening of overeating and stupid conversation.

So my days were spent swimming at daybreak, walking the wild thyme-scented bare hills for a few hours each morning, hiding in the house from the Euro sun worshippers through late afternoon, ogling in wonder the early evening color changes of sea and sky. Once or twice a week I would saunter into the village at sunset, buy some vittles, look over the babes, maybe have a drink or two at an unhip taverna with a half dozen old men sitting outside giggling like school kids, shlep back home in the dark. Yeah, home: that's what it came to feel like in very short order.

First night I tried sleeping upon an abbreviated yoga mat on the floor, but halfway through I got up, walked ten meters to the skinny slice of beach below, laid out my bag and had one of the best night's sleep in history. The beach was cool but not cold, and mysteriously completely free of mosquitoes.

One such night I was curled up in the bag, enjoying a decent dream for a change, when a voice came into my head. I suppose it was my own voice, but for certain it was one rarely heard from.

“Get up and look at your house,” the rarely heard-from voice beckoned. My eyes popped open and first thing I saw was the tiny church some fifty feet the other way, so I struggled inside the bag to turn around, got all tangled, and when finally I did face the house, the sight which greeted me exhausted my breath in total: the full moon, bright, bright orange and immense, was resting just atop the roof of the abandoned building. Two new voices booted the other out of my head: Voice One – how can a voice that sounds just like my own voice figure this scene is so amazing it forces me awake and –?; Voice Two – will you *please* shut the fuck up and enjoy!

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It wasn't just the scene, as the moon now began dipping below the roof line in its slow descent to the sea. Fascinating thoughts and images flowed through my head, too quick for me to fasten labels on. Walter would refer to these as cosmic insights, or *aha!*s. One in particular hung around for a bit, as though making sure I got it before flitting off the screen. Of interest, it was the only one I recalled upon waking a few hours later.

### The very near future

I had met Franni a few years before, at a party in Auckland. She was in her sixties, short and round with frizzy hair and eyes that smiled. Her husband, Wilson, was tall and lean and had very little expression. As I stood between them, Franni talked and laughed and talked some more, while Wilson stood around quietly, drink in hand, appearing as though he were thinking something profound. ("Profound my arse," she snarled when I made reference. "He's mentally masturbating over one of his dark, skinny, titless wonders.")

Franni was a shrink. When I said I'd never had need of one, she raised an eyebrow and presented me a look that spoke eloquent sentences. During further conversation she happened to mention that something which had great meaning, a painting, had been taken from her a while back. She nodded across the large room, at a very attractive, um, dark, skinny, titless wonder.

"And you'd like it back?"

"Indeed, but fat chance of that happening."

A few days later I knocked at her door, package under my arm. Since then we'd been friends, and whenever I went to Auckland I stayed at their luxurious Herne Bay home.

I now rang her on my mobile, expecting to reach a recorded message, was surprised when she answered. In a panic I was all set to click her off, realized she could see my name and number.

"Franni? I'm...I'm..." At which point my voice failed me.

After considerable silence, she asked, "Where are you, love?"

"Ho...home. I just, uh -"

"Are you able to drive?"

"Ah, well, of course I can. But really, darling, I, um -"

## Spook & Ghost

“Get in the car and drive up here.”

“But who’s going to feed –?”

“*Now!*”

“Yes ma’am.”

## Early 1990s

India was, well, astounding. An entire universe encapsulated in a single country.

I started in the mountainous far north. Kashmir, which was Muslim. Then next door to Ladakh, which was Buddhist. Slowly overland down to Amritsar, which was Sikh, and then...

The colors, the aromas, the magical music, the non-stop blaring noise which tore apart the senses, the elegant architecture cheek and jowl with the absolute worst kind of poverty, the elephants and camels and monkeys... And the people: my god, the people: a billion strong, eating, sleeping, begging, shitting, *living* right there on the streets. Disneyland on acid!

I watched Westerners, Americans and Germans mostly, who’d boarded their flights in jeans, disembarked wearing sarongs, freaking the fuck out in the space of hours, back on their planes, home. Or maybe to Kathmandu to smoke their hash and wait for the jitters to stop.

Me, I loved it, all of it. Couldn’t get enough. Hindi was a pretty easy language to pick up, first the necessary words to get me by, then some sentence structure so I wouldn’t come off a total dumbass, finally enough skills I could communicate with a modicum of intelligence.

Initially I found myself gravitating to whiteys, but they quickly bored me. Indians, most of them, were no less boring, but sprinkled amongst them were people of vast smarts, and I don’t mean stuff they’ve memorized and spout off to impress, which Indians tended to do. Just about every one of these brainy sorts had a load of spiritual understanding and practice, which made me think of Walter and how much I missed his company.

I continued southward, higgledy-piggledy, jumping on and off trains, mixing with the locals. On one solidly-packed, seemingly never-ending jaunt I was surrounded by eight or ten gorgeous dark gypsy females, all of

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whom asked would I marry them, and had to satisfy their lust for my body (and wallet) by painting intriguing henna designs on my hands and arms. “For luck!” they would giggle. If only.

I couldn’t get enough of the bombast of Varanasi, or the desert of Rajasthan, or the incredible stone forms in the countryside of Karnataka. Stayed a month in each place, well past my visa allotment, but who’s to know, and when they did, the national pastime of passing baksheesh made everything right.

It was in the southernmost state of Kerala I found peace. Less dirt, less noise, far less confusion. Nice mix of Hindus, Muslims and Christians. But most impressive was the communist regime which floated in and out of power and created a fascinating anomaly. In the country with perhaps the world’s lowest literacy rate, Kerala boasted nearly a hundred percent of its people able to read and write. I’d say god bless the commies, but that too would be anomalous.

I spent a year there, walked the back streets of Cochin, Alleppey and Trivandrum, lived in beach huts, explored the tropical waterways in the eastern part of the state. After which, I hopped over to Sri Lanka, also beautiful but I didn’t like it there. The British had run the place for ages, as it had India, but here had left it in a mess of corruption, sectarian animosities and financial desperation. Amidst the greatest tropical beauty imaginable, the vibe there was pretty awful. I didn’t hang around long.

It was at poste restante in Colombo on my way back to India I received a letter that cheered me up considerably. It was from Walter, who said he was ready for a rest from ‘killin and preachin’ and suggested we meet up on the island of Lamu in Kenya. I booked a flight to Chennai, and from there to Nairobi.

## The very near future

All the way up I kept telling myself, I’m not going to cry, I’m *not* going to cry. She opened the door and I went *waaaaaah!!*

“About time, too,” she said, flicking a hardly smoked fag into the garden and leading me inside. “Mister Control finally lets go. So, hurray – we’re off to a damn good start.”

## Spook & Ghost

Franni's house was even worse a mess than I remembered. The smell of her cigarettes, ash trays full, crumpled packs and empty wine bottles here and about. As with most shrinks, the woman had a few wrinkles in her own psyche, but OCD was not one of them. No sign of Wilson, and I wasn't about to ask.

I parked my bag in the room I normally had, then followed her to what she called her game room, where she conducted her therapy sessions. I'd never been inside, never saw the door open. I'd assumed it contained the standard shrink stuff, couch for us, comfy chair for her. Dead wrong. No furniture at all, simply mattresses on the floor and big slabs of foam rubber all along the walls. "You've hidden all the sharp objects, I see."

We sat on the cushioned floor and talked. When I told her about the curvy blond Franni merely said: "You do realize you chose her for what she was able to do for you."

"Do for me? How about do *to* me?"

"Darling boy, you've been in retreat for how many years now, pulling in the walls closer and closer. This woman was the button for all the women, all the rejections you've set up for yourself, way back to your mother, who presented you the ultimate rejection by getting herself killed. You must realize this before we go any further. You've been in control of this harmful game ever since your mother 'left' you; scared to death – literally – of attaining any depth in a relationship because you know abandonment is just ahead."

"Which is why I've always been the dumper."

"Which is why you selected this woman. What you resist, persists. Even though she appeared to be sooo sweet and malleable when you first met, part of you, the smarter part, sensed she would be the one to dump the dumper. Which shows how strongly you wanted to break this mold of yours."

"Ach, by-the-numbers pop psychology bullshit."

"Clichés do have a basis in truth."

Following an hour of gab, she had me lie on the cushioned floor, close my eyes and gently push aside my thoughts. Easier said, definitely. I was instructed to take long, slow, deep breaths, connecting the in and out and in again, never a pause, focusing on each breath. Which is how I started out, then felt the breaths becoming short and choppy.

"Slowly and deeply. Each breath is life. By seeking help you have finally

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chosen life over death, now you need to be fully alive, not just trudging through the space around you.”

We continued on this way for what seemed like ten or fifteen minutes, but actually was forty-five. At some point I fell asleep, had dreams that were positive and beautiful, rare for me, but which were gone soon as I came out of it.

More gab, hers insightful, mine feebly tossing it aside, until we called it a night. I went into my room, crawled into the sleeping bag I had brought, but sleep refused to come for some time, and when it did I soon had a screaming nightmare, the screams lasting so long that Franni came in and shook me awake.

“Oh man, I had the worst dream.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, you were in it. Except you didn’t look like you. You were taller, slimmer, dressed kind of fancy, nice clothes but a bit old fashioned. Your hair was up, and your face and neck, particularly the back of the neck, were mutilated with small vertical cuts, like from a razor.”

Franni, heavily into Jung and symbolism, sat beside me nodding. “That was a mutilated part of yourself, transferred to this woman.”

“Scared hell out of me.”

“Good.”

Following day was more of the same. Another long session of deep connected breathing. At one point she said, “Try not to swallow. You’re doing that an awful lot.”

“I have to swallow.”

“No you don’t. Each time you swallow you’re working to keep yourself closed up, which is a control mechanism. Try breathing past your throat into your heart, imagining each new fresh breath as bright and life-giving, cleansing the heart, and when you let go the breath visualize it as the old, dark, negative energy you’re letting go of.”

I tried it, but kept swallowing.

“Breath in, breath out. Into the heart and out again. Just concentrate on that.” Amazingly, after half dozen breaths I stopped swallowing. A miracle!

Following the session I did a lot of talking, more than I had ever done, with anyone. I talked about Nam, about my travels. Talked about Walter, how

## Spook & Ghost

I missed him, and how so often I would have conversations with him in my head. I thought about telling her what we had been up to as Spook&Ghost, then remembered this was therapy, not a confessional. Besides, I didn't want to blow her mind. Some things were best left unsaid.

During another forty-five minute deep breathing deal I felt myself growing angry, livid. First it was directed to the curvy blond of recent days, and then she morphed into Ellie from San Fran. Colonel Dick, head of the security agency where I had worked, appeared on the hate scope, then that ass of a lieutenant who got booby-trapped in the cave blast, and then – Jesus, where the hell did *this* come from? – some kid who pushed my face in the dirt when I was nine or ten.

“You do realize that each of these people represents a stepping stone leading to where you are at this moment.”

“Yeah, fucked up and falling apart.”

“No! Absolutely not! These people rose up out of the recesses of your mind because they are meaningful to you. What you might consider doing, instead of beating yourself with what you consider ugly characteristics and episodes, is get into them, embrace them, play with them as though they've been actors and sets in your life's stage performance. That way they'll eventually fade away, or at least not interfere with you negatively.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“And for Christ's sake, try dropping the tough guy persona. It's old and stale and no more than a front for your need to control everything.”

“Become a pussy, you mean.”

“The opposite of control is *not* being a wimp. Get a clue!”

I had to giggle. “Piss you off, do I?”

“Bah.”

Franni had told me she would put off all her other clients for a couple days, but no more.

“But I want you coming back every couple of weeks. You're doing beautifully and you absolutely must keep on with this work.”

The next morning we did our final breathing session before I drove back to the beach. It seemed to go well. No anger to speak of, and I don't think I swallowed more than three or four times the duration. When I opened my eyes and slowly sat up, I noticed Franni gazing at me oddly, her mouth a numerical 0.

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“What?”

“Something happened during the session,” she said uncertainly. “I don’t know if it actually happened, or was some really weird thing I myself experienced.”

“What do you mean? What happened?”

She was silent for the better part of a minute.

Staring hard, she replied: “I don’t know how to put this, but as I was sitting here monitoring you, you...suddenly *disappeared!* I don’t know how else to put it. Your body just was not here! At least, I couldn’t see you. Your clothes were still here, but your face, your arms and hands – gone! I reached out and put my hand where your face should be, and I could feel it. I pulled your trouser legs up a few inches: also nothing. It was like for about a minute your body became...*invisible.*”

I took a deep breath, let it out slowly.

“Babe,” I said softly, “you really have to take it easy on the hard stuff.”

## Early 1990s

I took a room he had reserved for me at the lovely Peponi Hotel right on Shelley Beach. The area was whitey haven, mostly wealthy Brits, hard drinkers all. I hung out for a week, no Walter. Every day I’d ask the Danish owner, Lars, or his beautiful English wife Carol, had they heard from the guy. These were the days, remember, well before instant electronic communication. Just telephone, telex, Western Union. Primitive times. “He’ll be here,” they kept telling me. Apparently they knew him; hell, everybody knew him. Guy was legend by now.

I was sitting at a table under the stars, looking out at the tied-up dhows and beyond, the blackened channel. Smell of frangipani all about me. Not yet tourist season, but the people who lived on Lamu, or stayed half the year, were talking and drinking and laughing, as they did every evening, ad nauseum. A waiter brought me a drink, unsolicited, slammed it down on the table before me. I glanced up, a bit startled. He looked different. Thinner, yeah, but more than that. I jumped up, grabbed him in a mighty hug.



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“Careful, careful,” he said with a soft chuckle. “It’s a Muslim country, remember.”

“Ah, man, it’s so great to see you.” I broke off, stood apart. “What’s happened to you, dude? You look absolutely fantastic.”

“Been doing what I been doing. Good for the heart and soul. I recommend it for all budding assassins.”

“No worries about being dobbed in? I gather there’s some big reward money for your hide”

“Bro, these people, the locals, not just here, everywhere, they the ones keeping me alive. They way braver than me by a longshot. Know that helping me in any way means death, not only for theyselves, families too. Still. Offer me shelter, food, advice when I need it. Such good people, man. And the wealthy tourists, they way they look at me. I’m a rock star, babe. My momma, I think she’d a been proud of me, she still living.”

“Must be a hell of a lot of scary moments.”

“More than I even admit to myself. Wouldn’t believe how many times my gums hurting so bad I wanna scream.” He paused, looked at me like I had something crawling out my nose. “Shit you grinning at like you know a joke nobody else does?”

“Two things. I’m so goddamn happy to see you, and see you looking so good.”

“And?”

“You don’t drop your g’s anymore.”

He stopped cold at that. “Yeah?”

“Like you left the street when you left the States.”

“Well, hell, how’m I gonna comm-you-nicate with mah homies?” Pause. “Except I don’t reckon going back to the USofA is on the boards this lifetime.”

“Simon says they’ve cooled off on us.”

“Ain’t that. I just –” shrug “– my home, my true home, is here. Don’t mean Africa, necessarily. But amongst real people. Don’t like to judge, but seems America has lost that sense, even the poor. Europe too,” nodding at the Westerners all around us.

“Understand perfectly. Two years on the road, most of that in Third World countries, damn, the life there is rich. Which reminds me. When I was

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on that Greek island I wrote you about? One night I had this insight. Maybe I'm wrong, and hope what I say doesn't piss you off—"

"Was Ellie who ratted us out?"

I stared at him. "You knew?"

He shrugged. "Somebody had to and who else could it be? Look, I left her to come here and you didn't want her. Plus we wouldn't tell her what you do to yourself to get in places, which she must've asked me a thousand times. To her, we were a boys club and refused her any more than associate membership. She loved us, man. Really loved us both. So how you think that make her feel? She's a woman, and I suppose she had a moment that women been known to have since the beginning of time." He took a breath, let it out. "Still, we survived. We lucky we had a different vehicle than they looking for that day, and we had our danger signals. So no harm. But here's something else I worked out. I reckon she's the one unratted us too."

"Don't follow."

"How come they stopped hunting our ass? Now come on, you know them government types. Once they put a stink on you, they pursue until there's no more smell. But they quit."

"So you're thinking she told them she'd made a mistake, she suddenly remembered we were with her when a few of the killings took place, so we couldn't be the bad guys, something like that?"

"Yep. Still, I know that woman, and I tell you she's gonna spend the rest of her life wracked with guilt and shame. Unless we forgive her."

"How we do that? Send her flowers with a note, We forgive you for trying to put us away for life?"

"Nah, man. Just forgive her in your heart. Truly feel it. The universe will carry that energy straight to her. That's the way it works."

"You're a hell of a dude, my man."

"Not there yet, but working on it."

We sat in silence for several minutes, hardly aware of the soft conversations around us. "You know," he said, gazing out at the dark, "what I been doing, taking out rich bad guys, not much different than what we did back in the States. We didn't kid ourselves then and I've never kidded myself that my killing is gonna change how things go down here. Seems to me my real work, where I've been most productive and what I truly love, is talking with

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folk. Explaining the dharma. Been getting a message for some time, and lately it's coming in louder: time to quit the killing, time to leave Africa." He looked directly at me. "Except there's one job I want to do before I go, and I can't do it alone."

"A-ha! Finally it comes out: the real reason you've conned me into coming all the way over here, take advantage of my sweet nature."

"It's big, man. Gi-fucking-normous. I got no problem you wanna walk away, I still love yo scrawny white self."

"What, and miss out on some major fun? Saddle the horses, kimosabe – Spook&Ghost ride again!"

\*

The Great Dictator was not always such. As a vibrant young university graduate, he was a leader of the forces that toppled the last dictator of his much-maligned country. The people hailed and loved him, and his early years upon rising to the presidency saw many improvements that benefitted the millions of poor. Gradually he began to change. Many of his original fellow revolutionists lost their positions in his cabinet, and those who remained began one by one to disappear. Their positions were assumed by strong military types, most of whom had held the same posts with the former top dog. The Great Dictator took control of his country's communications outlets, and those journalists who couldn't flee in time wound up with their heads publicly displayed upon sticks on the government house lawn. Free of criticism, he made untold deals with foreign investors, as had his predecessor, and like his predecessor salted away billions in personal accounts beneath the streets of Zurich.

Every new generation puts an anti-hero on the pop charts.

Walter and I talked long into several nights about the best way to deal with this man. My initial idea was simply to take the bastard out.

"And then what? This is Africa, man. You know the history. Next guy comes in becomes the last guy who went out. Nah, we gotta do something like we done to Freddy Delahunty."

"Bleach him white?"

"Even better. What these characters hate most is people laughing at them. So how best we make him look like a toad?"

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Which is where I came in.

So there's the Great Dictator, in front of thousands of ardent followers standing under the blistering sun because it beat the alternative of starvation in prison cells, cheering and clapping upon signal, plus millions more under gun at home and in the streets viewing on the country's one remaining TV network. His amplified voice normally droned on for hours of histrionics, and this particular performance promised to be no different. But then something odd happened. In the middle of a rant about his great contributions to education and health care, the Great Dictator began flicking his right ear, as though an insect were buzzing about. And then he began flicking his left ear as though the insect had switched ears. While his centurions began side-eyeing one another, the man then took to flicking both ears at the same time, hands flapping faster and faster as if he were attempting to create loft and leave the ground, his head swiveling this way and that, ready to lay deathly blame. At this point two female members of his inner staff were ordered to stand directly alongside him waving fans. This brought the situation back to normal for a minute or two, but then the Great Dictator suddenly jumped forward as though he'd been goosed on the backside, this despite no one being within ten feet of his back. Several more goose-jumps occurred, on each occasion the Great Dictator emitting a high pitch squeal and with both hands swatting the air behind him. The pinches increased in frequency and he began pumping his knees to go along with the rearward swatting, a new type of ritual dance perhaps, or introducing his nation's first jitterbug competition. Around him, dignitaries and bodyguards, bug-eyed and jaws slung down, no longer could hide their amazement, until finally the Great Dictator smashed the bank of microphones on the dais before him (actually, only one was operational, the rest for show) and stomped off the stage, for which I was ever so thankful, boiling in the intense African heat and praying my dripping sweat would not be apparent to those closest. Walter, meantime, was far off amongst the trees, shooting. Only he wasn't using a long-range rifle with sniper scope, rather a long-lens video camera. Within a few days several dozen copies of the resultant vid made their way to every prominent TV outlet on the continent and quite a few beyond.

Not long after, the still-shaken Great Dictator awoke suddenly in his double king-size bed to hear a hushed but creepy voice telling him his death

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was near. The trio of beauties who'd been asleep around him leaped out of bed shrieking, and when the lights were turned on the quivering Great Dictator, silk sheets drawn up to his throat, saw nothing out of the ordinary save for a sheet of paper on the bed bearing the image of a black cartoon Spook holding up a rifle. The Great Dictator screamed and screamed.

His food was poisoned – not to kill him so much as to immediately knock out his tasters. His underwear was sprinkled with itching powder. His toothpaste made his teeth turn red. And all the time his advisers, henchmen, bodyguards and bootlickers cast quick glances at one another or rolled their eyes or simply looked down at their shoes and tried their best to hide the smiles that would bring about their demise.

There being no such thing as a secret in this part of the world, word was disseminated throughout Africa like a raging bush fire that the Great Dictator, who had always displayed stoical control, indeed was losing it. Long after Walter and I returned to the beach in Lamu, the Great Dictator's paranoiac imagination carried on, often performing a better job of driving him bonkers than we ever could have done ourselves.

### **The very near future**

She handed me a pad of paper and pen.

“On the left side of the sheet, write down all the positive qualities you remember in your mother. On the right side, the negative.”

Yeah, whatever, I thought. Positive? Providing, creative, determined. And then I was stumped. Negative was considerably easier. A bitch, cynical, repressive, critical, hurtful, overbearing, compulsive, never pleased, cold.

For my father: playful and kind on the left, and on the right, insensitive, bull-headed, non-understanding, wimp, paranoid, victim.

“Now both parents together,” she ordered.

Positive. The same five words of providing, creative, determined, kind. Then more traits flowed in: trusting, accepting, free, warm, sensitive, understanding, dynamic. When I read them over I was about to go back and cross a few out, but Franni wouldn't let me. “I want your gut feelings here, not what your head tells you.”

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The negs? A bitch, cynical, repressive, critical, hurtful, overbearing, compulsive, neverpleased, cold, insensitive, bull-headed, non-understanding, wimp, paranoid, victim, paranoid, victim. Same as before. Then almost as an afterthought: too old.

I went to hand her the paper, but she kept her hands in her lap. Instead she bored her eyes into me. “All these?” She nodded towards the pad. “That’s what you think of *yourself*!”

“Aw, yo,” I bellowed. “That’s bullshit!” I looked down at the paper, went over each word. “You think?”

We were in the strange room with the floor covered with mattresses and walls lined with thick foam rubber. Now I discovered why so. She had me sit up, close my eyes, take some deep breaths.

“This game is called the wall of fear. Whatever comes up, don’t try to change it. Just deal with it. And describe everything that you’re experiencing.”

Nothing came to mind for the longest while. What was supposed to come up? Dancing girls? Then a huge apple appeared, sitting on a pile of sand. What the fuck did that mean? The apple faded, and I saw my mother, not well defined, in fact she was sort of shimmering, then slowly coming more into focus.

“What do you want to do to her?” I heard Franni say.

I started to say, Nothing. I want nothing to do with –. And then out of nowhere I reached forward, grabbed her by the throat and began squeezing. Harder, harder. “*DIEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!*” I heard myself scream. Jeeezuss!

Franni: “Keep going,”

Momma no longer was there. I was now in a dark room with a very high ceiling, the only light coming from a window far up the wall. The window was shrouded in black curtains hanging down to where I stood (then how was light getting in?). I pushed aside the curtains, but that didn’t increase the light. I wanted desperately to see out the window, but it was beyond my reach. Somehow, I boosted myself up until I could grab the window sill and looked out. What I saw was a lovely pastoral scene with trees and hills leading to water far beyond.

“Does the window open?”

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I tried to lift it, but it was stuck tight.

“Open it.”

I can’t.”

“Yes you can. Open the window.”

I struggled with all my strength. Nothing. Again, same result. One last try. This time the window budged an inch, then another. A last burst of energy and the window begrudgingly slid up. I leaned out, saw there was a very long drop to the ground.

“How are you going to get down?”

I looked around. I was, after all, a fairly accomplished burglar, was I not? But there was nothing on the smooth outside wall to grab a purchase. Screw it, I thought, pulled my head back in, stuck my legs out the window, sat down on the sill and thrust myself forward. I hit the ground hard (actually feeling a sharp jolt in my lower back) and fell forward onto my face. I rose up slowly, dusted myself off, looked around. I was now in a darkened forest.

I thought I saw movement on the periphery, but every time I turned my head to look, whatever it was would dart behind a tree. Then I saw that the forest was full of cartoony monsters. I told myself not to be afraid, they weren’t real. They would have to be real to hurt me, right? I saw a light in the distance. Figuring it was the edge of the forest, and beyond would be the hill and body of water I’d notice from the window, I began to move towards it. Lighter and lighter it got. And then, just as I knew myself to be easy distance from the pathway into the light, a figure appeared, blocking me.

“Do you recognize the person?” she wondered.

Did I ever. Salvatore ‘Sally’ Tomaccio, the tough little bastard who’d chosen me as his personal punching bag when I was twelve.

“What are you going to do?”

Nothing. I just stood there, watching him grinning evilly at me. It was wholly without thought that I suddenly found myself running straight at him, screaming. I reached out and grabbed him by the balls, propelling him rearwards as I continued to scream myself hoarse. I was actually running and screaming in Franni’s room. I realized this only when I smacked face-first into six inches of foam rubber and bounced back onto the floor.

“Keep your eyes closed and continue on,” she instructed.

I thought: Can’t I just lie here, take a nap? I got up, sat on my haunches,

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carried on inside my head. I followed a trail through the trees to the very edge of the forest, but once there I came upon a huge pile of excrement, maybe eight feet high. I stopped. Couldn't go over it, couldn't go around it. How the hell –? I spotted a shovel leaning against the trunk of the very last tree of the forest. I grabbed the shovel and in three savage, screaming slams flattened the mound to where I could step over it. When I did so, and turned around, the crap was gone. Before me now was the hill I had noticed before. I began to climb. The hill was steep and I felt myself growing tired, but I kept on. I got to the top and looked down. Trees and a house and a garden. I suddenly began to cry.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong!” I cried. “I found my home! It’s right there!”

I jogged down the hill, pausing at the gate for a moment before entering. It seemed someone was in the house, someone I knew and felt love for. A woman? No, wait. It was Walter! Walter was in my home, waiting for me! I went inside, but no one was there. I felt a little sad at first, but the feeling of being home soon overcame that. The house was simple, lots of exposed timber, old comfortable furniture. A large picture window looked out onto still water, whether a pond or small lake I couldn't decide. It felt calm and peaceful there. So calm and peaceful I wanted to stay forever. But Franni wouldn't let me.

“Okay, open your eyes,” she said softly. After allowing me to penetrate the fog of mind and focus: “In Jungian symbolism, the strongest symbol of all is the home. It represents the Self. I'd say you have accomplished a hell of a lot here today.”

“What’s weird is I didn't plan any of this. Had no idea what was coming next.”

“Definitely not weird,” she claimed. “As far from weird as you can get.”

## Early 1990s

“Australia?”

“Yep. Came to me a couple nights ago. I put it in the mental microwave and this morning came the ding.”



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“Okay, I’m not going to argue with your ding, but what’s there?”

“A hell of a lot of aborigines. They an ancient race that’s been screwed, blued and tattooed since the first whitey washed ashore. They lived on the land for forty thousand years, understood the land, understood there were energies inside it. Called them songlines, and they could walk thousands of miles through the desert carrying nothing coz the songlines told em just where to get food and water to survive. Then the dumb as shit English came, confiscated most of their land and abused it by raising cattle and digging for minerals to sell to foreigners. Not only that, these English bastards, what they did, they went into the outback and stole aborigine kids away from their parents, sent them to their Christian schools and forced them to become servants for rich white families in the cities. Now the aborigine people are mostly alcoholics living on welfare.”

“And you think you can help them?”

“Sure, why not. Done it here, can do it there.”

“Preaching the dharma.”

“Not preaching. Dharma ain’t religion, keep telling you. Principles of life. If these people were open enough to understand songlines as a principle of nature, I’m betting they’re open enough to understand the dharma in the same way.”

I gazed out from the Peponi’s terrace. Below me, in the early morning, a string of donkeys walked by free as can be. Off to my left, a parcel of healthy cats with slim bodies and long legs were sitting around patiently while a fisherman with a knife squatted over a large basket of fish, scaling them and occasionally tossing bits of meat to an awaiting feline. How did they know not to fight for the fish, these cats, or grab one from the basket and scoot off?

“I envy you your dedication, my brother. Kind of wish I had me some direction. Spook&Ghost gave me a purpose, and we had a hell of a lot of joy doing what we did, but now...”

“You’ll find your thing one day, man. Not just saying. I know it. Might take a time, but it’ll come to you, and you’ll be good at it.”

“Yeah, well. Meantime, I suppose I’ll haul myself up to Thailand. Maybe the far north, away from the crazies on the beaches and islands. From there I can move around Asia, avoid the monsoons and tourists. Maybe —” I gave him a wink “— do a little housework, I can find deserving rich folk.”

## **The very near future**

Franni led me out to her back garden. As opposed to the inside of her house, the garden might be called immaculate. Flowers, native grasses, cacti, raised beds of vegetables. “I have a gardener,” she explained as she showed me around, cigarette in the corner of her mouth.

Alongside a boundary fence sat a spa pool, quietly bubbling away. She slithered in, her one-piece black bathing suit – ‘togs’, as Kiwis called them – immediately became sparkling wet. I wore a pair of mid-thigh ‘swimmers’. I sat on the lip and hoisted myself into the water. It was warm on the verge of hot. But comfortable. She handed me a face mask and snorkel attachment. I had done snorkeling in the Greek islands, but wasn’t all that keen as water always seemed to seep into the mask.

“Don’t worry, love, this is top of the line stuff. If water gets in and you drown, I get a refund, no problem.”

She had laid out the program before we stepped outside.

“The behaviorists claim we are born with just two fears, loud noise and falling. That’s rot. Where the hell does the fear of the dark come from, or spiders and snakes? The academic know-nothings also talk about nature versus nurture, meaning we are influenced in life either by our genes and/or environment. Sure, to a point. But consider that the majority of people on earth believe in reincarnation. That our spirit hops from one material life to another, and in each of these lifetimes we accrue experiences which we carry over to the next life, and the next. Let’s just say there’s a possibility this is so, and why shouldn’t it be, since even that retardate, the great god science, tells us nothing can really be destroyed, it just changes shape and form. So if reincarnation is a reality, or even just a perhaps, then chances are we carry the strongly experienced traits and fears from one life to the next, and these influence our behavior in the present life. Make sense so far?”

I thought about Walter’s rock-solid grasp of what she was saying. As he one time put it, “I don’t believe, bro. I *know!*”

“So what we’re going to do now is put you into a situation that will replicate your time in the womb, where you may be able to re-experience

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critical past life experiences. The water will be body temperature, and I'll be supporting you so you can totally relax and let go."

"But what if nothing comes? If I don't see anything at all?"

"Not a worry. If nothing appears to you, then nothing appears. People often need a few sessions in the pool before they can break through presently-held beliefs and open up to what may be. Just don't try to conjure up images. Are you okay with this?"

I shrugged. Nothing else, I'll have me a decent soak.

She instructed me to lie on my back upon a water mattress, what the Kiwis called a lilo, with my head, shoulders and top part of my back tilted rearward into the water. She took hold of my shoulders just beneath the surface and maneuvered me slightly until I was properly balanced. I was to breathe, she said, just as I'd done in the indoor sessions. I was wary at first, waiting for the water to flood the mask, but it didn't happen, and after half a minute I had no trouble breathing through the extended tube. Being supported by her felt a little strange, but I quickly became used to it and actually began to relax and enjoy myself. Long breath in, connect, long breath out.

"Imagine yourself in your mother's womb," I heard her say. "Protected and safe, cozy and comfortable."

Weird? Oh, you bet. So I lay there in perfect equilibrium, peering out through the wet glass of my face mask to the blurred sky. I must have drifted off for a bit, because suddenly I was puzzled as to where I was, felt a mini-freakout, quickly reconnected and became calm again. Fun and games. Meanwhile, back in the womb. Which rhymes with tomb. Womb-tomb-room-broom-zoom. Jesus, shut up and focus. Focus-hocus-pocus. Oh god, my kingdom for a lobotomy. Better yet, just shoot me and be done with it. Next came what Franni termed the slide show: the curvy blonde; the time she tried to pick up Trump and he scratched her; is Trump okay by himself? what if in my crazy state I left the stove on – I'd been doing that a lot lately – come back to a house that's just ashes? Focus, asshole! On what? Past lives? If I'm a fuck-up in this one, maybe it's not my fault, blame my past lives. Could I have been a full-time invisible man in a past life, which would account for –

A strange image appears. I see a man, young, twenties maybe. Dressed

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in what looks like furs. Living in a tribal situation. There's a young woman with him; his wife. He's devoted to her. They're so happy together. Scene shifts. The wife is sick. The tribal medicine people can't work out what's wrong. She's in a coma and can't be revived. Shift. The man is called into a yurt-like dwelling where several elders sit in a circle. They tell him it's been decided his wife will never wake, that food is scarce, she's become a burden to the tribe. The law of the tribe dictates he must take her outside the tribal area to the distant hills and leave her there to die. He says not a word. Leaves the yurt. Shift. Dawn the following morning. The young man packs some things, gently picks up his wife and fastens her to his back, heads for the hills beyond. He arrives there but doesn't stop. He continues on for many days until he finds a spot he considers safe. Shift. Several years have passed. The man's hair has turned gray, his wife's white. Though she's still in a coma, has never awakened, he cares for her, feeds her, even talks to her as though she might respond, except he has no idea of that happening. In the final scene he is burying her, covering her grave with rocks, hoisting a pack and walking away.

I came back to Franni's pool, focused on my breathing. Within minutes another scenario appears. A woman now, fifties, professor at a university in Germany. One day she is pulled out of her classroom, beaten, pushed onto a cattle train already stuffed with humanity. Then she's in a concentration camp. Food is almost non-existent. Guards throw crusts of old, hard bread into the room. The women prisoners fight for scraps, punching, scratching one another for tiny morsels. But the professor refuses to participate. The other women shun her, call her vile names. She never answers back. In a final sequence she is lying on a filthy, narrow, soiled mattress. She is in pain, dying. But she has a sense of victory: she has defeated her enemy.

A third play quickly surfaced: again, a female, the time even further back in history than the initial scenario. She is four years old. A gang of marauding thugs attacks their peaceful settlement, killing the men, savagely raping then murdering the adult women, before rounding up the kids, taking them off to be slaves. Next scene. Now eleven years old. She is small, skinny, her hair cut short, yet obviously quite strong in body and character. One night she awakens, silently moves around their pen and wakes the other slave kids. She leads them through a narrow tunnel they have secretly fashioned

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under the pen walls. They overpower the sleeping guards, smashing their heads with rocks, steal food and weapons. In a number of short scenes, the girl commands these same kids as they attack settlement after settlement, killing, robbing, rounding up the children and taking them, not as slaves, but to be warrior children like themselves. In the final take, the girl and her gang are ambushed by a tribe of adults. Following a ferocious battle they are overwhelmed. Wrists and ankles bound, she is carried screaming and squirming by four men to the edge of a cliff, held there for some moments and thrown over. She is falling, falling...

...falling from Franni's grasp face-down into the warm water, choking as water filled my mask. Ripping the mask from my face, I stood waist-high in the water and looked around to get my bearings. I spotted Franni. She was looking at me with bright sparkling eyes, satisfied smile.

Dry and dressed, we sat in her padded clinic. I enthusiastically recounted step-by-step the fascinating adventures, a kid returned home following an exciting Saturday matinee. Franni listened intently.

"May I suggest one tiny change here? Your use of pronouns. Instead of he and she, try me and my.

"You really think?" I shook my head, more in wonderment than denial.

"Do you recognize a theme in these three stories?" When I frowned, she continued: "In each case you were a rebel, a renegade. You turned your back on convention, stubbornly went your own way. Sound familiar to you?"

"You're saying that's a bad thing?"

"I'm saying it is what it is. Commendable to a point. I wonder whether you might be taking it too far. It sounds like you've rejected society so completely that you've made yourself into a remote island."

"And that's bad?"

"Has it made you happy? Contented? At peace with who you are?"

"You would have to bring that into the equation."

## Mid-1990s

I based myself in Chiang Mai. I had my own small house, but spent a great deal of time at a forest monastery to the west of the city, not far from the

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university. I had met an English woman at a vegetarian restaurant I took most of my meals. We became lovers for a brief time while she awaited her husband to arrive from Britain. One day she said she wanted to visit a certain monk she'd heard about at this particular wat.

We grabbed a tuk-tuk and arrived at the entrance to what appeared to be a vast, peaceful park. She had been before and led the way to a set of steps built into a small hillside. "You can come up," she said, but I declined, and instead sat by the edge of a pond a short distance away. I saw a few deer, several rabbits. If heaven were like this, I thought.

Over to my right an hour later the English woman was coming down the steps, followed by a huge, robed monk.

"Hey, professor!" he called over. "Come, we have a talk."

I'd had enough Buddhist banter from Walter to last several incarnations, but the monk appeared friendly, so what the hell. As I passed the English woman, she gave me a small squeeze. Up the stairs to a cozy little nook. There was a tiny terrace with two rattan chairs. The monk, who had to be six-two and weigh maybe two-fifty, introduced himself as Santi. (I later learned his real name, or rather birth name, was Ludwig Wagner.) He said he was born in Germany during the war, had become a dropout beatnik at seventeen, traveled through India, tried on a few ashrams but they weren't him, moved east to Thailand and settled in as a Theravada monk, where he had been twenty-five years now.

I felt comfortable in his presence, enough so that I told him more about myself in that first sitting than all save Walter, Simon and Ellie. He rubbed his hands together like a kid hearing adventure stories. When I mentioned some of the gigs Spook&Ghost had performed, he laughed uproariously. Nothing about my becoming invisible, but a lot of other stuff. I surprised myself how much I did reveal, but that's the kind of person this Santi was. Not a word about Buddhism, nothing about the dharma – which the Theravadas knew as dhamma. Just a couple of roadies having a travel rave.

He took me to the side of his terrace and pointed down. Two tiny cottages sat on the edge of a thicket. "Those are my kutis," he said. "I had them built. They're for people to get away from the world outside, meditate and maybe clear the mind. In the first one, a young German guy is living for some weeks trying to decide is he to be a monk or is he to go home and marry

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his girlfriend. The second one I keep open for special visitors. Now, it is for you, whenever you want. Stay short, stay long, come and go as you like. You want to make donation, okay, but not necessary. I go on alms round every morning, there's always plenty of food."

"Interesting. Only what's the catch. I mean, offer like this, there has to be a catch. You going to bust in one night, shave my head, wrap me in robes?"

He laughed. "Yes, young man, there definitely is, as you say, a catch. People come here all the time with sad stories. They're all confused, don't know right from left. Like the young German guy down there. Okay, that's what we're here for. But it will be such a pleasure to have somebody around we can just talk bullshits for a change."

\*

So for maybe seven, eight months a year it was Thailand, with side trips to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The last gave me some jitters the first time. Remarkably, the people welcomed me. "You American?" one old crone wondered one day when I had stopped to buy some vegetables at her street stall. I nodded, reluctantly. "Good. Love Americans."

"Really?"

"Sure. Americans good people. Buy my vegetables. Don't haggle. Talk to me."

"But the war!"

"No war! We kick your ass, war over," she laughed. "Now everybody at peace. Old lady very happy!"

During the months of monsoon I would trip off to Indonesia, Bali before the beautiful people found it and turned the place into a ripoff yoga resort, then the islands to the east – Lombok, Flores and Timor.

A few years of this and one day Santi approached and asked where I would soon be off to. Told him I had no real plans yet, maybe the Philippines, Papua New Guinea. He rubbed his hands as I'd seen him do so many times when something excited him. "I want very much a favor."

"Sure, man. What's up?"

"I want to meet your Mister Spook. How about taking me to visit him in Australia."

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Santi had an additional agenda. Sly old devil that he was, following nearly thirty years' residence at his Thai wat, he now wanted out.

"The abbot of our sanga is very old," he told me on the flight to Darwin. "There's a power play unfolding for the position between two senior monks, and I don't like either of them. You know, our tradition has it we are not permitted to carry money. Both these monks get around it by having young monks go with them whenever they leave the wat. The young monks carry their money for them."

"Rules are made to be broken, my friend."

"That I understand. But to corrupt young monks because of their greed is to me unforgivable. Plus, both monks have girlfriends."

"How the hell you know all this?"

"Professor, there are no secrets in a sanga. A few months back I happened to observe another senior monk commit what you might call a sinful transgression. At the next assembly of the sanga I stood up and, without naming the monk, I mentioned what I had observed, and said I would not attend an assembly until this person withdrew from the sanga. What I didn't expect was the discomfort amongst a goodly number of the monks present."

"They were all doing it."

"So it seems. Plus there has been for some time a move to get me to leave. They can't kick me out because I too am senior, with an unblemished record, and besides, as the only Western monk resident, they recognize my position with overseas tourists. But there are many ways to skin the calf. The government here will not grant me permanent residence. Which means once a year I have to go to the immigration office to renew my visa. The head man in the Chiang Mai office is brother to one of the monks who wants me out. Meaning I have to go to Bangkok to renew my visa now."

I grunted in sympathy.

"But the truth is I have had enough of this beautiful place. I'm getting older and not really in the best of health. Your friend Mister Spook intrigues me. Perhaps this is my ego speaking to me, but I'm wondering perhaps I can be of assistance in his work in Australia."

"Wait. You, a monk for thirty years, assisting a layman?"

"What does it matter? He is doing the work of the Buddha far more than



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am I. If he is everything you say, whether he wears the robe or not is of little consequence. If he should accept me to carry his dhamma bag, it will be an honor.”

So we were off to see the wizard of Aus... a journey that would change the lives of all three of us.

### The very near future

“Can you get someone to look after your moggy for a few weeks?”

“I suppose. Why?”

“I’m sending you on the road. A few assignments to strengthen your grip on reality.”

“What is this, the boy scouts? I’m doing fine. How long we been at this, two months? More?”

“Yes, you are doing fine. But don’t kid yourself. You’ve had a major operation and you’re now ready to leave the hospital. The period ahead is like weight training for your soul. Or maybe like a wound that needs to stay open until all the infection drains out before it can fully heal.”

“Man, you’re all full of metaphors. Yeah, terrific. I’ll get somebody to house-sit for the beast while you send me out on fifty mile hikes with full pack.”

“Do you have access to a van?”

“A van. I’m going into the haulage biz?”

“You can take Wilson’s old Beddie. He’s just had it warranted and full serviced. Just take care of it, please. It’s one of our prize possessions.” I’d seen the ancient white Bedford in her garage, of course. Figured it was an antique, awaiting portage to a museum.

“I want you to spend at least three weeks in the South Island. You say you’ve never been, which in itself ought to be a crime. It’s the most magnificent patch of real estate on the planet. People there are a darn sight nicer than here as well. Take some money, not much, and leave your credit cards home.”

“This is my great assignment? Babe, I spent years on the road. Years.”

“And the last time you did this? I thought so. As we get older we tend to

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close in. We come up with the most wonderful excuses to keep from leaving our comfort zone, the prime lie being I useta. Well, you useta be a pretty together fella; unfortunately, useta doesn't count for much in real life."

"Three weeks, huh."

"At least. Plus I want you to write about it. Not just place and date and temperature and what you ate. Put your heart and guts into it."

"Well shit, Franni. I'm not a writer. Get finger cramps making out a shopping list. Does neatness and spelling count?"

"Double space and indent the first word of each paragraph. And I'll show you how to use the spell check. Now get on with you."

## RAMBLIN

*Boomboom. Not a blade of green grass anywhere everything brown the cows are dry sheep starving miles and miles and miles of parched withering life forms becoming nonlife forms. And then the West Coast. Green again. And then the rain. At first the sound on the metal roof is welcome. I thrill to the wealth it brings to the earth beneath me. But on and on harder more columns of water pillars. The van begins to leak. First one spot. Then another. Shit look there another. Plink plop. Rags and cups and pots everywhere. I step outside totally encapsulated in plastic and rubber to make my own water return in two minutes drenched. I move on a ways but visibility is limited to the windscreen. So I park by a lake. Scenic wonderment three asterisks says the guide book. But not today. That night come the mosquitoes. How the hell do they get in – follow the raindrops? A platoon a battalion a goddamn regiment. Okay here you bastards take your blood just don't sing to me of your fucking conquests! But no. Sonatas in A-positive. I learn the roads are washed out above and beyond. Imprisoned in a metal coffin on wheels one that smells of wet dog yet. Three days. Not just rain: RAIN. As only Noah could love. Enough already! HELP!!! And then just like that it stops. I step out with wet clothes bedding name it. Lord of the Wring. Back on the road everything crisp clear fresh. On my left the Southern Alps to the right the sea. Finally peace. Boomboom.*

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*Boomboom. Margaret is a tiny beautiful woman of 68. Her husband is a year older and an alcoholic. Margaret's husband is a retired seaman and a bully. She tells me over a delightful lunch that she had left him for three years but returned a year ago. Nothing changed. He won't stop drinking won't stop bullying. So she spends most of her time in the garden. The garden is immaculate. I ask her if she's afraid to be on her own is this why she came back. She says no those three years apart were her finest in nearly half a century of marriage. What then? I feel so guilty she says softly. I talk to her about reincarnation and karma the little I know about such things. Don't you think you've worked off whatever debt you may have owed this being? Margaret's clear blue eyes light up. So few people think like that she says. Do you? I wonder. Oh yes! And it's so encouraging to hear someone else say what I feel so strongly to be true. I finish my lunch wondering whether Margaret will ever leave for good her drunken bully. Boomboom.*

*Boomboom. I am a cosmic flea. I flit from here to there place to place one temporary shelter to the next. The past ten years I have lived in one single spot with hardly any movement whatsoever. Now here on the road strangers are opening their doors to me. A short week ago this seemed so bizarre and I felt guilty about the imbalance of payments. No longer for now I understand. Now when a door is held open I walk in. If it doesn't feel right I don't hang around. If it does I put down my bag. No sooner I do than the unloading begins. I am taken into immediate and total confidence. Father Mulrooney with his collapsible confessional in a backpack. 'I don't know why I'm telling you all this': the inevitable interjection. I do. It is my lot. I get a bed and a meal you get a sympathetic ear. (All I ask is you tell your story well. All stories are pretty much the same it's the telling that sets them apart.) I guess they think I'm safe. A cosmic flea is not apt to hang around very long. And when I go I take your shit and dump it beyond everybody's sight. Boomboom.*

*Boomboom. The sea is angry this morning lifting and dropping the ferry like a piece of pumice. I know it's only a matter of time. That time arrives. I*

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*fight through the crowd standing under the canopy. Over the rail but into the wind, and breakfast is now on my jacket. Swerving and stumbling I make it to the other side sit on a bench besides two yobbo types. The sea doesn't bother them in the least. One reaches into a soiled paper bag and removes two greasy meat 'poiz' handing one to his mate. I lurch for the rail. I am doubled in half my nose nearly level with the top of the passing swells. Behind me come the chortles of the dimwit yobbos. As I hang there the wooden rail both supporting me and digging into my waist issuing forth ghosts of dinners past I lift my head in time to see an albatross majestic in full wing-spread soaring barely an inch above the water not a feather in movement. I am now two the hassled tourist and the marveling traveler half of me in agony half enraptured by this wondrous creature before me. Boomboom.*

*Boomboom. The German hitchhiker has a madonna's face and trim curvaceous body. She's been thumbing on her own for three months she informs me. We swap ironies and laughs and delight one another with tales of the road. At dusk I drive her into a campground where she rents a cabin. We go for a walk then return to the old Beddie where I set up the cooker and prepare a feast. As we eat I silently thank the gods of the road for sending her my way. After dinner as we sit quietly sipping herbal tea she begins. A monologue. About her non-understanding boyfriend. About his kid brother who became her lover. About her jealous sister and bitchy mother and about the time she swallowed 25 capsules to rid herself of her lot and even failed at that. She lights up a joint to help her sift through the memory bank. Pungent gray smoke fills the Beddie. I open all the windows and battle for fresh air. When it's late she thanks me for a wonderful evening and sits with her hand on the door handle waiting for a word. The one I give her is goodnight. Boomboom.*

*Boomboom. 'You're lucky' says my host a family man with a steady job. 'I could never live alone like you do. I'd be far too lonely.' I smile and say nothing. Let him think what he thinks. Lonely? Let me tell you. I don't get lonely very often. At home or here I generally manage to occupy my thoughts*

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*and time. I read I walk I listen to music. What else is there when you're not busy worrying about the mortgage or changing diapers? HOWEVER... when loneliness comes it does not come slowly and subtly taunting me like a dull ache. It shoots out of the sky like the hammer of Thor and strikes dead centre in the heart. It comes at no specific time or set situation and its moment of duration can be an hour or a day or two or three. It overpowers me consumes me like the whale did Jonah. I am its slave. Whatever rational sense I might otherwise be afflicted with is gone. I watch myself eating far beyond any sensible point of satiation. I think long heartfelt letters to people I have neither been in touch with nor thought about for ages. I rave to anyone unfortunate enough to come within earshot. I seriously read the jobs available ads and might even answer one or two just to be doing something. I ask myself a million unanswerable questions the main one being what the fuck is wrong with me that I am alone? And then at some moment just like the West Coast rain it's gone. I know that it was there was real but for the life of me can't figure out why. Then like a dog that's taken a fall I get up shake it off and continue on my way. Boomboom.*

*Boomboom. From "Death of a Scavenger" a detective book picked up at a charity shop written by some dude named Keith Spores I never heard of: '...half of life is happy the other half is melancholy. One is as natural and necessary as the other. The purpose of life is not as most people think to be happy. The purpose is merely to be – and be gone. You float with the current from the headwaters to the end and the strokes you take along the way have little effect on your course. The banks of the river determine that.' These words are read by candlelight late at night in a hut on the Routeburn track. The truth finds me in the most unlikely places and from the most unexpected sources. Boomboom.*

*Boomboom. The mountains and lakes and seas and plains have become a continuous stretch of form and shape and color and earthly plasma. Days and dates and places and facts have lost their hard edge grow soft softer dissolve into uneventful memory. I try to recall the business I'm on and I*

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*forget I'm trying to recall the business I'm on. It is on this day at this moment I realize I have once again found my road legs found the flow. A second ago I was just traveling. Now I'm ramblin. Shit hot! Boomboom.*

*Boomboom. I call them Sadie and Max. They are paradise ducks but that's a name given them by men. I have a block against remembering men-assigned names for things. It took me two years to remember pohutukawa (is that the right spelling? Does the pohutukawa give a shit?) and only then because it sounds like bahut achchah which is Hindi for very good. One drizzly day I am walking with a young woman a born-again Christian through the bush around Lake Matheson. We stop at a clearing and look out to the distance. In one of those lovely little miracles of nature the clouds part momentarily bringing to view the glorious peaks of Fox Glacier. Below the snow line a brilliant red tint is softly highlighted by the setting sun. Pohutukawa I say knowingly making sure I don't say bahut achchah which would mean nothing to a born-again Christian. No Pohutukawas are only in the North Island she replies. Those are rata (which I now remember only because it's the first syllables of a machine gun blast). Which brings me back to Sadie and Max. She's the whitehead he the blackhead. They are always found in a pair and not often do you see more than one pair at a time. I have grown very fond of Sadie whitehead and blackhead Max. They represent union as I have never known it. They converse in alternating staccato squawks hers a little higher than his. It seems that Sadie does most of the squawking – at Max of course who pays her no mind. It is when they take off and fly together that Sadie and Max present their truest harmony. Oh how they fly in such magnificent unison. I wonder would I mind having a mate who squawked at me if we could fly together like that. Boomboom.*

*Boomboom. In all my past ramblings this has never happened before. Normally when I meet and stay with people who have kids the kids are a necessary nuisance. I tolerate them because after all it's their home too. But I have never been fond of their little mind games their attention-getting tactics. This trip for the first time the kids are coming to me with spittle-chins and*

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*knowing smiles and I am responding accordingly. I find myself playing with them taking walks with them eating together sitting by the side of their beds and reading to them of hairy brigands and grandfatherly pirates and goldfish that grow gigantic. And when they are softly asleep I stay and look at them and feel a melting of the heart. Suddenly and delightfully I am grandpa to kids from Marlborough Sound to Stewart Island. I wonder if this is growing up or just growing old. Boomboom.*

*Boomboom. Ben the Beddie (I finally got round to giving him a name) is my womb like me slow and sure and together we are one molded perfectly to each other's fabric. Three assigned weeks have stretched to four and now five and I wonder can I go on forever. I come to a city a small city where I spent a few pleasant days at the start of the journey. But now something is wrong. I walk the streets and no one looks me in the eye. I catch a movie browse the second hand shops patronize a favorite bakery – all the standard things but something is very wrong. On the third day in the city I figure out what it is. It's gone; it's no longer there: boomboom. In a sweat and half-panic I jump in Ben and drive hell-bent out of the city streets and houses becoming roads and paddocks and hills with sheep. Then a lake then the sea then the mountains. Then I hear it faintly at first then gradually it grows louder. Boomboom. Boomboom. Boomboom.*

*Boomboom. It is a heartbeat. It is THE heartbeat this magical land's and mine – one. Not even an echo – one. In the mountains or on the farmlands or by the sea it is loud. I hear it in my ears taste it in my mouth. I touch myself anywhere and I can feel it. Boomboom. Boomboom. Boomboom. I am its message bearing fool knowing not what the message is only that I bear it – boomboom. The words sound like the same old bullshit I've spoken and heard a million times over the past thousand centuries but something is behind them this time and they know it – the kids: Lucy and George and Ben and Wendy and Jenny and Jessica and Fiona and Joel and Daniel boy do they ever know it. Boomboom.*



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*Boomboom. So once again or is it ever yet it comes time to move on. I am a silver needle a thousand meters high and single mm tall weaving through the garments of untold souls a pattern I don't understand with thread I cannot see. Hey what the fuck I'm a ramblin man! Boomboom.*

\*

“You’ve never heard of a thing called commas, I gather.”

“You never told me where to find the comma check.”

### Australia, mid-to-late 1990s

Call it love it at first sight. Call it a marriage made in heaven.

I’d had my concerns. Sure, I got on great with each of them, but how would they be with one another? Walter had had his problems with hypocrite monks at the monastery in Northern Cal. Santi, well, what did he really expect from a guy who’d never had any real Buddhist teaching yet was going around talking to people, poor black aborigines mostly, about the dharma (or dhamma). Oh me of little faith.

Walter looked different again. Thinner even than he had been at Lamu. Older, too. Well, sure, we all were, but I’m talking a *lot* older. Was the work taking its toll?

Nonetheless, he damn near swooned when finally I tracked him down. He looked up from a cushion on the dusty ground where he sat having a quiet discussion with some tribal people – in their language, I might add. First saw me (smiles), then just behind me this huge bald monk in his robes (downright ecstasy). It wasn’t simply a monk he saw (he told me later), it was the absolute *right* monk. “Man, I’ve been sending out the message for ever so long: I need proper guidance. I need more than what I can get out of books and what’s already in my heart. Soon’s I laid eyes on the big Bude dude, baby, I knew!”

“Your prayers were answered?”

“Not prayers as such. More like a directive I been mentally emailing out to the universe. ‘Get off yo butts, y’all: yo messenger here has done come to the end of his satchel of wiz-dumb. Send help, quick!’”



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“And I show up, lickety split.”

“Lickety my weary black bottom. You five years late!”

Mainly, I left the two of them in peace. Walter was happy just to ask questions, then listen to what the big guy had to say. Me, I was content in the beginning to sit silently by and absorb what I could. Mostly I would fade in and out. Every now and then, though, I had to let loose.

“Santi, man, you keep saying this stuff isn’t religion, that you Budes don’t believe in a god. Then you come across with crap that reeks of the kind of scary mary tactics spouted by every Christian sect going, stuff meant to keep the ignorant peasants in line. In fact, you guys have more boogiemens in your dharma bag than the entire crowd of Jesus fear mongers put together.” Santi would simply laugh, while Walter looked at me with loving sadness, as though he’d given me a tip to buy Microsoft back in the eighties and I said thanks, but think I’ll pass. So after a while I just left them to it.

A couple months into our joining up I did have to straighten Santi out on another matter. By rule, the Theravadans were not allowed to eat after the noon meal, which kind of made sense in the tropics of Thailand as the monks rose before dawn, bedded down shortly after dark. They’d nap following the big lunch, then (in theory) spend the rest of the day in meditation, and not be slowed by a food in the belly. So Santi was accustomed to tucking in twice a day by the time the sun hit straight up. At the wat, the monks had a core of civilian devotees (= serfs) feeding them. Here, this duty fell to Walter. I could see the guy looked ever so haggard, and being Santi’s man Friday was draining him even more. I couldn’t believe Santi didn’t notice this, but the guy had been cloistered thirty years and was a tad shy in mundane street sense. One day I simply took him aside and explained the facts of life as it existed here in the wild West. At first he looked startled. Then guilty. (Monks have guilt? Go figure.)

“I have a confession to make, my friend,” he said. Almost in a whisper: “You may find it hard to believe, but I haven’t prepared a meal for myself in thirty years! We’re not supposed to, you know, but at the same time our teaching tells us when in Rome you must try to blend in with the Romans so long as you don’t compromise the dhamma.” He thought about what he’d just said. “Yes. Yes, you are so right, and thank you for telling me this when Walter is not around to hear. He feels it’s his duty to serve me, but that’s so

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much bullshits. If anything, I ought to be serving him! Now I have a major request of you.”

“You want me to make your goddamn meals.”

He roared. “Yes, exactly! Actually,” sheepishly, his voice again dropping to a whisper, “I wish to ask you to please teach me how to cook.”

“Only if you can arrange my next incarnation to be as night watchman in a harem. And not as a eunuch!”

No duck ever took to water as the big German did to the culinary arts. He couldn't wait through a demonstration before hipping me out of the way and taking over the propane burners Walter had set up in a makeshift outdoor kitchen. In no time Santi had a gang of adoring barefoot kids sitting around watching in awe as he flipped omelets with a skillet, some of them actually landing back in the skillet or, with luck, on a plate, then hand delivering them to the gleefully awaiting audience. Walter at first was aghast; check that: Walter at first made like he was aghast. If anything, he was relieved of a burden and proud of his teacher.

A little later the guy began talking up a new project. “Gonna build the big dude a house. I mean, this is one thing I know how to do. Except this one gonna be different from what we did in SF. You look around this place. Junk everywhere. Old tires, empty plastic soda bottles. Mountains of rubbish. Okay, let's built the boy a house outta this crap. Between stuff these people have been throwing away for years and rammed earth, we have maybe ninety percent of the materials we'll need. Make it totally sustainable, nothing wasted. Plus, lotsa farms and homesteads in the area have barns they want to demolish so they can put up concrete monstrosities and a heap of old windows they don't know what to do with. Reckon we can build the monk a palace for peanuts.”

“Ugh. What you mean ‘we’, black man?”

“Ah, c'mon. Bet you haven't got your soft pink hands dirty in ages.”

We got stuck into it. At first the villagers stood around and watched Walter and me out of sheer curiosity. Then one morning this big bad-looking fella showed up in overalls, do-rag and worker's boots and picked up a sledgehammer, and they did double takes.

“Hey, Catholic priests take off their collars and cassocks and do grunt work now and then, why not a monk?” he shouted laughingly. Following

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morning we had dozens of workers, Walter acting now as site foreman, which suited his energy level fine.

When the foundation was laid in and the walls began to go up, I decided to take off, do a bit of moseying around the country on my own. Australia is so enormous I would fly or take trains place to place, rent a car, spend a week or two, move on. The outback was truly bizarre. Tiny towns, set back in the early part of the century. The last century. Spindly trees, hardly anything green, dusty streets. Pretty rough trade, hard drinking and cuss-mouthed, spit on the floor, throw some shrimp on the barbie. And the males were no better.

When I returned to the community several months later, the house was still in the process of going up, and there seemed to be more people in the community than before.

“A funny thing is happening,” Walter told me after I’d settled in. “For almost ten years I’ve been going village to village, finding people to talk with. Just like in Africa, you know? I was worried coz I’m really not feeling much up to traveling anymore, but the amazing thing is, people have started coming here, leaving their villages in ones and twos and walking, some of them a couple thousand kilometers till they get here. I say, How you know where to find us, bro? I mean, there’s been no communication saying we’re set up here, have our own resident monk, come join us. Know what they say? ‘The songlines tell us! We hear them calling so we set out and follow them till we get here.’”

“Underground bush telegraph.”

“These people, man.” He shook his head. “They are so tuned in.”

Again, though, the man looked drawn. And he’d lost even more weight.

“Some bug I picked up in Africa. Hell of a thing, can’t seem to get rid of it.”

Santi had a different story. “I had him taken to the hospital last month. He didn’t want to go, but I threatened to return to Thailand if he didn’t.”

“What they say?”

“Walter says they give him many tests. No problems, he tells me, just needs some rest.”

“I don’t buy it.”

“Same here. I tried to get the hospital to tell me, but they say it’s confidential unless you’re a close relative.”

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Nobody closer than me, so I paid a visit. An invisible visit. Found the records room, waited until someone went in, followed. When they'd left, I rifled through the files. (Thankfully, they kept paper as well as digital.) Got Walter's, read through. Then I made a long distance phone call.

A week later, Walter came running up, all excited. "Bro, we got some visitors! You'll never guess!"

He led me to a clot of people standing alongside an enormous, spanking new van. Simon, Emil, Carlos and Shank, along with four females, one in her teens.

"Just happened to be in the nabe," Simon crowed following a round of hugs and back-slapping. "Thought we'd stop in, have a few laughs." He still looked like a kid, except he now had a paunch, a cartoon character. It was good to see him, especially here. He introduced two of the women, both in their early forties. "Meet Doctor Gemma. She's a renown oncologist. Lovely Amanda here is a naturopath and Chinese herbalist of considerable repute. And these two babes –"

I might not have recognized her had we passed on the street. Older, sure. A bit heavier, not all that much, but a growing thickness that would never return her to what she had been. No longer super pretty; instead remarkably handsome. We stared for several moments. Then I reached out, pulled her to me, gave her a mighty squeeze.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered in my ear. "I hope, I want, I just hope you \_"

"Shh, shh. Happy as hell to see you. Bygones and all that kind of shit, okay?"

The only person remaining was the breathtakingly tall and gorgeous teenage woman, she of mixed race where the genes had combined to have a party that kept getting better.

"Meet Shoshona," said Ellie.

"Hey," I said, too tongue-tied to come out with anything more eloquent. Instead of a hug she leaned in and gave me a kiss with the softest lips ever. I sighed, looked back at Ellie.

"Yours?"

"Uh-huh."

"His?"

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“Uh-huh.”

“Does he know?”

“Unh-uh.”

“Oh my god, he’ll be absolutely over the moon.” I turned back to the teenage goddess. “Shoshona, believe not a word of what she’s told you.”

“Actually, I not only believe every word, I know there’s lots more she hasn’t said. You know, don’t tell the children. She never stops talking about ‘those times’ and the two of you. Now finally I get to meet you both. Wow.”

We set up a tarp and cushions on the dirt floor of the makeshift kitchen, rolled down the screens to keep the flies and mosquitoes out, and everybody sat around talking at once. The chef? Some big German guy in robes, with help from half dozen of the community women. It was the best feeling I could recall in an age. Walter, sitting next to Shoshona, holding her hand, was unable to take his eyes off her. He’d lopped off fifteen years and added a moonshot worth of vitality. It wouldn’t last, but it was great to see the old Walter, even for an evening.

The next morning, our three former workers, now big-time contractors on their own, went straight to it. The materials being used caused them puzzling looks for a bit, but they caught on fast enough.

“I thought you guys and Ellie had a falling out after we split,” I told Emil. Like the rest of us, the guy had aged some, but he had so much more confidence than the guy Walter first hired on as a laborer.

“How do you fall out with a woman like her?” he replied. “What she did, she pointed her pinky at us tough-as-nails thugs and we wound ourselves around it voluntarily. Besides, the babe is a business genius. God, I’d lay down my life for her. We all would. And as for Shoshona!”

“Uh, uh, uh.”

“Aw no, man, don’t get that idea. We’re all her uncles, you know? Coz she’s so gorgeous dudes full of themselves can’t help but try something on with her. We got the word out on that number damn quick.” He looked around. “These aborigines. I mean, they’re really *black* people, know what I mean? Us guys, we call ourselves black, think we’re black, but we’re really black whites compared to these folks. Man, they go back to the very beginning of civilization, don’t they. You like working with them?”

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“Yeah, I do. You’d think after all the screwing over they’ve got from whiteys they’d be more aggro towards us. But they know the difference. When they’re not drinking, and I haven’t seen a single case of drunkenness in all the time I’ve been here, it’s like they can see right through to our souls.”

“Yeah? Think they’d accept a dude like me?”

“Why not? Carlos and Shank too, for that matter. Maybe when you’ve made enough money –”

“Aw, hell with that, man. I’m a millionaire now. What do I do, keep making more? Sheeut. Learned that lesson, good and proper. Hey, what we standing around for? Grab some tools, man. We gotta get this thing finished before he –. Uh, sorry, man.”

“Don’t be. It’s why you’re here. Why we all are. Let’s do it.”

\*

I watched them work. Carlos, who was around five-six; Shank, close to a foot taller, and Emil, somewhere in the middle. White, brown, black: if not brothers, exactly, for sure first cousins. They relished getting back to the basics, shedding their corporate exec roles. Walter and I got right in there, though we would peel Walter off the job every few hours, protesting. Even Santi pitched in, and as he had displayed in his chef’s role, once he was shown the basics he became a master with hammer and saw. Seeing what we were doing, the locals, both sexes, got involved. The house was finished in a month.

Meantime, people from communities all over Australia came, stayed a while, moved on. While there, they listened to Santi, to Walter, saying nothing but often nodding their heads. Wasn’t just the dharma, as explained by Santi. Walter spoke about the interconnectedness of all life. We are all tiny slivers of wood from the great tree, he would say. Each of us possesses the same life force as the tree itself. Same with every living being, as well as every non-sentient thing which, after all, is composed of molecules and atoms same as you and me: the rocks and stones and pebbles, every grain of sand, as well as the non-material energies that have names like electromagnetic wavelengths and ley lines and songlines. You fellas knew this from the very beginning, but you allowed the white fellas to con you into forgetting. Well, now it’s time to remember, and to act upon that understanding. You were here way before the

## Spook & Ghost

Buddha, but that dude put it into a beautiful perspective. If you were raised Christian and want to hold on to that, no problem. Simply incorporate the dhamma into your being. You know alcohol is shit, fast food is shit and your reliance on Western medicine is shit. You know this, my brothers. Now you gotta act on what you know, be strong, and when you fall weak into those traps, which you certainly will now and then, just shake yourself free and move on. And keep in mind that you are now the messenger of the Buddha. Let your people in on the truth by showing them right mind, right speech, right action. And have fun doing it. Remember what the Buddha himself said: life is an experience to be enjoyed, not a problem to be solved.

\*

Gemma the oncologist and Amanda the natural healer flew in from their base in Sydney every two weeks to spend a day, sometimes two, with Walter. The guy really was looking better.

“Don’t let that fool you,” Gemma told Santi and me in her posh English accent. “He let it go too long, and what started out in the bowel has spread. He’s adamant about not having chemo, and I don’t blame him. It’s dark ages medicine, horrible stuff. I did recommend radiation, but he’s against that too. Amanda, I’ll be honest, that lady works magic. What she’s doing for him with vitamins, supplements, Chinese herbs and teas will keep the pain level down and allow him to live longer. But it won’t cure him. The man’s going to die.”

“How long?”

She shrugged. “Hard to say. A year? Maybe, just maybe, two.”

As it turned out, he lasted nearly five. (“Buddha don’t seem to want me, and the devil’s scared a my ass!”) But that was further down the line. Meantime, Emil, Carlos and Shank decided to join us here at the community. With help, they designed and constructed a number of ‘garbage houses’. Every one was different, and each perfect in its function. What was remarkable was that on a scalding hot day you could step inside and without any mechanical help the temperature was never more than seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit.

The millennium came and went. One day shortly after, Walter gathered us together.

“Guys, the government has announced an amnesty for overstayers.”

## Barry Rosenberg

He looked around. “That’s all of us: Santi, Ghost, Emil, Carlos and Shank. And me, of course. I’m gonna go for it. Up to you fellas, of course, but I recommend you seriously consider joining me. Now, chances are, you stay put here in the community, you’ll be able to play it out as illegals. But if you ever want to leave Aus, even for a weekend, they won’t let you back in.”

“But you’re not gonna leave,” Shank put in.

“You’re right, brother. I’m here till you fellas dig a hole and pour me in. It’s just something I feel I need to do. Want to do. Maybe if I die legal, I get to the other side they gimme a seat nearer the bandstand. Anyway, you fellas take some time to think it over.”

In the end, we all decided to go for it. For me, it was a little scary. I’d been off the grid since Vietnam, had used so many aliases I could hardly remember my real name. Nonetheless there we were, the six amigos, joining the queue at the immigration office, each carrying documents that hopefully would prove who we claimed we were. It didn’t come easy. The pencil dicks (and vaginas) who interviewed us did not seem happy in their jobs, gave us each the third degree. But we’d been tutored by a switched-on immigration lawyer Walter had hired for the mission. Smile, look em in the eye, and under no circumstance do you joke or give out with cute sarcasm.

We had to go through medicals (a stout bribe got Walter through his), sign untold forms, tell a few hundred fibs. Santi was easiest. As a senior Theravada monk, he was here to start a small Buddhist monastery for refugee monks from Vietnam and Cambodia. The rest of us, well, the lawyer had specified we say not a word about what we were really doing, i.e. inculcating aboriginals with blasphemy. Rather we were all sports coaches from America, here to set up clubs in baseball, football (which the Aussies called gridiron) and basketball and train indigenous people in these endeavors to compete with Americans. This reasoning caused a few of the pencil dicks (and vaginas) to actually break into smile. It took a few months for the paperwork to clear, but in the end, following a swear-in ceremony that actually brought tears to big Shank’s eyes, we all became Australian citizens. Me, I reckoned the ceremony no more than your standard pseudo-religious fraternity ritual, but strangely enough I was surprisingly touched upon opening the brand new passport and seeing my own face staring back at me.



## **The very near future**

“You and I are going to have a contest,” she said, “as to who gets healthier faster.”

“Oh, goody. I have to start smoking two packs a day and finishing off a liter of wine with dinner so we can start out even?”

She coughed loudly. “No, but you’re right. I’ve been as bad as you. Worse. Shit quits here.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’ve been putting it off a while now –”

“Like several years.”

“– but I feel getting your body in shape is vitally necessary for your emotional recovery, and I can’t justify demanding you do something while my own physical self is in the dunny. So for the next two months, we’ll be each other’s inspiration.” She handed me a long list of do’s and don’t’s.

“Jesus, lady, what good’s going through all the therapy stuff if I drop dead doing this crap. Hell, I’m only maybe five pounds over my fighting weight. Okay, ten. Fifteen?”

“I had a teacher when I was studying psychology in Southern California years back. He was in lousy shape, but this was during the height of the running craze if you’ll remember, and his wife got on his case. So he began running, got better and better at it, ran a few marathons. He felt so much better for it that he got this idea to take it to his patients. A few of them dropped out when they heard this, but he didn’t care. For some years, he only practiced therapy while jogging. Became known as the running shrink. Some of his people were really bad off physically, but he took it easy on them. On their bodies, that is. Regarding their mind states, he told them you don’t run every single day, find yourself another therapist. He claimed his success rate through running was something like two and a half times better than on the couch. Mind, body, spirit: it’s all tied in, m’boy. And I don’t want to hear that you useta.”

“How’d you know I was just going to say that?”

The list, prepared by a recognized sadist, would have me running twenty miles a week, cycling thirty, plus some kayaking or canoeing. I was permitted

## **Barry Rosenberg**

no red meat, no bread, no coffee, no dairy and a weekly limit of one glass of wine or a small bottle of beer. In addition I was to cut out all medication save that which was absolutely necessary. When I got home, first thing I did was call the local funeral director and make a booking.

\*

First few days were murder. Jogged a mile on the beach on day one and come the following morning I was in need of a double thigh transplant. Twenty miles a week of this shit? Cycling would've been easier except the only parts of my unused-for-years eighteen-speed not rusted solid by the sea air were the tires, and those were flat. My one allotted weekly beer came on day two. Somehow I had got through day one without. Somehow.

How had I allowed myself to get so out of shape? Same answer, I suppose, as how had I allowed myself to get to age sixty: Not paying attention to the details.

Okay, it did get easier. A bit. Bought a new bike, bought a decent pair of running shoes, bought a kayak. By the middle of week two I was using them all. Not happily...still.

Week three I finally managed twenty miles spread over five days on the hoof, thirty on wheels. I found kayaking to be the most pleasurable, though my fears of the ocean kept me from matching those who paddled out to Whale Island, which sat five and a half miles offshore and looked more like a camel than a whale, except how would the early Maori settlers, who named the thing, know what a camel looked like?

I developed a routine and even got to like it. Early morning rise, feed the Trumper, out on the beach to watch the sun rise over the East Coast mountains, head off to the hills the other way. Two and a half miles to them thar hills, so five roundtrip, which included a sprint the last couple hundred meters. Me, this was. Hoo.

I even began going to a gym in town. I checked out the pricey gyms, offering cross-fit and step-dance and kick boxing, none of which I cared to become involved with, then settled on a grubby setup with grime on the walls and a single smelly toilet. A bit daunting at first as the guys who worked out there were quite muscular Maori. Felt rather a wuss when I would take over an apparatus following one of these fellas' use and have to change the weight

## Spook & Ghost

settings wayyy down. But nobody gave me crap or kicked sand in my face.

No red meat, hardly any meat at all after the first couple weeks. No coffee, and couldn't believe I was ordering tea at my favorite café. Toughest bit of denial was dairy. Okay, no milk, no cheese; got it. But what was the deal with eggs? I was used to ten, twelve every week. Why were they considered dairy – did cows lay them? The one bottle of beer I now saved for Saturday's meal... was my reward for a dedicated week. By end of the second month I'd lost fourteen pounds, or what the locals called a stone. And tough enough I could take any biddy over eighty who cared to fuck with me.

Me, once a killer, had become one again.

I drove to Auckland like a kid bringing home an ace report card to show momma. Only momma had done at least as good as me. Franni looked terrific. We examined one another's new bods like used car dealers at an auction. Damn near kicked each other's tires.

"So, are we done here, you and me?"

She laughed a nasty one. "Just getting started, dear boy."

Shit.

## 2004

Walter was dead.

Gave up the Spook.

Santi had left the mansion a month back and we moved Walter in. I'd say kicking and screaming except he was too weak by then.

In the end the guy looked beatific. He glowed. Beamed love at all of us. Just turned fifty, as had I, far too young to go, but it bothered him not in the least. A few nights before the event, we carried him outside to look at the full moon. The damn moon was so big it looked like a cartoon cliché of itself. Gemma had brought morphine, and though he had to be in intense pain, it was only now and then he actually would allow her to give him tiny doses.

The following day he asked everybody except me to leave his room for a while. I sat on a stool next to the bed and held his hand.

"What a great life it's been," he smiled. "I mean, the shit we been through, you and me, the past thirty years. I owe you a lot, bro."

## Barry Rosenberg

“Me? I’m just a now-and-again invisible man who still can’t find his pecker without a GPS. How about you? Look what you’ve made of yourself.”

“You think?”

“In the history of the human race has there ever been anyone who’s changed as much as you. And all for the better.”

“Hope so. But our friendship has been so special. And finding out I have a daughter! You see what an ugly brute like me gave birth to, man? That musta been one hell of a sperm, get through all the precaution and help form that magnificent child. Ghost, my brother, I have been so blessed.” We sat there in silence until I realized he’d fallen asleep.

The following morning he spent a couple hours alone with Shoshona, now in her late teens. After lunch Gemma called us into the room. As we stood around the bed, she led us all, Santi, Simon, Ellie, Shoshona, Amanda, Emil, Carlos, Shank and me, each with a hand on him. Santi did some puja chanting. Then it was over. The monk led us outside, where most, if not all, of the community were standing, many in tears. A straggly line of us marched slowly up a small hill to the stupa that had been erected some years back.

“We will circumnavigate the stupa clockwise three times,” he explained softly to the gathered. “Then we will ring the big bell three times each. When the last of us has done that, turn around and walk away without looking back or at one another.”

In a line, led by Santi himself, we strolled around the circumference of the stupa once, twice, three times. Then he led us to the big brass bell. Waiting until all had assembled around him, he pulled the rope three times, sending the loud gong reverberating over the community. Maybe fifty of us followed, in no certain order, to emulate his action. I waited till last. Standing beneath the bell, the sound as I yanked on the rope was ever so loud, ever so final.

\*

I was waiting for it to hit. It would, just not yet. I went for a walk. A hot as Hades day, but every day was like that here. When I was far away from all sign of sentient life, I sat under a tree. My screwy mind began playing tricks. Go away! I cried. But no. Went like this:

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A man walks into a human shop with a cage, at the bottom of which lies Walter. What's wrong with him? asks the proprietor. I'll tell you what's wrong with him. Walter's dead, that's what's wrong with him. He's not dead, he's resting, says the proprietor. Walter's not resting, he's stone dead! No, he's stunned. Stunned!? Yes, you stunned him just as he was waking up! Now he's pining! Walter's not pining! Walter's passed on! He is no more! He has ceased to be! Walter's expired and gone to meet his maker! Walter's a stiff! Bereft of life! Walter rests in peace! THIS IS AN EX-WALTER!!

Oh Jesus. No, sorry: Oh Buddha. Oh my head. Oh Walter. Walter Walter Walter. You've ceased to be. You are no more. And here I am, alone in this ever-so-strange yet loving and friendly environment. You brought me here and now you've left me here, on my own!

Yeah, that's right, asshole. Think of yourself. He's dead and I'm alive and it's all Me! Me! Me!

It was dark when I returned to the community, entered my darkened cottage, crawled onto the single mattress on the floor. Tried not to think of Walter. Good luck with that. Somehow. I fell asleep. I know I fell asleep because I was awakened by the faint sound of someone in the room. Total darkness, I could see nothing. Then someone pulled back the sheet atop me, climbed onto the mattress with me, the aroma of lavender filling my senses.

"Who -? What do -?"

"It's okay," she whispered. "It's only me."

I could feel her naked body move tightly against mine. "Look, I really -"

"I know how upset you are. Me, too. I thought we might comfort each other."

Her hand found my sleeping member, woke it up, fingers wrapped around it ever so gently.

"I don't think this is the right -"

"Sh, sh. You know he'd approve. He would, you know." A few more moments of stroking, so softly, prompted a full awakening. Then she climbed on top. I tried to push her off. I suppose I didn't try all that hard. She fit me inside her, slowly, slowly, until I was all the way home. Then she began small movements: Circle, lift, slide back down, circle. Oh god.

Lift, slide, circle, lift, slide. She leaned down, kissed me softly. A little

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tongue, then out again. Her rhythm. I did nothing. Maybe crossed my eyes, but my eyes were closed so how would I know.

“I’ve wanted this ever since we first met,” she whispered. “It never seemed appropriate until now.” I said nothing. Nothing that made sense, though I was making sounds. Uhuhuhuh. Circle, lift, slide, circle, lift, slide, circleliftslideciraaaAAARRRGHHHHH!!!

Which was the last thing I remembered. There was light in the room when I opened my eyes. I was alone, twisted in the sheet. Very much alone.

\*

After the cremation I spent a few months on the community. Some construction was still going on and I got into the thick of it. Fairly soon, though, it was evident Emil, Carlos and Shank had everything under control, and my purpose there was little more than a second hammer. So I took off for Indonesia, heading west this time to Sumatra, where I spent several months moving around. Then back home to the community, which wasn’t all that much of a home, not in the state of mind I was carrying round. Amanda and Gemma, who, I hadn’t realized until now, were a couple, flew in once a month to serve as medics. One day, musing a bit, I happened to mention I was growing tired of shooting back and forth to Asia.

“Know what I’d really like, at least for a while? To get away to a nice, clean, sedate, middleclass, English speaking country, good weather and scenery and not spread all over the map like here, where I could maybe go on long tramps or bicycle journeys where I might avoid traffic and heaps of people.”

The two women looked at one another and burst out laughing.

“That’s funny?” I asked.

Amanda: “We’re laughing because we just came back from a place that’s exactly what you’re describing.”

Gemma: “But you have to like lots of beaches and lakes and mountains and green rolling hills dotted with sheep.

Amanda: “And easy-going people.”

Which is how I got to New Zealand.

## Spook & Ghost

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Nothing went according to plan. I figured to spend maybe six months, move around, do lots of tramping and cycling, head back to the aborigine community. Unh-uh. Following a week in Auckland, which was six days too many, I bought a car and headed south. Day three I pulled up to a small beach town, pop. 2,500, and day five I bought the house which would become my most comfortable home ever and as well as witness to the gradual disassembling of my being.

It was a post-WWII native timber dwelling on half an acre of fully grown trees right on the beach. An older couple had lived there half their lives, claimed to be ready for the rest home (excuse me: retirement village). The way I met them? Walking the beach for an hour, I suddenly needed to pee. I ducked into a copse of trees, not realizing they were on private property, nor did I realize the owner happening to be standing just on the other side of the tree, also having a whiz. Being a typical Kiwi, it was he who apologized by offering the national mantra – *sorry*. To which I replied, No, I'm sorry, and he said it looks like we're both pretty damn sorry sods, and we each laughed in mid-stream. He then invited me onto the property, and I fell in love. The combination of mature trees, large grassy area and flower/vegetable beds was perfect. The house itself was in obvious need of repair, but nothing I couldn't do myself. The whole place had a feel to it that immediately spoke to me.

I met his missus, who quickly brewed up cuppas, and though normally I dislike tea intensely, for some reason this one hit the spot. We sat and talked for an hour, then two, the obligatory pictures of the grandkids plus a recently emerged great-grandkid, then talk of the All Blacks, the cherished NZ rugby side, and did I think they'd win the world cup.

They asked me to stay for tea, by which they meant dinner, of course. I was about to decline but for some unfathomable reason agreed and enjoyed myself thoroughly, and before I left to return to my motel I had bought myself a house. There were conditions, they said, more a plea than demand. I had to promise not to knock down the house and build a monument to myself, which apparently New Zealanders were now doing, as well I must keep all the trees, which New Zealanders most certainly were not doing. I told them I had no problem with either. By the time I got on the beach

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and headed back the way I'd come I was seriously questioning my sanity. Hell did I want with an old house in New Zealand when my home was an aborigine community three thousand miles away in Australia?

\*

The first several months I was too busy pulling out rotted wood and replacing it with new, with making subtractions and additions which opened the interior space on the lovely old single-level dwelling. What I should have done, soon as it was finished, was sell it and immediately buy another one and repeat the process. Put tools in my hand, get me to work with them, I'm a contented camper. (Another Walter-inspired lesson in life. Ah, Walter, my brother – how I do miss you.) But my plan was to hit the road at this point, head up to Cape Reinga, the country's northernmost point, and head south along the newly finished walk-and-cycle-way that allowed you to traverse the heart of the two skinny islands of NZ from top to bottom while hardly touching on a village, let alone a city. The plan never happened.

Now, a man over fifty, should he desire companionship, ought to find a woman close to his own age, a woman free of familial encumbrances, with whom he can share experiences and philosophies, a glass of good sherry and old black and white movies. At fifty-plus, a fella should restrain himself from following his protruding member into the honeypots of women nearly half his age with kids and cargo containers of baggage. Uh-huh.

Oh, I didn't blame the babes, each more troubled than the last, each adding to my reservoir of increasing self-loathing. There seemed to be list of standbys; soon as one would pack up and leave, there'd be a knock at the door. Hi, I'm Jane, your new suicide weapon.

During this decade of decadence I began drinking beer, eating poorly, not exercising, watching horrible New Zealand telly for hours a day, and sinking into my own personal oblivion. That I knew better meant nada. Actually, that I knew better probably accelerated my demise.

Then one morning shortly following my breakup with the curvy blonde, the one single ten-watt light in my life, a bedraggled ginger cat I'd named Trump the day he strolled into my home (an insult: he was far more intelligent than his namesake), was a few hours late for his breakfast and this tiny event proved the very last straw that broke the camel's balls.



## **The very near future**

“I think this will be your final outside assignment.”

“Because I’m fully healed and once more a contributing member of my community?”

“Because Wilson and I have finally split up, I’m tired of working with certified meshugganas like you and I’m selling the ranch and moving to Bali or Thailand or one of those exotic places where I can lie in the sun all day and rent inexpensive toy boys without a single follicle south of the eyebrows and shag myself to death.”

“Definitely a high moral ambition. I wish you well. Now what do I have to do to fulfill my final curative mission?”

“There’s a yoga center out in the Waitakeres –”

“Ah, shit.”

“It’s not what you think. They’re about a generation behind the high-priced resorts mentality, meaning you won’t find any of the beautiful people snapping selfies in their five hundred dollar designer leotards. Besides, they run classes in all sorts of thing, not only yoga. It’ll be a marked advantage to be in a healthy environment for a change. It’s a hundred percent vegetarian, not even chicken or fish –”

“Kee-ryst.”

“– but most of all you’ll be around people who are trying to get free of the kind of crap that makes us all stressed, depressed and wacko.”

“How long, a week? Two?”

“A couple months ought to do it.”

\*

It was hell finding the place. Finally I located a skinny, winding dirt path that bounced my butt on the car seat and banged my head on the ceiling for half a mile, the path growing narrower and bumpier, surrounding trees denser, until I grew convinced that at the end of it would be a pack of wild ravenous wolves. Instead I came at last to a set of thirty or forty year old single story dwellings. No one seemed to be around, so I opened doors and noseyed

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through the various buildings. Simple sleeping rooms that looked like dorms for a delinquent kids' summer camp, two bunk beds per, six rooms labeled women, four for men, indicating a preponderance of females taking up the yogic banner, no surprise there. An office with a fairly new PC, sparkling clean kitchen and dining area with four long tables and stools to seat forty, a nice feeling carpeted meditation hall bearing waist-high statues of Buddha, the six-armed Krishna, Jesus and Tane, the Maori top dog, plus large frame photos of old brown men in diapers sitting in the lotus pose. Why all these heavy dudes at a center with a preponderance of distaff custom? Sexism abounds, even in the spiritual arena.

“Hello?”

I turned to see a woman, maybe sixty, silver-white hair, wonderful eyes, cheekbones and full mouth on a Modigliani heart-shaped face. I felt a small *ping*. Quiet in there, I thought. She said: “You must be the man Franni rang to say was coming.”

“Yes'm.”

“Well, good. I'm Glenda, the acting director.”

“Why are you acting?”

“Because no one wants the job. I certainly don't. Would you like to be our director? We'll give you your own quarters and feed you. Can't pay you because we're broke. But I'm good at writing IOUs.”

“I've often been told I'm good for nothing, so this might be a perfect opportunity. Let me consider all the options and my people will get back to your people.”

She laughed, a sound like a wind chime. “Let me show you around. The dorms, which you've seen, are a bit run down, but quite homey in their way. As you can see here, the office and staff facilities are more modern.”

“You say the center's broke. Hard to imagine with all the paying customers running around.”

“Our weekend workshops are mostly booked out, and occasionally we have week-long seminars and retreats. Often during the week it's like this, which gives the few of us running the place a chance to catch our breath.” We came to three small but attractive rooms facing out to the trees.

“You can have this studio here,” she said, opening the ranch slider to a cozy space with single bed and small desk. “I have the one next to it, and

## Spook & Ghost

the big room next to mine is the day room for staff and visiting workshop leaders. We're on twenty acres mostly of bush with lots of winding trails and half dozen cabins sprinkled throughout. Only one is occupied at the moment, so if it's privacy you're looking for you're welcome to one of them."

"Nah, this is fine. Franni says I need to get involved, relate to people. See, I've been a bit of a recluse lately."

"How long is lately?"

"Ten years. I figure I'll give it another ten or twenty, and if I like the lifestyle I'll go live by myself on an island or mountaintop."

"But Franni didn't like that idea."

I shrugged. "She wants me to stay here a couple months. Any problem with that?"

"Not if you behave yourself."

"All-night parties are out then, huh. By the way, what do you want me to do while I'm here?"

"Whatever you want to do, really. Look around. You see anything needs doing and you're able to do it, come talk to me. Just remember we're short on cash so no grandiose ideas, please. Also, you're free to attend whatever seminars and workshops we have, and we do a group fast and detox once a month, which you're welcome to –. You look puzzled."

"Fast and detox."

"Usually four full days. Twice a year we do a ten-day. It's run by a naturopath so your progress is monitored throughout."

"Wait. People come here and pay you not to feed them?"

"And to be flogged every hour. Franni didn't tell you?"

"Glenda, darling, I get the strangest feeling I'm going to like it here."

\*

Peace and serenity for a few days, during which I walked all over the place. The cabins Glenda had spoken of were old and rustic, a few appeared not to have been occupied for an age. A couple times I spotted an older male, short, tanned bald head with long white hair down the sides to his shoulders, gray beard. He either didn't see me or didn't want to. Another recluse? Maybe we could get a few more like us, start a recluse club, have monthly meetings.

I visited the meditation hall every morning, sitting on the floor before one

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or another of the male-god statues: Tuesday in front of the Bude; Wednesday, Krishna; Thursday, the late great JC... Hedging my bets.

The hall had a library of sorts, jam-packed with books and pamphlets in no uncertain order, with a few years' accumulation of dust bunnies. I asked Glenda would she like me to go through them, chuck out the junk, put the rest in some sort of order. Be her guest, was the response.

The task was close to overwhelming, but I got stuck in, throwing out half, wiping down the rest plus washing the shelves, and restacking the books I felt should be keepers, which I split up according to the categories Body, Mind and Spirit. When Glenda popped in to see how I was making out she did a double-take.

"My gosh, what an accomplishment!"

"Well, y'know."

Friday evening people began arriving, mostly older women. "These are the long-term yoga teachers of our fair land," she noted. "Actually," in a lowered voice, "of all the groups we have in here, they're the biggest pain in the bum, always demanding, nothing's ever good enough for them."

"Get me a big stick, I'll walk around and patrol the place. I may not appear tough, but I can gnash my teeth and look pretty scary when necessary."

I thought I'd do my morning sit-in-front-of-a-statue number and be out of the hall before the old babes descended, but I was wrong. As they piled in with rolled up mats under their arms, the clashing of cosmetics suddenly gave the hall the rank aroma of a harlots convention. I rose off the floor and made to leave, but I was spotted – fresh meat. Oh, do stay, they cooed. How could I refuse.

The asanas were surprisingly easy, and near the end when they all contorted into the lotus position I maneuvered my legs by hand to do the same. Again, I was a bit shocked how easy it was to pretzel myself. Ten minutes later the woman leading us called a halt, claiming it was time for 'smoko', the morning tea break. Which is when a problem set in. No matter what I did, which hand went to which part of which leg, I could not untangle myself. The women passed out of the hall; I just sat there. "Come join us," the last one out called. "In a few minutes," I replied with a toothy smile. "Haven't finished my meditation. Do close the door, please." Alone, I began to roll around the floor like a badly weighted beach ball. I struggled. I

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squeezed. I clenched teeth. I pounded the carpet with my fists. Sweat formed on my brow, under my arms. My ankles were locked. Ankles were supposed to bend and twist, right? Well, mine were bent, all right. They just couldn't unbend. Frozen fucking solid. Somehow a toe got untracked. Two, three, then the entire foot popped out of its death grip. Now the knee refused to unbend. When the second foot worked itself free, I lay back totally fatigued from effort, but my legs, still bent at the knees, still bent at the ankles, shot up towards the ceiling. I pounded my thighs, working circulation back into them, then slowly began working the knees, little at a time. I rolled over till my knees and forehead were on the carpet, breathing heavily. Somehow I rose up till I was semi-vertical, leaned against the wall. Slowly I got my ankles to move, a degree at a time. Holding onto the wall I eventually limped to the door and out into the dining area as the women were getting up to move off, no doubt for their hourly freshening of makeup. I sat down on a stool and waited till the shaking stopped.

A young guy named Trent, the center's chef, asked would I help prepare the ladies' lunch, a wonderful excuse to stay out of the meditation hall. We prepared large bowls of salads, during which I got this idea. I began making faces atop the salads using tomato slices for eyes, carrot for the nose, slice of green pepper or celery for a mouth, and nasturtium flowers from the garden as hair. Each one was different. Glenda came by to see how we were doing, stopped to admire my works of art. "Lovely," she said. "They'll really appreciate the effort." Uh, no. The hall door flung open at twelve sharp and the yoga teachers all but elbowed and tripped one another in their dash to the tables, ripping into the food with both hands, often before sitting down, Viking warriors tearing into sides of raw bison while howling and thumping their chests. Glenda just stood off in a corner, eyes rolling towards the ceiling.

I left the building and went for a walk in the woods. My lousy sense of direction had me going in circles more than once, returning to the same tree. On one of my circuits I ran into one of the women from the group, actually the only one I found attractive. She was short with long black curly hair and a bit chunky, but the chunk was distributed quite nicely.

"Oh!" she said, upon spotting me. "Oh!" She gave me a nervous smile and quickly set off in the direction she had been headed. I performed one or

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two more roundabouts before finally straightening my path. Ahead, neatly planted in a tight leafy area, stood one of the old cabins. I was about to pass it by when I thought I heard sounds from within, a sort of soft moaning. I came up to a window fairly covered with mildew and grime. Shading my eyes from the sun I pressed my face to a relative clean spot on the glass. It took a few seconds before my eyes adjusted to the dark inside, then I saw, well I didn't know what I saw. Best I could make it out, three large mounds, two close together and very white, a third between them and slightly above, this one a reddish tint with a few small black spots. To a background sound track of slightly louder moans, I could see some movement in the reddish-tinted mound. By focusing on the black spots I could tell the mound was moving in a slow sideways figure eight snuggled between the two white mounds. I was trying to work out what the hell I was seeing when the reddish-tinted mound began slowly rising up. I saw a pair of horizontal white caterpillars, then just below them two very blue eyes peering directly my way. Startled, I was set to pull back from the window when a pair of gnarled hands rose up above the mounds. The index finger of the right hand pointed to a watch on the wrist below the left, then, palm outward, all five fingers of the right hand were held aloft, whereupon the eyes and caterpillars ducked down behind the dual white mounds and the reddish-tinted mound returned to its rhythmical figure eight, the accompanying moans not missing a beat.

I moved several yards off and leaned against a totara tree for maybe ten minutes before the door to the cabin opened and the short chunky yoga teacher emerged tucking her top into leotard bottoms and began walking quickly back towards the center. She passed not far from where I was standing, turned my way, said, "Oh! Oh!" then continued on at a quickened pace. The old chap with the suntanned bald head, long white hair and gray beard I had seen a couple days before now appeared in the doorway wiping his mouth and looking around. He spotted me, smiled grandly and beckoned.

"Come in, come in," he said. "I'll make us a cuppa."

The inside of the cabin was near to immaculate. And it looked far bigger than the outside. I had to step out and measure with steps. Back inside, this was impossible due to the well organized clutter, but again, I would swear inny was larger than outty.

"Everybody who's granted entry says the same thing," the man, who

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introduced himself as Boris, giggled. “Of course, not many are so granted, my guests generally limited to tasty wenches. It’s like the Tardis in that regard, which I suppose makes me Doctor Whatever.”

A small sink, propane stove, small fridge, also run off propane. Cushions covered with exotic looking fabric littered the floor area, and similar tapestries hung from the ceiling just over my head. Two-thirds up a wall was a built-in bed, the area below used for storage. The rest of the walls were lined with shelves, most all of these filled with books. Ceramic pots containing a large number of plants were dotted round the single room, and dozens, scores, of small strange things, miniature pods of some sort, were hanging from the ceiling, frames of windows, even along the cabinets above the sink.

“Monarch butterflies,” Boris explained in accented English as he watched me examine the pods up close. “Those are swan plants. You may have noticed many, many more growing all around outside.” (I hadn’t.) “Momma monarch flies by, picks out a plant and lays a clutch of eggs. They hatch into tiny black and white striped caterpillars, which eat the swan plant leaves, growing bigger by the day, until they know it’s time to leave the plant and migrate somewhere and form a chrysalis. Ten days or so later a magnificent full-grown butterfly hatches in one of nature’s most remarkable displays of living art. Problem is, the caterpillars get eaten. Wasps, praying mantises, birds. I love monarchs, to me they are very special, so to preserve the caterpillars I pick them off the outside plants and place them on the plants in here.” As he talked, I noticed a large caterpillar, maybe an inch and a half long, crawling up one of the windows, leaving a skinny oily trail much like a snail.

When the water was boiled, Boris took a wooden tray with hinged legs and placed it on the floor, cushions to either side.

“The tea is kawakawa, which grows wild all over around here. It’s very good for you but if you’ve never had, it’ll probably taste quite tart, so here’s some bush honey to stir in if you’d like.” He placed two interesting looking steaming cups on the makeshift table. “Made those myself,” he noted. “Among the many things I do not terribly well is pottery. I’m your classic practitioner of mediocrity.”

Boris wouldn’t tell me where he was from originally, only that he had

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lived for some years in Israel prior to coming here. “Did a lot of different things, few of which I take much pride.”

“Guns, drugs or Mossad?”

“Yes, no and sort of. Mostly I was a freelance businessman. I’ve picked up bits and pieces of several languages, and in today’s world that’s most handy. At one time I was determined to do biz only with the good guys, then I realized there are no good guys in this line of work. Certain elements were not all that happy with my leaving, so I made myself invisible –” I flashed him a look, but assumed he was speaking metaphorically “– and through a long and circuitous path wound up here.”

“Where you satisfy tasty wenches who can’t get their Kiwi husbands or partners to understand five minutes of the old lunge and plunge do not constitute a gratifying sexual experience.”

“Nicely put, indeed. But it is Boris who is my prime recipient of satisfaction. At my age I have no need to perform labors of whatever stripe where the main objective is to please others. I do find, mind you, that satiating my own selfish desires inevitably results in others benefiting as well.”

We talked for another hour before I left to help Trent and Glenda with feeding the leotarded piranhas.

“So you found Boris,” Glenda chuckled. “Isn’t he a fascinating character! Brilliant mind – there’s hardly a subject he doesn’t know at least something about. I do caution you, however. He’s got a secret side to him when it comes to his past. If he feels you’re probing into a sacrosanct area, he suddenly becomes a magician with verbal sleight of hand to distract your attention.”

“Yeah, from his living situation I kind of gathered he wouldn’t be too keen on a profile with pictures showing up in the weekend supplement.”

The days passed. I found a closet full of long neglected tools, cleaned and oiled them, and first began making repairs around the place, then constructing additions and partitions here and there. I’d drive into the nearby town and buy materials at the Mitre 10, paying for them out of pocket and telling Glenda they were throwing the stuff out or I got them on amazing special. She believed not a word, but beyond giving me a skeptical look nothing further was said.

The center itself was a non-profit trust run in theory by a board. The board, ten of them, showed up once a month, took a vote on minor issues, had tea and scones and convinced themselves of their astute leadership.



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“Tell you what,” I said one day, “if you ever retire from acting and become director for real, I’ll build you a house. Well, a cottage anyway.”

“Oh, now, really.”

“Are you familiar with what the Amish call barn raising? I lived out their way a million years ago, and it was a beautiful thing to watch, the entire community pitching in, usually for a young family without much money. I see you have a working bee scheduled the weekend after next. Why not put on your Facebook page that we’re going to build you a home, all interested handypersons come and bring your tools. I’ll draw up plans and dig the foundation, and what the volunteers don’t finish I’ll do myself.”

“And the cost of materials? Ah, right: comes straight out of the rubbish dumpster at Mitre 10. Really, I can’t let you go on doing this.”

“Why not? Think of it as part of my personal rehabilitation program.”

It all went well. Glenda was proclaimed director by unanimous decision of the board, the working bee was a gigantic success, and it took me a week on my own to make the cottage move-in-able. After she declared herself settled in and comfortable, the center threw a house warming party. Scores of people showed up, one of whom quite unwittingly provided the groundwork which was to change my life.

\*

By rights, these weren’t my kind of people. But what the hell did that mean? As I surveyed the meditation hall, which had been converted to a party room, if partying meant quiet talking, sipping non-alcoholic punch and the grouping split perfectly with the predominant females all on one side, minority males the other, as was the way in New Zealand, I figured that this was as true an assemblage of good and kind human beings as might be found anywhere. And I felt as much at peace with myself as I could recall in some years. Glenda was glowing; young Trent had baked a remarkable assortment of goodies using spelt and wholemeal flour, coconut milk, no salt or sugar or butter, as was the current healthful paleo fashion; and I was content to just wander through and feel myself among, if not friends, exactly, then compatriots, surely.

Even Boris had made a brief appearance. And thankfully he was not wearing what he had been last I visited his cabin of retreat. He’d asked me

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to give a whistle whenever I approached; if he whistled back, I was welcome to enter. If no sound came forth, it meant he was deeply into something, or somebody, and was not to be disturbed. The return whistle was heard and I opened the door, stepped in. His back was towards me, and he was reaching up to gently remove a butterfly from the spine of a book. As I looked around, half dozen others were flying around the room.

“Had a busy morning,” he said, as he gently maneuvered this particular monarch onto his extended finger and brought it close to his face, an obstetrician examining a new birth. It was when he turned around to show me I near leaped out of my sandals.

“Where did you get that?” I cried, pointing at his chest. He looked down and smiled.

“Had it for years and years. Why it’s so faded and full of holes. Ever see one like it before?”

“Uhhh, yeah, actually I have.” The T shirt pictured two cartoon ghostly figures, one white, the other black, both holding up weapons. Were there a Spook&Ghost museum, the garment surely would command a dominant position. “Boris, my friend, it’s time we lay some cards on the table and have us a little talk.”

Throughout my story I had to work to keep from laughing at his expression. This man, who had tried so methodically to hide whatever past he’d brought to this country and this particular patch of sanctified acreage, sat on the floor with mouth hung open. I was half afraid one of his lovely monarchs would spot it as a welcome cavern and flutter in.

“All this, I gather, is, as our Aussie friends say, fair dinkum?”

“Every word so far, and I haven’t even given you half the tale.”

“I feel like the street kid with his nose pressed against the five star restaurant window. How many people know all this?”

“You. There’s a monk in Australia and a couple of business people in San Francisco who know a lot, but not all of what I’ve just told you.”

“The street kid has a request, if you don’t mind.”

“I haven’t done it in years. No, that’s a lie. Last year when I began the therapy that’s brought me here, it happened without my intending it. Near caused the shrink to have a coronary. Okay, turn around.”

“Can’t I just sit here and cover my eyes?”

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“I’d really trust you. Turn the hell around!” He swiveled one-eighty, faced the opposite wall. “Now cup your hands around your eyes so you can’t side-eye me.”

“Jesus, you’re picky.” Maybe twenty seconds later I said it was okay to look. “And what if I had – oh my fucking Christ!!” He leaned forward onto his knees, hobbled over and extended his hands, patting my face, my arms. “Yep, you’re here all right.”

When I got him to turn around once more, I came back to full view.

“Amazing,” he whispered. “Just...amazing. Can I sell the formula to Mossad?”

Meanwhile, back at the house warming... I noticed a small clot of humanity in the corner, surprisingly both female and male. I wandered over, peered above a few heads. A lovely sweet dear was seated on a stool. In her hand was a short length of twine, at the end of which rested a crystal. Well, it wasn’t resting, exactly. Rather dancing in a large circle, though the woman’s hand didn’t appear to be moving even a smidgeon.

I was about to turn away. The crystal crowd gave me the willies. Okay, they’re pretty, hang one in the window and let the sun cast dancing refracted colors on the wall. But some of these new agey types treated the damn things like they were rocks brought back from the latest Mars expedition. Then I noticed the crystal had completely changed direction; where before it was swinging in a clockwise circle, suddenly it began moving counterclockwise, and I could swear she hadn’t moved a muscle or twitched a fingertip to make the change happen. Entranced, I moved in closer, perhaps in the hope I had just caught a warmup to her act and if I hung around she’d loop the loop, go round the world, walk the dog, maybe even have it whistle God Save the Queen or do the haka. Then one of her admirers said something that caused me to realize mere movement of the crystal wasn’t the main event here.

“Elsbeth, can you please ask it whether the biopsy of my leg tumor will be benign or malignant? I’m so worried.”

Ah. Ah. What we have here is a Ouija board on a string. Well, goodnight, ladies, was so nice to –

“Lord Jesus, will you please tell us whether this woman’s tumor is benign.” And the crystal immediately shifted gears and began swinging in a clockwise circle.

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“Oh, thank god!” cried the worried woman.

So clockwise was yea, counter meant nay. Got it. A few more questions were tossed her way. I watched the woman more closely. Like Boris, she had the most sparkling, clear blue eyes, more so even than his. So far, the directional responses were either yes or no. I wondered whether she could go beyond that. Just then another woman asked, apologetically, whether the crystal might tell what her astrological sign was. To which Elspeth asked JC to put on his thinking cap. She went through the list, the crystal swinging in a large counterclockwise movement, claiming no, no, no, until she came to Sagittarius, whereupon the damn thing suddenly switched to clockwise. “Ooh, yes, that’s right!” cried the questioner. “My birthday is the fourth of December. Remarkable!”

Okay, I thought, I’ve seen acts like this. Better than this. Let’s see now...

“Elspeth, darling, please ask Jesus how much money is in my wallet.” It was like everybody suddenly quit breathing. And I swear they all took a step back from me. The woman herself looked up with those amazing blue eyes, laid them squarely on me and smiled.

“I believe we have a skeptic among us. As we all should be. Would you care to satisfy the skeptic’s curiosity, Lord Jesus?” The crystal moved quickly to clockwise, and it appeared with more force than before. “Is it more than one hundred dollars?” she asked it. Yes. “More than two hundred?” Yes. “So much cash to carry around,” she cooed with a giggle. “Doesn’t the gentleman know about ATMs?”

I took out my wallet but didn’t look inside. Maybe she was really a mind reader and the crystal shtick just a gimmick. After a few more questions, getting counterclockwise at three hundred and two fifty, she finally hit clockwise at two forty-five. I reached in, took out the banknotes, was about to count them, decided to let the woman next to me do it, an impartial participant. I watched as she thumbed through the bills.

“Two hundred and forty-five,” she announced happily. The crowd went ahhhh and applauded lightly.

“Um, is that a special crystal,” I wondered. “Dipped in holy water or passed through Lourdes?”

Elspeth replied: “Not really, although it’s special to me. I’ve had it for

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years and it carries so much of my energy. But I suppose any crystal will do.”

She got up and prepared to move off, but the crowd of admirers kept her surrounded, demanded more of her time. Hers and Lord Jesus’.

\*

Boris roared. Speaking directly to the monarch sitting on his shoulder: “Do you believe this guy, my lovely? He can make himself invisible but finds it hard to believe in the pendulum!” Turning to me, “Old Elspeth, and isn’t she a honey, may or may not be one of the once-Jewish, now-goy’s chosen, but the pendulum is a device that’s been around at least since the first century in China, where it was used to record time – the old grandfather clock in my own youth is but a late example. Later it was applied in figuring out the movement of the earth itself. Galileo employed it extensively, as did Foucault. Elspeth’s magic crystal is being used as an ideomotor function tool. Meaning it externalizes thoughts of our higher self which, in theory, knows everything. I’ve seen people use it to a highly successful degree in supermarkets, determining which watermelon is best, or whether a vegetable has been treated with chemicals.”

“I don’t think you can equate my invisible thing with this. I’m no more than a freak. But you say the pendulum is there for everybody to use.”

“True. Consider that Einstein, that terribly embattled chap, claimed all knowledge is memory. Everything is inside us, the problem is getting it out. When the religious talk about god, what they really mean is the great energy mind that permeates all life everywhere. Think of it as a universal bank of infinite knowledge and wisdom, yes? In every cell, every atom, there’s a branch office. So in this regard, ‘god’ indeed is everywhere, but the main headquarters of the bank is not separate from, nor any more informed than, any one branch. Whenever a new deposit in the form of an idea or a creative action is made by any being anywhere, it’s instantly available for withdrawal at any branch in existence. Humankind long has had devices for extracting and displaying what our standard senses cannot perceive: ouija, divining rods, runes, tarot cards, crystal balls, automatic writing, you name it.”

“I always figured those things were a lot of hokum.”

“In most cases, sure, because of con artists using them. But they’re just

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tools. Depends in whose hands they're in. Elspeth no doubt is the real deal, and if she wishes to believe she's a channel for her blessed savior, what's the problem?"

"You think it's possible to tell the future through one of these things?"

"Ah, there's the rub. Two schools here. One claims that time, which we see as linear, is in fact expansive, spherical; all time is always. So the future, as the past, has already happened somewhere within the sphere. And because it has already happened, it cannot not happen. School number two agrees with this mostly but not fully. We dummies in the West focus on an event, then go searching in the past for its singular cause. The ancients sensed that every moment brings change. This moment must bring forth the next, and so on. Thus there is no one cause for any effect. If some gypsy tells you you're going to get run over by a steamroller next Wednesday, and her crystal ball has had its warrant of fitness recently issued, the event of you and the steamroller making kissee on Wednesday is no more than a probability. But by knowing this probability you can make that event not happen by altering the moments between now and then."

"How the hell can I do that? Wouldn't it make more sense to just stay in bed on Wednesday?"

"Sure, except the steamroller driver loses control, the thing barrels down your driveway and plows right through your bedroom wall. *Splat!* Better to use your mind's own power to incrementally change your moment to moment path so you'll be in a place the steamroller isn't."

"Okay, okay." This was getting exciting. "If I ask the right questions of the crystal, which is being used as a pendulum, which is really a – what did you call it?"

"Ideomotor function tool."

"Then I can know for certain everything which has already happened, or is happening right now, as well as the probability of what's going to happen in the future?"

"Very basically, that's true. Again, in theory. I wouldn't go playing the horses or stockmarket based on it."

He stepped over to a dresser, pulled out one of the drawers, reaching in his hand and working it around, closed it and opened the one just below. "Ah," he said. When he pulled his hand out, he turned and held it up. A

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large, round crystal with a tiny hook at the top. “Yours,” he said, somewhat jauntily handing it over.

“Yeah? I can have? Wow, my very first crystal.”

“Mazel tov!”

\*

I hung Boris’s crystal on a nail in my room’s wall and thought I had forgotten about it. I’d had enough drama in my sixty-plus years without getting into some new airy-fairy dreck. But it kept winking at me. Finally I took it down, attached about eight inches of twine, held it out in front of me. It moved, all right, but only because my hand shook so much. I put it in my pocket and walked through the woods to grandpa’s house.

“First,” he said, watching me try to perform, “the twine is too heavy. Here, let me attached a length of strong thread in its place. Next, instead of holding it in midair, try anchoring your arm by placing your elbow on a hard surface in front of you. Hold it up higher. Does that feel any better?”

“Yeah, my hand hardly shakes at all like this.”

“Now, before asking it any questions, you need to establish your direction responses.”

“But I already know them: clockwise circle for yes, counter for no.”

“Those was Elspeth’s responses. Yours very well may be different.”

“Oh.” I held the thread and stared at the crystal. “Give me a yes direction.”

“God, typical Yank. Ask it nice, for Pete’s sake.”

“Nice. Right. Please show me my yes response. Pretty please?” Nothing. I tried again. And again. “Is it possible it won’t work for me?”

“Patience! Think of it as a rusted well pump which hasn’t been used for ages. There’s water down there, but you have to keep cranking that old pump handle till enough air gets down to bring water up.”

“Yeah, yeah.” So I did. Asking nicely. Which direction is yes...which direction –. “I think it moved!”

“I think you jiggled it. Keep working that pump.” Boris’s face was no more than inches from the crystal, watching, watching.

“It’s not me. You gave me a bum crystal. Probably a reject from –. Hey!!” we both yelled together. The damn thing moved. On its own.

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Maybe an inch, forward and back, forward and back. “But it’s not going in a circle.”

“So? Maybe you’re a more straightforward kind of pendulumist than Elspeth.” We watched as the crystal gained a bit of momentum, maybe two inches now.

“Right. Now ask it —”

“I’m on it. Quit nagging. So, dear crystal, which direction is no?” I repeated it once, twice, and presto, the thing switched to a side to side arc, even more pronounced than the yes direction. “That figures since I’m such a glass half empty guy. Anyway, looks like we’re dancing here!”

“Okay, Gridley, fire away.”

“Um, what do you think I should ask it?”

“Start off with an easy one. Something you know the answer to.”

“Okay. Who’s buried in Grant’s Tomb? Hey, it stopped.”

“Yes and no answers only, remember?”

“Aw yeah. That means I have to do most of the work. Right. Is today Saturday?”

– *No.*

“Don’t patronize it.”

“Why, you believe it has feelings? Crystal, Am I horny?”

– *Yes.*

– Well, damn! Is being here at the center helping me get better?

– *Yes.*

– Ah, good. Am I a hundred percent yet?

– *No.*

– Close? The crystal slowed to a standstill.

“Be more specific.”

– Say, ninety percent better?

– *No.* A few more questions and I got a yes at seventy-five.

“How about this: Was Boris ever a Mossad assassin?” But before I could get an answer the man placed a hand gently atop my own, stopping the pendulum. “Now, I can’t keep you from asking extremely personal questions on your own time. But at least have the respect not to do it here, yes?” His eyes had shielded over, his expression semi-murderous.

“Oh-kay. I only meant it as a joke, you realize. I mean, after unloading



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every secret of my own to you, I would have thought –. Never mind. I hear you.”

“The fact of the matter is that I was never what you asked. But there are things in my past that are deeply locked away, and I wish them to remain so. Please respect that. Also, respect the process of this mechanism. Not that you need be a goody-goody. Just try to stay clear of what truly doesn’t concern you.” His look had returned to normal, his eyes sparkling as they do. But I got the message. Loud and clear.

\*

It was strange walking into my own home. Sherry, the woman who had been housesitting and feeding Trump, was as sad to leave as I had been walking away from an extremely nurturing and strengthening couple of months at the center. But had I stayed any longer in all probability I would’ve become a fixture there, and I wasn’t at all ready for that.

I was happy to walk and jog the beach, play in the garden, stroll around the property with a hammer in hand looking for something to fix whether it was broke or not. I called it *passatempo*, passing time. It was only when I finally emptied my pack more than a week after arriving that I noticed the crystal lodged in a corner. Boris had made me a leather pouch (off of what animal had he skinned it? I wondered) into which the crystal fit snugly, saying, “Hopefully, this will replace your smartphone one day.” I placed it at the base of a gooseneck lamp on my desk, and there it remained for a time, untouched. Perhaps it was no more than curiosity that prompted me to pick it up, remove crystal from pouch and begin messing around with it.

I was never one into team sports (or sport, singular, as they called it in this part of the world), but when the All Blacks won the world rugby cup in 2011, I got quite excited. After all, New Zealand, with a population of just over four million, had beaten national teams from countries many times the size. You pretty much have to be born in a country where a sport is played to understand all the nuances, which of course let me out. But I did enjoy the flow and precision of the game, one that didn’t stop after every play for at least half a minute, then several minutes for TV commercials following each exchange of possession as in American football. So I tried to follow the team, especially when they played arch rival Australia.

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This particular game, or match as they termed it, was being played in Aussie, meaning it wouldn't start till around my bedtime, so first thing in the morning I booted up the laptop to catch a score. At the same time, my eye happened to catch the leather-bound crystal inches from the computer. Thought: first let's see what the pendulum has to say. I closed the laptop, opened the pouch and took out the crystal.

- Did the All Blacks win last night?
- *Yes.*
- Really? (The Wallabies were a heavy favorite.)
- *Yes.*
- By more than six points?
- *Yes.*
- More than ten?
- *No.*

I worked out the final spread was nine points, and with half a dozen more questions got the score to be 23-14. I reopened the computer half expecting to find the game was an Australia blowout. The actual score was 27-18, ABs. Which was odd as hell. Got the upset, check. Exact spread, check. Wrong score. It felt like a somewhat exasperated crystal was warning me: quit wasting my precious time, schmuck! What the experience did do, however, was get me hooked.

Over the next several days I must have been on the crystal half a dozen hours daily. Sometimes I'd start using it in broad daylight, next I looked out the window it was dark. I believe it's called addiction. Was there a local chapter of Pendulums Anonymous?

Mostly what I asked was about myself. I tried like hell to get the gist on my invisibility thing, but just couldn't come up with the proper questions. It appeared there were a few people in the world with the same ability, but none of them had used it like I had. Besides this, I had always considered my life ever so strange. Why had I never got married, raised a family like normal people? Sure, the work with Franni had brought out a bunch of things, but even fucked-up people with the same hangups had families. It wasn't that I craved to be like everybody else, I was simply puzzled why I wasn't.

The pendulum kept telling me (in yeses or nos) that I wasn't bad, I wasn't wrong, I wasn't even all that different. I merely was what I was, now move right along.

## Spook & Ghost

I asked about everybody back on the aborigine community in Australia. (I talked to them by phone or Skype every month or so, but people don't often tell you the whole story.) Except for Santi, and his various medical problems, everybody appeared to be thriving. Simon, Ellie and the beautiful Shoshona as well. Concerning the last two, the pendulum did a funny thing: it wouldn't give me a straight answer as to which one had climbed into my bed that night. What happened was the crystal didn't go back and forth, nor did it go side to side. Instead it rotated in a counterclockwise oval. Further probing revealed I had two more direction responses than I'd thought. The clockwise oval meant *I don't know*, while counterclockwise signified *I refuse to answer*.

When I attempted to discover why these answers would come about, the damn pendulum swung in a counterclockwise oval! It refused to answer why it refused to answer. Well, shit!

Then a thought hit: I'm doing this whole thing as if the crystal had a life of its own. Oh please, great guru, tell me the answer true. It's a tool, Boris had said. A porthole to peek in to my higher self. So it's actually me that refuses to answer me. Now, that is truly weird.

– Are these answers coming from my higher self?

– *No.*

– What!? Wait. Maybe I didn't express that right. The crystal is just a tool, right?

– *Yes.*

– A tool to express the, um, understanding, say, of what the highest part of me knows. Is that correct?

– *No.*

– Oh man, am I confused.

– *Yes.*

– Well, thanks for that. Still, if not from inside me, then somewhere else?

– *Yes.*

– This is getting scary.

– *No.*

– No, my sweet tookie! So, if these answers are coming from outside me, then...god?

**Barry Rosenberg**

– *No.*

– The devil?

– *No.*

Thank god for that. Even though I don't believe in either.

– Still, from somewhere. Another being?

– *Yes.*

– Boris, maybe?

– *No.*

– But somebody who's alive, right?

– *No.*

I dropped the crystal, got up and quickly walked outside. This whole deal is crap, I thought. What the hell am I doing, doing what I'm doing? What next, séances? Even for me, the man who becomes invisible, who gets warnings of imminent danger, who seems able to survive everything (except maybe himself)...it's goddamn creepy. Well, enough. I went for a walk on the beach. Back home, an hour later, I actually had a look around from outside the French windows before entering. Ghost afraid of ghosts.

The crystal was lying there on the desk. It didn't give off strange light or vibes or levitate or speak to me in an other-worldly voice, as I had done to the Great Dictator years back. It just lay there, inert. I picked it up, stuffed it in its pouch. Then I took it out of the pouch and sat back down at the desk.

– Let's get this settled, all right?

– *Yes.*

– Good. You're some kind of spirit thing, yes?

– *Yes.*

– You one of the people I killed?

– *No.*

– Or maybe was responsible for killing?

– *No.*

– So...is it your intention to do me harm?

– *No!* (bigger swing than previously)

– That's a relief. Are you like a, I don't know what to call it, a guardian angel?

– *No.*

– But you are a spirit of some kind.

## Spook & Ghost

– *Yes.*

– Were you ever a person?

– *Yes.*

– True?

– *Yes.*

– Did we, uh, did we know one another? In this life, I mean?

– *Yes.*

– Are you someone – were you someone who I –. Oh. Oh. Ohhhhh. My.

God.

– *Yes!* (broad swing)

– Walter?

– *Yes!!* (broader swing)

– You're Walter? Spook? My best friend ever?

– *Yes!!*

– I've lost it, haven't I?

– *No.*

– Bonkers, barking dog mad, off my head, loony toons, nutsy squirrel.

– *No.*

– You're Walter!

– *Yes!*

– Back from the dead.

– *No.*

– Still dead but talking to me through a crystal.

– *Yes!*

– Well, fuck my mother.

– *No.*

\*

“What, you had to drive four hours just to tell me?”

“How the hell else can I get through to you? No phone, no computer. Smoke signals would only get lost in the smog here.”

“All right, so show me.”

I went through the deal with the crystal. Many questions, many answers. Boris watched attentively. “Well, what's your take here.”

He shrugged. “Walter says he's Walter, what's your problem?”

## Barry Rosenberg

“I’m just afraid, you know, I’m making it all up. I so want to believe.”

“Then believe. And be happy. Only, I would keep this very, very quiet else you’ll have every nutbag in the world at your door. Plus the corpos’ll find a way to have Walter endorsing Big Macs and Toyotas before long. Anyway, since you’re here, I have, ahem, a few thousand questions of my own, if you don’t mind my coming between you and your pal.”

Boris indeed had questions, hundreds if not thousands, one after another, an answer leading to another question. Unlike certain people with massive egos (um), Boris was only after capital-T Truths. We had thought since he was sitting right alongside me that he could ask, I’d simply be the monkey holding the string. But Walter didn’t work that way. I had to ask, me. It became a bit crazy, Boris presenting a question and my repeating it out loud word for word, so after a while I began to repeat the questions silently, and this became my *modus operandi* forevermore.

After some hours of this I became fatigued and somewhat drowsy. (Walter claimed pendulum action could be hypnotic and I should take a break whenever I began to feel this way.) Boris, a kid with an entrancing new toy, wanted to continue on, especially when the subject turned to alien beings and alternate universes.

I staggered out of his cabin at dusk, walked through the woods to the center. Glenda had left a message for me to have dinner with her at her cottage, so I stumbled over there. I didn’t anticipate the greeting I got. Candlelight and wine, a lovely vegetarian meal on the table, sure; but there was something else: a permeating romantic air. I’d been attracted to the woman since first we met, but had turned off that part of my brain. Till now. Minutes after walking in there, I was carrying her into the bedroom.

“I’m very rusty,” I told her.

“*You are? Ha!*” she laughed the laugh that sounded like a wind chime. It was slow and soft and so very lovely. Was I ready for this? Was I?

Waking up to birdsong and looking over at her face still asleep on the pillow next to mine gave me such a rush that I couldn’t recall another like it. We showered together, made love once more, showered again, sat out on the deck eating muesli and rye toast with avocado, sipping green tea. Maybe I was ready for this after all.

## Spook & Ghost

Boris showed up, hungry for more action. I was surprised he figured I was still there since I had told him I'd be taking a motel room in the town. But then, everybody in the town as well as all the ships at sea likely knew I wouldn't be. Where it concerns me, I'm always the last to know.

So for some days I split my time between the small domiciles of these two people I was fond of as we investigated the domicile of a non-person I was fond of. Every now and then the preposterousness of what I was engaged in struck home: having dialogues with a dead friend and making love to a live one. Can't imagine why, wasn't this your typical day's endeavor for a senior citizen?

I wasn't about to move in with Glenda, nor did she care for me to do so. After talking about our situation she made a few phone calls and arranged a house for me to rent quite close to the beach. Unlike the beach where my home was on the gentle Pacific, this was the wild and frequently quite dangerous Tasman sea. But as a swimmer I rarely went beyond chest deep, and there was no way I'd take a kayak out in this surf. The house was similar to my own, half-century old, native timber, not in the least pretentious. As with many second homes near the sea in New Zealand, the owner, a widow friend of Glenda's, was happy to have it occupied by a reliable tenant, the sole stipulation that I had to vacate during the six week period of summer holidays. I told her I very much doubted I would be there anywhere near that length of time.

I drove back to my own beach, arranged for a very happy Sherry to house and Trump-sit for an indeterminate period, loaded up some clothes and my laptop, and returned north. My head as I drove was doing loop-de-loops. I thought about turning back a few times. But my own home was not where my heart was, at least not at the moment.

Back at the center, I pleaded with Walter to eliminate me as a go-between and permit Boris to contact him on his own, but once more this was not in the rules. So added to my peculiarities of becoming unseeable and having a built-in mechanism which felt like a bomb going off in my brain box whenever danger was in the nabe, I was now ordained as planet earth's sole translator of dialogues between man and unman. O lucky me. Was this to be my lot in life till Ghost joined Spook once more in the land of unbodies? And then a few weeks later, a rather unusual weekend workshop at the center changed everything.

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Dr. Sara Morgenstern was a noted American psychologist who went around the world conducting seminars on states of consciousness. While this sort of thing had been going on since the late '60s, what made her seminar different was this: to gain entry to Dr. Sara's classes one must pledge to never having done street drugs. Virgin dopers, in other words. I don't know how she did it, but Morgenstern convinced the local police to give her some marijuana for the seminar.

"How in the world did you manage that?" I wondered.

Morgenstern, barely five feet tall, a human dynamo who always, always, got her way, replied, "I told them the idea of the seminar was to get straight parents to know what wacky weed looked and smelled like so they could counsel their kids against it. Therefore I had to have enough dope for twenty-five or thirty people. When they asked where I was going to get it, I said, Oh, most likely I'll score it on K Road like everyone else. No, no, don't do that! they cried. Well, I have to get it somewhere. A few days later they suddenly found some they could let me have."

"In some cop's desk drawer."

"There's a condition, however."

"You can't share it with the center's staff."

"They'll be sending a cop along with it."

"Oh terrific. Will PC Plod be standing there in his blues rocking back and forth on his heels smacking a favorite truncheon against his palm? That'll certainly create a mellow high for these people's very first toke."

"I told them no uniform. Fine, they said. And he should do his best to blend in with the group. Okay, they said. I've met the man. He's actually lovely. And he's happy to be doing it because he'll be on full pay for sitting around watching our good citizens get bent."

Indeed, Manu was a lovely fella. A handsome Maori approaching sixty, gray temples and trim physique, he had a glint in his eye and typical no-worries attitude many Maori were blessed with.

"This is good shit, bro," he told me on the eve of the workshop, holding up a plastic baggie. "Golden Bay gold, the South Island's finest. You can't get any better herb in Aotearoa." He did a thing with his eyebrows. "Maybe after the seminar –." He threw his head back and laughed. I liked him right off.



## Spook & Ghost

During the morning, Dr. Sara taught mantra meditation, and then following the break breath med, asking the group to compare mind states between them. “We won’t get them zonked till late in the afternoon,” she told me when they broke for lunch. “Then it doesn’t matter what you feed them, they’ll lick the plates clean and crave for more.”

I went for a stroll down to a stream that flowed through the property. Slipped out of my flip-flops – ‘jandals’, as the Kiwis called them – and sat on a rock dipping my feet in the water. Soon I was joined by Manu.

“Mind?” he asked.

“Not at all.” He sat alongside, looked round. The only sound was of the water slowly rippling past. “Lovely here. So, what’s your story, mate? You one of those Yanks smart enough to’ve left the rat race behind and become part of the small-mindedness of our colonial culture?”

“Actually, I left the States way back. Been here a little over ten years.”

“Just enough time in to collect superannuation.”

“Not yet, but soon. And yourself? Been a cop long?”

“Twenty years in six months. Then I’m gone. Take the pension and fishing rod and head down south. As it is, I’m the lone brown in an all-pakeha shop. Detective, but they don’t trust me to do much, so I jockey a desk.”

“Give you shit, do they?”

“One guy does. Or did. Not no more.”

I turned and looked at him. “Sounds like a story.”

He said nothing for a while. “Welllll, this one bastard, twenty years younger than me, racist prick, baiting me from the day I came aboard here couple years back, getting the others to haw-haw with him.”

“Alpha dog.”

“Went on for a few months. Kept a smile on my face. Y’know, never show it’s getting to you. Then I worked up a plan.”

“This I want to hear.”

“Figured the guy could take me in a straight-out fight, so I devised a strategy. Sure you wanna hear this?”

“I’ll toss you in the goddamn water you try to hold back now.”

“Worked on it a fortnight. Every step. Planned and practiced. At home and in the office when nobody around. First I made a glove. Just one, right hand. Same color as my skin. Reinforced, but not so’s was noticeable, if

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anybody looked. Which they weren't gonna. Then I got me a steel cylinder, maybe three inches, fit in the closed fist. With me so far?"

"Breathing down your neck."

"We got a loo in the shop. I paced off the steps I wanted. Then at home I set up a dummy. Probably a higher IQ than he got, but a dummy. Did my measurements. Step, step, step, stop, pivot, twist. In the office, waiting, waiting. Right moment. Gotta be the exact right moment. Day goes by. Two. Three. No hurry. Then it comes. Gets up, heads to the loo. No one else in there coz I been keeping watch. Stand up, grab a file, head in the direction, but not making it obvious exactly where. Nobody looking. Set down the file, open the door. Step around the barrier, he's at the first pisser, to my left. Looks around, sees it's me, lets out a bit of a snide laugh, back to business. Here I go. Remember, I been practicing. Step, step, step, just past where he's standing. Stop, pivot, twist, haul off. *POW!* Perfect crash landing, right in the ear hole. Knocks him into the wall, hits the side of his head, bounces back all rubber legged, but doesn't lose his feet. I'm waiting for some sign he's gonna hit back, but he's too dazed. I slip the cylinder in my pocket, point down at his willy hanging there. 'Pissed your trous, mate.' Walk out, pick up the file, back to my desk, slip the glove into a drawer."

"Repercussions?"

"Didn't hear him leave the loo, no sign of him rest of the day. Since then, he's never looked my way, said a word to me or about me."

"Gorgeous."

"Let's go bust some asses for breaking the drug abuse law."

\*

Glenda was all upset.

"What's up, babe?"

"You didn't hear? There's a ten year old girl been missing two days now. Lives not far from here. I know the mother, not well, but still."

"Cops must be on it."

"Cops and half the district. They're combing the woods, going house to house. It's so horrible."

I mentioned it to Boris some minutes later. He stared at me, first with

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a puzzled look as if ten year old girl and missing couldn't be in the same sentence. Then he broke into a rare smile.

“What?”

“Who do we know that knows everything?”

“Right. Riiight.” Take out the pouch, remove the crystal. Following a brief warmup,

– You know about this ten year old girl?

– *Yes.*

– Is she alive?

– *Yes.*

– You're sure?

– *Yes!*

“All right, sorry. Keep your toga on, or whatever you wear up there. Is she hurt?”

– *Yes.*

– Bad?

– *No.*

– Has she been abducted?

– *No.*

– Can you tell me where she is?

– *No.*

“Of course he can't,” Boris said, somewhat angrily. “Come with me.” He led the way back to the center, moving faster than I had thought possible. “Grab your laptop and find a room where we absolutely won't be disturbed.”

Once in the room, he locked the door, set up the laptop on a table, sat down before it. He dialed up Google maps, got the greater area. “Talk to your boy,” he ordered as I stood behind him. I kneeled on the floor, placed my elbow on a low table pulled up next to the lappie.

– In this area?

– *Yes.* Boris used the mouse to zoom in.

– In here?

– *Yes.* More zoom.

– Here?

– *Yes.* Zoom.

## Barry Rosenberg

The crystal had already changed directions before I could ask. One eye on the pendulum, Boris moved the map to the left. Nope. Then right. Uh-huh. Right again. In this way we narrowed the area down to a wooded patch the size of a football field. I took out my phone.

“Manu?”

“Can’t talk to you now, mate.”

“You’re looking for the kid?”

“Yo.”

“Have you looked in an area –” I leaned in close to the screen, read off the description Boris had his finger on. No reply from the phone.

“What do you know, mate?” His tone had changed considerably.

“You trust me, man?”

Another long pause. “Reckon so.”

“I think –. She’s in that area. I strongly believe she is. She’s alive. Hurt but not bad. Not abducted. Listen, please go look there. If she’s not,” I glanced down at Boris; he shrugged, threw up his hands, “I’ll apologize and shout you a brand new fishing rod.”

“Jesus Christ.” The phone went dead.

An hour passed, two. I rang him twice but his phone was turned off. I began pacing. Boris, the guy who’d been and seen it all, was trying to appear cool but was equally nervous, slight cracks manifesting in his normally stoic fabric. Half an hour later a car flew up the dirt road raising clouds of tan. Manu braked hard, jumped out, batted dust from his face as he made his way to where we were standing. Stared hard at me. Looked at Boris. Back at me. Reached out, grabbed my arm, hard, led me twenty, thirty feet away.

“Tell me what you know.”

“Did you find her?”

“Yeah. Now tell me what the fuck this is all about.”

“She’s okay?” He just glared. “Oh, man!” I grabbed him in a bear hug, squeezed. Boris took two steps toward us, stopped, stood there, not quite smiling, but for him, a watermelon slice.

“The story,” Boris said softly. “Please.”

“Right. Ten year old kid has a fight with her older brother over some shared i-toy. Tells her parents she wants her own. Both parents pissed outta their skulls, involved in their own domestic, your prototype model suburban

## Spook & Ghost

family scene. Kid takes off. Over to a girlfriend's. Girlfriend doesn't want to see her, kid runs away crying, everybody hates her. Gets lost in the bush, sprains her ankle, she's never going home, covered with scratches, mossie bites. End of drama." He pushed me off him. "Now you. Either you're a goddamn crim and your ass goes down, or you're one of these nutsacks hang around this kind of place. Don't know which I consider worse. *Talk!*"

The three of us walked quickly to the room where the laptop was, locked the door. "What, you two pervs plan on raping me?" I knew he'd calmed down, but still had to show his cop fangs. I took out the crystal.

"Oh my god."

"Quiet. This and the laptop. Google maps." I thought of something, turned to Boris. "Since when you're a closet nerd?"

"Your ignorance of my attributes is encyclopedic."

I sat down, put on a demo, no mention of Walter.

"Does this always work for something like this?"

"Dunno. First time I ever used it for anything of the like. And have only been using the crystal for, what, couple weeks? However, we've learned a shitload about alternate universes, you're ever interested."

"Right." He walked over to the wall, touched it, walked back. "Just, uh, listen. I'm doing my job, walking through those woods, calling the kid's name, convinced I'm a total bozo. Hear what sounds like a whimper. Call out her name, more whimpers, follow the sound, there she is, filthy but all right. Squat down, talk to her a bit, pick her up, walk out, getting whapped in the kisser and tearing hell out of my one good suit by every branch in that bit of shitty bush. Suddenly, outta nofuckingwhere, a hundred news people, cameras, mics in my face. Somebody uploads a vid of the rescue onto YouTube. Last I heard, quarter mill hits on its way to viral. Know what they're calling me? *Hero Psychic Maori Cop!* The whole ancestral thing, like my forebears willed me second sight or a sixth sense. Big cheese himself down in Wellington rings to offer congrats." He took a breath, stared down at the floor. "Okay. I didn't ask for any of this, but it's here, I'll take it. All the shit they've put me through in my career, I may not deserve any of this applause, but I'll take it. Now, comes out how I knew where to look, two goofy old farts dangling a piece of glass, I'm toast." Major sigh.

**Barry Rosenberg**

Boris and I both nodded our heads several times, I did a thing with thumb and forefinger across my lips. Unspoken treaty. Dead silence a full minute.

“The three musketeers, geriatric-style,” Manu finally said quietly. “God help us.”

## BOOK THREE

“I wish I had got to know Walter.”

“Me too. I believe you and he would’ve hit it off big-time.”

“You make him sound like a really appealing being.”

“Appealing.” I propped my head up on an elbow-supported hand.

“That’s pretty much a perfect description of the man. Extraordinary would be another.”

“How do you think he feels about all this?”

“Oh, I reckon he approves of me hanging out with you.”

She slapped my forearm, my head falling back on the pillow.

“Well, he’s got a lot of time on his hands. It’s not like he’s burdened with chores, plus he claims to be bored. I think if he didn’t approve of the work, or the rules forbid it, most assuredly he’d let us know. He’s turned down a number of requests —”

“More than half.”

“— so my sense is it’s all kosher. How many we have to do today?”

“Seven.”

“Good lord! Had I known about this way back I might not have become a burglar.”

“Or any of the other interesting sidelines you got yourself into.”

She got out of bed and walked slowly to the bathroom. I looked at her naked white ass, as well formed as any woman’s half her age. “My yoga bum,” she called it. Indeed.

We weren’t living together, exactly. It was like three nights a week at my place, three at her cottage at the center, and the one other day we sat around on our own twiddling thumbs and wondering what the other was up to. Glen hadn’t been in a relationship since her divorce several years back, and I

## Barry Rosenberg

hadn't been in a decent one, well, maybe forever. So the wise thing was to take it slow. Yeah, right.

\*

When Manu had carried the girl out of the woods, a number of things happened soon after. The entire front page of the Herald, NZ's national daily, featured the full-bodied picture. As he had predicted, the cap read HERO PSYCHIC COP! I guess there was no real need to mention he was Maori. Except they did mention it numerous times in the three separate breathless accounts the paper ran. The more he tried to play it down, the more they played it up that his heritage was what led him to find the kid and save her life. ("I didn't save her damn life; the little shit would have crawled her way out once she got hungry enough!") A genealogy investigation conducted by a TV station delved into his *whakapapa* and determined that more than a few of his *tipuna* had been genuine *matakite* and *tohunga* engaging in *wairua* practices of consulting their *atua* for guidance. When he tried to tell the big cheese in Wellington the media's take was a load of kaka, he was quickly visited by a trio of top cops, who explained the facts of life to him: one, the New Zealand police were in dire need of a positive public relations infusion; two, this was as good as it ever gets; three, not only should you shut your face (else your pension may suddenly sprout wings and fly away), but we're going to introduce a new department where the good citizens who require 'psychic assistance' above and beyond standard police work can contact you, as head of same in your new title with fat increase in pay. You do approve of your promotion, don't you, detective *inspector*?

His first words of thanks to us? "You buggers! You bloody got me into this mess, now you bloody get me out!" Which brought about a high level meeting of the brain trust. We dragged Glenda into the huddle, and a darn good thing we did.

"I see the situation as a big, big plus," she announced.

"Women," Manu snorted. He began whistling 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life'.

"Why don't we take over the role? The center, I mean." Looking directly at him: "Most of what you get is sure to be nonsense. You'll have staff to take care of those. Anything that smacks of being genuine why not farm it off to



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us. We'll be the private sector. All government departments everywhere do this because they don't have enough qualified staff."

"Right, right," Boris agreed. "And we charge for our service. Help put some needed green in the center's coffers."

Silence. Then eruption. Debating. Then arguing. Even some listening (not a whole lot). More silence. Finally, Glenda: "Personally, I don't like taking money from the police, or the crown. That definitely will involve people coming in to oversee what we're doing. My suggestion is we charge the people wanting the answers."

More back and forth. An assortment of thoughtful hmms. "How do we know what to charge for what service?" I wondered.

She laughed. "Ask the one doing all the hard labor," pointing to the ceiling. Curiously, two of the males in the room nodded knowingly, while the third, who had yet to be introduced to Walter, peered up as though searching for writing on the ceiling, then reminded himself where he was and whom he was with, squeezed his eyes tight and sighed. Meantime, I grabbed the crystal.

– Well buddy, what do you think?

– *Yes.*

– Does this fit in with your other-worldly Buddhist leanings?

– *Yes.*

– We can leave it up to you to decide whether you wish to answer a question, and how much to charge?

– *Yes.*

Manu asked, "Since I'm the one with poo on his shoes here, do I have a say about where the money goes, if there is to be any money, which I seriously doubt?" I figured him to be asking for a backhander, but the man surprised me. "How about we split the money between the center and outside charities. Me, I favor organizations working with the blind, like seeing eye dogs and the Fred Hollows Foundation. I have a blind auntie." I began to repeat the question subvocally, but Walter was already on it.

– *Yes.*

There was even a battle over what we should call ourselves. Glenda suggested, simply, Knowledge. Boris claimed it wasn't knowledge at all we would be providing, rather Erudition.

## Barry Rosenberg

“Air-you-what?” Manu cried. “Hell does it even mean? Chrissakes, we’re providing information, call it that.” Boris muttered that he was surrounded by Philistines.

“Look, how about this: S&G Information.”

“S&G?” Glenda said. “Am I the G? And if so, who’s S?”

“That’s the name Wal–, um, a mate and I used in a business we had years back. Thought it would be kind of appropriate here.” Glenda and Boris quickly agreed, Manu looked confused, shrugged. Not to be one-upped, he offered: “How about a slogan to go with it. Something like, ‘You present the problem, we find the solution – to anything.’”

We went through a large pot of coffee (organic, Fair Trade) trying for a better one, but Manu held fast, and we wound up giving it to him. As we broke up, each of us headed to his/her own domicile, not a one of us reckoned we would make so much as a single dollar.

The first week we took in just under five thou.

\*

Our pitch was this: Ask us a question or present a problem needs solving. We will let you know within twenty-four hours whether we can help, and if we can how much you’ll need to fork over. You transfer the money to our law firm’s bank account, whereupon we provide the answer to your query at once. You may not be happy with the answer, still, we guarantee its accuracy or your money is refunded. S&G will have nothing to do with domestic relations or predicting the future. Our lawyer, an older man on the center’s board, nearly broke into cartwheels when we told him what we had in mind. He immediately made several legal adjustments to the process as well as a number of sensible suggestions.

Our very first situation was phoned in by an eighty-four year old great-grandmother who had lost her engagement ring, which, she told us any number of times, she’d had for sixty-six years. She feared it was stolen by her cleaning person, whom she had employed for many years and was ever so reluctant to broach the subject.

– What do you think?

– *Yes.*

– You know where it is?

## Spook & Ghost

– *Yes.*

– Okay, should we charge the sweet old dear? (I figured he say nah, how can you possibly.)

– *Yes.*

Really? Hm. I started out low, twenty bucks, but he kept bumping me up, higher and higher, until we hit \$850.

– You sure about this?

– *Yes.*

– You're a hard man. Uh, spirit.

– *No.*

I felt embarrassed charging the woman anything, let alone that much; when I told Glenda she merely replied, I guess we just have to trust Walter. She volunteered to make the call. They appeared to be having a nice woman-to-woman conversation. What she told me after: on hearing the cost, the old woman let out a gasp, but not because it was outrageous.

“Why, that’s the exact price Jim paid for it back then! We fought for days about him spending so much, but he held firm. What an amazing coincidence! Oh. Wait. No coincidence at all – you people are psychic!” And when two days later the transfer of cash was made and she was informed the ring was at the bottom of the meat freezer in her shed, she responded with giggles. “I’m sure there’s some significance to that, but for the life I can’t figure what it might be.”

The next five questions/problems all had to do with lost animals, two dogs, two cats and a budgie. I thought these would be pooh-poohed by the board of trustees. Interestingly, all of us were animal lovers, especially the normally taciturn Boris and talky Manu. (And Walter, of course.) Remarkably, all the animals were alive, all were found, even the budgie (after a hell of a chase, we later learned). And which one brought the steepest fee? Yep, the budgie, which belonged to a wealthy developer’s four old daughter, who (thankfully) refused to eat or stop crying until her feathered friend was found.

I sincerely hoped lost pets wouldn’t be the major, or even strongly minor, subject matter for the fledgling S&G enterprise; as it turned out, it wasn’t. Synchronicity being coincidence with substance, the week’s number of missing pets must’ve had to do with a) moon phase, b) biorhythms, c) sun spots, or d) dumb luck. Then we scored with our first significant bit of cosmic detecting.

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A somewhat embarrassed insurance company CEO contacted Manu concerning some missing experimental hi-tech gizmos at a big Auckland IT client. “Made the mistake of telling my wife about it, and she insisted I contact you. Please don’t let it get out I’m even talking to you.” Turned out his second in command, who had a closet gambling problem, had taken the pieces and hid them away in a rented storage facility prior to working out a deal with a rival company. I figured Walter would dictate our going for the big bucks here as the gizmos were worth major dollars, and again he surprised me by advising a mere \$2500. I argued with him (picture me frantically swearing at a crystal, yeah?), but after some questioning as to his thinking, it pretty much made sense: we’d been given a tiny bit of finger food as prelude to a potential horn of plenty. When Manu spoke with the CEO, providing thief, whereabouts and cost, he also gave him a condition: that we be permitted to quietly circulate our success within the insurance community. (Manu, I had learned, could sweet-talk a blackbird into sharing a worm.) Reluctantly, the CEO agreed. After that, our business was in business for real.

Another big money maker was medicals. For this, Walter ‘insisted’ on having a signature of the patient. (This bit of data from him required nearly a dozen questions. Finally, Glenda came up with the idea, else I’d still be there dangling the crystal trying to work out what he wanted.) A person’s signature, he ‘explained’, contained all the vibrational energy of their being. This included, he ‘said’, past lives as well.

As none of us was medically certified to do diagnostic work, let alone prescribe treatment, a Walter diagnosis/remedy frequently was confounding to three of us, although Boris, who knew something about everything, often recognized the malady and, after trying to explain it to us in language which might well have been Venusian, simply indicated the part of the body it referred to.

The way we did this was have Walter spell out every word. I’d say, First word, first letter: does it fall in the alphabet between A and M? If yes, I would reduce it to A to G, then A to C or E to G until I pinpointed the right letter. If not in this part of the alphabet, I’d move to other parts. Generally, I could get the letter in five or six questions. The problems with this method were the time it took and the strain on certain neck and upper back muscles

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as I sat in an awkward position with my elbow on the table and hand raised up holding the crystal. But the biggest problem was Walter himself. Boris, who had considerable medical knowledge plus several reference books, would look up anything he didn't understand from the pendulum's yeses and nos, shake his head, and mutter, "You'd think a being that knows everything would have some clue about proper spelling."

Initially, we would write the diagnosis-plus-treatment on paper, seal it in an envelope and have the questioner take it to her/his doctor. Trouble was, more times than not the quacks demanded to know where such preposterous diagnoses/treatments came from, and when told from us, they'd blow their pointy tops, sometimes without even investigating. Harrumph, harrumph. We discovered this from Manu, who said police higher-ups had received complaints that his department (very few knew of our involvement) was, quote, overstepping their mark, and ordered all medical work to cease and desist. Whereupon Manu told the brass, Right, I'm outta here, time for my pension and fishing rod. Whereupon the higher-ups shit a briquette, nervously rubbed their hands together and said, Now, now, let's not be hasty. Reason being the newly-established psychic branch of the New Zealand police force had in a very short time become the apple of the public's eye. The problem was solved, again by the immaterial man residing on a cloud.

Walter provided us (i.e. spelled out) the names of three top-notch physicians who were believers, and it was to these persons (all of whom were female; gosh, what a coincidence!) we henceforth emailed all information, who would then contact the patient. In our fourth week of practice, we received an unsolicited transfer of fifty thousand dollars from a recipient of our investigation into his health, as one of our docs told him (after his being misdiagnosed by four different specialists, including one in Sydney) that had we not sent her our search results when we did, and had she not immediately had him admitted in hospital for a major op, he would've been dead within weeks. We thanked him for his generosity, at the same time told him to please keep his trap shut else we'd be besieged by every hypochondriac in the hemisphere.

By far, most of Walter's prescribed treatments were not your standard medication, rather natural, herbal, homeopathic and occasionally even basic foodstuffs like kiwifruit, avocado and parsley. And how many times did

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he spell out ‘vegan’. Often, acupuncture (and he would spell out a specific practitioner); other times a naturopath specializing in one form of intrinsic healing or another; frequently a certain osteopath or massage therapist. Curiously, the police received not a single kvetch from any of these types.

Now and then we got calls from the docs we were dealing with. “Are you sure of this prescribed treatment? I mean, it makes no sense whatsoever.” I checked it with our copy, read it out letter by letter. “Well, your spelling leaves a lot to be desired but I understand what you mean here. Really weird thing is the combination of ingredients. Some allopathic, some herbal. Makes no sense whatsoever.” Did it work? You bet.

Another time, one of the other docs wondered, “Where did you get this information? Yes, yes, I know: can’t, or won’t, divulge your sources. Why I ask is, one of these in your mix? It isn’t even on the market. As a matter of fact, it’s an experimental drug being secretly tested by a major pharmaceutical company in Switzerland. I emphasize: very secretly. It just so happens that a former associate working there as a research assistant told me about it.”

\*

“You may have noticed I’ve been sending more and more requests directly to you instead of taking them myself and slipping them to you when no one’s looking.” This was Manu, six months and two hundred and fifty thousand dollars along. “Reason is the bloody budget. Periodically there’s moaning and groaning about costs. This is one of those periods. Rumor has it a new broom will be coming in to drastically cut down the spending. Since the glamour of the psychic department has worn thin, I’ve already lost half my original staff, and first thing this monkey’s gonna do is shut me down completely. In truth, I couldn’t care less. I go out with a much higher pension than was due me six months ago, thanks to you folks. What I suggest is S&G become independent of the police. Means getting our own premises, taking on staff, begin advertising. I’ve already talked to an agency, they’re happy to work with us. Figure a quarter mill we’ve taken in such a short time just on drop-ins, heck, should have no problem doubling that, tripling maybe, within a year.”

“No.” This was Glenda, barely above a whisper.

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“We can lease a nice facility, buy some new hi-tech gear to speed things along. Plus, I have enough mates in the cops so when we need inside police work on investigations –. Excuse me, am I suddenly giving off a bad smell?” Dead silence in Glenda’s small, comfy living room. No one except Manu looking at anyone else. “Heck’s going on? Is somebody gonna talk to me?” Tick tock, tick tock...

“Most good ideas that start off fizzle out rather quickly,” said Glenda finally, staring down at her lap. “Else they stagnate, go nowhere, mainly because of the people. Take this center. The committee come in once a month for a meeting, read the minutes of the last meeting, sip their tea, munch their scones, talk about their grandkids and operations and leave feeling pleased with themselves. And I’m left to do all the work, just as I have been doing, and what the last director did before he got fed up and quit. No complaints; I believe in the program here and it gives me something to occupy my time.

“Now, the rare good ideas that somehow do survive never remain at the original small size. They begin to grow, and early on that’s probably a good thing. But the growth continues and pretty soon more and more time and effort – yes, and money – are spent keeping the machinery going, until at some point the main focus shifts from those wonderful ideas you started out with to the machinery itself. So, whether it’s Apple, or Google, or the Catholic Church or the New Zealand police department, a fortress is built and the number one mission becomes the fortress’s preservation. I think we’re so impressed with the quarter million dollars we’ve managed to earn, even if it’s all going to really good causes, that we’ve become blinded. Certainly I have myself. Manu, without meaning to, you’ve opened my eyes this morning. You know I dearly love the three of you, but if this is the way our fine little operation is set to go, I must sign off. It just ain’t me, babes.”

Boris quietly added: “I’m just an old guy lives in a cabin in the woods, reads books, raises butterflies and occasionally provides momentary solace for frustrated middleage matrons. And I’m stupendously content to remain that way. So I second Glenda’s insightful analysis of our circumstance, and should we continue to head for the big show then I too must submit my resignation.”

“And me, once again I’m the dumbest kid in the class” I noted. “I just didn’t see it, what we’ve become, are on the verge of becoming.”

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Manu sat with open mouth. He wiped a hand over his face. “I feel like a spanked bum. I never realized, swear. Nah, you’re not the dumbest, mate. I got dibs on the dunce cap. Blame it on my upbringing, I guess. Youngest of a brood of eleven, always wearing my older bros’ hand-me-downs, getting crap from the white kids at school. Then I become a cop, and do I get any respect? Nup, I still get crapped on. Guess I saw this gig as my one and final shot at the big gong. Ah, bugger it.” He rose up from his chair. “Sorry, folks.”

“Sit! Sit!” the three of us called. He sat. Nothing was spoken until Boris, peering around at each of us, said, “If we’re going to continue with the work, and keep it low key, may I then suggest we eliminate all insurance business. You realize they have accounted for nearly seventy-five percent of our earnings. I despise that industry and the chokehold they have on humanity and refuse to be party to their loathsomeness.” Glenda nodded, as did I. Manu, eyes to the ceiling, legs straight out before him, sighed deeply. Grumbling loudly, he at last nodded his assent.

Glenda, looking at me: “Why not run it by Walter, see whether he agrees with our new minimalist look?”

“Walter again! I keep hearing that bloke’s name. Who the hell is he? And why doesn’t he ever show up and speak his piece?”

“Oh, he does, he does,” I giggled, whipping out the crystal. “Fasten your seatbelt, Manu me lad. You’re about to go for a turbulent flight through the cosmos.”

\*

“I hear people who come to the center talk about higher consciousness and seeking the light. That’s nice for some, I suppose. But all I want is to be able to cut out the bullshit I continue to feed myself.” This was Manu, a few months later. “As you dear people know, I took some time off just prior to my golden handshake. Holiday leave, had it coming. So I gave myself a taste of what I’ve been looking forward to do with the rest of my life. Three days sitting in a boat with four rods hanging over the side, I’m so bloody bored I seriously considered wrapping the anchor around my neck and jumping overboard. So you’ll never guess what I’ve decided to do.” He looked around, waited. “I’ve applied for a license as a private detective.”



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The three of us exclaimed, “Terrific!” “Wonderful!” “Brilliant!”

“Really? You all approve?”

“Whyever not?” said Glenda.

“You going to start wearing a hat?” Boris wondered. “Have to wear a hat.”

“I can see it now: ‘The Psychic Eye...we know your problem even before you tell us!’”

“Aw, piss off. Thing is, I still want to still be part of us, but on my own I’ll be doing some insurance work.”

“Just keep your filthy habits away from our pristine efforts in behalf of the higher good.”

\*

Came the Christmas holidays, when by agreement I had to vacate my rented abode, I packed up Glenda and we headed northwest over the Tasman Sea. It had been a dozen years since I’d visited the aborigine community where Walter had left such an indelible mark. And, surprise: everybody looked older! Emil had been living with a community woman going on seven years, and appeared to be enjoying life immensely. Big Shank and little Carlos came and went, we were informed, both being in the States at the moment but would be coming back to meet up with us. Santi the monk, now seventy, looked great, wrapping his arms around me and hugging me to his large frame. I knew he wanted to do likewise with Glenda, but maintained proper monk decorum and simply took her hands in his and bowed slightly. The most wonderful greeting came from the teenagers, most of whom had been pre-schoolers when I was living there. It provided a rush to know they remembered me and didn’t need prodding from the adults.

As we walked around, I took in the number of new dwellings. Emil, who now fashioned himself an architect of sorts, pointed out that many of the homes as well as a new school building were constructed underground; that is, partly beneath ground level, partly above, and with earthen gardens on the roofs. When he took us inside, I was amazed how cool it was, as contrast to the suffocating sun-baked air outside.

“Mud bricks and garbage,” he noted of the building materials. “Hardly cost a thing.”

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“The man’s really found a home here,” I remarked to Glenda later.

“I do believe this is your home as well. And your true family.”

I looked at her, held it. Something major passed between us during the moment. Words almost passed my lips but I held them back, kept them safely locked away in the thought box. Merely shut my eyes and nodded.

A few days after our arrival, the California crew showed up. Simon, Carlos, Shank and...

“Oh my lord, who is that devastating looking woman!” Glenda gasped. At first I didn’t recognize her, tall and stately and heavenly, moving in a manner giving notice that every cell of her being was in total harmony with the billions of its sister cells. And when she came up to me, reached out and held me at arms’ length, then collapsed the distance and placed a soft and gentle kiss on my lips, finally my frozen brain kicked into gear.

“Shoshona, wow. I mean, just wow.” She laughed luxuriously, then stepped over and gave Glenda a hug. Looking Glenda in the eye, she said to me: “So finally, Uncle, you found the right mate for yourself.”

Simon again was rounder, and I swear shorter, yet still had the features of a Dorian Gray twentysomething. And what did he want to talk about? You bet: money. Explaining how my ‘investments’ now put me in the category of the most popularly reviled people on the planet, the fraction-of-one-percenters.

“Simon, you’re just so weird. People in your position are stealing right and left from their investors, and here you are actually making me money. Don’t you have any lawyerly ethics?”

“I know, man. It’s definitely a worry. But so’s the fact that you never seem to need any of it.”

“Minimalist lifestyle. And our Ellie?”

“Ah.” He shook his head. “Not good, my brother. Monthly botox session, mucho substance abuse, running around with dickish toyboys who are draining her every which way conceivable. I’ve given up. So’s her kid,” nodding sideways towards Shoshona, sitting some distance away talking happily with Glenda.

Dinner was, as it had been here, a grand affair with people sitting on the floor of the semi-enclosed dining hall, others wandering in, joining us for a while then leaving, kids, animals passing through. When finally it was over,

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I signaled for Santi, Shonshona and Simon to join us in the room Glenda and I were sharing.

“We just wondered whether you might like to talk with Walter.” Dead silence. The three of them knew enough to realize it wasn’t a joke, so following a slight initial shock, they remained attentive but quiet. I took out the crystal, told them about S&G Information and how it had evolved over the past year. Then I explained where, exactly, S&G got its information.”

“Ooh, this is spooky,” said Shoshona.

“Precisely,” I replied, and it took a few moments for the pun to sink in. This seemed to relax everyone into a proper audience for his coming performance. For the benefit of the others, I asked the questions aloud.

– My brother, any problem with your talking to us tonight?

– *No.*

– Is this indeed the late, great Walter?

– *Yes.* A hushed intake of breath from the three.

– Happy with your daughter, bro?

– *Yes!* “Oh my god.” she whispered.

“Would he mind if we tested him?” This from Santi. I repeated.

– *No.*

“Shoshona, darling,” he said quietly, “can you ask something only you know about?”

She thought for some time. “Daddy, I believe it’s you. I do! But, y’know, to please the rest of these good people, can you tell me who was the one I first had sex with? Oh, wait. Am I offending you, Santi?”

He laughed. “If you only knew what these eyes have seen, and these ears have heard. No-no, of course not.” To me: “Go on.”

– Does the first letter of the first name fall between –?

The pendulum spelled out L-I-O-N-E

“Enough!” she shouted, tears of joy running down her cheeks.

We spent the next few hours in communication with the man-who-was-no-longer-a-man. Simon, of course, wondered about his various investments, and appeared pleased with Walter’s responses. Santi asked exclusively about the dhamma, and appeared unfazed when Walter ‘told’ him that some of his – that is, the Theravadas’ – beliefs didn’t hold true up there. Shoshona was the toughest nut. Even though I had stated and repeated frequently that Walter

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could only reply with certainty about the past and present, nonetheless she kept asking about her future, in modeling, in acting, in potential Silicon Valley executive roles, claiming whenever he issued an I-don't-know, "Yes, I realize that, but don't you think --?" Or, "Isn't it probable that --" The best he would give her was a seventy percent perhaps, which seemed to appease her curiosity.

A few times I needed a break due to fatigue, and hoped each time it would be for the night, but little chance of that. Finally, it was Glenda, the voice of reason, who put an end to the night's activities, gathering up the others and shooing them off to their respective cottages before virtually carrying me to bed.

During the night I had a screaming session. It was the first since doing the work with Franni, meaning the first since I had been sharing a bed with Glenda. She had a hell of a time shaking me out of it, but appeared calm when finally I did open my eyes.

"Pretty bad, was it?"

"I don't know which was scarier, your blood curdling yelling or my not being able to wake you. Do you remember the dream?"

I shook my head. "But chances are the dream had nothing to do with it. I used to have them with regularity after Nam. Walter too. Plus he would thrash around so bad he'd fall out of bed. So he got this idea. Wherever he might be sleeping, he'd shove his bed against a wall, figuring if he hit the wall he'd bounce right back into the sack, no worries. This one place, room was so tiny he had to push the bed up against the window. Because it was stuffy in there, before he went to sleep he opened the window wide."

"He didn't."

"Flung himself out the damn window onto the ground outside."

"Hurt himself?"

"Didn't even wake. Come morning he opens his eyes, looks around, goes, 'Sheeet, why the hell I sleep outside, it's fuckin freezing!'"

This got her laughing, which it was meant to, stop her from maybe asking questions I might not care to answer. What it did do was stoke up a question I'd been having ever since what she'd said about this place being my home. Was it? Was it really? Even though I loved this woman, and even though the thought scared the crap out of me, as such thoughts always have,

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still, given the shot I could easily spend the rest of my years with her. Yet something was missing about the situation in NZ: the center, the S&G stuff, even proximity to Boris and Manu, next to Walter my closest male friends, ever. What the hell was it then? Seemed there was something I had to do, something, I don't know, major.

– Have I got this figured right? I was alone, me and the crystal.

– *Yes.*

– I should stay here?

– *No.*

– Back to NZ then?

– *Yes.*

– Something there for me?

– *Yes.*

– Can you spell out what?

– *I refuse to answer.*

– Really?

– *Yes.*

– That sucks, man.

– *Yes.*

– Gotta figure out what it is myself, do I?

– *Yes.*

– A bit dicey?

– *Yes.*

– You got my back?

– *Yes!*

## BOOK FOUR

Back to the grind. Missing pets, medical questions, lost objects, the occasional insurance project from Manu. A few bummers among them. In the space of ten days, three people with three different varieties of cancer, all incurable. Then a missing toddler, found just where Walter said he'd be, and just as he'd said, the tiny lad was dead.

"When stuff like this happens I really feel I'm in the wrong line of work," said Glenda.

Manu: "Just consider what it's like to be a cop. First you find some poor kid dead on the street, deprived of what should be the finest years of his life. Then you have the joy of rocking up to his family home with the good news. How does Walter feel about his part in this, do you reckon?"

"I asked early on. Said he can feel the sorrow, but the energy passes right through him."

"So nothing sticks when you're a ghost," Boris noted. "Or rather a Spook." He became pensive. "While I'm not thrilled by the prospect of dying, I do look forward to existence without need of a body."

"Curious," Manu wondered. "Does he miss having sex?"

"You're joking. The boy claims he's getting more now than ever."

"What's he use for a willy?"

"They have mind sex," Boris explained. "Their souls merge. Sort of like tantric, but without –"

"Boys, boys! The bell has rung, time to leave the locker room and head for class!"

"Women," the three of us muttered in unison.

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Was a week later, maybe a little more, that Manu came into the center looking pleased with himself.

“You heard about that Chinese guy who was murdered downtown?”

“The one they found with drugs in his pocket and no ID,” Boris noted. And once again I wondered how a guy with no obvious access to the media always seemed to know what was going on out in the world.

“Got a client through one of the top dogs in the cops,” Manu said, rubbing his hands together. “Actually, the one who came in and straight off closed down the psychic department. Damn strange in that I thought he considered me some kind of joke. Anyway, the dead guy’s family aren’t satisfied with the police take of the man being a druggie overlord getting done in by a rival outfit. Claim he’s a big property wheeler dealer, never had anything to do with drugs, the whole thing’s a setup. So they asked the brass to recommend a private guy to look into it further, and he gave them my number. Right off, no questions, they hand me twenty-five large, say whatever it takes, no limit on my fee, just find out what really happened. Can you believe it, the detective is finally gonna do some detecting!”

“Now you absolutely need a hat!”

“Fedora.”

“Homburg.”

“Charlie Chan wore a panama. Never an unsolved case.”

“Aw, piss off, the three of you!”

While professional pride, he said, moved him to do the detecting on his own, he did relent a bit for some help from above. We asked Walter whether the killing had anything to do with drugs, and the response was a definite no. Simple robbery, perhaps? Again, no.

“Right, then. I’m off to earn some big bucks. Trade in the old Toyota for a Beamer. New boat. Wait, I gave up fishing. How much you figure for a small private plane?”

\*

“You know what’s weird?” This was Manu, a week later. “In every detective book I’ve read in which there’s any kind of Chinese involvement, the main character goes into Chinatown, walks up a dark alley where no other white man, even a half-white man, dares to enter, looks up his close contacts in

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the triads and pretty soon everything begins to make sense. Only Auckland, with maybe a hundred thousand resident Chinese, has no Chinatown, hardly any dark alleys. Meaning not only no triad help, but the people who contracted me, the dead guy's wife and brother, have gone back to China and completely disappeared."

"So, you've got your twenty-five thousand and end of story?"

"No, and that's another odd thing here. The wife and brother have vanished, but I got an email address, and when I sent a request for more information about the guy, what I got was another twenty-five thou from a Hong Kong bank and not another peep."

"And you're moaning? Figure six months at this rate you'll have a fleet of private planes."

"Thing is, the guy was a legit property dealer, bought a bunch of houses and land here, he's worth a packet, whether it's his own or he was acting as agent for some zillionaires up there, dunno. So who offs him and why make it look like a gangland hit?"

"Want some help?" I nodded to the ceiling.

"Not yet. Just need to moan to somebody at this point. But keep your boy on hold."

Several days later: "Ever get paranoid?"

"Me? Never. Just like Walter, the energy of fear passes right through me, leaving nothing behind but a fat brown stain on my knickers."

"See, I talked to my friends in the cops. Normally, they're straight with me. Here, except for a few dribs and drabs, they're clamming. 'Can't get in there.' 'Records are sealed.' 'Please don't call again on this.' I mean, what the hell?"

"They've been ordered to shut you out, obviously. Feel like you're being played?"

"Sure I'm being played. But on whose orders? The top cop who gave me the deal in the first place? Higher up? And for Pete sakes, why?"

"Hey Pop, numba one son here will be happy to lend a hand."

"The one that holds the crystal, yeah, I know. Hold off a little longer. Got some leads I want to look into."

Few days passed. Manu, by phone: "Swear to Christ, mate, it keeps getting weirder and weirder. I finally made contact with the dead guy's wife



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in China. Get this: she's never been to New Zealand, never got in touch with the cops here, meaning it wasn't her talked with me. Plus she claims the dude didn't have a brother. So who the hell were the pair who handed me twenty-five K to look into the deal?"

"And all this doesn't scream at you to tuck tail and skedaddle?"

"You joking? If my curiosity wasn't piqued before, this thing now has my mind's full attention day and night!"

After he hung up I sat down with my once and forever best friend.

– Is there a rational explanation for all this?

– *Yes.*

– But one not evident at present.

– *Yes.* (As in: Yes, it's not evident. Such was Walter's way.)

– Uh, look. Possible there's bad shit involved here?

– *Yes.*

– Really?

– *Yes.*

– Is Manu in danger, then?

– *I don't know.*

– Right, I was asking about the future. But he could be?

– *Yes.*

I was weeding in the garden when Glenda pulled up at my rented house near the beach. She ran into the house, then around it, breathlessly calling my name. When she saw me she fell into my arms.

"It's Manu."

I froze. "Dead?"

She shook her head against my chest. "In hospital. They rang for you, but I convinced them to talk to me. From what they said, face pretty bad, broken leg, couple ribs."

Had she not been clinging so tightly I might have crumbled. As it was, I slipped out of her grasp, fell to my knees. What the hell had I been thinking. I had been amply warned. The guy's no kid anymore, though he would be the last to acknowledge that. Still, I should've done something, something, to get him off this screwy case.

At the hospital, two cops were standing outside the door to his private room. They refused to let us in. I kept quiet but Glenda let loose.

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“You bloody fools are responsible for this!” she spit out, her body stretched up till her face was right in one of the cops’, who reflexively took a step back. “Now do something useful for a change and stand aside!” I had to bite down to keep the smile forming. The door opened and a large man in a well-pressed uniform appeared.

“You his people from the psychic thing?” he asked quietly. I nodded. Glenda merely stared fire. “Please come in.” To the guards: “Nobody else. I mean nobody.”

Manu was lying back at a sixty degree angle on the upraised bed. Black eyes, bandage across the nose bridge, cast on his lower left leg. When he smiled, two gaps showed where teeth recently had been. Glenda went to the bed, paused, then wrapped her arms around him, head on his chest. Only then did I notice a woman standing in the corner. Light-skinned Maori probably late forties, though easily might have passed for younger. Tall, slim, elegant in dress. An absolutely gorgeous female. She gave me a small, sincere smile.

The large man introduced himself as Commander Ferguson. “I take full responsibility here, sir, madam. I am so dreadfully sorry. Easy to say I was merely following orders, but in doing so I let down one of our former people, perhaps almost got him killed.”

“What the hell do you mean, you were following orders!” Glenda wailed. “Who in the world gives such orders replete with lies and deception to an honorably retired member of your force? This is beyond normal police incompetence. This is programmed malice directed at one of your own people!”

I peered beyond her. Manu was eating it up. The commander nodded his head solemnly.

“I don’t know what this whole thing is about. Truly. To me, whatever is going on, and it stinks to high heaven, is way above my pay grade. For my part, I figured Manu would quickly be disillusioned by the ridiculous runaround he was getting, chuck in the towel, walk away with some easy money. Which, by the way, I figure we owed him for having to eliminate his department despite its effectiveness. But this guy –” he poked a thumb towards the bed behind him “– well, he’s known for having a giant set of, for a marked stubbornness. I normally pride myself in knowing my people, their

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capabilities, their flaws, and doing all in my power to keep them safe.” He threw his arms out to the side, palms up. “I blew this one. Badly.” He said this last to the woman in the corner. It was just now that Glenda noticed her, did a classic bit of a double take.

Ferguson picked up his hat lying on a chair, bowed slightly, glanced at Manu, left the room.

“Ha you li tha ack?” Manu cackled. “In he a loa a kaka?” He grabbed the ribs on his left side as he laughed. “By a way, thi beauifu la-ey ih Roamun.” The woman peeled herself gracefully from the corner and stepped into the room’s center to shake our hands. Hers had long, slim fingers and a strong feminine grip. “Rosamund,” she said softly. “I’ve heard so much about you both.” Glenda, it was obvious, stood waiting for a title, a label, a definitive word that would place her squarely in Manu’s personal scheme of things. None was forthcoming.

After a bit of chatter, Manu whispered something to Rosamund, who said something quietly to Glenda, and the two left the room. I pulled up a chair, took his hand in mine.

“Some shit, bro!”

“Own fault,” he replied, although not quite so eloquently. “Came back to office. Head in clouds. Should’ve seen place been visited. Lock picked. Pro job, not a scratch. Still in there. Grabbed from behind. Cloth bag over face. Kicks, punches. No chance. Bundled me up, carried me out to vehicle. Van. Throw in back. Drive maybe twenty-five minutes. Stop. Back door open. Pull me out. Figure dead for sure. But few more punches, kicks. Drive away. License plate covered up.”

“And you never saw faces, hands, anything.”

“Mnn. But.”

“What?”

“After shave. Never smelled anything like it. Would know it again, sure.”

“Not much to go on unless these guys turn up again somewhere.”

“Nother thing.”

“What?”

“Merican accents.

“Yanks?”

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“Maybe Canadian. But probably Yanks, yeah.”

I thought about it. “What the devil is going on here?”

“Dunno, mate. But reckon they waiting for me, not got caught out. And way they handled me. Real pros. Like, trying not to hurt me too bad.”

“Scare you off?”

“Like that.”

“Which, knowing you, that’ll work a charm.”

“Got my computer, all my notes. But.”

“But?”

“Rosamund has pen drive. Every day I update, give her for backup.”

“You crafty devil.”

“Give me few days. Be on my feet, outta here.” He gazed into my eyes, held it. “Need you on this, Ghost. Not just Walter. You. What say?”

“Manu, old saint, I do believe there’s some ass out there in need of serious kicking. Let me have that thumb drive the lovely Rosamund’s holding. I’ll grab Boris and we’ll go over your notes line by line.”

\*

“He’s certain about the Chinese wife?”

“Has a contact in the Beijing police, met at a seminar few years back. Guy agreed something smelled fishy, blamed the politicians, who he calls ‘the mortal enemy of mankind’. A sort of we cops have to stick together against the evil empire, so he’ll do whatever to help. Found the real wife, emailed Manu pics of the couple plus the marriage certificate.”

“So the fake wife and brother, plus the money, belong to whom, and were pushed onto Manu why. And who is it in this country behind the commander who set up our boy. We do accept Ferguson was a pawn here as well, yes? Then we have the professional thugs with American accents.” Boris was working on his kitchen table, awarding each element in his expanding puzzle a different colored Lego piece, moving them around like Montgomery going after Rommel.

“You have the Chinese, perhaps the most cunning race on earth; you have the Yanks, who use treachery and might to make up for any lack of chess-player type sharps. Poor Kiwis, innocent and gullible when you take into account the massive brain drain that send the best minds here overseas, haven’t a shot against those two.”

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“So what does New Zealand have that nasty elements within the two giants want?”

“Global position, America; land, China. Position to add to the existing networks for American control freaks and paranoids to spy on every living creature, land to produce food and clean water for the homeland, as well as to dump a few million unwanted poor citizens here to tend the crops.”

“And the Chinese guy who was offed?”

“I honestly don’t see how he works as a solid piece into any picture. He may have pissed somebody off on a completely different deal, or whoever’s behind this simply stumbled across a wealthy, expendable dummy who fit their scenario.”

“Then if it’s the Yanks, they tossed in the Chinese fake wife and brother, and have somebody with an account at the Hong Kong bank. And if the Chinese, they found a couple pros who speak American – remember, Manu never saw these guys, so they well could be Chinese Americans.”

Boris stood up and stretched. “In any event, I’ve grown kind of fond of this wee country, even if I inhabit no more than a tiny cabin therein, and wouldn’t mind sticking out my leg and tripping up one of the greedy colossi trying to grab what they don’t deserve.”

“Okay, time to visit the late great Spook who’s got all the answers.”

– Are the Chinese behind this?

– *No.*

– Americans, then.

– *No.*

– Wait. Not the Chinese.

– *Yes.* (Not them)

– And not the Americans.

– *Yes.* (Not)

– You’re positive.

– *Yes.*

– Well, of course you are. Um, the Russians?

– *No.*

– Islamists?

– *No.*

– Aw, c’mon! The Vatican?

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– *No.*

– The bloody Martians!

– *No.*

I looked at Boris. Boris looked at me. I threw the crystal onto the table.

“You think he’s messing with us? Has he ever done that?”

“Well, yeah. But only on things he and I joke about as brothers. This is serious and he damn well knows it’s serious. No way can I believe he’d dick us around on something –. Wait. Wait.” I picked up the crystal.

– Are we going about this all wrong?

– *Yes.*

– Like, maybe it’s not a particular national government.

– *Yes.* (It’s not)

– Or even a religious body.

– *Yes.* (Not)

Again, Boris and I exchanged stares. “What the hell does that leave? Spectre? Goldfinger? An advanced breed of soldier ants? Shit!”

A few days later I got a call.

“We caught a break.”

“Manu? You still in the hospital?”

“Signed myself out. I’m at the central cop shop. Come on down.”

The only time I’d ever been in a police station I was naked. And invisible. Not my kind of place. I worked to hide my nerves as I followed a tall, muscular young constable through the rabbit warren until I saw Manu standing outside the door to an interview room. He looked remarkably well. The rainbow flag on his face had faded almost entirely, and the huge bandage that shortly ago covered his nose had been replaced with a strip of adhesive. He had a small bag on his shoulder and single crutch under his arm.

“Got a couple guys in there. Ferguson, well, the man’s riddled with guilt over this and decided to go back to being the sharp cop he actually is. Ran down these guys and pulled them off a flight ready to take off for San Fran. Dummies thought they were clever, one seated in business, the other in economy. Cops couldn’t find any prints in my office – I didn’t think they would – but came up with a couple unexplained hairs. DNA checks out. I wanted you to be here when I went in and performed the special Manu sniff test.”

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I stood outside the one-way window with three ranking constables. On the other side, two sturdy-looking white men, mid-thirties, short hair, definitely ex-military, sat on the far side of a table, their hands cuffed behind them. I watched as Manu limped in with a uniformed cop and approached the table. He stood there for a while, staring from one to the other. One of them said something to him, then raised his eyebrows and shook his head, as though making an appeal. Manu remained silent, leaned across the table, stuck his face close to the man on his left, held it there, then moved over until he was facing the one on the right. He hovered there a bit longer, ran his fingers lightly over the guy's brush cut, then leaned in even closer and wriggled his nose in an exaggerate pantomime of sniffing. He pulled back, turned around, gently put aside his crutch, slipped the small bag off his shoulder, set it on the floor. He opened the bag and took something out. Looked up at the window.

"Oh no, he's not," I said softly. One of the cops alongside me glanced over, then looked back at the window. Manu appeared to be slipping his right hand into a flesh colored glove. He reached the gloved hand back inside the bag, took something else out, unseen. Closed his hand. Limped around the table until he was standing next to the man on the right. He appeared to say something to him. Then he looked over at the second man. Then so fast no one, in the room or out where I stood watching, saw it coming, he swung his gloved fist no more than several inches and connected solidly with the nose of the man nearest him. I swear I heard a crunch, though I suppose in fact I couldn't have. It was a massive punch and the man fell so quickly and so hard to his right that his chair toppled sideways into the chair of the man alongside, knocking him over as well. Whereupon there was rapid movement both inside and outside the room. But as well I knew, standing there shaking my fists on either side of my face with glee, Manu was a one punch fella.

The door swung open and he was shoved out, all smiles. "Forgot your crutch," I said, grinning.

"Bugger it, mate. Just had me a bonza physio session. Doubt I'll need it anymore."

We were escorted to an elevator, Manu semi-leaning on my shoulder, taken up a few floors, then led into an empty office. We sat there alone, recounting his recent performance and giggling like schoolgirls when several

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minutes later Commander Ferguson walked in, closed the door, looked at Manu, looked at me, back at Manu. Nodding to himself, he took his seat on the other side of a busy desk.

“They’re not talking, of course. But we have enough information from their baggage to know who, and what, they are. I rang up the SIS – that’s the Security Intelligence Service, our equivalent of their FBI,” he said to me, as if I didn’t know, “and talked to their director, a man I’ve known much of my life. Normally, the SIS, and their paranoiac spy-watching, phone-tapping equivalent, the Government Communications Security Bureau, consider us keystone cops at best, useful only when they want cleaned up some muck they themselves have created. Thus dealing with them sometimes you have to flex a muscle or two to have them pay even scant attention. To my compatriot at SIS I put on my snarlingest, growlingest tone, which he now demonstrated: ‘These bastards badly hurt one of my men, and either you level with me or I send half the country’s armed offenders squad to crap on your front lawn!’ (And by bloody Jove, I just might’ve done that.) ‘Now, who the hell are these creeps!’ I have no compunction that he did no more than begrudgingly drop a few crumbs my way. Our felons, he assured me, are not CIA, nor FBI, nor any of the rest of those abundant paranoiac three-letter Yank agencies that hate one another.”

“What then?” Manu wondered. I noticed he was unconsciously nursing his right hand.

“Private. Corporate security thugs.”

I turned my head to look at Manu, who already was faced my way. Ferguson was in midst of a shrug when our focus returned to him. “No idea. Except we found a flash drive on one of the men – the one with the misshapen nose,” he chuckled silently, “and it appears they’ve been doing quite a bit of work...for Google.”

“*Whaaaaat!?*” The both of us.

“Honestly, that pretty much sums up my reaction as well. There are so many aspects to this situation that make little sense. For instance, Ling Bo-Ping? The property buyer who was murdered? We know he’d been buying big chunks of land up north for some time as agent for large Chinese corporations. Which makes sense. They want to set up their own dairy operations in this country to compete with ours, and we’re stupid enough, greedy enough, to



go along with them, put our own people out of business. But as of a year ago, Mr. Ling drastically changed directions and began gobbling up huge tracts of land in the center of the South Island, hundreds of thousands of hectares at a go. For what purpose? It's too bloody cold for dairy down there. Plus, we know he wasn't acting for the Chinese. So who then? Seems apparent he was murdered because of some sort of betrayal. But betrayal to whom? And why?" He sighed and stared down at his desk. Finally, he looked up, turned his focus on me. I suddenly felt myself a teenage delinquent, called on the carpet by my school principal.

"Now you, sir. You've been asked to sit here in these hallowed halls of the police old boys club inner sanctum because Manu has told me some interesting things about you. That it was you who'd tipped him off about the missing girl, as well as primary party behind the psychic revelations his department flawlessly performed before I so assiduously wiped it off the books. Please, don't look daggers at the man, for this isn't the first your name has come to our attention. New Zealand police sometimes appear to outsiders as country bumpkins, especially insofar as our rugby world cup-deprived neighbors across the ditch are concerned. The Poms and Yanks as well. Our attitude is let them think that. Ego aside, it's to our advantage. The tortoise to the hare, mongoose to the snake. You can ask the French bastards who engineered the Rainbow Warrior bombing in '85, then arrogantly believed they could just waltz right out of here, whether or not we're truly the bumbling lot they'd thought we were.

"This psychic business. Myself, I'm a firm albeit quiet believer in what is often labeled paranormal. Years back I spent a bit of time at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Nepal. What I learned there, apart from what they specifically taught me, is there's infinitely more to life than meets the jaundiced eye. However, I sense that half the time so-called psychic phenomena are either sleight of hand or mere common sense taken a step beyond street level. In your case, how you do what you do, or whether it's genuine or not, is of little concern despite an admitted piquing of my natural interest. You have proved yourself eminently successful, and that's bottom line.

"Now, your background. From what I have been able to glean, your CV is fraught with gaping holes. Decades unaccounted for. Nonetheless, don't for a minute think I hold this against you, nor that you're one of a

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kind in this country. More than a handful of fascinating foreign-born older characters with adventurous pasts are residing here quietly pruning roses and tending bees, and so long as they cause neither harm nor damage and pay their taxes on time, good on 'em, I say.” (Note to self: inform Boris of this last statement.)

Ferguson leaned back in his chair, made a steeple with his long fingers. “As this present situation grows curiouser and curiouser, we, the police, are growing more and more uncomfortable. We know something major is going down, yet have not an inkling what, and for sure the upper crust wank— um, directors at SIS and GCSB are not about to let us bottom feeders in on their behind-the-hand whispers. Yet rest assured when the offal hits the fan we're the ones, not they, who'll cop the media and citizenry's frenzied flack.

“What I can tell you is that Mister Ling's supposed wife and brother are known Chinese intelligence agents. We had them in our sights from the moment their flight hit the tarmac, and I have no doubt they quite realized this and couldn't care less. We let them go because who in their right mind cares to antagonize China. We also know that Manu's second infusion of cash, from the bank in HK, came not from the Chinese but private parties in the States.” He made an exasperated face. “In police work, as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle so eloquently addressed it, when you eliminate the impossible, whip out your magnifying glass and examine the improbable. But in this damn equation both the improbable and impossible keep growing like a cancer!

“Now then,” he said directly to me, “in return for looking the other way so far as whatever your past shenanigans might have been, we now wonder whether you might be willing to do your adopted country a turn.”

“I — .” It took a moment to clear the bloated frog from my contracted throat. “Depends, I suppose. What do you have in mind?”

“The New Zealand police want to deputize you. We want you to do what we are completely unable to, which is go to the land of your birth, snoop around and try your darnedest to find out what the hell is going on. We'll give you a healthy stipend and whatever assistance you may require so long as it all remains under the radar. This includes other agencies in NZ.”

“ Question, Commander: Is this an offer I can't refuse?”

“No, sir. It may be dangerous, in which case there's no way I would send you out to do something that perhaps is beyond your abilities to perform and

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cope with. Learned that lesson with Manu. So the job is strictly up to you.”

I suddenly broke out laughing. Couldn't help myself. Alongside, Manu's expression was chisel-face serious. Which made me laugh even harder. Me, former half of Spook&Ghost, assassin, burglar, buttocks pincher of African despots: a secret agent working for the NZ cops. Tears streaming down my cheeks I bent my head back and looked to the ceiling. You've known this was coming all along, eh, my brother. Jee-zus.

\*

Simon's right eyebrow was a good two inches above the left. “You don't think they're messing with you?”

“Walter says no.”

“Google, huh.” He looked down at his manicured fingernails. “There have been whispers.”

“Uh-huh?”

“Definitely nothing specific, mind. There've been meetings down the road in Silicon Valhalla. Very top level meetings. People who normally don't talk to one another.”

I said nothing.

“Tinted window limos, back doors flung open, out dash the top of the pops. All but have their five hundred dollar leather jackets zipped up over their faces.”

“And you know this how?”

He smiled. “Our dear and darling Shoshona. She's well up the ladder there these days. Our own Valley girl. Don't know who she works for, exactly. Or her title or job description. But she's mixing with the bigs.”

“Think she'll talk to me?”

“Buddy-mine, for you she'll do anything. And everything. It appears, and this is just from say-so, you're the one male on spaceship earth she's not been able to seduce. For the Shoshonas of the world, that makes for mission possible.”

Hm, I thought.

A couple nights later, at dinner, Shoshona indeed talked. And talked. About everything. About nothing. On and on. I placed my hand lightly atop hers. She became silent. “Babe, I need something from you.”

Her face lit up. “Finally!”

“Or maybe not.”

“Uh-oh. I’m being a shit?”

“You’re being you. The most beautiful woman I’ve ever known. Who gets more beautiful every time I see you. I pray to your daddy’s spirit you don’t go the way of your momma.”

She looked away, then back. “Please,” she said softly. “Let’s go back to my place. Yes, I will try to get you in bed. Not because you’re a challenge. Because it would be a dream come true. I promise not to use any of my amazing feminine wiles.”

“What then.”

“Only my amazing feminine gym-toned body.”

We went back to her place. Her place was perfect. She presented me her body. Her body was perfect. I resisted. Just a bit. Not nearly enough. I expected a dynamo. What I got was the goddess Diana. It was so gentle, so loving, so wonderful I didn’t think about Walter once. I did after. I felt he approved.

Still in bed, I told her the whole story: why I was here, what I had flown in from New Zealand to find out. “But I can’t ask it of you. After what’s happened here between us, it’s just not right.”

“My god, a gentleman. A real old school gentleman.” She got up, went to the bathroom, came back, put on a flimsy, crotch-length negligee. Back in bed: “Okay, what I know. Yes indeed, something is going on. When secret meetings involving the top, the very top, people from Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook and Starbucks, plus the likes of Elon Musk, Bill and Melinda, Paul Allen – when people like these get together, quite likely it’s not to talk sports fantasy. That’s what I know. What I don’t know is what the hell’s going on.”

“Wow. And it can’t be to discuss taking over the world because you just named half the GNP of the known universe. They already own it.”

“I can look into it –”

“No. Absolutely not. This isn’t sneaking into Versace and snapping pics of next year’s fashions. You’d have a better chance parachuting into North Korea and pinching weapon designs than messing even the tiniest bit with

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the kind of clout we're talking here. Better yet, get me the layout of some of the throne rooms at these citadels of power."

"And you'll get in yourself?" She squinted at me almost evilly. "You know, my momma may be a little crazy, but stupid she ain't. Ellie used to tell me you were able to get in and out of places no-o-body gets in and out of, and never get nabbed." Her expression changed like the two masks of drama. "What can I do to get you to tell me?"

"No need to do anything. I'll tell you right now: I make myself invisible."

She offered up a stage sneer, jumped off the bed. "That's the very same thing Ellie said you told her. *Scheissekopf!*" Pausing at the bathroom door, she twisted around to face me. "At least I've done something my darling momma couldn't do – get you into my bed."

"Wait. What? But you and I have done this before, right? In Australia, the night Walter died. Right?"

She looked at me stupefied. "You and me in Australia?" Roll of eyes, incredulous shake of the head. Then into the bathroom, door slam. "In your dreams, old man!" she hollered just before I heard the shower come on full blast.

\*

Waiting. My all-time favorite pastime. Problem was I had no idea what I was waiting for. Meantime, I borrowed one of Simon's fleet of fancy cars and drove around the city. Checked out some of the houses we had fixed up and lived in. Said giddy to Ellie, who was now built like a battleship with facial skin smooth as arctic ice. Wanted to ask whether she had crawled into my bed the night Walter died, but was afraid whatever the answer she'd try to wrestle me into one now. Pass.

Visited Carlos and Shank. Carlos looked like a sage old Spanish conquistador, and Shank, who sported hair down his back and a white beard halfway to his belt, looked like a deranged yeti. Both were rich and happy. When I told them what I was in town for they rubbed their hands together like we were back in the bad old days. Carlos brought out a fascinating selection of killer knives, while Shank produced an arsenal of every model firearm produced over the past hundred years.

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“Guys, I appreciate your wanting to help, but I don’t think cutting or blasting my way in is gonna do it this time.” They looked ever so disappointed so I said, Look, if it turns out I do need you – which produced beams of expectant joy in the lads.

During this time I talked constantly with my old pal who for me now lived inside a crystal. But my old pal apparently didn’t care to talk with me. So many times did I get an ‘I refuse to answer’ answer. Why so? Well, why is not an answerable question. But then, my directly stated questions did not appear to be either. Damn you, Walter!

Day ten I got a call as I was tooling along the Coast highway. “Is this Mr. Granger?” the sexy voice wondered.

“No, sorry. I borrowed his phone for the day. Can I give him a message?”

“No, not really. I wanted to speak to him about a parcel I sent the day before yesterday. I’ll try again in an hour.”

“Right. I’ll make sure he has his phone back by then.”

Code. God knows what big ears these super-geeks had at their disposal. Okay, not very sophisticated spy stuff, but it got the job done. I did a one-eighty and hit the pedal.

\*

She was late. Either that or I was in the wrong place to meet her. Whichever the case, the main attractions were piling in with their limos and bodyguards like Oscar night at the Academy Awards. If I didn’t hurry...

I raced back to where I’d left the car. This was Simon’s Lamborghini, terrific for a run up the coast but not all that brilliant for a striptease. As I peeled off my things I worried that I hadn’t done the invisible gig in ages, but the way it happened, I’d got rid of my body by the time I was down to my underwear. Hated to leave the vehicle unlocked, but I didn’t think carrying an electronic key would pass whatever advanced form of surveillance technology they had going here. Matter of fact, I even wondered whether my being devoid of a visible body could do it. Ah well, nothing ventured.

I got out of the car, closed the door and ran some fifty yards to catch up with the mob entering glass doors under the scrutiny of trained gorillas and super-sensitive cameras. I got as close as possible to the last person going in.

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Talk about cozying up to power. A silly image suddenly popped into my head. When I was a kid my father took me to see the Harlem Globetrotters. After what seemed to be a bad call, Meadowlark Lemon, the Globies' designated comic, got right behind the referee and sneakily parodied his walk, going step by step with him, mere inches away, flashing this great grin at the filled-to-capacity stands. When the referee suddenly stopped short, Meadowlark crashed into him, knocking the stripe-shirted ref tumbling. As I was imaging this, smile on my invisible face, the man I was following step by step from inches away suddenly stopped at the security check booth and I just missed banging into him. Wouldn't that have been cute. Jesus, man, focus!

It was a tight fit passing through the booth, sticking to my man (I had no idea who he was) while the wand was passed over his body, then again marching in locked step behind him. We were all moving along a thickly carpeted corridor, this line of casually dressed billionaires and me, until we were herded into a huge glass enclosed meeting room with long seamless mahogany conference table, maybe forty leather swivel chairs and a gigantic plasma screen at the far end. While I immediately peeled off and went to stand against the outside wall, they all seated themselves in what appeared to be familiar assigned positions, accompanied by the clatter of body adjustments and the whipping out of an assortment of up-to-the-minute smartphones, tablets, ipads, mini-ipads, laptops and implanted wri-pads. Take away their cybergadgets, I thought, this mob would feel as naked as me. The glass walls and windows all around us began automatically to grow progressively darker until the room became a perfectly appointed modern cave.

Besides some very quiet conversation, whispers really, nothing was happening, and yet no one seemed in the least bit fazed that nothing was happening. Then the darkened glass door opened and a figure entered. I felt my eyes pop wide, and I was sure I made a sound, something on the order of a bullfrog croak, but apparently not loud enough anyone heard me. For the figure who entered this mass of power and abundance was none other than my dear Shoshona! But that wasn't what caused my shock. Had she tiptoed in and servilely placed some papers down, or whispered a message in an ear then quietly tiptoed out, I wouldn't have had a problem. But it was as though her presence had been expected, for everyone now sat up straight and focused attention on her rather than their instruments. I watched

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with mouth hung agape as this enchanting woman went around the room touching shoulders, bending down here and there presenting a cheek to be kissed, smiles all around. And when she moved to the far end of the table, stepped up on a small platform and faced them all, who were now facing her in anticipation, I had to reach out and place my hand on the glass wall behind me to keep from falling flat on my ass.

Shoshona paused theatrically, gaining full attention. She smiled.

“A recapitulation,” she said softly, her voice amplified by an unseen microphone and delivered throughout the large room via unseen speakers. “This for the few new members here for the first time as well as to further drill into the heads of the rest of us the utmost importance of the work we are here to do, and the reasons for it.” She paused, made certain she had rapt attention.

“National governments no longer have any use in our modern world. Why? They simply don’t work. I take that back. They certainly do work, but not in the manner they were initially designed. Governments have become so ineffective, they are no more than tools of corruption and oppression, machines operated by a handful of wrong-minded controllers. All governments, whether under the thumb of dictators or supposed democracies elected by the citizenry, have become corroded, rotted out, malfunctioning. These bodies are no more than corpses, zombies. Our very own is a trainwreck at every level.

“Religions. Same as governments. Fortresses of chaos, war and destruction run by old boys’ clubs for their own wealth and power. The masses they allegedly minister to suffer greatly, but the men at the helm simply tell them to have faith, have faith. Religions are big businesses that lack product, service and, above all, care for their customers.

“Then come corporations.” She paused, shrugged, widened her eyes in an exaggerated expression of incredulity. Titters from the audience. Then outright laughter.

While all this was being said, not with any rancor, but stated as plain fact along with this beautiful woman’s flashing eyes and warm smile, the giant screen behind her portrayed a human figure with shapeshifting faces segueing seamlessly from presidents and prime ministers to popes, rabbis and imams to industrial leaders in the fields of oil, transportation, weaponry, banking.



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“But the most essential reason for our being here is not political, nor is it theological nor business. Literally, it is earth shattering.”

The screen now displayed in 3D the west coast of North America, from the south of Mexico to the Yukon, bathed in sunlight and tranquility.

“The most advanced technology in the world, which has been designed and regularly updated, has told us this area is in grave danger. We paid this scientific prophesy scant attention until most recently, simply because the original estimates pegged the earliest signs of catastrophe occurring in the last quarter of this century. This no longer is the case.” The screen began to change: seismic eruptions, humongous tsunamis, rising seas ranging the length of the continent’s left boundary with the oceans. The graphics were brilliant, and horrific. Huge chunks of land were torn away from the greater mass; the Alexander archipelago, gone; the Queen Charlotte Islands, obliterated; Vancouver Island, disappeared; cities, vanished; the entire coast underwater. So real was the graphic that everyone in the room, most, I imagined, had already seen the presentation, gasped loudly. Someone, no, more than one, broke into sobs. I realized I had not taken a breath in several seconds.

“This picture –” the devastation had curtailed, leaving the new North American western seaboard hundreds of miles inland from its original long wavy line “– will be the reality *within the next ten years*. Sooner, most likely. The odds of this happening precisely as you have observed here have changed even since our last meeting. We are now approaching ninety percent certainty that by the year –.”

The year number she quoted was lost in the cacophony of voices.

Shoshona gave them ample time to settle down.

“So. Institutions failing, or having already failed, global warming, imminent planetary shakeup, leading to what? wars? riots? starvation? global chaos?” In an announcer’s deep toneless voice: “Coming soon: The Book of Revelations. Look for it at a theater near you!” She actually giggled as she said this. “Ah, but not for us. Right?”

The screen shifted to an image of the world turning slowly, the camera gradually zooming in, the globe appearing larger, entire continents visible as it spun from left to right.

“A few years back it became evident those of us on the West Coast had a

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move to make at some time in the future. We didn't put a lot of thought into such a move as the critical moment seemed far past our own lifetimes and, well, we were a bit more concerned with developing new toys and making our billions and buying up any competition that might slow down our paths to ever-increasing power. Then around eighteen months ago the prediction numbers began changing, and finally, finally, we sat up and took notice.

"Those of us in this room are the smartest people in the world, in the entire history of the world. Acknowledging this, we began to do something wholly radical: we began talking to one another. Imagine that! And following discussion after discussion, the smartest people in the world came up with a grand solution to this most grave problem: Run the hell away!" A few chuckles. Then total silence.

"But run where? Developing countries? Far too volatile. Europe? A doddering grandpa of a continent slipping on its rubber panties en route to the oldies' village. Remain in America? The Great Bully, now balding with missing teeth, beer gut and rapidly expanding posterior, but still in possession of super destructive bang-bangs and the keen desire to use them, and thus even a bigger target for crazed desert sects than ever? Oh, please."

The spinning earth behind Shoshona slowed to a halt as the Southwest Pacific region called Oceania became full-screen prominent.

"The future of the planet, the great minds in this room decided, is right here on the screen. They're civilized, they speak English, and though I wasn't present at these big brainfests I feel certain it entered into the thinking, they're primarily Caucasian. Not only that, but they've got huge amounts of space available for rent or purchase. Voila!

"Australia, the land of kangaroos, Cate and Crowe, was first choice." The camera zoomed in to the continent shaped like a great gaping frown. "That whole area in the middle is desert. Hardly anybody lives there. It's not used. A few trinkets, some pretty blankets, it's ours! Except Australia for some long time has been a happy satellite of our own government's nastiest, most secret spying efforts. Plus they have heinous American-run private prisons housing thousands of once-hopeful refugees. And, well, the desert. I mean, seriously?" Laughter.

"So we began eyeing those two skinny islands to the southeast." The camera panned across to New Zealand. "Population under five million, a

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third of that in Auckland. Then there's the South Island, what the locals refer to as the Mainland. Take away the cities of Christchurch and Dunedin, you've got what, half a million people? Sure, there's fifty million sheep, and God forbid there should emerge a smartass leader, a clever union organizer..." A lot of laughter.

She took a bottle of water from a nearby stand, had herself a long swig. Me, I was astounded. She had the top slice of world business in the palm of hand. They loved her. Only...who the heck was she? The woman I knew was sexy-gorgeous and smart, you bet, but to be in a position like this? For sure she didn't appear to be a walk-on, a frontpiece hired to run a room while the big boys leaned back and smoked their e-cigars and made their deals. Shoshona was in charge here: how did that happen?

She now looked around the room, first at the assembled, then beyond. At one point she smiled grandly. Not quite facing where I was standing, but pretty damn close. She knew I was here! And she knew in what guise!

"We've been secretly buying up this entire tract of land running from Nelson in the north to Wanaka here in the south. There've been a few problems, of course, most notably one of our purchasing agents, who formerly had been an agent of the Chinese, was murdered by his former bosses. Not to worry, we've got a few more down there with fistfuls of money. We expect to be in full ownership of the sought-after land, and to begin moving in, this time next year. It will be a massive undertaking, as you well might imagine. But before we even contemplate development of our new home – think of it as Silicon Valley South – there are a few issues we need clear up. Mainly, do we come in peace, or do we come in power."

She turned and looked at the screen above her. Kept her gaze upon it. "If Europe is old and senile and America's going through male menopause, New Zealand by contrast is a relatively young country, a teenager: gawky, awkward, hormones shooting all over the place, not quite sure who she/he is nor hopes to be. They love their rugby, their racing, and boy, do they ever love their beer. Basically good folks, the Kiwis, with the best shot of any peoples on the planet to grow up, to become mensches who lead us out of the mess we terrans are in. We've already worked out with their leaders, in super hush-hush meetings, a plan that'll provide jobs and training for every

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single resident in the country who wants to work for us. But...do we go into their home and look upon them as little white natives, pat em on the head but don't get too close to the real work we're doing, there's a good lad or lass. Or do we treat them with genuine humility and humanity. Ah, tricky, that."

A murmur went up in the room. It took a while to settle down. She had made them uncomfortable, which, I sensed, was precisely as she'd meant to.

"Look at us. We have been absolutely certain not to include in our rich, brainy club anybody or any organization which in the very least makes its money in a manner harmful to people, animals or the environment. I would imagine most if not all of us are ultra good food conscious, we meditate, do yoga, for sure keep fit, are politically astute and practice and firmly believe in racial, gender and sexual preference equality. Hey, we're the good guys! But when a major corporation of us good guys hangs out a slogan like 'Do No Evil', does that slogan encompass kissing repressive governments' asses and using advanced technological products to help them spy on their own citizens?" She looked down to her right, at a few people whose body language clearly registered discomfort. Then to her left, a couple, he being white, she Chinese: "Or use our extremely successful social media service, which attracts a billion hits daily, perhaps ninety percent of which are insipid, to sell members' personal data and email addresses to advertisers who then market them rubbish? And, by the way, creates such a stranglehold on its members that quitting said service is about as easy as climbing Everest in a bikini and Birkenstocks?"

"Aw, give us a break," the white male pleaded aloud. His Chinese partner merely covered her mouth and snickered.

Shoshona's eyes panned around the great table, stopping at each person and making a few moments' contact before moving on. "Every single one of you, of us, was raised in a system which incorporates the seven deadlies, and being a pilates-practicing vegan who donates thousands to save the Borneo orangutan does not wholly remove you – us – from that system. But I so strongly suggest that when we climb aboard our twenty-first century ark and leave crumbling North America for the distant shores of the Antipodes, we make every effort to extract ourselves from a system that does...not...work. So here is my primary question to you good people seated here today: *are*

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*we the new saviors or are we the new Nazis?* Thank you so much for your attention.”

She stepped off the small stage and made for the door. She didn't quite get there. The stunned audience, dead silent for some seconds, suddenly rose to their feet and began applauding. And applauding. For the first time, I watched Shoshona lose some composure. As the clapping went on, growing stronger, she morphed into the lovely embarrassed teenager I first laid eyes on at an aborigine community in Australia. Recovering quickly, she made a small bow, turned and slowly left the room.

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“I don't know whether to be super impressed by you or mad as hell. Both, I suppose.”

“Perhaps you slightly underestimated me?”

“Neither under nor over. I know you as clever and cunning, but it's the blatant lying that pisses me off.”

She came over and placed her arms around me, head on my shoulder. “I must admit it was fun. And I hope not too mean. But you had to do what you did by yourself, just a little help from me. You play your cards close to the chest; so do I when necessary.”

“But how –?”

“You think you're the only one Walter talks to? I'm his daughter, dear soul!”

“You use a pendulum?”

“Don't need to. Daddy speaks to me not in words or yes-no answers to my questions, but in sensations. He told me this would happen as he lay on his death bed. We talked, or rather he did, for two hours before his energy drained and he fell asleep, never to wake. He said I had great things in store, not to gain fame or fortune for myself, although that would come quite unexpectedly, and cautioned not to place distractions in the form of ego hopes and desires to prevent the true light from sinking in. I would slowly learn to differentiate between what my confused mind tells me and the messages he would be sending forth. Which for the most part I have, I believe.”

“Amazing.”

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“Yes and no. Is your ability to make yourself invisible not just as amazing?”

“So you know.”

“Walter told me all. Or all he cared for me to know. A lot of what he said I took as the ravings of a dying man. But every single thing he said that day has come true. That dude was supremely connected, even before he passed over.”

“Oh, he most certainly was. Anything else he said about me? Pardon me for asking.”

“Yep. He said you were special, and that I should always look out for you, take care of you without letting you know I was doing it.”

“And the night he died?”

She let out a sigh. She moved away from me, stared down at her nails. “Will you take a drive with me?”

“Now?”

“Mm.”

We made our way to the condo’s underground garage, climbed into her Beamer. The journey took around an hour, into and out of the Valley, continuing south along the coast, then inland until we came to a large attractive single-story building mostly hidden in a lovely wooded area. I followed her out of the car and into the building, where she led me to a reception area. A woman behind the desk smiled broadly upon spotting her, came over and clasped her hands. Shoshona introduced me by name, then the woman asked, “Do you want me to get her?”

“Yes, please.”

We moved to a tastefully appointed lounge. In a few minutes the woman returned with a tall, beautiful, shy young woman in tow, then left us alone. The young woman was the same height as her mother, just a few inches shorter than me. Shoshona introduced her as Walli. We stared at one another the longest while. Then she looked at Shoshona, and something unspoken passed between them. Finally to me, barely a whisper: “Hi, Daddy!”

I was breathless. My eyes began to water and at first I fought it. Then I thought, Screw it, and let go full blast. As did my...daughter. We fused together, two beings sniffing with joy.

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“She’s known about me?”

“Of course. Not by name, or where you lived. Just that you existed, that you were my own daddy’s very best friend, a good guy, and one day, the Buddha willing...”

“But I wasn’t to know.”

“Not that, but the situation was same as with me and Walter: will he accept me? I hated Ellie for years for not connecting us up, but later I saw it was the proper thing to do. You have any idea what it might be like for a young girl to be rejected by her father for whatever reason?”

We were back at her condo several hours later. Walli, it was agreed, would accompany Shoshona to New Zealand when the big move happened, and until then she was most welcome to come spend time with Glenda and me on her school vacations. The school: perhaps the best, certainly the most expensive in this corner of the galaxy. This is where the kids of Silicon Valley’s royals all went, and where Shoshona had made her connections with the upper stratum of Valley geekdom. These were not people who made tons of money without being smart and sensitive. They saw in her early what was there, most likely before she recognized it herself. Which is why they permitted the closed-door criticism, the now-and-then dressing down. She was the mirror on their wall, very much the fairest of them all.

\*

Manu and Commander Ferguson listened patiently. Wait, that’s a lie. Both were impatient as hell, constantly interrupting with questions, as well as a few accusations. I couldn’t tell them I was in the room when the Silicon Valley meeting took place, and I wouldn’t tell them Shoshona was the mother of my newly-found daughter, else they’d be jumping down my throat saying I wasn’t being objective in reporting her spiel. But these were minor points. Basically, the story I told was so improbable, so audacious, that there was no gray area: either it was totally true or one hundred percent bullshit. Both were teetering between the two when finally Manu proclaimed, “I buy it.” To which Ferguson nodded and muttered, “Those bastards at SIS and GCSB. Of course they’ve known this all along. And not a word to us cops.

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At least a word or two like, ‘Look, fellas, some deep secret stuff’s going on here, but don’t fret, we’ve got it all under control’ so we wouldn’t waste time chasing our tails.”

Manu, who appeared totally recuperated from his injuries save for a very slight limp, said, “This case may be closed so far as you two gents are concerned, but not for me. I still don’t know who murdered the Chinaman and why those goons tried so hard to keep me from finding out what there was to find. And you know what? I’m gonna find out!” Both Ferguson and I let out soft groans.

“Yeah, yeah, moan, moan. You,” he pointed a finger in Ferguson’s face, “are either a wimp or a goddamn liar. Shut up and listen to what I have to say! You damn near got me killed and then you throw up your hands and give with the old ‘I vuss only following orderss’ bullshit. Now it’s the other guys’ fault, SIS or ISIS or whoever the fuck those wankers are who won’t let you in on their secrets. Maybe when you take your big bloated head out of your arse and remember you’re still a cop and not a pols’ puppet you’ll be worth something. I’m gonna find out who offed the Chinaman and why. Now, either you can help when I call you for information or you can continue to play with your dick, but if that’s what your lack of cojones has you do, there’s one thing you better be aware of: stay the fuck out of my way.” Whereupon he stormed out of the office. I looked at Ferguson, my inside grin hidden behind a face mocking shock. I rose off my chair and made for the door, keeping an eye on the commander. As I was about to turn and step out the door, I thought I caught a slight wink from the man. But I could’ve been wrong.

\*

The gang of four was now the mob of five. Joining Manu, Boris and me in Glenda’s living room was Rosamund, the lovely woman we had encountered in Manu’s hospital room some weeks back. She was with us now at Glenda’s invitation, but for certain the three of us males were far from put out by her presence. Along with her natural sense of grace and elegance, she showed a quiet persona of intelligence and reliability. Plus, a new voice was desperately needed. We had grown stale, and we all knew it.

I played for them the audio of Shoshona’s talk at the Silicon Valley



get-together, which she had downloaded onto my smartphone. We listened without a murmur. When the recording finished, Rosamund asked, “Can you play it again, please.” The third time it was played, the room following the conclusion was dead silent for the best part of a minute.

“Okay,” I said finally. “Thoughts.” Nobody said a thing for some time.

“Mate,” Manu began, looking not at me but at the wall behind where I sat, “when you were telling this tale to me and the commander, you described the vid playing on the screen behind her. You also laid out pretty clearly the description of the people sitting at that big table. I’ve interviewed a million witnesses during my time. What you told us wasn’t second-hand info. You were in that room, weren’t you?” I smiled. “I would bet my pension, if they’re still willing to let me have it, you didn’t get a special invite. And with all the amazing security they must’ve had operating...”

I threw out my arms, held my hands palms up. “You have your ways, I have mine. Can’t you let it rest at that?”

“Sure, sure. Maybe you make yourself tiny as an ant and crawl into places.” Next to me, Boris shifted just slightly on his chair. “How you do what you do, as I’ve mentioned in the past, is not important. What is important, you’re really fond of this Shoshona babe—”

“Woman, not a babe.” This from Rosamund, softly.

“— woman, right. You sure she’s telling the truth? Certain you’re not in some way, not saying purposely, understand, protecting her?”

“Ninety percent sure on the first thing, hundred on the second.”

“Okay. Good. What I figured.”

“May I ask a question?” Rosamund. We turned our attention her way. “There are two points here I’m not clear about: she claimed they knew the Chinese killed Mr. Ling, or had him killed. And it has been said, by the police here, I believe, that the money sent to Manu from the bank in Hong Kong came not by the Chinese, either the government or private interests, rather by Americans. Have we checked out these assertions? Do we know them for certain?”

The body language in the room was telling. Nobody looked directly at anybody else; Manu, for his part, presented himself a comical Basil Fawltly-like forehead thwack. “Jesus Kee-ryst,” he said. “Me, the great detective. I’m more like Clouseau than Poirot.” Finally Boris spoke up:

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“What strikes me here is we’re dealing with mega billions, more likely trillions of dollars. Money like that, and the power it creates, does not walk willingly into the sunset, as these people appear to be doing. Yes, I know: they’re convinced of imminent calamity, or calamities, as I sense they’re as nervous of the political instability of remaining on American soil as much as of earthquakes and tsunamis. As they are largely leftwing people running these operations, I wouldn’t imagine the Republican controlled Congress being too put out to see them leave the country. But left and right are largely antiquated concepts. The primary commodity of these people is not a product as we know it, is not a service as we normally define such. It is intelligence, an odious concept in that the seekers and gatherers sift a zillion bits of data hoping to clean a single transactionable morsel, and do not care an amoeba’s worth whom they’re stealing it from. Their only concern is speed: how fast to grab, how fast to define, how much to sell it for. And the competition here is fierce!” He turned to me. “You trust Shoshona. But can you be certain that her being placed in a position as their spokesperson has not made her lightheaded, perhaps just a little? From what we heard here, what I heard, she’s a cheerleader for the team. The team that can do no wrong, despite her jokey asides concerning a few of them.”

Rosamund nodded and made a sound of concurrence. “Exactly what I was thinking. My gut feeling as I listened was that if there’s something stinky at all here, it’s within those who were assembled.”

“Now we’re cooking,” said Manu.

“May I ask one more question?” Rosamund wondered. “I’ve been trying to get the wording straight in my head as I do not in any way wish to cause bad feeling.” No-no, we all said. Ask away. She looked at the ceiling, looked at the floor. “How do we know,” she paused, took a breath, “how can we be absolutely certain that the entity you know as Walter does not lie.”

Absolute dead silence. A shiver literally crawled up my spine. I was about to come to my best friend’s defense when Boris responded before me.

“And you can’t ask Walter,” he noted, smiling, “because if indeed he does lie, wouldn’t he lie in answer to that question?” Boris the kid with a new conundrum toy. “Rosamund, darling, please believe that I have held this as a possibility since our friend here first introduced me to his no-longer-

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corporeal offsider. My background has taught me caution, my mother taught me paranoia, how could I not be wary? The Walter being may well be an agent from the Dog Star telling us truth after truth until we're wholly convinced of his veracity, then comes a matter of vast import and *chop!* Concerning these dialogues with a dead friend, a grain of Himalayan pink salt need be taken. But if he is, our Walter, a sinister misinformationist, then the devil exists, Hades, the river Styx, the eighty-seven virgins, the Bardo and all the other fairy tales that religions have conjured up for us scared, gullible mortals. In which case I would contemplate suicide except I should then encounter boogiepeople till the end of eternity. So, my dear, even the hardened cynic in me has by necessity accepted that Walter is real and the role he has taken on in regards to us is one of honest and genuine service."

Me, I could've kissed the old boy on his bald scaly head.

"I've got a few ideas from what we've said here, only what we need is a geek. Every detective book I read, the main character always has a buddy who's a geek, generally some fat kid with zits, lives in his mother's basement and eats nothing but Twinkies. Anybody know such a geek?"

"No, but would you instead settle for a gorgeous babe, excuse me, a beautiful female with graceful fingers and sparkling eyes?"

I looked at Manu, quickly panned around to Rosamund. Her face having turned from tan to red, she was staring with wan smile at her lap. "True?" I asked.

"Lady's a natural. Not a day's worth of tuition, there ain't nuthin she can't do with a computer."

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I put off contact for some days. It's a thing I've always done: when afraid of something, or someone, instead of hitching my belt and diving right in, I allow time to intervene, knowing damn well this won't make things easier. Prior to making the connection, I got instructions from Rosamund. "I've done all I can to provide a clear channel, but we're up against the very best, so no guarantees. If at any time a small red circle appears in the upper right corner of the screen, it means you're being observed. This happens, don't panic, and don't switch off. Just change the tone of the conversation. You're talking to the mother of your daughter, after all."

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“Happy families, then.”

“Exactly.”

No small red circles appeared to mar Shoshona’s beautiful face, and Shoshona’s beautiful face at no time screwed itself up in the rage I half anticipated. When I explained what I – what we – wanted, she became immediately business-like: “I’ll look into it right away. I don’t like being duped, and I certainly don’t like feeling I’ve been a breathless fan of Valley celebs. Love you for setting me straight.” We exchanged kisses and signed off. I could feel the sweat in my armpits. What a wuss.

Meantime, it was business as usual. People kept losing stuff, pets kept going missing, folks still got sick and didn’t trust their doctors. Manu got a fairly large contract from an insurance company, which I actually welcomed helping with as it took my attention away from the whole crazy matter of who killed Ling and whether anything funny was going on with the Silicon Valley thing. It was nearly two weeks later that Shoshona got in touch. Almost at once, a small red circle appeared in the upper right corner of the laptop’s screen.

“You know what we talked about last time,” she began.

“About whether Walli needs to be doing more work in the classics? I really hope you talked to people at that fancy school.”

She stumbled just slightly before recovering like a pro. “They don’t agree, and tell the truth neither do I. Other than that, what you suggested about more math and science? I have looked into it, and yeah, you’re definitely spot on there.”

“Reckon I should come up, have a talk with her.”

“She’d be stoked to see you. Just go easy on the kid, okay?”

I informed the crew. Manu said, “I’m going with you.”

I resisted, but only slightly. “Keep in mind you’ll be in another country, one that doesn’t take too kindly to foreign cops coming into their nest. Plus the fact you’re no longer a cop, and flashing a New Zealand private detective’s badge will surely have them all swooning there.”

“No worries. I had an idea this would happen so made plans to take time off to do a little traveling. I’ll give Ferguson a call and have him –”

“No.”

“What, no. He’s got some decent contacts with high level cops in the Bay Area, and he owes me bigtime –”

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“Think, man, think. Those geeks have eyes and ears everywhere. She let us know something definitely is going on, so let’s put on our softest shoes and tippytoe around up there.”

He made a face. “Never let me have any fun,” he muttered as he walked away.

\*

Manu was doing a decent impersonation of Wily E. Coyote, eyes out on stalks, tongue rolling down to the floor. “She’s your daughter?” he whispered.

“No. Told you. She’s Walter’s daughter. And the mother of my daughter.”

He finally focused enough to turn my way. “Wait. That makes you and Walter...”

“See, Walter was transgender. He and Shoshona were in a gay relationship. I’m their secret love child. Then I had sex with my mother and our resultant daughter had cosmic sex with Walter after he died, which makes –”

“Aw, hell with you. Except, mate, she’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on. D’you reckon she’d, y’know? I mean, I’m same age as you and twice as good looking –”

“And then there’s Rosamund.”

“That’s there. This is here. Plus, Rosamund and I don’t have sex. Well, not a lot of it, not anymore.”

“Jesus, I never should’ve agreed to let you come with me.”

“Hey, it’s still a free country!”

Shoshona reappeared from the kitchen carrying a tray of coffees and Danish. “You boys talking about little ol’ me?”

“Yeah. Manu was just commenting that your ass looks bigger than last time he saw you.”

“I did not say that! Besides, I’ve never seen it, her, before.”

“Maybe he said glass and you misheard him. After all, one’s hearing at your age...”

“Oh, god, you two are something else.”

We paused a bit in our teenage banter to take some nosh. “Here’s what I’ve learned,” she said, daintily wiping the corners of her mouth with a napkin that most likely cost more than everything I was wearing. “Supposedly –

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and keep that word in mind all through what I'm going to tell you because I haven't been able to prove any of it – there's a renegade in the consortium. Name of Montrose. A genius amongst the geniuses, but a weirdo. Employed by Google for a time. Designed a gadget you could use to read people's minds. His idea was to use it for what Google saw as not-nice purposes. They felt he was too loose a cannon, and fired him. They were going to destroy everything he did there, but somehow he took it all with when he left. Which I find really hard to believe knowing their security. The guy tried going with a few other Valley firms, but apparently he was too hot to handle. The Chinaman, Ling, learned about him when he tried to get Ling to buy him property in New Zealand, but Ling just wanted his mind-reading gadget, and threatened to dob him in to the Chinese, so Montrose had him killed."

"Christ, that's a plot too bizarre even for a B movie."

"Agreed. Montrose himself isn't saying much. When I spoke to him –"

"You spoke to him? In person?"

"Sure. He was twirling his mustache and drooling, of course, but I grabbed hold of his horns and shook him until some words spilled out."

"So this guy's around here some place."

"Yes, Manu. Undoubtedly hanging upside down from a beam in his attic as we speak."

"Will he be able to read my mind?"

"Well, I certainly can. And while I appreciate your show of attention, you dear man, if it will serve to calm you down I shall be happy to change into my Michelin man costume."

"Aw. Sorry. Sorry. It's just..."

"You do have women in your lovely country, yes?"

"Yeah, but –"

"You really oughta see his dolly, Sho. Looks like you will in ten years, you stay out of the sun and lay off the carbs."

"You say the nicest things, father of my daughter. Now shall we go visit the man who's too evil for the evil empire?"

\*

Baruch Montrose was tall and lean with a mop of curly light brown hair,

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sharp nose upon which rimless glasses sat and lips so thin they were hardly lips at all. He had all the nasty look and feel of the Pillsbury Doughboy. He reminded me of somebody, but I couldn't think who.

His small house was tidy as a pin. There was no sign of any deranged-geek apparatus, no Boris Karloff-style electrodes leading up to a transom in the ceiling, no spare brain parts lying about. Dude and his environment were disarmingly normal.

"I have no desire to engage in a slinging match with the consortium," he began in a soft, somewhat high-pitched voice. "And I won't defend myself against any of their accusations other than to say I haven't heard of a single charge that's anywhere near the truth. Best thing, I suppose, is to tell you of the –" he looked straight at Manu, who was looking daggers at him "– in your people's language, the *whakapapa* of the Buddha machine."

"The what machine?" Manu.

"In time." He raised a cautioning hand.

"And fuckapoppa?" This from Shoshona. "What the hell?"

Montrose smiled. "Ask Manu later. Since the 1960s," he went on, "science has been studying the rhythms of the brain. Basically there are four main brain waves, ranging along a scale of cycles per second, which are called hertz. They run from zero to above thirty: zero to four is labeled delta; four to seven, theta; seven to thirteen, alpha, and above that is the beta area. When you're asleep, you go through what's known as a sleep spindle, from thirteen down to zero and back up again to thirteen. This over a period of around ninety minutes. You dream in alpha, and have rapid eye movement, which you know as REMs, in that state. Very, very little is known about the sleep state, despite all the years of fairly close study. When you're awake, you spend most of your brain time in beta. The crazier you are, meaning stressed, anxious, the higher you show in the beta range. Panic is way, way up there, well above the normal range I've mentioned.

"In the early days of brain wave study, you had electrodes either implanted or glued to your scalp to gauge your rhythms through a device known as an electroencephalogram. In the '70s, machines were devised whereby your brain wave state could be detected from a distance without your being aware. Question: why would anybody want to know what brain state you were in?" He looked around, each of us in turn.

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“So they could sell us shit.” Shoshona.

He laughed. “That, too. But mainly for control. You’re in the alpha state, especially for long periods of time, as during meditation, say, you are by and large thinking for yourself. Controllers don’t like that. They want you in beta, the more stressed the better, whereupon you are more susceptible to what they want you to be thinking. And yes, as you say, to sell you shit.”

“So a truck could roll down your street –”

“Or a satellite several miles up –”

Montrose nodded. “Since the early days, these machines have become more and more sophisticated, as you might imagine. Not only could they now record your brain wave state –”

“They could alter it to suit their purposes.”

More dead silence. Guy had our full and rapt attention.

“So you developed one that could read our thoughts and intentions.” This from Manu. “So, what, you can tell if we’re thinking about voting for frick, whereupon you can zap us to vote for frack?”

“Close, but just a bit off-track. The idea of my Buddha machine is to get you completely in touch with your true thinking. Not theirs; yours. And by that I mean the highest, purest, original you. Consider that we are constantly, and by that I mean every single moment, bombarded with millions – yes, millions – of bits of information. Most by far are ignored by our conscious self; yet, these bits pervade and stick in our subconscious minds, and react when something external triggers them.”

“The basis of all advertising.”

“And mind control.”

“The Buddha machine, when activated by you, lets you know where your head is, so to speak, at that very moment; to register how far off your true self you are, enables you to focus on that self-truth and thereby return to that perfect state of your being despite any outside distraction, whether standard advertising, more advanced brainwashing, threats, even an actual state of devastation going on around you.”

“Holy shit – that’s about as anti-American as you can get!”

“So why didn’t Google and the others suck it up like warm milk to a kitten?”

“Because, fellas,” Shoshona explained, as to a couple of children, “despite



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coming off as the great gadgeteering mother's little helper to humankind, their mission is to go the opposite way. These days, most of their work has to do with helping governments, and their untold agencies, combat terrorism –"

"Or incite terrorism."

"– and little with actually helping us achieve our true states of being."

"So why did you have the Chinaman killed?"

"Whoa, Nellie!" I reacted. "And when did you stop beating your wife, Herr Montrose? Jesus, Manu, you sure know how to stick a pin in a party balloon!"

The three of us turned to the geek in the room. He appeared totally unfazed; wore a bit of a smile, actually. "Permit me to tell you about 'the Chinaman', as you call him. Ling Bo-Ping was not merely a property buyer, first for the Chinese, then the Silicon Valley people. He was a brilliant man, a beautiful soul, a billionaire on his own. His only problem was himself: he smoked two packs a day, loved spicy food and grog, never exercised. We met after I was proclaimed a pariah by the consortium. That alone, he said, inspired him to seek me out."

"He sought *you* out?"

"I was broke, and as such was denied the opportunity to perfect my invention. Mainly it was finished by the time we met, but I wouldn't let anybody use it until all the kinks were a hundred percent worked out. But Mr. Ling kept after me and after me. I explained all the negative possibilities, but he just laughed. 'Look at me!' he cried. 'I'm a living wreck! What possible harm can that thing do to a living wreck?'"

"I was really nervous when I attached him to it. I figured a couple minutes at most; he demanded I leave him for more than an hour. When he came out of the state it had put him in, he was in tears. He said something, but so quietly I had to ask him a few times to repeat it. Finally I heard, 'I am the Buddha!' Meaning, he explained a bit later, that he had achieved his own Buddha state, his truest state of being. I hadn't known till then that Ling Bo-Ping had been a lifelong Buddhist, but was forced to keep it secret under the communist regime."

Good lord, I thought. First Walter, then Santi, now Ling!

Montrose continued: "He's the one termed it the Buddha machine, first in jest, then for real. He bought me a beautiful tract of land south of Nelson

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in New Zealand, gave me scads of money, which I at first refused, kept refusing. But he said that so much money was going into the bad stuff, as he called it, the very least he could do was to put some of his wealth into good. He often quoted the ‘give a man a fish’ line, claiming what I was doing was teaching humanity how to fish.”

“That’s very – what’s the word? – magnanimous, but again I ask you, why did you have him killed?”

“You really think I would? After all I’m telling you?” Montrose offered Manu a sympathetic smile. “Maybe you should check out the other guys. The ones who hoped to stop me by stopping Mr. Ling from supporting me. And they, well, really they had no intention of killing the man. They just wanted to bully him into backing off. But this man had been through the worst scenario possible with Mao and the Red Guard. Spent years shoveling shit thousands of miles from his family, he told me, but wouldn’t allow his spirit to be broken. Maybe he just told them to sod off, maybe he actually punched one of them, I have no idea. There must’ve been a tussle, and his heart gave out.”

“How the hell you know this?” Manu said accusingly. “There was no autopsy.”

“Not in New Zealand. The Chinese demanded his body be sent back immediately without any cutting. The Chinese then autopsied him.”

“And you know this how? The Chinese mailed you the results?”

“In a sense, yes. I hacked their site.”

“Darling man,” Shoshona said softly, “our friend here is a major league, all-star, hall of fame, top of the pops geek. He’s been known to hack the best hackers in the world.”

“Which I do now and then only to plead with them to use their skills for the common good. Haven’t had much luck there, I’m afraid.”

“All right, all right. But the Chinese agents who contacted me, and gave me money. And the money sent from Hong Kong.”

“Me. I sent them to you. They were indeed agents for the Chinese government, but they were also dear friends of Ling’s. He had given me their names in case I ever needed help if he wasn’t around. Once they’d been to Auckland, working freelance for me, I had them disappear in a hurry back into their system so they wouldn’t get in any trouble. And the money

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was my money. I should say Mr. Ling's money, to be honest. I can show you receipts for both transactions.”

“Wow. I mean, just...wow. If all this is on the level – okay, you two, just quiet down for a second – if you're telling it as it really was, I didn't do much of a job for you. Plus I got my arse kicked in the process.”

“Hey, I'm happy,” Montrose replied. “Not about your getting hurt, surely, but because the two goons got caught and are in prison, although likely not for long, but mostly because the message has been received by the Valley consortium that they're not above the law, and they just can't push people around and get away with it.”

The three of us left there feeling winded, overloaded with information. Back at Shoshona's, I whipped out the crystal (which I hadn't used very much recently because I'd got pissed off with all the I-refuse-to-answers). Every question I now asked, no matter how purposely convoluted I expressed it, received a response corroborating Montrose's story. As I was doing this it struck me who the man reminded me of: he could've passed for Edward Snowden's brother. They stamp these characters out of a mold?

\*

The months passed. The world was getting crazier. Terrorists were blowing up *our* innocent civilians everywhere, and the West dutifully responded by bombing *their* innocent civilians to smithereens. Wars pockmarked the globe, hate soared through the roof, politicians barked, the media danced to the tune and celebrities thoughtfully offered sage messages of caution and compassion.

Building began quietly in the South Island. Somewhere down there, Buddha machines were coming slowly off the assembly line. Latest figure from Montrose was in the hundreds. Only seven and a half billion to go and everything would be set to rights.

Glenda and my relationship had progressed from partners to really good friends who spent considerable time together. And considerable time apart. We both liked it that way. And I still had thoughts about the aborigine community in Australia.

The Spook&Ghost train was rolling along steadily on smooth rails and

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looked to keep on rolling that way. Then one fine day, totally out of the blue...

Ah, but that's another story.

## **AFTER-WORD**

*Spook here. Last heard from, you'll remember, I was dead. Still am. Can't get no deader. Yet in so many ways I'm far more alive than ever. That's coz I don't gotta be concerned with all the dumb hangups I had when I was human. Worried will some hot babe think I'm cool, or do I gotta prove myself to that bunch of tough studs hanging on the corner. Biggest hangup, though, was believing I was stupid. No more.*

*Let me run through quick what it's like on this side of the ledger. Better yet, what it's NOT like: No such nonsense as heaven and hell. That's just religious fear-mongering bullshit. Everybody, the good, the bad, the ugliest, comes straight here. Also no reward or punishment for what you mighta done, you was in the body. There's a bit of judgment, yeah, only it's you yourself does it, nobody else.*

*What happens, soon as you pass over you're greeted by a committee, friends and relatives if you got em here, if not, just a buncha nice folks. They put on their earthly bodies (that is, the very prettiest of their earthly bodies; I mean, who wants to look old and wrinkled when greeting a dear friend or kin?), take you around, familiarize you with the lay of the land, so to speak.*

*Once you recover from the shock of your transfer, you're handed over to the care of trained counsellors, who gently, very gently, take you under wing (joke, folks; no angels hereabouts). They sit you in a pleasant place ('sit' and 'place' are figures of speech) where you review core moments of your recently departed existence. After a time, the immediate emotions you go through, specifically being stupefied by your mortal silliness and feeling shame over any yuk you mighta done, fade away and mostly you just laugh yo ass off at all the dumb-shit antics you got up to as a human being.*

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*When you settle in (no hurry – you got eternity), the deal here is pretty cool. Think of the happiest you've ever been. Now, times that by a couple thousand, and that's what we have here twenty-four/seven. (Except there is no tw- aw, you get it.) You mean, it's all good, Walter my man? Uhhh, well, not totally. There are some rules you gotta follow – I'll get to them in a minute. And, okay, there are a few million assholes among the mega-billion souls. But they just asshole amongst themselves, cause no harm or hassle, and since the place is infinite, you can avoid em, no sweat.*

*On the other hand, figure the smartest bods what ever lived all hang out here. And there be discussions going on all the time; everybody free to sit in, even participate. Imagine having a pow-wow with Socrates or Artie Schopenhauer. Listening to newly-composed music by Mozart and John Lennon. Like old movies? Got every single one.*

*See, what you are when you don't have a body is one hundred percent pure Mind. Enjoy reading? Our 'library' has every sentence every written. In every language. Which your Mind instantly translates. Take your time and enjoy Dylan Thomas or absorb all the classics in a moment.*

*Thinking, too, is different from what you been used to. Maybe, being a smarty, you can think two, three thoughts same time, right? Multi-tasking, y'all calls it. Here, you can hold a few thousand thoughts in your Mind, all working at once.*

*We do spend an appreciable amount of time in what we refer to as the 'zone'. Sorta like a super-heavy state of contemplation. Even then, other parts of the Mind can wander free to play. Now, all this thinking and not a whole lot of doing, yeah, it can get a bit boring. Often when this happens, I reflect on my most recent being.*

*Of all my corporeal lives, I do believe I enjoyed being Walter the Spook the most. Had me a load of fun. So, you may wonder, if I liked my past life that much, and it's a tad boring here, wouldn't I choose to return to the material world? Rules say unh-uh: I done all my necessary cycles (nearly two hundred), cleaned up all my shit, got my diploma. So here I remain. But truth be told, I wouldn't go back if I could. No way, man. Had me enough of that kind of crazy.*

*Another rule is no contact with you mortals. So those Ouija board*

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*and séance numbers? Sheeet. There are rare exceptions, and it so happens I'm one of them.*

*See, in the earliest days of earth as home for our species there was frequent interaction between living and dead. And material beings understood the dynamics. So no big deal one of us floating down, engaging in talk and a meal, maybe a little nookie with a loved one. (You could take human form – sorta Rent-a-Body – for a brief time.) But after several thousand years of this, mortals began getting goofy when religion done reared its ugly head. And those in bodies took to viewing those without bodies not as they themselves in different form, but – yep, you guessed it – gods. And we said to them, Yo, babe, I ain't no goddamn god, I yo granmomma, now get off yo knees and let's take a stroll down by the river before it gets dark and I gotta shoot off home! Unh-uh, you're gods! they insisted. Preacher man yonder tells us so. Hallefuckinlujah, praise de lawd! Well shit, ever try reasoning with somebody got religion shoved up they ass? So it was decided to dispense with fraternization with you dummies, figuring you'll get the message when y'all make it over this way. (As I said, the rules are bent here and there, and a bit of interaction going down; I'll get round to regaling y'all about one such situation in a minute.)*

*Basically, there are two camps here; two schools of thought. There are those who couldn't care less what's happening back on earth, and those very much concerned. Mostly, the ones who want no part of the dreck you're making of your sweet ol planet are lifers here. Done there, been that. And the non-bods who want to help with the mess you're making generally will be headed back. (And by the way, nobody is assigned a situation in which to reincarnate. You do the selecting all by your ownself.) But this is not an exclusive division. Me, for example. Though I'm here for the long haul, I still care about you poor slobs, want to do something to steer y'all onto the path civilization needs to be taking. (The Buddha tells me I gotta practise detachment a little more. Yeah, well.)*

*Knowing this, a few Overlords – wait, maybe I shouldn'ta used that word. Oh, what the heck, no harm done. See, a term like Overlord might lead you to believe there's a hierarchy here. Well there kinda is, but only*

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*in the tiniest way. Overlords aren't better than you, can't order you to do something you don't want to; it don't work that way. Mainly they the truly smart souls, the most brilliant thinkers. An Overlord might take you aside, explain something that makes so much sense, is so perfect in its delineation, so beautifully wise, it's like an aha! bell going off in your head. We love em, and, rightly speaking, it's what we gravitate towards becoming.*

*Anyway, a few approached me one 'day' and said they understood my continuing love and concern for humanity. (They knew this coz everything is known here; privacy, secrets, just do not exist, nor do you care for them to exist. Yeah, I know: weird at first, but you get used to it, and in truth total openness provides a whale of relief.) The Overlords asked whether I would like to contribute in a way might be of benefit to y'all. Absolute, zoot! Which is why I've been in touch with Ghost, through his silly-ass crystal pendulum, and with my beautiful daughter Shoshona by way of pure thought and feeling. Will my efforts do any good? Sigh.*

*I told you everyone here knows everything, right? Not quite true. We know everything that was, and everything that is. Past and present. About things that will be, the future, not so much. In general, as in trends of human behaviour, yeah, but so far as specifics, we only know probabilities. And even these can be scratched out by events that are unexpected, even to us, what know damn near everything. It's tricky. The part about whether civilization will survive, at this point in (your) time? Fifty-fifty. Gonna be a race to the finish between good and no-good, kids.*

*Before I sign off, I promised you a story. A true story. (Well, this entire book is a true story, so of course mine is as well.)*

*Ghost has already explained that New Zealand, especially the South Island, holds a very special place in the future of humankind. The Maori, who have an affinity with the land, understand this. But non-Maori, heads more into money and possessions and shit, may have a harder time buying what I'm gonna tell you here. I call it*



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### One Day A Year

Not much traffic on the road today. The few cars which passed, the drivers had given him the index finger pointing sideways, meaning they were only going a short ways down the road, no sense picking you up. Which was far more appreciated than the middle finger pointing up. He had received a few of those during his hitching experience here in New Zealand, mostly around Auckland, and entirely in the North Island. People here in the South were far more hospitable. Or maybe they just craved contact with outsiders a little more.

It would have been simpler, of course, to walk the few kilometres to the main road and hitch from there. But when he came down off the beautiful track he'd been tramping for some days, he wanted to get back into civilization gradually, which meant hitching the skinny red lines on his smartphone's Google map directory instead of the thicker ones; hitting small towns and villages where, he had been told early in his NZ experience, the 'real Kiwis' lived. That is, the ones who hadn't (yet) been corrupted by the impersonal modern ways of the twenty-first century.

It was a pleasant late summer's day, moderately cool and a bit of wind but not uncomfortable, so standing there on a small rise amidst a patch of trees wasn't the worst place in the world a guy might be. He had an old paperback found in one of the track's huts, and he now sat on a large rock reading until the sound of an approaching vehicle could be heard, whereupon he would stand, smile and hang out a thumb, waving as the driver passed, pointing his index finger sideways.

He suddenly remembered the tin whistle in his pack, took it out, began playing tunes that always seemed to be hanging out in the corners of his head. And wouldn't you know it, halfway through Old Man River, his favorite gospel song, a car came by. He didn't stop playing, though he did take his right hand off the lower three holes to wave, but the guy passed right by without even the sideways index finger. So he continued on with *Tote that barge, lift that bale, get a little drunk and you land* – Really getting into it now, which is why he hadn't heard the horn at first. What he heard, he thought, was a discordant note, wondering did that

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come out of me? when it sounded again. He looked to his left and saw the car that'd just passed had stopped maybe twenty-five meters down the road. He couldn't see the driver, but what he did see was an arm hanging out the window, the attached hand waving. All riiight, finally!

He hoisted his heavy pack onto the right shoulder and slowly jogged to where the car sat idling. He approached on the left side, bent down and peeked in the window. There was only the driver, an older male. Were it more than one male, he might have turned down the offer. It didn't happen often in this country, but in the hitching business, you always protected yourself. Two males, especially, say, under fifty, unless you really liked the look of them, unh-uh.

This chap was well over fifty, so no problem with that. Another thing he looked for was the presence of a bible. Once before, few weeks back, he'd got a lift from a solo male who had a bible on the seat next to him. It was pissing down rain, and he was happy to get in out of the wet. But the guy was a first-class bible bore, and for some hours he was a captive audience. Normally he could put his mind in neutral, replay old movies on his inner screen, let the driver talk all the shit he wanted. For some reason this particular jackass got into his head and wouldn't let go. A few times he thought about asking the guy to pull over, let him out, but the rain was coming down in sheets, and after weighing up his options he chose dry and biblical incarceration to wet and silent freedom.

As this one was an older vehicle, which obviously didn't have automatic windows the driver could operate, he opened the door wide enough the man might get a look at him. This was always a bit of a dance. He'd tell the driver where he was heading, driver'd reply he was only going, ta-ta ta-ta, he'd hop in or he wouldn't. Here, he didn't think it mattered, just so long as he got out of this place, lovely as it was, else he might be stuck here forever. When an agreement was settled, he opened the door all the way, then went to drop his pack on the back seat. The driver suggested the boot (trunk) might be a better idea, but he just smiled and said that's okay, the back seat will be fine. Again, it had never happened, but he'd heard of instances where the hitchee places his bag in the boot, slams down the lid, and immediately the driver speeds off. And though he carried everything of value on his person,

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passport, money, smartphone, journal, to lose your pack when you're in the middle of nowhere is not a terribly pleasant experience.

Once inside the car, as always he offered his name and a hand to shake. The driver said his name was Morrie, then shifted gears and away they went. The next phase generally was your standard feeling-out process: where you from, what do you do, how long have you been in the country, how do you find New Zealand. He tried not to be smartass in these dialogues. Once he couldn't help himself and pulled the old line to the last-asked with, Oh, you just hang a sharp left at Fiji. That particular driver either didn't hear him right, didn't understand that he'd made a sort-of joke, or was clever enough to top this smartass remark with his own inspired sense of playing straight-faced dumb. The driver had said, in dead seriousness: Fiji? You come from Fiji? You fellas used to play bloody good rugby, but lately... This was before he had discovered rugby, not Christianity, was the NZ national religion.

Morrie was quite pleasant and didn't seem to care where he was from, what he did, or how he happened to be in New Zealand. Refreshing. The man did ask whether he was a reader, and what he read. Anything that's well written and not beyond my mental capacity, he replied. Morrie smiled, as the response appeared to satisfy his curiosity.

"I only ask because not many people these days are readers. Not real readers. Me, I'm old school, I guess. I like to get my nose into a good book, bigger the book the better. Love to get lost in a story. Biographies mostly, but give me a good detective yarn, I'm in heaven. I'm lucky, I suppose. I grew up before telly got a foothold here, so as a kid I listened to radio drama. Had to form your own pictures, create the characters' faces and the environment around them just from the sound of some actors' voices. For me, it was like going to an imagery gym, really developed the mental picture-making muscles. Sparked my curiosity as well. I can remember lying in bed at night listening to those voices, spellbound, not a thought in my head besides being right there with the characters and their situations. Don't like to sound as though the good old days were better than now, but I do believe the new technology gives people too much information, cuts down on folks creating their own pictures."

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“Never thought of it that way, but I suppose you’re right. Wasn’t it Einstein said imagination is better than knowledge?”

Morrie turned his head and gave his rider an appreciative look. “You know, I have that very quote on the wall above my fireplace. I wouldn’t have thought –”

“What?”

“Oh my. I just realized I’m showing an old fella’s prejudice. Heck, why shouldn’t you be as curious as me?”

“Well, Google and the like, Wikipedia, are terrific, I believe. But only if you use them as tools, not the be all and end all. I have to fight with myself not to get too lazy, let the internet do my thinking for me.”

“If it’s thinking at all. Do you wonder about things like life and death and god and the hereafter? I don’t mean in the religious sense. But whether they in fact exist, and is there meaning to it all?”

“Probably not as much as I should, I suppose. This is why I strap on the backpack and go off for months at a time. It’s when I realize the walls of my mind are closing in on me. Traipsing around in a foreign place, everything so fresh and different I’m forced to pay attention, seems to blow those walls back and give me breathing space.”

Morrie laughed. “I like that.”

They drove for several minutes without a word. “Are you able to, as they say, think outside the box? What I mean is, if somebody brought up, say, UFOs, do you immediately jump in and either cry *rubbish!*, or say yes, and the US government is hiding captive aliens at Roswell?”

“Nah. I guess I usually say maybe. I do need some data before I form an opinion. Sometimes I think I ought to take more of a stand on certain things. But I just don’t know enough to even be halfway certain.”

“And life after death?”

“Boy, that’s the biggie, isn’t it. I can’t see everything ending when this body finally gives up the ghost. But other than viewing religion as a reason to hate others and start wars –. Ah look, I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to offend you in any way.”

“Not at all, not at all,” Morrie replied. “I will say organized religion, or maybe the proper word would be spirituality, can also be something

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to keep the billions of poor wretches of the world from just plain giving up. I reckon civilization has always been a tad insane. Sometimes I think our brains were wired wrong from the get-go, or humankind took a wrong turn somewhere along the path of evolution, but life is really becoming a horror for so many in the world today. For most people, if not for us all, having something of substance to believe in is definitely on the plus side.”

The younger man suddenly grew wary this might be the jumping off point for a sermon, and in a minute Morrie would reach over and pull a few pamphlets out of the glove box. But neither happened. Instead, he looked kindly at his hitchee and asked, “You in any hurry?”

“Well, I would like to be home by next Christmas.” Morrie chuckled at that.

“What I was wondering, if you have the time, I’d like to take you a bit out of your way, over to a village not far from here, meet some people you might find interesting.”

“Uhh, this isn’t a prayer meeting, or something?”

“Nope. Nor is it the New Zealand chapter of your KKK. Just a delightful old couple I know and would like for you to meet.” He glanced at his watch. “This is a special day for them, and maybe it would be of interest for you to be there, share it with them.”

“Well, yeah, sure. Don’t see why not.”

“Fine. Now, without getting all mysterious about it,” Morrie said, a bit more seriously, “may I ask that you simply observe without asking questions? When we get back on the road after leaving there, you can ask me anything you want, I’ll try my best to answer.”

“Wow, sounds, I don’t know, am I going to be given a glass of dosed wine, wake to find myself hanging upside down in the basement next to all the others come before me?”

“Arsenic and Old Lace, eh. Teddy Roosevelt charging up the stairs while the two old sisters sweet talk Cary Grant. Loved that movie. But see, one of the advantages to being in New Zealand is houses don’t have basements here.”

“Ah, what the heck. You only live once. Except if you’re Buddhist, of course.”

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“Good. And again, eyes and ears open; mouth, for the most part, closed.”

A few kilometres along Morrie made a left onto a dirt road, what the Kiwis called ‘metalled’, that was even narrower than the one they’d been on. The Yank took out his smartphone, but the new road must have been so insignificant Google maps didn’t even show it. Funny thing was, he didn’t feel the slightest bit apprehensive. Besides, he reckoned, isn’t this why I came to this country, to find the real people who were rapidly phasing out of existence? Lead on, McDuff!

They drove maybe fifteen or twenty minutes when a village seemed to appear out of nowhere. Small, looked-after houses, well cared for lawns. Your prototype NZ dairy which stocked everything, the petrol station, butchery. A car passed slowly and Morrie and the other driver exchanged a wave.

“Someone you know?”

“Not really. It’s just sort of tradition in small places to say giddy to another driver. I often wonder just where the line is drawn, where a road becomes sparsely frequented enough for this to happen. But you don’t really think about it. The other driver waves, you wave back. Here’s our place, just up ahead.” Morrie pulled up and parked on the verge.

When they got out he looked at his bag in the back, then over to where Morrie was standing. “Look, I’ll lock if you want, but I can assure you –”

“No, it’s okay. Really. Force of habit when you’re traveling.” Following a moment’s hesitation, Morrie did lock the car. Didn’t make a big thing out of doing so, nonetheless his rider felt a bit guilty.

They walked up the pebbled drive. There was a screen door, a rarity in these parts, and behind it the front door was wide open. Morrie knocked lightly, waited, then again. Through the screen they could see a small older woman approach. She seemed hesitant, her hand to her mouth. But when Morrie softly said, “Giddy, Fiona,” she immediately took her hand away and smiled.

“Well hello, Morrie. What brings you around today?” She opened the screen door, allowed them to step around it and enter.

“I wasn’t far off, and I reckoned you might like to meet my young

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friend here from the States. And for him to meet you and Graham. He's here, I take it."

"Yes, of course. Please." They paused to take off their footwear. The younger man's no doubt still carried evidence of his four day tramp, so he didn't mind all the untying and tugging off. They then followed her into a lounge area that might have been decorated just after WWII, but was clean and uncluttered and had the warmest feel to it. An older man put aside the newspaper he was reading, took off his glasses and got up, a hand extended. Morrie introduced the American by name, but said nothing about having picked him up by the side of a road.

"I imagine you're both waiting," he said, "and I hope our showing up won't get in the way."

"Oh, no," Graham replied. "When he comes, he comes. Nothing to do but wait patiently."

Fiona disappeared, and a short while later they could hear the sounds of a jug boiling and cups and dishes being laid out from the nearby kitchen.

Morrie and Graham engaged in small talk for a time: the weather, rising prices, frustration with some recent government decisions. Fiona returned with a tray containing a large steaming teapot, four cups and matching saucers, a small pitcher of milk, bowl of sugar, a plate of still warm home-baked cookies.

As the young man sat there holding on his lap a tea-filled cup on its saucer, a cookie nearby upon his leg, feeling the old-fashioned goodness of the place, the gentleness of the old couple, he couldn't help sense a nervousness in Fiona. He hoped his presence wasn't the reason. Usually in situations like this he felt a responsibility to say something to break the ice, ease any awkwardness, and was all set to start in when he remembered Morrie's gentle admonition to look, listen and keep mum. So he simply smiled, took some deep breaths and tried to listen to the surface conversation taking place.

And then something changed, quite dramatically. His back to the door, Fiona directly across, suddenly she looked past him, her eyes growing wide. She placed her cup and saucer gently on a tiny table alongside her chair and rose up to full height. The two older males did

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likewise. He twisted around in his chair to see a man standing in the doorway, which he thought a tad odd in that he hadn't heard anyone enter the house. The man appeared to be his own age, late twenties, and was wearing a military uniform, perfectly clean and pressed. His head was bare, revealing short, thick, dark hair. He was a handsome sort, almost a glow about him.

"Mum, Dad. You're both looking well."

As he stood up and turned to face the new arrival, both parents moved slowly across to where their son stood. He figured they'd give him hugs, as it was apparent they hadn't seen one another for some time. Fiona, especially, made like there was nothing in the world she wanted more than to reach out and touch her boy. Instead, they stopped a few feet from him, peering up at his face with shining eyes.

The American happened to look over to Morrie, and noted the man was trying to catch his eye. Time to go, he appeared to be saying in silence.

They set their cups and saucers on a table and stepped around the trio. Morrie smiled at the soldier, who smiled back. The other young man might've been invisible. Just by the screen door he picked his boots off the floor; Morrie did the same with his shoes. Outside, they sat on the step and slipped on footwear without a word. Walked down the drive to the accompaniment of soles and heels scraping pebbles. Just a single vehicle, Morrie's, was parked on the verge. How, he wondered, did the old couple's son get here if not by vehicle, and he hadn't heard one pull up. Anyway, out of habit he checked to see his pack resting safely on the back seat prior to setting hand on the front door handle, forgetting Morrie had locked it.

Once they were settled inside the car, Morrie started the motor, drove a short distance then made a U turn and proceeded past the house and away from the village back the way they'd come. It wasn't until they'd returned to the main road, made a left and continued on that any words were said.

"So, my friend, what did you make of the scene back there?"

"What do you mean? Parents welcoming a son they apparently haven't seen in a time."



## Spook & Ghost

“Uh huh.” They drove a few kilometres further, again in silence. “And if I told you their son, Stanford was his name, was in the Gulf War?”

“Okay.”

“The first Gulf War?”

“Wait. That was –” he paused to do the math “– top of the nineties, right? Daddy Bush was president then. But he – Stanford – looks around the same age as me. And I think I was around three at the time.”

“True, true.” They drove a while longer. “Were your eyes and ears working, as I’d suggested?”

“I think so.”

“All right, tell me what you noticed.”

“You mean things out of the ordinary.”

“Mm.”

He took a breath, let it out slowly. “Like, his sudden appearance without any sound?” Morrie nodded. “He didn’t take off his shoes.”

“Good.”

He looked over to his driver. “No touching, although Fiona certainly wanted to.”

“Yep. Anything else?”

“Hey, man, you’re beginning to spook me out a little.”

“Sorry. Not meaning to. It’s just, you recall what we were talking about before? And I asked can you think outside the box?”

“Uh huh.”

“Put together everything you’ve just told me about what you observed.”

“Guy looks too young to have been in the first Gulf War.”

“Right.”

“Suddenly appears without any sound.”

“Go on.”

“They don’t touch.”

“Anything else?”

“I think this has just gone from spooky to creepy.”

“Not really. Well, not really if you’re used to it as I am. So take a guess. Or as many guesses as you’d like.”

“He’s actually some sort of hologram.”

## **Barry Rosenberg**

“Now, that’s a fascinating thought. One I’ve never considered. But no, not a hologram.”

“Didn’t think so. I mean, he sure looked sturdy, real flesh and blood.”

Morrie nodded slightly. Then a bit harder, as though coming to an understanding with himself. “Stanford may well be flesh and blood. But he was killed in Iraq on 15 February, 1990. Operation Desert Shield, they called it.”

I felt a chill run up my spine. “Today’s the 15th of February.”

“He appears every year this date. Just for a few minutes. In that wee village, and so far as I know, it’s the only place in the world this happens, dead children come back on the anniversary of their death to visit their parents. Problem is, the parents age but the child doesn’t.”

“And that’s the only problem you can think of? Jesus Christ! Look, just for the hell of it, I’ll assume this whole number wasn’t staged for my benefit. Which, were I considering this from a, um, normal state of mind, it would have to be. But okay, I’ll play along here. How do you account for it?”

“Oh,” Morrie laughed, “you’ve just asked the unanswerable question. Even more remarkable than the fact that it happens, is nobody really remembers when it first started. Very few outside the village have the slightest idea this takes place there, and only there.”

“But you don’t live there, and you know.”

Morrie looked over with a touch of sadness. “I used to live there. I was the local vicar. Doubted what I heard. Doubted what I saw with my own eyes. Then I made a mistake. I was invited to observe a meeting by a lovely family whose fourteen year old daughter, whom I knew well, was killed in a car crash. When on her anniversary she appeared in their house, just as Stanford did back there, I reached out to touch her. I had been warned, mind you, but my doubts, oh my doubts. I just had to do it. The whole situation was against everything I had been taught, you see; what I believed in. She was flesh and blood, all right. But the moment I touched her, she vanished. And never again appeared. Can you imagine the pain I caused that family? That’s when I took off the collar. I traveled overseas some years. When I returned to the area the

## **Spook & Ghost**

people in the village begged me to again be their vicar. I couldn't. Just could not."

They drove on another half hour, until they reached the town he had originally told Morrie he was headed. He stepped out of the car, retrieved his pack from the back seat, strapped it on. Morrie waved good-by. He waved back. The car slowly pulled away, and he walked into the town to find accommodation for the night.