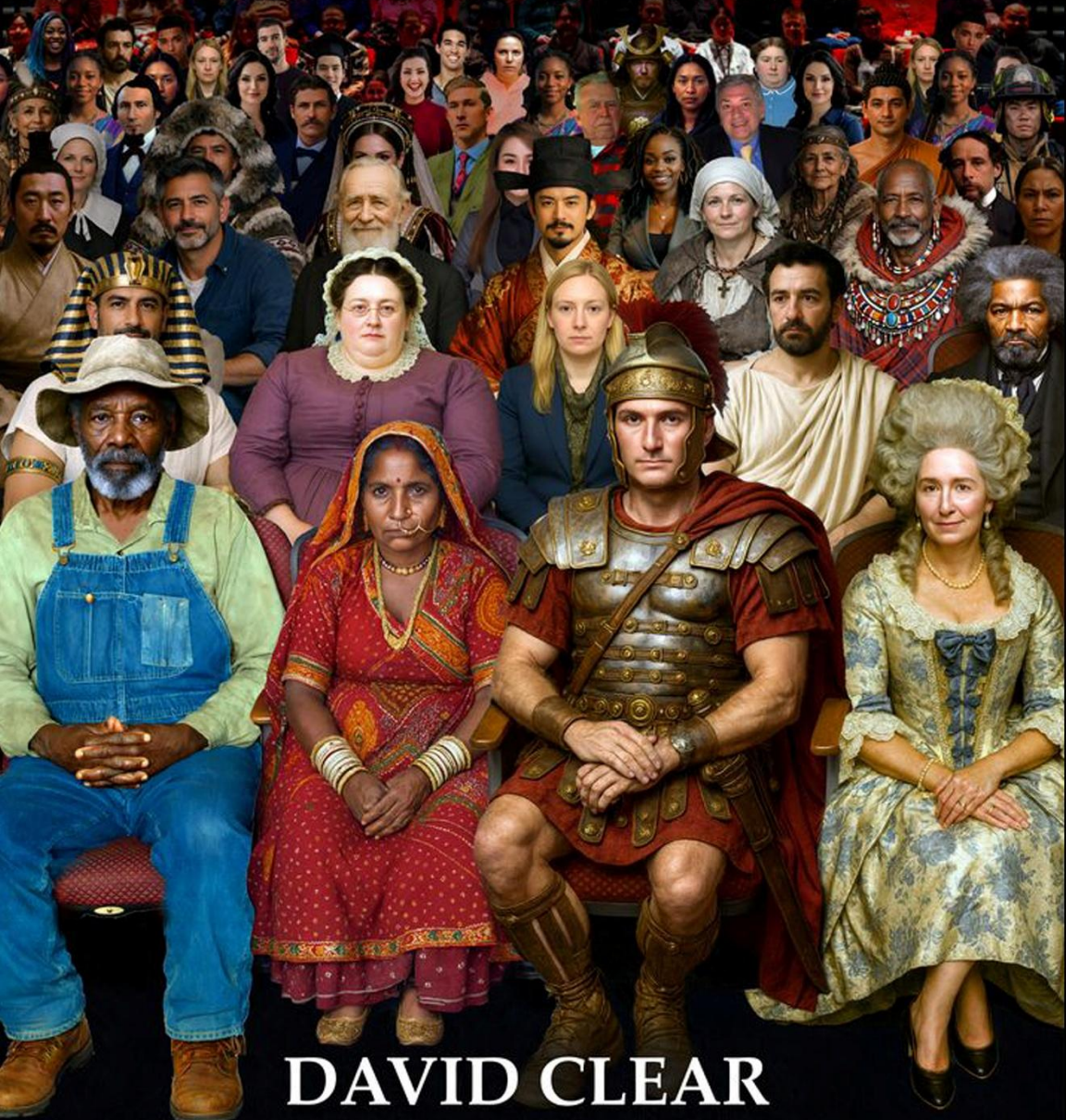


# THE ROLE OF A LIFETIME

Stories of Reincarnation in the Theater of the Soul



DAVID CLEAR

**The Role of a Lifetime:  
Stories of Reincarnation in the  
Theater of the Soul**

**David Clear**

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*And you may find yourself  
In another part of the world  
And you may find yourself  
Behind the wheel of a large automobile  
And you may find yourself in a beautiful house  
With a beautiful wife  
And you may ask yourself  
"Well ... how did I get here?"*

- David Byrne, from "Once in a Lifetime"  
by the Talking Heads

*A man finds himself, to his great astonishment, suddenly existing, after thousands and thousands of years of non-existence: he lives for a little while; and then, again, comes an equally long period when he must exist no more. The heart rebels against this, and feels that it cannot be true.*

- Arthur Schopenhauer

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## INTRODUCTION

I was born and baptized a Catholic. Neither of my parents were big church goers, but they defaulted to the predominant religion of the surrounding Italian Rhode Island culture of the time.

After the death of my younger sister, however, they seemed to withdraw from all things religious and spiritual. To me, though, that event was a clarion call from my inner self to try to discover an explanation as to why it happened, and, by extension, truths of life and death no one in my family could explain.

I found Catholicism unsatisfying at best and frightening at worst.

Shirley McClaine's *Out on a Limb* came out in 1983 when I was 28. Her exposition on reincarnation opened her to a fair share of ridicule. Ridicule being the first stage of a truth according to Schopenhauer.

The idea of reincarnation was quite foreign to me, but I was open to it. I had some exposure to other spiritual and philosophical traditions. In high school, I read the *Tao Te Ching* and *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse and then, in 1984, I took up the study and practice of Zen Buddhism. By then I was beginning to sense how reincarnation and karma might possibly explain something like the death of a three-year-old.

The linear, goal-driven, Christian Western mindset is in direct opposition to the idea that the Soul has lived before and will live again in a different body. At best, people might say, so what if it is true? How's that help me pay my bills today?

True, a past life of wealth can't bail you out today but I believe accepting the reality of past lives helps one better understand and accept their present one. This is cause and effect, as ye reap so shall ye sow. Hollywood did what I thought was a spot-on hilarious take on this in Albert Brooks' *Defending your Life*. The deceased (Brooks) is put on trial as incidents from his most recent life are played back to a judge who will decide whether he moves to higher realm or is sent back to earth to relearn his lessons. I won't spoil any more for those of who haven't seen it.

You don't have the same body now as when you were a child, and you won't when you're elderly. It's not too hard to make the leap from that to multiple lives moving along an arc of birth, growth, and death. In the stories that follow, I make an attempt to speculate on reincarnation behind the scenes.

Hopefully, this might get you to reflect on the backstory of the character you currently find yourself inhabiting.

Why do I intensely like or dislike this person, place, or thing? Why am I intensely interested in some particular area, like the arts, carpentry, mechanics, aviation, chess, or certain European or Asian countries? Why is the 9 to 5, worker/consumer family lifestyle just not fulfilling enough for me? And why, despite my strong belief in God, do I feel there are answers that are being kept from me?

There's no way to logically document a past life, although some cases provide strong tangible evidence. I suspect it would take the past life itself to appear in the physical and take a polygraph to convince the skeptics.

I feel that resistance to believing in reincarnation is because it threatens our egos. It shows us how transitory, even illusory, we are in the grand scheme of things. Also, who

would want to face the fact that, for instance, they were a murderer, or any of the multitude of evil variants known throughout history?

Surely there are as many or more lives of beneficence as malevolence, but in the meantime, I can understand how it is easier to believe there's not anything other than this life. I just came to a point where I could no longer believe that.

Another big stumbling block to believing in reincarnation is an unconscious memory of being burned at the stake or persecuted in some other way for spouting off when and where you shouldn't have.

On the flip side, who would want to remember a life of wealth, health, love and happiness if they presently are sick, poor and unloved and see no way out, no way to be happy, healthy and free again?

I believe the acceptance of reincarnation allows us to see the big picture, to see our eternal nature behind all the many masks we have put on and taken off through the millennia. All the polar opposites rising and falling and repeating, the ebb and flow of a cosmic tide, neither end of which you need cling to, for it is ever changing into and out of physical existence.

“You may as well try and catch the wind,” said Donovan Leitch.

Some spiritual and psychological theories espouse the belief that everyone we meet is really ourselves—our one, true self that continues to subdivide endlessly in an effort to ultimately reach its final truth. If this is true, then a bus driver in Providence, Rhode Island, is connected to a data engineer in Beijing, a sex worker in Los Angeles, or a politician in Buenos Aires. This connection continues through all the

8.062 billion huma beings currently alive, but also all the past (and future) lives of these beautiful, evolving souls.

Shakespeare famously said, “all the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players.” Accepting reincarnations helps us appreciate the plot lines, the sets, and the dialogues that sometimes end in sword fights and sometimes in romances. And you know if you keep moving ahead, you will get to the answers at the back of the book. You know you will pass the final test(s). You already have, many times.

*Disclaimer: In no way do I presume to be an expert on reincarnation. This is a work of fiction. Descriptions of inner worlds and characters, famous and otherwise, and the structures and operating procedures of the reincarnation dynamic are my own imaginative constructs. Additionally, the discerning reader may well identify in the narratives a repetition of certain concepts. Sort of like the same song being played by different artists. This is intentional, because it reflects the basic truth about reincarnation: that we will repeat a lesson until we fully understand it.*

## PROLOGUE

*Once there was a ONE who lived happily with all the other ONES. One day, ONE wandered into the next valley, the land of the ZEROS. He'd been warned to never go there. ONE wondered why. He met the people and they seemed nice, especially a woman about his age, more beautiful than any ONE he'd ever seen.*

*They talked and walked together, had lunch, and everything seemed OK. But then they kissed and a whole new, entire universe was created. When their parents found out, they were furious.*

*"You know what you two crazy kids have done now?" ONE's dad exclaimed.*

*"What? What's the big deal?" ONE asked.*

*"You've created what will be called the Big Bang. "*

*"What's that?"*

*"You've created a world of duality. Couldn't leave well enough alone, could you? We were doing just fine without duality and time, and now the incarnating and reincarnating is going to have to go on for a long time. A really long time. That's OK, you did it for love, the best reason of all, and you will both get back here to where you belong eventually. Nothing is out of balance, just always returning to a new balance."*

*And so, ONE and ZERO set off into the new universe they'd created.*

*"I think it will be fun," ZERO said, "an adventure. We'll get to experience so much variety and intensity we never would have been able to otherwise. We'll be so much wiser!"*

*We just have to always remember who and what we really are—lovers in love.”*

## ANOTHER SIDE OF PARADISE

My friend Mike and I were in high school when we first heard of reincarnation. Lincoln, Rhode Island in 1972 wasn't exactly a hotbed of New Age thought. Or, in my opinion, much thought about anything.

Our social studies teacher, Mr. Robidoux, had a tiny Buddha on his desk. I asked him about it once.

"You've never heard of Buddhism?" he asked. I said I had not.

"Well, I keep a low profile about it in the classroom, of course, but it's a religion practiced by millions of people worldwide. Didn't Miss Graham the English teacher assign *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse for you to read?"

I told him no, that I had never heard of it.

"I suspect that like most of your classmates and the town and state in general you're Catholic?" he asked.

"Not really. The few times I went to church didn't make much sense."

"What do your parents believe?"

"Working hard and saving money."

"What do you think happens when you die, Colin?"

"I've never really thought about it."

"Of course not, you're 17. But what if I told you that you have already lived and died? Many times?"

"I'd be interested in finding out more," I said.

"Well, Colin Calloway, buckle your seatbelt and hang on," he said, then reached into his desk, took out a book, and handed it to me. It was entitled: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

That afternoon after school, I went home and smoked some pot and started to read the book. I couldn't make heads or tails out of it. But after I smoked a little more and fell asleep, I dreamt that Michael and I were workers in the palace of the prince Siddhartha Gautama. We were pretty good friends with the prince.

One afternoon, while we were hanging out together in the garden, the Siddhartha said, "I'm going to sneak out of the palace tonight."

"What are you talking about," said Mike, or whoever he was named then. "You're the prince. You don't have to sneak."

"I don't want my father or anyone else in the palace to know. I'm not coming back."

"Why not?" I asked, "you've got a good thing going here. Your father dies and you become king sooner or later. Why do you want to go out there? There are beggars and sick people and dead people and..."

"Exactly," he said, "I saw them all today."

We both just looked at him blankly as he went on to explain his motivation for leaving a world of earthly pleasures. We asked him if we could go with him. None of his new philosophy made sense to us but, after all, we didn't get to partake in half the pleasures the prince did. We had to do all the lowly palace work. He was reluctant, but he let us tag along.

Well, it didn't last long. When he started eating just one grain of rice per day, sleeping on the ground, and not bathing, we thought, "hmm, not for us." Something similar had happened when we found ourselves riding donkeys with Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. We were making a good

living as paralegals of sorts for him and boom, he goes a little crazy for God like Gautama and we were out of a job. At first, Saul's idea of "living for the living word" seemed good, but after the first beating and imprisonment we ran back to work as clerks for the Romans. No more spreading the word for us.

Michael and I were now in our mid-60's and retired. We liked to hang out in the park and play chess.

"If Mr. Robidoux hadn't given you that book that afternoon," said Mike, "do you think your life would have turned out the way it did? I should say *our* lives, since we recall so many of them together."

"All of them, Mike, we recall all of them. Although I know there are many we'd rather forget. Yes, I think I would have tripped across the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* sooner or later on my own."

"I think if I didn't know you, I would have been happy being a Christian suburban working-class husband and father and bowling league president and Red Sox season ticket holder and never went anywhere near anything like the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. But you got me hooked on the hard stuff, you bastard," he said with a smile.

"Don't say you're not glad. Hell man, we know things great saints and philosophers don't."

"Then why ain't we rich?" he said with a grin as he popped open a beer.

"People don't want to pay to hear that there are evil aliens who have been responsible for all the killing and suffering in the world. That if they haven't carried it out directly, they have programmed humans to do it. And that the humans who have not actually committed evil are just laboring under the suffering of repressive alien programming

to prevent higher awareness. Which is why Siddhartha knocked himself silly to find a way to override the programming, and *that* has benefited millions of people, ourselves included.”

“Yeah, I know the savior archetype. Died to save other souls and such. But we’re not only not rich, but not saints or saviors either, Colin. And yet this mental video file keeps getting bigger. Last night we burned a poor Irishman’s farm for not paying the rent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Let’s not go any further and say what you did. So, why bother? Why try? Look at the Dalai Lama. How many lifetimes to become what he became and then he has to sneak out of Tibet ahead of the Chinese like a guy running out on the rent. Shouldn’t we at least be able to make a book out of all this? Better yet, a movie? My social security isn’t going to make it.”

“Scott Fitzgerald’s last royalty check was about \$13,” I said.

“Hey, I know you two hang out sometimes. What’s he up to these days by the way?”

“He’s an HVAC repairman in Sacramento with 16 years of sobriety in AA. A lot happier than when he was Scott.”

“This side of paradise, indeed. Ok, see you tomorrow.”

## SIDDHARTHA AND DAD HAVE A TALK

Yeah, enough lifetimes with the harems and the gold and all that? Hmm, maybe not. Maybe he came back from that little jaunt outside the palace and said:

“You know, Dad, I saw this sick guy, this beggar, a weird skinny dirty holy man, and this corpse. Thank you so much for protecting me from all that all this time. It was gross and I don’t ever want to see it again.”

“So,” says Dad, “it didn’t make you curious about the true nature of life? You don’t plan to leave the palace and its pleasures for a life of ascetism and then spiritual study and teaching?”

“Why would I, Dad, really?”

“Well, you will ease the suffering of many people over centuries to come with the wisdom you earn through your trials and tribulations.”

“Really? Well, that’s nice, but I’d just as soon not.”

“Siddhartha, it’s true, I wanted you to stay in the palace and inherit the kingdom when I die. But be honest, don’t you have a restless desire deep within you to find out the real truth, something more than wine, women, song? And riches, of course. When you saw the corpse, I’m sure you realized that’s the end for all of us, rich and poor and in-between. We can’t bring anything with us after death.”

“When I die, I won’t have any need for any of earth’s pleasures, true, but until then, why not enjoy them?”

“Well, son, there’s that whole Hindu reincarnation thing. You come back, you have to do it all over again to learn your lessons, to pay off your karma, and what if that means coming back as that beggar out there?”

“Wow, that’s a buzzkill dad.”

“Which is why it would be so valuable to find a way to teach yourself and then other people to reach true inner peace and contentment in their daily lives.”

Young Siddhartha deeply and rolled his eyes. “Yes, yes, I know. I’ve known for a while now that all this pleasure is ultimately unsatisfying at a deeper level. I guess I was just hoping it could go on a little bit longer. And, obviously, inner peace and contentment can’t just be bought off the shelf or everybody would be doing it, right? I wonder why not. I wonder why earth isn’t a happier place. Ok, so suppose I do find the way? All I could do about it is to teach people how to do a ‘work around’ because nobody is going to wave a wand and bring back the garden of Eden.”

“Oh, hell no, son. I can tell you it’s only going to get worse. I had a dream last night. Earth gets overpopulated and polluted. Pretty bad stuff. People could really use your help.”

“OK. I guess it would be important, noble even, to sacrifice all this palace lah-de-dah for the struggle to reach enlightenment and then pass it on, even though the odds are long that a decent percentage of the masses will ever be enlightened.”

“Think in terms of centuries, son. Your teachings will radiate throughout the centuries, and not just to the current population of India. Think about the starfish story too. You’ve heard that one, right? So many starfish dying on the beach and a child picks them up one by one and tosses them back into the ocean. A man walking by asks him why it matters when there are so many to save? The child responds, ‘It matters to this one’ and throws another into the sea.”

The next night, Siddhartha left the palace.

## HERE WE GO AGAIN

The first thing he noticed was a painful pressure. Then light, but not a continuous emanation as usual. This light was dependent upon a set of flickering muscles. Eyes! *Oh no*, Saul thought, *I have eyes?* With that he awoke, looked down, and saw that indeed he was in the body of a human. A human with a full bladder. A human in a bed next to another human.

He knew about the existence of human bodies, of course, how could he not? He had been told and warned, but had still sought out information about the general anatomy and behavioral traits of these bodies, incurring a reaction of both distaste and odd fascination. Had he ever been given the choice to experience a human body from the inside, the answer would have been an immediate and resounding NO!

Yet here he was, forced to participate in a morning ritual known as urination. He had to admit it felt good, and there was a vague recollection that this area held even greater potential for pleasure. But now the minor aches and pains in various other places of the body were taking precedence.

As he looked more closely, he realized that he had not only become trapped in a human body, but, even worse, *an older human body!*

No telling how old, but since he was moving it around under his own power, it wasn't *that* old. Still, the overall sensation of achy, weary grogginess first thing in the morning plainly indicated this body wasn't young and healthy.

Then he looked in the bathroom mirror and saw his weight. When he'd moved to get up to go to the bathroom, he felt that weight pulling him down. He had to fight against it, tug in the opposite direction, and without too much trouble

slide upwards to a sitting position with legs hanging over the side of the bed. It was a heavy body, a maddeningly complex machine made up of hundreds of parts. Yet somehow, as he washed his face, they all seemed to be functioning in relative harmony—dense, vibrating at an incredibly slow level, akin to a rock or tree. Saul had barely begun to adjust to his strange encasement when just as suddenly and unexpectedly as it had appeared, it was gone.

He found himself now in a diametrically opposite state. He was like a singular point that was both everywhere and nowhere. A dizzying array of objects swirled about him—from the hairline of a neighbor’s head, to the fur of a pet dog, even the body he had so recently been trying to fit himself into like a foot in an undersized shoe. Yes, there it was, moving, breathing, an independent entity, a sort of puppet really, interacting now with the other human who had been in the bed with him.

The other human seemed “puppeted” as well. What on earth could they be talking about? He listened closer. They were discussing things on earth and only things on earth. They couldn’t understand any more than that. They could only guess at what might be at the top of their strings of life.

I’ve got to go back in there, Saul thought, I can’t let “it” just stumble along on “its” own. Who knows what kind of trouble and/or mischief it will get into. I feel sorry for it, castaway as it is in an enormous, dangerous, swirling sea of sight, sound and sensation. I have to be a wise, guiding, and protecting force in its existence.

So, Saul went back into the body and started making some corrections. The first being brushing his teeth. Well, the first being overcoming the body’s resistance to brushing its

teeth. Saul could sense that not only did the body move slowly, often difficultly, but seemed inclined to not want to improve its situation, content to just try and maintain a mediocre status quo. The longer he stayed, the more imprisoning it seemed to become, a clutching “don’t leave me,” dependency and a seductive, siren-like, “stay and see all the fun there is to do and have here!”

Eventually, Saul forgot how to get out. He forgot he had not originally been *in*. A sort of slumber descended upon him and “it.” A mechanized repetition of eating, sleeping, talking, working, and watching TV. There was a lot of watching TV. But even there the humans behaved predictably and often unrealistically.

Humans seemed to believe that everything that happened to them was important. The daily news, their respective illnesses, their financial situations, whether to get curtains or stay with miniblinds, on and on. And yet, simultaneously, there was a simmering discontent that bubbled up in resentment, boredom, even hopelessness. Saul often heard the puppet humans whisper to themselves or each other, “none of it matters, we’re all going to die. There’s nothing else to do and nowhere else to go.” Saul knew they were wrong, but now he was also a prisoner puppet.

He’d forgotten the true nature of things, and how maddeningly indecipherable it was from the perspective of this overweight, aging, aching, weary collection of water, chemicals, and matter.

But there still was the string connecting “it” to a bountiful and beautiful pattern. Even though the string was buried in a panoply of images and constantly shifting forms, Saul recalled that the string meant a connection.

And yet that very insight caused a painful sense of separation from it all. It seemed all the other puppets had no real notion of the string. They were like schools of fish that blithely swam on, appearing to be at one with their environment, even while disappearing and reappearing repeatedly.

He could dive in amidst them, blend in with them at least in appearance, but not in truth, for he knew there was a decided demarcation between them and him. And so, they were all being carried along by a current of a stream that was muddy, rocky, root entangled and ensnaring but the only stream available. It rolled on, sometimes so swiftly as to be overwhelming, an exhausting travail and trial by fire and water. At other times it moved with a slow somnolence that seemed to mock death.

Death, he learned, was just another bend in the great overarching river of life. And then Saul understood why so many humans, apparently 9 billion or so at last count, chose to take on these cumbersome flesh, blood, and bone sheaths with their accompanying complements of unbalanced brain chemicals, volatile emotions, fragile physiologies and ridiculously broad spectrum of interrelationships from love to murder. He understood why they chose to accept the steady, metronomic marching to a beat, a structure supplanting the wondering mind from wondering too much about where the puppet strings go.

You see, Saul and many others like him, knew they had buried a great treasure long ago. Yes, it was a treasure they could live without in their laissez faire corporeality, but Saul knew that ultimately, he had to go find it and claim it. He knew

it would be truly, wonderfully worthwhile despite the damn gauntlet of interim hardships.

The first of which was to take on a human body, likely many successive human bodies. Then to always remember everything that happened to those bodies. It was a meticulously calculated training exercise, the explanation of which lay beyond the human mind's ability to understand. For if the mind caught too much of a glimpse of the real understanding, a decided imbalance would occur.

Saul had once looked over the shoulder of his human companion and was utterly befuddled as she worked on a computer. Why wasn't she researching where to find the treasure instead of something called a payroll spreadsheet?

And then, one morning, Saul awoke again in the restrictive bag of bones feeling better. What was different? His bedmate wasn't there. He went to go look for her. She was just one room away but she was doing something he had never seen or heard before. She was making an unusual sound, chanting it was called, as she sat perfectly still.

She stopped, stretched, and looked at him. Saul knew she had found the map to the treasure. Such was the glow in her eyes that emanated with such power from her that it touched him and every corner of the.

And then they talked, a limited medium, but the only means these "bags of bones" could use to share information.

"Ok, I think I got it," Saul began. "This 'I' we've come to inhabit is not the real 'doer of things.' It is moved about and has its being by dint of something we can refer to as nameless. From our limited mind/body perspective, it's like trying to read a book in California when you're living in New York. Meanwhile, these "Is" are besieged daily by things to do!

Urinate, brush teeth, drink water, eat food, drive a car, pay for gas for the car, all if it requiring money to pay for them. How does all of this just ‘happen’?”

She excitedly answered, “From the first breath to the last breath the entity is coursing down a nameless river. It is affected by the river and the riverbank but, although almost always incognizant of it, it is never apart from the river. Some entities do become so hopeless they end the incarnation prematurely.”

“Suicide,” Saul said, “I have felt its appeal.”

“Not a shortcut to reaching the treasure,” she said.

“OK, no shortcuts. Perhaps the way to the truth of the treasure is trying to maneuver this entity in all its restrictiveness, via a kind of remote-control system put in place *before* incarnating?”

“A video game?” she said with a smile.

“For lack of a better metaphor, yes, and when you win, you’re done!”

“Yes,” she smiled, “unless you want to play again.”

“I don’t think I would want to play again,” Saul said, “I think winning, so to speak, will have been difficult enough. Here on earth people play the lottery despite astronomical odds against winning, but some do win. If you won millions, why would you play again?”

“Ok, let’s put that aside for the moment. For now, how to operate more from the remote-control wisdom omniscience as it were, within these limited, high maintenance and forgetful – “

“Puppets?” Saul said. “Yes, they are, strings and all, seductively appealing. It is no wonder so many people choose to exclusively identify with them!”

“It is because they contain a built-in seducer!,” she exclaimed. “Traditionally overcome by fasting, chanting, or meditating, but – “

“Too hard,” Saul said.

“There’s always the sleep/dream bypass. I know, also hard.”

“So, knowing we are non-doers, the more we allow the real doer to “do,” bypassing the seducer, the better it all will be? But it seems like what were now calling self-driving cars. How difficult would it be to trust that something over which you have no control can be trusted to always be operating in your best interest? Particularly when you factor in earth’s religious writings about karma and so forth?”

“Yes, that’s the voice of the seducer built in. Our adversary. Don’t trust anyone or anything but me.”

“What a stupid system, I have to say.”

“But if absolute trust and inner reliance on divine source is what is required to achieve divine source for oneself, wouldn’t a worthy adversary be the best honing mechanism?”

“I don’t know. It makes me feel like it’s better just to stay disembodied and forget about trying to reach divine source if you must go through all this.”

“Yeah, maybe,” she said, “but we’re here now.”

“Why can’t we just go back? I didn’t ask to come here! There’s been a mistake!”

“Yeah, we all say that.”

She smiled and went back to chanting.

## VOLUNTEERS FOR EARTH

The young man mustered his courage. He knew that when he told his parents of his decision, they would not be happy. Well, his dad might. His Dad was a veteran, and he used to advocate for military service as a way of building character. But he had already died several times in the effort and now said he'd never think about going back. Mom had already lost many children to the service; she would be mightily opposed to another joining.

So, he told them. "Mom, Dad, I know I've earned the right to stay in the higher planes, but I want to join the Earth services. I want to reincarnate on Earth."

They cried, they cajoled, they tried to compromise with him, but he had made up his Soul mind. He needed one more earth lifetime to finish his spiritual growth cycle and move on. By not going to Earth, it would take five more lifetimes where he was, while one more time on Earth and voila! Mastership!

"That is, if you make it," his dad interjected with the wisdom of experience. "Half the trainees drop out by the first trimester, several more by adolescence, and anyway what's the rush, son? Don't you remember..."

"Yes Dad, I remember. I've already met with the recruiter and seen the orientation film—disease, taxes, crime, weather extremes, and of course obsession with money. But it's 2026 down there now and things are looking better."

"Well, of course the recruiter is going to sell you on how much better things have gotten! Did they guarantee an assignment in St. Thomas or Maui? A trust fund inheritance? And then you wake up in Sudan or Bangladesh or as a single mom on welfare in Buffalo New York..."

“Dad, Dad, they’re not allowed to bait and switch anymore. You know that was done away with in the 1600s with the Protestant Reformation.”

“Where did you hear that? The recruiter? Son, there are unscrupulous salesmen even up here. They’re training for their lives as unscrupulous salespeople down there.”

“Really? Damn, that’s disappointing, I thought everybody up here was, well, on the ‘up and up.’”

“That’s what happens further up. Way further up.”

“Well, why don’t we go there?”

“Because it’s hard to get there. We have perfectly good lives here in the valley.”

“But I’m bored,” he said, in typical teenage fashion “I want the excitement, the struggle even, the challenge.

“Are you sure you’re not just wanting the ego boost that you think will come with being in the elite services?”

“Well, maybe...”

“Well, definitely. I know, because that’s what motivated me! And that’s the first thing they pound out of you! If you succeed, yes, as you put it, mastership, but the first rule of elite mastership is that you absolutely cannot ever think of yourself as an elite master. You will scrub toilets and similar tasks in your training until that gets ingrained into your consciousness.”

“OK Dad, that makes sense, a polishing of the diamond in the rough kind of thing, right? Why are you both looking so glum?”

“Because here we never have to scrub toilets. Here there are no need for toilets. That alone makes your mother and I want to stay here. We’re comfortable. We had to go through some strenuous things to get here, and when we did,

we breathed a sigh of relief. We picked out a nice little house by the river, with a nice view of the grand mountain in the distance, and happily directed passersby to the trail that led to the base camp for those who so foolishly sought to climb that mountain. We did not think we would raise a child who would become one of those foolhardy ones!”

“Look, it’s what I want to do! Don’t I have the right to choose that?”

“Of course, son, his mother said, but your dad and I are disconsolate not because you’ve chose to go to the mountain.”

“Why then?”

“Because we know we have to go with you!”

“No, you don’t! I’m not a baby anymore!”

“You may not think you are, but we could not in any good conscience let you go down there alone any more than we could let a baby wander into traffic. You are advanced in terms of consciousness. Quite a bit more than us, son. Which is why we have been dreading you making this decision. We cannot deny you your desire, nor refuse to accompany you. Long ago, we agreed that if you decided to do this, we would do it with you.

“You will not remember us are your spiritual parents helping, guiding, and most of all protecting you in this effort. You will have an entirely different Soul couple that will be your biological parents. And they will be both major stumbling blocks and steppingstones. That’s one of the things that really bugs us about Earth! Everything is backwards! Nevertheless, you will likely not recognize us down there. But we’ll try to drop clues.”

“Who will you be?”

“You won’t know unless you succeed in getting to the top of the mountain. But remember, we’ll be marooned and exiled. There can be no rescue. We will be fully immersed and imbedded, so much so we’ll forget the why of it all. Forget completely and maybe want to kill ourselves because of that.”

“The recruiter said I can always reconnect with my true self and other Soul allies through dreams and etheric out of body travel.”

“Right. And that’s about as easy as getting your PhD in quantum physics. There, it’s usually just a stare or a word from some troublesome antagonist or a random person, or a license plate or billboard, overheard conversation. Breadcrumbs, really. Whereas here the guidance and answers are as readily available as a drink of water.”

“Yes Mom, I know. But isn’t it a noble mission to consciously imbed in the enemy territory and collect intelligence on the tricks the enemy uses to keep people trapped? They’re coming up with new ones all the time. Didn’t the Soul spies do that for you two guys?”

“Of course. And we attained limitless singular consciousness. But there’s plenty of good, noble work to do right here. You don’t need to volunteer for the most dangerous mission in all the dimensions! Don’t do it just because you’re bored.”

“Have you really thought this through, son? And I mean, deeply meditated on it?” his dad asked.

“I have. I want to get there in one shot. Because I have seen that I can. And that means you both will get there with me! And, hey, if we fail, we’ll just end up back here where we started, they’re not going to demote us. But we won’t be the same as when we left. I love you both and I love our life here,

but I've truly sensed that this is a way for us to experience even greater love!"

"That's true, son. That's true. But before we go, take this." His father stood up and went over to a desk from which he took a piece of paper and handed it to his son.

"I must read this to all earth volunteers, and then they must sign it," he said, "Please listen carefully."

*Watch for the gaze. The Hindus call it darshan; to see, and be seen by, God. It is a recall from your limitless tidepool of inner wisdom, an enveloping of your consciousness in the cloak of the unnamed. A means of walking through imprisoning walls of thought to re-merge with glimmering insight after glimmering insight. Always be willing to try another way, an unknown way. Be willing to wait it out, whatever it is. Let it all eventually dissolve back into nothingness. The deceiver will give you looks also. Looking for a chink in the armor. But armor is for protecting something that can be injured. You cannot be injured. You consume and transmute experience as the physical body consumes food; for fuel, for sustenance, for expansion into the limitlessly rich field that is earth and the human population. Remember to pace yourself. Prepare and train or go blind or mad. Climb the waterfall of moments, the effusive drops of sinuously falling light. Breathe the blessed stream of sustenance. The hardest rocks are slowly and surely rubbed crystalline smooth to a fine silt that the breeze collects and disperses to infinity. And remember the law of the reverse: all of the experiences you think are delaying you from succeeding in the overall mission are in fact moving you closer.*

The father slid the paper to his son who unhesitatingly signed it, and then the floor opened and the three hurtled down a tube into rushing whitewater.

## THE ART GALLERY

Imagine you're walking through an art gallery. It is the largest, grandest, even heavenly art gallery you've ever seen. That's because it is heaven. Or one of the heavens, anyway. You're not sure which, but you know for certain you are supposed to be here. You like being here. You feel relaxed and happy being here. Even though some of the paintings have disturbing contents (you've just walked by something by Caravaggio having to do with a beheading), many are pleasing and soothing beyond belief. Ones you've seen and loved many times before (Yosemite by Bierstadt) now have an even greater, hypnotic attraction for you and you stand and gaze at some of them for what seems like hours.

Then the museum guide taps you on the shoulder. He asks if you've decided yet which painting you like best. There are so many it will be impossible to choose, you say. He says it will be necessary to choose if you are choosing to be born again. You ask him what he means. You don't believe in reincarnation. You certainly don't remember dying. You were young and healthy, happily married with a good job, and you just decided one afternoon to go to an art gallery.

Then, suddenly, you remember dying. You remember dying *many* times. Dying in different ways and different places and times, and you suddenly feel cold and afraid and realize the guide is right. You are dead, or at least who you are when you walked into the museum is dead. But some 'body' is walking around looking at art, so you know, once more, there really is no death. Naturally, you remember reading and seeing movies about such things, scientists even confirming experiences people had while they were clinically dead then

came back. You thought of it as the “great near-death experience fad,” as hogwash. You were Catholic, so if you’re dead, Jesus should be here. The guide doesn’t look at all like him. He suggests you sit down on one of the benches.

He tells you if it helps you feel better, imagine this is all a dream and you will wake up to what you knew before. Maybe you just dozed off in church and your wife will nudge you awake to hear the rest of the sermon. You try to do this but know it isn’t true; you cannot fool yourself.

You ask the guide what you are supposed to do.

He says again that you must pick a painting; a painting that includes elements of what you would like your next life to be. Unless you’d rather not have a next life on Earth. You’re confused. You ask if you can just stay in heaven and live happily ever after doing whatever you want, never getting sick or old or lonely or afraid? He says yes, that is an option.

You wonder to yourself why the hell you don’t sign on to that immediately. Because you’re gazing at Vermeer’s Girl with the Pearl Earring. Because you know somehow that to love such a woman and spend a life on earth with her would be as good or better than anything in this museum heaven.

The guide asks if the Vermeer is your choice, and you unhesitatingly say Yes! You expect a bolt of lightning, a flash of smoke, or something dramatic, but nothing happens. He goes on to explain how the process works.

Once you are sure of your selection, your painting becomes a jigsaw puzzle. The number of pieces corresponds to the number of minutes you’ll be alive. For example, if you live to be 90, that’s a puzzle with 47,304,000 pieces. But here’s the important part, says the guide. The painting will finish *exactly* into the one you chose, and will never change along

the way into, says, a Picasso. Do you understand, asks the guide? There is trial and error. The Vermeer will be put back together one piece per minute for every day of your life.

You object immediately. Hold it right there, you say. There's no such thing as free will for humans on earth, is that what you're saying? Doesn't that sound like hell, you say. You think you're making decisions about your life but really, you're just a piece of a finished puzzle being put in place from some unknown power minute by minute, day by day until you die? I don't care if I did have the free will to pick the Girl with the Pearl Earring. Are you telling me all nine billion people on earth are just puzzle pieces being put together? There's got to be a better explanation.

Why did you pick the Girl with the Pearl Earring he asks you. Because you fell in love on the spot, right? You remembered happy lives with women on earth, married, maybe children. In all those lives, you were making choices! Where to live, what work to do, when and how often to make love.

Wait, do you mean to say that in those past lives I picked my parents and my in-laws and...And everyone else you ever came into contact with? As did everyone else? You close your eyes and rub them. You keep your hands over your face as if to block looking at any more paintings. If you had two more hands you would cover your ears so as not to hear anything else from the guide. But you open your eyes and ask a question.

So, everybody who wants to 'reincarnate' on earth picks a painting? There must be more to it than just the painting?

Yes, the guide answers, much more, but the finished piece—whether a simple content like pearl earring or

something crazily complex like Hieronymus Bosch—is the symbolic embodiment of that life.

So how do I know my choosing the painting here isn't also just some predetermined outcome?

Because nothing is finished here, everything is in eternal flux, able to be molded into any shape, form, or vibration. These paintings have been put in place over the eons, replicated below, and signify the ongoing karmic wheel of the earth world. Once you're "in" a painting, so to speak, you're resolving the karma of your previous painting, perhaps a Durer.

Apparently, it will help once I'm reincarnated to take an art history class. But I'm still missing something. Whatever I am now, a Soul, an energy field, a light being, something alive in any case, has the choice to jump onto this karmic wheel or not, right? What if they jump into that Caravaggio beheading thing? Do they create bad karma and have to go back and fix it with something light and fluffy like a Fragonard?

So, you do know your art history a bit, eh? The answer is no, *unless they want to do it that way!* It's entirely a matter of choice. Whereas 'down there' there is no free will whatsoever, 'up here,' there is nothing but free will! So, yes, if you were a murderer on earth, you can go back and pay the penance for that in some way, or you can do it up here. But it will have to be balanced out; everything gets balanced out, always, one way or another.

Ok, let's return to the puzzle analogy. Minute by minute, the finished picture of let's say, a JW Turner with lots of ocean scenes, causes you to join the Navy as it's assembled. Why would the reincarnated individual think he or she can

decide whether or not to join the navy or not when in fact they are just participating in a predetermined assembly of something that a painter picked *for* them?

Think of it as parents and children, says the guide. The parents first, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally, decide to have the child. After the child is born, the parents make the decisions, both good and bad, about its care, nurturing, educating, and so forth for various amounts of time. Usually, the child goes through the breaking away process at some point to begin individualizing itself. But whatever happens, the child remains in the child role and the parent remain in the parent role until the deaths of both. The child has to believe it is separate from the parent. The physical body born into the world, onto Earth, has to believe it is capable of and is in fact frequently making its own decisions. At some point, the awareness of how the heart beats by itself, or the hair grows by itself, is extrapolated outward to all functions of the physical body – aging, disease, libido, addiction, memory, good and bad thoughts, desires, and ambitions. The list is long but you get the idea. Once this state is reached, it doesn't mean that acting "as if" you were making your own decisions stops, you do so to function, walk, sleep, eat, talk, defecate, and procreate etc. But you *know*, it's not really *you* doing anything anymore than *you* are regulating your bodily functions. You pick your parents, you pick your painting, and you pick your puzzle assembly. Those picks are the wisest you could possibly make at that juncture, even though you may not know why you're going with the pearl earring. You will only know with some certainty, time to time, the infinite wisdom of your choice.

Am I supposed to be OK with that? Acting as if I am a functioning decision-making human being when in fact it sounds like I am naught more than a ghost in a machine?

You watch as the guide now he rubs his face with his hands in a kind of hopeless exasperation of ever getting through to you, but then he shakes it off and begins again.

Imagine you're an astronaut. Your ship, your suit, everything is mechanical, dependent on systems almost entirely regulated by ground control. And ground control has access to exponentially more computing power and data than you could ever have there in your space suit. So, yes, in a sense you are part of a machine intimately dependent and interconnected to the ground control. Which in fact is just the reverse of the reality. The machine is on the ground; the control factor is in space.

Sounds a little like a fetus connected by an umbilical cord in the womb.

In a way, because the fetus is utterly dependent on the mother's womb and yet it develops on its own, according to precisely coded, unchangeable directives.

Which continue throughout the human lifespan, you're saying? No choices, no decisions, just a continuation of organism development until expiration back into the formlessness of pre-creation?

The guide pauses, then speaks again. I understand the reason, the necessity for humans *thinking* they are making decisions for themselves; thinking they are doing this or that and functioning as independent, autonomous entities. They would otherwise lapse into immobility, like yogis, or Zen meditators. One can only sit still and quiet for so long.

He goes on. Most people, for their entire lives, have to think they are making hundreds of decisions throughout the day. That's the first stage. The second stage is to be aware that you are fooling yourself with this idea of self-motivation. This takes courage and humility. You must let go, even though the fear of dying or going mad is deeply ingrained as a survival mechanism. It was necessary for hunter gatherers on the savannahs, but we're approaching 9 billion humans on the planet. The species, despite much evidence to the contrary, does indeed stand a good chance of survival.

Sounds like you know something I don't.

The guide laughs out loud. You'll have the chance to get off the planet and colonize elsewhere, more prosperously and more peacefully, if you decide to reincarnate for another 2000 lives or so.

I don't think I want to do that. I want to pick my painting. My last painting and be done with it. But why do I have to forget which one it is after I'm born? Going back to my earlier question, what does it feel like to know this truth and live this truth? Trusting that each moment is unfolding precisely as it must, and is doing so for the absolute best of all concerned? I can't help but think I would get lazy—no work, no bathing, or just taking drugs because, what the hell does it matter?

If that were the nature of painting you chose, that's the life you would live. Which is why you ought to choose carefully.

I've got it! Whatever painting I choose will be assembled piece by piece, like your example of living to age 90 with 47,304,000 pieces. I would know I had fully agreed to every piece because I chose freely. I knew it would be the best

possible choice on all levels, because when I chose it, I was in a much higher state of consciousness than anything possible on earth. And that choice would expand to a yet even higher state of consciousness once the pieces were all in place. It would be like every hour someone giving me the equivalent of a million dollars. Even in the form of, say, a toothache. Because each moment revealed more of the overall, ultimate picture of an ever-expanding, infinitely free, creative and powerful being.

I pause, then say. Only I've changed my mind. Not the Vermeer. I choose *New York City Rhapsody* by Grace Hartigan.

Ahh, so I'll put you down for a life of the abstract then? That is the closest form to approximating the formless, to resembling the structure of the higher worlds. Despite the first glimpse of chaos, there is structure. There is *always* structure, whether in meticulous and finished form or the impressionistic, oceanic swirls of formlessness. Structure is always forming and expanding. Pieces will assemble on their own and in their own way in the only way they can, in the best possible way for all concerned. Human consciousness has to believe it might actually be doing/controlling something, because if a person saw the process moment to moment, they would be paralyzed with awe. So now you are beginning to understand the comforting illusion of action within inaction, incompleteness within the complete, choice within choicelessness. All while the puzzle meticulously, exactly, effortlessly, gracefully and lovingly is assembled and reassembled.

Please exit through the gift shop.

## **DID YOU SIGN A DNR? (DO NOT REINCARNATE)**

**A**rthur Di Fillipo, age 67, suffered a heart attack at his desk **A**one Tuesday afternoon in the office where he worked for the local State Farm Insurance branch. Given his overall health condition, it wasn't unexpected, but nevertheless, the suddenness of it required he be given some immediate palliative counseling.

Firmly believing he was still alive, he was taken by a staff member to another office and told that his regional supervisor wanted him to watch a video.

"Feel free to ask questions, Mr. DeFillipo. I'm sure this will not be what you expect."

The screen illuminated with a scene showing an office where Arthur and his supervisor were seated across from each other at a desk.

"Before I was born," said the supervisor, "I met with a reincarnation facilitator who reviewed my request as to the nature of my next physical life in his world."

Arthur spoke up immediately. "Whoa! Before I was born? There was nothing before I was born."

"That's the premise of reincarnation," said the supervisor, "that you exist outside of physical life and death. People have a hard time accepting it because usually human egos are so strong and stubborn they don't want to think they are only temporary, and that there is something, not only different, but greater."

"I believe when you're born, you're born, and when you're dead, you're dead," said Arthur. "And what does any of

this have to do with insurance, by the way? Can I have some water, I'm starting to feel a little funny."

Arthur was given some water and asked if he would like to continue watching. He said sure, feeling like he was getting an interesting, if incomprehensible, break from work.

On screen, the supervisor picked up a piece of paper off the desk. "It says here, Arthur, that you have selected to strive for the highest possible state of earthly consciousness and to never reincarnate in a physical body on earth again. Is that correct?"

"That is correct," said the onscreen Arthur. "And it's my understanding that you can run the actuary numbers of all my past lives so far. All my strengths, weaknesses, karma, and so on, to come up with what would be the optimum circumstances and conditions for me to attain this goal. A sort of spiritual aptitude test."

"Yes, we are always happy to help someone who has selected this most difficult option. I have in fact already begun printing out your life file. Because of its length it will be a few more minutes."

The supervisor left for a few moments, then returned, When he handed the thick sheath of papers to Arthur, the front page read:

To the DNR (do not reincarnate) candidate:

"Our calculations show that for you to succeed in the goal of attaining a high enough state of consciousness to never have to reincarnate again, you will have to become a writer. You may have to supplement your income with other jobs to survive financially, but writing must be your overarching lifelong mission. Your passionate pursuit. And not the Stephen King/John Grisham genres either. You must write

like a spiritual philosopher. Think of Rumi meets Thomas Wolfe meets Nietzsche, with a dash of Oscar Wilde.”

After reading that first paragraph, Arthur looked up. “Seriously? I’m guessing in the pages to come we’re not going to see a great deal of financial profitability from this kind of writing. Although I guess Oscar did alright for himself before he ticked off the powers that be of that time.”

“I would suspect you are correct in that assumption,” said the supervisor. “But it’s a hefty file. You never know what you might find later on. And, hey you’re the one asking for the highest possible state of earthly consciousness so you don’t have to ever reincarnate in a physical body on earth again. If it were just a matter of playing in the NFL or being hedge fund manager or journeyman plumber, a lot more people would be doing it.

“Anyway,” continued the supervisor. “Look over the entire file carefully to make sure you really want to do this. Truth is, of all the times we get pre-reincarnating Souls choosing this option, I think the rejection rate once they’ve read the file of prerequisite experiences they must go through, is around 98%.”

“Does anyone ever just pick it without reading through what’s to come first?” asked Arthur.

“We can’t let them continue unless they preview at least a dozen pages, the equivalent of 20 or 30 years of life on earth. Then, if they want to take the leap, *bonne chance!* Please use this office for any reading time you need, I’ll step out for a while.”

*Arthur looked away from the screen presentation to the staff member who had brought him to the room and was still standing against the wall.*

*“So, I really get to pick whether I am born again or not?” he asked.*

*“Yes.”*

*“Sort of like a vacation to either Europe or Disneyland?”*

*“It’s a little more complicated than that, and you will have a guide to help you if you wish.”*

*“So before now, why didn’t I pick to come back as Hugh Hefner or somebody like that? At least a lottery winner?”*

*“Maybe if we watch a little more of the presentation.”*

Arthur was a fast reader, so onscreen he moved quickly to age 30 in no time. And nowhere did he see himself making a dime from writing. He was hoping at least for something along the lines of Hemingway in Paris, Fitzgerald on the Riviera, or Kerouac on the road. Before he could think about it too much more, the supervisor came back into the room.

“I’ve only read up to age 30,” Arthur said.

“OK. Pretty grim, right? Are you thinking of switching to a different vocation that will require incarnations? Maybe accounting, HVAC, or maybe coaching a high school football team?”

“I’m going in as is.”

“Really?”

“It’s got to get better after age 30 from what I see.”

“No, Mr. Di Fillipo, it really doesn’t. The likelihood is that it will get harder.”

“I don’t care, send me. If I survive, I don’t ever have to reincarnate again, right?”

“That’s right, but you must agree to the clause at the end of the file which, had you read all the way through you

would have seen. He paused while flipping through the pages. “Ah, here it is: The DNR candidate accepts that, in the event of premature death, suicidally intended or accidental via self-destructive behavior, the agreement whereby the candidate is allowed to not reincarnate on the earthly plane again becomes null and void.”

“Ok, but who decides the exact definition of premature? I mean, pulling the trigger of a shotgun is one thing, but drinking yourself to liver failure?”

“This is why we recommend reading the entire file Mr. Di Fillipo. Candidates can assess whether events to come might cause a premature death. It’s quite individual and complex and can’t be determined for sure until you actually have the experiences, but you stand a much better chance of surviving if you choose to preview them.”

*Arthur turns from the screen to the staff member. So, this is showing me in some kind of heaven I suppose, and instead of angels and clouds, I’m stuck in an office with my supervisor reading a file. I looks exactly like my life today as an insurance adjuster. Does this mean that at some time in the past, I selected insurance adjuster in Albany rather than Hugh Hefner, or somebody like him?*

*Wouldn’t you agree, Arthur, says the staff member, that being an insurance adjuster was a far more practical choice in providing for yourself and your family than the you in the video who wants to be a writer, the so-called starving artist?*

*Arthur was beginning to become aware of what was really happening. Well, just on the sheer dollars and sense side of it, but I’m beginning to think...”*

*Let's watch a little more, the staff member says, releasing the pause button.*

"I don't want to preview the rest of the file," says the Arthur on the screen. "If I do, I'm afraid I'll chicken out."

"You do know," said the supervisor, "that after so many lifetimes, not reincarnating just becomes automatic? End of the cycle. Why are you in a hurry?"

"Isn't it true that once you attain the right to not reincarnate you also attain the ability to return in different forms to help the suffering in ways you never could otherwise."

"That is true."

The video ended. The staff member turned to Arthur and asked what he thought of it.

"That's me, isn't it? I'm dead, aren't I? Damn clogged arteries!"

"Yes, Arthur. You're dead, but you have some time to decide what you want to do next."

"I would like to go back to my insurance adjuster life. I would like to be thankful for my wife and child and financial stability. I will miss them."

"We can do that for you, Arthur, if you'd like."

"You can? I'm not really dead?"

"Oh, yes, you were, but haven't you read anything about all the NDE's lately? Near death experiences? All the rage lately."

"Can't say as I have. Even less than I've read about reincarnation. I'm a Tom Clancy fan, truth be told."

"Did you know Clancy worked in insurance before he became a bestselling writer?"

"I did not."

And just then, the EMT's brought Arthur back to life, right there in his office. His wife and son met him at the hospital where he was given an excellent prognosis for recovery. *If* he changed his diet.

He took a few weeks off from work to recover and, one day, while browsing kindle for something to read during this time, he discovered and was immediately fascinated by *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

## SENSE AND NONSENSE

*An answer to the question, "If I chose the life I am currently living for very good spiritual reasons when I was in a higher state of consciousness, why can't I remember the reason(s) for it?"*

“Can you believe this line?” Jake Bright said to the woman standing ahead of him. “Why would this many people be wanting to reincarnate on earth in the 21st century? Makes no sense! I’m Jake, by the way. I was last time, anyway. Who knows what’s coming up, right? Damn DMV.”

“Hello, I’m Liv. And the fact that we are at the Department of Mortality Variables is a privilege. We have some say in how we reincarnate. Most people just wake up in the doctor or midwife’s hands with no idea of what’s coming.”

“Yes, I know,” he glumly admitted, “Still, why do we have to do this at all? I liked it better when I didn’t believe in it. When it was just a matter of putting in your time, non-sinfully as much as possible, then dying, meeting Jesus, and getting your harp and cloud.”

“Yeah, and Santa Claus came every night,” said Liv sarcastically. “My last time on earth, I died poor and sick in a Victorian London alleyway. This time I just want to make sure I get a good job and secure the means to always provide for myself. I’ve learned I certainly can’t depend on men to provide for me. Assuming they don’t kill me first. So, I’m determined to not have any relationships this time. Just so you know.”

Then a new line opened and their names were called together.

“Oh no,” she said, “I hope this isn’t what I think it is.”

They walked into the next open cubicle.

“Please, Jake, Liv, do have a seat. My name is Roland Kemp and I am your facilitator for your upcoming reincarnations.”

Liv interrupted at once, “Is this an arranged marriage reincarnation?”

“Those are quite rare. The paperwork is a nightmare!” he answered.

Jacob jumped in. “Can I just say up front that I’m tired of it all! I killed you; you kill me. I used to think it was a simple matter of debits and credits balancing out, but I’ve come to think it’s more like Mafia interest. It never gets paid off!”

“OK,” Roland said, “let me first say that reincarnation is not simply to pay off the karma of past transgressions. We are eternally free, creatively omnipotent beings of infinite possibilities. The “I killed you and now I have to go back and let you kill me” paradigm is a highly simplified attempt to understand...”

Jake shook his head and jumped in again, “Why is there suffering in the first place?”

“Buddha said desire causes suffering,” Liv reminded.

“That’s right, Liv, which would mean that you, Jake, that your *desire* for the designs of the lower worlds, which...”

“I hope you’re not going to say,” interrupted Jake, “that the reason for desire is that Souls/God work in mysterious ways? That the human perspective cannot comprehend the higher truths. Well, let me say I’ve been dead for a while now, here in the so-called higher worlds and I still don’t understand the higher truths! I could accept *any* incarnation, a beggar in Calcutta or a banker in Manhattan, if it could be lived in full awareness at all times. So that in each moment you can see

and understand how *it all makes sense!* And I don't mean slowly studying and figuring it out after meditating for years. I mean knowing right away and at all times!"

"And would you like fries with that?" Roland joked.

"That's funny," Liv said, "but what Jake said is what I've always wanted, too! Nothing could be better!"

Roland cleared his throat with a little cough. "OK, the two of you are now talking about joining MEMSA. Not Mensa, mind you, that's purely mind limited. MEMSA has a much higher and broader mission and there are no monthly dues or meetings. MEMSA stands for Making Everything Make Sense Alliance. It's for the advanced reincarnator to be sure, but I think that for the two of you, it's a perfect fit. What we do is run an algorithm which calculates your past lives' strengths and weaknesses in relation to what it would take to achieve success in MEMSA. Essentially, it's the reincarnation Super Bowl."

"I'm not really into sports right now," Jake said.

Liv rolled her eyes and said, "OK, how about metaphorically, then, it's the *pièce de résistance*, the *crème de la crème*? Yes, I enjoyed being French for a few lifetimes."

"*Mais certainement*," Roland said. "Nothing could be better. MEMSA is spiritual mastership. And the more of those Souls incarnate on earth, the better place earth will be."

"So," Jake said with a grin, "the Dalai Lama is getting tired of doing all the heavy lifting?"

Roland and Liv merely grinned a little as Roland continued, "He doesn't really care. At a certain level there is no heavy lifting. But, getting accepted into the program..."

"I can't imagine it's harder than some of the lifetimes I've had to endure," Liv said. "I'm a quick study with a low

tolerance for pain. I want to sign up. I think it's about time I got promoted."

Jake appeared far less confident. "Forgive me for being the Devil's advocate here, but I have a fairly strong intuition that the difficulty of the program is because it's more like Marine boot camp, metaphorically speaking."

"Well, you don't have to apply, then," Liv said. "Go to Canada and be a sheepherder, nice and peaceful."

"Actually, Liv, a bit of bad news," Roland said, looking up from his screen. "Turns out individually neither of you have the incarnational prerequisites for MEMSA application."

Liv groaned. "Let me guess," she said, "but if we both apply our combined credits it will get us accepted?"

"OK, I'll do it," Jake piped up with sudden enthusiasm.

"Be aware, Jake," Roland cautioned, "whatever has been messed up or covered up or otherwise distorted in any way in the past between the two of you will need to be worked on and fixed once and for all. That is just to qualify for acceptance into the training program. It will, however, be possible to view the MEMSA lifetime you will experience with Liv, in advance. You'll then have time to agree to it or not."

"Sort of like waiting in line," Jake said, "for the plunge of death rollercoaster ride and watching everyone ahead of you scream and vomit?"

"You know, if you've already got that kind of attitude, we may as well forget it," Liv said.

"C'mon, I'm kidding!" Jake backpedaled, "Sure, let's do it."

"Excellent," said Roland. "I have a real good feeling about the two of you! I'll notify the MEMSA supervisor that

you're on your way. Go out into the hall, take a right and look for the office marked MEMSA. Easy, right?"

They stood up slowly and walked out of Roland's office. Once in the hallway, Jake said, "Part of me wants to run away now. Become that shepherd in Canada."

"I understand," Liv said, "but it's just an application. We don't have to take the job. Look, here it is." She knocked.

"Come in, Jake and Liv," they heard.

A man looking very much like Roland greeted them.

"Yes, I know," he said, "that first guy is my twin brother. My name is Winston and I congratulate you both on your interest in the MEMSA program, in volunteering to make everything make sense."

Jake immediately asked, "Whoa, I thought we would just learn why things don't make sense. There was nothing about being responsible for *making them make sense!*"

"How would it be different, Jake?" Liv asked, then turned to Winston and said, "What if it is the very repetition of nonsense that gradually, inevitably, brings a Soul to the tipping point? Couldn't it then be said that nonsensical behavior is indeed making sense all along because of the sensible fruit it eventually bears in consciousness?"

"Very good, Liv! An 8-billion-piece jigsaw puzzle makes sense once assembled, but actually it will never be completely assembled. As an incentive, let me say that what you're applying to is better than anything Earth can offer a physical body, mind, and emotions."

Jake rolled his eyes a little and said, "I was never good at jigsaw puzzles."

“Maybe you just don’t remember being good at them,” Winston said. “For instance, do you remember being a writer?”

“Can’t say as I do.”

“Our calculations show that for you to succeed in the MEMSA program for this next incarnation, you will have to become a writer again. You may be able to make a living at it, but the primary goal will be consciousness expansion. And that will involve a period of excessive drinking.”

“What?” Liv exclaimed. “An alcoholic impoverished writer for a partner? I think I want to pull the plug on this right now!”

“Yeah, me too,” Jake said. “Couldn’t I just be a boring insurance guy in the suburbs of Des Moines with a wife and 2.5 kids, and Little League games? You know, work at the same job for forty years and then retire with a pension in Boca Raton?”

“Yes, Jake,” Winston said, “that and other comfortable options are plentifully available. However, it will leave you at the end of that life, despite regular church attendance and exemplary moral behavior, with the nagging sense that something, maybe many things, just didn’t make sense! And you’ll be back here at the DMV needing to do this all over again.”

“What’s Liv’s profile if I could ask,” Jake said.

“Excellent, stable and lucrative work record, no incidences of drug or alcohol abuse, but... “

“But what!” Liv shouted, obviously panicked.

“A history of generalized, ongoing depression. Easily treatable, however,” Winston answered.

“Oh boy,” Liv said. “How in God’s name would such a partnership lead to making everything make sense?”

“Well, that would be the training, wouldn’t it?” Winston answered. “Trust me, we have been doing this for a long time and we have many successful members. Be aware that your memories of this meeting and the choices you have made will be able to be activated after incarnating. When you need them.”

“Strikes me as the opposite of blacking out while drinking and waking up in jail or the hospital or an alley,” said Jake.

“Exactly, Winston said with a smile. “You would not at first be able to recall that you were in a higher state of consciousness when you created and agreed to your new life. However, you would have enough of a recollection of our meeting here today to take responsibility for your experience, just as you would have to when you black out from drinking. With practice, it will all eventually begin to come back to you. Even more, you will be able to make sense of what you call blackouts. As our name indicates.”

“I do recall blackouts in lives past,” Jake said. “What will be the trigger that activates enough memory to get me sober this next life in MEMSA, as I assume that is a requirement?”

“Yes, it certainly is,” Winston answered, then made an odd request of Liv. “Could you take off your shoes, please?”

As she did, she said, “Don’t tell Jake he has a foot fetish too!”

Winston didn’t answer, but Jake knew from that moment. That was his recollection key of himself, Liv, and what they were doing on earth together.

“Liv, do you still want to pass on this plan?” Jake said with a new sincerity in his eyes as he looked at Liv. “If nothing else, it’s just good to have a partner in the wilderness down there.”

She paused, then answered, “What will be my sign to recognize Jake?”

“He won’t be trying to have a relationship with you,” said Roland. “He will respect you as a friend, and you will be able to dialogue with him at length about spirituality in a way no one else ever had.”

“Really?” Liv said with surprise.

“Really,” Jake chimed in. “I’ve evolved in my relationships past thinking murder/suicide is the answer. Now that thought just comes up occasionally, and only theoretically.”

“Yes, let’s do it,” Liv said with sudden enthusiasm, “I’ll be rational reincarnator and you’ll be irrational reincarnator.”

“Won’t we cancel each other out, then?”

“If you leave the math to me, Jake, we’ll be ok.”

Winston smiled broadly and said, “Ok, just quick signatures here and here if you please.”

As they signed, the letters come out in gold bas-relief.

“Thank you,” Winston said.

“When I signed, it made me feel like our hundreds of thousands of lonely past life children had at last found the true parents to bring them to their true home,” Liv said, teary-eyed.

“I think it’s more like we’re tossing ourselves a message in a bottle,” said Jake. “It will float on the tides until it reaches the barren shore of earth where we have willingly stranded ourselves for a greater purpose.”

“Hey, Robinson Crusoe,” Liv jibed, “as much as I like hanging out on a beach, why not just program an embryonic alarm to wake us up on a regular basis to adjust our course? Wouldn’t that be the way that makes the most sense?”

“I guess,” Jake said.

“Don’t worry,” Winston said. “It’s already done. Now off you go. Your wombs are waiting. Sorry. But do remember to listen for the sound.”

“Which one?” Liv said as she and Jake began to dematerialize into the proverbial twinkles in their dads’ eyes.

“All of them,” Winston answered.

## THE FORGIVENESS OF THE MUSES

Another morning began at the Blue Star Coffee House, Saloon, Fafe, B&B, and Meditation center, etc. Our establishment changes according to who shows up at any given time.

My name is Sal. Barkeep, manager, boss, whatever title is necessary. And, of course, none of them are necessary at all.

Because the Blue Star is not an earthly establishment. We have our counterparts there, but they are the palest of imitations. They only make people lust for the real thing. Until they find out you have to die to get it. The dying doesn't have to be permanent, of course, but everyone usually misses that part in the fine print of the liability release.

Anyway, I'm happy to work here, 365 earth days per earth year. Earth is like my handicapped child/sibling/parent/friend. They want to learn and do better and be happy but it's a struggle, still, after some 4 billion years.

I had an Australopithecus gentleman in here recently, who found much in common with a 21<sup>st</sup> century politician.

And, yes, we get a considerable number of celebrities. Why just last night I'd been convinced to have a drink with Ernest and Scott, the writers. Just one drink, but I still feel a little hungover this morning. Scott insists he plans to go to the AA meeting that gathers regularly in the back of our building, but Ernest remains a resolute mojito drinker.

It is 9:35 a.m. now, for anyone keeping track of earth time, and time to make breakfast. Virginia will be arriving soon. Yes, that Virginia of *To the Light House*. We've been

married several times in several lives. We remain close friends, as we all are in the cosmic sense.

“Morning dear,” I say, setting her breakfast down on the bar. “I hope you’re not still upset about *Fifty Shades of Gray*, are you?” It was our private little joke.

“Oh Sal, how you love to kid,” she says, “It makes me wish I hadn’t been so young when Oscar died. I would have loved to have some of his wit rub off on me. But that would be all! What? Too early for the ribald my dear?”

“A little, but only because I’m feeling a bit woozy.”

“You cannot have even one drink without side effects. You must accept that!”

“Yes, dear.”

We smile at each other knowingly.

I should mention here a lot of knowingness happens at the Blue Star. People often find conversation of the earthly sense too slow and, frankly, incomprehensible. We writers do our best to assist. But it is similar to teaching 5<sup>th</sup> graders. Made more difficult, of course, if we have various and sundry addictions to overcome.

Speaking of which, entering almost on cue, here comes the almost always charming Oscar Wilde.

“Bit early, isn’t it, Oscar?” Virginia queries.

Wilde chuckles. “My dear, you ought to know I’ve yet to retire! Sal, my good man, my usual please.”

“I’m sorry Mr. Wilde, but we are fresh out of good-looking young boys at the moment.”

“Oh Sal, I know you quip with only the greatest of affection for your literary superior, but you may not know that today is my 57<sup>th</sup> day of total and utter celibacy!”

Virginia almost spits out her cereal.

“Congratulations, Oscar, I guess,” I say.

“Merci beaucoup. I find it frees up considerable energy. I am at work on a new play as we speak.”

“We look forward to it,” I say.

“As well you should. Now, as to this new theory of yours we discussed here yesterday. Are all past lives indeed the one same life? I’d be interested in hearing you elucidate over an espresso, please.”

“Well, OK, though I am not fully awake yet,” I say, making espressos for both us. “I will give a quick example. Virginia was born on January 25<sup>th</sup>, the sign of Aquarius. I was supposed to have been born on January 25<sup>th</sup> but was late by a couple of weeks or so. My writing and Virginia’s are remarkably similar. After her death in 1941, did Virginia decide to reincarnate as me in 1955 and begin writing again in 1965?”

“To be freed from the shackles of publishing success and acclaim perhaps?” Oscar says.

“Perhaps, or perhaps just to have a relatively safe and longer life in order to more fully develop the themes she had been unable to earlier,” I say.

“What have you to say about this, Virginia?” Oscar asks.

“I would prefer to know what’s going on with Sal this morning. He seems troubled. Usually, the patrons tell the bartender their troubles. What say we reverse that?”

“Thank you, dear,” I tell her. Oscar sips his espresso with a look of disappointment that the conversation will no longer be about him.

“Well,” I begin, “as you both know, I’m running a body in the year 2025 in New England.”

“Oh, dear Lord, my condolences,” Oscar says. “It brings to mind my *Ballad of Reading Gaol*.”

“Not nearly, Oscar. Although I must confess to a similar penchant for hyperbole, I will try to avoid it here. Anyway, we are in 2025, where I am currently 70 years old.”

“I cannot imagine what that would be like,” Oscar says, having died at 46.

“You’ve never had a life where you lived past 46?” I ask him.

“Not that I recall. I have always been about the aesthetic as we all know, so, hmm, old age, wrinkles...”

“What about the eye of the beholder?” Virginia intones.

“Shh!” Oscar rapidly puts a finger to his lips, whispering, “next thing you know...and here he is.”

“Ah, Will, my good man, what can I get you to drink?” I ask as Shakespeare comes to the bar.

“Nothing,” he says, dressed in clothing from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. “I’ve discovered a great secret I must impart before it is too late.”

Oscar, looking unfazed, says, “Let me guess, you didn’t really write the plays and poems you are credited with writing?”

“Of course not. Every thinking person knows that! But here is the secret. The real author, Sir Henry Neville, and I were one! I thought I was just profiting from the scheme to put my name on his works...”

“Which plainly you have through centuries of adulation,” Virginia says.

“Yes, there’s that. I have to say it’s comforting at times, but I really do believe there is nothing of substance to a name, and neither does Sir Henry. But here’s the point. People think,

including the personality known as Will, that they are doing something. They are actually doing nothing. It only appears that we poor mortals are strutting briefly on the stage...I forget the rest of that now....”

“Signifying nothing,” I add.

“Yes. Let’s say I do not attempt to interfere and the works of Sir Henry. What I really did was sign the copy he sent to me.”

Now Oscar looks puzzled and asks for another drink. “But who or what is writing for Sir Henry? Or are you saying Sir Henry is God?”

“Sir Henry is only *my* God. We all have our own. Maybe I will have a drink after all, barkeep. How’s the mead today?”

“OK now, hold on,” Oscar says, intrigued after his initial reluctance. “Are you saying my god, whoever that may be, would have told me to flee England rather than break my health in their idiotic penal system?”

“And mine,” Virginia joins in, “whom I always assumed to be Sappho the Greek poetess, might have discouraged me from my selfish act of suicide?”

Will takes a deep draught of mead and says, “I don’t have all the answers. I have just stumbled upon this myself through the strangest of circumstances. May I relate them to you?”

“Well,” Virginia quips, “we have eternity, so yes, the sooner you start the better.”

“Well,” says Will, “it was a typical night. Another performance at the Globe, another success, another party, another night passed out drunk in an alley. Only this time I was awakened by a guy in a white sequined suit and sunglasses saying, “That was your last chance.””

“Last chance at what?” I say, squinting my eyes to try to focus on his apparition, my head throbbing, made worse by the rare appearance of an unusually bright sun beating down on the London Street he was describing.

Will continues. “Last chance to kill yourself, he said to me. From now on your you are meant to be sober. Dear mysterious sir, I said to him as he helped me to my feet, I was not trying to kill myself. By no means! I am William Shakespeare, a famous and acclaimed playwright of the London stage, admired by crowds and even the queen herself!

“Walk with me, sassafras, he said, and I unsteadily complied, finding his accent most unusual and rather grating. Once we began blending in with the crowds, I expected his outlandish outfit to attract the attention of the constables, but no one seemed to notice.”

I interrupt his story at this point, saying, “That was Elvis.”

They all three intone simultaneously, “Who?”

“Elvis was a performer in mid-twentieth century America, and, well, here he is right now.”

“Pleased to meet y’all again,” Elvis says.

“Yes, you’re the man who awakened me from my drunken slumber!” Will exclaims.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” Oscar says, “have we also been acquainted in some manner?”

Elvis grins at him and says to me, “A large iced tea if you please, barman.”

I serve it up. He takes a swallow, then turns to the group and says, “We know each other. We know each other all too well. Except for Will here, he’s a newbie to the group. And

since he was doing a bad job telling the story, I had to come and explain.”

“Oh, dear God,” Will says, “I remember now. I did die of a fever after a night of heavy drinking! Correlation is not causation, but this Elvis gentleman apparently saved my afterlife! Otherwise, I would not be able to come to terms with the fact that I took credit for Sir Henry’s work. Even though he didn’t mind! He encouraged me. He required anonymity. He had already spent time incarcerated in the Tower of London, but he just had to go on writing. So in a way, I was of service to him and all of humankind in the succeeding generations!”

“It would be wonderful if we could get some confirmation on that from Sir Henry himself,” Oscar says, “Would he not have preferred that the truth eventually be known after he died?”

“Of course he did,” Will says, “but I had no time to honor his contractual request and confess. I died less than a year after him and lost the only copy of the contract. I suppose it may turn up someday, signed by us both.”

I reach under the bar and say, “Well, I have a copy here. We have copies and originals of everything at the Blue Star.”

“Oh, do read it aloud,” Oscar asks.

*I, William Shakespeare of Stratford, do freely admit to having been in the employ of Sir Henry Neville for purposes of affixing my name to his plays and poems so that his anonymity be preserved, per his solemn request, during his lifetime. Of all the works attributed to one William Shakespeare, I indeed did not pen a single line.*

*I, Sir Henry Neville, freely engage in partnership with the actor William Shakespeare to be my nom de plume as I*

*am his ghost writer. Furthermore, the actor William Shakespeare consents to make public in full and formal disclosure the truth of this arrangement as soon as possible upon my passing, taking no credit for himself but duly designating myself, Henry Neville, as the one and only true author of all such works heretofore represented by him.*

“So why didn’t you fess up and honor your contract, sassafras, Elvis asks, “What’s this about no time? You had almost a year!”

Sheepishly, Will answers, “Truth is, I couldn’t let go of the accolades. What was in my name only smelled sweeter.”

“And that,” I say, “is the topic for this evening. Letting go of fear, of pride, of greed, of lust...”

Oscar rolls his eyes. “The seven deadly sins? Isn’t it time we close the curtain on those cliches? I mean, we are all here to go beyond the conventional religions that have wrought such destruction upon earth, are we not?”

“Do not mistake the forest for the trees, Oscar,” Virginia offers. “We are here the way we are because of perversions of the muses. To which they do not take kindly. I was the longest lived on earth. And 59 is not that long! Oscar and Elvis, you both had so much more to create! Of course, there will be more chances, if we choose.”

“How, exactly, dear Virginia,” Oscar asks, “did we pervert the muses?”

Before she can answer the door swings open and a young, virile, energetic Jack London strides in and up to the bar, proclaiming, “If I may answer that, please?”

She nods, nonplussed by his sudden appearance.

“Hey, he only lived to be 40 years old,” Oscar objects, “Why should he...”

A stern look from Jack silences him. “Alcohol, drugs, ego, and greed. This is how we perverted the muses. Do I need to go on?”

“There’s got to be more to it than that, sassafras,” Elvis jumps in.

“Dear God, man, are those not reasons enough?” Jack replied.

At this point, Georgia O’Keefe strides briskly in and declare, “I would like to add my two cents to this 40-somethings club. But first, a peppermint tea if you have it, barkeep?”

I serve it up for her. She takes a healthy sip and begins. “99! I lived to be 99! I doubt we will get many patrons at this coffee house to top that. From 11 years after Custer’s Last stand to Reagan and the space Shuttle!”

The room is quiet. She takes another sip of tea.

“Identifying the perversions,” she begins, “is not nearly as important as avoiding them.”

The room remains quiet, the rest of them listening with sincere truth-seeking attentiveness.

“Remember to connect with nature, even if you must live in the city. We all choose to come to earth with the decision already made to work with our individual muse, sometimes more than one. The problem with you boys is, to use an old prairie expression, is that y’all got too big for your britches. And when that happens the blowback is such that you must find a way to numb it. Alcohol is the most popular way, but self-destruction in general is what you were seeking because you knew, even if you never admitted it to yourself, that you had perverted and betrayed your muse.”

“I fear we may soon hear the cautionary tale of Icarus flying too close to the sun,” Oscar says, looking a little bored now.

“Or too close to the sea,” Will says, “which would make the foam saturate his wings and make them too heavy to fly. Everybody forgets about that part, the need for balance.”

The group looks at him with some surprise, to which he reacts, “What? I could read. I wasn’t just a note taker for Sir Henry. Well, Sir Henry told me that. I never actually read it.”

“Georgia kept her balance,” Jack says. “Far easier said than done.”

“Hell,” Elvis says, “this makes me think I would have been better off driving a truck all my life. I would have had a much longer life, maybe working on a farm with nothing ever stronger than Jack Daniels occasionally. And just play and sing a little at county fairs.”

“Your muses brought you to other places, Elvis, as they did with us all, with your cooperation,” Jack says, “I do wonder, though, and maybe you can answer this barkeep, if the muses are our sources come from on high, where do *they* get their inspiration from?”

“You’ll have to ask them yourselves,” I say.

And just then, they appear. Thalia, Urania, Polyhymnia, Erato, Terpsichore, Melpomene, Euterpe, Clio, and Calliope. In the flesh, but outlined with a surging, steady tidepool of light that enveloped them all.

Then a sweet, kind, even motherly emanated from them, even though none of their mouths moved. Their vibration shimmered with a forgiving love.

*Dear ones,*

*“We are the muses of poetry, dance, history, music, love, tragedy, and comedy. We live only to kindle the flame of creation in any individual who so chooses to hold it. You have all created so much, so many great works of art so far, and the spark of art and creativity runs through the whole human race, always. Wildly different in all its manifestations but springing from the same source. We live with you, we breathe with you. When you suffer and die, we suffer and grieve with you. So, simply look and listen for us always. We do not judge your mistakes, your misspent and misused energies of your creative imaginations. It is all a gift.”*

And then they are gone, as were Jack, Will, Oscar, Georgia, and Elvis. It is closing time at the Blue Star, for now. I must be at one of our satellite locations.

The dialogues and lives will continue there.

## BUILDING NOTRE DAME

On the screen, two men—one older, one younger—are digging a trench.

“This really sucks,” the younger one says.

“What do you mean, aren’t you happy to have a job?”

“No way, I’m only doing this to get my father off my back. Once things calm down at home, I’m out of here. I mean, c’mon, we could work for 150 years on this stupid thing and still it won’t be finished.”

“Actually, they’re projecting it will take about 180, but it will be considered one of the finest examples of Gothic architecture for centuries afterwards.”

“180 years. And our life expectancy is what? 35? What’s the point of working on something we’ll never see finished?”

“If you believe in reincarnation, you know that it’s all working towards the goal of ultimate purification as a God Realized being.”

“So, you mean I could come back in another life and still be working this dead-end job?”

Before he has a chance to answer, the older man is taken away by soldiers. One of them tells the younger man,

“Forget what you heard. Your co-worker is a heretic and will be executed.”

The scene changes to the nearly completed cathedral. A caption at the bottom of the screen reads Paris, 1340 AD.

Two workers again, “Sure is taking shape nicely, don’t you think?” the older one says.

“It should,” says the younger one. “They’ve been at it for 180 years.”

“I used to have that attitude, not able to look at the big picture.”

“The big picture? You’re a peasant just like me! What’s the big picture?”

The older man leans in and whispers, “I’ll let you in on a big secret. We’ve lived before. I was here on this very site when they started work on this cathedral over 150 years ago. I was disgusted because I thought I wouldn’t live to see it finished, but here I am!”

“So, what’s the point of living again if you’re just going to come back to do the same thing?”

“To learn to do it better! I’m back now as one of the architects of one of the greatest cathedrals ever built! Not the lowly laborer I was before, like you are now.”

“Heretic!” the younger worker shouts. Soldiers rush over and the older man is taken away.

The scene changes to his cell the night before his execution, where a priest is speaking to him.

“You can’t be shooting your mouth off like that,” says the priest.

“Save it father, I’ve wised up to your game. I’m not worried about dying and eternal damnation. I know I’ll be right here back on earth in literally no time at all. I expect that in my next life, everyone will be a lot more open-minded.”

“Good luck with that. Look, I’m on your side. I’m not really a Catholic priest. I’m a spiritual secret agent here to see if you’re interested in joining our organization.”

“Is it going to save me from burning at the stake tomorrow?”

“No, that boat has sailed, but we can arrange between lives training so that you don’t have to go through all of this again. How many lives do you remember?”

“Just the one where I was the disaffected teenager working on the beginnings of the cathedral. There’s been more?”

He nodded with solemn affirmation. “We’ve been watching you for some time. Who are we, you’re wondering? Well, we’ve been known by many different names throughout the centuries. More of that later, but right now we need to get you up to speed before you execution. Do you remember anything else about the early cathedral worker’s life?”

“Well, one day a stone fell on me and I died.”

“Do you remember anything more about that?”

“I saw the stone start to fall, like it was in slow motion. The other guys ran but I stayed still. I even felt calm, thinking, well, I’m really losing interest in working on the cathedral and I don’t have any other exciting life options so if the reincarnation deal is real...”

“So, you committed suicide basically, which is why you ended up right back working on the cathedral.”

“Yeah, but with a little more status than before. Anyway, I would still have preferred to come back as a king or a pope.”

“Well, in the first place you hadn’t earned that. And even if you had, it would still mean coming back to earth. You’ve got a lot of clean up to do my friend, and the biggest part of it is that you don’t think you have much cleaning up to do.”

“I’m being executed tomorrow. Shouldn’t that count for something?”

“Only if you utilize it for the next time. Progressing from laborer to architect is OK, but getting yourself imprisoned and executed for shooting off your mouth isn’t so swift.”

The next scene is the prisoner being brought to his execution. He laughs the whole way, saying, “Burned at the stake. Really? Why the drama? You could save a lot of time and wood with just one lop of the broadsword. It’s a bit of overkill if you ask me. Hey lowly paid guards tying the ropes and stacking the wood, you might be on the other side of this next time. I’d reconsider my employment situation if I were you.”

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## BALANCE DUE

When Michael turned 18 and graduated from high school, his parents presented him with a bill.

It said, *The cost of your upbringing: \$244,488.89.*

“Of course, you don’t have to pay the \$244,000 all at once,” his mother said.

Michael laughed out loud, sure it was a joke. “How long *do* I have?”

“Well, until we both die, of course,” his father said, “but bear in mind interest is accruing.”

“You’re actually serious about this?” Michael said.

“Oh, we’re quite serious. Michael, we *have* to be,” his mother said.

“Why did you have children if you didn’t want to foot the bill for them?” Michael said, still wondering if they were just putting him on.

“Once I got pregnant, there wasn’t a choice,” his mother said.

“But you had a choice whether or not to get pregnant in the first place?” Michael protested, immediately wishing he hadn’t asked that question. He knew young people were often careless, and expected that would be the answer as to why he was here now.

“Yes, of course, we had the choice. And we made a choice,” his mother said.

“That we did not think entirely through,” his father continued. “I would see your mother in class in high school, and I just knew we would fall in love, make a baby, get married, have two more children. And here we are. I guess it

was like choosing to buy a ticket for a rollercoaster ride. You can't just take the ride part of the way, you know?"

Michael was at a loss for words. He knew now that they were serious. They expected to be paid back! It was like some Twilight Zone Christmas where someone gives a gift and the obvious expectation is for the receiving party to reciprocate.

"Is it that your strapped for cash now?" Michael asked, "Now that I'm out of high school, I understand that if I continue living in the basement I ought to chip in for house expenses. But \$250,000?"

"It's a little more complicated than that," his mother said.

"Michael, remember in some of arguments that you would often say, 'I didn't ask to be born!'" his father said with a smile. Michael wasn't smiling at all. In fact, he was beginning to feel a little sick.

"Well, the truth is, you *did*. You were a deciding participant in the process just as your mother and I and your brother and sister were. It was our karma to all become a family once more."

"Karma? Since when do you guys believe in karma? Have you joined a cult?"

His parents both laughed, his mother answering, "Millions of people in the world, none of them in cults, believe in karma and reincarnation. True, not so much in America, but your father and I spent two years in Nepal after college."

"And that's when you converted to...?" Michael asked.

"Buddhism," his father said. "Well, a sort of freestyle Buddhism."

"This is the first I'm hearing about this?" Michael said.

“We didn’t want to influence you,” his mother said. “We wanted you to discover for yourself what worked best for you.”

Her words didn’t help. Michael felt like he’d tricked and kept in the dark. “This is a lot to digest all at once. I don’t have the grades, or money of course, for college and I’m certainly not going to join the military or become a plumber. I mean, really, you ought to have clued me in on all this sooner!”

“We probably should have, son,” his father said. “We were wrong to leave your career guidance to the public high school and media influences. But we were worried that if we tried to get you to consider Buddhism, you would unthinkingly reject it just because it was coming from your parents.”

“Look, why can’t we just call it even and say that we’re starting now from scratch? I’ll get a job and pay you guys some room and board money until I figure out what to do.”

“Oh, if only,” his dad said. “That would be like me telling the bank to forgive the 15 more years of mortgage payments we on this house. You see, for all of us not to reincarnate again, and maybe end up with you being a single parent to us as handicapped children in a low-income housing project, you have to settle this debt. Then we’ll all be free to move on.”

Michael’s mouth fell open at his father’s words, like the human facial equivalent of a spinning hourglass indicating a hard drive wasn’t responding. He did finally manage to stammer,, “Debt? Handicapped child? Please, don’t tell me anymore right now. I need to take a walk and think about it.”

“We’ll be here when you get back, son, no pressure,” his dad said.

Michael grabbed his laptop and went to the park. He opened it to search on karma and reincarnation. 10,700,000 results. He closed the laptop. A girl from his high school class was walking by.

“Michael! How are you?”

“Hi, Janet. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I’m just out for a walk celebrating the fact that high school is over! You don’t look so happy. Did you not get into the college you want?”

“I’m putting off college.”

“I was also going to do that, but I figure my parents will stay off my back about money if I just jump into four years of college. I mean I’ll have to work a little, but...”

Michael couldn’t hold back.. He blurted, “Janet, can you believe my parents want me to pay them back for what it cost them to raise me to the age of 18?”

She paused, stared, then laughed uproariously to the point of tears, needing to sit down on the park bench beside him before asking, “How much do they want?”

“\$244,000! And get this. They say if I don’t, we might all have to reincarnate in a low rent housing project. Have you ever heard anything so crazy? Do you know about reincarnation? Do you believe in it?”

“Oh, I’ve believed in it from the time I could walk and talk.”

“Really?”

“As soon as I started walking, I remembered walking down a path beside a river somewhere. Not in a toddler’s body but as a Native American man of the Crow tribe, and within minutes a Cheyenne warrior on horseback came galloping by and killed me.”

“Did you *remember it* or just imagine it?” Michael challenged her.

The look in her eyes gave him his answer and it triggered a reincarnation memory of his own. He began to speak, unsure of where the words were coming from, but having no doubt as to their veracity. It was like looking up answers to a test in the back of the book. It felt a little like cheating, but not really, because he knew he’d already determined the answers for himself and had just forgotten them.

“The Cheyenne and Crow had a long-standing rivalry. Crow warriors would steal Cheyenne women. It’s too astounding to think we both lived before as Native Americans and...”

“You killed me?” she said with a smile.

“Why are you smiling? I feel so guilty now!”

She smiled even more broadly, saying, “But I’m still here,” making air quotes around ‘I’m.’”

“Are you going to have to kill me in this life as revenge?” he asked, making air quotes around ‘this life’?

She went on smiling. “It’s not always a tit for tat kind of thing. I wish I had studied more about it myself, but my parents are strict Catholics and wouldn’t be open to anything Hindu or Buddhist. Your parents must be...”

“Freestyle Buddhists, they told me, “whatever that is.”

And then, looking at Janet, Michael had the most unsettling sense that they were going to have sex and get married! He had the strongest urge to bolt up from the park bench and run as fast as he could away from her, but a force as sure as duct tape kept him sitting there, hearing his dad’s words.

“Once you buy the ticket you can’t just take part of the ride. You did ask to be born. We all agreed to it.”

“What are you thinking, Michael?” Janet asked.

“Are we supposed to get married?” he answered, afraid he’d embarrass them both.

“Well, there was that killing me by the riverside thing, and this would be a way for me to get even!”

He flinched.

“Michael, I’m sorry, it was a joke! You don’t have to be worried about money or marriage or anything. You have choice!”

“I certainly don’t want to choose coming back as the parent of a handicapped child in a low-income housing project! There’s got to be another way!”

She smiled slyly, almost affectionately, and said, “There’s always another way, Michael. I’m fortunate this time that my parents don’t have the same deal with me as you do with yours. I’ve already paid their way many times over. Whatever it cost them to raise me this time is a drop in the bucket by comparison, and they know it.”

“So, you were rich in your past lives?”

“Oh yes, and it was pretty good for the most part. But that doesn’t mean I know how to do it this time, especially if I get pregnant with you at 18!”

“No problem!” Michael exclaimed. “We just don’t have sex.”

“Sure, you say that now. The problem is that we often can’t control our choices, don’t you think? Because we can’t know what’s better or worse. Then, after making a choice, we have regrets and don’t want to take responsibility. So the easy thing to do is just say I had no choice!”

“I’m sorry, Janet, I don’t understand.”

“One time I went to visit the Louisa May Alcott house. The tour had already started so I jumped in a little late. At one point I realized the guide was describing things I had already seen. So, I politely raised my hand and said that I had already been through this part and would be leaving. I didn’t want her to think I was just bailing because of boredom or something.”

“Are you trying to tell me you were Louisa May Alcott in a previous life? That women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were very polite?” Michael asked, clueless.

Janet rolled her eyes mercilessly and said, “No, but thanks for playing. Let me finish. The tour guide, without missing a beat in her delivery, said, ‘Of course, thanks for coming.’ And then, with a smile, she said, ‘If you don’t speak up, you’ll just end up going round and round forever.’”

Michael was silent, at first befuddled, but then a light bulb went off. “I’d like to speak up and not go around another time, deferring to a choice I won’t be happy with.”

He took a deep breath, feeling the relief of sudden awareness. An awareness of many more possibilities than he previously thought had existed. But then he added, “There’s still the problem of the \$244,000? But wait, what if...”

“Yes,” she widened her eyes in optimistic expectation.

“What if, like your tour guide story, they were speaking metaphorically? They just threw that big dollar number at me to wake me up? To make me speak up? Maybe I can repay them in some equivalent, non-monetary value?”

“You might be on to something there, Michael. Just in our case, for instance, it might be as simple as us just being good friends to balance the scales. Maybe we’d eventually

want to become intimate, even get married, but obviously neither of us is ready for that right now. Uh-oh.”

“What?” Michael said, ready to panic again.

“I just remembered a past life of mine with your parents. They were tenant farmers on my estate in Ireland. I treated them very badly.”

She shuddered involuntarily, then said, “Maybe, if we get together and have a happy healthy long-lasting marriage, that will kill two birds with one stone!”

“How so?” Michael asked.

“You will repay them by just being happy, and I will repay them by making you happy. Also, not to brag, but I’ve been accepted by one of the better colleges thanks to my sterling grades these past four years. I expect I will easily acquire well over 200,000 within a few years, once I graduate and begin working. So, if need be, as your parents get older, we can help them out financially. But don’t plan on marrying me just for my money now!”

Michael’s entire body finally relaxed as he laughed and said, “But despite money and careers, you really think past life karma can be resolved just by being happy and trying to make other people happy?”

“Why don’t you invite me over to meet your parents? I think once they see us together, they might just tear up that bill!”

## PROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

**M**y name is Kevin Calloway and I am the owner and editor of a small independent publishing company in London, Kentucky.

One afternoon I met with two gentlemen who had a book proposal for me. It was the afternoon that changed my life forever.

They introduced themselves as Harold and Edward Hellman, brothers from Rhode Island.

“I, myself, am a transplanted New Englander,” I began. “I’m curious what brings you gentlemen all this way. Certainly not just for a book proposal, which could have been handled by email, right?”

Harold answered. “Perhaps the best reply to that question would be if we began straight away with showing you a document.”

He reached into his briefcase, withdrew a folder, and placed it on my desk.

“Before you open that, sir,” Edward joined in, “we advise you to keep firmly in mind what we’ve read your website. We understand that you are an advocate for reincarnation AND you believe that Sir Henry Neville is the true author of the works of Shakespeare.”

“Well, yes,” I said, “that’s an unusual pairing of the many interests on my site, but true on both counts.”

And then I opened the folder.

Safely sealed within clear plastic was a yellowed piece of paper that read:

*Year of our Lord, May 20, 1615*

*I, William Shakespeare of Stratford, do freely admit to having been in the employ of Sir Henry Neville for purposes of affixing my name to his plays and poems so that his anonymity be preserved, per his solemn request, during his lifetime. Of all the works attributed to one William Shakespeare, I indeed did not pen a single line.*

*I, Sir Henry Neville, freely engage in partnership with the actor William Shakespeare to be my nom de plume as I am his ghost writer. Furthermore, the actor William Shakespeare consents to make public in full and formal disclosure the truth of this arrangement as soon as possible upon my passing, taking no credit for himself but duly designating myself, Henry Neville, as the one and only true author of all such works heretofore represented by him.*

I leaned back in my chair. “Well, this is quite a document, gentlemen. Certainly, you can’t expect me to believe it is genuine, can you?”

They were silent.

“Can you?” I repeated.

“Our only expectation sir is that you give us a fair hearing,” Edward slowly began, “which would include a *willingness to accept the possibility* that the document is genuine because...”

“Because?”

“Because its signatories sit before you now.”

“Oh dear,” I said, “is this some sort of prank my old college buddy Chris put you guys up to? Wouldn’t it have been better if you’d come in dressed in doublets and codpieces?”

They both chuckled amiably. “Dreadfully uncomfortable they were,” Harold said. “but, plainly, you indicate your familiarity with the Elizabethan era.”

“Yes, I have been fascinated by it almost since I could read. I’ve had dreams of living in that time, and when I visited London, I experienced numerous episodes of strong déjà vu, a vivid sense of knowing streets and buildings. but the idea that the two of you are in fact the reincarnations of Neville and Shakespeare, and have showed up here with the document, that...” I found I couldn’t continue speaking, only shaking my head.

” Are you ok Mr. Calloway?” Harold asked.

“Yes, I’m fine, it’s just that...”

“It’s just that you would *like* to believe that the document is real we are indeed who we say we are, would you not?” Edward said, with a keen intuitiveness.

There was a long silence in the room. Here sat before me two older men in their mid to late 60’s. In a way, they seemed more genuine to me than the document. It was just a piece of paper after all, even though it seemed to made of linen. Anyone can forge something, and they have throughout history. The shroud of Turin, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Rosetta Stone, hell, the Zapruder film, UFO, moon landings and 9/11 photographs and films were examples that people argued over endlessly.

Objects are objects, people are people, and one version of truth may not be the same for all of us. Yes, death and taxes and gravity are taken as measurable constants, but the certainty I began to feel as I sat there with these men was of equal, even greater certainty. But certainty of what, exactly?

“Sir, I compliment you on your patience so far,” said Harold. “If I were in your position, I might have already shown these two senior citizens the door! Preposterous is too mild a

word for what we propose. But at this point, might we impose upon your good graces a bit more?"

"What is the saying?" Edward jumped in, "you ain't seen nothin' yet?"

I grinned politely, "Please go on."

And Harold did.

"As you know, we were loyal subjects of her Majesty, Elizabeth I, who passed on some years before us. Nevertheless, in the afterlife, or life between lives, Elizabeth gave us an assignment."

"An assignment? From the dead Queen Elizabeth?"

"For our reincarnated selves," Edward said.

"Why couldn't she just reincarnate and do it herself?"

"Her Majesty was good at a number of things, but writing was not one of them," Harold said. "We were tasked, Will and I, to return and set right the hoax we set in motion with this document.

He paused. "And we need your assistance."

"My assistance?"

"You sir, are the reincarnation of William Jaggard, the publisher of the first folio," Harold said.

"Really?," I said with a scoff. "Then I wish I'd kept a few copies for my reincarnated self. I'd be rich right now!"

"Your polite skepticism is well noted," said Harold. "We have almost concluded our case. Edward, would you continue?"

"Her Majesty foresaw that literature of the caliber of Shakespeare/Neville would fall into a miasmatic pit of destruction by the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a means of remedy, the average person needs to know who really wrote the immortal

works of Shakespeare, so they can go back and re-read and absorb their wisdom in a new light!”

Harold jumped back in at this point, looking suddenly animated,

“Because my writings, yes, my writings, had become so renowned, so imbued in the consciousness, and because the misappropriation of the authorship, the lie, had become more and more entrenched in the public mind and in academia in particular...”

He stopped speaking and seemed to be having trouble catching his breath.

“Are you OK, Harold?” I asked. “Would you like a glass of water?”

“He’s fine,” Edward said. “Let me continue. Her Majesty felt that the longer major untruths are permitted to exist, the closer humanity comes to a tipping point of destruction. I think you would agree, Mr. Calloway, that something is amiss in the truth of humanity and in the truth of life on earth. Of course, this has been true for a long time, but the overpopulation and electronic connections of humanity have now put us on a razor’s edge. On one side is the potential for redemption, hope, freedom, and truth. On the other is destruction born of the ongoing deceits and disempowerments of people by the manipulation of their consciousnesses. Phew, might I have that glass of water? Might you have anything stronger, in fact?”

“Just coffee, I’m afraid.”

“Just water then.”

I got them both bottled waters from the office minifridge and replied, “Even if I believed everything you’ve said here today, surely you realize that the chances are slim to

none that someone is going to go around and change all the book covers and bylines for your works. Not to mention coffee mugs, sweatshirts, and so on.”

“What a shabby goal that would be, sir,” Harold said, offended. “The fact that I declined authorship in the first place is proof enough that transient identity means little to me. I am simply concerned that the truth be made manifest to the deepest and highest degree possible! And perhaps the most significant truth of all is that there is no death! The acceptance of reincarnation as truth, that we have lived before, and that we will live again, will imbue the mass consciousness with a wisdom that will safeguard, preserve, and elevate humanity in ways heretofore not known on the planet! The mental prison walls of fear and illusion will begin to crumble! No Inquisitions or governmental forces will cause humanity to recant of this divine truth!”

Harold drew a deep breath sipped his water and said, “Once you publish my book, sir, it will make plain the truth that I, Harold Hellman, unknown writer and retired housepainter, am in fact Sir Henry Neville, the true author of the works of Shakespeare. And you, now reincarnated as Kevin Calloway, were previously William Jaggard, publisher of the first folio in 1623. The very outlandish grandiosity of this claim will serve to begin deconstructing the fear of believing in such things. Some by curiosity, some by ridicule, but either way, the truth will be set in motion!”

“Hold on a moment,” I said, sipping my own water. “I simply came back as a book publisher again? Are you sure I wasn’t really Christopher Marlowe or Ben Johnson or somebody a little more noteworthy?”

“And thus, the human ego strikes again!,” said Harold. “Why would you not be content as a publisher to further the legacies of many publishers who were, if not outrightly murdered, otherwise pilloried in various ways for daring to expose uncomfortable truths?”

“A most noble role,” Edward added. “Believe me, Kit Marlowe and Ben would have killed for it! They did, later, but that’s another story.”

“You, Mr. Calloway, stand to gain the right of eminence over the crumbling walls of established, archaic, misinformative teachings, both religious and otherwise. Within the ever-changing flow of earthly time, composed of ever-shifting personalities and dramas, runs a wellspring of truth that supersedes and subsumes them all. By having the courage to place a paddle in the divine course of that stream, the little boats we call our current lives will cease their aimless drifting and redirect to new and brighter shores. Approximately 4 million books per year are printed in the United States alone. It *would* take the reincarnation of a Shakespeare to stand out in that crowd would it not?”

It was like being in the audience of a stage production. I could almost see him performing in a doublet, codpiece, and neck ruffle.

He went on, “Do you recall, sir, the dream we had last night? The dream, the most important dream we had together? There is an old library with musty cobwebs on the shelves. No one’s been there for a long time. I run my finger along a table picking up a trail of dust. And the quiet! Library quiet of course, but more like tomb quiet. I start to wander down the halls, dazzled by the volume of books. It is as vast as the population of Calcutta or New York city. Such density that

it makes me feel helpless, drowning in knowledge too multitudinous to digest. And yet still I want to try. I'd always wished I could have visited the library of Alexandria before it burned.

“Then, shafts of light start shooting through the stacks, and I panic when I realize it's fire and the books are burning! They fall in flaming gobs from the higher shelves, I start to run, remembering how some of the Dead Sea Scrolls were burned for firewood by shepherds that didn't realize their value. I must save these books, but how? I run faster, reaching a hill where there is more fire, more books burning. But this time people are doing it! Intentionally, even happily tossing them on the fire. I can't believe what I'm seeing, but I know it's happened. Nazi Germany, even the American south when Beatle records and paraphernalia were burned in protest over their 'we're more popular than Jesus' remark. I know I can't stop them. I turn and look behind me at the smoldering pile of rubble and ash. And then I see you, Mr. Calloway, and demand that you repair this damage! You ask me how and I withdraw from my shirt a copy of the *First Folio: Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories and Tragedies*. And then we awaken, do we not?”

“We do,” I said. “I've had that dream many times over the years. All I can say at this point is that I'm not ready to believe either the document or your past lives 100%. But whoever you truly are most certainly deserves further research. And, from hearing your passion and erudition, maybe a book contract. I mean, what publisher would pass up a chance to publish something new by Shakespeare? Unless it's terrible, of course.”

“Splendid! Shall we adjourn to the nearest tavern to celebrate over several strong pints?” Edward immediately asked.

“I think I need to take some time with water only to absorb the contents of this meeting, Mr. Hellman. I take it you have your first draft with you?”

“Most certainly,” Harold said with verve, withdrawing from his briefcase a thick document with an imposing title page that said:

***Being the Full and Honest Account of how Sir Henry Neville and his nom de plume, William Shakespeare, were so instructed by her Majesty Queen Elizabeth I to reincarnate on earth and set right the hoax that had been perpetrated upon the literary world for over four centuries.***

“We’re going to have to work on the title,” I said.

“From my editor’s lips to God’s ears, sir,” Harold said. We shall go and leave you to it. You shall find our contact information within the document.”

We all stood and shook hands. I felt drunk, but more mentally lucid than ever. I could not wait to begin reading. But as I watched them exit the doorway. I also could not wait until I got to see and talk with them again.

And then I turned to page one.

## **Introduction**

*Opening scene. A royal palace. Henry Neville and William Shakespeare stand around looking confused.*

WILL: Henry?

HENRY: Will?

WILL: What are you doing here?

HENRY: What are *you* doing here?

WILL: I thought I died.

HENRY: As did I. I mean, I knew I died. But you were still alive and were supposed to reveal the truth about...

WILL: Yes, I know, but I died less than a year later. I didn't have time to get around to doing that. Besides, I lost the contract.

HENRY (*looking exasperated*) I knew it was wrong to trust you with that! Well, it doesn't matter now that we're dead. We must be in some kind of purgatory for what we have done. I have to say, I never thought purgatory would look so much like Whitehall Palace. And so much bigger and nicer!

LOUD VOICE: The Queen will see you both now!

WILL: Uh-oh

They are ushered into her presence.

HENRY: Your Majesty, I thought...

ELIZABETH: You thought I was dead! I am, you fool, and so are you! Do you think we could afford anything as grand as this in England? Stand up, will you. No one kneels and bows here, I found that out right away. Let me cut to the chase, gentlemen. As I'm sure you recall, I died some 13 years before the two of you. When I arrived here, I was as surprised and dumbfounded as the both of you are now. Which is why it's good I got here first. I was never so busy on earth as I am here now cleaning up all the messes left behind by my "loyal" subjects!

WILL: So, this is purgatory?

ELIZABETH: Please don't interrupt the Queen! Purgatory in a manner of speaking, and not the Catholic manner I assure you! You see, gentlemen, we will all be returning to fleshly form. Everything will look and feel the same for a little while to help you transition. But we were all wrong down there, Catholics and Protestants alike. There is no death, just a change of venue. And clothes. I could have gotten into something more comfortable but I was always rather fond of the regalia. I will be returning once more as Queen, Victoria to be specific, to oversee the ascendancy of the empire, but the two of you will want to think about T-shirts, overalls, work boots.

But before we all return, there are some matters to resolve. First of all, Henry, you weren't fooling anybody, least of all me. Will was an amiable chap, but there was no way he could write the lines I heard on stage. I thought to throw you back into the tower again, but reconsidered. What's the point, I thought. If he wants to give Will the credit, let him!

And so, among numerous other tasks assigned me when I arrived here, hoping for a nice rest, I find I must arrange lifetimes for both of you to set things right. Are you listening?

HENRY, WILL: Yes, Your Majesty

ELIZABETH: Alright then, here it is. The two of you will reincarnate as brothers in America, specifically Rhode Island, the colony founded by that fine Protestant boy, Roger Williams. You, Henry, will be a writer once more, and you, Will, a portrait and mural artist. However, the family into which you will be born will be anything but artistically or intellectually inclined. This of course, is by karmically balancing design since you, Henry, abdicated your authorship

to Will, who agreed to go along, and even profit from the deception.

HENRY: Your Majesty, I did not expect to ‘reincarnate,’ as you say at all, I...”

ELIZABETH: Of course not! None of us did! Did anyone in England in the 15 and 1600’s even know about Buddhism and the concept of reincarnation? I doubt it. We were too busy with the Catholic/Protestant nonsense. But look around, here we are, talking. If necessary, I can bring my father Henry back to confirm things for you, but he is busy digging ditches as an indentured Irish servant in Massachusetts as a ‘reward’ for his behavior. And believe you me, he was grateful to get off that easy! As are the both of you.

Now, back to your next incarnations. Your parents won’t understand you will be forced into the family business which you will hate. But you will...yes, Henry?”

HENRY: I thought Your Majesty said we would be a writer and an artist...

ELIZABETH: In your spare time! And, to demonstrate the sincerity of commitment to your crafts, you will both have to survive many years of heavy drinking.

WILL: About how many years, exactly?

ELIZABETH: Do not provoke my good graces towards you. Will. Your comedic timing on stage was superb, but don’t try and use it on me. Here’s the rub.

After a series of other lives, you, Henry, will eventually be born in 1955. You, Will, 1964. You will both have until the year 2026, a more than reasonable amount of time, in which to work out your issues and become successful in your respective fields.

Whatever your degree of success, at that time it will be necessary for you both to reveal the truth of who you are what you did. This will likely be greeted with the equivalent of rotten vegetables being thrown upon the stage at you.

But your respective times and experiences on earth will have toughened you enough to withstand any and all criticism. In any case, by 2024 the populace is obsessed with far more weighty matters than Elizabethan authorship. Such as the destruction of the planet via nuclear war, environmental disasters, and false flag alien invasions—all perpetrated by governments more corrupt, duplicitous, and flat out evil than even dear old dad Henry VIII could have dreamed up in his most dastardly fantasies.

So, I wouldn't worry about the critics. So, any questions? Remember, the only dumb question is the one asked that irritates the Queen.

HENRY: It is apparent to me in just the short time we've been here talking that this is a place where so much more is evident than what is comprehensible to the human mind. I would like to stay awhile and study, perhaps, the teachings of this Buddhism that you have mentioned?

WILL: And it is apparent to me that I need to return to earth as soon as possible and work on my drinking problem, Your Majesty.

ELIZABETH: (*rolling her eyes*) There is no time, here. There is only when something happens. It gets more complicated than that, and I, the Queen, have earned the right to stay awhile and study complexities. Neither of you will have that luxury. Therefore, at the conclusion of this meeting you will both find yourselves as 60 and 69 year-olds in the office of a Mr. Calloway, the reincarnation of the publisher of the

first folio. The three of you working together should be able to balance the universal books that need balancing. *Do not forget to bring the document of proof!*

WILL: Rest assured Your majesty, I shall not misplace it!

HENRY: No, you won't, because this time I will keep a copy!

ELIZABETH: That may not even be necessary, Henry. I have it on good authority that sometime after the year 2030 there will be independent verification of you as the true author of the works of Shakespeare.

WILL: Really? Good for you, Henry! How will that happen, your Majesty?

ELIZABETH: Alas, humanity has lapsed steadily into greater depravities of destructive illusions in the last 400 years. The golden thread of the genius of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and all the rest will begin to be recognized subconsciously by readers of Henry, uhm Harold's, new material, despite the radical differences of language and genre. Eventually, critical mass will be reached as humanity begins to honestly face the real truths about itself. The ocean of infinite wisdom we now reside in reduces to a drop in the form of a human physical life. But a proportionate amount of that wisdom is retained, and via the arts merged with more such drops, pushing back on the destructive tide of ignorance and evil.

HENRY: And should we fail, Your Majesty?

ELIZABETH: Recall that the "invincible" Spanish armada failed. We shall not fail now as we did not fail then. A quick word to the wise, however, Henry. After transcribing this meeting in play form, abandon it. Playwriting I mean.

There isn't enough of an audience anymore. Stick to prose, maybe a little poetry, but ideally, screenplays if you can. On second thought, scratch that, you won't have enough creative control. They'll be wanting explosions, gunfights, car chases, nudity and vulgarity. Prose, yes, experimental as you want. Well, I mean, don't go overboard like that Joyce. I still can't make heads or tails of Ulysess. And don't be too somber and serious. Will, can help you out in that area? Your comedic timing is first rate. Above all, don't get too preachy, that really turns people off. And don't pander to their baser instincts, you know, sex. Get the message out via interesting, funny characters. Ah, but listen to Your Majesty prattle on, giving advice to perhaps the world's greatest writer! Looking forward to your first draft. Now, get on with it!

## **Chapter One: Henry and William in 1650**

WILL: OK, so now what? Is this one of the lives before we end up in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Are we Pilgrims? And where are we?

HENRY. We're Puritans, to be specific, and we're in the Massachusetts Colony of the New World. Please watch what you say. And believe me, I'm not writing a word here! You thought Elizabethan England was bad? Look at the poor bastard over there in the stocks.

WILL: I know what you mean. I've been seeing this rather comely lass by the name of Anne Hutchinson. She tells me the "elders" of the community have really been harassing her for "speaking her mind."

HENRY; Anne Hutchinson? Jesus, Will, she's trouble! Not to mention married! I wouldn't be surprised if she and

that loudmouth Roger Williams get thrown out of the colony altogether!

WILL: Pretty discouraging, isn't it? I mean, all these folks leave England to be free of the repressiveness there and they just bring it all with them times 10! But c'mon, Henry, show some balls this time. Write something under your own name. What are they going to do to you here? They're lucky to get themselves fed and warm.

HENRY: You know, Will, I thought we were supposed to get wiser after we died? You don't seem any wiser.

WILL: I'm still not afraid of the powers that be, if that's what you mean. Don't you want to be free of your fear once and for all?

*Just then they are approached by two elders of the community demanding to know why they hadn't been seen at church most recently.*

WILL: Oh, we're not staying. My friend and I find your community far too repressive. Not to mention the grindingly primitive conditions. Really, could London have been so bad as to trade it for this?

HENRY: Gentlemen, forgive my friend's rudeness. He was an actor in London and used to a certain life. The Devil's life, to be truthful, and now that we're here, I hope to help him find salvation. So, we will see you next church service to be certain. Illness has kept us away up to this point.

*See to it that you do, the sterner one of the two elders barked and Henry and Will walked on.*

HENRY: A little more of your smart mouthing, Will, and we could have landed in Puritan jail! I've been in the Tower of London Will, and I know what it's like.

WILL: Oh please, it was cushy enough for you to write while you were there.

HENRY: I could have been beheaded on any given morning the Queen woke up in a bad mood!

*Oh Henry, I would never have done that, a man said, approaching them.*

HENRY: Your majesty? In a man's...

ELIZABETH: Body? yes, just as uncomfortable in this ridiculous get up. But I am John Winthrop, the governor of the colony now, so...

HENRY: Your Majesty, what happened? We all died in England and...

ELIZABETH: We were promptly reincarnated in this dreadful Massachusetts Bay Colony for reasons I have yet to determine. However, you realize it is impossible that we talk freely about the rules of reincarnation here, right? And yet it is necessary for the three of us to make peace with our disembodied souls.

WILL: But Your Majesty, are we not embodied now as we all can plainly see?

ELIZABETH: Yes Will. I said make peace with our *disembodied* souls. The bodies of souls, I have learned, such as these frumpily dressed ones, are never truly at peace. Most often, they are in turmoil. It's a lot to learn, I admit, but you two needn't worry now that it's become obvious you are acquaintances of the colony's governor.

WILL: That power position is still appealing to you, isn't it, Your Majesty?

HENRY: Will, show some respect!

WILL: Oh please, she's not the queen anymore. She's some backwater colonial governor. What I understand about

the whole reincarnation thing is we keep getting more chances to get something right! But it won't work if we keep running around like frightened toadies, bowing to whoever is in power at the moment. Like you said, the physical body is never truly at peace. It's always struggling in one way or another. Hell, weren't you, even as Queen, going through trials?

ELIZABETH: I was Will, and you are correct, courage is called for. In the case of you and Henry, that would mean getting the next boat to England post haste.

WILL: I'm all for that.

HENRY: But Your Majesty, what awaits us, or at least me, there? If I am not Henry Neville, who am I? Just some colonist who couldn't stand the life of the colony and returned to England to do what?

ELIZABETH: "Oh, Henry, just shut up and write!"

## **Chapter One: Henry and William in Italy, 1822**

HENRY: Good Lord! I'm a woman?

WILL: I'll say you are.

HENRY: And you, Will?

WILL: Percy. Percy Bysshe Shelly. Isn't this a fine affair? We both come back as writers, and writers of recognition under our own names. Except, of course, you're the woman. But don't you see how perfect it all is, Henry? We remain a team, compelled to write. True, you write a novel and I produce drama and poetry. but in this life, you see to it that I am appropriately recognized. But Frankenstein, really?

HENRY: It is my life's work! And why do you get to be Shelley? Why do you get to rank above my novel in terms of notoriety...

WILL: OK, stop right there. You wrote Shakespeare and no one can take that away from you, or at least away from your knowledge of it within yourself. Yes, I, Will Shakespeare, took credit, but we agreed! Then we discovered we would live again. Let's pause and say huzzah to that, hmm? True, we had to be common puritan fanatics in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, but somehow that was just preparation to become the famous Mr. and Mrs. Shelley! I, as Shelley, foolishly drown at a young age in an unnecessary boating accident but you, as Mrs. Shelley, live on to carefully preserve my works for the world!

HENRY: You've really got a thing about fame, don't you, Will? The Queen told me to write! I don't think she meant write science fiction!

*Your turn shall come again Henry, a voice interrupted.*

HENRY: Your Majesty?

ELIZABETH: Apparently the two of you are my errant children. And here we are in Italy in 1822. I apologize that we were abruptly cut off from our discussion on reincarnation in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, but even though I was governor, there was a good chance we all would have ended up imprisoned or executed as witches by those religious fanatics. I thought it best to quickly adjourn. So, for now, although still your Majesty Elizabeth within, I am a humble boatman. The humble boatman that rents out the boat in which you Will, as Shelley, will unfortunately drown. The boat was fine. It was the storm. Nothing could be done. Except not get in the boat of course.

HENRY: I assume we can talk freely here, since we're on a lake shore in Italy, a place of peace beyond snooping eyes and ears.

ELIZABETH: Yes, Sir Henry, please continue.

HENRY: So here we have Will as Shelley, only 29 years old. Imagine how much more great literature awaited his pen had he just not gotten into this boat?

WILL: I could have caught smallpox or something, but I see where you're going with this.

HENRY: Your Majesty, or should I call you boatman?

ELIZABETH: Luigi. Luigi the boatman. Who, as it turns out, is due to return as Queen and next time you see me you may address me as Your Majesty. But back to your question, which is really why do souls choose the lives they do? And what happens in between those lives?

WILL: Yes! For instance, what happened between the Massachusetts Bay Colony and here in Italy?

ELIZABETH: Nothing. Sometimes it's just nothing. And then an opportunity comes along. I told Henry to write. He wanted to do something entirely different from Hamlet and Macbeth. So, he decided to write Frankenstein. Now, in 15 years or so I will return as Queen Victoria to carry on the work of Elizabeth. This, I'm starting to learn, is the whole reincarnation cycle. Choices for rest, work, happiness, suffering, service...you get the idea. Will, you had the freedom to pick a quick, explosively creative life, bursting with passion and energy and then dissolving back into the great ocean of being- and you exercised that freedom choosing Percy Shelley. Henry, you agreed to do your part in the partnership while you wrote *Frankenstein*.

WILL: I have been harboring a certain amount of guilt over being credited through multiple centuries with authoring the works penned by my great friend here Henry, and..."

ELIZABETH" Will, you of all people should know that the play is the thing. It's all a play. But like any good play, there are meaningful elements from which playgoers can have their consciousnesses expanded. And here's a kind of secret, all the playgoers have the expanded consciousness within them. This is true whether they are at a performance at the Globe in 1600 or Broadway in 1955. They freely choose to go or not go, resonate with the message or not. You and Henry have partnered in an extraordinary way, and will continue to do so. The result as to who gets credit is the least important thing. Will Shakespeare and Henry Neville have been dust in the earth for some time. Meanwhile, Percy, let's go and get the boat ready.

## EARNESTLY SPEAKING

“Oh damn, what a headache! Anybody got a shot of whiskey I could have?”

“No whiskey here,” comes a response.

The gray-haired man pauses, thinks, tries to remember. “Where am I? What happened? Last thing I remember there was a loud bang, and ...oh, right.”

“Yep, Ernest, you shot yourself in the head good buddy.:

“So I’m in heaven now,? It’s over, no more worries, right?”

“Hmm, about that.”

“Oh c’mon, I earned my place here. You’re not going to tell me I’m in Hell are you?”

“No, I guess you would call it limbo, or purgatory.”

“Well, it’s better than where I was, which was pure hell.”

“We know you were having a hard time, Ernest, but killing yourself wasn’t the answer.”

“Well, too late now, isn’t it? Can’t go back and un-pull the trigger.”

“No, but you *will* be going back.”

“Like hell! You and what army are going to send me? I did my time. I was through.”

“No, Ernest, you weren’t through. You just quit.”

“So? Who says someone can’t kill themselves if they want?”

“Now this is getting awkward.”

“I’ll show you awkward.”

The gray-haired man once named Earnest stood up and tipped over the table the younger man was sitting at with his papers, then stormed out of the room. He found himself walking in the woods. They seemed familiar, but not quite. He walked for a while before yelling out to the sky and trees, "All right, come out and smite me if that's what's coming. Let's get it over with! I'm not afraid of you! If I had my gun, I'd do it again right here and now! I'm tired and sick and in pain. I've had enough! Why can't you understand that? Why can't you just let me go in peace? You're supposed to be the great one for peace and love!"

There was only the sound of the breeze in the trees, but then, footsteps on the dry leaves.

"Dad?"

"Yes son, it's me." The two men embraced, began to weep, then sat down together on a log.

"Dad where are we?"

"I don't know, son."

"I've been here lost for a while. So have my brother and sister.

"Why doesn't someone help us?" Earnest said.

"I thought you'd never ask," says a man who appears out of nowhere.

"Groucho Marx?" father and son say as one.

"I can see where you'd make that mistake," the man says. "Call me that if you wish, but the resemblance is purely coincidental. In any case, I'm here to talk with Ernest. Clarence, your guide will be along shortly."

Ernest and Groucho suddenly find themselves in an elaborate mansion.

"Is this San Simeon?" Ernest asks. The Hearst place?"

“Again, the resemblance is purely coincidental.”

They take a seat on the veranda overlooking the hills that furrow down to an ocean.

“I’ll cut right to the chase here Ernie my boy,” says Groucho.

Ernest feels an unprecedented fear.

“You’ve got to go back,” says Groucho. “There’s no arguing that one, but given your accomplishments I’ve been authorized to offer you a deal.”

“A deal? What kind of deal?”

“You had more writing in you. Lots more. Yes, I know about the illnesses, but that don’t cut the mustard with the big guy. He doesn’t really care when people kill themselves. It’s just another way to finish up the lessons. Had you lived to 91 and died peacefully in your sleep, you would have had to come back and finish also.”

“What are you talking about!” Ernest screams but in a pleading manner.

“It’s just like finishing a book. If you start it, you have to finish it.”

“I finished my books!” Ernest protests.

“I’m not just talking about an individual book on earth. I’m talking about an individual’s book of life—their unique, holy scripture. You killed yourself because you felt you couldn’t write anymore, right?”

“That was one reason.”

“So, we’re going to give you the opportunity to write again. But for many years, decades, there will be no accolades, no income, no recognition, nothing even published. You had all that and what did it get you? A shot in the head. No, this time you’ll write in isolation and you really won’t even know

what you're doing. You'll just be accumulating paper for the longest time. At the time you killed yourself in your prior life, age 61, it will all begin to bear fruit. And another bonus is you won't have to start again as a fetus. You can pick up around 5 years old. We've got the greatest little kid for you to become, but he will start having problems in his life even before the age of 10. So, he starts writing around at age 12 as a respite and refuge from his troubles."

"Well," said Ernest, "I do recall Anais saying, 'I am aware of being in a beautiful prison, from which I can only escape by writing.'"

Groucho nods. "If you accept the arrangement and reincarnate along his timeline, you and the former Ernest will influence, even inspire one another. He will quit drinking and seriously take up spiritual study, two things you never did. The two of you will eventually collaborate. He has the spiritual insight, but not the writing talent, and you had the writing talent but not the spiritual insight. You got close but ran out of energy. He's healthier in all ways at 61 than you were, but not nearly as rich. Will you do it?"

"If I've got to go anyway, this seems as good an idea as any other. I love writing. I'd love to get the chance to do it again. It doesn't matter if it's through another person who may never be as "successful" as I was."

*A gentle, firm hand guided him to the computer where he added more to the story. The moment-to-moment mundane minutiae of life made into art. They were both old now, Ernest holding steady at 61, the boy, 70, and like seasoned utensils of spirit, well-oiled with the richness of experience, they continued their collaboration.*

## THE OVERDUE LIBRARY BOOK

One night when I was about 10, I dreamt I was in a library. A lady walked up. She looked familiar. She didn't say anything but when she turned and walked away, I felt compelled to follow.

We came to a large set of double doors.

*Sapere aude, and caveat scriptor.*

She looked at me but all I could do was shrug.

"It's ok, you'll remember soon enough," she said, pushed gently on the door and we went inside to an office. She sat down behind a desk. I remained standing. Scared.

"You're early," she said, "why are you so early?"

The fear that her words induced was so great I woke up and sat up in bed, startled and shaking.

Four years later I started 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The first thing the new English teacher did was write on the board: *Sapere aude*.

"Does anyone know what that means?" she asked the class.

Somehow, *I knew!* Shakily, I spoke up. Not because I knew I had the right answer but because it was love at first sight for me with Miss Colwell.

"Dare to know," I said. She was quiet, a surprised look crossing her face before a tender smile and the reply,

"Very good. I hope you continue to dare Mr. Calloway."

That very night I dreamt of the library. And her.

*She was the dream librarian!*

"Can I help you?" she said, walking up to me as I stood browsing the fiction section.

"Miss Colwell?"

"You are a good student."

And with those words, we were suddenly on the roof of the building. A change of scene the way they commonly happen in dreams; sudden, inexplicable.

We were standing at the edge. A tightrope was strung to the next building. Cloud cover obscured whatever was below, but the feeling of immense height was undeniable.

“Do you remember when we first met in the library? You were younger. Less jaded. You checked out a book that night,” she said.

“I don’t remember,” I said, squinting against the wind whipping across my face. Yet not a hair on her head moved.

“You will. It’s the one that hasn’t been written yet.”

“Excuse me?”

“You have to write it—on earth. It’s overdue now.”

“What does that have to do with a tightrope?”

“The wire between the lower and higher worlds is how you dare to know. But don’t forget the other part- *caveat scriptor* -writer beware.”

And then I woke up.

Our next meeting wasn’t until eight years later when I was wide awake, standing on a sidewalk in Prescott, Arizona watching the rental house my girlfriend and I had been living in go up in flames.

There she was, standing right next to me. My girlfriend couldn’t hear or see her.

“I know all your writings of the past fifteen years or so are on paper in that burning house right now. Your life was saved by that off duty cop who just happened to smell smoke as he was driving by. You and your girlfriend are alive. You realize whatever you’ve written up to this point is insignificant compared to that, right?”

“Oh, I do, I really do. It would be nice if they could be saved but if not, I’m ok with letting them all go and starting over.”

She smiled the way she did when I gave the right answer in class. I didn’t have to start over.

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Sometime later we met again.

“You didn’t have to set the house on fire to get my attention,” I said.

“Oh, I’m afraid I did. Got you sober, didn’t it? You could never walk the wire drunk or stoned. C’mon, they’re waiting, follow me.”

We walked down a long hall which ended where she opened the door to a huge, crowded auditorium. I had the strong sense an interesting presentation of some sort was about to begin. Perhaps an erudite academic of some esoteric philosophy, or spiritual teacher.

I took an empty seat in the back of the room but Miss Colwell grabbed my arm.

“What are you doing sitting down? You have to convince everyone in the audience to walk the wire with you. You have to finally, and fully, convince yourself it’s worth the risk.”

I was as scared as I had been when I was ten and first dreamed of her. But I was also as certain as I had been when I knew the translation of *Sapere aude* in class. In her eyes the wisdom of a thousand libraries were transmitted and I knew I could tap into it in now in just the right amounts needed.

I walked to the podium knowing, instinctively, *I was the audience.*

Sitting in no particular order were: Neolithic hunters, Neolithic gatherers, Roman senators, Roman slaves, medieval barons, medieval serfs, Japanese samurai, Japanese courtesans, bankers, musicians, merchants, madmen, monks, businessmen, philosophers professors, poets, popes, preachers, pedophiles, alcoholics, addicts, gamblers, thieves, murderers, merchants, martyrs, hermits, hoboes, housewives, soldiers, sailors, seamstresses, farmers, carpenters, brick masons, fishermen, lawyers, doctors, priests, dancers, wrestlers, husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, the aged and stillborn.

I knew they were all teachers and all students, comprising a mosaic, a maze, a repeating, ascending cycle of individual endeavors each trying a new role, a new scene, a new costume, a new play that might lead to a final, definitive answer as to which would be best.

I looked down at Miss Colwell in the front row. I knew what to say.

“Personalities are like vines growing entangled over the same tree. Over time they forget it is the tree that is the real truth and source of life. And, once we disentangle, we become free.

“That golden cup awaits across an abyss of forgetting; the one we have all so often fallen into in the past. It’s an opportunity to walk with full awareness of purpose into an experience without having to kill or be killed or starve or freeze to death or just live a humdrum life and take that final breath wondering what it was all about.”

“Wait a minute, sonny,” an older African American man spoke up. “What if we go with you and you’re wrong; there are no answers, there is no freedom? I know you’re a

reincarnation of my miserable slave life on the plantation, and while I don't mind being you now, despite being a little boring, I wouldn't want to risk it for some pie in the sky."

Then, a corpulent, red-faced, jolly-looking gentleman called out, "I daresay it's just another gamble, another turn of the cards. I for one am feeling rather lucky at the moment and propose we give this well-spoken young lad the benefit of the doubt. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, wot?"

I remembered him/me-then. I was a happy-go-lucky alcoholic, gambler, carouser, running away from working in my dad's saddlery shop in London but always coming back long enough for a loan from my mom or to work enough to head back for another party.

A regally dressed Asian woman then stood and said, "I must respectfully decline. I, an empress, taking advice from an unemployed housepainter?"

Sitting next to her, a tall man stood and said, "I have to say, in my position as Emperor of China, I, too am reluctant to give up the bird in the hand; by which I mean unlimited power, wealth, privilege and concubines, for two invisible ones in some spiritually nebulous bush."

"Oh, my goodness," we all heard then from somewhere in the back of the room. "So many lifetimes as slaves of one sort or another, both rich and poor, both enslaving others and being enslaved!"

Then he came forward in his 16th century attire and continued. "I beg all of you to accept this opportunity to move on! Was I burned at the stake for publishing a book contradicting the prevailing jackass wisdom of the time for nothing? Yes, many of us had sweet cushy, lives, dying in our sleep but then returning to a most rude awakening! Don't you

see what he says is true! This is our chance to get off this merry go round!”

An ethereal silence descended upon the room, and with it the golden light of a precious autumnal afternoon. And then came the sound. The sound that had been leading us to be together here across centuries, millennia, continents, oceans, planets and galaxies for that matter, through war, peace, poverty, prosperity, community and isolation, leadership and servitude, freedom and slavery, any and every state of being that could be manifested.

A murmur—an effortless but exact swirling, shape-shifting coordination of starlings at dusk—painted the sky above a yin-yang light and dark. Shape and substance and silence and sound all became one expression of the ecstasy of existence. An expression arising and ascending out of all constraints and restraints to coalesce into something far too impossibly grand and timeless to squeeze into one flesh and blood body.

But the connective conduit to that vastness was ever open and flowing with precise dispensation into the essential, lost but never forgotten, eternal and inviolable truth of all.

We all began filing from the room to the stairway to the roof, moving quietly and harmoniously as monks, but also, as prisoners now to be released unconditionally. I was the last to the roof where Miss Colwell took my hand.

The energy flowing from her pulsed wildly into my body. And then she spoke so sweetly.

“Continue to allow pieces of the cosmically large puzzle to slowly fit themselves into place. The pieces are your words. Writers can only do their best to toss out messages in bottles upon the waves of the mass consciousness. The most

outwardly successful ones worked, consciously or unconsciously, with assistance from the library editors. They built upon what had been built already by the previous, invisible builders. Feel free to become a bestseller. However, the clock will keep ticking on that human form of yours, so you will need to start walking across now. Once you reach the other side is where the book will be written, the one that will then need to be returned.”

“There won’t be a late fee will there?” I asked, trying to make a joke, but actually once more rather worried after so recent a flush of uber-confidence.

A deep, sonorous voice from midway back in the line was then heard to say, “Good God Calloway, will you start walking and stop worrying already! We conquered the known world once and now you’re fretting about late fees!”

I looked back but could not see who had spoken. Miss Colwell grinned a little and said to me, “no, not Alexander the Great. One of his lieutenants, but with a greater ego than his boss, even. Don’t worry, you won’t be late. Ready?”

And she handed me a balancing pole.

As I took it, I was surprised at how light it felt, and then took the first step. I couldn’t see anything below, but the strong sense of immense distance was undeniable. But there was no fear because my feet felt stuck to the wire with each step until I lifted one, and then the other, each locking onto the wire with perfect balance and security.

My upper body meanwhile felt like it was harnessed to a safety line extending upward into invisibility. After just a few steps I knew with certainty I was going to make it, there was no doubt, it was preordained, it was a fixed truth. And when I reached the midpoint, I confidently turned around to see the

other selves. As each took that first step onto the wire, they disappeared. I turned back and walked on to the building across the abyss.

I had a book to return. Maybe more than one.

## THIS IS THE NEXT TIME/ WAITING FOR SCHRODINGER'S CAT

*Weird: Old English wyrd, meaning fate, personal destiny and or personal power."*

*"Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards"*

- Søren Kierkegaard.

*"The total number of minds in the universe is one. In fact, consciousness is a singularity phasing within all beings."*

- Erwin Schrödinger

**I**t was chilly and windy when we pushed open a hatch door at the top of an old set of dusty stairs. We walked to the edge of the roof. Oh yeah, I'd been here before. I looked down at where my hands should be holding the railing. It was just a flickering light, ready to die. But then the light around the both of us grew brighter, revealing continents, oceans, hemispheres, lakes, rivers, and cities. Then explosions, earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions. We were immersed in flames and smoke. But I felt no pain.

The boss was there, smiling.

The flames began to die down. The smoke began to drift upward and away from the explosions and the building debris. I became pure light connected with blinding speed to a symmetrical system of connector nodes spread out across the planet which then arose as one immense networked web, a golden latticework afloat in the space dust and sunlight, billowing with the ease of a jellyfish adrift upon the ocean

waves. Just as they had since before the dinosaurs—precise, symbiotic, and transcendent. Earth scenes unfolded now as before, cinematically, but the emotions no longer throbbed within me like a toothache as they had before. I was detached. I was going back.

Then, suddenly, the boss and I were having coffee.

He loved his coffee.

“Everybody on the planet felt 1955-1967,” he said. “It was a momentous shift in consciousness that I’d like to take some credit for.”

“Were you a hippie?”

“No. I was in Vietnam. And you almost were, too. But, after missing the draft, you attempted suicide. Which meant you were appropriately tenderized for meeting me.”

“It sounds like lottery odds, my brother.”

“Exactly,” he said. “How else could the payoff be so big?”

I changed the subject. “I know we’ve been through this many times before, but each time we leave the rooftop and take on these bodies I forget more pieces of the lesson.”

“Go ahead, I don’t mind repeating.”

“Humans are born and almost immediately get stuck in unhappiness to one degree or another. Or at least confusion.”

“Partially true. Many religious people aren’t confused at all. They’re all in with their respective beliefs.”

“Until they’re not, right? Judaism, Islam, Christianity, all the major and minor ones, I’ve tried them all and exhausted my free choices. So, this time I tried to kill myself.”

“And you failed, unlike many times before when you succeeded. So, now you’re in the perfect position to pass on a sacred truth. You don’t have to talk about nearly killing

yourself and meeting me. People will sense the truth about you.”

“OK, I get it that meeting you is the lottery win. Why? Why is it necessary to beat really long odds, to get pried loose from the lower ego consciousness persona to know spiritual truth in the first place?”

“Try to recall being born. All that tension at the very start! The pulling, the squeezing, the slippery, gooey mess. That seed tension is necessary for survival on Earth. It braces us for the heat and the cold and the bullshit that begins to quickly assail us. Not to mention ear infections, measles, diaper rash...you get my drift.”

“Yes,” I nodded. “And then it seems like every morning when planet wakes up, it’s like letting kids loose in a dangerous playground. One filled with moats with alligators and barbed wire and a bunch of other stuff that can cause tragedy or injury. So that’s why there has always been a drug and alcohol problem throughout human civilization from the time the first Australopithecus saw his buddy get eaten by a saber-toothed tiger! Tell me that wouldn’t be enough to make you want to eat some magic mushrooms or something!”

He laughed. “All just band-aids. If you think your physical body is your only residence, well, sure, you’d hate to lose it. But if you now it’s the threshold to something vast. you can overcome your self-destructive urges.”

“Which I willingly chose to put in place, right? Just to learn how to overcome them? Like Houdini letting himself be locked in a trunk and thrown into the river? So, the duality of pain and pleasure is the only way the lower world **can exist?**”

“Yes, it is by design a pain planet. Which means it is an accelerated portal. It is a choice. It is *all* a choice. Easy, hard,

fast, slow...but ultimately the process serves all of life by loving all of life, which is the mastery of all life on all planes and all dimensions. That is not a choice. The mastery will happen, *must* happen, in the end.

He continued. “Remember, you don’t just reincarnate in a physical body, but also an emotional body. Both are storage files of all your previous incarnations, and each time you make the choice for the next one.”

“So, let me get this straight,” I said. “Some souls pick a script where they die at three years old of congestive heart failure? Others incarnate as a bright young men or women who have happy home lives, graduate from high school, and are about to start college when some drunk driver kills them? Or a child that drowns on a family vacation? You would say this Soul read that script and agreed to follow, because all life on earth is a fixed deal, no free will, just an unfolding of the existing plan? They chose these lives as conscious service to a greater purpose through their grief and trauma?. I’m going to need further clarification.”

“Yes, the souls associated with your examples selected scripts for themselves in which they *agreed to be* the ones who died or their loved ones who grieved. They had their own unique individual reasons. I don’t make the rules. I just explain them.”

“Well, who the hell *does* make the rules and why aren’t we talking to him/her?”

“I can try to arrange that, but he/her is very busy. In the meantime, here’s a case example. Soul A picks a life where it interacts with Soul B in various ways until the tragic and even easily preventable death of Soul B. Soul A never recovers from the grief in that particular lifetime. Perhaps Soul A later

even commits suicide over it, sending out ripples of a particular energy signature/intelligence schematic to all souls.”

“Dominoes? All leading to a grand finale?” I said. “OK. Let’s assume it’s true that everything is preplanned and agreed to. Including, say, my child dies or another relative or friend and I am so despondent I want to commit suicide. But somehow I understand this grand energy signature schematic you’re talking about. I just don’t believe it, or even if I do, I can’t emotionally accept it! I miss my loved one! We even agree *to this?!?*”

“Can I get a refill, please?” he asked the waitress. “From outside another’s script, it’s baffling, especially when it comes to war. Why would someone agree to be a victim of genocide? But you cannot know another’s motivations if you are not part of their script. It would be like reading someone else’s private diary. Entering another’s consciousness can only be done with their permission, and then there is the danger of sharing in their karma. As soon as you take the form of flesh and matter, the cycle continues and begins to recall awareness of itself as above and beyond flesh and matter. It connects with imperishable energy. This is yin and yang’s exquisite symmetry in motion. A wave goes and another comes in. Who can stop the waves? What contains the waves? The ocean. Be your own ocean. Allow each wave to be the perpetual deconstruction and reconstruction of the sandy beach.”

I nodded. “So, when “I” remember “I” created everything, “I” can relax because “I” know “I” designed “my” experience to the minutest detail for “my” best possible outcome in all ways, in any given physical life?”

“Yes, and ultimately it can be relaxing,” he said. “The illusion of choice can be dissolved by accepting you cannot make a mistake.”

“So, you’re saying we pick a life script that’s like a code that runs a program. It runs for 80 years or so, but can’t we hack the codes ourselves if we don’t like how they’re playing out?”

“Of course you can, if you know how!”

“You mean if “I’ve” programmed myself to know how and then want to do it?”

“Have another coffee, why don’t you? Or there’s always meditation, fasting, and celibacy?”

“Yeah, right. I think the best case scenario is to run out the clock, put in my time, do my job, try to relax and have fun. Love my wife, family, and pets. Volunteer at the soup kitchen occasionally. Maybe a weekend beer or two. I don’t anticipate *ever* being able to reconcile the incongruence of *what I know I am within and what I see I am without*. When I draw that body’s last breath, I think I’ll just say, ‘Whew, glad that’s over, I’ll do better next time.’”

“But what if there is no next time?” he asked.

## EDGAR ALLEN POE WALKS OUT OF A BAR

Kierkegaard was unusually depressed that evening, muttering to himself over his coffee.

"But Soren," I said, "don't you want to get out of Copenhagen?"

"And go where?" he said.

"The 21<sup>st</sup> century. Just for a little while. It might just change your mind about things. We have this thing called the Internet."

He pondered deeply before answering. "Am I finally recognized as a great philosopher in that century?"

"Oh absolutely," I said, adding, "but I must caution you that if you walk down an average street in the USA and ask the average person who Soren Kierkegaard was, you're probably going to get some blank looks. But if you find the right coffee shop near a college campus on a rainy dreary November night, you might be praised with great effulgence."

"OK, I'll go!"

"Great! But we have to bring another writer with us. He's in New York, I think you'll like him. His name is Walt Whitman."

Soren and I boarded a boat out of Copenhagen for New York where Whitman was working at the time (1849) on a newspaper.

"Why me?" Soren asked, "Why'd you pick me?"

"Well," I said, "when I was a teenager and into my early 20's a lot of what you said made sense."

"Really," he said, "because to be honest a lot of it still doesn't make sense to *me*. I often find myself looking in the mirror with a blank stare."

"It's heavy being a philosopher. Which is why going to see Walt is perfect. He was a carpenter and a printer before becoming a poet. I think we're trying to find a way to take it all a little less seriously."

Soren suddenly got seasick and went to lie down. We were yet to hoist anchor. The crossing would take about two weeks. I always enjoyed being at sea, and I never got seasick. However, poor Soren suffered terribly, you might even say he had a sickness unto death. The next morning, I saw him wandering on deck, protesting to anyone who would listen, though no one did. They simply gazed at him as if he were a crazy man.

I heard the gist of what Soren was saying. "There's a crazy man who says he's from the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He has kidnapped me and is taking me to meet some unknown American poet in New York named Walt Whitman!"

"Soren, what's wrong?" I asked, catching up to him, "I didn't kidnap you! You came of your own volition."

"OK, yes that's true, I exaggerated a bit," and then he threw up over the railing.

"Soren, sit down and relax, you're worrying too much!"

"Ah," he spat with indignation, "Yes, you're right, why bother? No one understands, and if they do, what can they do about it. Hang me? Imprison me? Burn my books? Very well, from this moment on I will not worry, for I am traveling through time with a stranger who knows a coffee shop where I will be justly praised!"

"New York City, dead ahead," some excited tourist yelled just then.

"Wow, we really made good time," I said, "I'm surprised and I'm the time traveler."

Walt was waiting for us at the dock. He let out a loud bellow,

"Soren, and some other guy whose name I don't know, welcome to New York!"

"This unkempt gentleman makes a good point," Soren said, turning to me, "What is your proper given name?"

"Manuel, Manuel Bede," I replied as the three of us shook hands.

"How did you know we were coming?" I asked.

"I am large. I contain multitudes," he quipped.

"I don't know how I know it. but that is a line from one of your poems, correct?" Soren asked.

"Yes, and as obscure as any of your philosophical tomes my friend."

"Well," I interrupted, "perhaps a tad less obscure, because in my future, an American president sends a copy of *Leaves of Grass* to his mistress. Now, I have good news and bad news."

"Is there a third choice?" Soren said with a sly smile.

"Was that a joke, Soren?" I asked.

"I blame this New York air. I will return to my traditional seriousness directly."

"The good news," I said, "is that we are getting close to the end of our journey. The bad news is we are not there yet."

"I need to rest," Soren said.

"I'm rested and ready to go now!" Walt bellowed. "Ahoy, shipmates! Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?"

"OK, Mr. American poet," Soren said, "if we're going to be traveling together, you're going to have to tone it down a little. I'm Danish and I'm a philosopher, so have a little

consideration. We take things a little more slowly, with a little more refinement."

"I'm sure you do, and so you, unlike me, will never have your writings banned in Boston, or anywhere else, because..."

"Excuse me," Soren raised his voice, "I am considered the father of existentialism. I attended the University of Copenhagen!"

"And I dropped out of school at ten years old to support my family!" Walt shot back. "But a future president, apparently, sends my book to his mistress!"

"Gentlemen, please," I interrupted, "this is getting us nowhere. Let's all take a long, deep breath and maybe a short glass of absinthe and regroup here tomorrow."

"That man is a total boor!" Soren declared as we walked into Manhattan.

"Once you read more of his work you will think differently of him," I said. "It's all about timing. You helped me make sense of some serious chaos in my teens and early 20's. At that time Whitman would not have reached me. But his is a broader appeal. President Clinton would never have sent Monica Lewinsky any of your books."

"I don't know how I know this," said Soren, "but I take that as a compliment. This journey you have taken me on makes me think that we know ourselves, and everyone else, backwards and forwards in eternity as is needed for the present moment."

"Well, now you've let the cat out of the bag, haven't you?" came a voice from a nearby alley we were passing.

We both turned to look just as it began to rain. The unmistakable visage of the inimitable Edgar Allan Poe emerged from the alley into the light.

I did the introductions. “Edgar, Soren. Soren, Edgar.”

“Forgive me, sir,” said Soren to Edgar, “but are you not recently deceased?”

“Do I look deceased? Depressed, disheveled, discombobulated perhaps, but no sir, I assure you I am not deceased except in the sense of this natty, black-suited form you see before you. But more to the point, why have you so rudely dismissed my amiable homosexual friend Walt from whatever it is we are doing here?”

“I thought it best,” I said. “He and Soren weren’t quite getting along.”

“Not getting along?” Edgar exclaimed. “If we all got along all the time, how would great books be written?”

This befuddled Soren and I, so I just asked, “Edgar would you like to join us? We’re about to take a little trip.”

“I could use a change of scenery to be sure. So far, the afterlife for me is not too different from Baltimore. But only if Walt can come.”

“Try and leave without me,” came a bellowing voice from down the street. “You trio of ne’er do wells wouldn’t get past Mulberry Street! And Edgar, please, no need to trumpet the gay thing right now. It’s still the 19th century, dear fellow. Now what is our destination Mr. Bede?”

“Europe.”

“Return to Europe!” Soren exclaimed. “We just came from there! I’m still a little seasick!”

“We won’t be sailing back,” I said, and he breathed a sigh of relief

“I have always wanted to see the old country,” said Walt. “But I’m curious. How does one get to Europe if not by...oh wait, yes, I see it now, some sort of airborne

conveyance. Delightful, purely delightful. I feel the joy of it all arise in my chest even now!”

Walt in his floppy hat, Soren in his formal European mid-19th century attire, Edgar in his ubiquitous black ensemble, and I, dressed in early 21st century business casual, were then passing through security at JFK international without raising so much as an eye from the TSA.

“Not a good idea,” Edgar said, shaking his head somberly after we’d reached cruising altitude.

“What?” I asked him. “Flying?”

“Not so much flying, but flying so fast! Don’t you realize that if we can get to Europe so quickly, Europeans can come to America in equal the time?”

“Was that a snub of Europeans, Mr. Poe?” asked Soren.

“I suppose it was. I am not known for my congeniality.”

“Some might say the same of me I would posit. Perhaps we are the counterpoints to the unkempt poet and the time traveler? But I cannot imagine to what end the four of us are involved in this endeavor?”

“Personally, I don’t trust this Bede guy,” Edgar said.

“I believe he is only a few feet away and could hear...”

Soren began to warn but Edgar waved him off with, “he’s asleep, or deeper, judging by the number of those tiny empty bottles.”

“Hmm,” Walt leaned in, stroking his beard, saying, “I believe you are correct. And I’m not just saying that because for a brief period you were my supervisor, Edgar. I’m saying because I know you know your way around an empty bottle.”

“Excuse me my, American friends but is no one perturbed that our first-person narrator has collapsed

inebriated and we are left to the devices of an unknown 3rd person viewpoint?” Soren interjected.

“Oh, not really,” Edgar intoned, “when you’ve survived a lifetime such as mine, the taking of literary license without warning is practically a pleasure. You ought to know about that Walt, am I right? Those long lists of names? I never got it.”

Just then the pilot announced, “We are preparing to make our landing in Hamburg. Please fasten your seatbelts.”

Manuel awoke with a start and resumed his duties.

“Gentlemen, we have arrived at our destination. Hamburg Germany, August 17, 1960. We will be attending a musical performance this evening.”

And then they were there; for one of the first performances by a group called the Beatles.

Edgar cheered up immensely, Soren had a flash of the most satisfying insights, and Walt found a date for the night. Manuel slipped away into the night, and into another time and place.

## NOW BOARDING

“Keith, wake up,” his wife said, shaking him.

“What? Why?”

“You’ll be late for your flight! Your alarm has gone off three times! Now get going, I need to go back to sleep!”

“Did she just call me Keith?” Richard Wilkins thought to himself as he dragged himself out of bed to get ready for his business trip. Looking at the time, he thought, *Damn, I’ll have to hurry now.*

He didn’t usually remember his dreams, but this one he did.

Jigsaw puzzle pieces were falling from the sky. Thousands of them raining down upon him and collecting around his feet. And then they began to assemble themselves, piece by piece. Every piece that drifted down slipped neatly into its perfectly correct slot. The subject of the puzzle began to form scenes from his life. Where he grew up, his parents, his school, his job. He thought to himself, *is this what they mean when they say your life flashes before your eyes when you’re about to die?*

He was glad his wife woke him up before the puzzle was finished, but he still wondered. *Had his life been flashing before his eyes, just in extreme slow motion?*

It made him a little anxious, knowing he would be getting on a plane this morning.

By the time he was sitting at Gate 5, waiting for the flight, all jigsaw puzzle dream anxiety had been washed away by the freeway drive, airport parking, and TSA security tediousness.

And then a man next to him asked, “Who are you supposed to be?”

“Excuse me?”

“Look around. Everybody here is famous. And change your point of view to first person, will you? You’re no longer royalty.”

I had been trying to ignore the other passengers, as I usually did, but now, when I looked at the man asking the question, I saw he was dressed as Henry VIII! Then, looking around, I saw that everyone else waiting for the flight was dressed in some eerily authentic period garb. It was like a huge, elaborate costume party. On a midweek flight to Dallas?

“If you’re not famous, what are you doing on this flight?” the man next to said in a demanding, king-like tone. “Oh, you must be a draftee, a foot soldier of some sort.”

“Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I began to say, but our attention was diverted by an argument breaking out at the gate.

“I have been a damn soldier dozens of times,” a young man was saying. “And always on losing side, always dying in battle. Why do I have to go back and do it again?”

“You don’t have to take the flight, sir,” said the woman flight agent, looking flustered.

A young woman also approached the gate. “Females end up being a mother, or dying in childbirth, or a housekeeper for some rich family, or a prostitute. I’d rather not be *any* of those.”

“Peasant gripers,” King Henry said. “Are they too ignorant to know this is their best chance to better themselves?”

Freaked out by what I was seeing and hearing. I got up from my seat and started to leave the gate area.

Two TSA agents blocked me. “Sir, please return to the waiting area.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “I cleared security. My flight hasn’t left yet and I need to go to the bathroom!”

“Sir, if you don’t return to your gate and wait for your flight, you will be placed under arrest.”

Already on edge, I began to reel towards panic. What did they know about me? What had I done wrong? I sat back down next to King Henry.

“Nice try, peasant,” he said snidely. “Did you think you were going to get out of it?”

“Get out of what? What’s going on?”

He snorted derisively. “Just keep your seat belt fastened at all times.” Then he laughed and said, “and pay attention to the demonstration on how to fasten a seat belt! You dolts must be reminded every friggin’ time!”

I tried to ignore him, looking around for cameras, some elaborate TV hoax special, something to settle me down. And then they called my seat row.

I stood in behind a woman dressed like Marie Antoinette and in front of another woman dressed essentially in rags. I turned behind me and asked, “Why are you dressed like that?”

“I’m poor, of course. 19<sup>th</sup> century East End of London poor.”

“Going to be quite the costume party in Dallas, I guess, huh?”

She didn't answer. Then I noticed how badly she smelled and hoped I wouldn't end up sitting next to her. Costume authentic was OK, but the smell also?

Fortunately, when I reached my row, my seat mate was a well-groomed and dignified looking middle-aged man.

We smiled and nodded to one another politely. Once my seat belt clicked, he said, "OK, that's it, in for a penny, in for a pound."

"Are you going to the costume party?" I asked.

"We just left the costume party."

"What do you mean?"

"Once the flight lands, all these appearances will be shed. Why are you going to Dallas?"

"I've been assigned by my editor to do a research paper on..."

"Let me guess, the assassination?"

"Well, yes," I slowly replied, inexplicably embarrassed.

"Got to let it go, son. I was no more special than the ordinary foot soldier in any of the wars."

The Boston accent rattled in my ears not because it was unmelodious, but because it jolted my awareness. How could I not have recognized that face immediately?

"Quite the resemblance," I said to him.

"Isn't it, though?" he said. A lean, rawboned man came down the aisle next. He looked like a farmer. His clothes were threadbare and dirt soiled.

"Would ya mind if I sit next to my distinguished offspring," he said in a thick Irish brogue.

I stood up immediately and let him slide into the middle seat.

“Ah, another anniversary has come and gone, Johnny, me boy,” he said, taking a flask from his top pocket. As soon as he uncapped it, the smell alone was strong enough to get me a little buzzed. Then again, I had been feeling strange since I woke up this morning.

“I’ve stopped keeping track,” the man in the blue suit replied.

“Ah, that’s wise me boy,” and he offered a draught of the flask. but the other man waved it off.

“It might help you remember, Johnny. Or forget. Your choice,” he said, his hand still extending the silver flask.

When the other man declined again, the farmer offered it to me. I unhesitatingly took it and swallowed large. Just before I did, I saw the interior of the plane begin to change. The farmer disappeared, then many of the seats disappeared, replaced by fewer, larger, more luxurious ones. Seated in one of them was a woman in a pink suit with white gloves. I was seated next to her.

A man in a suit came down the aisle and said to me, “Mr. President, we’ve been on the ground for some time now. We need to deplane to make it to the trade Mart on time for your speech.”

Suddenly, this delusion, or whatever it was, became all too clear

“So, this is it,” I thought. “But it’s not too late. Nobody is going to make me get off the plane and get in that limo. I could just order that we turn around and go back to Washington.”

And then I saw them, the faces behind the faces that would betray me that day. I’m like an undercover agent in enemy territory, and I’ve neglected to maintain secure

backup. I am a marked man now, have been since Cuba surely. This is a war with no front lines, no uniforms, no way of telling good from evil. 58,000 boys, many still children this morning, are also marked.

“Jack, c’mon, let’s go.”

Jackie looked so beautiful in her pink suit. I’ve been so awful to her. She’s put up with so much. She’s strong. She’ll go on. I can see in her eyes now that she knows, and that she knows we must go through with this even though neither one of us knows why. Like me, part of her is saying, *close the goddamn plane doors and let’s get the hell out of here!*

But then we were outside walking on the tarmac. Jesus, we were running out of time. But the people around us looked so happy. Did it have to be today? Such a nice sunny day?

Then we were in the car. There was one of my agents holding his hands up, dumbfounded as to why he was being called back to not run alongside. They weren’t all in on it, only the ones that had important roles to play in getting it accomplished. I could imagine them saying to each other, *Remember guys, get the body out of Texas as soon as possible and don’t let anybody stop us! Shoot them if you must, we’ll call it national security. Jesus, that’s all we need is a legitimate honest autopsy! Oh, and don’t forget that bucket of water to splash on the back seat.*

And sitting there, knowing what I knew, I thought about how the fat cats would go on getting fatter. I thought of how some of them actually believed the anticommunist mind game. Beware foreign entanglements said George W. The birthing of a new consciousness is painful and bloody. The old guard never wants to go. It always fights off the new to hold on to its power. Soon, a campus in Ohio would bear that out.

Not just the 58,000 in Vietnam, but cities would burn. Literal and figurative bombs would go off inside the country. Nothing would be the same. But I also knew that a counter-culture consciousness—the depth and breadth of which no one really understood—would not be stopped.

Making the turn on Elm, Christ, I knew I had waited too long. I knew it would be quick at least. I could have been sailing off Cape Cod, or reading a spy novel, or spending time with Mary. Dear Mary, I'm sorry, I know they will get you too. Is this my punishment for all that? Is it too late to just come clean and resign? Wait it out several years and then become the talk show circuit darling like that future guy who did far worse? Jackie will divorce me, but I would still I'll get to visit the kids, collect my pension, retreat somewhere to Greece to write my memoirs. Or just stay beloved, however flawed, for a few more minutes. I did some good things. But I guess I did more that were worse. I know I did. I'll have to come back.

Then the thought struck. Did coming back already happen? Had I left this body? Everything was moving so slowly; a single strand of Jackie's hair moved on the breeze like the laziest ripple of water from a stone's throw.

And then, finally, and goddammit, don't you know they missed! Again, and again! I guess they hired some amateurs. Or maybe the shooters were having second thoughts. A weird thought strayed through my mind. I had I read somewhere that Joane of Arc's executioner was quite upset with himself afterwards.

I felt like shouting, *Hey driver, how many shots will it take for you to speed up and get us out of here? Other guy up front, the governor is howling in pain. Do you think maybe you should jump over the seat and shield me? Or just keeping*

*looking ahead? Slowing down now? Why the hell are we slowing down?*

*Hey driver, what the hell are you looking at? The getaway road is in front! Oh, right. Then the brakes go on! The brakes, yes. Driver was told, if our guys are too inept to hit a moving target, go ahead and make it easy for them. Make it child's play, for that is what we are, children of the devil.*

*You shouldn't have to stop too long. Got it? Okay, now, speed up! Good job. But what's so unusual about it all, really? Et tu Brutus? Our mob buddies are always getting whacked by their close associates. Follow the money. Even now Ruby is being told his job is to take out Lee or else.*

*Why did Jackie crawl on the back and try to get away? Because she knew she was sitting in the bull's eye. The car was stopped, dead! Yes, and except for trustworthy secret service agents, likely all the other passengers would be too, soon. Fewer talking witnesses. She knew I was gone. She knew she had to try and save herself for the kid's sake.*

*OK now, enter the secret service heroics. They push her back and take off at 90 mph. And then finally we are at Parkland Memorial Hospital. Not much more to say. Not much more to do. Getting sleepy, peaceful. Will miss holding John and Caroline.*

*"That's how I remember it, gramps," I said to the older man, my great-grandfather. "Since then, I've just been wandering around, wondering what to do next. I guess I'll find out when this plane lands in Dallas this time."*

*"Yeah, you will, Johnny, surely so. What happened to you helped birth a new consciousness. Like you said, raw and bloody. But the ripples from that stone in that pond are still*

going. People, so many, keep coming, absorbing those ripples each in their own way, and ....”

“Don’t mean to pee on your parade gramps, but Buddha, Jesus, and all of them raised the collective consciousness. Then the tsunami of evil bastards wiped it out and we had to start again.”

“Think of this, Johnny. Imagine an alien ship landed on the White House lawn with a video of how the whole thing happened—from the secret early planning stages at a Texas ranch, all the way through to the actual shooting and all the suspicious deaths afterwards, and they said, ‘There it is earthlings. What are you gonna do about it?’ What would it actually change?”

“Good one gramps. Thing is, that video would also show the pot, the acid, the starlets, the painkillers, and all the rest. Yeah, I could have done a little more with the time I had. Just take some sensible precautions, but I thought I was invincible. I’ll likely be happier reincarnating next time as a potato farmer.”

Now they both smiled and laughed.

One of the flight attendants came down the aisle and said,

“Afternoon, gentlemen, I’ve got some paperwork here for a reincarnation. Do I have the right man?”

“You do,” I said, “I know it’s time for me to go, just like I knew then. I’m hoping that this time I would not be a martyr, but maybe a potato farmer?”

“Hmm,” the man said, looking at his clipboard, “I show something different here, sir.”

And then I knew that no one on the flight had been pretending. Except me.

## THE REMODELING BATTLE OF MISSIONARY RIDGE

Another summer was approaching Chattanooga, Tennessee, the way a lion might stealthily paw its way forward through tall grass to an unsuspecting herd of ibex.

It was my 67<sup>th</sup> summer on earth, and my 7<sup>th</sup> consecutive one in the Suth.

I did not want to die on this hill, but it felt like that was happening. I was probably just dehydrated, mowing with a push mower in the Southern summer heat.

Missionary Ridge was where Union troops, smarting from a recent defeat at nearby Chickamauga, had decided to charge and push back their Southern brethren in what would eventually become the March to Atlanta and the defeat of the Confederacy. I had a distant Ohio relative who had been there, fought there, and died there.

Often, during the multi-year remodel of the 1949 house we had bought here, I felt like I was in combat. One day that distant Ohio relative, Elihu, whose presence I had sensed for some time was hanging around the area, still sorting things out, dropped in for a visit.

"Shucks, cuz, you got it easy," he said.

"Oh, do I?" I retorted angrily, turning off the mower, "Do I really?"

"Well," he drawled lazily, "is anybody shootin' at ya?"

"Are you sure you're from Ohio? That's a bit of a local accent."

"Guess I picked up a little local flavor in my time here. But my time's over, yours is still going on."

I dragged myself into the shade, almost collapsing on the lawn to rest and answer my invisible companion, "Don't I know it. After this, I've got painting inside to do."

"Pretty big project for a fella your age. What you be now, 60?"

"67, don't I know it!"

"So why you doin' it?"

"To resell the place eventually, hopefully for a profit."

"Profit? What profiteth a man to gain the world and lose his soul?"

"Oh, don't start in on that!" I said "I get enough of that here in the Bible belt."

"Got to separate the wheat from the chaff, if you'll allow me one more. I was just a farmer in Ohio. I thought it would profit my Soul to enlist and fight to end slavery. Ended up losing my world, but gaining more for my Soul."

We were quiet for a while, perhaps trying to coax the breeze to move with a little more cooling gusto.

"How old were you when you died?" I asked him.

"All of 28 big years, cuz, and I'd only been kissed a few times. S'pose that's what I missed most when that crusty old Reb shoved his bayonet in me. He pointed to a spot just below his heart. He was kinda old, y'know, like you, and I thought why is this old geezer fightin' in the ranks? And he was uh-gee, my Lord was he ugly! Then all I could think about was Jenny back home, and how she was so pretty, so real pretty, and so I tried to see her face instead of his, wishin' I could have gotten out of this mess and gotten back home to her. But I didn't. Yeah, I know no one ever really dies though, otherwise I wouldn't be sittin' here talkin to you. I came to talk to you in case you're thinkin' of doin' somethin' stupid because you've

got yourself all twisted in knots about this remodel. Hell man, it's just a remodel. It's just work."

"Which is what my wife and I are always fighting about, especially the quality of my painting work."

He looked confused. "Didn't you spend a lot of years as a professional painter? We check up on the family tree from this side."

"Yes, and more than once I was told, 'Hey Michelangelo, it looks good enough, it'll pass.' But now, my wife wants actual Michelangelo quality and I don't have it."

He chuckled and said, "Oh, I think you do. I think you just don't want to work that hard. I get it. Lots of guys when the shootin' started just up and ran the other way. Hell, with this noise, who needs it? Wish I'd been one of 'em, tell ya the truth. But if you hang in there and make it all nice and pretty like she wants, maybe it will sell for a tidy sum. And I don't just mean financial profit. Maybe the remodel has you bent out of shape because all the contractors are southerners, and that makes you, a northerner, feel like you're being attacked?"

"Yeah, I know, I know. Reincarnation, but I'm not sure I believe in it."

"Let me tell you, it wasn't far from this spot where all you folks have your nice fancy houses and yards now that we were sleepin' on the ground in all kinds of weather, feelin' lucky when we got enough crappy food and, oh yeah, gettin' shot at on a fairly regular basis."

"Are you trying to tell me I was here in a past life? In this battle? And now I'm back, fighting a different kind of battle?"

“You have been talking about fighting and dying here. Hell of a lot easier to do it verbally and metaphorically, don’t you think?”

He cocked his head and I looked away to see my wife Jenny and our dog Daisy as they came out the front door and into the yard with a cold drink. She did not see Elihu, but Daisy sniffed up a suspicious storm.

"Lawn looks good," she said, "I know you like to do the lawn more, but in this heat it's more dangerous than painting inside. Come on, that's what we have central air for."

And then cousin Elihu gave me a wink and a smile and was gone.

“Be right there,” I said, and as I went to roll the lawnmower down into the garage, I said aloud to myself, so as not to miss the point that I was having trouble getting into my head.

“*I* was cousin Elihu?”

I had often griped to myself during this remodel, but never *in person* as had just happened. I wondered. Had my beseeching God, the angels, or a higher power, just delivered me from what I thought was such an onerous hardship? Had they been calling me to a higher, wiser part of myself?

## THE SUBSTITUTE TEACHER

**M**y name is Chem Eshar. I was a retired schoolteacher on my own planet when my services were requested to fill in for a middle school teacher on Earth. I agreed because I still had distant relatives there and I hoped to reunite or, dare I say, rescue them. If they didn't freak out at the prospect.

Earth people are still prone to freaking out should the truth of other planets with intelligent life become known. I thought that by 2026 everybody would be OK with the idea, but I was told it would be another 100 years or so before the population as a whole would be receptive. By then, the condition of life on earth would be commensurate with that of an alcoholic who hits bottom and finally admits defeat, sincerely asking for help from a higher power.

In the meantime, I would be just another one of the "do-gooders" from our planet, sallying forth to plant seeds of potential redemption. I was seriously re-thinking this idea after reading a story about Captain Cook. But I was here now. I showed up at my classroom and wrote my name on the board, explaining that Mr. Robidoux was and I would be filling in. I knew I only had one day, so I had to get right to it.

"Let's me start off by saying that in this classroom not only born around 2007, but at other time periods in history and in many different bodies of many different races. I take it by the looks I'm getting you don't believe me?"

One student spoke up. "I'm familiar with reincarnation, but I don't believe it. It can't be proven. And, anyway, what does it have to do with social studies?"

"Excellent question, Jason, is it?" looking down at my seating chart, then turning to write on the board the classic

definition of social studies: The study of individuals, communities, systems, and their interactions across time and place that prepares students for local, national, and global civic life.

“Yes, Rhonda.”

“Is it possible to be born on earth, die, and then reincarnate on another planet?”

“Certainly. That is exactly what I did.”

The class was deathly silent.

“And I may as well let you all in on something else. Not only are all of you reincarnated, but when you were young children, you were taken via your inner bodies, to an alien base on the planet Venus. There you were subconsciously programmed to activate later at a specific time and place and in a specific manner to work together to carry out a mission. You will soon experience insertions of awareness, moments of transcendence, glimpses of messages of incomprehensible but undeniable content, to facilitate your training.

Many of you perhaps already suspect the puppet nature of humans being randomly, often maliciously, manipulated by some “other” force which programs your bodies and then disposes of them. Violence and sickness programs, just to mention two built-ins to limit population growth. Of course, programs fail. Medicine advances, wars get smaller. But all life on earth is a program, an ongoing experiment. And there have always been the experimenters and those experimented upon. We took a group and marooned them with certain environmental conditions and supplies to see how they do. Yes, Rhonda, I could tell you would be brave enough to ask your question.”

“This training. Is it paid? Will we be paid when we graduate from the program? Because the part of the ‘experiment’ I’ve struggled with all my, yes, many lives is, where’s the money? We need money for everything. Please don’t trot out the examples of aboriginal peoples. How they lived in simple harmony with the earth that provided all their needs. Because it should be “experimenter-mind-consciousness” got bored with all that simple harmony and introduced things like agriculture, possessions, competition, record-keeping, capitalism...”

I listened intently as she continued

“Maybe the program was designed to activate at a certain point but it went viral and manifested in different times and places. Every time one segment of the collective consciousness got a little of that viral awareness, rather than share it, they set up things like kings, masters, slaves, serfs, workers, wealth, and poverty. That has continued to this day with our even sharper divide between haves and have nots, not to mention misplaced use of resources. Is this our assignment?”

“Are we to become eco-alien-secret agents? Because to me, it seems like this part of the experiment is keeping the collective consciousness dumbed down. We are all running around trying to get bigger pieces of the cheese. And then, there’s our rampant procreation. Can you imagine what the population would be had it not been for wars, disease, and suicide? It makes me angry. If you all could hardwire us for self-destruction, why not for creation, for sensible birth control, for higher minded ideals? I know why! You didn’t have those things yourselves. You were like dysfunctional

parents. You couldn't pass on something better, only what you knew."

"My, Rhonda," I said. "Someone has been doing their homework. Let me point out briefly that if you went into a truly deep memory of your past lives, you'd recall that people did live long, healthy, and harmonious lives. There was a golden age, a manageably sized and highly evolved civilization. So what happened? The answer lies within you, but you know that, don't you."

"Do I know the answer?" she said.

"Is this some psychological gambit to get it out of us?" said another student. "Haven't you traumatized us enough already?"

I couldn't hold back a chuckle, "I do not have the answer. I would not be here if I did. Does anyone here feel traumatized? Yes, Cindy."

"Not traumatized, but what nihilized. I know that's not a word, but I gave up around age 7 on anything ever truly getting better. So, even though this morning I've found out I'm in an alien seed training program for some mission of earthly redemption, I'm still pretty bummed out. I just want to get high after school."

"Thank you, Cindy, I was a nihilist in my youth as well, and I grew up on a much better planet than this one. Yes, Arlo?"

"I wrote this story about the earth as a casino, and every time you incarnate, you're going into the casino thinking this time you'd beat them, or at least break even. But after a while you start to think, 'I'll be glad just to get out and not come back.'"

“Interesting. So, what is meant by getting out, or getting back? Sandra.”

“Nirvana, God realization, Samadhi? Nothing is good or bad. It’s just our thinking that makes it so, right? So, yes, the problem is the mind, or thinking, call it whatever, but there’s a problem and just *saying* there is no problem doesn’t make it go away!”

I wrote on the board:

*Subject to the laws of time and space on the physical plane.*

“So, trainees, the work around is perception. It’s like that story of a man in prison who describes beautiful view from his cell to a man in the next cell who doesn’t have it. Then that first man dies and the man from the next cell over inherits his cell. He finds that it has no view at all. Just another wall. Have you heard that one?”

A unison groan of boredom goes up from the class.

“OK,” I said. “I forget that you are advanced students and ready for the next step beyond the platitudes to change your attitude and be grateful. Yes, Michael.”

“Since there are no 64-year-old high school seniors,” he says. “is the master plan for all of us to graduate into whatever modality metaphor we choose? Then we keep incarnating, spending hundreds of thousands of lives learning to be the being *we originally were to begin with in the golden state*? If so, sign me up for nihilism.”

“Does anyone have an answer for Michael?” I asked the class. “Yes, Jeffrey.”

“I would surmise that we were never some static golden beings that devolved into the physical plane for whatever reason and became subject to its rules. Like being knocked off

a ladder and slowly needing to climb back up. Instead, we are ever expanding beings choosing this physical world reality for a particular purpose that will expand us even more. It may not seem that way. Spend 70, 80, 90 years and achieve what? By physical world terms, not much. We work, we love, we age, and then we die.”

Cindy interrupted. “One of the laws of the physical plane is that pure truth cannot be shown. Paul of Tarsus would appear to a bystander to simply be someone who fell off a horse drunk. Instead, he was blinded by the brightness of the truth.”

I changed the subject by scrawling on the board Plato’s Cave.

To my utter surprise, Cindy responded. “I remember studying with Plato. He could be a little tedious.”

“Not as bad as Aristotle,” I said, continuing, “I renounced nihilism because I came to realize there is no running away, no escaping. “It” will find you, on earth or the Andromeda galaxy. Think of the fact that there are some 92 million lottery combinations and that you are playing them, one at a time, and the winning number **will** be drawn. Of course, it might not be for 10,000 more lifetimes. Or, you can just declare yourself a winner without playing. We are all here for a definitive, you could say even, divine purpose, like it or not.”

“Hold on,” Jeffrey protested. “By that logic, when some mentally disturbed individual shoots up a school, it doesn’t matter? All the victims just pick up on what they were doing in another life, leaving so many grieving relatives?”

“There is an answer to that question,” I said. “We find it better to grieve, suffer, wonder, ponder, yearn, and ache,

than accept the fact that all lives and deaths are choices. No, you say? It is better to believe in a mystery, in something we can't understand? God works in mysterious ways. OK, God you take it and make sense out of it. I'm just a puny little human incapable of understanding the big questions of life and death. Besides, if I tried, God might get mad at me.

“But if we accept that we chose to be in the place when we were killed for seemingly no reason, we have to claim responsibility for some part of us making that choice, right?”

“For argument's sake, stay with me for a moment. Everything about our existence stems from choices we make. Some God-mysterious part of us, because the ordinary, everyday, part of us would never choose to die by being hit by a drunk driver? How senseless? Everything happens for a reason. So, what the hell is the reason?”

“Camus said that life is meaningless and absurd, but becomes meaningful once we accept that fact. So now we're into quantum physics. A thing only takes on reality once it is observed, and then takes on the nature of the observer? I see you watching the clock, Jeffrey.”

“Yes. You keep going down wormholes, and it feels like we've been here for millennia.”

I sighed. “You humans with your perceptions of time. Time flies, time drags, out of time, in time. You are slaves to time. In ancient Greece, slaves were tattooed on the forehead with the words, ‘I am a runaway return me to my owner.’”

The bell to end the class sounded.

The next day, the regular social studies teacher was back. All the students had forgotten entirely about Mr. Eshar and their discussion.

Well, not quite entirely.

## REVERSING THE CURSE OF THE VASE

Professor Dan Calloway was happily tenured at Wake Forest University. Happily married to one Leslie Partridge, he was looking forward to retirement when he planned to travel the Far East with her. He would, read, researching and reveling in all things Asian.

This, after years of teaching as Professor Emeritus of East Asian Languages and Literature in the unlikely venue of Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

This particular day had begun as an ordinary one for the professor. But it would end with a metaphysical, re-incarnational, trans-dimensional, intercontinental job assignment. Perhaps, every day was like that, but who had the stamina to live like that?

He was driving home from work when his wife called and asked him to pick up some kimchi, the traditional Korean side dish of salted and fermented vegetables they both so loved.

“Are we having dinner guests?” he asked.

“No, I would just like some kimchi,” she said, “Oh, and the strangest letter arrived for you today.”

“Really? What was strange about it?”

“I guess I should say the delivery was strange.”

“We have a new mailman?”

“No, it was a guy in a white van. He spoke no English, handed me a plain brown manila envelope addressed to Professor Calloway.”

“I’m sure you opened it. What did it say?”

“Couldn’t read it. I was in Chinese.”

“I thought you were getting pretty logo-syllabic literate?”

“Yeah, I thought so too, but I couldn’t make heads or tails of it, or the dialect of the few words the delivery driver spoke.”

“Did he seem friendly?”

“Not really. More worried.”

“Did you give him a tip?”

“Didn’t have time. He rushed off like a scared rabbit.”

“Ok, I’ll look at it when I see you soon.”

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Dan parked his KIA Soul in front of the store where he would buy the kimchi and some other groceries. He was walking across the lot when he spotted two house painters sitting in front of the store on a bench drinking beer. Then, from over his left shoulder, he heard the voice of a man say, “Take a good look at that son. That’s what happens when you don’t stay in school.”

As soon as the word school left the arrogantly rude man’s mouth, Dan suddenly found himself inside the body of one of the house painters. He felt like one of the Hindu Untouchables until his partner nudged him and said, “C’mon, forget that guy, let’s go.”

Dan felt compassion from the professor for the painter, and yet not from the painter for “himself.” He looked down and saw that his clothes, as well as his hands and arms, were encrusted with paint and grime. He felt a kind of disgust. It wasn’t that he necessarily preferred to “be” the professor, but he didn’t want to be the painter either. Or did he?

He got into a beat-up old car with his co-worker that sported bald tires, dented and rusty fenders, torn seat fabric, a duct-taped window, and a collection of empty beer cans strewn about the floor.

His co-worker, Jim, sensed something was different as Dan looked at the car like he was seeing it for first time.

“You’re not still thinking about that jerk in the parking lot, are you?”

“What if he’s right?”

Jim scoffed audibly and pulled into traffic. “Of course, he’s right! Hasn’t that been the way since the first Neanderthal decided to work on hieroglyphics instead of hunting woolly mammoths?”

“I don’t think any Neanderthals ever worked on hieroglyphics. Well, unless you consider cave paintings of animals,” Dan heard himself begin speaking professorially. “It’s the Egyptians who...”

Jim cut him off. “My point is that world has always been full of haves and have nots. Always will be. The game is rigged. College might help, but it might just end you up an educated dummy. Grab me another beer from the back, will you?”

“You’re going to drink and drive?”

“I’m driving, and I have already drunk, so yes, I am drinking and driving. That would be the transitive law of algebra if you recall.”

“I’m not sure that’s right, Jim,” Dan said, handing him the beer.

“Didn’t you graduate summa cum laude from Notre Dame? That’s right, don’t look so shocked. He hoisted his beer can towards the roof. “Had I not the fallen in love with this

little lady right here, I might have been the guy telling his son what a cautionary tale you were. And are.”

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"Dan? Dan!" Leslie was saying, tapping on the driver's side window. "C'mon, bring the groceries in and let's start supper."

"I'll be right in, just have to make a quick call," Dan said.

He walked in the house a few minutes later, saying, "I was trying to call Roger. Just got voice mail."

"Roger!" Leslie said with mild alarm, knowing Roger was called only when Dan felt an imminent crisis. This could mean a job change, residence change, or any number of changes all at once. Roger, despite the Anglicized name, was an elderly man of Tibetan birth, a mentor and friend to Dan.

Shortly after Dan began his first teaching assignment, he and Leslie took a trip to India on winter break. They wanted to make the pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment experience around 400 BCE.

The tour bus transporting them and the other pilgrims to the site broke down. The driver seemed helpless as to what to do when Roger came casually strolling along with his robe and walking stick, his persona essentially unchanged from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

He sought out Dan, who had exited the bus and was attempting to lend his extremely limited mechanical expertise to its repair.

"Why are you going to Bodhi Gaya?" he asked in perfect English.

Dan was unable to respond, gripped in the silence of Roger's gaze.

“Bodhi Gaya is a nice place, but you don’t really need to go there. My name is Roger, by the way.”

“Dan. Dan Calloway.”

“Professor?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“You look like a professor. East Asian literature and religion studies most likely?”

“Right again. And you? Are you a monk?”

Roger smiled and patted Dan’s shoulder affectionately and firmly. Dan noticed then that not only Leslie and the bus driver, but all the passengers were silently observing Roger as if perhaps he were the Buddha incarnate about to bestow some cosmically wise pronouncement. But then he just said, “Have a good trip everyone. The bus is fixed. Professor, where do you teach?” Dan told him. Roger winked and said, “See you there soon.”

Leslie stuck an interrogatory paddle into Dan’s stream-of-consciousness flashback, asking, “Tell me what’s up before I start making things up.”

“I saw two housepainters drinking outside the market where I bought the kimchi. They weren’t drunk. They were just having a cold one after work, minding their own business. For a brief, scary time, I felt like I was inside the body of one of them. This was right after some jerk had pointed at them and said to his son, ‘See what happens when you don’t stay in school!’”

“Well, you are quite empathic,” she said.

“But this was more. I felt physically inside the body of the painter. I began to identify with it as myself. The built-up paint on my hands and in my fingernails. I watched “myself,” walk into the store. And then I jumped back into “me” buying

the kimchi and the other groceries and walking back to the car and driving home. I was the housepainter and then I was here, unpacking the bags.”

“Maybe you should look at the letter,” Leslie said after a pregnant pause of elephantine length. Her face was pinched with concern as she handed the manila envelope to him. At first, he held it with the tentative caution one might a dog’s poopy bag after having used it to clean up the yard dropping. Then, he opened it and read aloud to Leslie:

*My dear professor. You don’t know me. In this lifetime, anyway. As you know, reincarnation is widely believed to be a fact in the East, and, fortunately, more so lately in the West. Once we meet, I know we will recognize each other from any number of other lifetimes. We are old friends. Very old friends. Which is the only reason I would impose upon you with this request to make such an arduous journey.*

*My name this lifetime is not important, but for convenience’s sake call me Hop Sing. Yes, the cook from the old TV show Bonanza. He happily served the Cartwrights even though they probably paid him squat. Which sort of brings me to my point.*

*A great injustice has been done to our mutual relatives. Ah, how to begin? It was 1952, in Narragansett, Rhode Island, before you were born. And it all inauspiciously unraveled beginning with the simple forgetfulness of leaving a window unlocked! Please play the disc.*

Dan had set the envelope down on the table by the door after extracting the letter and reading it. Now he picked it up and a disc slid out.

“I’ll put this in the computer to play it, but would you please try calling Roger again?” he asked his wife. She dialed the number on her cellphone as they sat at the desk and booted the PC.

The video began playing as Leslie said she too, was just getting voicemail again. They watched a wizened Asian man muttering to himself, pacing the dirt floor of his mountain hut, hands wringing, countenance compressed in concern.

Another man sat at a corner table, little more than roughhewn wood haphazardly nailed to rough-hewn wallboard. He was sipping tea.

It was then that Dan and Leslie gasped as one when the camera took a more direct focus on the man at the corner and he was revealed to be in fact Professor Dan Calloway!

They sat frozen as the video continued, as Dan’s voice, unmistakably, in addition to his visage (no chance of it being Photoshopped or otherwise manipulated) asked the older man, “Is it really so bad?”

The older man stopped in his tracks, swirled around in his sandals, and faced his guest with an expression of utter incredulity. “I’m afraid so, Professor. I’m afraid it is. Until the vase is returned to its rightful owner, the rift in the universe that I foolishly allowed to open will allow all manner of malevolent mischief to flourish unabated.”

The computer screen went to crackling snow and the disc ejected itself automatically.

“So,” Leslie said with surprising nonchalance, “apparently your consciousness can transcend time and space. It’s what you’ve always wanted, isn’t it?”

“Why are you not freaked out about this?”

“Because it’s fascinating,” she replied. “It’s what Roger talked about on those long nights in India. Now it’s actually coming to pass here in our lives, right now in Winston-Salem, North Carolina!”

The doorbell rang. Dan sat frozen at the PC. Leslie got up to answer it. It was Roger.

“You called?” he said, his cherubic face beaming a smile as usual.

“Do come in, Roger,” Leslie said.

Roger walked immediately to where Dan was sitting at the PC, placing his hands on the professor’s shoulders with fatherly concern and affection, saying, “Let’s have some tea.”

“On it,” Leslie called from the kitchen.

“Use the Bhutan blend I gave you last month,” Roger called out as he and the professor walked to the living room and sat down.

“OK, so tell me,” the Tibetan said.

“Well...” but before he could continue, Roger interrupted and said, “First, show me the letter.”

Dan retrieved it from the desk and handed it to Roger. He looked at it for all of five or six seconds before setting it down on the coffee table and taking out his cell phone.

“Hop Sing? It’s Roger. Email over the rest of letter. Yes, I’m with him. He’s OK. Yes, he’ll probably be able to make the trip. Call you back later.”

The professor’s PC hummed to life, then the printer ejected 2 or 3 pages. Leslie picked them up on her way back from the kitchen with the tea. She set the pot, cups, and the remaining pages of the letter on the table. Roger picked up the papers and began to read aloud.

*Well, of course, our story begins well before 1952, Professor. Do you recall how we toiled in the emperor's service creating fine porcelain jars and vases? Likely you do not. You never liked the work. You never had the patience for the hand painting of miniature landscapes, and so you were dismissed. I suspect you chose to follow your true passion of the time which was drinking copious amounts of sake. Ah, perhaps that would have been better for me as well, but with my reflux I never would have been as successful at it as you!*

*In any case, I went on to create a vase that was nothing short of a work of art. So much so that I thought it was too good for the emperor, which was heresy, I know, but what had he ever done for me? Whether as peasant of the Ming dynasty, a serf of medieval Europe, or an indentured servant in the American colonies, I'd never had much use for the ruling class. You are aware of that. We have always agreed on the inherent unfairness and exploitation of it all. Except of course when **we** were the ones in charge.*

*So enamored of my creation was I, that I sought the services of a local shaman, what have you, a curious fellow, that had for some time been attempting to sell me on his supernatural goods and wares. I estimated him to be merely another of the many devotees of rice wine with the added exception of a particularly vivid imagination.*

*I asked the shaman to render the vase invisible, to make it beyond the emperor's proprietary reach. Yes, the emperor had paid for the materials, but I had manifested the design and creation, and so I felt ownership was rightly mine.*

*Well, that shaman actually had the skill to make the vase invisible, but when I returned to reclaim it, he*

*sheepishly admitted he could not rematerialize it. That he had somehow (probably due to rice wine) lost it in the ethers.*

*Accepting reincarnation means accepting and trying to understand karmic cause and effect, so I took the loss of the vase as proof that the Lords of Karma, if such a group exists, simply had decided my payback would be the loss of the vase.*

*I felt a despair that seemed wholly out of proportion to the event. I spent the rest of that life lamenting my loss with bottle after bottle of rice wine. I somehow knew I had created something far more valuable than just a beautiful vase. I knew that was why it had disappeared and we were not able to bring it back. The shaman had no special powers. It all lay within the vase. What had I done? What had I set in motion? Since that time more has been revealed to me. Primarily that you, Professor Calloway, are needed to help me set right what is now crooked. When can you visit me in Gobi?*

Roger set the letter down and said with grinning enthusiasm, “It’s like you just won a billion-dollar lottery Dan!”

“How so, Roger?” Dan looked pale and on the verge of trembling. He also seemed to be breaking out in random itches, as, with each sip of tea he saw within the amber liquid a galaxy of lives and intelligences effervescing, coming into existence in blissfully short lives, yet long enough for him to know he was able to connect with each of them.

“Dan, our friend Hop Sing tapped into energy he was not prepared to handle. He then unwittingly made a vase out of it. The vase vanished to protect him, but then reappeared in

San Francisco in the mid-1800s. It was ostensibly innocuous until it was stolen.”

“What does it have to do with me, Roger?” Dan asked, finishing his tea.

“The vase is concentrated energy, an energy uniquely blueprinted to you by way of your father’s DNA. As you know, Professor, in the reincarnation cycles the roles of parents and children are interchanged hundreds of thousands of times until they are resolved. And that is the opportunity that you, Dan and Leslie, have here and now.”

Leslie shuddered, anticipating what would come next.

“Yes, Leslie,” Roger said reassuringly. The timbre of his voice had a far greater calming effect than any anti-anxiety prescription. “You were a common prostitute in that life and time and came across the vase in a debris filled alley. It had simply fallen back into materiality of its own accord, but plainly there was some karmic calculation involved that you just happened to be walking down that alley. Your eye caught the vase’s gleam and luster, resplendent amidst the detritus. It was a glimpse of divinity that is so often obscured to the human eye.”

“I took it. I remember so well,” Leslie said, tears welling in her eyes, “I clutched it to my heart, I knew how special it was, but I didn’t know why. I hurried back to the hovel I called home, wrapped it in grease paper, and hid it under my bed. And from that moment my life began to change.”

“What happened?” Dan asked.

“Good fortune came into my life,” she said. “Not just money, although there was plenty of that and I helped many people with it. Not once did it occur to me to hoard it. But it was more than that. Good and loving people came into my life

and I lived many happy years. I left the vase in my will to my only daughter, but as I lie on my death bed, I watched it dematerialize again. She never got it.”

Roger picked up the story. “The vase, although invisible again, stayed in the Bay Area after Leslie’s past life ended her guardianship of it. Were you not also in the Bay Area in the 1970’s, Dan?”

“Briefly, before college,” Dan answered. “Basically an extended spring break misadventure. Oh my God. I can see it now, just like the video of me being in the Gobi hut. I wandered into some antique shop because my girlfriend at the time dragged me in. The vase was there behind the counter. An old Chinese man was there. It was Hop Sing! From the Gobi Desert video! My girlfriend, Renee, really wanted the vase, but Hop Sing said he couldn’t sell it for less than \$5000, which was completely out of the question for both of us. But, he said, there would soon be a new company forming nearby, a company that would be extremely successful, and anyone who bought stock in it would share in its great profits. Renee and I walked out, convinced he was just a crazy old man.”

The crazy old man rang Roger’s phone at that point.

“You skipped over the most salient part of the chronology, Roger,” his voice came through loud and clear from several thousand miles away in the Gobi Desert. “Tell them how the vase ended up in Narragansett, Rhode Island in the early 1950’s. Dan’s involvement is much more crucial than profiting off some computer company IPO.”

“I defer to you, my humble compatriot,” Roger said, turning up the phone so all of them could hear.

“Leslie said her daughter in that past life in San Francisco never got the vase. That is true, but her

granddaughter did! She was a political activist and writer, one of the early suffragettes in New York city around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The vase appeared in a shop in Greenwich Village.”

“Excuse me,” Leslie interrupted, “is it that the vase has a mind of its own, appearing and disappearing in accordance with some sort of karmic connection to individuals?”

“The simple answer is yes,” said Hop Sing over the phone. “And we don’t have time now to give the complicated one. Ellen Jacobs, the woman previously referred to, married a well to do manufacturer from Long Island and this man built a house in Narragansett Rhode Island. One afternoon, three young women—Carol, Helen and Sylvia--convinced a young sailor who was the fiancée of one of the girls’ sisters, to slip into an open window and take the vase.”

“My father,” Dan said softly.

“Yes, Dan,” Hop Sing said, “and that is why you need to see me in person.”

“For the complicated answer?” Dan queried.

“Indeed, and more.”

“Wait,” Leslie jumped in; “If the vase was stolen in 1952 and remained in Dan’s family, how did it get to San Jose in 1977?”

“Dan brought it there. And I guess we may as well give part of the complicated answer now. He brought the vase energy, even though the physical vase remained in Rhode Island. A doppelganger of it manifested in the shop in San Jose.”

“It can manifest itself as anything, anywhere, at any time as needed,” Roger added, “Dan and Leslie, you are needed to help me set right what is now crooked. The vase

vanished for humanity's protection. All was quite well until it was stolen."

Dan and Leslie looked shell shocked.

"So, you have kind of a big trip ahead of you, don't you, my friend," Roger said, looking, for just a moment his most avuncular, "then again, maybe not so far, all things considered."

"Oddly," Dan said, "I do feel like I've won a billion-dollar lottery, but I'm afraid to cash the ticket because I'm not sure how to manage so much money."

"That's what the trip, and, of course, Leslie is for," Roger said, "and I will be happy to help out at any time. But the redemption of the ticket does require a visitation to Hop Sing's hut in the Gobi. That is where you will be able to experience a holographic moment of incomparable and unsurpassable bliss, encoded within the most inconsequential objects and events."

Suddenly, Leslie and Dan's sparsely furnished living room was bathed in a supernal energy. Something transcendental had slipped through the narrowest of mental portals. That awareness of the two of them somewhere else, as some other people, had a certainty of tectonic proportion. The air surrounding them became like drops of water in a waterfall, each an expanding story unto itself. Individual *intelligences* each separate and apart from the other and yet unknowingly aligning themselves into this much greater pattern, like an immense microprocessor chip operating at incredible speed, precision, and elegance.

"Dan," Leslie said, her voice coming from far away even though she was inches from Dan on the sofa. "We're totally responsible for it all! From all sides, holographically."

“I agree with you, but – “

And then a solid sheet of shimmering ciphers surrounded them, creating and supporting the ceiling, floor, and walls of their living room.

Roger explained. “To see the layers of reality is not to go mad, or to sacrifice one reality for another. You can be adept enough to move between and through them as easily as driving from one town or one state to another.

“You will see. It is all contained within the vase.”

## THE MOSAIC

I awaken in a barracks. I've been in so many barracks, so many times, in some military or another. But I recognize this one. France, World War I. I can hear the noise of the planes. I'm a pilot. My commanding officer charges into the room, yelling at me to get up and get going. The rest of my squadron has already taken off.

I drowsily comply. He glares at me, but I see him not just through the eyes of a scared 20-year-old, but those of an eternal being. I know he was a child of mine in some past life. A son I mistreated and neglected. Now he is superior to me and wields that power to satisfy his current ego. He would hit me if he could, just as I used to beat him, but he relents. He feels why bother, the average life expectancy for a fighter pilot is six weeks. I have been flying here for five.

Soon enough I'm back in the air. I know my plane and my mission. It is noisy, dirty, cold, and, soon enough, dangerous. The German fighters swarm us. They are more experienced; they are better killers. I haven't yet killed a man in combat. But now I find myself above a slow-moving Fokker D-VII. The pilot turns around to look up at me. He must be new, maybe his first flight.

He looks scared, unsure of what to do. He slows down. My hands grip my machine gun. I don't want to do this, but I could face court martial and prison if I don't. My commander looks for any excuse to use against me. Two or three men in my squadron are also "out to get me." They were his brothers in the family I had back in the early 1800s in America. A hard scrabble farm in Ohio.

But who is this young towheaded German flyer? My finger is ready to fire. I let it rip, knowing I have to get it over with. The bullets tear into his wings and fuselage, and then into him. I can almost feel them penetrate my own back. He slumps over and his plane begins to dive to earth.

I look around but, oddly, see none of my squadron nor other German fighters. The young German's plane lands in a fiery crash in a flat field. I circle it and then land nearby.

Approaching the burning wreckage, I see he is struggling slightly, weakly, to get out of the cockpit. I drag him away from the fire. Still, he is badly burned and bleeding.

I kneel beside him. With his dying gaze and words, he says, "We're even now."

We transmogrify then, something I've gotten used to, everything around me and my body changing, suddenly, magically. He and I are in the Colosseum of ancient Rome. This time I am wounded, lying supine in the bloody dirt. He stands over me—tall, muscular, and merciless. We are both former slaves having been trained and condemned to fight as gladiators. He thrusts his sword downward into my chest in a killing blow. He hopes his victory will earn him his freedom. It may, in the short run, but soon enough he finds himself as a woman looking up at Roman general...

"No! Please, no, don't! I can still work! You don't have to take my baby!"

The Roman general sits upon his war-horse, impassive to the wailing woman being restrained by his guards. She is one of his favorite prostitutes, but she has broken the rule, which he reminds her of now.

“It is my legal right as governor of this province to execute the infants of prostitutes. You knew this but chose to have a child anyway.”

I'm Marcus, one of the general's officers, and I'm witnessing this. Unwanted pregnancies were common at Roman brothels, and infants were not considered to be "full" human beings until about the age of two.

I watch as the woman, previously the gladiator that killed me in combat, holds the wailing baby in her arms. The feeling of an eternity of awareness and truth again balances on a sword tip. Who is this baby? Why would any soul choose to come to such a short and brutally ended life? Who is the general? He turns to me

“Marcus, take the baby and dispose of it,” he commands. Then he tells the woman, “Your life will be spared,. You will return to your work. There's no escaping the roles to play!”

I cannot possibly carry out such an abominable order again. It has happened many times already. Standing there in my uniform, I recall being a slave, then thinking being a soldier in the army would be an improvement. As a slave I had the loathsome task of nailing the feet and hands of the many people who were crucified.

“Marcus! I gave you an order!” the general shouts.

I know the penalty for disobeying a superior. I look at the woman and her baby, and then to the general I say, “No.”

The baby dies anyway. I am imprisoned and eventually executed. I welcome it because I know it will be the last lifetime I will have to spend in ancient Rome. It was all depravity and brutality. I never knew peace through several incarnations from 27 BC to about 400 AD.

I know now that time is not linear. The lives in Rome were payback for my participation in one of history's most egregious events—the Pequot massacre.

I was a member of the Puritan militia commanded by John Mason and on May 26, 1637, we attacked and burned a Pequot village of mostly women, children, and elderly.

The heat waves from the fire buffeted my skin, but I had to keep watch with my weapons ready. They were unnecessary. It was a massacre. Most of the warriors were away that morning. The village was burnt, the exits blocked, and I forgot about the heat and any danger. All that seared my thoughts were the screams of the dying.

Little more than a generation had passed since Europeans first arrived on the North American continent, and here we were on a killing spree. How could we call ourselves men of God, the elect? The heat from the flames reminded me of another such time.

Except then I was the only one being burned. For no other crime than writing and speaking words that contradicted the prevailing order. For not retracting my statements and beliefs when given the chance. Sometimes I was the one atop the pyre, sometimes I was the one feeding it the wood.

Facing an inquisition, I knew they had the power to kill me, but why? Why did they deserve to censor someone's thoughts and words with the power of life and death? It would be so easy to bend to their will, to recant the insights and revelations I had come by both scientifically and spiritually. But then how could I live with myself?

If I fled to the to the mountains and became a hermit, I would perhaps be killed by wild animals or tribesmen. No

place was safe. Even as a dutiful commoner in the villages, wanting only to live peacefully with my family and farm my lands, I was pressed into service as an executioner, the fire-setter, under penalty of death if I didn't comply. The answer came to me. Power. Power was the only way to be safe. Acquire power. Power is the greatest aphrodisiac, said a 20<sup>th</sup> century presidential adviser. I can only imagine his Machiavellian reincarnation lineage. "I refuse to believe that a fourth-rate power like North Vietnam doesn't have a breaking point," he also said, reaffirming the more apt quote by Lord Acton, "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Yes, it was sweet to be waited on hand and foot, to be deferred to, to have sycophants for friends. To have your enemies easily eliminated. To be held in awe, even for a while. Perhaps for a long while, even most of your incarnations, the power feeding the illusion of immortality. To be buried as a pharaoh with my treasures to have in the next world. All in a misguided but inevitable quest, to find a way to claim the true power within.

But that didn't sit right with me. Instead, I could live many happy lifetimes amongst the Native Americans, the Australian aborigines, the various tribes of Africa and the South Seas—Hawaii in particular. We would have our intertribal wars. There would be things like drought, famine, and storms, but mostly it would be life in unity with the scared earth and our relationship to our higher powers.

What could go wrong there? Well, the ships of Captain Cook. Or wagon trains, or British convicts, or Portuguese slave traders, or Spanish conquistadores and priests.

I chose a life among the aborigines. I had my obligations to provide food, shelter, and protection for my family, but it wasn't difficult. I knew it was a responsibility but also a privilege. And there was so much time to sit and ponder the sky and stars. I went on vision quests. I fasted, chanted, and joined drum circles.

But even there, when the Whites brought guns, alcohol, and lies, I could only think the Great Spirit was punishing me for some transgression. Only after I died many times did I come to realize nothing is lost or wasted or punished in the great circle of life.

It all comes to balance. Always.

## STARFISH OUT OF WATER

In the year 2040, Jacob Bright was an 85-year-old widower when he won the largest prize in lottery history. He, of course, immediately secured the services of a tax attorney, a Ms. Rosamunde Pike. Not the British actress of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, although everyone said the resemblance was remarkable. Ms. Pike was 40 years old when she and Mr. Bright fell in love. Although his many years of disciplined yogic practice contributed to an astonishing health and fitness, Mr. Bright was, nevertheless, 85 years old. They asked the Reverend of a new age spiritual group, Samantha Poole, to perform a wedding ceremony. Meeting with the two of them at Rosamunde's office, the Reverend got straight to the point.

"I consider myself to be of an enlightened mind, Mr. Bright and Ms. Pike, but I wanted to meet with you both to be sure I'm not creating a problem by performing a wedding ceremony that involves a 45-year age difference."

"Of course, Reverend Poole," Jacob answered, "You do believe in reincarnation, right?"

"Of course."

"Rosamunde and I have been together in various bodies in multiple past lives. Before we met, we had individually and decided that this would be our last lifetime on Earth. After we met, we learned that to accomplish that we had to form a spiritual partnership. That is something we have done together in many previous past lives. It just so happens that this time I am much older than she is. I hope you can understand that this is a spiritual partnership, beyond the veils of personality and materiality."

“I wasn’t aware you could just decide not to reincarnate?”

“You certainly can. Soul is an eternally free being.”

“What about karma? Don’t you believe that is integral to reincarnation?”

“It is, and karma is produced and resolved on all planes of existence, not just Earth. You’re familiar with the Akashic records?”

“Probably not as much as you are, Mr. Bright.”

“In addition to us marrying, the records show that it is necessary for us to have a child. I say all this because we’re not just asking you to perform a ceremony, but to be part of the beginning of a karmic acceleration of humanity in the future. Expectedly, I will pass away soon, but our daughter will be lovingly raised by Rosamunde. Through the Akashic records, I’ve already met her, and my granddaughter as well. The source of all knowledge, past, present and future, is accessible to those with the proper desire, discipline and motivation. I feel blessed to have developed that ability.”

“Well, Jacob and Rosamunde, I believe all my doubts about this have been satisfyingly put aside. Shall we begin planning your ceremony?”

---

Jacob and Rosamunde were wed in Sedona, Arizona on June 19, 2041. Shortly after that, Jacob told Rosamunde more of the truth about their spiritual partnership and the plan to not reincarnate on earth.

“Rosamunde, I started writing a book when I was ten years old. I have been writing it since then.”

“You’re 86, Jacob. Hopefully you’re getting close to a final draft,” Rosamunde kidded.

Jacob laughed. “I am, but it cannot be published in my lifetime. Or yours.”

“Okay. What about our daughter’s lifetime?”

Jacob shook his head.

“Granddaughter?” Rosamunde pressed.

“Probably. At least 100 years from now in any case. As I go on, please don’t think about having me institutionalized.”

She laughed loudly. “Why? You think you’re crazier than me, marrying an 85-year-old? I’ve learned so much from you, Jacob, and I knew from the start it was all true. Weird, but true. You taught me to read Akashic records when all I ever thought I’d read for the rest of my life was balance sheets and romance novels.”

“Thank you for accepting what you have, even if you didn’t always understand it. There’s so much more I couldn’t share with you Rosamunde in the time we have together on this plane.”

“So, the rest of it is in the book you’re going to give me, right?”

“Of course, but I have things to tell you first.”

“Then tell me, Jacob, while you’re still here and I can hear it with my physical ears and be sure. I can handle it. You trusted me with over a billion dollars, so you know you can trust me with a book. To begin with, why 100 years? Is it something like Moby Dick, way too ahead of its time for the mass consciousness to be receptive?”

“Yes. Think of like a ship from space that has to enter the earth’s atmosphere. It must do so at just the right angle

with just the right timing or it can easily be incinerated. That's how it is with bringing certain truths to the physical plane."

Rosamunde laughed, even though Jacob's tone had been quite somber. "I'm sorry Jacob, but it sounds like you're saying you're a messiah? And you might be persecuted or killed if what you've written comes out at the wrong time?"

Jacob just smiled. He looked away from her gaze and out of the window at the sun sinking below the red rocks of Sedona. Rosamunde waited as he seemed to be communicating with something out there.

"Let's go outside and meditate a little first," he said. "There'll be a meteor shower tonight."

They went out to their favorite meditation spot on a hill in the backyard, well away from the artificial lights of the town. They faced only the red rocks illuminated by the moon and stars in the night sky as they let the dusk rise around them like bath water.

And then Jacob quietly began. "We know there are entities that exist in the nonphysical, right? And you and I have discussed the fact that these entities sometimes arrange themselves into partnerships, groups, and organizations with varying goals, just as humans have done with communities, towns, cities, and countries."

"Yes, Jacob, and I've been privileged to visit some of these places with you. My favorites are the libraries and temples."

"Mine too. Here's the thing. Even on these inner planes of existence, there are secrets kept even from the advanced mass consciousness as it exists there. For instance, I am still now and have been for most of my life an agent of such a secret

spiritual organization. It is called the Leaf Alliance and it is dedicated to saving humanity from self-destruction.”

Rosamunde was quiet, looking at him now as if he were suddenly a stranger. An interesting, wonderful stranger. And then she grinned and said, “I’ve always had suspicions of such about you, old man. But I would have thought you’d retired after winning the lottery.”

“I did, essentially, but was given a final assignment. Complete the Akasha manuscript and see to it that it is passed on to a direct heir at the right time. Believe me, I had not planned to remarry at 85.”

Just then the meteor shower began. Shooting strings of light laced the blackness of deep space in defiant streaks, culminating in silent explosions of light at unique terminus points from which spread billowing rings of golden foam, anointing the shore of humanity’s consciousness.

“That wasn’t a meteor shower,” she says.

“No, it wasn’t. They’re coming to Earth,” Jacob whispered.

They could feel the consciousness of the planet begin to spin more quickly, its blues and greens and browns and whites melding into a lustrous, elegant pearl effulgent in an infinite ocean of sweet, undifferentiated light and sound. It embraced them as they embraced it, and they heard a whisper from the surrounding red rocks,

“Welcome to the new Alliance, Jacob and Rosamunde. It will be almost a century more of your time for the rest to join us, but you are experiencing it now.”

On November 2, 2042, their daughter, Renee, was born. For the next 13 years they lived happily together. Renee was a highly spiritual child from the very beginning. She walked and talked quite early, and one day in her 12<sup>th</sup> year, when the family was out hiking in the red rocks, she calmly turned to her father.

“I know you’ll be leaving soon Daddy. I want you to know it’s alright and that I understand why things have happened as unusually as they have. I know that mom and I can still visit with you even after you leave your body. And thank you for allowing me to help you with the mission of your book. I’m sure my own daughter will be able to complete it when the time is right.”

Jacob and Rosamunde had never spoken to Renee about passing on a book to her, but they were not at all surprised that she was fully up to speed.

One night, Jacob dosed off in his chair and Rosamunde thought he had left, but he suddenly bolted awake saying, “Oh, one more thing, I almost forgot.”

“Yes, Jacob?”

“Before we met, I worked in the agency with a guy named Henry Booth. He will be coming to see you sometime in the next few years. He will have the draft you’re supposed to read first.”

“You mean I won’t understand your final draft?”

“Probably not.”

“Why didn’t you keep your earlier drafts?”

“I wasn’t such an organized person back then, Rosamunde, and Henry wasn’t either. It ended up in the luggage he took with him to India. Whatever you read in whatever order you read it, it will be OK.”

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Before Jacob passed away that night, he pressed into Rosamunde's hand a slip of paper with a series of numbers on it, saying, "This is the combination to the second safe in the library. The one in the floor under the rug."

"There's a safe in the floor under the rug?" she said, truly surprised.

"Yes, that's where the last draft I could manage to create is. I worked on it up until the night before last."

"Oh Jacob. What dedication!"

"Thank you, dear Rosamunde. I know you will do the correct thing with it for our child and grandchild and all concerned."

Jacob Bright passed away into the higher worlds the next night at 11:11 pm, February 11, 2055. A bright light awoke Rosamunde to allow her to see his physical body dissolve slowly and magnificently, leaving no mess behind.

Renee lived with her mother in Sedona until she turned 21. Then she left for college in Maine. Having become as adept as her parents at reading Akashic records by this time, she knew most of her future.

She would get a job she loved working near the Maine coast. A man she would meet in college, named Joshua, would become her life partner and the father of her daughter. Their baby was born within three days of her mother's birthday, on October 31, 2070, and they named her Laura.

They made their first trip to Sedona to visit Rosamunde when Laura was 14 months old. Renee and Joshua were awed when they saw the streams of light that passed between

mother and granddaughter when they first encountered each other's physical presences.

"Oh yes, it's her," Rosamunde simply said.

Rosamunde lived the rest of her life in the beautiful house she and Jacob had bought in Sedona. She knew she would leave the earth for good in 2100, the same age as Jacob at an even 100 years old. Renee would be 58 and Laura 29, and it was still 40 more years before Jacob had instructed the manuscript could safely be brought to light.

One afternoon, as she knew her time to join Jacob was drawing near, a visitor came to the house to visit Rosamunde. A quite elderly gentleman.

"Ms. Bright?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Henry Booth. I knew your husband Jacob before the two of you were married, before he won the lottery."

"Yes. Hello, Henry. Please come in."

They sat out on the veranda and had iced tea.

"I shouldn't be surprised that you were expecting me," Henry said.

"Not much surprises us the older we get, wouldn't you say? How old are you, if I may ask, Henry?"

"134. Not uncommon when you decide to live in a monastery in the Himalayas."

"I guess. You don't look a day over 120!"

Henry smiled, "It became quite a wonderful life once I dropped most of my attachments. Hard to believe this is the same body, though, that used to go out and get drunk with Jacob."

"Really? But then apparently at some point you both became members of this, Leaf Alliance, is it?"

“That’s right. Jacob didn’t want to publish. I disagreed, but it wasn’t my manuscript, even though I had done a considerable amount of editing. Jacob thought I was being too logical, that I wasn’t grasping the spiritual underpinning of it all. He also disagreed with me about the political statements I thought should be included. He felt they would do far more harm than good given the volatile political climate at the time. Plus, he was the senior agent. He’d been told that he had to wait, and he accepted it. I was still a bit of a rebel against any authority structure. But my real motivation, I soon realized, was material. I knew it would make a lot of money and we could both retire and travel, living *la dolce vita*. We had both been working as agents for about 30 years. In those days, if you were in the military, you could choose to reenlist after three, four, or six years. In the Leaf Alliance, it was every 30 years! Jacob reenlisted. It was actually called re-enlightened, because after thirty years that initial flame that got you involved in spiritual service was diminished. By that time, you may have cleaned the karma of 12-15 lifetimes at least. I chose not to continue, to opt for what might have appeared to have been much harder, but was in fact much easier. I became a Buddhist monk in Nepal. It made it easy to communicate with Jacob, since I was free of distraction there in the monastery. He could appear to me even holographically. The first time that happened was when he told me he had won the lottery and would I like to leave Nepal and come back to America to help him spend it?”

Henry shook his head and laughed. “I had wanted to be rich in America, but I had become monk, opting for spiritual riches instead of material ones. And then here comes my old friend as a billionaire! Of course, by then it was too late, I said

thanks, but no thanks. He went on to say in later visits that, around 2140, many books were being banned outright. This Leaf Alliance manuscript would have been quickly censored.”

Rosamunde smiled. “Fortunately he kept copies of many of his favorites to pass along to me, like *Moby Dick*, the *Great Gatsby*, *Ulysses*, the writings of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. We have an entire room of them.”

Henry sighed. “That’s wonderful. And fortunately, I managed to keep a copy of the original draft. Jacob liked to cite Schopenhauer’s three stages of truth: ridicule, violent opposition, and finally acceptance. Of course, I’m sure that becoming a billionaire took the edge off his despair about society being systematically deprived of individual freedoms.”

“Henry,” said Rosamunde. “I must admit that at times I thought Jacob was either egocentric or just delusional. Even though we’d had many past lives together, and I could read Akashic records, I couldn’t completely read him. I’ve read through the final draft he left me many times over. He told me that the very fact of being in the physical precludes knowing the entirety of eternity. Do you think he was correct, that 2140 will be the right time for his writing to be revealed?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. In the last few years, I’ve sensed a gathering storm on the horizon, which of course could be good or bad. I’m glad that once I give this to you, I will have fulfilled my obligation to Jacob and the world. Anyway, at age 134, I don’t suppose there’s much time left for me to worry about any of it.”

Henry reached down into his briefcase and withdrew a heavily worn, loose leaf notebook and passed it into Rosamunde’s hands. Instantly, they both saw the same glow of light that had encircled Rosamunde and her granddaughter

Laura when they first met. And so, Rosamunde knew the answer was to wait and let Laura decide in another 40 years.

Rosamunde invited Henry to stay but he was resolved that he needed be going. He joked about wandering off into the Sedona wilderness to let his body be returned to the earth. At least she thought he was joking.

“You can start right in our backyard,” she said. “We back up to the Coconino National Forest.” He thought that was a good idea. She gave him a backpack and some food and water and he set off. She never saw him again. She knew he was doing what he wanted to do. If you get to be 134, she thought, that certainly ought to be your right.

That evening she did a contemplation time, then took out Henry’s draft. In the time she had known Jacob in this lifetime, they usually stayed focused on the present moment and raising Renee. He had asked her if she wanted to know more about his life before winning the lottery and meeting her, but she declined, saying, “Like that time in ancient Rome when you killed me? You were a different person then. A much better person than the gladiator I’m sure, but, different. I like you the way you are now. I’m sure I’ll find out everything else when I read your book.”

But, as she had told Henry many times after she had read his final draft, it did not result in her finding out everything.

“That’s why you have to read the earlier draft first,” she heard Jacob say. And so, she turned to page one, *The Prologue*

Dear future wife,

As I write this, you are at least 20 years in the future. I will endeavor to do my best to convey to you in these pages the truth of the Leaf Alliance and my place in it.

Ours will be the marriage of the formless Soul and the formed Earth. We must ever be balancing because we have chosen to become two from the one, and as soon as there are two, imbalance often results.

I know you are out there, somewhere, and we are being drawn to one another, however distant in space and time, we will return to our path.

## **Chapter One.**

*The fishing boat of Earth had been dragging behind it an immense net that, over millennia, had collected within it a bubbling mélange of lives, each a unique consciousness kernel fighting its way upward within the salmon like swarm.*

*The boat now approached a waterfall, and the captain had to decide if it could descend safely, or if all would be lost.*

Rosamunde fell asleep immediately. When she awoke, she knew she was out of her body and far from Sedona.

She looked around at what was a small but cozy house with a stunning view of the ocean. Maine, she suddenly knew. This was the Maine Atlantic coast where her daughter had gotten married and given birth to her granddaughter, Laura. The only sound was a teakettle coming to boil on the stove and the distant roar of the waves upon the rocks below. Then she saw her Granddaughter Laura, whom she had first seen as a bright, lively 14-month-old radiating such love and joy. She

was now a slender, seasoned 70-year-old. On a nearby wall, a calendar featured a photograph of Bell Rock, Sedona. The date read July 2140.

Laura turned off the stove and poured herself a cup of tea. Then she tilted her head slightly, and Rosamunde knew she was sensing her grandmother's presence. A delicate smile creased Laura's lips as she crossed the room to her desk. She sat down and opened an envelope.

Reading over her shoulder, Rosamunde saw:

*Dear Ms. Bright. Thank you for the submission of this remarkable manuscript. Our publishing company would be excited to put it into print immediately. If acceptable, please sign and return the enclosed contract at your earliest convenience.*

A cat rubbed up against Rosamunde's invisible leg.

Laura signed the contract without reading it, scanned it into her computer and hit send. Then she leaned down and picked up the cat, cradling it in her arms. "Well, that's it, Miguel. Grandpa said it would mean either destruction or creation. We shouldn't have to wait too long to find out."

## THE ROLE I WAS BORN TO PLAY THIS TIME

I hate high school. It's hard to admit to myself that it's because I am so afraid of it.

Lunch ought to be a welcome reprieve. The food is never any good but the tension of the classroom isn't there. Such as when Ms. Colwell might call on me to explain the theme of *Old Man and the Sea*, or some such nonsense. Good God, it's about a fish, right? I don't know what else. I suppose I kind of do, but it's nerve-wracking to speak up in class. I get so tongue-tied also because I have such a crush on you Ms. Colwell!

Then in algebra I might be asked to get up and stand at the board to solve an equation! I hate algebra. I can't admit to myself it's because I don't understand it.

There I am, at the board, sweating inside, knowing I'll soon be reprimanded by Ms. Brule in front of the whole class, the chalk dust irritating my fingers, when I notice Patty Wagner in the front row.

What is she doing? She's trying to whisper the answer to me? Well of course she knows. She's smart. Why isn't she up here doing the equation? Just like Ms. Colwell, I'm sure Ms. Brule just wants to humiliate me. But it's OK to be angry at Ms. Brule because not in a million years would I ever have a crush on her.

Patti gives me the answers. Somehow, I can hear her whisper! I write them on the board and Ms. Brule says *very good* and that I can sit down and breathe easy. Patti smiles at me. Does she like me? She *must* to do what she did. She might have gotten into trouble if Ms. Brule had seen her whispering. Maybe she just felt bad for me. It's too bad I don't like Patty

like a girlfriend. She's nice, but not as pretty as Linda Guertin. If only Linda had been giving me the answers. But Linda is worse at algebra than me.

Anyway, lunch. It feels like the prisoners are let out into the yard. Mr. Robidoux paces up and down the front of the cafeteria room just like a guard. But no one is going to call on me to explain fish or polynomials or, God forbid, the anatomy of a frog.

Still, I don't feel comfortable at lunch. To be honest, I *never* feel comfortable and I really don't know why. I often think about running away into the woods. When I get the chance to really do it, I relax and start to think clearly and start to understand. But it never lasts. Mom always calls me in for supper.

So, I'm sitting at lunch with my best friend Glen Whitworth. I like him a lot. He's the only person I can talk to about UFO's. He tells me alien technology is so advanced they could have a train running right through the high school cafeteria and no one would know. I start to wonder if Glen is an alien. I shut out the cafeteria noise, I've forgotten briefly about being controlled by a bell while never knowing when you'll be put on the spot.

I think about a pretty girl speaking to me and the thought scares me. Why? After all, Eddy Greene talks to any girl just like he's talking to his mom or dad. Maybe they feel bad for him. Maybe he just doesn't know any better. In any case, he talks to them, they talk back, and he doesn't dissolve into an embarrassed puddle on the floor.

I would like to understand, I would like to have an answer, but it's far more mysterious than algebra, and I've

heard that beyond that even, there's things like geometry and calculus.

But this afternoon talking with Glen, something happens that will forever remain the greatest mystery of all.

"Is this chair taken?" I hear to my right.

I turn and there she is. I had never seen her before. Where did she come from? From the table a few feet away, obviously, but something else is happening.

I can't speak. Glen is watching my reaction as if a miniature UFO has just landed, the pilot emerging to ask if the empty chair next to me is taken.

Although I had stopped going to Catechism class, I had been there long enough to hear about St. Paul being knocked off his donkey by a blinding light. The light of God and a voice. And in that moment, he went from persecuting Christians to become a champion of a new religion.

And in this moment, I understood why I was afraid of talking to pretty girls. Because I knew in this moment that they, at least for me, had all the answers. They were often unaware of this, but still, they were my maps to the answers. The answers to all my questions about life, death, men, women, algebra, calculus, war, peace, UFO's, will I graduate, what will I do for a job, anything and everything I wondered about now and would wonder about in the future.

"Is this chair taken?" she asked again. But what I really heard was, "Do you *really* want to know *all* the answers that really matter?"

Then the words of Mrs. Eck, the art history teacher, came to me.

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Art opens our eyes, our hearts, and all of our senses. Art can answer all our

questions if we let it. But usually, we don't want answers to our deepest questions. We want the answers to more mundane things. Will I pass a test, or what do I need to say to get that special date? When will I graduate, how do I get a job or buy a house? We pretty much just want to have a happy life—a wife or husband, and see our kids and our hometown sports teams to do well. We just want to sleep peacefully at night.

“But the time will come when you see a work of art that is particularly special to you. And it won't be in a museum. It will be a person. Someone you don't know. You will see truly for the first time what a great work of art they are. The beauty and wonder of this person, this work of art, lets us know that, yes, answers to all questions do exist! They exist within everyone and everything, particularly yourself. But almost right away, you will realize what a lot of time and work it would take to really reach them!

“All great statues were once just slabs of stone or marble. All great paintings were once just blank, empty canvases? You will ask yourself, usually unconsciously, will I really like what will eventually be revealed here? Will knowing more important answers be even more frightening than not knowing? Will I discover something about myself I don't want to know, something I couldn't stand to know?

Don't be afraid, for it is all just a parade of memories long gone by, leading you to the real you.

## THE OUROBOROS

My Higher Self, my Soul, the omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent One (such a high bar to live up to!) had called a meeting of the vicarious entities that have inhabited me over the lifetimes.

“OK people, the situation has become critical,” said One.

“Look, we know, we get a bad rap, but so what? We’re dead, right?”

“That’s no excuse for the meddling you all have done over the years with this physical, living little self, that has now turned 70 years old. You didn’t think he’d make it, did you? Neither did I, to be honest, mostly due to you friggin’ alkies in the back.”

They entities looked down at the floor sheepishly. One spoke up

“We were just doing what came naturally. In the early 1800s, Americans consumed alcohol at a rate that seems incredibly high by modern standards. In 1830, it’s estimated that the average person consumed 7 gallons of pure alcohol per year. And don’t forget, on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, his father said, ‘Aren’t you going to go out and get drunk? That’s what I did on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.’”

“And his father also smoked unfiltered cigarettes for about 70 years before dying of lung cancer! Yes, I’m looking at the tobacco entities trying to hide their faces back there! How selfish of you to get vicarious thrills for yourselves, all the while, unable to suffer the consequences the physical selves have to endure!”

“Hey, your boy down there never smoked. Well, other than pot. And, yes, we did get him to chew tobacco for a little while. That never hurt anything but his love life!”

“Look” said One. “I fully understand that you motley crew of disincarnate entities assembled in this room, are in fact only agents of change. In and of yourselves, you cannot bend the physical arm to take a drink. However, like politicians and the marketing media, you regularly employ devious and insidious mind control techniques. Which, yes, is still just a test for the lower self to conquer and rise above. To learn a lesson. All that aside, we are here to work with what we have here and now. A fairly healthy 70-year-old whose main problem, like millions of Americans, is weight.”

“He had an Italian mother! Bread! Pasta! Bakery!” shout multiple entities.

“Nevertheless, if we let you poltroons run wild with the lower world physical body self, it will suffer and die. Then all it will know how to do is to grab a new host and keep drinking or practicing gluttony. So, there we have it, people, the ouroboros.”

“The what?” says an entity.

“The snake that swallows its own tail. The disembodied negative entity—sex, drugs, alcohol, gambling—causes the death of its physical embodiment, its “host,” so to speak. The host then becomes a disembodied entity still craving that which caused its death because *it* didn’t learn *its* lessons. Another death, another lower astral manifestation. A parasite is really the best way to describe it. Always another chance to overcome it, to break the ouroboros cycle, but like a badly written TV series, it becomes repetitively tiresome.”

“So, why don’t you just override the system if you’re so all high and mighty? Why? Because given the chance he will cooperate with *us*, not *you*.”

“Point taken. It’s a chess game. One king is a spiritual aspirant and potential master. The other is an alcoholic addicted to a multitude of substances, illusions, and other detriments such as greed, lust, vanity, and anger. Motivated by fear, questing only for self-recognition. This second king’s queen is a composite of women similarly motivated and similarly lost. The queen of the first king shares his aspirations: consciousness expansion, contentment, courage, and a willingness to work as partners in an effort greater than Self.

“The bishops, knights, and rooks of the Fear king represent the slave owner, the mercenary, the criminal and thief. The abuser of the innocent and defenseless in a myriad of ways, all towards the goal of consolidating their temporal power in the illusory hope of cheating karmic truth and justice.

“The bishops, knights, and rooks of the Spiritual king are the monks, statesmen, devoted mothers and fathers, scholars, teachers, explorers, and adventurers. They are seekers in many guises, mostly commonplace, aligned with truth, devoted to service of some sort or another, dedicated to the higher, lasting principle of love.

“The 16 pawns are at once the least and potentially most powerful pieces on the board. Their motions are limited, yet depending on their placement, their effects can be unlimited.”

“Very poetic,” says one of the entities, “but the game has to happen on our board – earth – where we have greater

direct control. The best you can do is coach from the higher planes. And you've been trying to coach him for decades! He doesn't listen. He makes stupid moves and gets himself into check and checkmate! He's lost a lot more games than he's won. Sure, he's won some big games. He gave up alcohol, gambling, and drugs, but his scale now shows that he weighs 245 pounds!"

"I grant you it will be a tough game. It's discipline, the ability to stay focused on the goal and the desire for success..."

"None of which he has ever sustained him," said a particularly sarcastic entity. "Add in his age and need I go on? Is he seeing any consequences from diabetes, heart attack, or stroke, or is he still just stuck in the syndrome of *what tastes good now?*"

"I see I will have to bring in my consultants," said One. "May I introduce Jim Morrison, Herman Hesse, Franz Kafka, and Stephen Foster. Mr. Hesse, as the senior consultant, would you begin, please?"

"I lived a long, productive life," said Hesse. "Longer than Jim and Stephen put together, and twice as long as Franz. I passed away at age 85. It was because I was aware of the entities, those psychic parasites, and I was able to defuse their destructive energy through my writing. My compatriots here, Messrs. Morrison and Foster elected not to do the same. Am I correct in that assumption, gentlemen?"

"In my case," Morrison spoke up, "Yes. I chose to gamble on riding the flame of creative expression to the degree that it would either consume me or elevate me to unknown heights. I lost that gamble."

"I lived a scant ten years more than Jim," Foster said. "I, too, could not resist the flame. Except in my case, it was

creativity mixed with romance. My heart ached for connubial bliss, and I was unable to channel that yearning through musical expression. I also allowed the alcoholic entities to consume me.”

“The good news,” Hesse resumed, “is that neither of you are trying to feed off living beings. You’ve learned your lessons needed to break the cycle of the ouroboros. Now, my friend Franz has an interesting theory. I think we’d benefit from hearing from him.”

“Thank you, Hermann. I would like to explain the significance of Jim dying on July 3, my birthday, while Herman was born on July 2<sup>nd</sup> and Stephen on July 4. Not to mention John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both dying on July 4. I’m talking about spiritual independence.”

“Whoa,” said one of the entities. “I think I speak for all of us when I say why don’t you all stop beating around the bush? Just come out and say that you think it would be better for *all* humans if they just didn’t have these urges. That these urges are a mistake in the DNA or something, a slow burn self-destruct mechanism?”

“Hell, yeah,” Morrison said, “that’s what I was trying to say, break on through to the other side. Hopefully without dying of an overdose first.”

“My limited understanding,” Foster said, “which I was also trying to express in music, is that the seeking, or some say reclaiming, of a transcendent state is the natural, original impetus of human beings.”

“You got that right, Camptown races,” said an entity. “We disembodied entities provide the mind-alerting substances and behaviors to help humans reach that goal! It’s

not our fault that they have abused them almost from the very beginning!”

One sighed. “We are having the discussion that needs to be had over and over again. Franz wrote about it in his short story *The Hunger Artist* and his other works, as did the many books that Hermann produced. It is also in the music of Jim and Stephen.”

“Yes,” one of the entities said. “It almost makes me wish I had encouraged our boy in question to stay in school and get an English or History degree instead of toiling away in the minimum wage world all his working life. But at least he has survived to the age of 70. Still, like the ouroboros, we are back to where we started. He’s too fat!”

Franz practically rolled over with laughter. Something no one had likely ever seen before. Including Franz.

“Could I say something here,” Jim Morrison spoke up.

“Of course,” One answered.

“The night before I died of an overdose, I took a bath. I’m sure it’s quite familiar to everyone how you sink down into the warm water and relax completely.”

Relaxing completely is an art form so few people achieve,” said the One. “They achieve a mere form of it through everything we’ve talked about: drugs, sex, and, yes, rock and roll.”

“Don’t forget alcohol,” Stephen chimed in.

“My point,” interrupted Morrison, “is that there is a bliss portal. Or, to bring it down to the materialist level—and this is just me, a dead 27-year-old rock genius talking—it’s like there’s a firmament of money above our heads that we’re always trying to get to. The problem is that we always go about it the wrong way!”

“You’re talking about the monkey and the fruit in the jar,” Herman added. “By putting his hand in the jar it makes the opening too small to release the fruit. All he has to do is tip the jar over and let the fruit fall forth! Right, Franz?”

“We could sit here all day and swap metaphors,” said Franz. “My experience was that eating became too painful. And before that, the tuberculosis was a manifestation of no longer wishing to breathe. That is the choice before us, gentlemen, and let us put aside for now any history, philosophy, and literary symbolism. Let us ponder how we may eliminate this antagonistic relationship between the physical and the non-physical, the transcendent and the lowly, for that is the root of all distress. One side always attempting to subvert the other. The details are unimportant, although the phrase bliss portal is quite enchanting, Mr. Morrison.”

“There’s a key for everyone to get there, Franz,” said Morrison.

“Indeed. I believe the goal that we all unilaterally agree upon is to burn away the dross from within. Then there will be no questioning of this or that. Do I or don’t I? There will only be truth-in-being. That’s the best I can contribute at the moment, my friends, and I will depart now for further inner study. I leave you to the One.”

*“Cut! OK, people, that’s a wrap. Nice work everyone staying in character. Let’s get the sets taken down. Turn in your outfits to the costume department, sign off on your payroll slips, and I’ll see you all next lifetime  
Maybe.”*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“I’m a New England writer; plainly a hobbyist rather than a professional. I had no formal writing education, but many great writing teachers, from office jobs to heartbroken relationships, and even convenience store clerks. I am retired, and I guess I’m still seeking my great writing whale. My first novel, *Dreaming at the Speed of Sound*, is available on Amazon at this [link](#).” My second novel, *Mosaic of Madness and Mastery*, is also on Amazon [here](#). I have also had the following stories published by Story Sanctum Publishing: [Cresting Wave](#), [Thus Spake Alan](#), and [The Overdue Library Book](#).