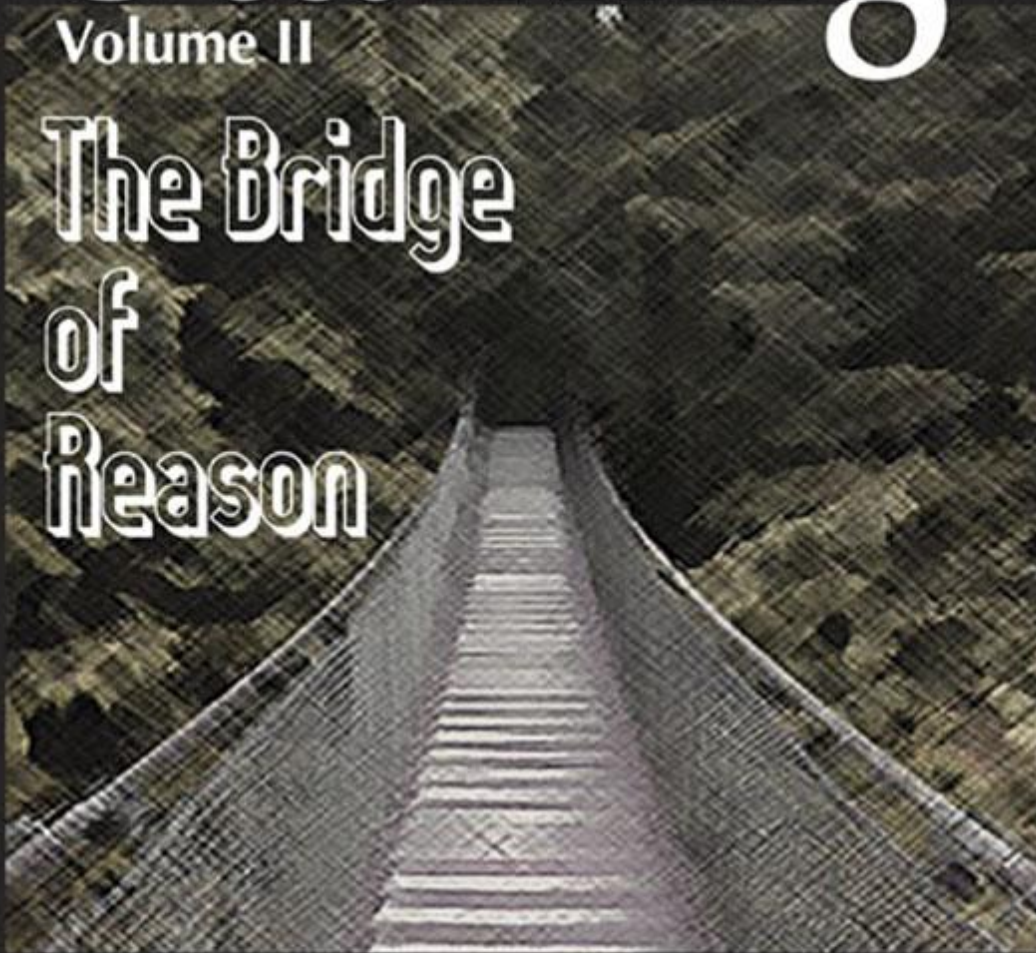


Stalking

Volume II

The Bridge of Reason



based on a true story
by **John Axelson**

**Stalking Volume 2:
The Bridge of Reason
by
John Axelson**

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Table of Contents:

[Chapter 1- Elements of Delusion](#)
[Chapter 2 - Enemies of Learning](#)
[Chapter 3 - Saturdays' Principal Players](#)
[Chapter 4 - Classes](#)
[Chapter 5 - Classes Part 2](#)
[Chapter 6 - The Minimal Chance](#)
[Chapter 7 - Undercurrents of Fear](#)
[Chapter 8 – Deconstructing Personality](#)
[Chapter 9 - Essential Flaws](#)
[Chapter 10 - Translating Reality](#)
[Chapter 11 - Iran and the Blues](#)
[Chapter 12 - Cruelty](#)
[Chapter 13- Self-Interest](#)
[Chapter 14 - Assemblage Point](#)
[Chapter 15 - Zippers](#)
[Chapter 16 - Belief and Conviction](#)
[Chapter 17 - Ten More Minutes](#)
[Chapter 18 - Dreaming](#)
[Chapter 19 - Greed](#)
[Chapter 20 - Loyalty](#)
[Chapter 21 - Nantucket Sleigh Ride](#)
[Epilogue](#)

Chapter 1

The Elements of Delusion

The day after rising to the ceiling of my bedroom dawned warm and dry, and my mood was positively expectant as I drove to see Bonnie in West Vancouver.

Arriving a few minutes earlier than our agreed upon time, I sat in the upstairs living room until she finished putting on her morning face. Minutes later, she appeared from her bedroom at the far end of a hall, and I stood to meet her at the mid-house stairway. Before I had taken two steps, she cocked her head coyly fixing her gaze on the sofa behind me.

"Shit," I whispered under my breath; I returned to fluff the green accent pillow I had used to cushion my back.

Without further comment, as was her way after making a point, we left the house for our upscale bakery on Marine Drive. Seven minutes later, we entered the multi-terraced open room through wide wooden doors, where Brandi's bubbly greeting always entertained us.

We had toast and tea over an encompassing conversation about the similarities between my personal development lessons—the role-playing that had actually been real—and Carlos Castaneda's meticulously chronicled encounters with the sorcerer, don Juan Matus. Categorically, my faux apprenticeship had more in common with his than I realized, but at an introductory level primarily focused on revealing specific behavioral flaws. She said that there were many allegorical tales in don Juan's lessons that applied directly to me, as well, but these were for another time.

For now, I needed to appreciate that the world had confused me with social practices and political policies that did not stand up to logical scrutiny. This could not have happened, she said, had I been aware of my true essence of conscious energy, or spirit: mankind had lost touch with our source, thereby isolating us from knowledge otherwise available to us, and from which we would clearly see the ruse.

Over second cups of tea, she asked me to review the essence of the lessons she had subjected me to under false pretenses, but not as a test: I could better organize and integrate what she had told me into new intellectual relationships as we moved into my first formal day of lessons in clarity.

Under her casual guidance, this review included how she had surreptitiously presented me with an overview of reasoning versus logic, when she talked about her screenplay characters seeing their world in terms of the underlying nature of events. Many people could not help but argue on behalf of the reason for their actions, because self-interest blinded them to its logical essence. Individually, this focus on "self" explained why seeing events clearly was a difficult process to master, and it became almost impossible when our institutions used it to create a mass manipulation of our reasoning. Their goal was to create an apparently consistent, therefore equally reasonable confusion they can direct.

Because I was inside this manipulation, the first step she had taken to free me from its grasp was to make me aware of how I contributed to my confusion. In this way, I would set aside some of the influences of "self" and eventually create enough clarity to allow me to peek through the fog of my way of thinking. She said this was a breath-taking view from which nothing would ever be the same, because it created a pathway that would relentlessly usher me toward a massive assumption. She said I was almost there, but I needed to see how a continuity developed—any continuity would do, but she thought communications was my best bet.

In this regard, the heart of the matter was that while words reflect our thoughts, they are also events that program how we think, therefore what we will do. This happens at the level of

unconscious assumptions, because we are unaware of the effects of maintaining the continuity of any perception. In fact, we are unaware that we even have continuities that feed a master view of such importance that to shatter it is to irrevocably alter one's life. Enigmatically, she said her ultimate goal was to shatter my master continuity, but only after she had taught me how to assemble a new continuity, otherwise I would be an unreasonable man adrift in a world of reason. Equally puzzling, she said she wasn't really teaching me how to reassemble a new life; she was making me ready for Spirit to do this.

She then had me acknowledge that, after only a few lessons, I was seeing things more clearly than usual, and experiencing unexpected insights. She had followed this lesson by having me mimic a screenplay character's efforts to gather energy enough to focus outside of the perceptions the average person had available to them, but did not use. Gathering energy, she emphasized again, is based on not behaving poorly, because this always created circumstances I would later have to deal with.

As I practiced energy management, precise speech, and following through on what I said, I also began to recognize other people's incomplete and/or misleading ways. This was the point at which she had me purposefully focus on the words people used, and guided me to assess them for their underlying beliefs—the essence of their statements. This essence was evident after I discarded the manipulations and convolutions pandemic to common conversations. She called this rehearsing our self-image, attributed the idea don Juan, and said I'd see how this is a precise observation soon enough.

Back to the review, in a relatively short time I had come to see how others secretly designed their personal and professional deceits, just as I had failed to grasp how my incomplete thoughts led to incomplete sentences that gutted my implied commitments. That was my rule.

At this point, I told Bonnie that I was beginning to see the design of her teaching methods, and she asked me to explain what I meant. I said that through her preliminary procedures, and then our crisp exchanges, I had come to think of the word "assumptions" in three terms: our version of them had evolved to include experience-based, ever-broadening concepts that increasingly moved the depth of our conversations further away from anything I was used to.

She said this was an inevitable development, as I lessened the elements of confusion in my thinking, and the knowledge that lay ahead of me could only be grasped by way of larger assumptions.

Categorizing these levels of understanding, I said we form unconscious assumptions directly through experiences we never have to assess for validity, because they are ever-present for everyone: these are the root assumptions of reality, such as gravity. We also form opinion-based assumptions through the building of beliefs that evolve as circumstances warrant. This is our Reason, and sharing reasoned assumptions requires that people agree on basic interpretations of events in a moment that may change. For example, the government is doing a good job, but the Chicago Cubs baseball team sucks—or vice-versa.

Bonnie snickered at this, because she had lived in Chicago, and hearing about the Cubs was as unavoidable as sugar. She added that reason-based assumptions are riddled with errors we manipulate into a continuity of thought, to avoid disturbing our self-image; we would get to that.

A Stalker's assumption, I next said, is something else entirely. These were deliberately sought, and taught, piece by irrefutable piece, and dealt with precise knowledge based on understanding the essences of the events that constructed them. These essences never change—they are pure understandings that effortlessly attach to other essences, as one discovers them. As such, sharing a Stalker's assumption with an apprentice about any topic could replace a book of

instructions with a simple glance—as seemed to be their design. As far as I could tell, these assumptions were entirely about behavior.

Bonnie added that while behavior dealt with what the average person deemed reasonable under a circumstance, the stalker's point of view was devoid of reason: it was ultimately about energy. Seemingly pleased with my review, Bonnie said, "Now that everything is fresh and condensed, and you've begun to arrange what you know so that it's at your finger tips, I'm going..."

"I have?" I joked... kind of.

"Never forget this: we cannot help but order information, or our lives for that matter, to suit the way we think."

"Locked in," I said, pointing to my temple.

"In this phase of your training, I'm going to help you reorder how you think, to build toward a Stalker's assumption in the same way we expanded the word entitlement into an assumption—not head on, but through application. That's how we learn anything worthwhile. Do you agree?"

"I do."

Bonnie sipped the last of her tea, patted her lips with a paper napkin, and put it under her cup. While she was reaching for her purse, I said, "I've got it this time."

"Thanks." She sat upright, and cupped her hands on the table. "We'll begin building this assumption with a simple overview of your potential cycle of physical life development this time around, and of everyone's eventual journey."

I made myself comfortable.

"In our native state, we are conscious energy that chooses everything about our path of development, because free will reigns supreme. But we are not all-knowing, so we have to learn the energy-based rules of whatever version of reality we're in, from those who have been there before us. This applies whether we are in our energetic dream state, or in a physical reality. So far?"

"So good."

She nodded. "Everything in physical reality is a manifestation of energy vibrating at what we perceive to be physical matter: our literal translations of events are actually metaphors for what we have created, and the lessons we need to learn. Hold that thought, as well. Your entire Identity, with a capital 'I'," she continued, "has chosen a cycle of physically based lessons. In this particular incarnation, you are the student learning on Phillip's behalf, and yours: he has designed a lesson-quest to which you agreed, but you could not know what it is while you were in it. This is no different from anyone else who comes here. More over... and this is the crux of the matter, the energy-essence that is Phillip vibrates extremely fast, because he has attained a high level of knowledge. Physical reality vibrates very slowly, which means his knowledge, in its purest form, cannot manifest with you consciously. Instead, you possess the physical translations of his knowledge—their metaphors being your senses, like intuition and conscience, which attach you to his knowledge of what is possible, and how things should be done."

"Still with you... but slipping."

"The goal in everyone's development is to learn what they need to know about traveling in any reality: in your energetic state, this is to use pure logic to navigate through other's environments and experiences while recognizing the sacredness of all things. In our physical state, this translates into learning how to assume total responsibility for our acts. This assessment is based on our ability to reason, until we have gathered the energy to transcend the need for reason, and we enter the realm of logical assessment. It follows that the goal of physically based

incarnations is to increase our speed, by gaining knowledge, thereby learning how to translate our reasoned physical experiences into knowledge that applies in our energetic existence. In other words, this process takes us from mankind's reasoning, to spirit's pure logic, after passing through a number of steps."

"Still hanging on."

"The first of these steps is to recognize reason as a tool that uses beliefs as a guide, but you can't fully employ this recognition until you have energetically *seen*, or assessed a circumstance from outside the grasp of reason. As we just talked about, think of this experience as blazing a path to clarity that you will never forget, so my goal is to lead you to having this experience because this point of clarity cannot be reasoned, nor reasonably explained."

"Why not?"

"It employs your inner senses. In fact, the less reason you have in play the better you will be able to utilize these senses. This means we first need to cleanse your reasoning of polluting influences, so that you can recognize the path to understanding the logic of energy—of impeccable acts. Let's get going," said, ending her introduction.

"Simple overview..." I muttered as we stood to leave.

Bonnie tittered until we reached the cash register, where she formally said, "I will list the elements of the assumption we're after through the two cognitions as best I can. These are the reasoning..."

"As best you can?" I said, handing the waitress a twenty-dollar bill.

"Again, some of the elements don't translate while others may only appear to have a relevant conversion. As I was saying, the two cognitions are the reasoning of the average person, and the logic of a Stalker. Don't be concerned about memorizing the elements."

"Things will fall into place?" I interjected.

"Things are already in place; they're just not here. They're over there," she said, pointing imprecisely toward Stanley Park, across the inlet. "You have to cross the bridge of reason to understand what is awaiting everyone who makes that trek."

"Uh huh," I said, as the puzzled cashier handed me a fiver, three one dollar coins, two quarters, and a nickel. I put a dollar in the tip jar.

"So what's the assumption specifically about?"

"That's for you to discover, like you did with the entitlement lesson," she said, taking two quick steps to hold the door open for me, "but nice try."

"Thanks," I mumbled, passing by to the outside. "Where we going now?"

"We go big road to many square huts," she deadpanned.

"Sorry, where *are* we going now?"

Coming along side me, she said, "A walk along the Denman Street shops, then into the park should work for us today. We'll see." Bonnie looped her arm through mine, looking up at the ragged edge of clouds creeping over the western horizon of Vancouver Island.

"Are you ready?" she said, looking my way.

"Go for it."

"All of this training is designed to make you ready to access true power. This power is knowledge of energy you cannot handle in any other way but impeccably, otherwise it might kill you. That wouldn't be helpful."

"I can see that."

"Handling power properly is not something that can be reasoned; it can only be understood after you understand who, what, and where you really are. Right now, you reason who you think

you are, so we have to neuter your personality's influence and redefine yourself—what you are—according to energetic rules. Where you really are is what we will discuss today. Without these understandings, handling the knowledge of true power is akin to a child playing with matches in a dynamite factory." She took a deep breath.

"Just curious, why are you beginning with where I am?"

"You didn't notice that we began your formal lessons the moment you stood up from the couch—a lesson you reacted poorly to instead of embracing it as a monumental event."

"A monumental pillow?"

"Some people might think that the first formal lesson, on the first day of knowingly being taught Spirit's ways, was special."

"The lesson wasn't new." I shrugged. "I was pissed at myself because of that. Anyway," I said as the thought occurred to me, "yesterday you said my first lesson would be about how cheap I am?"

"I said it could be, and this is probably part of it: I don't get to choose what I teach—not the way you think I do. So you know," she exhaled, "I have to go through your lessons ahead of you, and one of my first was to assess the moment—every moment—to see what it tells me. This morning, your actions chose the lesson on knowing where you are."

"How do you figure that?"

"You were with a teacher of Universal knowledge, and you acted like you were in kindergarten." Squeezing my arm, she said, "Knowing where you also are entails understanding your overall conditioning to physical reality, and how you shaped your beliefs into a self-image from which you draw conclusions that you call your personality." She shifted her grip to my elbow as I mouthed, "Conditions, shape, conclude..." "yup—everything you said was in English."

She looked at me quizzically.

"Your statement was complex," I said, confused that she didn't catch my meaning.

"Be that as it may, the essence of your comment was that you didn't grasp the relationship between handling power, and the elements you must understand so that it doesn't kill you. Instead of taking this seriously, you tried to disguise your ignorance in humor." She stopped short. "The essence of your obfuscation was an attempt to manipulate my view of your intelligence which, again, did not take into account where you really are; or who you really are, for that matter."

"With a teacher, and I'm a student, got it."

"This could be a very long day," she muttered. Then to me, "You must ask me questions as soon as they come to mind. I already know that you're a reasonable man," she said smiling.

"I suddenly have more questions," I said amiably, as Bonnie nudged us to one side to allow a mother with a double stroller room to pass by.

"Go ahead," she said, winking at the infants.

"You said, examine events through the reasoning of the average person, and through logic." We started walking again. "Are you saying reasoning isn't logical?"

She looked my way, staring vacantly.

"Really," I said, "One second the distinction is clear to me and the next... not so much."

"Reason is a tool through which you funnel beliefs that help you develop logic."

"Is logic the Stalker's cognition?"

"Logic is the beginning point for clearly accessing other senses—like *knowing*, *seeing*, and controlled dreaming." She paused, formulated an analogy, and said, "You were conformed to see this world as a solid, stable construction, when it is your perceptions that literally create this

apparently seamless physical continuity from an intricate energy illusion. In the same way, you have shaped your beliefs into seamless assumptions from which you have drawn your conclusions about who you think you are. These conclusions are an intricate entanglement of beliefs *about* you. They are not you; they represent how you feel about yourself, and how you want to be perceived by others.

"Is my personality an energetic flaw in a physical body?"

Shaking her head in mock frustration, Bonnie said, "You are ignorant; your beliefs are flawed, so acting them out with the best of intentions can wreak havoc." Seeing that I was having trouble making this distinction, she said, "Consciousness is not Spirit; it's a tool—a light that Spirit focuses in endless ways to experience and explore all that it can, because it can. In a similar way, your personality is a tool of self-exploration the elements of which you focus in particular ways to develop understandings that go beyond the need for those elements, and finally the tool itself."

"Elements such as being greedy, for example?"

"Yes—you focus on greed until it proves to be a bad idea, then the reasoning behind not being greedy becomes a logical conclusion. At this point, you've shed that aspect of your reason, and of your personality. Overall, your personality is that light of conscious awareness when you know yourself. Stalkers literally use their personality as a tool for more advanced development, no different than other's might use greed for the same purpose, or they can discard it entirely."

"Discard their personality?"

"Yes... we'll get to that."

"Uh huh, so I shape beliefs into conclusions about who I think I am?"

"Correct."

"What are they?"

"That's the point of stalking—to discover them."

"You can't just tell me—I mean do you know how Phillip put me together?"

"I already have told what you are like, but you had no reason to believe me. Now that spirit has introduced themselves directly to you, you do. Unfortunately it's still only a reason, so we have to make my claims undeniable convictions, and finally *knowing*."

"You've lost me."

"To have you understand the nature of the average person's confusion, and gain some semblance of clarity, we had to dissect the elements of confusion. Through practice, we separated you from them; practice is what made them undeniable and easily recognizable thereafter. In the same way, we have to dissect your self-image, and through practice render its elements moot. These elements are beliefs you hold about yourself, most of which are inaccurate... for now."

"So if I've got this right, my personality is a conclusion drawn from an entanglement of inaccurate beliefs?" Before she could reply, I said, "That explains why you're so big on teaching me essences."

"I am not teaching you essences; I am teaching you how to lose your reason, so that you can see them for yourself."

"Lose my mind is more like it."

"It amounts to the same thing," she said, as we reached the intersection of 14th Street and Bellevue. A red neon hand flashed that the traffic lights were about to change.

"For our purposes," she carried on, "the essential elements of all personalities are chosen before birth to suit particular challenges. We shape these proclivities through our interactions

with the outside world, which we funnel through three mechanisms of self-perception; I literally mean your perception of self. We've talked about them."

"I remember that self-importance, self-indulgence, and self-absorption form our self-image, but I don't recall their characteristics."

"We'll cover those as they come up again. For now, know that they are the mechanisms through which you shape and express your views, and therefore from which you draw your conclusions about whom you think you are," she said as we began crossing the street. "Self-image is the singularly most formidable assumption of self-corroborating beliefs a human can have. Nevertheless, like all temporary beliefs, a self-image will eventually bring you to experiences that no longer bear out your views, and the image changes. Eventually, you don't need a self-image either—you will *know* yourself."

"An example of changing my image would be what?"

"You might be confronted with a dilemma you thought you were steadfast on, like the fight or flight response, and surprise yourself. Personal attributes need the same kind of dose of reality to be corroborated."

"Personal attributes such as?" I said, as Bonnie's nudge led us toward the park benches on the other side of the railway tracks, near the Ferry building.

"Such as you not realizing you are cheap, but we're taking care of that." She motioned the example aside. "The point is there comes a time in everyone's evolution when their beliefs have outlived their usefulness, as is their design. This is when a teacher..."

"Sorry... beliefs outlive their usefulness as what, again?" I said as we came to a bench. We sat down facing Burrard Inlet.

"Beliefs guide us toward knowledge through trial, error, and assessment; they have no substance of their own. They are directions to consider, and possibly explore by acting on them. Fighting for them is as stupid as defending north."

"Over what else?"

"Over any other idea; it's just a direction?" she said, raising her brow.

"Right, but we use magnetic north more."

"Do you want to kill me over it?"

It took me a moment to realize I had defended magnetic north, which created the turning point Bonnie wanted me to grasp: beliefs are only ideas until we bestow upon them the false substance of our self-image, then they become a cause as artificial as the self-image that created it.

"Point made," I said.

"Excellent—what is it?" she said, surprising me. Before I could respond, Bonnie said, "This isn't a test; it's to cement your gains, and add them to the assumption we're ultimately after."

Nodding, I said, "Beliefs guide us to and through our experiences so that we can examine, modify, discard, and essentially solidify convictions based on logic."

"Correct, then a teacher arrives to dismantle them all, beginning with your personality."

"Just so we're on the same page, essentially your lessons are about dismantling all of the elements; these are my beliefs, the assumptions and conclusions they formed, the personality I formed from these, and the mode by which I formed all of these things—reason?"

"You've got it."

"Leaving me with what?"

"Not with—without."

"Without what?"

"The continuity that makes you human... don't worry about it," she said, casually. You'll understand when we get there."

Apparently editing her thoughts, she slowly said, "Dismantling our vision of ourselves is an excruciating process, but the reward is what don Juan called the single most important achievement in everyone's development." Looking into my eyes, she said, "It's called a Conditional Death. This is the moment in which you embrace, as your own knowledge, the concoction of beliefs and conditions upon which you constructed your personality, and dismiss them in their entirety. In that moment you are euphorically free—an essence upon which you have to replace the void with the disciplines that brought you to seeing what you are really like. Otherwise, the elastics of a lifetime of poor programming will draw you back to the person you once were. I think I mentioned this earlier."

"Is this what you called surrendering your self-image?"

"It is; I didn't want to use words that might scare you." She grinned.

"And losing the continuity that makes me human is calming?"

"I'm not perfect."

"What happens if I don't have one of those conditional things?"

"You need to stop focusing on the negative, as a reactive response to information that intimidates you," she said, shaking her head. "Without this event," she answered my question, "access to more advanced knowledge is blocked."

"Meaning I'm doomed to be stupid?"

"Meaning you're not responsible with what you think you know, so you're not ready for more," she grinned, "until you are."

"When would that be?"

"We demonstrated that moment first thing this morning: by condensing the elements of what you knew so far, you created an assumption that was more than the sum of its parts, because you're constructing the framework of essences."

"Like you did with the elements of entitlement?"

"Correct, and as you said essences easily and instantly attach to each other. So doing this now would make you ready to learn more of the unreasonable assumption we're after, because you are getting rid of reasoned information, and crushing the remainder into knowledge." She grinned. "Start with the idea that we are energy: if you think of the elements of your personality as a cone of focuses that are always interacting to appear to be consistent, it'll flow more easily."

And sure enough, it did. After a moment, I said, "From the tip of the cone; we are energy living by energetic rules. We condense this energy, and its rules, into physical translations. Moving down the cone, physical experience indoctrinates us to the affects of the first set of rules as assumptions we never have to consider. These include weight, distance, time, pain, and so on." I motioned the physical laws aside. "The second set of assumptions comes from interacting with people, and they infiltrate all of our personal experiences: we compartmentalize these experiences in the three cores of self-image, according to the personalities we have chosen. Collectively, the beliefs we form from embracing all of these assumptions design our experiences."

"You're almost there: what holds all of these influences together to make our perceptions seamless?"

"I know the answer, but I'm not sure I can explain it because your goal is to have me transcend it: reason is the glue."

"Is it fair to say that your problem is with defining reason?"

"It is, sorry."

"Reason," Bonnie said academically, "is typically thought to be the capacity to comprehend events in a rational way. However, rationality is dependent upon how we view our experiences within familiar environments and conditions, and we initially have no choice but to adopt certain values until experiences customize our view." She paused to allow me to bring our previous conversations to bear.

I grunt-nodded, ready for more.

She carried on: "The process of customization is multi-layered. As we've discussed, our first assumptions about physical reality, such as weight and distance, are interpretations of psychological and energetic conditions that exist in our natural state. These root assumptions are literally forced upon our form, causing us to perceive physical reality in the way that we do, while our interactions with others create social assumptions that conform our behavior to suit our culture. Taken together, these influences form a consensus about not just what we see, but all of our perceptions in and to the world at large. Stalkers call this level of perception our inventory, and it includes all of the average person's experiences. For practical purposes, if you can perceive it or conceive of it, it belongs to your inventory." She paused again.

I nodded to signal that I intellectually understood my inventory included everything real and imagined.

"In a nutshell, the world has been incessantly described to us until we are capable of perceiving it as it has been described, then we color it to suit our beliefs."

"That makes perfect sense."

"This process creates an internal dialogue that maintains the description. This dialogue includes the person you think you are standing in the time and place you think you exist, believing the things you were told to believe, when all of these ideas are borrowed beliefs, and shared translations of our underlying reality." Nodding to herself, she said, "You have agreed with the root assumptions of a physical experience, such as the three dimensions and gravity. If you had not, you couldn't function. You'd probably be dead. Correct?"

"Yes."

"You have also agreed with the consensus assumptions of proper conduct. If you had not, you'd be in prison."

"Correct."

"These conformations create the apparent continuity of our existence: our perceptions literally assemble the world we know, but we need a way to get from point A to point B safely. Otherwise, we would all stare at the four-way stop sign and do nothing. Do you see how that would be?"

"I do."

"To simplify this circumstance, all of the intricate influences of perception we have discussed create your personally reasoned arena of *should*. These same influences apply to the other three drivers, but we all interpret circumstances uniquely, so we need a basis of agreement upon which to interact with others in a coherent way. Reason is our operating system. It's the way we assess our experiences as we navigate through our days. That said, as you know from your clarity lessons there is only the assumption of continuity: the process of reasoning is full of personal gaffs and gaps, but our self-image fills them." She took a thoughtful breath.

"Still with you," I said.

"The point you're struggling with is that reason is a tool—a transitional stage in our development, the same way that learning the alphabet is the forerunner to communicating in

sentences. The next stage for everyone is learning how to see through the beliefs and illusions that reason uses, foremost of which is to lose self as the focal point through which we see the world—losing that filter is to lose reason is to gain logic."

She took a breath. "Again, everyone's developmental quest is to see past their literal physical perceptions, recognize the metaphors that physicality represents, and untangle their beliefs to break the trance of their conformations. Doing this reveals the illusions they held about the world, and their place in it. This is true knowledge, and as knowledge increases speed it brings one closer to the pure perceptions of Spirit."

"Got it."

"Not yet: we have to deal with the first barrier you have to learning an unreasonable assumption—doubt."

Chapter 2

Enemies of Learning

"I don't doubt you: I know Spirit exists, so it's only logical that I believe everything you—and they say."

"Doubt is reasoned, so it is a barrier to comprehending what we're after, which is setting you up to experience the assumption directly. Blind acceptance is also reasoned, so it would stand in the way as well, would it not?" She paused.

"Other than I believe you, sure." I said.

"The most prevalent flaw in the average person's reasoning process is a ditch where they park their second-hand convictions, and call them logical conclusions. It happens like this," she said, holding up her hand to forestall my question. "Like most people, you change your ways one severe event at a time, while your ego and intellect combine to convince you that the original experience will cause you to avoid it again. This makes you feel safe, and you quickly ignore the potential of similar things happening by way of not assessing the contributing elements, or by molding them into rules you are convinced is knowledge. You subsequently demonstrate that this is a lie by not incorporating that knowledge into your way of living: you pay it the lip service of a belief, and not act on the conviction that your life might depend on your knowledge some day. So while your out-of-body experience provided you with a single conviction, you have yet to develop a new way of thinking from it, because doubt and suspicion are so much a part of you."

"They were earned."

"But not fully learned; you adapted to higher levels of danger in Lebanon so that, during the nightly Beirut car bombings, you didn't even bother to drop to the floor. Correct?"

"Being on the floor wouldn't have changed much if a car flew through the wall."

"So you metaphorically stood on the outside of the branch to get a better view of someone cutting it off, instead of applying your new knowledge to all circumstances?" She gathered her breath. "A minute ago, you took an hours-old incident—proof of Spirit's existence—which created a true conviction from which you claimed you believe everything I say. The problem with your claim is that, not an hour ago, you demonstrated it's a lie." Chuckling at my constipated look, she said, "You couldn't graciously accept a simple lesson." Miming fluffing a small pillow, Bonnie whispered, "Shit," under her breath. "How shallow is that comment on the conviction that you believe everything I say?"

"I didn't call you a liar," I said petulantly.

"My point is that you have not integrated your knowledge into a conviction. If you had, you would have believed me when I said there are no small things in the Stalker's world, that nothing

comes from nothing, and to stop any poor practice is to not neglect the power you wield. You didn't appreciate these things, because you filtered your neglect through your self-image."

"The true circumstance being that I was with a teacher... I know that now."

"But you don't: the true circumstance was that this lesson is very difficult to master, that my constant reminders should cause you to focus on what you're really doing, and where you really are at all times. The true circumstance was that these lessons are designed to enhance your energy by always doing the proper thing. Getting pissed at yourself, or anyone, is a waste of time, which fails to take into account that you will die. It is also a waste of energy, which fails to take into account that you need all you can earn to endure the training leading up to your Conditional Death, without which you can't go further than the average man's ego allows."

"But I really do believe you," I said stoically.

"You just think you do."

"How is thinking I believe you and believing you not the same thing?" I said, perplexed.

Exhaling a substantial puff of patience through her nostrils, she said, "Your claim is missing a decisive element." She cleared her throat. "As an average person, true conviction arrives as a consequence of feeling that your life is at stake. Without this, you are indulging your reasoning on what you deem to be critical beliefs, like sincerely concluding that you believe everything I say. Your claim is an off-shoot of the main event, and it is certainly reasonable, but like most people you do nothing much with it but make promises to yourself." She shrugged. "The missing word in your conclusion is that you *should* believe everything I say, because it would be unreasonable not to. This makes your sincerity a second-hand conviction reasoned through the aspect of your self-image that deals with the appearance of rationality. But our goal is to get you to cross that line."

"What put my survival at stake about spirit's existence?"

"You were nearly scared to death on the way up to the ceiling. Speaking of which," she said, as if I might argue the point, "you had a dream that provided you with the conviction to keep going with me, when it was not reasonable to do so, before you had your out-of-body experience—the wraith?"

"Right."

"From a life threatening situation," she said, "you gained the conviction that you were safe. Because it was delivered in the dream state, it also took away your fear of the unknown in general, and the unknowable in particular—that being Spirit." Bonnie leaned forward, stood, and stepped toward home.

I did the same.

"Another example occurred," she said, taking my arm, "after the first channel from Kha-lib. You had to decide whether I was crazy or that, according to Kha-lib, the world was crazy and I was actually one of the saner people in it. Correct?"

"Uh huh," I said, though we'd never discussed this.

"To do this, you had to deal with the apparent incongruity your reason created between my intellect and my foolish beliefs, until you had your out-of-body experience." We stepped off the grass onto Argyle Street.

"What difference did that make?"

"It was a definitive event that made my sanity a reasonable conclusion, because you had a new framework within which to view an otherwise unreasonable event. However, you did nothing more with that knowledge than you did with your extreme combat experiences." She gestured laconically. "You proselytized about the rules to others—facts that begged you to make

the next logical leap and employ them all of the time. Claiming that you believe everything I say, based on one conviction, is indulging your reason in the same way because you're really not sure that you're not nuts."

"What? I know what happened, and I didn't make it up."

"But you have yet to make the next logical leap."

"Which is?"

"Which is that you don't understand this world; you literally left it behind. Your continuity has taken a huge blow, and you're pretending otherwise."

"I hadn't thought about that."

"Precisely my point," she said tapping her temple. "You can't help but challenge some of my assertions when your reason hasn't accepted that it is inadequate for dealing with the way things really are. It's defending familiar turf—like the importance of magnetic north, because it has run into the first natural enemy of learning, fear."

"Of what?"

"No quest is ever what we thought it would be, and as you have amply demonstrated most people do not know how to learn. They memorize events like statistics, without assessing the underlying natures or connecting acts that would reveal the continuity of events. Instead, they claim their poignant encounters generated an encompassing conviction, then they roost on the fact of its occurrence with no real understanding of their role in it; they are surprised when it happens again."

"You've made your point about fear, but where does doubt come into it?"

"You have reasoned your fear of learning life-changing knowledge into doubt, which is a more socially acceptable response for a man." She grinned like the Mona Lisa. "The fact is, you must have doubts because you still rely on reason, while at the same time you secretly know that you can't trust it. So I'm not accusing you of insincerity when you say you believe me; I'm explaining how your sincerity is as cleverly contrived through your self-image as is your selective vision of your wonderful self. This is the difference between believing me and thinking that you do," she said as we separated to walk around her car. "To the returning emissaries, this difference would get them killed. It follows that they have to transcend reason, by leaving all of their beliefs behind; they have to *know*. That's their rule."

Leaning forward onto the roof, I circled an unformed point: "Most doctors say that out-of-body events are not indicative of the existence of life after death; that would be the realm of God. They say the experience is a hallucination created in a particular part of the brain, usually under traumatic conditions or drugs. I think they can even map the event electronically," I added as if this mattered.

"And?" she said, leaning comfortably across her side of the roof.

"Some religious doctors also believe this." I paused to better formulate my question, as Bonnie's head-tilt indicated I should.

"If religion has them believe in God," I said, getting a handle on my circuitous thinking, "and science has them dismiss experiences that point to His existence, is science or religion the second-hand conviction?"

Bonnie opened her door and sat inside her car.

I did the same, and we buckled up.

Taking a considered breath, she said, "They have mapped the position where the brain *interprets* a conscious event in physical terms... an event of consciousness is a better way of saying it." She began fishing through her cloth carryall for her keys. "The doctors who dismiss

out-of-body experiences as hallucinations are embracing beliefs that were entrenched during the arduous training they use to define themselves. If they believe in God, a concept they also have not experienced—or recognized as such—they are reasoning away evidence they don't agree with."

"What about patriotism?"

"What about ducks?"

"Sorry, would it be right to say that patriotism is entrenched during our arduous conformation process, and soldiers use it to define themselves?"

"It would correct to say that."

"Are you implying that all beliefs, at best, are second-hand convictions?"

"If they're missing the defining element of properly assessed experience, yes."

"Patriots experience their country."

"They do not; they embrace the *idea* of their country—they experience their culture. In fact, we are our culture, and as such we are the caretakers of values that may or may not still be in development. We are not our country, and you can't otherwise kill ideas by killing the people who hold them." Bonnie looked over her shoulder. "It's ludicrous that with the simple waving of a flag people will kill for an idea."

"Like I defended magnetic north without thinking."

"And there you have it—without thinking."

I looked behind us to see what was holding us up: a straggly stream of walkers clad in yellow T-shirts were passing behind us. Finally, I said, "So it's through the gaps that this awareness of self inserts into our reasoning that a religious doctor can explain away my experience without disrupting his religious beliefs?"

"Correct, which is no different than a soldier slaughtering people without tainting his idea of his country, even altruistically enhancing it."

"Why doesn't it taint his culture?"

"It does, but he's like the doctor; he doesn't want to see it." She took a deep breath and said, "Reason allows us to form all manner of ridiculous conclusions. Logically, you either have a source of an infinitely diverse universe, inherently designed with a purpose for all things, and the free will to choose the direction of this purpose, or you have a universe formed without a reason. In that case, your existence is a brief and pointless enslavement to chance. Most people live in-between, latching on to the flavor of the month."

"Baffling," I said, absently.

"More baffling is that reasonable people should see the ludicrousness of believing that billions of the smallest of particles in the universe could randomly get together to create a single molecule, and agree on what it should be, let alone create all of this."

"What would a Stalker say about the existence of God?"

"The unfathomable order of life that Stalkers perceive renders a chance creation inconceivable, but they would not try to define that creative power other than labeling what they know about its affects. They don't believe in a greater power, they *know* it exists."

"What kind of perceptions?"

"They can *see* the lines of energetic vitality everywhere, and that it is under relentless pressure is proof of a driving force of intention in the Universe. They also know this force is neither detrimental nor benevolent by nature; it responds according the nature of the energy present, so they choose their daily interactions carefully. When they deem it appropriate, they

tread boldly into the face of the unknown, because they have no beliefs to skew their behavior. The rules of energy—of spirit's impeccability—guide their actions. That is their rule."

"If this force is neutral, are you saying that Stalkers think God, or Intent by any name, doesn't give a shit?"

"The opposite: the force can be used by anyone in any way they wish, as a perpetual propellant of free will. What greater gift of love could there be?"

"Love?"

"To a Stalker, all of this," she waved her arm as best she could from behind the wheel, "defines beauty beyond description, intelligence beyond imagination, and cooperation so complex as to stagger their thoughts. Stalkers are humbled by the privilege of experiencing its energy directly. They revere all of this, just as the forces that created it must have to allow unfettered development."

"We must look pretty stupid to them."

"They have been us, and they don't waste energy on judging anything—not even the slightest comment about another's appearance or behavior crosses their mind, let alone slips from their lips. If it is the choice of others to waste their energy, or dismiss the miraculous evidence they are privileged to witness because it doesn't suit what they think they know, that's the path they have chosen for now." She checked over her shoulder, turned around, and started the car.

Slowly backing out of her driveway—there were still some stragglers nearby—she said, "I need your reason to make a small leap from what you could not help but think, when I raised points in specific ways: I was not expressing my personal opinion, I was discovering where you stood."

"Such as?" I said.

"You think I've slammed Americans for being warlike." She straightened the wheel and shifted the car into forward gear.

"You did, and they are," I said reflexively.

Driving carefully along the narrow street, she said, "I presented you with an outline of how an industrious, generous, and kind people, have been led into blindly participating in the destruction of their society, and by interfering with many others along the way. Their system has been corrupt for years, and the population duped, but they will come to see how this happened."

"Why not pick on Canada? I mean, you know that I know we're no better; we're just more polite about it."

"I'm not picking on anyone: your views are impaired by almost caring about Canada."

"Almost?"

"You literally aren't capable of caring about much other than yourself right now, but we're changing that."

"I have nothing against Americans."

"You also have nothing heartfelt to say for them, but you're familiar with their society, so you can see the points I'll be making from a safer distance than if I tripped over a patriotic thread left in your Canadian identity. What I say about America can be applied to most countries, to some degree."

"So how will they correct their situation?"

"The same way you will recover your sanity." Without further explanation, she said, "You also believe that I slammed both you and the media you represented for being irresponsible, which they often are in a crucial way, but editorial staff don't realize what they are doing

anymore than you did. They're inside the manipulations they unwittingly perpetuate. So you know, I think a free press is the life-breath of developing and sustaining cultures properly: we'll probably get into that later this week."

"I think you lead me to believe otherwise," I said.

"You did that. I never lied to you."

"Maybe not directly." I couldn't recall. "But you didn't tell me the whole truth either."

Chuckling, she said, "I couldn't have done that if I wanted to. You have to discover the truth from your own vantage point."

"There's more than one true point of view?"

"Personal perception does not assemble facts; it creates the assumptions we use to explore ideas until the teacher arrives. And their job is to guide students through all of their assumptions to a place from which they can see the truth. This place is unique to everyone, but what they see is uncompromising."

We stopped in the right lane for a red light, and a biker on a chopped Harley pulled alongside; the dual explosions of patently tuned exhaust forestalled conversation.

When the light changed, and the biker had eased his machine through successive rhythms of pulsating blasts ahead of us, Bonnie said, "To recap, for our purposes there are three barriers to the average person achieving clarity of mind. One of them is failing to understand that our true essence is energy and all that this implies, another is our incessant social conditioning, and the third is our self-image."

"I'm not clear on the practicality of knowing we're energy."

"You have seen human bodies die, so you might believe in death as some kind of finality, instead of the transition point your out-of-body experience demonstrated. It follows that without having this experience you might not believe this earth is primarily a school for personal development. Now that you know you don't die, you can embrace the idea that as far as mankind is concerned all of this is first and foremost a school. And like all schools, its purpose is to be transcended, just as the body is a temporary means for part of your consciousness to learn in this arena. With that understanding comes acceptance of abilities formerly unused—the abilities of seers and mystics by any name. And with that acceptance comes individual practices that gain knowledge in more efficient ways, and knowledge is speed."

"With you all the way on that."

"Good, now condense the poor affects of your social conditioning."

"It created biases, often to the point of me being unable to determine right from wrong."

"And self-image?"

"It causes me to interpret events through the limited vision of my self-interests, which pretty much demands that the world evolve around me. Overall," I said as the thought came to me, "reason screws us from the get-go."

"Your statement," Bonnie said formally, "does not recognize these apparent barriers as the tools this school uses to teach us how to transcend the influences of all illusions. Maybe a better way of saying it is that they create the human experience we are here to master."

"You're trying to have me transcend being human?" I joked.

Seriously, Bonnie said, "I'm teaching you how to integrate your earth-bound energy with Spirit, which includes losing the human form—that's a topic for another time. Otherwise, dealing with these barriers requires only the willingness to explore them. It's a choice—inevitable, but still a choice." She quickly glanced my way. "Question?"

"A while ago you said your job was to convince me to leave my idea of self out of my thinking, right?"

"Correct," she said, grimacing at my grammar.

"I can see why that is, but wouldn't convincing me of anything inherently be second-hand?"

"You're talking about words; I'm talking about leading you to having experiences that preclude the idea of self. Then you will *know*, and when you do you'll recognize the danger of sharing space with those who claim to have convictions."

Bonnie became more visibly alert as we reached the ramp. "Review our Saturday classes in your mind, and include your view of the source of the channels; it colors what you think. Hopefully, you can leave some of your reason behind before whatever lesson they're setting us up for begins."

Three lanes of traffic merged into one like a bumper car rally, and we began crossing the Lion's Gate Bridge.

Chapter 3

Saturday's Principal Players

I began my internal review by listing the cast of characters' attributes, as I perceived them, as if I would recognize their influences on what they had told me...

Kha-li's first utterance to me through Bonnie was, "We have been awaiting you," then to quell my skepticism, and address my partially formed questions, he said that nothing was what I thought it to be. He soon explained that all entities had to adopt a personality to speak with mankind, because we would otherwise identify poorly with the source of information, and thereby lose much of its meaning. Otherwise, a personality, as humankind knows it, is an aggregate of preferred traits and unresolved issues in our personal development. Spirit has no such issues. Even their male and female representations were preferences chosen for a given circumstance: the female principle, Kha-li explained in simply terms, is the originator of ideas, while the male principle is the power behind their manifestation. Because all entities at his level had command over both principles of power and application, they were neither male nor female. They were whole.

Communication with us was also a much broader concept than we realized. Tone, inflection, choice of words, and pacing were overt influences, but they (Spirit) also spoke to levels of consciousness of which we were unaware. These included our personal store of evolutionary (silent) knowledge, and what he called our cellular indoctrination—the literal programming of knowledge into our cells. He said that, because individuals are unique in their perceptions and programming, how one person viewed Kha-li's "personality" would not necessarily be how another interpreted the same 'event' of speaking with him. He said that, at his core, *he* was an ongoing event.

On Saturdays, Bonnie presented the Kha-li persona like a great grandfather/C.E.O. of a cosmic conglomerate that was exploratory in nature. He also oversaw massive events, but was rarely seen other than by emissaries whose reverence for him was contextually apparent, as opposed to declared in the teaching stories Bonnie channeled from them.

From these tales, one could envision Kha-li as the soothing voice in a frightened infant's mind, and the country doctor who attended to their growing pains by showing them for what they were. He was also the consummate teacher who never shared an answer that a student could deduce or experience. Overall, he seemed to be a ghost-like purveyor of purpose, whose very

shadow radiated strength to those who were on his journey-assignments. And when these ended, there was no fanfare to welcome them home. His joy was ever-present, piercing, and pure.

In stark contradiction to this, his teaching personality was that of a remote enigma, i.e. no personality at all. During our private channels, Bonnie's features appeared angular, her jaw-line straighter, and her full lips flatter below cheekbones that defined a chiseled look out of which a baritone voice seemed to travel down miles of cast iron pipe. To challenge his gaze was to risk slipping into a kind of mental seclusion where rainbow possibilities resonating within a brilliant psychological landscape could suddenly invade my monochrome imagination. One blink and the panorama evaporated, but the information-perception remained. Talk about communication...

Because of this potential inner event, Kha-li's rare appearances could take me through a cycle of feeling honored, insignificant, thankful that his stays were short, then embarrassed and mystified: I was embarrassed because his sessions were the most emotionally draining, when not through poignant pauses or penetrating language then in anticipation of a picture going off in my mind. I was mystified because his persona seemed to be conspicuously disinterested in speaking to anyone. His Portions (defined as direct emanations of his energy-knowledge) had been in physical reality many times, some of which he revealed to us.

Saa-ra: From the context of her lessons, she seemed to be in charge of the Rescue and Rehabilitation division of Kha-li's corporation, personally dealing with the explorer agents and emissaries who had been injured, and the lost souls who had harmed them. Her agent-entities, such as Phillip and Caroline, spoke of a "woman" whose soothing heartbeat had made their fetal sleep deep, and of being nursed into physical and emotional health by Saa-ra patiently teaching them the ways of wonder. Everything had a place and purpose, and nothing was impossible, so they grew up with no barriers to building solid foundations upon which they would make their first true stands at no one's expense but their own.

By mythic name and historical encounter, mankind knew about many lifetimes in which Saa-ra's Portions had been demanding friends to all of good heart, and perceived as a demonic force by those who could not face the truths she dared to tender. She also asked nothing of her Portions that she had not first tasked to herself; she told us of some her physical manifestations, as well. The legacy of her physical portion's passing was of children stumbling graciously through obstacles that might have hindered the harvest of their potential. And when their time was over, no one was more delighted to review their courageous journey, especially the times when they thought they could go around difficulties.

Collectively, other entity's stories implied that the euphoric gateway of light and love we passed through on our way home was a welcoming kiss on the cheek at the entrance to Kha-li's and Saa-ra's school of development and exploration.

For me, and in class only, Saa-ra's Jacqueline Kennedy demeanor created the impression that she lacked depth, which she furthered by way of a 'things simply are' attitude. For example, Bonnie, as Saa-ra, sometimes had informal chats with people before a lesson began. When the rest of us noticed that Bonnie had switched personas, Saa-ra thanked the individual for sharing their concerns before announcing, "Today we will embrace the letter P."

Regulars fell silent, some struggling to conceal their delight over a visitor's expression of "What the hell is this—Sesame Street?" because Saa-ra's often fluffy mannerisms had nothing to do with the material she imparted. "P as in potent, or powerful," she said to Meaghan. "Portion—less than the whole, but encompassing all of its elements," Saa-ra said to me. "Portend—a sign of things to come," she said, turning to face Josh, and then to Rachel, "Potential—capable of actualization." Her eyes swept the room. "The consciousness of your entire evolutionary Selves

has helped to shape the destiny of this time. You are here because each of you has the potential of furthering your collective goals; we have just discussed how this can be with our new friend, Georgio."

Georgio's confusion was comprehensive, because his concerns had been about an old car and a new girlfriend, in that order.

Wringing life-lessons out of their innocuous conversation, Saa-ra made his present circumstance a fulcrum between his entire history and endless probabilities, thereby giving us all a sense of our own evolutionary scope. Her downy persona also kicked a few egos in the ass by overlooking them. At these times, I thought that being ignored was far better than getting her attention, because her one-on-one teacher's persona differed from Kha-li's only in that she seemed to care. Kind of. Sometimes.

Kha-lib: I envisioned Kha-lib as the head of Human Resources, Chief Recruiter and Hatchet Man as circumstances warranted. To the best of my recollection, Bonnie's other personas never said anything about Kha-lib beyond having shared experiences that were his to tell.

To me, he was distant, but not like Kha-li's Alpha Centauri routine. He was more like the top non-com in Special Forces addressing new recruits, in that the directness of his questions implied that to answer incorrectly demonstrated a tragic shortfall of intellectual resources. That said, his wit was drier than popcorn in the Sahara sun and the last thing you would expect to hear within serious discussions with a disembodied consciousness who was older than time. As a result, we learned to pay attention to his every syllable, as was his goal.

His teaching techniques also included ignoring commonly accepted assumptions in poorly framed inquiries, so that it could take a while for us to realize he was answering a question as it had been asked, and not as the questioner had intended it. This practice forced us to refine our thinking because, metaphorically, he would talk endlessly about apples until someone interrupted him to say the question had been about oranges. Kha-lib would then repeat the original question verbatim, so that we could see that it had indeed been about oranges... unintentionally.

As a result, feeling foolish amid bolts of ideas intended to graze our comprehension was a normal part of a session with the most exacerbating persona, who gave us more time than all of the persona's combined. A tight gut often advised me of his presence.

Phillip and Caroline: Their individual influences on Bonnie's facial expression made her appear to be enjoying a secret, and my automatic reaction was to relax. More often than not, they spoke humorously about their many stints in physical reality, and be they rogue or princess, they spoke about every experience with fondness. Dealing with either of them was like going out for a beer with an entertaining debater, because their stories about living productive lives seemed more like an option than a requirement.

Notable by his absence in class was **Ed:** During this first summer of my apprenticeship, our arrangement was that I need not pay for anything unless I came into some freelance money. Not rent, food, or even beer. He was well paid, but far from a wealthy man because, as it is with so many experts, he had less success regulating his own finances. It would be fair to say that I taxed his resources between the ebb and flow of my freelance jobs, and he never asked for repayment because he knew, and had stated, that I'd just borrow it again. This seemed not to be an issue for him, but there were circumstances that could make us uncomfortable...

Ed and Bonnie had gotten together on a number of occasions, where he eventually met his higher self through her channels. Ed was no stranger to the mystical view; his father practiced but did not preach the idea of life and knowledge existing outside of physical form. He had also experienced the occasional *knowing*, and although he was moved enough to try a few internal

exercises, an unavoidable circumstance cut these efforts short: I knew much about his exploits and escapades, so he received information of a psychic nature from Bonnie with skepticism, eventually saying that I must have told her things ahead of time. This was inadvertently true in a few cases, because my escapades were linked to his, and so lay the basis of his reasonable skepticism about all of Bonnie's claims.

The bottom line was that he attended no classes, which meant the distance between us was becoming more than a financial gulf, and not only because of our diverging experiences: In early July, he and I were idly talking about his plans for a summer vacation when he mentioned the possibility of a few weeks sailing in August. It came to me then with clarity and certainty that he should not go away at that time; his father was going to die in August. I said this, just as I had told my mother the same thing when I *knew* my father was going to die, many years earlier. He understood that I was not trying to prove anything, but having said anything wasn't the smartest thing I ever did if only by coloring his summer days.

Chapter 4 The Classes

I slid lower into the Accord's seat to place my knees on the dashboard, because I had a nerve problem in my hip from carrying the first 'portable' electronic video equipment. I had lived with pain coming and going, with minor movements I could not anticipate, long enough to adjust my body to angles of relief without thinking. Sitting as if I was balancing a book on my head was one of these positions, so Bonnie never commented on my occasional, apathetic appearing posture. You could say we shared an assumption about it.

I continued my review...

In the earliest classes, Kha-lib explained that the personas Bonnie channeled weren't the only entities to teach in our twentieth century. Not to impugn other invaluable materials, but at this stage in our development he said the works of Jane Roberts (The Seth series) would help us to better understand the evolutionary intricacies of personal development, while Lynn V. Andrews and Carlos Castaneda's books made this knowledge physically and personally relevant, from the male and female perspectives within their cultural interpretations...

"What subjects do you teach?" Meaghan asked.

"My fondness is for the arts of living," Kha-lib replied.

"What has that got to do with us?" Jenny said.

"It is said that the teacher arrives when the student is ready. Implied, is that the meeting furthers a purpose of which the student is unaware, because foreknowledge of the encounter would taint the preparation period in which willingness must meet its demise. Is it possible that you are ready?"

"Hold on," Rachel said. After a less than inconspicuous glance toward her friend, she said, "Students live for a purpose that can't be achieved if they know what it is, because they wouldn't want to do it?"

"Knowledge of one's quest would affect how they engaged challenges that are purposefully designed to be encountered from a particular point of view. Therefore such knowledge is counterproductive."

"Blindsiding them isn't?" Elani said with a sardonic chuckle: she was a gorgeous, mid-twenties supernatural blonde, who gave away little about her life as she came to hear Bonnie speak, scrubbed and without makeup, looking like she had not slept. I suspected that she was an exotic dancer; she looked familiar, but in the light of day with clothes on it was difficult to tell.

"You cannot be blindsided if you are facing the proper direction."

"We're paying attention to the wrong things?" Jenny said.

"Hang on." Pulling back one finger after another, Meaghan played catch-up. "If we knew what we were supposed to do, we wouldn't do it right, because doing it wrong shows us how to do it right?"

"Teacher's of The Way To Live know this is a student's predicament by design, because changing fundamental views is a threat to the core of their being. For this reason, teachers arrive in disguise to probe their student's personalities before formal lessons begin."

"Probe for what?" Elani said.

"To learn which core illusions they must deal with, and to what degree they need attention, in order to bring all aspects of the personality along at a similar pace: the teachings are so difficult that, without a balanced approach, the student has less opportunity to succeed than would otherwise be the case." Apparently addressing a common thought, he said, "All apprentices must have doubts, otherwise their preparatory indoctrination has not been effective; it is one of the first issues addressed by a teacher."

"That qualifies us," Josh quipped.

"We're apprentices?" Meaghan said with anticipatory delight.

"Then why don't you deal with us like you do with Bonnie?" Rachel said before Kha-lib could respond, meaning one on one.

Kha-lib faced Rachel. "Teachers have struggled with their personal development like everyone else, for one cannot teach what they do not know. She (Bonnie) is passing a critical point of change in her lessons beyond which we can teach lessons in power directly to her. You have yet to reach this stage."

"What's the knowledge she knows?" Meaghan said, innocently.

"She has long ago learned that who and what you all think you are is a description contrived from how you interpret the physical world, and your experiences in it. Essentially," he said, addressing Meaghan's confused expression, "time slowly manifests your decisions from which you learn that you create your own reality through your view of whom and where you think you are. Everything is a reflection, and you relentlessly summon or create these to help you see yourselves, and your choices clearly. This is the nature of the school you all attend, which means the natures of the events you encounter represent a particular purpose."

"Not sure I follow that."

"You do things in the name of camouflaged interests, the ramifications of which often bewilder you because they come from a broader underlying reality. In many ways, you are like puppies barking at a mirror, confounded by what you see when faced with your own reflection—as if it was an influence outside of yourselves—and often no less aggressive defending your perceived territory on this side of the glass."

"How does that make her different, now that I know the same thing?" Meaghan said.

"She is being reminded of knowledge she long ago claimed as her own at the level of an assumption. This is that the world she perceives is a description about reality, so there is no need to judge or embrace anything or anyone as complete, or an unalterable fact. She understands that for us to say she is acting the fool is a precise observation—the portion of her source-soul that has been conformed to believe is her entire self, known in this time as Bonnie, is acting in a foolish manner that will reveal the drawbacks of that behavior. She understands that she is performing, and that this audition demands of her a personal evaluation after which she will behave differently. In the same way, she knows that soldiers, clerics, skeptics, and artists, are

literally projecting their beliefs upon the physical world to probe for answers about themselves in the reflected consequence. Unlike them, she can already observe and assess these reflections without reacting to their descriptions, as this would be highly damaging for one of her energy."

"Literally projecting?" Elani said.

"Essentially, you have made your home inside a metaphor mirror. This causes you to think that an out-of-mirror experience in a dream, for example, is a contrivance of your mind, so vast is the scope of what you can see and do there. However, reality works the other way around; the dreamer and the dreamed are the reverse of what you embrace as factual."

"Are you saying I'm being dreamed by my source soul?"

"You are a projection of energy-ideas purposefully designed to suit specific developmental challenges. Your reflections are a two-dimensional description of a greater reality, the full scope and richness of which escape you because you focus on only what is apparent to senses that have been conformed to perceive a physical reality in a specific manner."

"Two dimensions?" Meaghan said.

"The third dimension, of depth, is dependent upon experience: you do not perceive it without motion." He carried on, leaving a few 'awwhhs,' of a new awareness in his wake.

"Your dreaming reality is your home base for the human experience, a place to rest and to learn, which is why being taught in your dreams is so penetrating. We mean that literally. What you learn in dreaming becomes part of you, and influences you thereafter, regardless of whether you recall the lesson in what you perceive as your waking state."

"How would Bonnie view an event like being told she was being a bitch?" Elani said.

"She would hear your idea of yourself acting foolishly by judging that which you do not understand." He turned to face Meaghan. "There are endless ways for energy-consciousness to choose to develop. Humanness is the most direct vehicle to ride to the culmination of your sacred journey as a being."

"Do you mean we began our development as something other than human, or somewhere else?" she said.

"There are no beginnings as you think of them. You are translations of limitless beings that form self-definitions when you emerge from energy into form. You chose this mask of humanness to make yourselves responsible during the exploration of the epitome of yourselves in a cyclical arena of situational mazes. To have reached this developmental stage is a major accomplishment, for it is a threshold state for more advanced developmental arenas."

"Are you saying there were easier choices?" Meaghan said.

"There are many choices which, in your terms, need not be as dramatic as being human. However, the price of this relative gentility is the restrictions you put on your experience in those arenas. In your terms, much more time is required, and less freedom permitted, while you master your lessons from the energy state. Time being irrelevant," he said, apparently cutting short Elani's next question, "you may ask why you would volunteer for the relative brutality of a physical education. The answer lies in the nature of consciousness; everything always strives to learn: we will teach the workings of this at another time. In physical terms, trying not to learn is like holding your breath—you still learn something. She (Bonnie) would call it a rule."

Bonnie cracked a smile.

"When you are focused as energy-consciousness in what you view as your dreaming state," he continued, "you are being taught, under supervision, what is possible when you are entirely responsible for your acts. In so doing, your consciousness may long for this vast independence,

and desire the physical route to achieve mastery over your thoughts sooner than other routes of development offer."

"It seems like an unnecessarily tough road," Elani said.

"Your choice to manifest lessons in this way was not made blindly: the human being aspects of your journey were known in that your penchant for destruction was expected and anticipated by you and your guides—guides who were our first physical manifestations."

"Our spirit guides had to learn about the human way of development, as well?" Josh said.

"We did, and so we can say that to have chosen physical manifestations are a testament to your great courage, for literally every imaginable core adversity to personal development, in any universe, is present in physical reality. And there is one other, which exists only in mankind's journey—malice."

"And I still chose this?" Meaghan said.

"From your chosen experiences here you will learn to deal with all circumstances from the position of inner strength and knowledge. We are referring to experiences both in a body and out of one, because your world will have shown you what the ignorance of having to be right, from the position of might, brings into any reality."

"Our evolutionary purpose is to control our thoughts?" Meaghan said belatedly, but insightfully.

"As energy, what you think is what you instantly create. Without the apparent time lapse between thought and manifestation you experience in a physical form, you would create circumstances of great difficulty that you are not prepared to deal with. Mastery of your thoughts is essential, but you are free to do so under any circumstance you desire: a father may try to protect his daughters from people who are like he was at their age. A comedienne's humor may come from disturbing trials with men, and the abruptly wealthy may quickly find themselves poor in the ways that had formerly enriched their lives."

Elani cleared her throat. "You're saying the core lessons of mankind are all about behavior?"

"Physical experience is an artifice for your development as energy-consciousness, which cares not for things; this includes beliefs that represent your behavior. Your classrooms of things represent your desires. When you can consciously choose a journey devoid of things not required to sustain your physical needs you are not thinking of you; you are not saying, 'I wish,' or 'what if?' You are acting deliberately from the knowledge of what has to happen, according to the nature of the events you set in motion. Without the influence of self, this translates directly into your Master's Degree in responsible thought. How you achieve this is yours to choose, be that through more arduous predicaments than joyful play."

"No matter what job we do, or whether we have kids, or..." Rachel said.

"Every circumstance is a developmental exploration of an arena that renders knowledge pertinent to the explorer, but it may not necessarily be relevant outside of the physical realm. A doctor of physical medicine, for example, may overtly learn nothing relevant to her patient's energetically manifest disease. However, the psychological and emotional circumstances under which she studied, and subsequently practiced her profession, could be the relevant lesson she was after. In addition, there is a level of exploration dealing with beliefs that healers of all ilks cannot help but encounter. Parents approach their lessons in love, perseverance, and responsibility from a different perspective, as do beggars."

"Essentially," Elani ventured cautiously, "we are in a school of one-way mirrors that grants a Master's Degree in how to live properly when we find our way to the other side of the glass and see ourselves? I mean, what we actually do here doesn't matter. It's how we do it?"

"What you do matters to all that you influence, everywhere, all of the time, to a degree that would astonish you, hence learning responsibility is paramount to moving on." He faced Meaghan again. "You are now, and have always been, apprenticing in personal development." He scanned our faces. "The degree to which you experience core lessons in a given lifetime is determined by the momentum generated by your beliefs, emotions, and subsequent actions. However, formal apprentices in the throes of learning personal power directly from their Source are also subject to the momentum of their Source's intentions. It is therefore essential that they learn how to distinguish where, when, and why they can insert their influences upon an event. If they were a blank canvas of raw energy, their potential for destruction would equal their potential for creation, both of which are beyond description."

Clearing her throat, Meaghan said, "You're saying I haven't learned enough for my Source to take me on directly?"

"The issue is energy; an apprentice must have enough energy to confront the certain death of who they think they are, or their training must end."

"If it's certain," Elani said, "what's the problem?"

"While the death of their illusions is certain, their reaction to the impending death of who they think they are is not knowable. Free will prevails, and we have learned that your kind needs every opportunity to embrace the truth before you make the final leap. The preparatory phase of many lifetimes before meeting a teacher must also have accomplished precise goals to ensure the candidate's massive evolutionary energy is not misdirected."

"What truth is that?"

"The truth of which we speak is but a fragment of the whole; this lies beyond description."

"If you are so wise, why can't you explain it?"

"Your ability to comprehend is not equal to the challenge."

"Why not just teach the people who want to be taught?" Josh said, moving us along.

"There's one on Denman at West Georgia," Elani quipped too lightly.

The group chuckled: an ancient Volkswagen van plastered with a Day-Glow placard that read, 'The end is near—Jesus is the answer,' was a summer landmark.

"Volunteers do not come to their convictions from experiences properly assessed. They adopt and abandon ideals in favor of better ones, better being self-defined as beliefs more agreeable to their unrealized personal agendas. These teachings are the most personally disagreeable you will ever encounter, because the goal is to eliminate the idea of self from your perceptions."

"Not to be difficult," Elani said, being difficult, "but we have to volunteer to follow Bonnie's advice."

"At this point, you are a follower only in so far as learning is a matter of faith, as it is for everyone: you volunteer only your faith, which is easily withdrawn and turned to confrontation. In conjunction with a learning stage in which students believe they are their teacher's equal, following a personal agenda of which they are unaware would be harmful to them, and possibly to the teacher."

"If they're not equal, what's the problem?" Josh said.

"Not equal does not mean weak."

"What happens to people who don't know about you?" Elani said.

"Your century is rife with individuals who have returned to heighten hope and open the door to embracing the influences of their dreams. Those who are attracted to these people are ready for the messages they offer. Those who are not, either do not need these messages, or would not accept them."

"Not need them?" Josh said.

"There are many kind people in your world doing what they came to do."

"Kind?" Elani said, dubiously. "That's the proper way to live?"

"There is more to kindness than your world understands: at many points, all of you have not known better, and with the best of intentions contributed to the demise of a developing circumstance."

Rachel developed a keen interest in the weave of Bonnie's carpet, as Kha-lib continued, "There are many others among you who have come back to aid in mass changes."

"Come back from the time of Christ?" Meaghan said, taking the focus off her friend.

"Don't they need these lessons too? I mean, they won't remember them, will they?" Rachel said. Looking at Bonnie strangely, she added, "What were their lessons, anyway?"

"In your terms, our emissaries will need reminders of the core lessons they developed both before, and at the time of your Christ figure. However, memory as you think of it is not in play when they deal directly with their Source." He faced Meaghan and said, "Give us a moment." Bonnie sat passively for about ten seconds before the airy, but formal voice of Saa-ra took over...

"The returning Masters and their students comprise one mass consciousness, mystically focused, forming one family from one level of evolution and experience. They have evolved cultures in a cycle of events and conditions, ever changing and ever challenging, for millions of years. They did not appear based on the theoretical evaluations of a superior intelligence, or by the whim of eternal chance. Evolution, as you know it, was learned even by All That Is.

"In your time," she looked around the room as this boggling idea settled in, "this cycle of events is described as reincarnation, which is not quite accurate. However, this concept allowed our students to see their lives in a larger way, and aided them in understanding their grander relationship in and to an ever-evolving universe." She paused, her gaze on Meaghan.

"This family of Masters has been known in many times, by many names. At the time of your Christ figure," she looked away from Meaghan, "which in your time-oriented terms would be their fourth mass intercession into mankind's ways, they were the Essenes."

Bonnie closed her eyes.

"Their Prophets," Saa-ra said at a slower pace, "spoke of the arrival of Kha-li's portion, or son, and members of his family. All of them were channels to the realm of creation, and as Masters of the balances of life, art, science, and the humanities, they considered themselves the eternal, willing, and passionate students of knowledge." She faced Elani. "The Masters developed lessons designed to hold each individual completely responsible for his or her own behavior. Judgment or prejudice against others due to race, age, gender, or social condition was tantamount to declaring war on yourself and your family, since whatever it was that you gave to the world bore the vibratory signature of its originators and participants. Catalytically, this momentum sought out its source to complete the cycle of events."

"Are you talking about Karma?" Elani said.

"In terms of experiencing the underlying nature of what you do, we are. But there is no judgment attached to the momentum of your evolutionary development by any source other than that which you program into your personal choices." She faced me. "It followed that to seed the

future with hope the young must be taught and cared for in an atmosphere of love and responsibility." Switching her gaze slowly from Elani, to Meaghan, then to Rachel, she said, "To the Essene family, no actions would be engaged that threatened the independence of spirit and thought of any child or individual. It was further seen that if man's home environment was out of control, if grief, pain, deception, and greed found their beginnings within the domestic situation, then the children of such individuals would carry the impact of creating the society itself. On a mass level, such a society could not possibly hope to survive, because each compromise resulted in an immediate catalytic action in social terms. This would result in one abuse after another growing under the impetus of its own thrust until its proportions were so sweeping that only the destruction of the culture and disbursement of the remaining members of it could stem the flow. By that time, all politically motivated questions, be they economic, imperial, or domestic, would be academic. Your current circumstance is no different."

"Meaning it's the end of time?" Josh said.

"Not of time, but the end of cycling lessons you have repeatedly placed in your path and failed to learn," Saa-ra replied. "As a result of these observations," she scanned the room again, "the Masters developed disciplines centered on personal dignity, empathy for the conditions of the less fortunate, and a cooperative effort to hold their shared culture in reverence." Looking my way out of sequence, she said, "These lessons were extremely hard to teach."

She moved on.

"It took continuity and a psychological process which required that the child live up to his or her share of responsibility, not down to it." She paused at Georgio, a passionate Brazilian waiter in his early-twenties, before addressing us randomly. "Those who were capable, did all they could do even to personal sacrifice, but for the right reasons. Their lessons of The Arts and the Disciplines became known to the Essenes as the Kabala. As Kha-li taught these, his students also learned the arts of How to Teach, which addressed the three principle aspects of physical challenge. These are individual cleansing, social evolution and ethics, and national intent." Saa-ra moved on.

"To teach these, the context of the lessons had to be directly proportionate to the arena, therefore proficiency depended upon one's ability to recognize exactly where they were, and whom they were addressing. To this end, fluidity of movement, or the ability to adjust to conditions whatever they might be, became a key portion of their mental and emotional disciplines. Overall, total responsibility for one's actions was an absolute prerequisite. Students had to hold themselves sacred, and act among their fellows as they would wish to be treated."

"Are these the Stalker's disciplines in Castaneda's work?" I said.

"Adjusted for the culture in which he participated, yes," she replied.

"Where did it fall apart?" I said.

"There were those with a little more energy at their disposal," Bonnie said, facing us in no apparent order, "who saw the weakness of a man who never looked beyond his material world or physical fears. These individuals determined that great numbers of people could be easily controlled and mobilized by utilizing the concept of Immediate Need. Within Immediate Need, the individual believes himself to require far more than he actually does, and therein finds a social stigma attached to 'not having'. In the light of these realizations he sees that, to others, he will not be acceptable should he not seek to attain all that he is entitled to." Sa-ar-a stretched the word en-tie-tulled.

"To this end those seeking power perpetrated, on an ever increasing scale, the concept of Immediate Need. The result combines masses of humanity, striving in unison within the

philosophy of greed, to attain everything within their grasp. They subsequently connive and cheat to attain anything they believe they 'must have' in order to fit in.

"To these powers, this was a harnessing of a massive energy force that could be manipulated at will, with little triggers created of fear and suspicion. This is how your kind has risen and fallen many times. She faced Meaghan. "The Masters, and those among their children who are ready, are returning to your reality for the express purpose of refining these skills at a time when they are needed most. Be advised," she said, pausing briefly on every face as she spoke, "the depth perception they practice is a precise discipline: they will know where they are, and their every act will be a direct translation of the knowledge they hold sacred. As such, their actions may not reflect your visions of what you term the Second Coming reformation, for they know what you do not—what mankind is really like, and they will deal with you accordingly."

"Meaning they aren't what—angelic?" Rachel said.

"Meaning they represent our purpose through love as we know it, not as you understand it."

"Hard ball," I said, facing Rachel.

"What happens to people who can see the possibility of things falling apart in our world, but they can't accept that your emissaries are here, or you're talking to us for that matter?" Josh said.

"Give us a moment." Bonnie lowered her head and twisted her neck as though to relieve a kink. Kha-lib had returned.

"The pattern of our presence in your part of the world can be found in the writings we have discussed, and some to soon come. Those who are ready will read these works, or have been oriented to the inevitability of our arrival."

"Are all channeled books really channeled?" Rachel said.

"There have always been charlatans," Kha-lib said, then he listed the errors that give pretenders away. These included preaching any form of violence to resolve any problem, practicing revenge under any banner, and taking advantage of the unprepared or weary through fear; from contractors telling the elderly they need home improvements, to preachers charging for salvation—a point he clarified about psychics.

He said, "There is nothing wrong with charging money for a psychic reading, for even a mystic must eat. There is also nothing wrong with gathering large sums of money, for this is the energy your reality uses to bring about change. In time, our representatives will gather vast sums to do their work."

"Is that how we can tell if people are really with you?" Josh said.

"It is not. An entity recently left a legitimate channel, because she fell prey to the apparent power she had over others, and charged them exorbitantly without true teaching or giving back. Now she is faking. When the entity returns, they will impart a grand lesson and she will become a supporter of our work."

"Who is it?" Meaghan said naively.

Much to our surprise, Kha-lib named the faker.

"It seems counterproductive to have a fraud speaking for you in the first place?" I said. "You must have known what was going to happen?"

"At other levels of awareness, frauds and their followers know they are experiencing both sides of the coin of betrayal for their own development."

"Betrayal develops suspicion. How is that helpful?"

"You have all been betrayer and betrayed. For some," he said looking from me to Josh to Georgio, "this has happened many times because you admired the fleeting rewards of selfishness. Consistent with this," he said, as Georgio became absorbed by a hole in the heel of his sock,

"charlatans of many disguises blame their victims for being victimized to shield themselves from their own responsibilities."

"What kind of disguises?" Meaghan said.

"They wear the ritual garb of the pious, the uniforms of social order, and the tailored cloth of industry. They are everywhere, but none is hidden from us."

"Then it makes less sense to act against your own cause," I said.

"We are turning over the care and control of mankind's destiny to entities indigenous to your universe—we are not of this kind. These teachers will be more direct with you than the original explorer's have been," he said with an ominously flavored compassion, "for as the hunter and the hunted they are intimately aware of the relationship between gluttony of the body and famine of the spirit."

Focusing on me, he answered another unasked question. "Phillip is not usurping your free will by enforcing an agreement he knows you do not understand. He is hastening the inevitability of your development by stripping you of apathy. In a similar way," he said, glancing around the room, "those who fail to act with honor service their own development while forcing others to make a stand at a time when the anaesthetized among you would come to harm by default."

Reviewing a row of uncommitted faces, he said, "In a short time, you will all have to make a stand. Those who are unconvinced of our presence, or who remain afraid, will have knowledge of the disreputable principles from which to assess our standards. Nothing is wasted."

Chapter 5

The Classes, Part 2

Coming off the bridge onto the Stanley Park causeway, I realized something now obvious but surprising, nevertheless. Bonnie had targeted me from day one—not that the others were window dressing; they had every opportunity to learn, but they had not experienced Spirit as I had. That said, they also requested nothing extra in terms of lessons, other than miracles of their own: I felt cocky about how special I must be, as I resumed my recapitulation of the first classes with a more fluid ease...

Kha-lib's topics rarely strayed from some aspect of gathering energy through reshaping our personal behavior(s) toward acting responsibly. To this end, he examined the political and religious beliefs that influence us; these included but were not limited to theocratic and autocratic structures, as counterpoints to democracy, because we were more familiar with this system, as were Jewish and Moslem beliefs to Christianity.

These lessons could be tedious to a shallow thinker, but two things kept me alert: Bonnie's personas offered material in entertaining ways, while no religious, ethnic, or political group escaped unscathed, though not judged. Her delivery was always without speculation—the way it was. Nevertheless, I heard her spearing the bastard scoundrel looters, prophets, and profiteers in whose hands we had placed our trust, and who in return had placed their hands in our pockets.

As time passed, the design of these lecture-type lessons increasingly involved our input, which was subtle at first, but carried with it ramifications we could not have anticipated. For example, a first-time attendee introduced himself as Hilding, and as a father of precocious boys asked Kha-lib for his opinion on corporal punishment in our schools. Kha-lib replied by asking Hilding to consider the lasting effects of authority figures inflicting pain on the impressionable, justifiably ignorant, adolescently rebellious, and physically defenseless with the permission of those upon whom their safe existence depended. Hilding reasonably countered, saying that teachers and parents know that discipline sometimes needs a literal helping hand, therefore being

impressionable is a plus, punishment by nature shouldn't be something that can be defended against, and ignorance was the issue being addressed. To this, Kha-lib asked Hilding why our universities did not attach electrodes to students' genitals, and shock them into their degrees.

At the conclusion of their exchange, which included the negative impact of using fear as a teaching tool on any living thing, Hilding sincerely thanked, "whoever you are," with satisfaction.

"You are most welcome. May we explain to the others before you go your way," Kha-lib said, "so they do not remain distracted?"

"Please do," Hilding replied with mild surprise, causing us to assume he had told no one his true objective.

Kha-lib stated that Hilding was adamantly opposed to corporal punishment. As a new member of the local board of education, he had come to pick a mystic's brain in the hope of better presenting his own views to policy makers, whose records showed little evidence of thought beyond projecting influence in their meetings.

Ironically, after this session our free flow exchanges became lumpy with reluctance, because attendees rightly suspected that Bonnie could discern their motives. Not all were willing to reveal the ones they were aware of, and fewer risked discovering the ones they didn't realize they held in an open forum.

This circumstance made it inevitable that a lengthy pause, after Kha-lib asked a question that we deemed too risky to answer, created an elephant in the room. When he probed our collective hesitancy, "So that we do not misconstrue tranquility for understanding," the ease and warmth of our gatherings began to erode.

The next clipping of our collective comfort came with specific lessons in the responsibilities of freedom, two of which were that we blindly follow others, and we do not finish what we start.

Bonnie's affronting example of the latter problem came when she said that what one is like at home represents how one treats their entire lives: a cluttered home reflected a cluttered mind, and a cluttered mind manifested neglect in other areas of life. If such a person was responsible for another's welfare, they were putting them at risk. A personal discipline that could resolve this problem, she said into an amalgam of skeptically sheepish expressions, would be to look back whenever we left a room. If we could tell that we had been there, we had left behind a monument to our neglect. It didn't matter what this monument might be; a spoon sitting on the counter or a toothpaste tube cap represented an attitude that has a concomitant value outside of the home. As continuity in one's life reigned supreme, this value could grow to cruel proportions.

Bonnie said that to argue leaving a toothpaste cap off the tube was indicative of a callous disregard for humanity was ridiculously petty, as I had, was to say that whoever replaced it was performing a task that was beneath the social station of the neglectful person. They are self-important, not having time to clean up after themselves, and they will habitually treat others as servants in other ways. The proof of this, she explained blandly to a newcomer, is evident when the culprit is informed of their neglect and they treat the circumstance with disdain—as I had just done. She added that there are no small things in life, only small perspectives.

As simple as this exercise may sound, Kha-lib explained that our programmed penchant for laziness and neglect was so deep that just remembering to turn around invariably required the help of another person. This situation quickly became confrontational, which was another lesson in self-importance and servitude.

He said, "It is from experiencing the difficulty of turning around that you can appreciate how careless you really are, and that it is your irresponsibility that leaves you feeling vulnerable, thereby robbing you of joy."

Thereafter, Kha-lib dryly asked attendees if their clothes closets were in order—all items clean and on hangers—or did we reuse items that should have been washed. Did we leave cupboard doors and drawers open so that someone else's hip or forehead could close them? Was there a shoe perched on a stairway landing, like a banana peel, instead of in the hallway shoe rack? Did we leave anything pending until a more convenient time? Did we have insurance?

Into the silences his questions created, he said our stillness spoke of our willingness to be followers. Questions represented the will to learn, and formed the personally relevant framework for a meaningful reply. Without establishing this relevancy, his sessions would amount to information doled out by volume, from which the deceitful could become hypocrites espousing a philosophy they did not practice, the arrogant could become pious in their unexamined understanding, and the self-important could become fanatics, as beliefs acted upon without examination knew few boundaries.

As if these lessons weren't making us uncomfortable enough, he dealt extensively with the designs of our intentions relative to the responsibilities that went hand in hand with personal freedom. Essentially, he said that good intentions were a ruse, because we programmed personal events through the true nature of our actions, not what we thought we were doing. As a reasonable species (I heard this as a cryptic pejorative), we had lost our discernment.

His first example startled us: a defense worker knowingly making products whose exclusive use is to kill people, uses the spin of cultural reasoning to say they are not pulling the trigger. This reasoning includes, it's just a job, and/or they are doing their patriotic duty, as an act of necessary defense, making cashing their check acceptable to their conscience. "Better a stranger die because of what I do than I change what I do," doesn't enter their thoughts.

They may also enjoy what they do technically, but the essential act is one of fear and destruction, so their lives are lived amid the ramifications of putting their faith in fear. It follows that their children cannot help but be influenced in ways the parents cannot fathom when they suddenly explode. Kha-lib said the solution was to commit to acts of heart. In simple terms, if what you do is not designed to harm anyone, and you like doing it, then what you need comes with the positive programming of your intentions.

I interjected, saying that the theory was clear but we had to eat. Moreover, many great artistic works had gone unrecognized in their time, while the artist lived a harsh and impoverished existence. I didn't think the theory of acts of heart held up—not in one lifetime.

Kha-lib said that all of the great works I cared to name had been completed, therefore the means to do so were provided. If I would learn to view money as energy, and to distinguish the difference between want and need, my ideas about money would change. I would be free from them, and so free to follow my heart.

This session caused us to examine our jobs for unseen threats to others, but without a true understanding of the underlying nature of our daily events, vis-à-vis the defense worker's reasonable view, we remained unsure of what was productive and what was harmful.

To help us in these assessments, Kha-lib said our choice of words, body language, and especially our deeds were irrefutable evidence of what we are really like, therefore what we regularly do. His examples of our misguided reasoning, such as punishing misdeeds as opposed to teaching their equal and opposite conditions to perpetrators, programmed the energy we expended in negative ways. For example, a child who does not take the responsibility of putting

their toys away, because they "forgot," can soon expect the parent to forget where she / he put them, as well. In this case, the parent is taking responsibility for teaching responsibility at the level the child designed.

Predictably, the immediate complaint from parents in our group was that they had to deal with the tantrums that followed. To this, Kha-lib said this circumstance provided them with another opportunity to teach their children about social responsibility. A quiet room, in this case, was an appropriate place for the child to consider how taking care of their toys yesterday would have avoided them disturbing the peace today. When a mother said her child's tantrums often led to them refusing to eat, Kha-lib rhetorically wondered how many six-year olds could hold out longer than one meal.

This mother returned no more.

When another attendee implied that her leaving was due to Kha-lib's uncompromising approach, Kha-lib said that teaching anyone how to live responsibly required discipline and continuity in proportion to how the student had unconsciously learned to behave poorly. In time, proper practices were no longer an effort for them, but a way of life that had replaced their former way of life. It could be no other way, for the responsibilities of freedom knew no compromise.

"That's contradictory," Elani argued.

"We speak to responsibility boding no negotiation; you may compromise your freedom as you wish."

This statement was a head-scratcher that we explored into the topic of impeccable acts, where I was again left behind.

As the weeks went by, and Bonnie continued to explain the responsibilities of freedom in terms we had never entertained, it became abundantly clear that spiritual development was not the passive endeavor many of us had believed it to be. Nor was it an adjunct to how we lived our daily lives: it was how we could practice living all of the time.

For the most part, I was used to these no-nonsense encounters and I went with the flow, but there came the time when a particular lesson put me on the defensive, as well: the session had just broken up, and as I stood to leave, Bonnie caught my attention and nodded toward an accent pillow on her couch.

"What?" I said.

"The pillow," she replied.

"What about it?" I said, puzzled.

"Is that where it was when you sat down?"

"On the couch, sure."

"Wasn't it propped in the corner between the side and backrest?"

"I guess."

"Two things." she grinned, making a peace sign. "Don't guess, and you need to make a practice of leaving things the way you found them unless it is an improvement. For the time being, you don't appreciate what constitutes an improvement, so it's probably best that you leave things as they are... if you can remember that much."

Understanding that she was already back in research mode—discovering what her student-character's response to any spontaneous circumstance would be—I returned to the scene of my odious crime and positioned the pillow in the way she said it had been before my arrival. The next week, I remembered the pillow lesson, but I didn't put it exactly where it had been, touching

only the backrest. The week after that I forgot to re-fluff it. Ultimately, the number of times I forgot to properly place and/or fluff the pillow grew to embarrassing proportions.

Overall, in spite of Bonnie fulfilling many of her student's expectations about New Age teaching, such as holding lessons and meditations while burning candles and incense, those who came to hear her on a part-time basis missed the progression of what I perceived as aggression in her lessons. Including those who had experiences with the white robed soft spoken, teachers of the mystical way, this was their cue to be affronted by something and not return.

Out of about 150 people who had come to hear her in the first four months—an excellent turnout of twenty or so people that filled her downstairs living room every Saturday—there remained only seven regulars to face the first recognizable stalking lesson upon our small group: Bonnie opened her eyes at the beginning of a channel, and said, "Who are we?"

Those who did not venture a guess were forced to participate, as she gazed from one person to the next, repeating the question each time. When no one bothered to ask Kha-lib why he was doing this, Kha-lib said, "Do not guess about anything. Be certain about even seemingly unimportant decisions, otherwise your commitment to them will lack conviction. In time, you must be willing to make a stand and fall on that spot."

The second overt lesson was based on our regular queries about money matters, such as how long a car or old washing machine would last. Kha-lib put an end to these by saying, "You need not concern yourself with funds. In the near future, she (Bonnie) will receive a large sum of money—a relative's legacy to all who are involved in our quest. She will distribute this to sustain you during your lessons. You need to discuss what to do with it before it arrives."

Though there really was a source of large funds in her distant family, Bonnie said she believed the legacy was knowledge.

As our suspicion and disappointment grew with every empty mail call, Kha-lib responded to our guarded queries by increasing the amount of wealth we were about to receive. Still, after a few weeks Rachel asked Kha-lib what the problem was.

"A point of change has yet to occur," he said, "which will route the funds to her." Days later, Rachel asked him if this point of change had happened; she would call the rest of the group and let them know.

"Your benefactor has not died, but he soon will," Kha-lib told her; by early evening, we were all eagerly anticipating the death of a stranger...

A cabbie cutting through traffic, to arrive at the red light at Georgia Street seconds sooner than us, refocused me on the lush scenery of the park giving way to the Coal Harbor Marina, and the narrow vista of office buildings beyond. I also noticed that the sense of fluidity had settled in deeply—a feeling that had happened a few times since I had met Bonnie, and a few times before I knew her, most often in dire circumstances. At these times, I had put the experience down to a reflex action, so that I did not cloud my choices with emotion. Bonnie and I had since talked about these instances of what she called heightened awareness; I now accepted that something was about to happen that required my full attention.

This would be something more than Bonnie having parked, exited the car, and left me sitting alone, musing over my sense of fluidity.

Chapter 6

The Minimal Chance

Catching up to Bonnie, she glanced at me curiously—I understood that she wanted me to take note of something, as we walked silently downhill under the canopy of broad leafed trees that lined the street of apartment buildings.

After a short while, Bonnie said, "According to Stalkers, the most important lesson a human can learn is to embrace the concept of the Minimal Chance. To do this, and I mean with you right now, you must act as if every moment is an offer to be evaluated in the terms we've been discussing: where you really are and what's really going on." She walked a few more paces, looked back at her car, then straight ahead. Formally she said, "Teaching the Minimal Chance is to make the apprentice aware that they have a connection to an energy-essence some call Spirit, their Source Soul, or Higher Self. Because the abstract should not be limited to common descriptions, I will also call this energy-essence Intent, and when we talk about its greater reality we'll simply call that the Universe."

"Works for me, except I already know that Intent exists. Hang on," I said slowing, because I was feeling light-headed.

Looking at me in an approving manner, she tugged on my sleeve and said, "It'll pass," as we reached Denman Street. Automatically, I tried to veer left toward the park.

Pulling me back toward the shopping area, she said, "I didn't say exists. I said have a connection with, and constant awareness of that connection is the Minimal Chance."

"Why is it difficult to be aware of—you just told me?"

"Awareness to the average person is to be cognizant, but their focus is erratically at the mercy of their self-interest; this is what will screw you until you catch on. Awareness in the Stalker's world is to apprehend every moment in its true nature, especially as opportunities arise such as the Universe making a gesture to them. If you had thought to assess our morning's events, you might have seen that we began with the pillow lesson, then we reviewed your personal lessons by categories based on Castaneda's and Lynn Andrews experiences. As we drove here, you filled out these categories with a recapitulation of our class lessons. When we parked, you were focused elsewhere and I literally left you behind. When I prompted you to think about something you had missed, you didn't see what was going on in front of your eyes. Are you with me now?"

"I am."

"In terms of essential events, we have done a comprehensive review to position you to encounter a Minimal Chance event. That's the lesson I recognized unfolding, and I'm telling you about it because you're new to consciously employing heightened awareness. That's what you're feeling again."

"I'm not controlling it."

"You have recognized its occurrence. Now you can more easily choose to focus on the nature of what is going on around you—to observe, as opposed to becoming involved."

"Understood." And I did.

"At this point in your progression, recognition of a Minimal Chance rests on what Stalkers call the most critical piece of knowledge available to mankind. There is..."

"Hang on, the conditional death-thing is the most important achievement, the chance thingy is the most important lesson, and now the most critical piece of knowledge?"

"Really—having just spoken about memorizing events?" she chastised me.

"How else will I learn?"

"You will recollect all of this when it's time, but I suggest that you don't use 'thingy' as a reference point."

"Uh huh—I'm sharp, but not..."

Briefly resting her hand on my arm, Bonnie said, "Recollecting is not remembering in your day-to-day type of thinking. As I was about to explain, behind our shoulders is a fist-sized ball of energy called the Assemblage Point, which literally assembles a view of our world from an infinite number of possibilities depending on its position. One of these positions of perception stores every event you have ever experienced. It follows that the most critical piece of knowledge a man can know is that this point exists, and we can control its position, which is why I said don't be concerned about memorizing things." A flick of her wrist indicated a new paragraph.

"Another position allows for absolute clarity—the essence of a moment unfolding—which makes every event a potential opportunity to gain knowledge beyond what is apparent to the average person." She checked my eyes. "Where are you now?" she said, not 'How are you feeling?' a distinction I registered with a grin, because she clearly knew what was going on with me.

"I'm kind of in two places. I mean, I'm more aware of everything in a broad way," I said, as my concern for what I can only call the dinky stuff of life dissolved into the awareness that it had been blocking my view. In the next moment, my focus expanded like a wide-eyed stare, without fear, and I no longer felt light-headed. Strangely, I felt bigger.

"Hmm...cool," I said.

"Your point of perception has moved closer to the Place of No Pity," Bonnie said.

As I languished in a blasé mood, she pulled me closer to allow room for an elderly couple to pass while still walking side by side.

"You are feeling the aloofness of the observer," she said, "not here and now, but here and there, just like you did when you needed to grasp the underlying order of a situation in your wars. Intent has set up your lesson, and positioned you to grasp it. Let things unfold; don't stare at a rose—you'll judge it. It's the entire garden you need to hold in your view."

I was pondering the possibility that I must be a genius for understanding her so clearly, as I stepped on Bonnie's heel peeling her sneaker off her foot.

Holding my arm for support, she bent down to put it back on. Rising, she said with warm reminiscence, "This temporary shift in your perceptions also brings with it the sense that you're an inseparable aspect of everything—no better or worse. You need to hold this focus, as well, or it could slip into marveling at how insightful you think you are." A puff of amusement escaped her nostrils.

With little effort, I regained my sense of what Bonnie had perfectly described as a sense of being here and there, as we separated in anticipation of walking around a man who had apparently realized something, and slowed his pace in the middle of the busy sidewalk. Taking the inside route, Bonnie had to suddenly dodge a rotund man emerging from a donut shop with his attention so firmly fixed on the contents of a carry-out bag that he stumbled on the aluminum transition strip between the inside flooring and the outside step. Instinctively, I reached out to help her, and promptly ploughed into the side of the man who had stopped and was turning around: he immediately apologized, quickly explaining that his mind had wandered and he had passed where he wanted to go.

Laughing, Bonnie touched him briefly on the forearm—an odd gesture for her—then nodding at me, she said, "We understand how that can happen."

"Sorry about that," I said meaninglessly, because I felt nothing as I sidestepped to walk around him.

Matching my motion to remain in front of me, the man said, "Any little help you can offer will go a long way toward getting me back on my feet today." He closed his mouth self-consciously.

I was initially confused, because he did not hold out his hand, then his words sunk in and I realized he was panhandling: I scrutinized him without subtlety while my fingers searched to separate the dollar coins from the other change I had in my pocket.

Bonnie leaned uncommonly close in what to me was a clear effort to detect alcohol on the stranger's breath. The man smiled briefly with amused tolerance, while she casually leaned away and looked at me in a disinterested way. This action was antithetical, because her glance had marked the moment.

The scene was unfolding like a play for me: viewing the man as an actor in costume, I placed him in his mid-thirties, a weathered face and wider than normal stance spoke to time at sea, or a visit with the needle, and his world was spinning a little faster than mine. Except his eyes, a peaceful Mediterranean blue on Clorox white, were clear and focused. He was also clean-shaven, and in the still air I smelled industrial soap—the waterless kind that mechanics use.

As if for further inspection, he removed his Seattle Mariners baseball cap and smoothed his short brown hair. It was clean, and appeared to have been recently worked on by a friend with a penchant for acute angles. When he put the cap back on, I noticed that stray fibers on the worn cuffs of his red and black checkered shirt had been evenly clipped.

Briefly marveling at how observant I was, I retrieved one of the dollar coins that had clinked against another in my pocket, and handed him \$1.55, palming a penny as being insulting.

He thanked me evenly before turning his tranquil gaze toward Bonnie, who had been rummaging through her purse and withdrawn a neatly folded ten dollar bill. Placing it in her left hand, under the strap, she looked for something smaller and came up with a crumpled five dollar bill from a pouch into which her son habitually crushed her change, after buying milk at the local convenience store. She put this on top of the ten, then freeing a quarter and two dimes from the grasp of corner seams, she handed him all the money she had.

His expression did not even graze surprise, but went straight to appreciation; he bowed his head minimally, thanked her quietly, and humming a familiar tune stepped toward his intended destination with purposeful strides, as if he had a business meeting.

Bonnie and I continued our walk toward the Denman Street Mall, my aloofness dissipating with each step.

"You're in a good mood today," I said, boorishly.

"I am now," she said cheerfully, wiping at the corner of one eye.

"He'll probably hurt himself with that much cash," I ventured.

"I doubt it, but that's none of my business."

"Aren't you responsible if your generosity causes something crappy to happen?"

"To give things with strings attached is not a gift. It's a judgment of others to be less than you, when you have no idea what they may have gone through to be where they are." She winked. "We didn't purchase the right to tell him how to live."

A warm flush ran through me. "Why did you dig so deep? That's not your usual way."

"Until today, whenever we've been approached for money we were on our way home. I've always given whatever I can afford, which never included a bribe." She glanced at me. "People cannot be coerced into changing their ways, other than for show. They can only be confronted, without judgment, into recognizing how they got where they are, and only when they are ready

to hear it." She chuckled to herself. "I was going to hold onto ten dollars for my son, then I recognized you were literally fulfilling that man's request: I had no choice but to give my all."

"Literally?" I said, confused.

"Did he not say that any little offer of help would get him back on his feet today?"

"He did, and we gave him almost... no, exactly twenty bucks. That's not enough to get anyone back on their feet. Probably the opposite," I sniggered.

"The total wasn't important; it was the value of our gestures that fulfilled his request." She squeezed my forearm. "You took him literally and offered a *little* help, which represented a view that would keep him on the streets if he believed he was worth loose change. My reference point was that he was worth everything I had to help him get to where he had planned on going, but a concern had distracted him. The metaphor behind him losing focus was that he'd lost his way," she chuckled, "just like I left you behind, so my money was more importantly a sign that allowed him to muster that final surge of courage most of us need to complete a difficult journey. In effect, we cajoled him to keep his appointment. We're a naturally good team."

"It's possible he was a clever junky, or a drunk. You checked his breath," I said, not grasping her interpretation of events.

Bonnie let go of my arm to gesture. "His manner showed us that he knew he was no one's victim but his own. At some point, he thought he had it all then lost it, because he thought 'it all' did not require the maintenance of his care and concern. He had embraced things so tightly that he squeezed the life out of them—the spirit behind what these things represent. Since then, he has summoned the courage to start over by focusing his care and concern where he can, like maintaining dignity by keeping himself presentable. This is the starting point of cleaning up one's life, and to a man making that climb there are no little things. He appreciates everything, as you so meticulously noted." She touched my arm. "He didn't mention money directly; he asked for help, but he didn't plead hunger or explain his circumstance because he knew you wouldn't have believed him."

"What other kind of help could he have been after?"

"Toothpaste or mouthwash; he covered his mouth because he was conscious of his breath. His smile revealed good teeth."

"Uh huh."

"It's logical that he was preoccupied, because he was going to a job interview," she continued, "and he wanted everything to be the best that it could possibly be. You told him it wasn't worth the effort. I told him it was worth everything I had for him to get the last of the little things he needed on this day."

"What's courageous about washing?" I scoffed.

"His courage was evident in not pretending that his circumstance was anything other than what it was. He wasn't apologetic, as if he was a lesser man burdened with private failures, nor was he defiant, as if the world owed him something." Bonnie shrugged. "He's no longer fearful, so he doesn't need things to validate his self-worth."

"Good thing," I chuckled.

"His physical poverty," Bonnie said, with a disapproving glance, "caused him to see through the superficiality of the world. Now he is not a poor man, no matter how little he has." Speaking to a spot on the sidewalk, "If he was an ordinary man," she said enigmatically, "he would make it back, and never again make the judgments that brought him to us—judgments such as, 'Good thing.'"

"Are you saying that he won't make it?"

"Always focused on the negative," she said, shaking her head. "I'm saying that he was a gift of the most beautiful kind—a Stalker's projection sent to us specifically for this lesson. I touched him to see if he was real," she giggled. "I know about projections, but I never recognized one before now."

"Let's find him," I said, turning around, "I want to meet a..."

"He's not here anymore," Bonnie said, grasping my arm. "His job is done."

"What... he was a ghost?" I quipped sarcastically, looking for a Mariners cap bobbing down the sidewalk.

"He was a gesture of Spirit and Spirit wastes nothing. He is no longer needed so he is no longer here." Bonnie sniffled and said. "Your roaming mind had me take my eyes off where I was walking, so that I could explain where you were heading in your apprenticeship, then you ran into a stranger who had stopped to get his bearings. The event gave us all a direction."

"Directions from Davie Street to Robson, maybe."

"That man's contemplation was about a direction in life, and your lesson was to see the underlying nature of an event—recognize your Minimal Chance as a direction to take—which happened right away." She snapped her fingers. "The panhandler made it clear that you need lessons concerning judgment, generosity, and appreciation. When you accept these, it'll change the way you are going as well." She looked behind her. "It was too perfect to have been administered by an average man."

"Generosity? I gave him almost half of my money," I protested.

"Half of your change," she corrected me, "and you did it to show yourself that you are generous, otherwise why keep the other half when you still have five dollars?"

"Prudence."

"You are a miser," she said crisply.

"Come off it. I spend as much on you as I do on myself, even if it's not so smart in the moment."

"That's how you camouflage the underlying truth from yourself. You hold onto your last dollar like a pauper to a prayer, regardless that you have no immediate need for it; you camouflage your secret fear of poverty by equating angst with generosity."

"Did I ever hold out on you?" I said coolly, not bothering to unravel what she had said.

"You regularly decline to have a pastry with your coffee, or dessert after a meal." She chuckled. "You've perspired when I thought about ordering one, and you become trite because it adds to your split of the tab."

"Split?" I chuckled mirthlessly. "You might think about how we've been sharing costs for the past few weeks—which," I quickly added, holding up my hand, "is fine. I appreciate that you've done the same for me."

Bonnie's expenses had shot up to cover her car insurance and son's sporting goods/summer wardrobe needs, which I knew had tapped out her monthly household account. At the same time, my freelance work was flourishing, and I knew that she was in arrears with her power bill so I had causally offered to help. She politely refused, saying only that it would work out. I believed that she expected Josh to offer, which as far as I knew had not happened.

"You can't be afraid and appreciative at the same time," she replied, "and the momentum of pettiness undeterred leads to cruelty." She bit her lower lip, looking at me expectantly.

Missing the head's up, I said, "You can't convince me that twenty bucks would change anyone's direction in life, other than getting two or three bottles."

"You claim that nothing changes for anyone you might help, because nothing in you changes from making contributions that aren't selflessly offered."

"Some people gushed with gratitude," I said lamely.

"If not a show for your benefit, they were gushing temporary relief from their fears, which is the other side of you helping them to keep your own fears at arm's length. When you're willing to explore this idea, as our friend back there did," she said, thumbing behind us, "you'll find your heart and stop being a miser with it as well."

Counting off rebuttal points on my fingers, I said, "I give money to strangers. I spend the bulk of what I have on us, I usually give most of the rest as a tip, and I'm a miser? What would I be if I gave the last dollar away—Saint Nick?"

"You'd be desperate, as long you're paying off your self-image."

"What does the amount or my motivation have to do with anything? The guy got a freebie," I said, frustrated.

"Hardly," she chortled. "You made him pay with a strip search followed by a meager offering, and now you're trying to accuse him of a deception because I caught you in yours!" She laughed.

"What if there was another guy with him who obviously needed it more?" I said without purposeful focus.

"It depends. I'd probably split it."

"So how much you'd give, and to who isn't an easy choice?"

"It's whom, and my quandary would be about giving it in such a way that it would do no damage." She grimaced sympathetically; a thought struck her. "This is not a hypothetical is it? You've been caught in these circumstances, or you wouldn't be defending yourself so adamantly." She drawled, "Ahaaaaww, I didn't see that coming: it wasn't a question of should you help, or how much, it was that you couldn't do anything. You had to walk away because you understood the fourteen-year-old punk in Beirut might kill them for taking your money."

"Or let them starve," I said quietly.

"You did the right thing."

"Nothing?" I scoffed.

"In the grander view of behavioral evolution, that punk was safeguarding their lesson. I'll explain..."

"You've got to be fucking kidding," I snarled.

"As you can clearly see," she said flatly, "I am doing neither. Circumstances dictated your course of action, and you listened to them. You were not responsible, nor were you meant to think you were; you were there as a witness. Besides," she punched me lightly on the arm, "need isn't necessarily obvious. Our panhandler friend took better care of himself than you do. You're fighting me because you feel guilty. Let it go. None of this is personal."

"Uh huh," I said, rounding off the corner at the intersection.

I was two steps across before I noticed that Bonnie was still standing at the curb, looking at unstable skies; a light drizzle began to fall. Though the sun was visible, so the shower would be brief, I walked back to her and suggested that we stop at a local hotel lounge until the drizzle passed.

"I can't afford it," Bonnie said, smiling apologetically.

"I've got it covered," I said, waving her objection aside as though striking at a fly circling my nose.

Bonnie gave me a peculiar look, as though a foul smell had wafted her way.

Chapter 7

The Undercurrents of Fear

We stopped at a convenience store cash machine, where I withdrew the last of my cash. Offhandedly, I flashed the twenties her way and mentioned that we were good for a couple of glasses of wine and splitting an appetizer. Bonnie nodded in a preoccupied manner.

Half a block later, nearing the door to the lounge, she unexpectedly stretched her last two steps to get ahead of me, then she just stood there. I reached around her to open it.

"Thank you kind sir," she said in Victorian fashion.

"It pleases me to fulfill m'lady's expectations," I said as she walked by.

Bonnie tch-tched me, then headed toward our preferred table in the back tier, three steps up. With a confirming nod to Catherine's raised brow, a familiar server who was dealing with another customer, I trailed behind her jaunty pace wondering what the hell I had done this time.

Catherine soon brought two glasses of red wine—maybe rain wine would be more accurate, because we went into Checkers only when the sky was bleak, which was enough for her to recall our preferences.

We exchanged belated pleasantries and comments on the capriciousness of Vancouver weather before Catherine reported the contents and price of the lunch special. After she left us to make our decisions, with fatalistic cheeriness I said, "Was my bow too shallow, or did I forget to spread my cape across the threshold?"

"You turned a courteous act into a power play."

"You scripted the play," I replied reasonably.

"The core of stalking is spontaneity. It doesn't matter if I contrive circumstances, because it doesn't change the nature of your response."

"Why go to the trouble of creating games, when you can just tell me what you're trying to teach me?"

Sighing, she said, "People don't believe much of anything unless they are shown it. Even then, they have to agree with the procedure, and like you, they still don't work at making it relevant to other circumstances." With a softening smile, she added, "You are caring and kind until someone offends your image so your loyalty and generosity come with conditions; we all give those away at some point. How often have you heard a diatribe followed by, 'I don't know where that came from' or, 'That wasn't like me?' "

"Often enough."

"Did you ever see a hand up their butt, forcing caustic words out of wooden lips?"

I chuckled at the imagery

"Irrefutable experiences followed by an assessment of how they apply to your entire life are the only way to turn those clues about your true nature into knowledge. Minutes ago," she nodded toward the street, "you limited your help to a stranger, which told me that you were feeding the camouflaged belief that you are superior, based on your judgment of his circumstances. That you did this with your Assemblage Point in an advantageous position, and me having just told you to pay attention to the nature of what's happening, not what's happening to you, tells me how damaged you really are. Your comment after opening the door was just as revealing."

"That I judged you—how?"

"I'm a woman."

I snorted at the implication.

"You interact differently with men, including the apparent maleness of representatives of Intent, than you do with me, Saa-ra, and Caroline—with less respect."

"I really don't think I do that, at least not consciously," I said as if this mattered.

"You hide it in culturally acceptable ways, but words are deeds and yours are loaded with male attitude." She shifted the silver condiment container to one side, a symbolic gesture suggesting there was nothing standing in the way of her making a point, or me seeing it.

"We've discussed the concepts of momentum and continuity enough for you to know that you can't logically think in one way and act in another." She cocked her head in a *fait accompli* gesture: the effects of momentum and continuity were no longer issues to me, not because I could read or dissect them well, but because my otherwise fucked-up world of random violence made more sense under their auspices.

"What words give me away?" I asked her quietly.

"You know full-well that it's not just about you, but if we are going to create another shared assumption..." she shrugged.

"Go ahead."

"Most women in everyday circumstances use gentler words, such as 'nonsensical', whereas you would say 'crap', as if judging things gently with a club. You have been scared shitless, but never frightened to the core; you have been fucked over, but not betrayed; shit happens did not convey the hollowness of sudden destitution when all that you owned burned to the ground."

"I'm a bit more graphic than women," I shrugged.

"Your shallow, clipped, and callous judgments of specific events extend to other circumstances whether you mean them to or not. You know you can't help but maintain the continuity—no one can—because the very nature of our perception, and so our sanity, is based on maintaining apparent continuity. The unintended consequence of that momentum takes you to the manifestation of those intentions while you're focused elsewhere, and then you're surprised at what you created."

"What was the clue I gave away at the door?"

"Expectations."

"I don't..."

She raised her hand, and said, "Figure it out."

After a short moment, I said, "That I am a chauvinist or superior in general?"

"Both are excellent starts." Bonnie shifted in her seat, a sign that she was constructing a more comprehensive point.

I took a slow breath in anticipation of it being my last calm one for a while.

"The momentum of a nation made fearful enough to expend enormous resources in preparation for war focuses on all of the possible scenarios that could blossom into one. This makes war inevitable because you get what you focus on, which justifies the preparations. You can see how that continuity feeds on itself?"

"Yes."

"In the same way, constantly having to guard your own secrets from yourself means you will always find something to threaten them. If the threat is something basic, like someone wanting to get to know the real you, you increase your vigilance because your deepest secret is self-loathing. This creates the need for additional subterfuge to protect yourself from what you feel lurking in the shadows of your unrealized fears, but you can't define what's there because you never had to. You always ran away, or went to war with them."

"War with who—whom?"

"You created a momentum of conflict by elevating your defenses, from subtle satire through condescension and sarcasm, to bold-faced lying. By essentially attacking innocent circumstances, because the boogie man of truth has by this time become too difficult to conceal, your partners either leave, or you break up with them." She cocked her head.

"All I did was open the door," I said as Catherine came back for our order.

"And you are not pleased about it now that I'm presenting you with your reflection in the glass." Bonnie looked up. "The poached salmon, with two plates, please."

"Maybe I'm annoyed at your poor perception of me," I said, quelling the anger I felt at hearing her order without consulting me: that Bonnie knew I enjoyed salmon, but rarely bought it because it was expensive, didn't calm me as much as my having the foresight to show her how much money I had. I could hardly pick up the menu and check the price; it would be close.

Leaning toward me, she said, "I told you that self-importance has to be dealt with head on; I'm orchestrating experiences that will show you to yourself in an infinitely safer way than your travels did. I'm not the enemy," she said, reaching over to tap me on the chest. "The enemy is always within."

"It's comfortable there."

Leaning back and ignoring my comment, she said, "You felt awkward about our encounter with the panhandler, so I pricked your ego to put your defenses on full alert. Then I presented you with an opportunity to reconstruct your self-image so that you could see it for yourself."

"What should I be seeing?"

"You tried to gain control of a threat to your autonomy by presuming grandiose authority over an insignificant circumstance."

"Grandiose authority over a door?"

"You blithely assumed you could fulfill my expectations, which tells me that your sense of self-importance is the size of a free state!" Her grin complemented the breadth of her arm span.

"It was role-playing—an expression that suited the circumstance you created," I said scowling at her contrivance.

"I told you, prodding your calculated attitudes and fears to the surface is tough stuff. Stop acting like an average man, and I do mean acting; it's getting old." She sipped her wine.

I did the same before saying, "What calculated attitudes?"

"Why did you both show and tell me what you could afford?"

"Prudence: it's all I've got."

Bonnie looked away, failing to conceal a grin from which I caught on that this circumstance was by design; it always had been.

"I'm broke until my check comes in on Friday, which you couldn't have appreciated when you ordered; what's miserly about me spending everything?" I said reactively.

"What's prudent about it?" she countered.

"Liking you affects my judgment," I said evenly.

She looked at me as if memorizing features for a police sketch artist. "You should make a habit of treating yourself well. You've been cheap for so long that you don't recognize the contradictions it creates."

"Such as?" I said, proving her correct.

"Feeling that you are spending unwisely and doing it anyway demonstrates two things: as an average person you are extracting recognition, while the Stalker in you knows you'll be fine, because you always have been. Speaking of which, it is Friday and your check is in." She

withdrew her touch and added, "But thank you for letting me know where our accounts stand. By the way, remember this word... zipper."

"Why?"

"You're right. Forget it."

Chapter 8

Deconstructing Personality

Without pause, she said, "We are going to discuss the construction of a personality, which will help to explain the techniques we're going to use to take yours apart when we get to that part of your training."

"Other than going through doorways?" I jested weakly.

"Whatever I need," she replied. "Here we go: beliefs are not sacred or immutable, as if we are all-knowing at any given point in our lives. Their purpose is to create a particular approach—the one we require to service our personal development. I know this sounds paradoxical, but tearing them apart is not personal—making them personal is why it's so difficult to change beliefs that are merely agreements with circumstances that we want to represent us. So far?"

"So good."

"What makes them personal is that we shape them through the three contributing mechanisms that form our self-image." She took a breath to line up her ducks. "Self-importance causes us to think we are the center of the Universe, so we are affronted at anything that challenges our majesty or perceived subservience. We cannot overcome these challenges because they are self-sustaining myths, so we fall into the warming arms of self-absorption where every comment is about us, and then self-indulgently grasp for the illusionary prizes our cultures create by aggrandizing useless things that we think better represent us. This process is energetically exhausting, because the prizes are ever changing. Taken together, the beliefs we have hardened through our self-image are, to us, immutable facts that we have defended since their inception; we will literally fight to the death for them."

"That's clear—all of it."

"Good, hold onto it as a background landscape." She swallowed quickly, and carried on integrating previous points with her new lesson. "Everything the average person learns from the moment of their birth until the moment of their death touches on the three core perceptual agreements of humanity; root assumptions of physical existence, social and cultural conformation, and the personality we have concluded is who we are. This trio forms a broader harmony of consequences that is greater than the sum of its parts—a grand consensus as basic everyone agreeing that a tree is a tree, and as pervasive as all of using reason to assess our circumstances, without realizing this is how we have been conformed to perceive our world."

Her enunciation then conformed to the Queen's English. "Stalkers call this master accord the cognition of the average person, and from which the human personality can be objectively categorized." She paused.

"As in definitively listing the elements you've talked about? Sure."

"No, as in crushing those myriad elements into basic categories."

"Are you saying we're more alike than we'd care to admit?"

"You might put it that way," she grinned guardedly. "From the perspective of the Stalker's cognition, there are only four personality types."

"Everyone falls into them?" I said, dubiously.

"There is a category of assistants and companions," Bonnie carried on, "which Stalkers call the perfect secretary. These people are gracious, efficient, and some of the nicest people you will ever meet. The fatal flaw in their personal development is that they are virtually useless without direction." She looked at me inquisitively.

"I'll wait until you're done."

She continued. "The opposite of the perfect secretary is the petty, devious, and egocentric person. Insecurity makes them envious, so they talk almost exclusively about themselves to be the center of attention. Their fatal flaw is that they will kill for power."

I nodded.

"The dreamer is the middle ground: they are mostly indifferent to outside events, and instead spend their energy creating the illusion that they have great things waiting for them. They also talk incessantly about things they don't do anything about, which makes their fatal flaw neglect."

"Do you mean that literally, or in terms of personal growth?"

"I mean it literally and metaphorically," she said, tapping the tabletop. "If you can't operate without direction, what's to stop a devious person from using you to death—a person who talks but won't intervene?" she said rhetorically.

"Point taken."

"The fourth personality," Bonnie said, "is what some seers call a Warrior. These people can accept events without judgment, then choose to act upon them or not. Either way, their choices are deliberate, and include following the dictates of impeccability; we will have to expand the meaning of both these terms." Bonnie gestured the point aside. "Go ahead, ask it."

"You are saying that we are not unique?"

"I am not saying that. Our uniqueness lies in the one-off arrangement of our energy construction, which constitutes our accumulated knowledge and undigested experience that allows for the endless variations of perception we find between our experiences and other's versions of the same events."

"So I'm unique, and like everyone else at the same time?"

"You are like everyone else who is energetically encased in the modality of your time. This encasement includes your unique means of interpreting events, which underscores your assumption of autonomy."

"In English?"

"I'm saying your conclusions—your personality being one of these—are limited to the cognition of the average person."

"Artists create unique things all of the time."

"They create unique interpretations of their perceptions." She waited for me to process the distinction.

"Meaning these interpretations are drawn from the same four core conclusions they think of as who they are?"

"You're getting it." She feigned a strained grin. "But my point goes deeper."

"It would. Shoot."

"If all of our assumptions have been shaped by the same fundamental forces, then so have our decisions."

"My decisions have been shaped by... okay, I see your point."

"I think not," she grimaced. "I'm saying that all of your so-called independent decisions are actually acquiesces to pre-existing assumptions drawn from the cognition of the average person."

"I have never made an independent decision?"

"Correct, no one can make a truly deliberate decision until they have left reason behind."

"That's just bullshit," I smirked.

"So says your reason, which is what we're trying to have you leave behind." Bonnie looked at me inquiringly. "Logically, if all that you think you know has been shaped by the same perceptions that have been hammered into everyone, what else can you conclude within that cognition?"

"Okay, let's try what impeccability is about again. Maybe I'll see your point from there."

Looking into my innocent eyes, Bonnie realized I had not grasped much of that concept in our Saturday classes, either. In a monotone, she said, "You have a difficult day ahead. Grasping the pervasive nature of your conformation is critical."

"Still..." I held my ground.

Shaking her head at whatever I was in for, she relented.

"To a reasoning mind, impeccability can look like ethics or morality, but it can fly in the face of both because it's about the regulation of energy. In simple terms," she cocked her head to one side, indicating this was not a definitive explanation, "impeccability means doing the right thing for the right reason, which includes doing nothing as a proactive decision. Where it can get complicated," she grinned ruefully, "is that reason doesn't apply to decisions based on the regulation of energy. Reason is inherently energy inefficient. More than that, impeccable choices have to take into consideration where you really are, so that you act in proportion to the arena. Otherwise, the amount of energy employed will not be correct."

"Let's start with what you mean by it looking like ethics, then we'll go to acting in proportion to the arena," I said evenly.

"Reason deals with the 'because' of an event you have interpreted in a particular way and subsequently decided you should respond in a way consistent with your interpretation. This maintains the continuity of thought through action, which always seems reasonable under the circumstance. It follows that there are many ethical standards—meaning no real standards that everyone can embrace as the most moral, or apparently beneficial to the most people."

"Understood."

"There are no variables affecting a Stalker's motivation: they would say a circumstance beckoned them, and they responded with the most efficient use of their energy. This response could mirror your reasoned choice and look ethical, or it might confound you with its apparent irresponsibility."

"I'll need an example of that, but what does acting in proportion to an arena mean—it sounds like a variable?"

Bonnie gave this a moment's thought before, suddenly sporting a wide grin, she said, "Imagine that you are driving the third vehicle to arrive at a four way stop simultaneous to a fourth car on your right. You know the correct order in which to safely proceed, but what usually happens?"

Her pleasure came from knowing this circumstance was a pet peeve of mine: in casual conversation, I had used it to support my declaration that twenty-five percent of driving-age humanity was terminally stupid. Being generous with Murphy's Law, I said that we are certain to encounter at least one of these people seventy-five percent of the time at four-way stops in most of Canada. The exceptions were in Halifax, where a cluster of identical signage was uniformly thought to mean, "Just go ahead when you can," and in Nanaimo, "Slow your truck, create the impression that you know what you're doing, then go."

"Someone goes out of order, because they either don't see how discretion and law can be in the same sentence, or they can't figure out their left from their right. Then there's the one who waves a car through ahead of their own rightful turn, because it adds to the confusion of who goes next."

"In what way?" she said.

"Did the waver give up his turn, thinking he should go next, or did he relegate himself to the last person to go through?"

Nodding, Bonnie said, "In the context of this arena, doing nothing is the impeccable choice."

"Going last?"

"Your reason says you are going last, but logically you are making the best decision you can make in a muddled circumstance." Into my puzzled expression, she said, "Your intention is to get from point A to point B. Does a fender-bender help you do that? No," she carried on. "So why not wave everyone through with a smile and a shrug, and achieve your goal without risk at the cost of thirty-seconds of doing nothing?"

"Doing the right-thing for the right reason is the most efficient use of energy?"

"Yes, but there is more to it."

"I'm shocked."

"Describing this presents a problem," Bonnie chuckled, "because I'm speaking about the momentum of energy while addressing the limited vision of your reason." She sipped her wine and said, "But I'll give it a shot." She set her glass aside.

"The driver who gave up his legal and expected turn was thinking only about his wonderful self, not the potential consequences of his actions. The energetic overview considers that the essence of an act will always enhance a similar continuity of events."

"Which was what?"

"His apparent kindness to one driver carelessly disregarded his true circumstance; this was the arena of legal, standardized procedures that create safe and reasonable expectations for everyone. Doing nothing takes that altered situation into account, and does not add to the confusion."

"It would piss off the guy behind me."

"How does that affect your safety, or his, for that matter?"

"Okay—right so the energetic overview would be that the good guy encouraged other drivers to be careless?"

"Which would be their choice, of course, but we're not talking about cause and effect in the arena of reason or discretion. We're talking about expending energy properly, which will always equate to efficiency and safety."

I nodded my understanding of her energetic overview, so far.

"Now take the essence of an act further." Gathering her thoughts, Bonnie raised a finger to signal there was a preamble to her explanation. "The human form is a literal translation of our Spirit's purpose for a given lifetime. By practicality and design we cannot recall all that we really are or know, but knowledge of our purpose is literally designed into us. This includes the personality that best suits our challenges, which means the beliefs that we will embrace based on our conformation to a time, place, and our parents' influences are highly predictable. Moreover, we constantly revisit our choices under guidance in the dream state. We'll talk about this in depth," she said, motioning this topic gently aside as if sliding something delicate out of reach of a child.

"My point, which is a key consideration about the concept of impeccable acts, is that we choose everything that happens to us; there are no accidents. These choices include mass agreements to experience even hellacious circumstances for our own development, over many lifetimes. Have I lost you in your memories, yet?"

"No," I said petulantly, because she caught me drifting into my past.

Without commenting on my tone, she said, "In your experience, the Ethiopian famine was a mass agreement to learn developmental lessons they had failed to grasp in less impressive forms, at other times in their developmental history. Those people needed and chose an undeniable lesson in order to move on at this great time of change, when the momentum of all events is extremely high."

"You're not saying that we shouldn't have helped them?" I said, bewildered.

"Correct, I am not saying that. I am saying that those who died meant to die and those who didn't were meant to live, just as those who helped them made a choice, and those who didn't made a different choice. There is no judgment either way. There is only the energetic intent to participate in any circumstance, which contributes to the momentum of similar events."

"Okay, but a month ago you said we shouldn't go to war, as in the media shouldn't cover them."

"As in no one should go," she corrected me. "I told you, peace simply 'is' if you leave it alone. You can only further war by going to war in any capacity."

"But you included peacekeeping armies, as I recall," which I did because, for all of my apparent failings I had a steel-trap memory. This is why I was rarely caught in a lie; before now.

"So that we are clear, are you asking me why we can provide relief in a famine, but not in a war?"

"Sorry, yes. I hadn't formulated the question."

"That's a convenient habit you need to break."

"I... right, I understand."

"If a conflict is artificially ended," Bonnie tackled my question, "the reasons for it remain intact, and you are postponing the inevitable because peace is not something that can be imposed. It has to be sustained by the free will of the population, just as a country cannot go to war without their agreement, be this silent or overt."

I nodded that I understood the principle: we all were in charge.

"The reasonable point of view is that Peacekeepers stop the suffering, but it is short-sighted. Their temporary influence allows cultures and combatants time to sharpen their beliefs, and arm their children with them, when a developmental lesson is to not follow in their father's footsteps." She shrugged sadly. "The nature of the Peacekeeper's actions is to interfere with an undeniable lesson—the end point manifestations of thoroughly crappy beliefs, which will kill the combatant's, their children, and their children's children, until they finally understand what they are doing. Logically, the impeccable choice would be to let them slaughter themselves as an undeniably impressive lesson they have failed to learn in other ways. Then we can help the survivors, who might know better the next time around."

"I get the principle. Still..."

"You are thinking about the innocents that still haunt you; that is your conformation to reasoning imposing itself on the developmental overview." She touched my arm. "You needed this experience to see the big picture when it was time, which is now." She removed her touch and pursed her lips. "Part of what makes this your time is your awareness of the existence of Spirit, therefore your own immortal status, and the ways mankind develops through cycles of

birth and death. As others become aware that this cycle is an inseparable, sacred aspect of the physical journey, they will have a context within which to view the deaths associated with the earth's end-time cleansing as well."

"I can see that intellectually, but how is working a famine different from working a war?"

"Think in terms of contributing to the nature of the act: in a famine, official observers and bystanders have the option of alleviating suffering in an event that has reached its final manifestation. Inserting your positive influence does not create more suffering; there is no onus attached to it. It is not as if participants would want to make life or death stands for the right to starve. Correct?"

"No shit."

"As I said, those gruesome events also provided millions of people with the opportunity to choose to help those who would never again behave in ways that would lead to them to starving to death. What's the puzzled look about?"

"I'm trying to wrap my mind around letting it all go to hell. I mean, dictators would be popping up everywhere if they thought there was no form of global peacekeeping to keep them in check."

"It's the other way around: if you want to see rights and freedoms blossom, allow genocides to run their course and populations around the world would know better than to allow the power mongers and the corrupted to lead them."

"Because it would be covered by the media?" I raised my brow.

"Unsanitized coverage—we'll get to that."

"Still," I said stoically.

She clasped her hands. "I can't go further with this today. Explaining the right thing to do isn't something I can spoon-feed to your reason, and as I said, your day is going to be difficult enough. Can we go back to the constructs of personality?"

"Fair enough," I relented.

"Where were we?" she grinned.

"Jesus, how do you expect...?"

"It was your insistence that stopped the flow of the lesson. Deal with it."

Taking a considered breath, I said, "If I have this right, my sense of self-importance has me think I'm unpredictable, if not unfathomable, but in terms of my overall conformation to the world and behavioral evolution I'm old news?"

"Correct."

"There are three kinds of average people, as defined by those who are unaware that the only battle worth fighting is with themselves?"

"And these are?"

"The perfect secretary is sweet, but useless without direction. The petty egocentric has to be the center of attention, and would kill for power, and the dreamer is always waiting for something so they're not reliable."

"Very good."

"Which one am I?"

"Can you operate without direction?"

"I usually resent it."

"Do you talk about things, but not do anything about it?"

"You know I don't." The opposite was the case; I did things and talked about them endlessly.

She cocked her head while I did the math, scoffed, and said, "I couldn't care less about power."

"Not to put too fine a point on it," she said, looking at a young couple entering the doorway, "you manipulated your government minder in Pakistan to take away his power over you, which could have led to his death." She looked back at me. "You were party to controlling a key circumstance in Lebanon, where you literally caused soldiers to shell other soldiers for your benefit. As far as maintaining control over yourself goes, you bet you would kill if you thought you had to." She took a needed breath before dismantling more of my self-image.

"You also planned on applying for the screenplay grant on your own, which was deceitful, and when I filled in the gaps in my story line you put the application on hold to learn more to advance your work—not ours—which was devious."

I blushed as she looked outside.

Focused on something I could not see, in a disinterested tone she said, "Your personal storytelling is entirely egocentric, and pettiness is yours to discover." She faced me. "It's too rampant to catalogue. Is that enough for now?"

"There's more?" I mumbled, mockingly.

There was now.

"Do you recall our talk about the Law of Catalytic Momentum as it applied to relationships?"

"All of them," I said warily.

"What was their essence?"

"Everything is conscious, charged energy, and because like attracts like we attract like-minded people and events to us."

"You've been meeting these kinds of key people at critical junctions of your journey, to move you along, because it's their nature to use people and throw them away, like you do."

"Such as?"

"What was the fellow who ran Scarlet Productions like?"

I took a moment to edit my expletives, before I said, "He was ambitious, vindictive, loved control, and always had to be right—but he was a good father and provider," I added to not seem too lopsided.

"This is the man who defrauded you out of earned money, deceived you out of a partnership, and then to be rid of you enhanced an otherwise reparable transgression to deprive you of your livelihood in Toronto?"

"Okay, he was a fucking dickhead."

Bonnie stared, waiting for me to make a connection.

I didn't, so she did.

"You had just finished being shaped by your wars; you had all of the negative programming in place but you lacked the opportunity to display it. He was you, moving you along to me."

I withheld my sneer to reassess the possibility that I would kill for any reason.

Chapter 9

Essential Flaws

"In time," she continued as if speaking to a plant across the room, "three of the four categories of personality types will become assumptions of the way you look at people, most of whom will give themselves away through three common personality flaws." She faced me again,

apparently finished with whatever had taken her attention away. "These flaws are categorized as the pious, the bigot, and the obsessed."

"Three types of average people, three crappy flaws, got it. Before you go on, you're not saying these are the only flaws we have, as well?"

"Correct. I am saying that the most prevalent among mankind's behavioral aberrations fall into three types." She held up one finger for each as she said, "The pious agree without assessment, and feel they always know what's going on. The bigot thinks he is always correct so he ignores what he doesn't understand. The obsessed can't decide which way to go, because they can't ignore or accept events entirely." She lowered her hand, and with an effort kept a straight face, which was akin to laughing at me: I didn't have to ask, because we had been down this road the day before. I was the bigot, always having to be correct and too many times to count I had ignored what I didn't understand about my metaphysical experiences. Maintaining my sense of continuity, ergo sanity meant that I had a history of this behavior.

"I will warn you," she said with a fading grin, "that some of the behaviors appear to line up with the personality types, but there is no easy rule about that. We are enormously clever at disguising our flaws; there is no reason why a perfect secretary can't disguise a streak of bigotry in piety, or an obsessed dreamer can't appear to take charge of a circumstance they may have mulled over until it was virtually resolved. That said, everyone in every possible mix of behaviors can have the energy to hunt their flaws, and become a Warrior to battle them."

"Why you call them Warriors?" Apparently, I said this distastefully.

"Warriors are in an endless struggle, first with hunting their flaws and then with overcoming them. You don't like the term because you assess it with judgments ranging from utter stupidity to callous murderers, no different than how you have acted in professionally camouflaged circumstances. We can call them Stalkers, if you like—that's where they're headed if they so choose to go there." She leaned my way as if to whisper, and enigmatically said in her normal tone, "You never know who you might be talking to."

Bonnie raised her gaze to look out the window with more intensity than was required to see if the weather had changed. "For now," she said, leaning back to face me, "make a habit of placing your questions about behavior inside the boxes of these six categories, and you'll discover the answers on your own. As we go along," she said, refocusing somewhere over my left shoulder, "you'll also be making connections about the way you are, and you will be miles ahead of just having organized information."

"You told me not to bother memorizing lists," I said crisply, becoming annoyed at her lack of focus.

She looked squarely at me. "I said no such thing. I said not to be concerned, because that would have distracted you from the key points I was making. When we're done for the day, you can be as concerned as you like about memorizing everything... which you have been doing at the expense of trying to understand their connections."

"Speaking of distractions, what's out there?"

"Nothing important." She smiled wryly.

"Coulda fooled me."

"I just did: I wanted you to know what your concerns are doing to your ability to grasp what's in front of you."

"Like what?" I challenged her, thinking she meant right now.

"Exactly my point... Stalkers," she continued without hesitation, "relentlessly make connections to these personality categories, and practiced flaws, until they know themselves thoroughly. From here, they can learn to know the rest."

"The rest of what?"

She inhaled patiently, a signal I interpreted to mean that had I been paying attention her explanation would not be necessary.

"We all begin as hunters of the truth, as we know it. Think of it in terms of a child asking, 'Why I am here?' as everyone does sometime during their lives, but they can't become a Hunter—capitol H—until they understand the landscape in which their prey resides."

"Part of that landscape being the elements of personal and social confusion?"

"Yes." She grinned at my simultaneous effort to make connections and amends. "The landscape of a Hunter is the reasonable world, and their prey is the detrimental beliefs they have embraced from that world. When they accept that these beliefs are forerunners to logic, they can become Warriors stalking the behavioral flaws their beliefs created. When they have subdued these behaviors, they have slain their concomitant beliefs, and their personal landscape is clear. From here, they can *know*. To answer your question, the rest of it is to understand human behavior to perfection."

"I don't see how, when..."

"Don't bother arguing for the uniqueness of our individuality, again. In terms of this physical school of development," she said, with a wave of her arm, "we all have to learn the same core ideas."

"Force of habit... sorry."

"Think about it," she said less casually than a rhetorical remark would be delivered, "if all of your decisions have been shaped by global assumptions encapsulated in core perceptions, why can't Stalkers know what you are like when they are standing outside of these illusions looking in?"

"That makes sense, but let me catch up. If I heard you right..."

"By which you mean correctly, or left?"

"Sorry, if I heard you correctly, by definition the average person does not know they live in a world of limited and manipulated perceptions, from which they have reasoned their beliefs to fit into what is essentially an irrational circumstance... speaking about now, that is?"

"It wasn't always that way, but you are correct."

"So," I hesitated, "realizing just this much—to hunt down crappy beliefs," I said, framing my query awkwardly, "would be a huge accomplishment."

"It is."

"Then becoming a Warrior would be friggin huge."

"It is."

"So becoming a Stalker is..." I stalled.

"So huge that it requires the overt involvement of Intent."

"And Stalkers can do these magical things because they've left their ego behind, or their reason?"

"You've been relentlessly trained to tell your ego what to do, so that it supports your reason, but the ego doesn't need your direction. It knows its purpose perfectly well, which means teachers have to train their students to stop talking to it, while cajoling their reason to stretch toward logic. Stalkers have achieved both."

"I get that all of your categories are how Stalkers think, but can't an average person assess people in the same ways?"

"To begin with," she said, twisting her lips as if untying a thought, "a Stalker can assess circumstances in ways that average people can't, such as through *knowing*, so it's not accurate to say 'according to how they think.' That said," she straightened her body, "There is no reason why you couldn't make these personality assessments, but you'd be hard pressed to get them right as long as your beliefs filter them. This doesn't mean these penchants are bad, or that they can't have redeeming applications," she said, anticipating my next question. "They are subjects to be studied from a particular point of view in order to arrive at another point of view."

"Please," I said with a short sweep of my hand, magnanimously inviting her to continue plumbing the surprising depths of my ignorance.

"Poor behaviors are a means of exploration, which can have inherently good qualities. Bigots, for example, usually take the initiative, and one way or another demand that people conform to their standards. If they have a good head for fundraising, running a charity might do some good in the world. But I'd check the financial books often," she winked.

"In effect, you're saying they can't have redeeming qualities—not to a Stalkers way of thin—assessing events?"

Bonnie gave this question more thought than it deserved before saying, "I use the term 'redeeming' in the context of the average person's cognition, which is to make up for something. There is no equivalent in the Stalker's world. If a Stalker screws up, he screws up, the event is over, and its event-energy has been propelled onward according to the intensity and nature of the screw up. If a Stalker sees it's the right thing to do for the right reason, which might also alter an event's outcome, that is a separate event with separate energy. The Stalker is not redeeming anything; it was too late the moment he set the original energy on its way."

Chuckling, I said, "Now you sound like he can redeem himself, he just doesn't see it that way."

Unexpectedly, Bonnie reached over and clasped my hand tightly. "You are learning about energy, not reasoning; energy doesn't think." She squeezed and let me go. "To a Stalker, making up for an act is preposterous. He would no more think about redemption than a pope would consult a psychic."

"I get it, I get it," I said, raising my hands in surrender. "What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that you have no idea what you are really like, or how much energy you have, so you're not concerned about the damage you can cause by waving someone ahead of you at a four-way stop." She relaxed her shoulders. "Definitions are problematic because they attempt to contain ideas for the convenience of our reason, when we are trying to shatter that container. This means..."

"It's a paradox in the training?"

"No. The context of our lessons broadened the moment you left your body; some definitions simply stopped mattering, and others became assumptions you no longer have to question. It follows that other terms will change with new experiences so where you're standing now will not hold the weight of your reason later on."

"Why would a Stalker bother defining anything—just curious?"

Catherine appeared with our order already split, asked us if there was anything else she could bring, and left us to our meal.

"Definitions help your reason agree with what is inherently unreasonable to you," Bonnie said as if no time had passed, "but only as a temporary circumstance." With a poised fork, she

checked a space in the air slightly above my head, and said, "The average person treats words as if they are knowledge. I'm using this conditioning to gain your ego's agreement to accept ideas it would otherwise defend against, until you have the experiences that teach it to sit down and shut up—like an out-of-body experience told your ego that it's okay to fly. You'll understand this better the first time you access knowledge directly." She took a bite.

"Like when I knew about Rachel's motives?"

"No," she said before swallowing.

"What then?"

"Accessing knowledge directly isn't reasonable, so it doesn't translate. The best I can do is to say that, at some point, your First Attention will ignore your inventory of the physical world, and from the Second Attention you will claim as your own knowledge that words are highly limited, symbolic representations. In terms of their ability to communicate ideas, you will know that they are near the bottom of the food chain, because a single simultaneous vision inherently informed you of this... and more."

"I think you can do better than that," I said, seriously.

Chuckling at my constipated expression, Bonnie said, "The First Attention contains all of your assumptions, beliefs, and symbols you both create and uphold according to the rules of physical conformation. The Second Attention has access to far richer symbols, but it can use the ones from the First Attention to illustrate a point without embracing their related beliefs or assumptions."

"For example?"

"If you throw a ball in the First Attention, where all of the root assumptions of our physics are in play, it moves in a mathematically predictable trajectory and falls at a precise rate to roll to a stop. In the Second Attention, neither physical laws nor their attendant reasoning apply; the ball could travel in a straight line forever, climb, turn, or vanish as soon as it left your hand—whatever you wanted it to do. The apparent drawback of these experiences is that they need to be translated into First Attention terms, to be retained in your normal memory, but your body will always remember what was intended." She set her fork down. "Generally speaking, without training your Assemblage Point to shift back to the place where these experiences occurred, your memories are vague and leave only impressions such as a sense of mystery, unexplained joy, or apprehension. If Spirit wants you to remember details, you will likely recall highly vivid dreams that better replicate the knowledge/experience." She took a satisfied breath, allowing a moment for me to grasp what she claimed we could do in the Second Attention.

"Everybody has had similar dreams of flying, weightlessness, and walking through walls into entirely different locations," she continued. "Most people don't try to interact with these events, because they don't know they're either agreeing with a teaching lesson, or creating the content as a reflection of their emotional or psychological condition. Speaking of which," she said academically, "Emissaries chose the specific focus of seeing the full and true nature of human beings, as opposed to exploring the other worlds they could focus on... other than the Players' probable worlds."

"The what worlds?"

"This is material for your dreaming lessons. Just know that most of what we do in the First Attention has been chosen from the Second Attention—which is part of our dream state reality. There is also a Third Attention where probabilities are seen and /or assembled, but that's not for now."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"You tell me."

"The emissaries can see what the Players are planning?"

"Yes, and they set up activities they will act out in the First Attention."

"Then the Players are..." I exhaled in wonderment.

"They are what?"

"I was about to say that they're pretty much fucked, but I will amend that; they're entirely fucked."

"They are indeed."

"With that kind of power and knowledge, why can't the emissaries just shut them down?" I snapped my fingers.

"Impeccability and free will must reign, which includes allowing the Player's their choices lest they interfere with a lesson yet to be completed." She leaned in. "Influencing an existing momentum, without attaching yourself to it, is also a fine art. This is why I literally took you by the hand to make a point about focusing your energy so you don't get sucked into someone else's vortex." She dipped her head in thought. "How did your friend Manny, in Argentina, put it when nothing was happening in that remote town you went to... 'This is still dangerous shit?'"

I got the point; three weeks under house arrest cemented it.

Clearing my throat, I said, "When my ego learns its place, I'll be able to look at other people, and with a few categorical clues know," I emphasized, "what they are like without having to dissect all of their camouflage behaviors?"

"Like recognizing the elements of entitlement—correct."

Noting my subdued grin, Bonnie said, "It's not the treat you're thinking it might be." She cocked her head a minuscule amount. "For a Stalker, knowing someone is like having power over an ant. It's meaningless. If anything, they must take great care not to step on them."

"That sounds hugely arrogant and manipulative."

"There's no gentle way of saying this; I love my cat, but we can't talk about the things that are important to me."

"Average people are like pets to Stalkers?"

"I've explained this: they've been us, but now there is a huge gap in our understandings of not just what's truly important in life, but in the nature of reality itself." She swallowed an idea and said instead, "I know the journey of the average person, and I empathize with their difficulties, but I could not tolerate on-going friendships based on past experiences I have turned into knowledge, and they have not. The people in my past have their own agreements with the life they have chosen, and I have mine. It's that simple. I am not better than anyone else because they are me in future time, as I am someone else's past version in developmental terms. That said I am infinitely better off as I consciously strive to pass through my learning stages, and tomorrow is a new experience that might cause me to leave someone else. This is not because I judge them, or because I am ready to move on; it's because I have to move on. This may appear to be arrogant, but it is simply not spending energy on the behaviors that come with having a personality. I'm not that reasonable anymore," she deadpanned.

Missing the joke, I said, "Your idea of being better off sounds like humility masking superiority."

"Everyone you interact with is a choice you both agree on, as a potential means for both of you to explore yourselves. Fundamentally, this is the design of the average person's journey—I told you, there are no accidents. Stalkers know this and have transcended this unconscious phase of self-evaluation; having an advanced outlook may seem like superiority, because transcending

less mature views includes dispensing with the need to feel anything about it. You misconstrue aloofness with superiority unless it is warmed to suit your sense of self, and then you call it a deception."

"To tolerate is not condescending?"

"The knowledge that I am *my* living challenge," she emphasized, "that my development depends on the choices I make, and that there is nothing standing in my way except me, is humbling by itself. I am a creator of experience, mine and others, and I am aware of it. I am also aware that I am flawed relative to the power that I wield, so to say that we are all children with nuclear capability is not a stretch. This is why we are not alone; our source souls guide us, but they force nothing on us even though we are like ants to them, yet they love us without conditions. That is the essence of humbling; to either condescend or bow to anyone is ridiculous." She sipped her water, then said, "The bottom line is that people of power have no choice but to learn. That is the rule, because standing still is intolerable. It follows that change is a requirement of gaining knowledge, not a consequence of it, and it has nothing to do with whom they are standing."

"No exceptions to the requirement?"

"Are you asking me if there is an off-ramp?"

"Sorry—I mean what about me?"

"What about popcorn?"

"No... you're teaching me about self-stalking. How did I bypass the Hunter stage?"

"You lived thirty-five years of it!" she exclaimed. "Now we're assessing the beliefs you gathered by stalking them into view."

"That's a warrior's phase."

"Indeed."

"Oh—hmm; it just flows from one category to another—there isn't a break?"

Laughing, Bonnie said, "Your knowledge won't allow it whether you consciously pursue the Warrior's path or not. Try holding your breath."

"Okay so how's a person supposed to get by socially, if they're essentially bored with everyone?"

"They don't care about socializing, but when they have to interact they use a stalking art called Controlled Folly. It has specific rules, but explaining those now would sound like they're masters of deceit."

Unable to let the idea go, I said, "Just to be clear, emissaries can see through everything a person does?"

"It's not that they can do this, they can't help but do it."

"Okay so when they talk to an average person, it would be like a tiger playing with a mouse—now that you've mentioned deception."

"It's the other way around. As you well know, the average person is inherently self-deceiving, but unaware of it." She cleared her throat. "Little of what a Stalker says is what it seems, because the average person interprets everything according to reasoned assumptions filtered through their self-image. The Stalker needs neither of these to speak with another Stalker, but they have to use the average person's assumptions to appear to be communicating with them."

"When they're not?"

"I told you, they've transcended that phase; maybe you would understand this better if I put it in your terms." She shifted her fork on her plate to one side, and set it down. Leaning slightly

forward, she said, "They couldn't give a shit about the weather, or uncle Arnie's gout. You've listened to and assessed the prattle of the average person... are you interested in it now?"

"Never really was."

"When we're finished taking your personality apart," she said, leaning back, "you won't be interested in talking about yourself either."

"Leaving me with what?"

"Clarity, and Controlled Folly."

"I'm still confused by what you mean by appearing to be communicating when they're not."

"When we first met, you and I appeared to be on the same exploratory page as we established our views, but my understanding of yours lay in knowing what you were giving away beyond what you think you were conveying." She picked up her fork and took a bite.

"You were pretending to be interested?"

A moment to swallow later, she said, "Not at all. I was sincere in everything I said, and deeply interested in what you had to say. I'm saying that I knew more about the situation than you did."

"How much of a mouse am I to you?"

"You are a student; there is nothing more precious to a teacher." Listen," she said leaning closer, "you have studied the elements of confusion, clarity, and assessing the nature of an act so what you can learn about others from a few sentences far exceeds what the average person would understand, or believe they are giving away. Correct?"

"Correct."

"Are these people idiots?"

"Not categorically. There's about twenty-five percent of..."

Bonnie's rigid stare stopped me short.

"I get it. Can you give me a sample of what you mean by using the average person's assumptions to appear to be communicating with them, but not really?"

"Your own example will have more meaning to you."

"I can say anything?"

"Anything at all," she said, mimicking my shrug.

"Okay." Pausing briefly, I said, "Hi, how are you?"

Without hesitation, Bonnie said, "I am clearly alive and apparently well, so at the least you are being insincere under the auspices of established social graces." On an impulse, she reached for her carryall to retrieve a pen, and an old receipt on which she scribbled some words. Turning it face down, she said, "My reply is 'I'm fine, and you?' by which I mean I'm finely tuned to your deception."

"Me too, by which I mean I'm feeling fine."

Bonnie said nothing.

"You don't care what's on my mind?" I finally said.

"I know what's on your mind." She tapped the paper. "You had the opportunity to choose any topic, and you chose a common deception to camouflage the most common concern. Asking me if I cared what was on your mind confirmed my assessment—not that I needed it. I know you."

"Meaning you have been misleading me since day one," I complained.

"You have misled yourself. I haven't lied to you about anything, whereas you have lied to me endlessly... the overt one's aside," she said blandly.

"But you knew what I was doing?"

"Which doesn't make me responsible to explain what I know," she grinned, "but I am because I'm teaching you now."

"What does a stalker mean when he says, 'Hi, how are you,' to another Stalker?"

She stared as if I was a stranger. Finally, she said, "They'd probably die laughing—or the other Stalker would seek immediate medical attention for his friend."

Gathering my thoughts, I said, "Can you give me an example of reason versus logic in assessing a neutral circumstance?"

She looked at me as if I had said, "Pull my finger."

"Really, I'm not sure about anything right now."

"Why is that?"

"Because I just saw how using a person's assumptions can sound like one thing, but mean something else, or more... or whatever." I motioned the point aside to articulate my thoughts. "This means I don't know what the hell I'm really saying, even as I say it; my reason only thinks I do," I said, spontaneously creating a separation between the two ways of thinking. "Shit... this is what you mean by how a Stalker sees things!" I exclaimed as if I had discovered this on my own. "Come on—give me another example!"

Shaking her head in amusement at my apparent solo discovery, Bonnie said, "It's more effective to experience the difficulty of escaping reason than it is to demonstrate logic. I can give you an example of that."

"Go for it," I said, confidently.

Bonnie puckered, breathed deeply, and nodding slowly to herself said, "I'm going to offer a riddle to your reason, which logic can easily solve. To help you as best I can," she said as I ate, "I will tell you that it contains no subterfuge, no secret information, no assumptions you need to properly make, nor tricks in the phrasing. I will contrive nothing to throw you off; there is no question you need to ask for clarification, and no answer that will help you. Arriving at the logical answer requires only that you ignore all of your conditioning and personal views, and embrace the event as if you are from Mars—as is. In fact," she tittered, "hammering on these conditions might become a reason for you to feel unsure, so I will end by saying there is no information that will alter the nature of the event, and no justification I can use to have misled you."

"So what's the catch?"

"That's my point," she laughed. "There is nothing I can say to make the resolution to the riddle any clearer, and your reason still *had to* interfere with the problem." She tittered. "And you'll do it again."

"We'll see."

Smothering a smile, Bonnie robotically said, "Eight men enter a room in which stands a padded gurney. Beside this is an intravenous tube that runs underneath a cloth-covered table. There are two syringes on the table top; you can see that only one of them is attached to the intravenous tube, but by design which one is inactive is unknown to everyone including you." She raised her brow.

"I'm good with that," I said.

"Five of the men are wearing identical khaki uniforms. The sixth man is dressed in a business suit, the seventh in a white medical smock, and the eighth in a prisoner's orange jump suit." She tapped the table to stop me from getting lost in the descriptions. "The costumes mean nothing; they are merely a way of distinguishing between individuals. Make them all naked, if you like. It won't change a thing."

"Understood."

"Three of the men in khaki are restraining the struggling man in orange. The man in the business suit nods, the man in orange is forcefully strapped to the gurney by the three men in uniform. The business suit nods, the man in the white smock inserts a needle into the orange man's arm. The business suit man nods again, and the two remaining men in khaki simultaneously push the plungers on their syringes. A man dressed all in black, except for a round white collar, enters the room and speaks under his breath while motioning in a ritualistic manner. The man in orange dies. The white smock man tests for vital signs. How many murderers are in the room?" Bonnie said.

"Including the prisoner?" I said, cleverly I thought.

"And there it is," Bonnie said, shaking her head.

"In for a penny—does logic exclude the man who pushed the empty syringe?"

"There it is again: which one is that?"

"I don't know," I shrugged.

"Neither did he; how many murderers are there?"

"Two," I said with an 'it's obvious' shrug.

Bonnie dipped her head and said, "Look at the nature of each individual's actions."

"The priest wasn't relevant," I stated categorically.

"I just told you the answer."

"Six," I said with conviction.

Bonnie grimaced as I listed the doctor, the three guards to hold him... I had to clear my throat... and the two on the plungers.

"On whose orders?" she sighed.

"The warden didn't physically do anything," I deadpanned.

Bonnie closed her eyes, breathing deeply.

"Okay, we're back to one—the man wouldn't have died without the warden's order," I said, chewing on the inside of my cheek.

She raised her eyes as if in prayer and said, "Could he have done it by himself?"

"Seven," I stated as if this was my first deduction.

"Finally," she exhaled haplessly.

"Except was it a murder?" I said, with furrowed brows.

"Jesus John! Did he commit suicide?"

"No," I answered innocently.

"Did he die of natural causes?"

"Nope."

"If your friends held a defenseless person and you killed him with a club," she said in a rush, "what do you think the police would charge the guy holding onto his left arm with?"

"I see your point, but we don't know why..."

"You know all you need to know!" she gushed, exasperated.

"I know multiple syringes are sometimes used so that no single person feels they killed him, but the fact is only one of them did it."

"Without both of them present, the event would not have taken place. Otherwise, there would be only one syringe. As both of them entered the room willing to be the killer, and they subsequently pushed a plunger and a man died?" She left the sentence hanging.

"But if one guy had refused, another guy would have done it, and the orange guy would still be dead."

"In which case, the man who refused would not be a murderer." Noticing the trembling curl of my lips, she said, "You bugger... you're playing me."

"You really are psychic," I said, feeling only slightly better for not having given away how many tries it really had taken me to arrive at the number seven.

Laughing at herself, Bonnie said, "Does that example suffice—as an assessment devoid of reason?"

"I think I'm getting a handle on logic, as well."

"As well as what?" she said seriously.

"As well as how to wind you up," I said, stepping down a tier. It did my nerves a world of good to hear her titter; it told me that she wasn't a full-fledged Dreamer-Stalker thingy.

Chapter 10

Translating Reality

When I came back, Catherine had cleared our plates and left a small silver tray speckled with cello-wrapped, peppermint hard candies. There was no bill.

"A question, if I may?" I said, taking my seat.

"Shoot," Bonnie mimicked me.

"It seems that going forward isn't such a given. I mean, you say you have to move on, and I can see that, but you can fail. Kinda harsh, if you ask me."

"Are we getting close to what you really want to ask me?"

"Sorry—inevitability seems to interfere with free will."

Sighing, she said, "You have an agreement with Intent, so the question is moot." She grasped my hands. "Again, I strongly suggest that you don't focus on how difficult you think these lessons will be. So far, it's just been words and you have a reasonable grasp on those; there's nothing to be afraid of."

"I'm not afraid, I just don't get it."

"Get what?"

"What you mean by logic."

"You experienced the difference between reason and logic not two minutes ago!"

"And now I can see how your resolution was reasonable." I shrugged.

Bonnie gazed into my innocent stare with the astonished awe of an astrophysicist discovering something denser than a black hole. Eventually taking an audible breath, she said, "You are unable to imagine processing your daily circumstances through the logic of a Stalker, as if your experience a minute ago was a reasonable oversight, and you think that hammering at what you think you know will lead you to understanding something that lies outside of reason."

"So answering won't help?"

"I don't know; your interpretations are unique."

"Give it a shot," I also said tonelessly.

"Stalkers have broken their bonds to the conformities of reason. They understand, but have no attachment to the rules the average person uses to maintain their perception of continuity, because they can figuratively and literally see beyond what they were told to perceive. This includes what lies in the gaps of reasoning and physical perception. The idea that everything is a metaphor is a root assumption to them—they can see energy, and think in terms of essences, so what they *should* believe is irrelevant. They don't believe anything. They *know* or they don't, and they assess every event in-between the two like we did with the murder room: where are they really, and who did what to whom." She touched the top of my hand. "When I said you

should act as if you don't understand your true nature, the nature of the events you experience, or the world et al, I was not passing judgment on your education or intelligence. I was speaking literally." She raised her hands in a 'this is simple' gesture, and said, "It is reasonable people who have taken a beautiful creation and twisted it into a place of endless wars and virulent diseases, where the abuse of the weak and dependent has horrified even The Creator. Can you tell me that mankind's reason has not run its course?"

"Are you saying everyone will go through this shi—stuff?"

"Everyone will have to face the nature of their beliefs at some point in their development. How they choose to do this is another issue, but learning how to *see*, to *know*, and to reposition the Assemblage Point are not mandatory lessons for graduation. These abilities are part of becoming a teacher, and you are learning about them now because your lessons coincide with the return of the Masters. It's a huge advantage."

"I'm supposed to become a teacher? I thought you said..."

"Your quest is to learn the alphabet of what it takes to become a Master, in part because these lessons will help you evolve, and because you can't describe an emissary from here—you have to know them from there." She cocked her head.

"Describe them? Right—I get the connection. So I'm not supposed to actually be one?"

"There is no rule about how far you can go. The emissaries will present our core human traits," Bonnie moved us along, "and their concomitant beliefs to the world in clear terms. People will then have to choose between working for a loving, peaceful existence of challenge and discovery, or working for themselves and coming back into what they leave behind."

"So having a choice is the point of... of the Second Coming?" I found this difficult to say with conviction.

"The point is to educate people so that their choices can be made from the most advantageous position. To this end, the Second Coming is not a hundred yard dash; it is a marathon of layering knowledge and setting the foundations for changes that are now inevitable."

"How does free will jibe with the emissaries influencing people's choices—I mean, as I see it, their kind of influence is more like a hammer to the head?"

She stared at me.

"I'm not arguing against a universal intercession." I took a moment to formulate my question. "Doesn't having a huge advantage affect the rules of impeccability?"

"The rules of impeccability inherently forego the concept of advantage; there is only the most efficient application of energy. Think of it this way: there are no beginnings or endings, yet every act is also an absolute if one's focus specifically brackets an event, but its momentum goes on."

"Like a Stalker's view on redemption... got it."

Bonnie nodded. "Everyone's unique perception of exterior events is their reality. Then it follows that there are endless realities, meaning there are endless events that offer infinite choices?"

"Yes."

"To restrict the infinite to a definitive few at a critical time when the momentum of this shared reality is unusually fast is to force people's movement one way or another. So the advantage is not the emissaries', it's yours and everyone else's."

[Chapter 11](#)

Iran and the Blues

I pondered her point of view, and sniggered dryly over the impossibility of getting people to listen as Bonnie said, "We're going to look at your travels to consider the conformation process in different cultures."

"Ready when you are," I said as if it mattered.

"I think maybe you are," she said. "You'll recall from our conversation at Chez Michel's," she said, settling into the new topic, "that you designed the span of your experiences to encompass how the average person's beliefs are formed, and how people react in various circumstances of increasing pressure and fear. You now know that you represent individuals who represent nations who are leading their children down the path of ruin."

"I remember; you're saying that my fear is archetypical?"

"You could have it no other way, and it's more pervasive than you can imagine... for now." She tapped the table lightly as she made her points.

"When we first met, you were so sensitive to the word magic that you claimed there was no such thing as a mystery—just ignorance. You also claimed that nothing spooky had happened to you, as a derisive term, when I was talking about a mysterious side of mankind's awareness. You did this because unimaginable depravity had crushed your sense of wonder in general, and your faith and trust specifically. Your stunned reaction to meeting Kha-lib, and dismissive attitude about anything spiritual also proclaimed the degree to which religion has influenced you, because you viewed from the standpoint of their failures."

"That information was so far off the norm that you surprised me."

"You told me that you had lost the capacity for surprise?"

"I said that in the context of malice and cruelty, not in the sense of hearing pure crap. I know better now."

"Do you? I think that you were not surprised; you were frightened." She sipped the last of her wine and set it aside. "There are two chapters in your book that form the bookends of your surreptitious study of a society's conditioning to fear. What do you think they are?"

"Hang on: to be clear, part of my personal quest was to become severely affected by the average person's beliefs taken to their end point... correct?"

"Yes."

"Then recover from them so that I understand the full cycle?"

"Also correct?"

"So what does that have to do with the alphabet of mastery of anything?"

"Emissaries can't teach what they don't understand, and only experience can bring them to the comprehensive knowledge of their individual missions. You needed to know this definitively, while you also needed this specific lesson, so nothing is wasted. We were talking about your study of a society's conditioning to fear..."

"Right... El Salvador was the big one," I said with a shrug. "It was all-pervasive; nothing else ever came close."

"There was nothing surreptitious about fear El Salvador," she said with a dismissive wave. "A short while ago, I helped you reassess a section of your book in which you said crews hated working in some countries."

"You said we couldn't hate people we had never met, and that we actually feared cultures we didn't understand. That was about Iran."

"And?" she grinned.

"Working there wasn't too bad." I chuckled at an event that could have been tougher on us, but it had worked out.

"Again, the fear I'm talking about isn't the gripping, crisp kind that comes with overt events. I'm talking about the insidious manifestations in everyday life that prepare us to react to specific stimuli in directed ways. Tell me about working there."

Leaving nothing out, because I was missing her point, I told her that I had arrived in Iran on day eight of the hostage crisis and experienced what was to me an unbelievable zealousness over heaven and hell. That I did not understand the basis of this enthusiasm, and the Iranians could not imagine how I could be so unconcerned with such issues, was a constant problem: countless citizens solicited our opinions on the situation, to which I explained that I was covering a story, no more or less. Typically, they also asked me if my work was my purpose in life, or did I serve my God through my work. Their expressions implied that if I did serve a God, He was not Allah so I was destined to roast anyway. That's how I saw things after only a few hours.

I said that having a personal purpose was a murky issue, but I liked what I was doing, to which the youths (usually in their twenties) told me that serving Allah was their purpose.

Reading between the lines, I understood that Allah approved of, if not actually ordered the taking of the embassy, a divine act for which I showed no appreciation. I may even have inadvertently challenged their beliefs, because I had no understanding of the depth to which religion pervaded their society when I said that following one's faith into a withering hail of bullets was certainly a glorious demonstration of the power of personal conviction. However, I thought it was asking a lot of those who were not so sure that the immediate spiritual journey such an act of devotion precipitated was worth it.

I gleaned from their conspiratorial glances that I was slated to endure a nightmare worse than having to explain my life to them in perpetuity.

"Would you agree that part of what camouflaged the source of their zealousness from your view," Bonnie said, drawing on our previous conversation, "was the intelligence, high degree of education, and unexpected sophistication of the people in general?"

Nodding in the affirmative, I said, "I was generally ignorant, and specifically held a western bias, partly because I had no opportunity to research the country. The telephone had rung at three in the morning," I explained, "my wife said that if I answered it she would not be there when I got back; I was on the plane to Iran by seven-thirty." I shrugged again.

Bonnie knew the whole story about our mutual infidelities, so she knew the phone call wasn't the cause of my divorce—that my work frightened my wife, and I was away a lot, aside. It was a final nail.

I told Bonnie that, aside from dealing with issues of religion directly, we also had confrontations over nationality. The theme was that Canada was a puppet state of America, therefore Canadians are Satan's cousins. Only once did I unwisely argue that if geography was the criteria of similarity, was it that the Iranians were more like the Iraqi's, or were Iraqi's like Iranians? This brought one youth to near apoplexy, which would have been funny were we not standing amidst a crowd of (officially estimated) one million believers at the time. As a result, we left the area amid a fusillade of angry Farsi before the Revolutionary Guard came to see who had started the ruckus.

So ended our first full day in Tehran.

Day two began with us removing identifying country flags and network logo stickers from our equipment. Everything in Iran, we had realized, reflected one's rapport with Allah at this crucial time of social revolution. Ironically, it turned out that having no stickers was considered

an act of subterfuge, according to the attention it drew, and by lunchtime we had put on stickers that were more acceptable to the public. For reasons I did not know, ZDF of Germany did the trick most of the time: when we were questioned about anything—meaning we were about to be caught as English speakers, I'd point toward the black smoke of another Jimmy Carter burning in effigy, and crisply shrug off the only phrase I had gutturally mastered, "Ich liebe dich!" then we'd trot off into the crowds.

Although there was no shortage of smoking Jimmies to keep us on the move, we finally had to flee from a German-speaking student who could not bear the deceit of two more... whatever we were to him, in addition to the three hundred million Americans he seemed to know by individual offense.

We got out of that situation by moving into the depths of a roaming crowd, and replacing our ZDF stickers with an Italian network logo. When the ranting about an American television crew disguised as Germans penetrated the din, I shrugged to those around us, pointed to our logo, and uttered the most important foreign phrase I knew at the time, "Dov'è il bagno?" (Where is the bathroom?)

"They had you on the run from day one, correct?" Bonnie said.

"Now that I think about it... but it wasn't a pervasive concern."

"Why not?"

"From our perspective, a crowd larger than the number of people we could personally defend ourselves against, which was maybe two septuagenarians in wheelchairs, was moot."

"That's not the pressure that got to you. The issue with huge numbers lies in the potential for a trigger-point to cause the masses to relinquish their individuality to a mob mentality... as in smoking Jimmies?" She raised her brow.

"Except the crowd was remarkably civil."

"Or afraid of their own regime at the level of an assumption?"

"Maybe," I shrugged. "It would mean the same thing to us."

"For a guy who claims to be unaffected by the views of his own society, you displayed the intolerance of a Crusader with the foot soldiers of Islam," Bonnie said evenly. "The strength of the crowd's fervor was not just about religion; it was a reflection of the restrained nature of lives lived under a daily threat, and surreptitiously reclaiming their personal power as representatives of greater forces."

"I can see that. Iran is supposed to have the highest per capita cocaine usage in the world. There's their relief."

"You also witnessed this kind of devotion to beliefs with the passive zealots in India, who held an arm up in the air, sat in a tree, or refused to speak for years as demonstrations of their piety."

"And?"

"At these times, you felt obliged to silently judge them on behalf of your indistinct Christian philosophy, when you knew next to nothing about any of these cultures or religions. For that matter, you still do not understand how one can interpret a frozen arm as a spiritual act, any more than you can see the influence religions can have in cultures more closely aligned to your own. As you said, you had a Western bias; you just didn't realize how large that was—still is." She raised her brow. "Anything come to mind about the other bookend?"

"Not really."

"By which you mean no?"

"Sorry. No, nothing comes to mind."

"What's the last thing left in this world that touches your heart?"

"Sailing."

"That's where you convalesce. What about Otis?" she said, referring to a dog she had used for a lesson about social conformation.

It took me a moment to tie my love of dogs to a job I had worked in a culture more similar to mine. "Arkansas?" I said, perplexed.

"Recount that job for me."

In October of 1981, we were on a story involving the mid-American Bible Belt. One of our stops was fifty miles from Little Rock, where shacks built from crates and aluminum sheeting spotted the countryside. The roads were narrow and bumpy from lack of maintenance, and domestic and wildlife carcasses. Otherwise, there was a spectacular beauty as the leaves of autumn turned the forests to fiery hues; the air seemed to have a sweet flavor.

Our destination was a parish where the Baptist minister was known as a gifted speaker, and purportedly a prime example of how religion ruled the back-country. Our quest was to document whatever we found in this regard: we expected a high degree of incongruity between the theory of brotherhood and social equality, as represented by the lifestyles of the idealists who existed on the funds of the practitioners. And we did.

The church was nestled within a forest off the main road. Evidently, this modern structure of wood and glass, large enough for a small city to take pride in, was a central point of reference—the poor man's Vatican situated in the middle of its most needy followers.

As impressive as its elegant exterior was to the eye, the inside was pristine. Deep pile, blue carpeting ran throughout and between highly polished pews, surrounded by three balconies. The podium was professionally lit, innocuously wired for sound, and positioned higher than necessary for the congregation to see the preacher from any seat. His elevated status reflected his relationship to God, as it is in most places of worship.

At the rectory, we asked where we might find the preacher.

"Home. You cain't miss it," one of his minions said.

Another one thought to describe its location to us...

At our first stop for additional directions, we heard, "Yu'all, go anudder bit ta-thu birch, thane turn that-a-way at the sign. Up yonder you'll see it."

Prior to our second stop for directions, we learned that internationally recognized aids to travelers did not carry the same meaning in the Arkansas out-back that they did when I had passed my driver's test in Toronto. Stop signs, for example, were regarded as targets, whereas Yield signs were overt challenges, and possibly a rite of passage into manhood—or the great beyond. No signage at some crossroads remained a perilous mystery.

After our third stop for directions, our British producer, Neville, cracked the cultural code that had taken us on an otherwise beautiful drive in the countryside. 'That-a-way' was the direction one nods their head, and not necessarily the direction in which one points—the hand is often used to scratch a body part at the conclusion of a sentence. 'Up yonder' is color commentary that bore no direct relationship to inclines or distance, other than to imply 'not obvious.'

'Anudder bit' turned out to be roughly a half mile.

The birch tree was an unmarked historical reference point, certainly KKK related. As it was one tree among many birches, it also rendered the phrase, "You cain't miss it," as portentous an utterance in the southern USA as it is everywhere else in the known universe—in time, it would be true.

When that time came, we entered a winding, tree-lined driveway that paralleled the banks of a private lake, ending at a ranchero style home half-buried in a hillside. The interior furnishings tastefully matched its exterior design with modern functionality, if not quite overt opulence.

We talked to the preacher for half an hour, before we went back to the church to set up for his sermon. This is when I discovered some of my expectations had been wrong; I had thought his flock would be desperate and miserable people. Though obviously poor, they treated us with a casual respect, did not intrude on each other's privacy or ours, and viewed life in black and white terms. Literally.

When we asked, they said they attended church because they were raised to do so, and though there was a significant difference in lifestyles between God's mouthpiece and their mouths, this was an understandable demonstration of what the nearness to God could do for you. That the congregation paid for the preacher's lifestyle made perfect sense to them, as did the pomp and circumstance of the Vatican make sense for Catholics living in barrios.

When we were alone, I asked our reporter, [Gavin Hewitt](#), if he understood where the blockage in their reasoning might be, to which he said that wealth was not a criterion for evaluating the value of one's life. However, he agreed that illiteracy, filth, and hunger, would likely diminish the quality of it. Noncommittally (BBC) British to the core...

We decided to shoot additional footage of the people at play, to balance our story visually, when we learned that a couple of "the boys were 'goin coon huntin."

The scene was straight off a Hollywood lot: The first pickup truck to arrive was a faded red, ancient Ford with round, dented fenders, and battered body. The owner, dressed in baggy denim overalls, was gangly thin, but I could tell I wouldn't have done well arm-wrestling him.

He was casual but deliberate, treating his hound with a rough affection that did not undermine his manhood, before setting the dog loose to sniff a tree and pee. Then he called him back, "Bleewww ... Bleewww-boy. Git heeah!"

Jerking his head toward another open-back pick-up turning off the road, he said to us with a nod, "Cuzin comin yonder."

The second truck and its occupant came from the same library of cliché stock shots—used and tattered. The mandatory deer antler gun rack mounted over the rear window bore a well cared for shotgun, as had the first man's vehicle. The hound was a clone of the first animal.

Gavin went to chat with him, as the man reached the back of the truck: he treated his animal with a manly, rough affection before setting the dog loose to sniff and pee on a tree—the same tree. Then he called him back. "Bleewww.... Bleewww-boy. Git heeah!"

Blue number one proved to be a wanderer, and required some attention, whereas Blue number two was conscientious and quick to respond. As a result, the soundtrack made little sense as "Blues" could be heard every few seconds, followed by different commands from two sources. The explanation of the full church, and the minister's private estate, resonated with every command—absolute conformity.

With his fiery sermon on tape, and interviews from members of his congregation safely in the can, it was time to leave; we went to the rectory to thank the preacher for his cooperation. Unexpectedly, he ushered us into a room where he all-but forced us into a row of four chairs, which had been set up for the specific purpose of catching us when he stood so close that we had to back into them, or ask him to slow dance.

Up close, he was even better than we had on tape—a riveting soul-saver, sans spittle, fully in command of our personal space. Flanked by his honor guard of three dark-suited lay

employees, he first blessed, prayed over, then salvaged Gavin's wretched soul. Wizichinski's was the next to be spared ill-determined ravages, before the chorus line sidestepped to me.

Having time to think about it, I acted as if the preacher was having trouble saying goodbye, and interrupted his fervent prayer that I avoid the fires of hell: "Too late," I said, standing to shake his suddenly limp hand. "It's in Central America, and I've been as close to heaven as I'm going to get." I leaned forward and whispered, "Rio de Janeiro," as if his acolytes might rush to the ticket counter ahead of him.

On this cue, our crew stood to shake everyone's hand.

"You think this had an effect on me?" I asked Bonnie when I finished retelling this much.

"I'm not saying it affected you—I'm saying you witnessed the shaping of different cultures through fear and blind obedience, but at the time you failed to view it in this light, because your own conformation had risen you above them. The same applies, to varying degrees, to all of the countries you visited."

"Right—sorry. That's about it."

"Do you recall telling me about Iranian Generals sending children into Iraqi minefields to spare Iranian fighting forces? As martyrs going to their great reward," she said as I nodded affirmatively, "that society viewed children as acceptable losses."

"Maybe officially, but I doubt that their parents felt that way."

"You'd be surprised. At any rate," she waved my words aside, "Western societies thought this was barbaric, yet they always bomb their enemy's infrastructures to preserve their own fighting forces. They know they are killing children, but they presume the moral high ground of good intentions and lesser numbers, by trying to limit these casualties. But what's the reality of warfare?"

"In what terms?"

"Any terms that come to mind—say whatever comes to your mind at anytime, for that matter."

"More civilians are killed than soldiers, but they're not targeting children," I said inanely.

"Which matters how?" she said.

I waved her on.

"America awards endless medals to preserve the idea that patriotism expressed through warfare epitomizes duty, courage, and honor, when it demonstrates the absence, failure, and misplaced application of them all. These..."

"Hold on. Are you categorically saying that we don't owe allegiance to our nations, and that there is no courage or honor demonstrated in warfare? I know you've said this before," I added, "but I didn't quite follow—not all of it."

"I'm still saying our motives are misguided until and unless we understand the true nature of our actions. As things stand, the conditioned reasoning of the average person has them believing that duty, courage, and honor, can be derived from the unnecessary savagery in which they have chosen to participate, and without whom it could not happen. That's like your partner in crime getting shot while robbing a bank, and you save his life by turning him in for a reward."

"Let me catch up with that one," I chuckled.

"I'm saying it's not heroic, or a sacrifice, even if you turned yourself in without immunity. It's the best choice you can make after having made a spectacularly stupid one."

"It's still selfless."

"Unnecessarily so, because it's predicated on the original crappy choice." She pitched forward. "We've covered this: an apparently good end can never justify a poor means, because it

is the means that generates events down the road: the greater good is about principles, not numbers. The reasoned outcome is the fog of self-interest that limits our view of the true nature of the event, and its consequences remain hidden from our self-proclaimed enlightened view." She leaned back. "Westerner's idea of patriotism has them bowing to equally deviant versions of duty, courage, and honor, to those of the Iranian's religious beliefs having them sanctifying the death of their children. The nature of both acts is to celebrate the slaughter. All arguments to the contrary are reasoned spin based on second-hand convictions. There is no caveat—no middle ground in 'what is'—but survivors and the families of the dead buy into the reasoning that there are circumstances that approve of such events, because they need these beliefs to justify the sacrifice and placate their sense of loss."

"Can you strip down duty, or courage, or honor in the same way?" I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling as if I was on the edge of really, really, getting it this time.

"Logically," Bonnie said, "our first duty is to learn about and assume our responsibilities for ourselves—it's our journey, and our parents and friends are caretakers and assistants to that journey. When we are able, we can take care of those whom we have attached to our lives and/or can't properly fend for themselves. This takes great courage without giving into your own flaws and damaging others, thereby honoring their independent path and purpose. When we can deal responsibly with the two square feet we occupy our nation cannot help but deal with issues responsibly, because our leaders would come from their own two square feet; they would not be separated from us by the aphrodisiacs of power and immunity. They would understand responsibility based on the nature of their actions, not based on the numbers their decisions may immediately affect. The numbers follow as a matter of momentum."

"Good—back to celebrating the slaughter thing," I said before I lost my train of thought. "I agree that partying after a war sucks as a 'look at what we did' kind of thing, but aren't medals and parades also a celebration of survival for the participants—maybe even closure to them, and to society as a whole?" This idea prompted a related thought. "There wasn't any celebrating at the Vietnam Memorial."

"That wall isn't what you think it is."

"No doubt," I sniggered. "What's the Stalker's version of it?"

"It is an attempt to reconstruct a national image of a just and caring people. In fact, it honors the useless sacrifice of loved ones based on the shame of defeat, and from society throwing away their returning veterans. It is a national memorial to carnage, and a source of sad inspiration for generations of cannon fodder to come that will see it as an error in tactics, and not that war is wrong in every way."

She took an elongated breath.

"It's impossible to grow from experiences not properly assessed, because you are dragging the weight of your errors in judgment with you, and applying them to new circumstances. This is why it's beyond America's view that events like Vietnam represent the culmination of their evolutionary ways. This is not closure; it is the end of a cycle in which their momentum has caught up with itself, and now it's tearing them apart from within." Bonnie thumbed toward the door. "Like you showed me that you are still at war with yourself."

"My core behaviors parallel America's?"

"As do the Iranians under different auspices."

"There goes that audience."

"Joking won't derail me: when we first met, how you relayed your stories of combat, and your high opinions of those who participated alongside you, made it clear that your memories of

risk and terror are memorials to your self-image. Your superior attitude told me that you're keeping a secret that undermines your basic camouflage of an affable intellectual, whose adventures have made you a just and fair man, if not always wise in his impetuous incursions into other's lives. Our society has also effectively thrown you away, because of what your experiences did to you." She looked at me for a piercing moment. "Another of your deepest secrets that supports self-loathing is about courage. You don't think you have any, which is why you act in verbally brutal ways to prop yourself up."

Snorting at the idea, I said, "Really, what do I have to be frightened of?"

"I thought you'd catch on by now." Resettling in her seat, she said, "You've made your secrets monuments to your misery, and altars from which you defend them with the forces at your disposal. This is not closure; it is the end of a cycle in which their momentum has caught up with you, and now it's tearing you apart from within." She let that idea settle in my mind for two seconds.

"America portrays their powerfully virtuous selves through military incursions that essentially defend their bloody history as a memorial to their national-image. They are also keeping a secret from themselves about true courage, because the politics of fear have taken hold of their reasoning. Like you, they relentlessly express their fear through what have become more than acceptable acts, but what is now seen as acts of courage, such as killing whoever the government tells them are impinging on their freedom: the courage implied comes from facing death in defense of their country. The courage fighters infer comes from having the balls to kill people. This idea meets its maker on the battlefield for those who realize it was really about beliefs, and you can't defend or kill anything that has no substance. The abstraction of country remains the country, but it is tainted by the caretakers of its values failing to perceive the underlying nature of their actions. The caretakers also make up the culture, so their culture is diminished. As we have discussed at length, reason overrules that which diminishes our view of ourselves, and too-few have the real courage to face that view. The meek justify it, because the original atrocity came from fear. This is what you are doing when you rant in defense of your ideas about yourself."

"I don't kill people."

"You kill your relationships when they impinge on your secrets." She motioned the redundant point aside. "Peaceful societies have thrown America away as a true friend, because they fear what they've become. There can be no real trust, because peaceful societies know there is no courage involved in killing anything. Living properly requires it by the bucket load." She raised her brow.

"I get that much, but..."

"But your reasoning is standing in the way of applying it to your own life." She shifted in her seat. "My point is that you've seen the consequence of cultural conformation through the suppression of individuality in some cultures, and the surreptitious directing of beliefs in others, so that people fit in. Both are stereotypical..."

"Lost me," I interrupted. "Directing of beliefs?"

"Trucks, clothing, guns, and attitudes varied only to the extent that males were named after their grandfathers, who were named after Civil War Generals or Apostles. One dog in each household was named Blue, because that was what a good hound sounds like when he's on the hunt. Even a tree was a common cultural reference point, and they all went to church to display their commitment to conformation. Take everything I said about America, substitute the word religion for patriotism, and you've got another match."

"But under different levels of pressure?"

"The principle applies to all nations. The symbols might change but, like the people you experienced in Iran and Arkansas, all of us are shaped to accept, and be accepted in our particular cultural circumstance. This makes it difficult to see that we are all brothers and sisters on the same journey."

"Makes sense."

"Your fears differed only in that they were more obviously earned, and buried as a way to cope with the unmanly sense of helplessness you experienced in more circumstances than you've revealed to me. They created deep feelings of self-loathing and unworthiness, which you can't see because the places you feel safest don't remotely resemble where you earned your fear."

"I came from a place that doesn't practice fear, got smacked with it, and came back leaking it all over the place so that I couldn't miss it?"

"Yes, but with the addendum of knowing American culture well enough to see how their institutionalize fear is the infant from whom otherwise good people agree to kill strangers, because they are told to: no warrior nation is exempt. Canadian culture has not been subjected to living in fear as a way of life."

"So much for a human audience."

Bonnie stared at me placidly.

"All of this is from opening a door?" I said with transparent nonchalance.

"Not at all: I told you weeks ago that there is a constant undertow in how you present yourself, which is designed to drag people into acknowledging your bravery. A simple wow propels you to anecdote after anecdote within which you play down your presence in volatile circumstances so that others will raise the issue. You wouldn't do any of these things if you thought well of yourself, and neither would the stereotypical American—who you pointedly avoided being cast as even when you were in safe places, like London or Athens. True?"

"True."

"Have you been to the other Wailing Wall?" she said.

"Other? Ya—sure—a few times."

"As students of their version of God's ways, and that their society has been taught to believe in suffering for salvation, they ensure that they do. It's no different than the other memorials affecting the patriot zealots on this side of the world ensuring their sacrifice continues, because this idea underlies their national focus." She sat slightly askew, fidgeting to keep both cheeks from going numb on the lightly padded seat.

"I agree that life scares most people, but maybe it should. I mean, otherwise it would mow them down."

"Am I speaking Mandarin?" Bonnie said, feigning exasperation. Maybe not feigning by now. "Not understanding the true nature of our own actions extends poor circumstances, while we think we are making a stand for what is right. And it's from fear that we are mowed down, not the other way around." She pitched forward. "You get what you focus on," Bonnie said, moving her glass aside to lean closer.

"This is critical for you to understand. The art of change is not to be against poor circumstances, because the focus is on poor circumstances. If you want positive change, you have to focus on creating, joining, or unifying an existing momentum of positive action, if only by withdrawing your silent consent to allow crappy ones. This will inherently starve the poor situation of momentum."

"How do you separate the two when you're like me—in the middle?" I said, perplexed.

"We've just been over that: strip the event of reason."

As frustrated as she may have been with me, I was doubly flustered and flummoxed that, once again, I couldn't crush my reason to clear my view. Gathering what was left of my composure, I said, "On a peace march, if the police leave the protesters alone there would be peace. Right?"

"Yes."

"If they confronted them, they would be doing what?"

"They would be giving away what they're really like."

"You mean brutal?"

"Brutality is based in fear, so the question is what are those who control the institutions afraid of—peace?"

I chuckled, thinking her statement was rhetorical.

"I'm asking you a question."

"That would make no sense."

"And yet the evidence is staring you in the face." She resettled in her seat.

I saw that the weather had cleared so I signaled for the bill as Bonnie said, "This is not a question of metaphysics. It is logic: what we do reveals what we believe, and it will always show itself when the pressure is on because nothing comes from nothing. This is the average person," she said, holding her left palm open at hip level, "and here is normal behavior—the consequence of their beliefs." She held her right palm open an inch away from her left. "Now, here are the average person's beliefs under pressure, therefore taken to their final manifestation." She raised her left hand over her head, stretching it as wide as she could reach. "Here is their idea of normal," she raised her other hand, positioning it in the same manner to the other side, "which reveals that the underlying nature of normal is traumatic." She lowered her hands. "You are still under pressure, but in a less pressurized world than the one you left behind, so you stand out when you let your guard down. In Sweden, you might be hospitalized for trauma. In Lebanon, you'd be a celebrated comic. In America, you are one of the masses returning from doing your duty."

"If you put peace under pressure, you'd get what?"

"You'd get creativity you couldn't begin to imagine, instead of destruction that's unimaginable."

"I know we've covered this, but most people say pressure is the reason they behave badly?"

"Pressure is the camouflage behind which we give ourselves away; it has nothing to do with the nature of the act we're giving away. Pressure is the canary in the coal mine that registers the toxicity of our beliefs; it does not create the toxin." Looking into my dull expression, she dipped her head and said, "Let's try it this way. Recently in Canada, local politicians flexed their power from the fear of being perceived as weak, which is precisely what they did by ordering the police to act with force against a peaceful demonstration. What was the nature of their actions?"

"Suppressing freedom?"

Pursing her lips, because I was guessing, she said, "In larger arenas, countries have used their own military to suppress the public. Is the nature of the act representative of an open, free, and democratic society?"

"No, but... " I didn't know what else to say.

"Exactly—but your reasoning is standing in the way of accepting a logical deduction: our freedoms were usurped. Moved to a larger stage, a coup of the government you thought you had elected either will, or has already taken place, because...?"

"Because nothing comes from nothing, but what if..."

"There are no special circumstances. You can't be a little bit pregnant, a part-time murderer, or live in a kind of free society. You either have the right to participate and protest, or you do not, just as the police have the responsibility to not allow vandalism—which is how they get away with their own brutality: protesters screw up, or the police are directed to incite them so that they can justify the suppression of the public's rights."

"No compromise anywhere?"

"Now you're getting it!" she said, enthusiastically.

"I've done a comprehensive shoot on police work, and I know that it's an incredibly hard job on the nerves. People don't understand their lives."

"Are you offering this as an excuse for brutality?"

"No, I'm saying that I can see why they can abuse their authority, even enjoy the release, because they live a different world than ours. They keep us safe, but have to deal with danger and disrespect all day."

"Meaning they are reacting to these circumstances in otherwise peaceful circumstances, like soldiers do from the undercurrents of fear in their lives?"

"Exactly. So what are you advocating?"

"I am not advocating anything. I am explaining, and can see that you are agreeing with, how the foggy reasoning of the average person can cause them to commit terrible acts—justifiable acts to them—because they are focused on their conditioning, not what is in front of their eyes. As a result, they form special cliques to separate themselves from those who haven't walked the walk," she said as Catherine brought us the bill.

Bonnie smiled, nodded her thanks, and continued making her point as Catherine quietly retreated.

"Initially, you lacked fear because your parents and our culture did not promote it, and as a non-combatant you naively went off to war. Once there, you were harshly conformed to its ways on a scale that propelled you far beyond the cultural script that had instructed the fighters you were with, so that you could see its stark influence without hesitation." She paused. "This will be a dreaming lesson, by the way."

"Being propelled beyond the cultural script to see its influence?"

"You told me it was common for crews without reporters, meaning you, to do independent interviews; what struck you the most about them?"

"The stock answers soldiers gave about why they were there; no real understanding at all."

"Exactly," Bonnie concurred. "The bottom line is that the fighters you came to know did not see a coup of their freedoms taking place in front of their eyes. They had become just what you saw right away, but could not fully grasp—they are not defending the gates of freedom from foreign tyranny, they are the marauders storming foreign lands. So blinded by patriotism and duty are they, that they've killed their own people to maintain the farce."

"I assume you mean the Kent State thingy—it's making sense to me now."

"It should; it happened to you."

"Huh?"

"I'll take that to mean you would like an explanation?"

"It was more of a 'what the fuck' huh, but go ahead. Are we still aligning my behavior with America', or are we dealing with how I can't see my own conformation to fear?"

"They are one and the same."

"Kent State?" I prompted her to continue.

"Killing those students probably did more to gut America's drive to fight in Vietnam than any other single event, because beneath the overt act lay the truth—even a nation of veterans could see who the real cowards were."

"What were the national guardsmen afraid of?"

"Losing their assumptions, if they acknowledged the validity of the protest." She pouted sadly, and added, "Which is exactly what they did."

"So the My Lai massacre would have done that, as well?"

"Absolutely. It gave people a real view of warfare." Bonnie hesitated before saying, "The message was diminished by the delay in it becoming public, and subsequently lost when the public shunned the returning veterans, as if warfare for Americans should somehow be cleaner than it is for other countries. For the powers that be, it hammered home the need for the sanitizing of their actions in their wars." She shook her head slowly. "Canada is no different—no army is clean. They all kill civilians, they all kill prisoners, and they all kill each other if they are pissed at someone in a place without rules."

I knew this was all true, so I said nothing.

"Are you aware of the number of Vietnam veteran suicides?"

"More than those killed in action, as many as sixty thousand. Why?"

"It's much more than that," she said with her eyes closed. Then looking at me, "They were thrown away when they came home, leaving them with no way to feel justified in their actions, or compensated for their personal losses. In other words, left alone the momentum of their acts and years of indoctrination manifest in the only way it could; it killed them."

"I can see that, as well," I said, nodding intellectually.

"You haven't been moved by the scope of that tragedy, because you can't see how you are little different from them." She reached over to take both of my hands in hers. "You were practicing killing yourself when I came along."

"You don't have to threaten me into continuing with this," I said, sliding mine away to look at the bill, as if I was disinterested in it.

"You don't have to interpret a logical comment as a threat, but your view of a hazardous world—even here—demands that you do. Now," Bonnie said, leaning back, "Can you tell me what Americans might have metaphorically seen in themselves at Kent State?"

Having no idea where we were heading, I took a few moments to organize what little I knew. Finally, I said, "They killed four young people who were no physical threat to anyone. In fact," I said, as the thought arrived, "they were killed for exercising a right upon which the nation was founded."

"Describe their physical and geographical status?" she said, her growing grin making no sense to me.

"As far as I know, they were young whites being educated more or less in the heartland." The weight of the event struck me. "They represented the American dream—innocence acting on the unalterable expectation of prospering in a safer, freer society for what they were doing. A couple shots killed the illusions."

"Excellent."

"Thank you."

"Before you take your customary time off to celebrate your wisdom, there's more for you to consider. Let's get out of here."

Standing, I put all of my money on the tray, which included a slightly larger than 15% tip; keeping the overage would have made me look cheap, while prudence wouldn't have fed a parking meter.

As she stood, Bonnie slid the crumpled receipt she had written on towards me.

"I know what it says," I said, leaving it untouched.

A few steps toward the cash register later, we both chuckled at the same time, thinking about what Catherine would make of a note that said, "How do I feel about you?"

Once outside, we headed toward the broad beach at English Bay; Bonnie continued making her point about Kent State.

"Your experiences slaughtered your altruistic illusions, which were defenseless in light of your comfortable and caring upbringing as a young, white man educated more or less in the heartland of Canada. Specifically, your sense of self-importance and naive expectations of continued living in a safe society were crushed when the press corps abandoned you in Argentina. After this, you deliberately determined to prosper from others suffering by diligently over-charging them for your pain and suffering. You missed the irony, and contradiction, of acting as they did, including putting others at risk to the extent that you were willing to be injured. Historically," she motored on, "this has been an all-or-nothing proposition for both of you: America is dangerous to anyone who dares to confront their muted fears and unchecked greed, and you are dangerous to me because I'm confronting your fears. The minor difference between you and America is that you're further ahead now that you know you reconstructed your image from the same rules your perceived enemies live by."

Bonnie waited for me to acknowledge this truth, which I did by turning a shade of Nordic usually seen on the first weekend of Spring daylight.

She continued: "You both have experienced how changing fundamental assumptions is tantamount to committing suicide, but neither of you have recognized that the deaths are of illusions only."

We crossed the busy intersections of Denman, Davie, then Beach, and the seaside bicycle route, as smoothly if we controlled the traffic signals. Stepping onto the grassy skirt surrounding the beach, I said, "I can't imagine the home of the brave and the land of the free seeing it any other way than you're attacking them... and Jews, and Iranians, doctors, and all religions for that matter. The movie isn't going to make any friends."

"Those who are free of fear will understand me, and the brave will strive to be free, just as you are attempting to do in the only way it can be done—by discovering and facing the truth. As I have said many times," she bumped my shoulder, "I'm not attacking you or any culture. I'm talking about how they created the way things are."

She slowed her pace, stopping short of a three-foot diameter, twenty-five foot log. Apparently pondering how much she was going to tell me, she said, "America is in a unique position to facilitate global changes, but not through their military might; that is the means of their downfall. I'll come back to that. For now, it's enough to know that they have the economic influence, and a particular population needed to create a wave of new thinking. They also have a massive pool of uncorrupted courage to make the changes that will be required of them to survive."

"Only them?"

"America can lead, because it's their lesson. The population chose it, and now it is their time." She stepped to the log, brushed the top of its worn surface, and sat down. I did the same.

"The free among your audience might agree with you," I said, bumping her shoulder lightly, "but the rest will see your views as a personal attack because, as you've said, they've lost too much to their indoctrinations to change their thinking. I think our movie won't be made, or you'll be shot. Maybe both," I added as the thought arrived.

"Between being told what to fear and what to overlook, leading a nation into bankruptcy through greed and warfare isn't difficult. When that reaches the tipping point, a spark will set fire to the myths they have been defending so vigorously as to give away that they are myths." She looked across the inlet toward Point Atkinson. "There are a lot of them awaiting the flask point; many more than any government would care to admit, or are aware of, because they've used them and thrown them away, as well. They'll be a formidable force when they organize."

"But you're not advocating that," I teased her.

"I have not lived their experience, so I have no voice."

Uncomfortably, I said, "You were saying wars are scripted long in advance—that we don't want peace?"

She looked my way. "I'm saying the Players don't want a healthy population, or peace in particular, because there's no money in it compared to the alternative. We've been following their scripts into debt and degradation for decades."

"Do you know who specifically is designing our fear?" I said, shuffling sand between with my feet.

"You can figure out some of them with a little research," she said, removing her shoes. "I'll tell you what to look for at another time, but you will have to assess these events through your own experiences. You've met some of them."

"No doubt," I quipped, but I meant it.

"Their basic manipulations," Bonnie said, breathing deeply, "lie in the generation and relieving of aspects of fear in everyday life. If it were overt and non-stop, everyone would become like you—no one can make you go to war anymore. But wiser, nastier people have long since understood how reasonable people can be manipulated by regulating key aspects of society."

"Such as through television?"

"Take it deeper: the media is the most influential institution of mass manipulation that can surreptitiously make us feel unnecessarily guarded. The most easily observable aspects of this are reporting agencies relentlessly causing us to focus on the negative, ostensibly awaiting resolution. They call this news when they present, as hype, only half the story, and endlessly speculate or spout indecisive clichés under the guise of insight and drama. 'How this will end, only time will tell,'" she said with a sniffled smile: Bonnie knew that pontificating drivel drove me nuts, because its natural evolution into infotainment was taking hold, and people were receiving both as if they were gospel.

"Moreover," she said, "the negative focus of the media contributes to negative events as a matter of energetic momentum manifesting within a particular consensus, or about the evils of the world in general. Even sterile financial reports focus businesses on risk management—the focus being on risk."

"I wouldn't have thought of that one."

"When you have time, assess weather reports," she said, throwing her hands in the air. Suddenly somber, "Another influence is the bombardment of what we supposedly need, and I'm not talking about advertising turning want into need for the moment. I'm talking about the media introducing us to whatever the powerful want us to think we need to have a better life, through

political means and cultural reformation. They do this while we are literally focused on the small picture through which ten-second sound bites create the stark impression of expertise. This process transcends the obvious goal of pulp news programming. They have not just infiltrated—they own highly regarded programs that investigate the seeds of fear the Players want to germinate through talk show interviews, expert debates, and opinion pundit forums that contribute to a momentum that can be directed."

"All sides of a debate take hits," I said.

"Thereby splitting our focus." Bonnie skootched a few inches away from me, set her hands by her side, and raised her butt off the cool wood. "Within this process," she said, "the media sets up the acceptability of a country going to war, by having the population buy into the lengthy preamble that's placed on our dinner tables months, or even years ahead of time—but that wasn't your beat," she said, waiving the issue away. "In terms of your personal quest, the media was your way to experience the fraud inherent in the representation of the truth, and its complicity in manufacturing consent from the public."

"The media can't see how they're doing this any more than I did."

"Which matters how?"

"Sorry... ingrained defense, again."

"To be clear, I'm not saying the main editorial characters necessarily know what they're really doing, just that they do it by not crossing the lines that direct experience forced you to cross. I'll come back to this." She turned to face me. "For the Players, it's enough that you were made so afraid as to appear to be the one that's mentally and emotionally off-balance, when your reaction to warfare is exactly what should be experienced by reasonable people."

"Are you saying I'm not really crazy because it's a *should* thing?"

She smiled at my grasp of the correlation between reason and *should*, as she said, "Your reaction is unconditional evidence of the underlying nature of the acts you've been coerced into agreeing with."

"So I'm on track—cool."

"I'll take that to mean you're uncomfortable with the idea of being unstable, but you understand the reasons for it. You are the canary: the pressures of combat magnified the toxic beliefs that are required to have a war, and you learned how to fit it." She looked down, gathered her thoughts, and said, "Extend your discomfort and embrace this idea: the so-called normal world was systematically brought to the point where it became reasonable to farmers, college graduates, and production workers to kill strangers on the say-so of people they don't normally believe, yet will follow if they wave a flag. They were like a blindfolded man, oblivious to being posed against a pockmarked wall, hoping cancer won't touch him as he takes a last drag on a smoke." She slapped my thigh lightly.

"I'll say it again; nothing comes from nothing, so there has to be a prologue—a continuity of controlled events presented to the point where a spark lit the fuse of momentum that was sown within the fabric of everyday life. That's how the absurd becomes reasonable to good people."

"So the media influences things everywhere," I mused aloud.

"More than everywhere."

"What else is there?" I chuckled.

"Nowhere," Bonnie said seriously. She cleared her throat twice slowly, compelling me to settle into a neutral mindset.

Softly, she said, "The media's underlying influence places us in an in-between state, where we feel that we have to buy into something, anything, or there's something wrong with us. It

doesn't matter what we believe, only that we choose between what's on offer, while the incessant bombardment of the same underlying events cause us to not look beyond those choices. The more adamant and outrageous the better the distraction, and the less likely there will be a unification of right-thinking people, who are targeted for ostracism to make credibility an issue. And once raised...?" She motioned her point aside as one previously stated. "I want you to focus on your personal progression of fear."

"Get me started," I said, still processing her point, and unsure of what she meant.

"You were terrified in El Salvador and, as far as I can tell, never again were you particularly afraid in combat. True?"

"Kind of—not in the same way. I see your point though; I got used to it."

"Relative to the horrors of your first exposure, yes," she added. "By *particularly* afraid," she parenthesized with her fingers, "I do not mean you were without fear. I am talking about accumulating it in various circumstances, which you interpreted as adrenaline rushes that you tamed by guzzling beer. Warrior cultures are no different. They accumulate fear," she said, stacking her hands one on top of the other, "becoming accustomed to it until something has to give. This could be a race riot based on a traffic ticket, or the deliberate construction of an event designed to relieve the stress, such as attacking the alleged threat a government puts in front of us."

"How do you define warrior cultures?"

"Total the number of years of peace and those of war any nation has experienced since its creation, and draw your own conclusions."

"Their causes will skew the numbers."

"Not in any way. Peace 'is,' without doing anything. The question is, who will be willing to face themselves, and who will have to repeat their lessons in self-treachery?"

"How would I know?"

"You sound like a tourist shouting, 'You can't do this to me!'" she said, chuckling. "The question was rhetorical."

"That reminds me of an incident in Iran," I said, deflecting.

Bonnie cocked her head in puzzlement.

"You asked me to say whatever comes to mind?"

"So I did."

Chapter 12

Cruelty

"Around day eleven of the hostage crisis, the Revolutionary Guard arrested us for allegedly taking pictures of restricted sites. We hadn't, which our confiscated tape would prove, while our jailers entertained themselves by poking bayonets into our cell. Joe Schlesinger, tired of the taunting, leaned against the bars..." I chuckled, "and told four guards that the new regime was staging massive demonstrations for the benefit of western reporters, and he was about to miss his deadline!" I laughed.

Bonnie looked perplexed.

"You can't do this to me?" I said with transparent glee.

"I understood that. I just don't see the humor in your situation."

"I guess it came from nervous tension at the time," I said lamely.

"And now you're bringing those fears into the present. You must have been angry with him?"

I had forgotten about that: I was severely pissed at Joe for possibly provoking the guards into using us for serious entertainment.

"I was for a moment," I admitted, "because I didn't understand our situation the way he did. It wasn't really dangerous."

"Why not?"

"Holding us was their job, but intimidating a source of national exposure for their cause was assuming more authority than they had. Besides, the Iranians hadn't harmed any of the hostages so they weren't about to hurt us." I shrugged. "Just like it was in Argentina, we were a warning to the rest of the press corps to play nice." I sniggered, "which they all soon did." I chuckled.

Bonnie waited for my merriment to pass, which it did quickly in that vacuum.

I explained, "When we were released, a guard told us that although LeBlanc had been carrying his camera casually, the lens had remained relatively steady pointing at a restricted building. At the time, crews were in short supply and there were a lot of places to stake out in case they released the hostages, so producers worked all of them for as long as they could stay awake. The only way anyone got a break was to walk down the street carrying their cameras in a casually steady way." I grinned.

"You spread the word about how to get arrested?" Bonnie said surprised, instead of laughing as normal people did.

"If you carried a couple of old tapes with you, it could take six or seven hours for them to clear a crew, who got some sleep while being paid."

"You don't think this was dangerous?"

"I just explained why it wasn't. Twice actually," I said, perplexed at the density of her usually supple mind.

Bonnie nodded as if she finally understood me. "What was your most nerve wracking job?" she asked me, casually.

"You know it was in El Salvador."

"You must have spent hours howling over that war," she said, levelly.

"As best as I can recall," I said, missing her point, "there was only one genuinely funny event. These two women," I chortled, "walked into..."

Rolling her eyes, Bonnie cut me off by saying, "Set up the ambiance so that I can separate a tension guffaw brought forward, from your sense of humor today. If there is a difference," she added.

Awkwardly, because I sensed that nothing good could come from telling this story either, I continued my tale...

During my first hour in El Salvador, [Manny Alvarez](#), a CBS freelancer, warned me not to discuss politics, or my personal feelings about anything to anyone in public. The streets were full of part-time and wannabe informers who ingratiated themselves to the military by pointing out crews with subversive ideas. Manny leaned forward and whispered, "Interviewing guerrillas is at the top of the list."

"Why are you whispering?" I said.

"Spooks are all over this place," he replied, pointing out two of them by way of micro-nods, as he scratched his head.

I told Bonnie that their above average quality, but out-of-style clothing easily marked them.

"We talk shop in our rooms," Manny explained. "Running the shower isn't a bad idea."

"Just a moment," Bonnie stopped me. "Are you saying troops arrested everyone you talked to, because they suspected they were guerrillas?"

"They interrogated a lot of them sometimes in front of us, and sometimes in front of the alley where their bodies were found in the morning. Civilians crossed the street to avoid us even approaching them. That made it hard to connect with the guerrillas."

"But not impossible?"

"No, but you couldn't be sure you weren't being set up to lose your accreditation. At least your accreditation," I added as a legitimate tension builder. "Anyway, by the third round of drinks Manny had explained the press corps daily routine to me: In the morning, every morning, there were a couple anonymous souls lying on the curb near the hotel, and they remained anonymous because no one wanted to align themselves with whatever reason they were killed. Only the clergy dared to speak to us openly, Manny told me, before he accurately predicted their demise because of it."

I explained that journalists also received friendly warnings, "For your own protection, signor," about the hazards of attempting to cover some stories. Many of these warnings were delivered anonymously over the phone, or by a passing stranger on the street. The brief kidnapping of a crew then made the intended point that the protection we needed was not from the guerrillas.

Leaning into my tale, I said, "Manny told me that a man the media called the Little General, but never to his face, often threatened the press with helpful advice like, 'Be careful where you go and who you speak with. My troops are not so dee-cee-plined that they will see the rifle you are carrying is really a microphone,' was a standard line for newcomers." I settled back. "Manny said the Little General wasn't a man to be fucked with. I've already told you why."

"He killed journalists."

"That, and the family massacre."

"Remind me of that."

I knew this was a set-up: Bonnie hadn't forgotten a single syllable of the story I had told her within half an hour of us meeting for the first time.

Feeling as if I was goose-stepping through a minefield, I retold my tale...

Our crew had seen a death squad, dressed in regulation army fatigues, leaving the scene of a family slaughter just as we rounded the corner of the same street. We waited in our car, because death squads often circled the block to discourage witnesses from coming forward. Five nervous minutes passed before we entered the house. Tony took slides of the carnage while Brian tried to avoid staring by taking notes he would never need. Leblanc shot his pictures while I meticulously recorded the sound of flies buzzing around the still-pooling blood.

From the gore, and listening with every fiber of my being for the sound of a troop truck, I began shaking so much that my feet were literally bouncing off the plank floor. It didn't help that I was sure LeBlanc would soon be saying something professionally caustic and personally humiliating to me, because the vibrations had to be interfering with his work. But no one made a sound other than to gag.

Finally, LeBlanc declared that he could do no more, and as a unit we moved toward the door and fresh air. Tony and Brian passed ahead of us, while LeBlanc stopped to draw the curtains closed. "Won't rot so fast," he said, staring at the leading edge of shade as it moved across the stack of corpses. Then loudly, "We need some fuckin' witnesses," he said, as we exited the house.

Of course, we found no one willing to speak to us on camera or off, nor would our own driver divulge how he knew the massacre was taking place, when he called us at 04:00hrs.

We called it a wrap and piled back into the car, which is when I noticed that the smell of violets, blood thick and sickly sweet in the humid house, had invaded our clothing. Manny had told me this would happen, and I would have to throw them away. During the drive back, I avoided revisiting the scene by thinking about where I would hide the cost of a new shirt and pants in my expenses.

It was breakfast time when we got back to the hotel so the lobby was full of journalists planning their day. They knew by our expressions and aroma that we had recently stood close to death, but they let us pass. After we had showered and gathered again to eat, representatives from each network, in turn, sauntered over to our table to ask us where and how many.

"That was the ambiance of my day, and most days, when the Swedish team came into the bar, but there's another incident that..."

"How did Brian slant his story to avoid the wrath of the Little General?" Bonnie interrupted me.

"I pretty much accused him of implying that the family had committed suicide," I said, peevishly, "but it didn't matter; Toronto telexed that evening, 'Contents too graphic to air.'"

"How did you feel about that?"

"I was pissed. Really pissed."

Bonnie drew a deep breath, exhaled, and said, "We view our experiences so as to support assumptions that are inextricably tied to our sense of self-worth and safety. When events undermine either of these, the validity of our very existence seems threatened and we do one of two things. We choose to assess the experience for the knowledge it contains, and adjust our view of the world and our place in it accordingly, or we adjust our view of the event to suit our assumptions, thereby becoming more enslaved to our convictions. In the first case, we are constructing a more insightful, less threatening view, because our fear of apparently random events diminishes in proportion to the scope of our new understanding. In the latter scenario, we are reconstructing our visions according to the ever-narrowing parameters of increased fear."

I nodded that I understood her; I saw the world in narrow terms.

"Initially," she carried on, "these new parameters give us back some of our sense of security—better the devil we know. But the mental gymnastics required to contrive a safe place become so great that we eventually glimpse our own insanity, and redouble our fear." She raised her eyebrows.

"So?" I said, stupidly.

"That day caused you to question the very existence of mankind's moral core. Without that, you assess every event and everyone through a filter of danger."

"Everything in Salvador was dangerous."

"This brings us to the problem you had when the focal point of your existence became a salvage operation of your assumptions."

"Lucky me."

"For the next five years, you reconstructed your views while drenched in fear and surrounded by malice and madness. The only way you could regain your assumed safe place in the world was to become a part of that world." She tapped the log. "You got what you focused on. Your dangerous desires should tell you this."

"Working combat assignments?"

"I'm talking about your fit over the footage not being aired."

I had no idea what she meant.

"It was based on you wanting the sacrifice of your assumptions paid for, by assaulting your audience's sensibilities. You didn't think about your driver's safety, and the Little General certainly wouldn't have allowed such a damning story without retribution, would he? For that matter, I'd bet you didn't stop trying to interview people on the street even knowing what could happen to them."

Bonnie leaned back, giving me the psychological room to accept her points; a sheen of sweat materialized on my brow.

Brightly, she said, "Now tell me about the Swedish women."

"The ha ha moment seems to have passed," I muttered.

"You mean the contrivance of interjecting a thought, to avoid facing what you and America are like seems to have backfired?"

"That too."

Sucking it up one more time, I blandly told her that the ladies walked into the long, mirrored lounge soon after they had checked into the hotel. Briefly surveying the scene, they glanced at each other and silently agreed not to hover over the trough with the rest of us. The statuesque blonde followed the lithe redhead to the far end of the room, both of them probably thinking that our lingering glances were based on impure thoughts generated by their fluid movements down the narrow aisle between tables. Though this held some truth, at this specific time it wasn't the reason behind our widening grins, which they could not help but interpret as lust bouncing back from the mirrored walls. It was that with every inch that they moved into the empty seating area they were breaking two rules of personal safety: As I had recently learned, veterans of combat coverage position themselves near an exit, and away from windows, if they can. They also do not isolate themselves, which is moot if you pay attention to the first rule because one faction or another in every war eventually tries to put the press corps in their place. To separate one's self in any way is to make the choice simpler for them.

Should one follow these rules, they would also quickly become acquainted with the peculiarities of that conflict by mingling with veteran crews who have nothing to gain by holding back on what it's really like. Eight days earlier, upon our arrival at the Camino Real Hotel, LeBlanc—a Middle East, Africa, Vietnam, Bangladesh veteran cameraman, had virtually ordered me to mingle in the bar as soon as I had my gear unpacked. "It's the only safe OJT you'll get," he said. (On the Job Training.) Manny had provided that for me.

If they had known better, the women would have sat nearby, or at the bar, which would have put them across from the only exit to the lobby, and away from the huge plate glass windows that paralleled a thoroughfare. By thinking we'd be more interested in hitting on them than helping them, we knew this was their first day in their first war: no one in the bar had ever experienced the kind of butchery and random cruelties of this war, which tickled our collective fancy to the nth degree on this night in particular...

Early that morning, troops had sealed the road leading into a village to conduct a house-to-house search for weapons. The media were not allowed in until it was safe, meaning there would be no witnesses should they find weapons, or even not. We paced around our cars on the outskirts of town, except one enterprising crew crept in through the bushes. From hiding, they taped a young mother frantically calling for her young sons to get out of the way of the scurrying soldiers. Well aware that the civilian population derisively called soldiers chicos, behind their backs, the soldiers interpreted her calls as a flagrant insult. Two of them held her as she hysterically explained herself, while a third cut off her breasts. They walked away laughing as her children raced to her side to watch her die. Realizing the significance of what they had

captured on tape, the crew decided to get away and sort out what to do with the footage later on. A soldier spotted their retreat, and called after them.

When the crew had not been approached to give up the footage by dinnertime, we realized the army didn't know who specifically had the footage, and that the Little General would be reminding us that anything detrimental to his army's image was dangerous to have.

At 19:55hrs his spies left the bar. This was the cue for everyone to leave, or at the least stand behind the large commercial refrigerators behind the bar area.

Leblanc and I abandoned our chess game at the exposed corner of the bar, and with drinks in hand we joined an AP photographer and an ABC camera crew sitting on the floor in front of the refrigerators.

The Swedes seemed to be entertained by our strange game, possibly thinking that we were clowning for their attention when the sniper's shot crashed through the glass at the stroke of curfew, 20:00hrs, as had happened every other time the General wished to make a point.

Instantly terrified, the ladies scrambled the full length of the room on all fours, while we adjusted our watches to official time for curfew's sake.

"What a hoot!" I told Bonnie, who stared as if I had a booger hanging out of my nose.

I pressed on with accentuated glee, having interpreted her gaze as dazed wonderment at the ways of a world she thought she understood.

"Not two minutes later," I chuckled, "four spit-and-polish bodyguards framed the Little General's waltz into the room. With exaggerated sincerity, he apologized for not protecting us as well as we had the right to expect from him. 'Fortunately,' he told us, pointing to the hole high on the inside wall, 'thee sni-per was not a marksman. Maybe eet is better for you dat we doan catch heem. The next one could be a good shot—no!'

"The guy burst out laughing," I told Bonnie, sniggering where ever my narrative required a comma, "but seeing that he was alone, he translated his remarks for his bodyguards. Three of them saw his point before it was fully made, and they guffawed in the transparent way subordinates must. The fourth man, we figured he was the sniper, struggled with the possibility that the General might 'catch heem' as a show for the American congress!" I laughed harder.

Bonnie blandly asked me what happened next.

"You really had to be there," I said, chortling awkwardly.

"I can see it clearly enough. What happened?"

"Acting barely inconvenienced," I said with strained delight, "most of us were having trouble containing ourselves in this cartoon-like sea of contradiction. You should have seen it..."

"I am about to."

I explained that the General's unbridled arrogance emanated from physical features that were a cross between Elmer Fudd and Baby Face Nelson. His height and girth, about equal at five-foot two, put a huge strain on a wide brown belt that held matching pearl-handled revolvers. Far from emulating Santa Anna, he looked like a miniature Michelin Tire man impersonating the Lone Ranger. It was even money amongst us whether he could have reached his guns. Priceless.

"On the other hand," I continued upon seeing that I was alone in my merriment, "he knew that we knew he was a psychotic prick: he had ordered the killing of the four Dutch journalists that Manny had told me about, to convince me not to even think about fucking around with the rules. Anyway," I concluded in a rising tone, to entice at least a grin from Bonnie, "the Swedes staring in opened-mouthed incomprehension at the bizarre situation was more than some of us could take." I paused to feign the need to regulate my breathing. "And the General was thrilled that we'd finally found our sense of humor!" I burst into laughter, just as I had six years earlier.

"You are a cruel man," Bonnie stated flatly.

"It was a joke!" I blurted through asphyxiating glee.

"It would not have been funny if your casual chauvinism, augmented by your practiced disregard for dangerous circumstances, hadn't blinded you to what you were doing."

"I didn't do anything!" I protested.

"That's the point. You didn't do anything because your beliefs were the same as the soldiers."

"What the fuck," I said, baffled like an obsessive-compulsive at a blinking red light.

"They butchered that woman," Bonnie said flatly, "as a manifestation of years of viewing women as tits and ass, and objects to be conquered in bed. The amputations were the ultimate conquest. Their malice was a joke to them, no different from how you took delight in staring at ass moving ever-farther into danger, then cheering at their terror. You were the chicos my friend."

"I guess you had to be there."

"Meaning it was a special circumstance?"

I had nothing more to say.

"A few weeks ago," Bonnie said, softening her tone, "you told me a similar humorous tale about your travels in Pakistan; when you duped your guide into leaving you guys unattended, your punch line was a play on words about how he was probably shot because of it."

In that moment, all of her assaults on my behavior finally made a dent, and the possibility that I was more than a devious bigot had me salivating as if I was eating a finely ground sand and Szechuan sandwich.

"When I made you open the door for me," Bonnie continued laconically, "you opened the door of opportunity to learn that you are far more dangerous than you know. As a person of power, this should scare the crap out of you." She stood up to brush the back of her jeans.

"There's only so many times we can travel this road, and your tolerance is limited. We'll need to cement this lesson soon, now that you've seen at least this part of yourself."

Bonnie started to walk down the beach toward the low-tide waterline. As if I was still beside her, she said at normal volume, "There is another important aspect of the Swede's story we need to explore, because it attaches directly to the promotion of fear, and the media's role in controlling it."

"Uh huh. I mean, go ahead," I said catching up.

"When you returned from that job, you no longer fit into our society in many ways—we can explore these later, and construct a comprehensive continuum of changes. The point is that events transformed you into an advocate of peace, if not an activist against war. Do you agree?"

"Yes."

"This is exactly what the Players do not want, and why that critically defining footage never aired. If people saw war for what it really was, they would not support it. We're not that stupid, and we are that squeamish when it comes to viewing a neighbor's corpse. "

"I'm confused... by which I mean more than usual. Last week you said airing the slaughter in Vietnam would have enhanced enlistments."

Scuffing the sand with her foot, she said, "I said this was an inevitable consequence of maintaining their particular brand of national image from the cradle to the grave. Their brand is a skewed vision of duty, patriotism, and sacrifice, which they would apply to scenes that would effectively raise the standard of acceptable atrocity, because the focus is on the spin. If television coverage was as relentlessly stark in presenting reality as it is now lopsided, most people would

see the insanity, just as most people saw that the core message of the peace marchers... especially when authorities tried to break that peace."

"I'm not clear on your distinctions."

"Intimate coverage of warfare, without spin or cultural trappings, would promote war in the same way that throwing yourself off a cliff wearing a flag would promote hang-gliding. That was what the government was afraid of." She skimmed off a thin pane of water with her heel, and a mirror of translucence burst from her foot, collapsing in sheets on either side of her ankle.

"So coverage isn't the issue; it's the packaging that matters?"

"The media sanitizes atrocity, which anesthetizes the public to make human aberrations acceptable," she said, "as if they exist in small numbers, far away, and under extreme circumstances that we can somehow better by reporting them." She looked my way. "The corporate giants that sanitize reality do so under the banner of maintaining a prescribed level of taste, to allegedly protect our sensibilities." She tapped my thigh with the back of her hand. "Think about it; what's sensible about war that needs to be protected? Who sets these levels of acceptability, and why? For that matter, who tells the public what movies to watch through the regulation of mass distribution, and what documentaries that reveal the true processes of aberrant power see the brighter lights of day?"

"I get it," I said in a clipped tone, feeling the need to defend the media; but I had made that mistake more than once.

Chuckling, I said, "I'm sure you said this is just an overview day to get me started."

"I never said it would be easy. By the way, what was that 'as close as I will ever get—Rio,' remark about?"

Thankful for her contrived respite—she knew I needed a break, and jumping back to a previous conversation was not unusual—I said, "I took Catholic lessons when I was in basic training, to get out of the barracks; we were all restricted to them for the first six weeks."

I explained that, a month later, our platoon went on all night maneuvers. Around seven on a frosty October morning, after a sleepless night playing silly soldier in deep, wet grass, a jeep pulled up to our riverside camp and the driver announced that anyone who wanted to be confirmed Catholic had to come with him; the Bishop was waiting back at the base. As we were theoretically heading for a stretch in purgatory anyway, Ed and I figured we might as well get a ride part of the way. The rest of our troop had to march five miles.

Chuckling, Bonnie said, "You paid for those miles a long time ago—let it go. Speaking of going," she said, looking at her watch, "I have to drive my son to a basketball tournament."

"And it was just getting interesting," I muttered.

"Reading Castaneda's views on being stalked will be interesting as well," she said, heading toward her car ahead of me. "Later," she said with a wave over her shoulder...

I thought to call Ed's office from a pay phone on Denman Street, before I headed home. His secretary said he was on a service call, and that she didn't expect him back. I walked four blocks to the Dover Pub, where I found Ed and Roddy—the president of a collection agency—finishing their 'service calls' dressed in civvies. Ed said he would cover my costs until I cashed my check; it was in the apartment.

I finished my first day as an apprentice of The Way to Live by getting as properly pissed as an average man can get. Bonnie worked all day Friday, so I had a full recovery study day off. During this time, I decided to reread all of the books we had ever talked about. Otherwise, I reminded myself that I should do whatever she asked of me regarding my lessons. As a result, my upcoming days were full of 'gathering energy' whether I was with her or not.

Chapter 13

Self-Interest

At our regular Saturday morning class, Kha-lib told us that Bonnie's relative had "returned home," but heirs were contesting their percentage splits, and lawyers were fighting it out. Nevertheless, the legacy would come our way; the many points of change that turn a probability into inevitability were at a momentum-zenith."

"What points of change?" Josh asked.

"The disposition of the estate has stipulations regarding the amount of each disbursement, depending upon the willingness of its recipients to meet certain conditions. Not all of their responses are known to us."

Kha-lib then continued his lesson about how we could most effectively use the money, because it was seen that at least one beneficiary would not meet a condition of the Will. As a result, there would be an additional hundred thousand dollars in our legacy, which should arrive two Saturday's hence, in the morning, by messenger.

This ended our session.

Bonnie had a private reading booked, followed by a dinner with Josh, so I went home. I took Sunday off to watch the five football games I could switch between from morning until night: I loved living in the Pacific Time Zone.

Meeting at the corner of Pendrell and Denman on Monday morning, Bonnie said nothing beyond "Hello," as we crossed the street and turned right on Morton to enter an area of gardens and statues that were a prelude to Stanley Park. After a short while, we crossed Beach Avenue to sit on a bench facing Spanish Bank Beach, across the English Bay anchorage. West Vancouver was ninety degrees to our right. North Vancouver was behind us.

As the silence stretched, I commented on the general beauty of the area, to which Bonnie gestured over her shoulder, to the north-west, and asked me what it communicated. Not knowing what "it" was, I assumed she was asking me to speak generally about Stanley Park, so I said something inane about it representing the diverse nature of nature.

"What did you just communicate to me?" she said.

Prudently arriving at the honest answer quickly, I said, "That I don't have a clue what you're asking me."

"Why didn't you say that instead of trying to B.S. me?"

"I thought I'd give it a shot, like a good apprentice."

"You've learned to deceive under the banner of acceptable social practices so well that it doesn't cross your mind that you are lying." She said this as if it was a passing thought, but I knew better.

"You've made that point, and I get it, but what does it matter when everyone agrees with an innocuous practice to keep things friendly."

"What's wrong with clarity to keep things friendly, especially after you've experienced it at heightened levels?"

"There's nothing wrong with it. Like I said, we all do a similar verbal dance so that we're not misunderstood on a basic level. You know I understand the continuity of confusion issue," I chuckled at the memory of my struggles to make fewer errors, "but we're sitting here talking about nothing important to be confused about."

"Let's see if it's not important." Bonnie looked over the wide inlet, her eyes settling on the farthest point of Stanley Park that we could see, which was the Second Beach Pool only a few hundred yards away.

"What does the bridge communicate?"

"Traffic, I guess," I said a moment later, understanding that extending her line of sight beyond the pool would transect the causeway leading to the Lions Gate Bridge.

"That's what it facilitates. I said communicate."

"You'll have to explain what you're after."

"Finally some honesty," she whispered as if to herself. "A few months ago, I said you can't live in between fact and fiction without confusing what you want with what you think is necessary, or eventually taking what you think you're entitled to. Living in-between can only generate fear of the unknown, and confusion about what you think you know, because there is no true standard to rely on if the standard is moving—like a dance." She looked toward Second Beach. "That structure is a bridge of communication: goods, services, and workers cross it every day, but the knowledge and intentions of about sixty-thousand people cross into the city as well, and all of them are spreading what they think they know, or need to know, to achieve their daily goals." She widened her eyes in inquiry.

"I can see that."

"The assumptions of the people crossing it include the certainty that the structure is categorically stable, and how long it takes to make the commute, while anticipating the inevitable summer construction. Most of them," she smirked, "having learned the benefits of meshing when two lanes become one, also assume this courtesy." She entwined her fingers.

"Most," I agreed.

"In other words, the bridge is reasoned to be structurally sound and predictably timely, assuming the cooperation of all who use it. It is the truth to most people, when it actually represents a means to reaching another destination. This is why they call it a bridge and not a fact." She raised her brow playfully.

"You're saying our language is the bridge to facts, and our cooperative assumptions smooth the way?"

"I am, and...?"

"Neither is the truth; we're just heading that way?"

"Yes, and if something isn't exactly the truth, but represents it, it's still not the truth."

"Understood," I said warily.

"Consider the impact on Vancouver if the bridge wobbled."

"Economic instability?"

"Don't guess."

"Uncertainty."

"Now you're getting it: think of our culture as a suspension bridge that bounces slightly with every step, and each rebound as a nuance of interpretation that is the wiggle room that keeps people more or less centered. What you can't detect is the lateral sway of the structure; we'll call that our consensus conformation overlooking a fact, because you are looking down at your reasons—each of them being a plank moving in sync with the sway."

"I've got the picture."

"What would standing on that bridge be like if you could break the spell of your conformation, and for a second look off to one side?"

"I'd detect the motion, and it might be harder on my nerves," I said, putting myself inside the metaphor.

"Make that professionally relevant."

I stared at her.

"Your television work," she prompted me. "What common practice of representing facts takes the place of the truth?"

"We have people stage common actions, so that we have pictures of them working during the voice over, but that's not really a contrivance."

"Why not?"

"Because they'd normally do these things; they're innocuous moments in the life of the subject."

"Are they not re-enactments?"

"Technically, but it would be confusing to draw attention to a guy walking down a hall by keying in the word 're-enactment' at the bottom of the screen." I bracketed the word with my fingers.

"Why is that?" she asked me innocently.

"It would generate a false sense of relevancy; the audience is literate in the language of television, so they know that some staging has taken place in the same way they know that a visual jump cut means some time has passed." I took an organizational breath. "Staged pictures are not meant to be informative, per se, because there's nothing in them that doesn't happen every day. If anything, they provide a minimal context of time and place, as an alternative to showing boring graphs and charts. No harm, no foul."

"We'll see about that. To recap, a correspondent does not undermine the factual certainty of his presentation by staging events, because the audience's conditioned assumptions about the language of television allow for it. By this I mean they speak the nuance of acceptable practice to the degree that if the reporter calls these scenes re-enactments, the truth actually confuses them?"

"It's not confusing so much as an insult: we don't key in the word cat when we first see one."

"Is the cat an assumption?"

"Huh?"

"From your reasoning, some members of the media have presumed that any action they could prompt by their presence would have taken place anyway, or had already happened before they arrived. Down the road, the momentum attached to what seemed to be a reasonable way to create visual continuity allowed some well-known personalities to ask soldiers about their ability to do things, knowing full well that this would propel them to do it. They allowed themselves this stretch by saying soldiers have a choice, and that they do it every day. True?"

"I've been there and done that; I literally have the T-shirt, in the case of ceasefires*."

"Would you agree that there may also be an underlying tit-for-tat mentality, because you all have covered events that were flagrantly designed to mislead the public?" She shrugged. "Why not cover news that is staged as an accurate reflection of reality?"

"That may be, but setting aside for the moment that television news without pictures is called radio, a correspondent without the smarts to get pictures of bang-bang in a war will soon be covering flower shows."

"And this reality of the business allows trickery to become a trap, because staging the way it is does not have him pull the trigger?"

"A fake office scene never killed anyone," I countered.

"It certainly has: somewhere, a reporter facilitated an extreme manifestation of a staged action, because it was seen as an attribute of clarity. Your own words by the way, if you care to review them."

Clearing my throat, I said, "Minimal staging is a standard ever reporter understands, and by otherwise incorporating the language of television it avoids having to explain the obvious, or emphasizing elements that aren't relevant. This is no different than you and I building more complex assumptions into our lessons than most people can appreciate, so we don't have to explain every little thing we know."

"What we understand is knowledge; our version of an assumption has no wiggle room because our beliefs have been discarded to the facts."

I scratched my beard.

"You are still failing to grasp the importance of momentum," she said, addressing my consternation. "The average person's assumptions create the illusion of a factual continuity in everything. Based on this, the media uses chosen information and professional technique to create a place that's between fact and fiction through which the public assumes they're watching the truth precisely because it has been designed to suit their assumptions."

"Sure, because assumptions carry our communications; otherwise, saying hello would take us half an hour."

Shaking her head, she said, "I am saying that cleverly designed assumptions have been incessantly implied to us until we perceive them as the truth. In fact, they blur the truth, which is that our experiences are re-enactments of our beliefs—they did not happen by themselves." Bonnie stepped away from the creeping surf, as she said, "They have become a part of the internal dialogue that maintains our illusions."

I thought about this, almost grasped something larger, then it eluded me... like Bonnie following the waters retreat seaward again.

"There is something else you've missed today," she said without me having said a word. She gestured toward the causeway.

"The bridge..." I said after a moment. "You were talking about things I couldn't see?"

"You're catching on. The lesson was a metaphor to help you see events as essences, by demonstrating that what are facts to the average person don't mean much to a hunter of the truth."

"Clever."

"Not at all; it's the way it is without reason interfering with perception," she said, raising her palms in a 'that's simple' gesture. "We also dealt with the so-called dinky stuff in your television practices to help you see the whole picture—pun intended—because you're still playing with your language. This tells me that you haven't seen the potential harm of that becoming a large issue—a misinterpretation at a critical time. Our lesson today should make it clear that there is nothing too small to ignore, because maintaining our continuity reigns supreme, and all continuities create a momentum that overlooks the flaws in them—until they kill you."

"You said it yourself; I was playing."

"Until you weren't: you quite reasonably argued on behalf of the correspondents' discretion, the audience's intelligence, and the sharing of a common assumption without which the narrative would be more like radio. What you're missing, still and again," she emphasized, "is that I'm not criticizing either of them for what they don't know. I'm trying to have you see the pitfalls of using any of the average person's assumptions—even tiny ones—to assess essential events. You

can't. They'll implode on the flaws of your reasoning, and as I've said a few times, handling energy is dangerous. For some reason, you don't believe me."

"You know I believe you."

"And yet you do nothing about it. Sound familiar?"

Our conversation about second-hand convictions and sincerity flashed through my mind, as I said, "I need to be absolutely deliberate and strict about how I say things all of the time?"

"Until you don't need to be—yes."

"When is that?"

"When you understand the importance of practicing it, it will become part of your behavior."

* In early 1984, factions declared ceasefires so often in Lebanon that we had T- shirts printed that stated, "I survived ceasefire X11, X111 X1V XV, XV1.

Chapter 14

The Assemblage Point

Bonnie stopped to use a log for balance while she brushed sand from her feet, and put her shoes back on. With that done, she said, "Our encounter with the panhandler was your first official lesson about the Minimal Chance. Your awareness of Intent manifesting a gesture also had an underlying point about how difficult it is for the average person to see the essence of what is in front of their eyes. This is why your perceptions were aided by Intent shifting your Assemblage Point closer to the Place of No Pity."

"I'm with you on that."

"Actually, you're not, which is the next part of that lesson: what did the big man with the donut bag represent?"

I thought about his near collision with Bonnie then I admitted, "It has to be about me in some way, but I don't know what that is."

"Put self-image in the bag; he was feeding on it to the exclusion of watching where he was going, and stumbling through his day like you did by walking on my heel."

"I wasn't thinking about myself. I wasn't thinking or feeling much of anything."

"He represented the average person's key distraction." She grabbed my hand as we stepped back onto the grass, and began leading me toward False Creek.

Letting me go, she took a considered breath and said, "Yesterday, I told you that everything is a reflection, and that we relentlessly summon or create these metaphors so the natures of the events we encounter represent our purpose for being here. Later, just before our encounter with the panhandler, I told you that your awareness was erratically at the mercy of your self-interest, and that awareness in the Stalker's world is to apprehend every moment in its true nature. In other words," she exhaled deeply, "I effectively told you to pay attention to your version of here and now—here it comes—here's your lesson—then bam! You literally walked straight into it." She looked down and whispered. "It was beautiful."

"And I still missed it, so why didn't Intent shift me all the way to Place of No Pity?"

"You would have learned what is possible to perceive, but not what is required of you to achieve that perception." She took my arm again. "You were doing well noticing things you would not normally bother with, but you lost your sense of being no better or worse than everything else. A short pause to congratulate yourself would have been enough."

"I didn't do that."

"Did you stop your evaluation of the circumstance at any point?"

"No, I... hmm. I noticed the clarity and detail of my perceptions."

"As I said..." she pursed her lips. "You also abandoned your heightened awareness to maintain the image you have of yourself as a generous person. In essence, you gave yourself an example of what is possible to perceive in a pure moment, then you reverted to the cognition of the average man to defend an illusion."

"You make it sound like it was the only time I will get the lesson."

"Two things," she said, holding up two fingers. "There are magnificent perceptions that lie ahead of you, which your suspicion and skepticism can manipulate into something sinister because that's what they do. This can cost you years of effort to put it right. There is also no force in the Universe that can guarantee you will still be breathing an hour from now, so you have no time to waste on self-indulgence, such as how smart you think you are or justifying your personal views. I can't seem to get through to you that this is not personal."

Before I could comment, she said, "I haven't mentioned all of the practices that Stalkers use to overcome their flaws, but you're familiar with the idea of using death as an advisor, from Castaneda's works?"

"Familiar only."

"I mention this so what I just said doesn't scare you." Bonnie officiously carried on with her original topic. "At times during your dangerous assignments, the aspects of your personality that stood in the way of perceiving knowledge directly were set aside to allow you to experience the critical nature of the moment. In these times, when you chose to not go down one road or turn back, you may have entered into heightened awareness, aside from Phillip's influences. As we discussed in the last few weeks, you forgot about or dismissed these occasions, because you couldn't explain them. In the case of knowing things ahead of time, such as your father dying, some part of your thinking was afraid that you somehow caused or contributed to events. Now that you're learning heightened awareness can happen spontaneously, you will better allow for it, even summon it, and make it a personal practice to not interfere with it."

"Now that I know what's happening, sure."

"I'm telling you this because it's not all that will happen, and I don't want you to think you're losing your mind as we work with the positions of the Assemblage Point." She chuckled. "Actually, you're going to do that anyway. I'm saying don't be concerned about the apparent contradiction of intentionally undermining your reason. The payoff is experiencing ever more instances of pure understanding for no reason other than you intended to." She grinned like a cherub. Holding up two fingers again, she said, "For a Stalker, there are two one-way bridges of knowledge." She lowered her hand. "One of them is from Reason to Silent Knowledge, the doorway to which is through the Place of No Pity; the bridge deck is called pure understanding, and it entertains no behavioral influences. You do not bother believing or not believing anything in the moment of embracing a pure understanding. You experienced this with Nabi Berri's guards in Beirut."

"Ahhh... that makes perfect sense."

"It follows that latent concerns can block your understandings, which is why it's critical to stop talking to your suspicious ego." She drew a concluding breath.

"Also understood," I said, chuckling at her reasonable explanation of an unreasonable phenomenon, and me understanding it.

Hesitating to assess something, Bonnie then said, "The other one-way bridge is from Silent Knowledge back to Reason, and the bridge deck is of concern—concern for the source of your knowledge. This just happened to you."

"Not be contradictory, but I wasn't concerned. Like you said, it just happened."

"We've been over this: you regularly *Intend to Know*, which is concern." She looked toward the Lions Gate Bridge, then back my way. "In the moment immediately before your 'Ahhh,' you took all of the pieces of that event from your reason, into the Place of No Pity, and you *knew* the whole experience at the level of your Silent Knowledge. As we've discussed, knowledge without expression is useless to you, so you had to bring what you *knew* back to where reason would grasp it in its entirety. The Bridge of Reason is one way, so you had to find another way, which was the bridge of concern for what you knew."

"These are like simultaneous acts?"

"Imagine if you had control over them?" Still grinning, she said, "We have talked about stalking mostly in terms of a student's comprehension of the process, which is to reveal and examine the core nature of behavior. The stealth aspects lie in me knowing what will result in a given circumstance, and you being unaware of what's coming, but willing to face what happens. Do you agree?"

"Sure... I mean yes."

"Now we're going to deal with stalking in a Stalker's terms: In an overview," she carried on without pause, "stalking is about saving energy by deliberately choosing to act impeccably. As you get better at making these two evaluations, deliberate and impeccable, a broader clarity will placate your ego's drive to interfere with your decision making."

"What do you mean by placate my ego? I thought I had to stop talking to it?"

Her focus seemed to drift before she slowly said, "At one time, the ego awareness was perfectly adapted to maintaining our health and safety. Over time, our reason put more and more trust in the ego, and we allowed our leaders to impinge on areas of life where it was not needed. This created an illusion in man, which was useless in situations of survival—a self-image that interjected self-interest into the essential nature of events."

At her normal pace, she said, "In our time, every member of their culture is taught the illusion of their ego's independent power through the nature of the acts they experience and witness. But the reality remains; the ego doesn't think. Instead of just keeping us safe, it responds to the secrets that our reason has us keep from ourselves." She circled her finger in the air, and sorrowfully said, "As you're learning, it takes a monumental struggle to free ourselves from a cyclical series of secrets, so you are blessed that an out-of-body experience made it unreasonable for you to refuse to learn how to escape that momentum. More than this," she said as a concluding thought, "because your ego learned that flying doesn't threaten it, it considers other formerly unreasonable events safe to experience, such as *seeing* and *knowing*. It has been placated, and need not interfere unless you tell it to by introducing any element of self."

Bonnie continued formally: "Behind our shoulders is a fist-sized ball of energy called the Assemblage Point; it literally assembles a view of our world by lighting the filaments relevant to the modality of our chosen time, from an infinite number of possibilities. It follows that if this point moves our perspective changes." She paused, and I acknowledged that I understood her, though I missed the thread of why we were discussing this.

"From a Stalker's perspective, from birth we are relentlessly taught by every external experience, and personal encounter within this modality, to repeat an endless dialogue about the world we perceive. This dialogue is a description—a translation of energy into beliefs and

assumptions that we internalize, the force of which keeps the Assemblage Point fixed in the cognition of the average person. Otherwise, its position is random. It follows that you need to practice stopping the internal dialogue to achieve a view of events untainted by your conformation to the physical world. Does this make sense?"

"So far."

"When this day is done, I will give you procedures to practice an art called not-doing*, to help you stop your internal dialogue. When you're comfortable with the idea, we will work on them together. Moving on," she flicked her wrist. "As an average person, your Assemblage Point is rooted in the Place of Reason; we'll call that the First Point of Knowledge or the First Attention. Again, this is our most precious tool of development in physical reality, but in relative terms of all that is available to us perceptually, it is like the letter 'A' to a Shakespearian scholar: absolutely necessary to know that letters exist, to teach kindergarten reading, but long since supplanted not by sentences, but by classic works."

"I can imagine that potential difference better, because of the first assumption we shared."

Nodding, Bonnie said, "The Second Point of Knowledge is the Place of No Pity. This is where you have no emotion, no compassion, and no concern about events, because the filaments are focused on what's in front of you entirely without influence—the judgments of self are part of the inventory of the First Attention."

"If the Place of No Pity is without compassion, wouldn't you be cruel?"

"For a Stalker to have compassion means they'd wish other people were like them. This would make them average, and they'd waste energy helping those who aren't ready for the head-on challenge of self-discovery." She touched my sleeve. "While we're at it, one of the most difficult lessons to learn about impeccability is letting others choose their own way, because you will recognize harmful continuities in your friends' behavior. If it's part of your path, you can support them until they learn enough to agree to being taught, or more likely not." She shrugged without compassion. "I let you be yourself until you decided to learn, but you could have run from me until an experience hooked you."

"If I understand you, the Place of No Pity is where metaphorical novels reside, in terms of the scope of our awareness, but there is no sense of attachment to them?"

"Yes, and when you better understand how to determine the true nature of events, alongside accessing knowledge directly, a complete novel can reveal itself with just a glance." She snapped her fingers. "This is why I've been teaching you how to assess the nature of events since the day we met. It's part of a vastly larger picture."

"So you have," I said, only then realizing that I had stood no chance of impressing her in any way. To the contrary, I felt... well, not exactly grateful.

"You have also managed to save enough energy to experience a small example of this kind of clarity with Rachel and Meaghan, but the ultimate energetic achievement is controlling the movement of the Assemblage Point."

"I can imagine how that might be."

"Good. Now a Conditional Death occurs at the behest of Spirit moving the Assemblage Point to the position where the awareness of what one is really like envelopes you." She pursed her lips. "That's not precisely correct, because you intellectually have to be aware of what you are really like to recognize the elements of the moment you are being freed from." No matter," she flicked her wrist. "If you were religious, you would say that God's love embraced you. As you are anything but religious, if this happens to you in this lifetime you will know beyond

words that the average person's awareness is inconceivably inadequate compared to what is possible to know outside of reason—outside of language."

"Still with you."

Nodding, she said, "Seers can see the energy lines in all things, including the apparent nothingness around us." Looking around, she said, "They can see the infinite intelligence and vitality of the Universe, and within that vitality they can see there is a constant pressure." She focused on me. "Don Juan called it a predatory force that relentlessly tries to enhance the awareness of all things. In other words, we have no choice but to learn, whereas free will allows us endless choices of how we will do that—with an exception of sorts. We are no longer free to wantonly endanger our planet to the point of no return; that's the line we're standing on, and why the Universe has sent emissaries here to help us get on track."

"An exception to free will sounds like a contradiction."

"Free will must ultimately reign, but responsibility must be taken for one's actions." She closed her eyes. "This planet is one probability of many, but it is the core version that came into existence at the behest of Intent. Because of this, they are taking responsibility for it and us, for now, by allowing us to choose which version we will come back into. One version is the virtual annihilation of humanity; another is the successful transition from where we are now, to a progressive and peaceful place of development. This place is the middle ground from which we are making our choice, so they won't allow the ultimate catastrophe to happen here. That's the point of their intercession in our ways: they can't stop events that are unfinished, or otherwise attach themselves to them, but they can affect the conditions that allow for these events to continue."

She shrugged the topic of free will aside.

"According to Stalkers, the Assemblage Point is more or less fixed on illuminating specific strands of perception, but it can both shift and move. A shift is a small action that essentially extends the area of illumination, which one experiences as an insight or inspiration. A movement, which can also be caused by an accident or traumatic experience, can literally assemble another worldview. The average person would think they are hallucinating."

"Are you saying they really would be seeing another world?" I interrupted her flow.

"Of course, but that's not the issue. It's critical to know about the Assemblage Point because we literally teach it to respond to circumstances we have been conformed to receive in particular ways. In simple terms, if our self-image tells us we've been insulted, our Assemblage Point says 'your wish is my command,' and it shifts to where we feel angry."

"But we really do feel angry?" I said confused.

"Of course we do, because we told our Assemblage Point to shift to that point of perception."

"You mean we can tell it to shift somewhere else?"

"That's the point!" she beamed. "You can tell it to do anything you like by cutting out the voice of reason, and the ego's efforts to protect you from the secrets you hold about yourself. Remember, without being conformed to the position of average people its position is random."

"Isn't that like suppressing feelings, or outright denial?"

"No. It's taking charge of your reactive life. Some Stalkers have taught themselves to cry instead of laugh, as a discipline that became their automatic response."

"Pardon me?"

"Where you would burst into laughter at a good joke, they would burst into tears just as spontaneously."

"But one is natural and the other is contrived?"

"Control over our contrived indoctrinations is the essence of self-development, and you have no idea what is natural because your decisions have all been conformed to suit pre-existing conditions." She took a breath. "A Stalker crying in a comedy club is taking charge of her conditioning, and making it whatever she wants it to be, not what the world told her it should be." Bonnie grinned ruefully. "There is no time to laugh, cry, or become angry, that we have not decided to do so, and we can exchange our reactive responses for good decisions. This is why it is critical to understand that your behavior reflects your beliefs, so understanding the true nature of your beliefs is to be able to change the crappy ones by practicing better behaviors. Doing this repositions the Assemblage Point."

"Wouldn't that be lying to your emotions?"

"Only to the *should* of your conditioning, which is precisely what we are trying to get rid of."

"So consciously reversing self-deception..." I said, hesitantly.

"Feels deceptive," she finished my sentence, "because you are aware of what you should feel, which would be arbitrary had it not been conformed in specific ways." She took a breath. "Behavior for the average person is literally practiced at the behest of outside events impinging on their self-image; for Stalkers, behavior is a conscious choice."

"An example for someone like me, please—not a Stalker?"

"Instead of complaining about a crappy event, thereby reinforcing it, you could immediately fix something that was broken, clean your house, or go out and commit a random act of kindness."

"How does that work with emotions?"

"You need to learn to use them properly. A setback, for example, is not sad. It is an unexpected challenge on planned routes that never turn out to be what we thought they were anyway."

"So it doesn't have to be an extreme emotional change; taking control is the issue."

"Exactly. This brings me to the pivotal idea that changed my thinking about controlling my behavior: it takes just as much energy to learn and practice how to live a self-oriented, ill-considered, reactive, and apparently risky life, as it does to learn and practice facing properly considered challenges without self-interest." She stared, waiting for this idea to make a dent.

It was a good thing she was patient.

Eventually, I said, "Does this mean that if we started out learning how to live properly, we wouldn't need such a massive amount of energy to change our thinking?"

"Yes; now because the Assemblage Point is initially fixed in the cognition of the average person, Stalkers describe a permanent shift away from this position as loosing the human form, which is our goal—separating you from the world of average people." She hesitated before saying, "I'll explain this further, but for now I want you to be aware that the average man is driven by the *should* of reason. This makes them dangerous, because they feel they must do things only because they've been told to feel that way without questioning why, before examining their true circumstance. This assumes they are able to do that. An underlying affect is that they're automatically afraid of what others may know about them, and they'll fight you to the death of your relationships to maintain their core illusions." She squeezed my arm, meaning this still applied to me.

"This circumstance is dangerous for me," she continued, "and why I'm asking you not to reveal my identity to anyone until I tell you otherwise."

"I won't, but aren't you... you know—protected?"

"My integration process is a partnership. I do not know enough, and I am otherwise not yet capable of properly applying what I do know to keep myself and my children safe on my own."

"Understood."

"To be clear about our circumstance," she let me go, "you are free to discuss your own journey with anyone, but I caution you again that it will cost you those relationships. You might not be ready for that. Not all at once."

"I recall."

"Learning from me will cost you that anyway, but it isn't a loss. As you leave your reasoned agreements behind you won't be interested in maintaining contact with people on the same level you met them, and you won't want to speak about your lessons until it's time. It would be useless if you did—who would believe you?"

"What time is that?"

"If and when you are guided to teach someone who has the energy to learn," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "Now," she declared a switch in focus, "for an average person to remain ignorant of their Assemblage Point is to guarantee that they remain average, with all this implies. For the Stalker, controlling the Assemblage Point is about more than controlling perception: they know that it is literally a connection to Spirit, which they can work with directly by earning the energy required to move it at will." She slowly shook her head, pondering.

I cocked mine.

"That's not incorrect, but it's not entirely accurate. Let's just say that saving energy by behaving properly makes it easier to move, which includes working directly with Spirit, who offers advanced lessons through the principle of the Minimal Chance."

"I understood all of that."

"There's hope for you." Refocusing, she slowed our pace to a lover's stroll without the romantic ambiance, as if to allow more of my daily allotment of energy to pull my head out of my reason.

"We've covered the perceptual mechanisms that affect your behavior, so it's time to make it more relevant to you. Glass of wine at Bridges, while we do that?"

"I'll probably need a bottle."

Chapter 15

Zipper

Our slow walk to the Aquabus dock took fifteen minutes, and crossing False Creek to Granville Island only five more. Along the way, Bonnie continued her technique of reviewing my lessons while expanding them, and having me integrate this information into a larger view:

"We choose physical incarnations from our primary state of conscious energy," she said, "which is translated into what we perceive as the physical form. This idea-form has chosen, and is therefore predisposed to engaging specific lessons, and bypassing experiences that are more appropriate to other challenges."

I nodded patiently.

"As we experience early life without explanations, we translate the nature of events into their influences on us as sublimated beliefs. This programming always translates into behavior at the instigation of related events. With the development of language, our still-developing personality accepts, rejects, or modifies our beliefs, based on what we conceive to be in our evolving best interests."

"Still with you—is this the point when our personality is set, and we begin adopting our predominant flaws?"

"Which are what?"

"Pardon me?"

"You said you are still with me, so you can either *intend to know* them, or you can shift your assemblage point to the spot where that conversation took place. Try not to recall the conversation in conventional terms; you naturally use *intending* well, you just don't know that you do."

Knowing better than to doubt her, I said, "Give me a second." I closed my eyes sought the conversation as an intention, not an ongoing effort, then following her instructions I waited quietly... unconventionally. Soon recalling the beginnings of that conversation, I trusted more would be there when my mouth got to it, and I said, "The pious assess nothing, but claim to understand everything, the bigot is always right because he ignores what he doesn't understand, and the obsessed are pretty much ping-pong decision makers."

"Hold that position, now explain the translation process for the development of any belief."

Still with my eyes closed, I whispered, "What the fuck."

Bonnie giggled.

A moment later I found my starting point; it also filled out as I spoke.

"I am a translation of energy that translated familiar energetic concepts into unfamiliar physical laws about my new existence, which my experiences transformed into a way to apprehending my new place. That way is called reason, which also made sense out of my early experiences before explanations began to conform them to accept other meanings."

"An example of an early event would be what?"

"Shaking me as a baby would scare me, and maybe create pain, so I'd cry more. As I grow, and learn that fear and pain are how grownups who love me, also teach me, the shaking would have taught me to shake my own kids to make the point that, although I love them, crying isn't acceptable." The impact of this idea settled in. "No wonder we're all so fucked up," I said, coming out of my rhythm. "This," I said, waving my arm to encompass the visible world, "is the Tower of Babel!"

"You might have intuited the origins of that myth: what is the essence of the act you described?"

"Abuse."

"It is certainly that; what is the nature of the damage?"

I saw how the abused child's views had been skewed by the experience, but I didn't know how to articulate it; this is what I told Bonnie.

"Their consensus reasoning has been altered to include brutality as an acceptable personal practice, at the level of an unconsidered assumption. This will rob them of the comfort that comes with growing up feeling safe, and that they fit in. In the same way, sexual abuse is a heinous cruelty that deforms one's reason toward accepting aberrations that are passed on, robbing victims of a normal developmental path for generations. By the way, you're headed for a lesson in appreciating that particular disgrace."

"Why is that?" I said perplexed.

"You are a person of energy. As such, what you say and do programs what you need to experience... kiddy-diddlers?" she said.

Not fully understanding her, but nodding uncomfortably I said, "I have a question. Yesterday, you said I was the first to be rescued."

She nodded.

"But your goal isn't to have me rejoin the world I left behind as a better person. Sorry, as a better-off person, because I'd just be better off in the midst of the same bullshit—right?"

"Correct."

"This means your goal is to have me leave the world I know, apparently literally," I chuckled, "by moving my Assemblage Point to a place where I will perceive a different set of assumptions."

"Assumptions that are elements of a Stalkers' cognition, correct: you knew that much from working on our screenplay," she said curiously.

"I did, but I'm asking you how far away from that old world view am I, because of my experiences since I met you?"

"How well are you doing?" she grinned.

"Ya—yes."

"You began the transition long before you met me, by joining the millions of people who perceive their world differently than they did before their personal wars." She looked at the recreational boating activity around us; I understood this represented my original view.

"Through trauma?" I said.

"As a Stalker would see it," she said, refocusing on me, "you are literally deranged when the Assemblage Point moves because the original position presents the version of reality that has been hammered into you. But being deranged is neither a permanent nor definitive position." She cleared her throat. Subduing a smile, she said, "It is a transitional state in that you have perceived a truth that people who are still assembling your old version of the world haven't perceived." She touched my hand. "They may consider you unstable, because they think your combat experiences screwed you up, when it's your agreements with their version of the world that have gone *beyond* theirs. This does not mean the experience didn't screw you up, only that it was meant to, so rejoining their world is as insane to you as you are to them."

"And feeling so much better for knowing this," I quipped.

"All you need is help translating your new knowledge into a workable continuity. Let's head toward the University," she said as we pulled alongside the Aquabus mooring on Granville Island.

We disembarked behind a tourist couple—fanny packs and Vancouver Aquarium T-shirts, who I then realized had been looking at us strangely for most of the crossing. I felt like checking my fly, but the thought had no momentum: I was somehow outside, looking in at our circumstance, and pleased to realize that Bonnie's teaching methods had probably caused me to focus in this way. I would have to ask her about that...

Through a thin grin, and a stabilizing breath, I said to myself, "I look crazy to my friends because my Assemblage Point is not centered on the version of reason that theirs is. But in a Stalker's view, I'm less reasonable—as a good thing—because I resolved a puzzle that my friend's reason hasn't dealt with, because they don't know that war is insanity on display in real time." I had a sudden thought. "It's a second-hand conviction to them, which is why they say it's nuts, then they still go to them?"

"Good so far," Bonnie encouraged me.

"My shitty experiences became my personal landscape, and it was toxic; fear infected me, but I don't know what to do with it other than display it through unconscious behaviors in a place that doesn't understand how they are immersed in the cultural practices that gave rise to what I became."

"You're on the right track." Somberly, she said, "Millions of Post Traumatic Distress victims are poised to embrace a new position—literally—that reflects their understanding of the true nature of the events that shifted their Assemblage Points away from what others consider normal. I'm not just talking about the military. The police, fire and rescue workers, ambulance attendants, the able but chronically unemployed, and a massive reserve of the physically and emotionally abused, all have a voice that will unite and be heard over the din of nationalistic propaganda."

"Will unite, not might unite?"

"Will unite." She gathered a short breath, and counted on her fingers. "Oppressive systems cannot help but breed rebellion, because all things inherently strive; courage is contagious, and unification completes the energetic cycle. For now," she inhaled deeply, "they are silent because they've been taught that they are not quite right when, with a little help, they'll learn that it's the other way around." She tapped her temple as we topped the boat ramp and turned left.

"It's the relentless draw of 'the way things are' in the world they left behind that's killing so many of them, because their continuity has been shattered, and the cultural glue of common assumptions is no longer filling the gaps in their reason. Like you, they have not been set back in the world—they have transcended a critical aspect of aberrant reasoning."

"You're saying that helping veterans reintegrate into the society that shaped them, hurts them?"

"Psychologically, it is an attempt to reverse the process of their personal evolution. If they were instead helped by those with the same experience to embrace what they've seen and done, as is, and why they participated without reasoning justifications, they would clinch the lesson as-it-was-meant-to-be," she ran on, "because that is the design of the experience."

"What was the lesson?" I said as Bonnie stopped to look at an engineering monument to momentum outside of the Emily Carr University: a ball bearing rolls down a ramp into a cup, the cup tilts, the ball strikes a bell, the swing of the bell actuates a lever etc.

Looking at the glass-encased device, she said, "The same as it was for you. They were supposed to be screwed up to make a developmental point they had not learned in lesser ways, and now they have succeeded. These ways could be of many lifetimes of trying different approaches, but they definitely include the culture they came from this time around." She turned to face me. "I'm not saying there aren't some positive ways they're being reintegrated, like learning how to trust again, and coming out of their emotional shells. It's the patriot thingy I'm talking about." She grinned, then turned to walk away.

"The true courage of their journey," she said as I caught up, "lies in making this discovery. Honoring the journey is their duty to themselves and their children, by speaking out and making a stand. Moving on, let's look at conditioning from a Stalk..."

"Sorry. Just to cover all bases, some people I know said they're not affected by regularly working in dangerous places. How do you explain that?"

"How do you explain that?"

"I'm biased, but I don't see how it's possible unless there's a level of courage I don't know about."

"Or their courage had long since been infected or deflected."

"They're displacing fear to embrace a cause?"

"I'm saying they've dealt with it elsewhere: one way or another, they'll still leak when pressured; it's just a different button. Follow up on their cause."

"That would be the public's right to know, as a belief entrenched during their formal training and evolved into a conviction by way of being shot at, both of which they use to define themselves. They have also learned how to function publicly," I carried on, "but I saw them leak fear in intellectual rants, or in a bottle, when the truth stood too close."

"Or in painting by numbers—there is always something to hang onto when the floor disappears from beneath your reason, but it might take a while to find a hand-hold."

"The floor disappearing is from having witnessed the insanity?"

"You would know; you walked away from massacres." She cleared her throat. "It's possible that the brighter one's realized they were contributing to the carnage by sanitizing heinous acts, be that a secret they are keeping from themselves or an issue they cannot resolve and remain employed. Moving on; we're going to look at conditioning from an energetic perspective," she said, becoming the academician.

"Let's do that at Bridges. Can I ask you a stupid question?" I said.

"Why not take a moment and ask me an intelligent one?" Bonnie said, looking up to search for the broad yellow building that was Bridges Restaurant, bar, grill, meeting place, and general single's hangout on the weekends. Spotting a corner of the building, she led us in that direction.

"The question is this," I said, having dismissed two inappropriate remarks, "you seem to define true courage as doing the right thing; this includes knowing what it is, either by facing yourself or already having done this, so that you have no secrets to blur the underlying nature of an act. Is this accurate?"

"It is accurate as far as it goes, but you might recall an early Kha-lib channel: he said everyone on a physical cycle of development is courageous. This is not only because of the intensity and the hazards involved in this means of exploration, but because every incarnation is an investment in a blind trust." She looked my way. "You're not seeing the big deal, are you?"

"Not really."

"Meaning that you are seeing it through an alternate reality?"

"Sorry—no I can't see the big deal."

"In that case, I've got another zipper-like story."

"Ready when you are."

She spoke efficiently, as if presenting symptoms for a medical review while we walked around, between, and through gaggles of tourists.

"An entity returning near the end of her physical cycle is displeased with her last performance, and she decides to design an irrefutable lesson. It was supposed to go like this: the first third of his journey—she had chosen the male perspective—included a persona, friends, and cultural influences that would focus him on manipulating the way things are to his advantage. The second third was to be formally educated in these ways, and to become wealthy as a master marketer. The third phase was to lose it all, because the fog of self-deception would cause him to believe he deserved his advantages—the phenomenon of focusing tightly on *self* that he had wanted to correct. However, he became so caught up in the modality of his exploration of mankind's weaknesses that he failed to see the awakening omens he had designed into this phase. So far?" she said, seeing a question in my eyes.

"Fog of self-deception?"

Holding up a finger, she said, "Even from his narrowing perspective, he intellectually knew better than to judge others for any reason, let alone for small things like appearances, physical circumstances, and social skills. However, his quick wit, comfortable lifestyle, and easy adaptation to a wide range of mostly affluent circumstances had slowly changed him."

I nodded my understanding of the tug of social influence.

"I am not saying he became mean; he remained generally benign when not occasionally benevolent, because that much of his heart still ruled. But in the final stage of his journey, he felt inconvenienced by the average person: they were uninteresting because he could manipulate them, and so felt no special need to help anyone. Overall, insincerity became the hallmark of his exploration, and appreciation for his circumstances all-but disappeared in that which he had almost effortlessly achieved." She raised a questioning brow.

"The change over point would be from remaining unaware of his growing sense of superiority?"

"Correct."

"The redo should be good."

"It is very good." First taking a thoughtful breath, Bonnie said, "The entity decided to return amid equal but opposite circumstances to his former advantages, by designing a superb confluence of minimally odd behaviors that would act like a social snare all of her life. But she will not know why she had essentially been shunned until her life review."

"Sorry—couple of things: she wasn't like a megalomaniac; she just secretly believed her internal press as she accumulated the things that represented success?"

"And her social status being the most influential of these things, but as we've discussed there are no small flaws in Mastery lessons."

"Okay, and how could she not know that she was different if she was shunned?"

"Two points: I said shunned because even the people who will know her well, and care about her, will learn to ignore these strange aspects of her behavior. Doing this inevitably leads to generally ignoring her presence in the same way others pay attention to their friends, and the effect is a relaxed, unconscious shunning." Bonnie motioned that point aside. "Her plan was to be conformed from birth to the ways of the world, like everyone else, but with a masterstroke of cognitive distortion: I use this term to distinguish it from ours, but there is nothing inherently wrong with her intellectual processes. It's simply different."

"Understood."

"She will put a minuscule crimp in the Fine Waves of her interpretive centers, which will result in a slightly skewed way of seeing things, as well as how she communicates."

"Fine Waves?"

"Everything is energy—imagine a wobbly wheel of energy-perception creating occasional gaps at imprecise moments. You'll see... because these specialized waves also touch the *orientation* waves of her entire Identity, she will not be aware that there is anything different about her until, and unless, the outside world informs her directly of what they see as peculiarities." Bonnie shrugged. "But they won't, because they will see them as mental or genetic defects. She will also have a personal camouflage to help her not notice many of people's tiny negative responses; she will be endlessly optimistic, naturally kind, selfless, and smile until *your* face hurts—and all of it sincere."

"Are her peculiarities defects?"

"Maybe to you optimism, kindness, and selfless smiling are abnormalities?"

"You know what I mean."

Bonnie looked at me as if I must be joking. Seeing that I wasn't, she said, "The Down's Syndrome child?" prompting me to connect to my own answer.

I still missed the point.

"You are energy," she explained patiently. "You design your mental, physical, and emotional circumstances as energetic pulses and frequencies that, when slowed to appropriate levels, function as they should in a physical context. Your DNA represents these ideas, so where science can locate a so-called defect that causes Down 's syndrome they are identifying the physical manifestation of a purposefully designed, less mobile intellect, which the entity wanted so that they can fully explore their world from an emotional perspective."

"Got it, the judgment will be of *apparent* defects. What will they look like?"

"She will have a superior, but more fluid intellect than ours, but it will lack the ability of refined verbal expression that usually comes with it." Bonnie paused for an organizational moment. "Internally," she said, satisfied with where she was going, "she will organize her thoughts, and so her expressions, based on a continuity of personalized connections—think of these connections as symbols her crimp will generate in place of the language-based, shared assumptions you and I make when we chat. In effect, where we make presumptive connections, her processing of context will sometimes only graze the same organizational standards we use."

"In English, what would her contextual processing be like?"

"Her internal cognition of continuity is more figurative than ours—fine nuance is inherent to her visually oriented thinking, so she will excel at things like design, painting, and photography. The trade-off will be that this internal gift will impinge on her exterior world, where nuance and context are based on the common assumptions contained within the otherwise literal descriptions of language. The effect will be that she sometimes uses language in peculiar ways, like saying going and coming instead of the other way around, and mixing metaphors like 'out of the fire and into the black pot.' However, for the most part she'll think she's saying coming and going, because this is entirely consistent with her intentions—intentions activate the connections between the fine waves."

"She hears her internal translation, not what she actually said?"

"Correct. Simplistically, she might intend to say, 'That's a very nice red dress,' but it comes out as 'That's a red dress,' because the crimp filled a portion of the thought with a pleasant symbol. Of course the recipient can't know this, and will assume the blunt comment is a criticism: our entity will do this only often enough to be an oddity."

"And she can't joke her way out, because she doesn't know what she did. Tough spot."

"She's also one of those people who can't tell a joke."

"I knew a girl who always started telling them with the punch line," I snickered, "which became the joke."

"Her unique way of organizing thoughts skewed contexts according to your standard means of interpretation," Bonnie said, with a slow shake of her head. "This caused your friend to miscomprehend jokes, because perceiving the nuance of language that comedy depends on was lacking, correct?"

"Now that you mention it."

"I'd also bet that satire confused her, and she perceived teasing and sarcasm as critical judgments, but she understood slapstick—not that it was always funny, or maybe funny only to her?"

"You'd win that bet," I said awkwardly. "But it was kind of cute," I added to mitigate my judgments of her.

"Not feeling foolish?"

"Beginning about ten seconds ago... so this entity set-up a double-blind journey?"

"It was a doubly blindsided journey so that people like you would assume she is strange, if not oddly endearing, but always intellectually less than them."

"I can see how that would be."

"At worst," Bonnie said, looking my way, "she will occasionally make people feel uncomfortable, but few of them will risk befriending a quirky misfit who might embarrass them. This will include her equally educated peers avoiding other than professional relationships."

"She will have no learning disabilities?"

"I thought you understood: she has no disabilities whatsoever." Bonnie tilted her head in afterthought. "But she can be clumsy when her internal processing overlooks what is to us a standard continuity of perception and action."

"Translated into John-speak, that would mean what?"

"Her figurative thinking tends to simultaneously encompass the big picture of here and there, with little thought of transitions, because her contexts are fuller than ours. Just as she sometimes leaves words out of a sentence, she can overlook what's physically in between here and there. Reaching for a coffee mug, for example, her brain might have her lifting it before she has fully grasped the handle, which would look like she swiped it off the counter. But unless you had coffee with her on a regular basis you wouldn't notice that she breaks more than her share of cups."

"Would people perceive her as being dangerous?"

"Someone like Rashaef would, but with an upside."

"Pardon me?"

"If such a person were to throw a fish net from a pitching deck into rolling seas, and overlook people standing in between to two?" she grinned.

"Ahhh... Teyo—and Aleena's mispronunciations, and the glib stranger's humor," I said catching on. "They were all personal development lessons."

"Lessons that applied to everyone who looked down at them, as well: our entity..."

"Sorry, how do explain Teyo's dexterity with sleight-of-hand?"

"Teyo learned, as will our entity, that his literal view of the exterior world could be highly focused on specific tasks for hours on end. In Rashaef's world, when he learned that Teyo was born to talk it also meant that he was born to teach." She took my arm as we made our through a swarm of people exiting a store. "As I was saying, our entity will be intermittently, surreptitiously, and unconsciously judged only enough to exclude her socially, for no reason she will fathom. This will cause her to go through life with the simmering frustration of not really being heard, punctuated by the occasional stark bout of disappointment exploding out of the mystery of other's constant underestimation of her, when she's alone. Only her endless optimism and massive energy will keep crippling self-doubt at bay. The bottom line," Bonnie took an earned breath, "is that her diabolically delicate approach, even though meticulously conceived, is also impetuous and risky."

"All of this is just to explore the consequences of judging others?"

"It is to master, in the finest detail, how our socialization processes can highlight *self* to the degree that we are blind to what is really important, until it is time to remove our own behavioral masks and see the damage we have done. Reciprocally, the impact of constant contact with our entity will be to scrape, when not gouge, people's sense of self-importance. All lessons are always two-way streets."

"Helluva ride: so your definition of courage is facing yourself?"

"It is one definition that perfectly applies to everyone on a physical journey."

"There's more," I deadpanned.

"The entity," Bonnie scuttled a grin, "became overwhelmed by the futility of trying to recognize the fine distinctions that the world was inherently wired to make, but which only tangentially included her methods of perception. Her guides anticipated this probability, and they had prepared for it: a graduate of earth-time development—meaning one who did not have to go back—volunteered to take on nearly the identical traits. Paired with another old soul with whom she had shared many lifetimes, and so would let her be the way she was, came back to help bring her sister home."

"Nearly?"

"She will also be a metaphor—an artist born to teach others about image, under the banner of images and imagination. By applying her life's experiences to a specialized focus she will become an intuitively astute therapist when she reaches the third stage of her rescue preparations. So to answer your quasi-question, I also define courage as a selfless act taken on behalf of another who needs help, for as long as they need it, and for no reason other than they can do it."

"It's a good definition."

"Then we're on the same page about courage," she said with finality.

"Almost: why would the rescuer risk taking the same route, plus having to formally learn how to apply its consequences to others? Wouldn't there be a safer—an easier way?"

"To paraphrase a tenet of teaching, 'Because she's been there, and she knows the way out.'* Maybe you can better appreciate how I view you now."

"Courageous? We've been over that."

"Did you not say it was all about doing what you had to do?"

"Ya—so?"

"Taking on a physical life aside, which is all about learning what you have to do," she opened her palms to me, "you volunteered to become deranged, counting on me to show you how to heal. That was hardly a wimpy choice... moving on," she said, "we're going to look at human conditioning in terms of context and perspective from an energetic point of view."

"Go for it; you can translate it later."

With a quick chuckle, she said, "There are two psychological cores of orientation for exploration of the human experience. These are the stalkers' perspective—small 's'—and the dreamers' perspective—small 'd'. In simple terms," she continued, as I rolled my eyes, "stalkers consider the means and consequences of their decisions less before acting, so they can find themselves less prepared for the consequences. Dreamers look further ahead. In the final analysis, the stalker may have more scars than the dreamer when they finally do their life recapitulations, but the dreamer may have taken longer to discover the answers required to master the same arena of experience. One approach is not better than the other," she answered my unasked question. "They are different approaches to discovering knowledge, and everyone uses both techniques. The average person would say it's a matter of circumstance and proportion. A Stalker, capital 'S', would say it's a matter of how one prefers to move their Assemblage Point most of the time: one prefers the control and utilization of their Dreaming awareness, capital 'D', and the other prefers controlling their behavior through Stalking, capital 'S'. Without a doubt, you are a stalker, small 's', whom we are orienting toward understanding the Stalker's world, capital 'S'."

"I get that," I said as if I were not proud of my scars. "Just to clarify, what's the difference between capital 'D' and small 'd'?"

"Capitol 'D' is to consciously access and control Dreaming. Small 'd' is more like exploring one's imagination."

"You also said dreamers were talkers who did nothing more than create the illusion that they have great things waiting for them?"

"That characterization was part of the three most practiced flaws of mankind's behavior. We are now talking about the energetic orientation of consciousness, as it perceives and prefers to approach physical reality."

"You'd think Stalkers—capitol 'S'—could come up with a better term than one they've already used," I quipped.

"You would, wouldn't you," Bonnie mused seriously.

"Why then?" I took the bait.

"It wouldn't make sense to you right now, and I don't want to rob you of your delight when you do understand." Without further explanation, she shifted her body into me as if a wave had pushed her over. "By practicing saving energy over the past months," she said, "you were able to perceive information about people while they were carrying on what was to them a normal, unconsciously guarded conversation, correct?"

"I saw through the personality image they were offering, but I don't know how or why it happened."

"I told you, it happened because you intended it to happen, and knowing now that you can do it is the forerunner to practicing it."

"Practicing something that seems to happen spontaneously?"

"Practicing something that cannot be reasonably explained does not mean it has no explanation." We turned onto Duranleau Street, where we had to contend with heavier tourist traffic. Oddly, because she always gave her undivided attention to the task at hand, and I was paying strict attention to her, Bonnie began window-gawking at the Raven and the Bear, a native art store.

"In some cultures," she said, spontaneously, "the raven is a symbol of knowledge and divine providence, and the bear is symbolic of strength and wisdom."

"Uh huh."

Bonnie looked at me as if I had missed something.

I was about to ask her what this might be, when the nature of our exchange came starkly into focus: I was a student who did not treat a teacher's observation as relevant, when I had no idea how it might apply. I was still acting like an average person after I had experienced the concept of the Minimal Chance, *knowing, intending to know*, and I knew that I had been taught in my dreams. Then I had secondary realization: I understood this because, in that moment, I wasn't acting like an average person... as per her topic.

Shaking my head at this twist of reasoning and teaching method, I said, "Knowledge, providence, strength, and wisdom," filing the terms away for an unknowable moment.

Grinning as though she knew what had happened, Bonnie said, "Between the lines of Rachel's conversation, you understood the path she has taken with men; you knew her core story without words or specific incident, correct?"

"Yes."

"For now, we are going to call that *seeing*." She raised her hand to prevent me from interrupting, which I was about to do. "Seeing does have something to do with your eyes, but it is not the obvious and it's not something we are going to get into right now. Sufficient to say that

seeing occurs outside of thought, so it includes understanding without the need for language and without necessarily directing, or wanting to know what you saw."

"What could I know without trying to know anything?"

"Knowledge is available everywhere, to everyone, all of the time, if they have the energy to access and assess it." She peered into me. "Everything is media, because everything is an interpretation, and because everything is conscious everything communicates. Who or what is listening is another issue." Briefly gathering her thoughts, she said, "As a teacher, you are media to me: everything you say and do is a metaphor about you and your perspectives. I am now teaching you how to locate the metaphors you create, specifically the behavioral aberrations that infect you. Of necessity, these essences lie outside of the reasoning you use to maintain the continuity of your existence, which is why they are so difficult for the average person to merely locate, let alone change. It follows that you cannot act like an average person to hunt them."

"Which I was at the store, then I wasn't to have realized where I was... did I cross the bridge of concern again?"

"Excellent, you're seeing how things work. Important to note that achieving this kind of clarity doesn't do a thing to change your poor behaviors: there's nothing stopping you from becoming an idiot with power other than heart and discipline, one of which you've lost and the other you've never had. We are on the hunt for both, and we will find them within the three cores of knowledge required to become..." she hesitated, and said instead, "As your ability to know through any means grows you must guard against your penchant for piety, and become smitten with your presumed power and treat people like servants. Now, what word did I ask you to remember?"

"Zipper."

"This is how your ability to *know* becomes incorporated into ever larger assumptions: There was a young boy who knocked things off shelves," she said, "too often touched hot stoves with his elbow while making peanut butter and jam sandwiches, and skinned his knees and knuckles so regularly that his mother put Band-Aids on her shopping list every week. As he grew so too did the scars, which evolved into mini awards for the battles of life he had fought. In time, his parents bought him a new winter coat, not a jacket design, but the kind that went down almost to his knees. He hated the fashion, but it was a warm coat and getting snow down the back of his pants while sliding down hills on the way to school was no fun in class. On balance, the only real problem he had with the coat was zipping it up.

"Half the time," she explained mysteriously, as if to this child, "he couldn't get it to close beyond getting the tongue and the teeth in line, and pulling up about a quarter of an inch before it became stuck. He got used to tugging and sometimes succeeding, so he eventually wore away a section of stitching and bent some teeth; his parents had to replace the zipper. He secretly hoped this might correct the problem, or get rid of the coat, so he didn't have to decide what to wear, but it did neither. He still wore his old jacket, and endured the occasional wet butt that a less frustrating exit from the house offered."

She paused to have me voice that I knew she was speaking about me. I nodded for her to continue.

"Finally, the day came when fatigue from arguing with his mother about playing with his friends versus doing homework overcame his exasperation; looking down, while trying to think of a way to avoid homework, he held the tongue of the zipper in place and pulled slowly. For the first time, he noticed that on the first tug he habitually turned the bottom of the zipper slightly upwards. This crimped the teeth just ahead of the joiner causing the tug of war with the zipper.

By holding the tongue even in the slot, which meant pulling down slightly with one hand—a counter intuitive move—the zipper worked perfectly every time.

"He didn't tell his mother that his frustration had been all her fault, be it for having a child with short arms or for buying a long coat, and he wore the garment comfortably after that." Bonnie stopped walking and looked my way.

"The lesson is that through impatience he blamed the wrong person?" I guessed.

"His lesson was that the world didn't require his concern; it was all about him and his wants, so assessment of his actions wouldn't cross his mind until enough scars got his attention, and he realized he'd been like this all of his life. His free-spirit, damn-the-torpedoes attitude was a camouflage for his youthful sense of invincible self-worth, which superseded all else to the extent that his moods were created and controlled by clothing and weather."

"I was just a kid."

"You don't see the grander implications. To recapitulate everything he could possibly recall about breaking dishes, burning elbows, falling off bicycles—everything you can imagine about being in too much of a hurry to be careful," she opened her arms to encompass the world, "would be to capture the essence of his problem—self-importance. To later witness any of those behaviors, and hear the same excuses he used as he ran out the door with no apology for putting his hand through the screen again, is to comprehensively see that continuity." She snapped her fingers. "As he equated these behaviors with their adult versions, he would claim as his own knowledge the entire spectrum of this aspect of self-importance. With it, he would see the incalculable losses his neglect, disinterest, and utter lack of concern for anything other than himself had created." She stared at me.

"I can see the benefit of getting a lot of information all at once."

"It's not a lot of information; it is a massive comprehension that almost supersedes language." She took a considered breath. "The more comprehensive the exploration of your behavior, the more comprehensive is the zipper you will have closed around a massive data bank of indicators about everyone who uses the same excuses and practices the same essential behaviors."

"No offence, but we've been over all of this."

"And you have yet to incorporate its principles into your daily way of life, so we're going over it again."

"Incorporate what?"

"Being cheap is one tug on a zipper of your behavior. It is a sign of a greater continuity in play, so when you understand its impact on all else that you do, you will have subdued an enormous amount of your personality. In fact," she corrected herself, "as the core influence that blinds you to seeing the rest of your harmful beliefs, it's probably the only influence we need to deal with. I think I mentioned, the rest will fall like dominos without its support."

"What is it?"

"I told you, fear."

"And I told you, I'm prudent because I can't pull twenty dollar bills out of my ass."

A digression—

The moment I left the world of news video editing, where my days passed in one-thirtieth of a second frames progressively compressed against a six o'clock deadline, I literally threw my watch away. It is for this reason that I do not know precisely how long Bonnie howled in laughter, indelicately sniffing back snot so that she could gulp a decent breath, only to continue choking to the brink of purple. As a measure of sorts, her attempts to regain a modicum of

dignity reached five before she managed to slurp her mirth into submission and say, "That's why it's called the Minimal Chance."

* Based on the teaching tenet, "You can't teach what you don't know": a man falls into a deep hole and is injured. The first person to come along offers him a rope, but he can't pull himself up. The next person throws down tools, but the man doesn't know how to carve steps. A third person comes along, sees the predicament, and jumps in.

The stranded stranger says, "Why did you do that?"

The rescuer replies, "I've been here, so I know the way out."

Chapter 16

Belief and Conviction

I surveyed the busy street casually, as if a woman laughing and crying so hard as to put her life at risk was a common sight, until Bonnie recovered... kind of: her stilted sobs were infectious as we walked to Bridges.

It was not threatening to rain, so I led us to Bridge's massive waterfront patio area where we ordered wine. When we thought we could handle speaking intelligibly, Bonnie said Saa-ra wanted her to take our regular Saturday gathering on a field trip up Cypress Mountain—not the Lookout, but up a trail. We thereafter speculated about what Intent might do with us on that trek. After paying our bill, we headed back to the ferry where Bonnie turned to me for a second time and said, "I want you to voice thoughts that seem to just come to your mind."

"That's a bit much," I said, amid the loitering passengers who would soon be sitting shoulder to shoulder with us.

"Do you remember how I stopped many of our conversations to ask you why you said something?"

"Sure... you asked me to explore why I felt the way I did."

"Then you flashed-back through apparently unrelated events, which coalesced at your current emotional state. Correct?"

"Yes, they explained why I was feeling the way I did."

"Do you accept that Phillip prompted these memories to have you see why you are the way you are?"

"It makes sense."

"Voicing your thoughts will continue doing that and... hold on."

"To what?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Thought of what?" I said, perplexed

"Sorry—not you, I was speaking to Saa-ra. She said you need an experience with Phillip to put some quandaries to rest. One of these is that you secretly embrace scientific explanations of mystical events to avoid religious connotations. Another is fearing for your mental health in general, because you've been told you're not quite right."

"Because of my out-of-body flight? We've covered that."

"I'm just the messenger: I can tell you that if you learn specifically how religions became what they are, you'll have nothing standing in your way mystically."

"I'll accept religions?" I said, incredulously.

"God, no!" Bonnie laughed. "You'll dismiss their structures entirely."

Sheepishly, I said, "I already know Intent isn't—aren't religious."

"Intellectually, but your predisposition is a much stronger force than you realize," she said as we began boarding the ferry. "A core inner awareness of our true form of existence unavoidably manifests in our religions. How these operate symbolize mass beliefs of a particular bent, each one trying out various interpretations from different vantage points. It follows that religious convictions are based on the fact of this awareness, but our physical interpretation of this awareness has been skewed by self-interest over the ages. We'll deal with that later. Phillip wants to deal with the mental health issue now."

"How?"

"I don't... we're going for a drive. That's all I know."

We boarded the ferry and took our seats.

On the crossing of False Creek, we again reviewed the principles and concepts that were becoming assumptions of our chats. Many of these were metaphysical premises widely held by millions of people, which Saa-ra corrected for accuracy throughout their historical development. For example, rituals were originally about altering focus to shift the Assemblage Point. They had nothing to do with metaphor, memorial, or worship.

When we reached her car, Bonnie handed me the keys and walked to the passenger door.

"Just start driving," she said when we were seated; I headed into the West End along Pacific Avenue.

"Go where you feel like going," she said.

I turned right on Broughton with the intention of taking it all the way to West Georgia, then turn left into Stanley Park, a motorcycle drive I never tired of.

"Phillip is going to direct you from here," Bonnie said as we crossed Nelson Street.

"Okay," I said, having no idea what that meant.

In the next moment, I heard a male voice say, "Turn left here," as clearly as if I was wearing studio quality headphones.

I looked at the car radio—no tuning dial light—then at Bonnie; she was concentrating deeply, her lips tight, head bowed.

I looked back at the road.

"Turn left on Bidwell and go to Beach," the voice said.

I turned the radio power switch—first on, then off.

"Can you hear him?" Bonnie said casually.

"Perfectly," I replied.

I followed Phillip's directions for another few minutes, until he directed me to park beside a church. He ended his monologue by saying, "We will speak later."

My complete acceptance that Spirit spoke to Bonnie changed everything and nothing; I had believed her, but without the experience it was a second-hand conviction.

Bonnie subsequently explained that Phillip had wanted me to drive to demonstrate, to myself, that I was not hallucinating, dreaming, or in an altered state of awareness that would allow me to think I had made up the event. My out-of-body experience had also been preceded by similarly designed events to make sure that I knew I was wide-awake.

From here on, she said that Phillip would speak to me in this way only if and as I worked on my energy gathering practices, because words were an incalculably inefficient use of energy. In time, our conversations would take place through visions, *knowings*, and pure understandings that encompassed enormous blocks of knowledge, with one caveat; I had to be familiar with the elements of the whole lest the message-landscape be skewed.

I understood this to mean that the better I understood essences the larger the scope of knowledge Phillip could offer in his communications.

"I'll take you home," Bonnie said, getting out of the car.

I said nothing as we switched seats...the idea that she could literally know anything in the Universe, and beyond, if that's what Saa-ra wanted her to know, was too much to grasp.

The day had been beyond tiring; as soon as Bonnie dropped me off I arranged to meet Ed at a pub for a pick-me up, which of course is an oxymoron. The evening was brief, because our pub dinner was heavy, and we were home earlier than a Friday night out in Vancouver usually warranted: Ed's newest girlfriend, Jayne, an acquaintance of my helicopter pilot friend, Paul, was also not available. This worked out for the better, because a phone message from his brother in Winnipeg had him packing his bags.

I drove him to the airport in the morning, before my class with Bonnie.

Chapter 17

Ten More Minutes

Saturday's weather was crystal clear and warm, excellent for hiking up Cypress Mountain: Bonnie maintained that she didn't know what the lesson was going to be, as she led nine of us up a root-crossed trail, often stopping to point out aspects of the flora that represented energy concentrations of a specific type.

Rachel eventually commented on these stops, saying that she had mentally begun to separate areas of the terrain into various patchworks, like a quilt of nature. Difficult to articulate though it was, she said this gave her a sense of being a part of the fabric of the mountain—her sense of its enormity did not make her feel diminished. Instead, she began walking more carefully so as not to disturb anything.

With Ed's father on my mind, I initially paid no heed to the time or distance we were covering while Bonnie took us up ever-steeper inclines. However, beginning with those who were in the worst physical shape, members of the group began to ask, "How much further?" with varying degrees of irritation.

At first, Bonnie said, "It's been years since I walked this trail, so I'm not sure, but I think it's close—maybe ten minutes to clear that ridge."

Ten minutes later, and past the ridge we thought she had pointed to, someone raised the question again.

"I remember now," Bonnie replied confidently, "It's just over that one."

When it wasn't, tongue in cheek I suggested, "Maybe it wasn't this mountain?"

"Hmm," Bonnie seemed to contemplate the possibility. "Let's give it another ten minutes," she said. "I'm almost sure it wasn't Grouse Mountain."

Had I not been focused on other matters, I would have heard a declaration: she now understood what the lesson was about, because there was no such thing as 'almost' or 'sure' in her world. To get away with saying "almost sure," must have tickled her pink.

We trekked for another ten minutes, as a chorus grumbled, and Bonnie again said it couldn't be much farther.

We were not quite at an altitude where oxygen is required when we came to a huffing, sweaty halt, and Bonnie brightly declared that we had arrived. All of us, already peeved, were deeply dissatisfied at finding that we were in a small clearing in the forest that did not offer so much as a glimpse of the ocean. We might as well have been in Rachel's back yard.

"This is it—this is the lesson?" Georgio said.

Bonnie sat on a fallen tree. Wiping her brow, channeling Kha-lib she explained into the charged silence that we had been led to heights we would not have climbed had we known beforehand how high 'up' was going to be. We were willing to continue the climb, in spite of the increasing evidence that Bonnie did not know where she was going, which she had made apparent every ten minutes, while distracting us with repetitive comments about energy's manifestations.

That we had empowered her through our choice to follow, only to be increasingly peeved by Bonnie utilizing this power, demonstrated our predisposition toward victimization: we regularly agreed to live by the manipulations of others, because people who liked us told us we were likeable. We wanted to be polite, not rock the boat, and now we blamed her because we had not taken responsibility for our decision to come along. If we had, we could no more blame her for teaching an important lesson than we could blame the mountain for being high.

Kha-lib said that our relative silence was a requirement of mass victimization; we were constantly being subjected to ill-defined promises, and then distracted by apparently valid contrivances that had us fail to question other's alleged knowledge, because it meant risking affronting them. This was in spite of the fact that taking this responsible action could only affront those who were manipulating us. We had become so lazy through acts of convenience that we did not think to see what we could do to better our understanding of circumstances. Apathy had become our standard of living, and a terminal condition.

I protested that this lesson had a gaping hole; we had to put our trust in Bonnie to teach these lessons; we had no reason to question her actions. Additionally, she was just as subject to human limitations, so it wasn't as if we were lemmings taking the leap alone.

Our concepts of reasonableness and fairness, Kha-lib replied, are what made the lesson poignant. We easily gave into a 'nice person', such as Bonnie, who demonstrated no more competence in mountain navigation than we allowed others to lead us in ways just as foreign to them. How else would the lesson have worked without causing real harm and still make the point that we had presumed our freedom away and took no responsibility for it? The world was full of people who believed the summit was just over there, ten minutes away. They climbed toward imaginary rewards, on the behest of other's dreams, until they perished or were discarded when their leader's ulterior purpose was fulfilled. If we took responsibility for our every action we would be vigilant enough not to climb other's mountains on promises, or become angered into acts of retribution for going however far we went. In time, others could not trick us because we no longer practiced the personal acts of neglect they required of us.

At this point, two people stood, brushed themselves free of debris, and in silence headed for home before the rest of the group had rested. This unexpected, but understandable, event prompted me to question the logic of administering lessons of such magnitude that people stopped learning. It had happened a lot.

Kha-lib stated that these two people had not been discarded, as I had implied. They had chosen of their own free will to participate, and then to stop because they did not agree that Kha-lib was serving their purposes. Bonnie had given us the experience of victimization instead of a lecture about it, because it was only through experience that we learned anything worthwhile.

"Lessons on personal behavior are difficult because they deal with your deepest beliefs," he said, as we began our descent. "It is premature to judge to what effect these so called failures might have; consider that the likelihood of anyone selling our two friends a bucket of wishes has now been greatly reduced. That they do not yet appreciate this gift is of no consequence, for the lesson was conceived and delivered with impeccable intentions."

He said this circumstance also applied to those who came for a quick fix of self-fulfillment at Bonnie's home. Some of them will find a wind-chime garden and sit cross-legged basking in the golden light of dusk, awaiting enlightenment by osmosis to avoid another wound. Others will seek another teacher, and not stop until they find one who agrees with their vision of themselves. The rare one will try to reconstruct their self-image, find it lacking, and continue tearing it down.

The effectiveness of any lesson aside, I argued that Bonnie had abused our trust, and trickery seemed so... un-universal.

"It is because mankind does not appreciate the pervasiveness of their victimization that there exists no subtle way to make our point. At this time, you have climbed a gorgeous mountain on a beautiful day, been subject to the wondrous nature of life itself, and been presented with an invaluable lesson by a source that loves you beyond words. Will you allow your affront to pillage the value of this day?"

"The world might not appreciate your tactics."

"They may appreciate that the lesson was for you."

After this exchange, we moved down the mountain in relative silence, discovering that the muscles we used to climb were not the ones used to descend.

We did not get back to Bonnie's house until late afternoon; there was no mail or messenger notice of an attempted delivery by any means; a renewed hostility set in. It was clear to us, as we consumed copious amounts of lemonade, that our financial status had not changed, nor would it.

Tired, grimy, and doubly irritable, we sat silently in our usual places while Bonnie refocused. When it appeared that she ready, Rachel preemptively said, "There's nothing in the mail."

Looking at each of us in turn, Kha-lib said, "During the entire time of your legacy's impending arrival you all have been warm, well fed, and safe. Yet you were disappointed by not having received more?"

"Meaning what?" Meaghan said.

"Meaning he lied," Rachel said tightly. "He had us waiting ten more minutes from day one." She was really ticked off.

"It is you who put your lives on hold instead of taking responsibility for each moment. Nevertheless, we have delivered on our promise, for we are not those who would hold out the hand of hope and take it away."

"It's still coming?" Meaghan said hopefully.

"From this day forward," Kha-lib replied, "you will listen more closely to what others say, question that which is unclear, and take action on your own behalf instead of waiting on other's promises to relieve you of perceived burdens. This single change in your daily lives will cause you to scale other barrier ideas that currently stand in the way of achieving your dreams."

Turning crimson, Rachel declared, "I didn't need to learn anything more about bullshit." To everyone's surprise, she stormed out of the house; the sound of the pneumatic door closing settled over our meeting like the metaphor it was. We were all out of gas.

"Why do you let people think they're ready for you, if they're not?" Meaghan said.

"We do not tell you what to think. We offer a perspective from which you can form better ideas."

"You created the expectation. That's why she left," Meaghan said, undaunted.

"Your friend was distraught because the fulfillment of our promise did not agree with her desires." Kha-lib paused to allow Meaghan to argue the point. She thought about the recent sermon on the mount, and declined.

"To you, our delightfully gentle soul, we also say that prejudice is integral to mankind's attractions, for you first embrace your own reflection. This narcissism undermines the potential of a lasting relationship, because true love does not insist that one agree with you. Take that forward from today and love will find you."

He looked around the room.

"Your friend is far from alone. There are many among mankind who wish to participate in the coming changes, but losing their physical assumptions is a demanding challenge most of them will be unable to fulfill, just as it was in your Biblical times."

"They weren't," Meaghan hesitated, "sent by God?"

"The characters in your religious works were men and women of extraordinary energy, who designed their lives to reflect the principles of how to live productively. There were many others of whom you are unaware. In your terms some of these people made the cut and some did not, but they all struggled similarly to how most of you quietly fulfill extraordinary challenges every day. They were not religious people, but over time religion became the context for their journeys, and their messages were skewed by the politics of self-interest."

"What was your relationship to them?" Josh said.

"The principals were Portions of Identities sent into your reality to adopt the roles of which you are aware. In your terms, they were the sons and daughters, and their sons and daughters of the creator of your world."

"Of God?"

"Originally, All That Is created of Himself two explorer entities that in turn created of themselves other explorer entities. The first of these entities is the creator of your world. She (Bonnie) will tell you of these events when it is time."

"I don't see how ordinary people, regardless of their energy level, can do anything for you," Jenny said, looking at the space where Rachel had been sitting: it was clear that the group's interest in any other topic was about avoidance, because we all felt like walking out.

"We are here to open your eyes," Kha-lib replied. "She has a story."

Still formal to the extent of not using contractions, Bonnie told us that Josh had taken her to an establishment widely known for the semi-permanent aftertaste of its draft beer, the premature aging of its patrons, and Dolores, the bar's resident hooker addict.

At his appointed time, a man whose face seemed suspended like a loose-fitting mask from a pot of thin, gray hair extricated himself from a group of regulars. Shuffling to a low-rise stage, he picked up an immaculate twelve-string guitar, caressed each wire intimately, then buckled on a fret cheater with fingers that shot out of his palms at congenitally odd angles. The audience quieted as this weary puppet prodded notes reminiscent of an arduous climb then, nearing the summit, he slipped a split-fingered slide that a normal hand would have trouble duplicating. The crowd gasped as if their chairs had dropped an inch.

The minstrel next palpitated a progression of chords, through pathos toward hope, before stopping to tweak the tension of a string.

The crowd applauded his warm-up routine.

Blushing, the little man opened his set with a less stressful sequence of empathetic riffs; upon these he layered penetrating insights aimed at resurrecting sanguine dreams from amid the haze and spittle that was his audience's life. In time, not for the last time, a drifting note took their imaginations into the warmth of better times... and gently left them floating there.

Belatedly, the audience erupted in unabashed appreciation.

"I asked Kha-lib who this special man was," Bonnie said to us. "He told me that the musician had finished his lessons in physical life, but seeing the nature of the times ahead he chose to return and contribute in his own way. He chose his appearance because, in spite of the talent he intended to bring with him and further develop, a world of cosmetic values would never aggrandize him. He would also have to trust that the Silent Knowledge of his entire history would carry him through a task he would not remember was his challenge."

"What was it?" Jenny said.

"It was his desire to bestow upon others moments of peace, free from the social stigmas he would understand from his own life. His approach was to offer quality entertainment to those whose circumstances did not allow them access to the elite, and to display his kind of unassuming beauty to people whom society had thrown away. In this way, his audiences felt better about themselves, and for those moments the world was better off."

This ended the double lesson, and my second week of training in which Kha-lib did not overtly deny the existence of the legacy check...

I was physically exhausted, emotionally distraught, and bearing the weight of a secret that I dared not tell anyone: the out-of-body experience had been looked at with reserve by the few whom I had told, but a hearing a voice? Nope.

Chapter 18

Dreaming

The first of the formal teaching dreams* about my alleged quest began that night. Upon reflection, this made perfect sense because I had just 'met' my Higher Self \ teacher on the physical plane, so finding myself in his classroom was not a surprise... which later worried Bonnie.

The first thing I noticed upon becoming aware that I was dreaming—an observation that created a psychological separation between the waking and dreaming me—was that the dreaming version was calmly accepting of events: I recollected my dreaming experiences through this secondary point of view—somewhat detached, as if I had a foot in both camps of here and there.**

Having been here before, I also knew that he—that is I, was smarter than when I was awake, because I always understood more complicated principles in this state of being than I otherwise should. My dream-state companions over the years had always treated me this way, as well.

Zzzz: We stood unseen beside a fountain in a square, as the world passed us by in slow motion. I somehow understood that, from within the fabric of this psychological timeframe, all locomotion appeared this way due to the difference in vibratory speed between physical existence and the true speed of my energy consciousness. I knew that millions of physically focused beings were having experiences such as mine; they called it dreaming and they may or may not remember them, or necessarily know that they were being taught in them.

A man of indeterminate age stood comfortably next to me: I knew that I knew him—had met him countless times this way—only then that it was Phillip. He glanced at me casually: I knew was important to him in ways I could not fathom, yet I was unable to reciprocate. The best I could do was to feel secure.

He allowed a moment for me to finish orienting to my circumstance.

"They don't know what they are doing," I finally said, signaling that I had accepted where I was.

Ignoring the comment, because it required no response, he said, "Politics is one of the two basic translations of man's inner awareness of his origins," he began formally. "The other is religion, both of which manifest in your cellular programming."

"They would be politics and religion," I chuckled at the irony of harboring a deep distaste for both.

"Does it make sense that you have studied them?"

"A bit of politics, but I haven't studied religion."

"You have been immersed in their failures, as well. We will revisit that knowledge; for this session we are opening your mind to the scope of your journey."

"Ready when you are."

"From various platforms of existence, the We that is Us assemble our choices to be endeavored in an order that is subsequently perceived as continuous. In fact, we choose these experiences from any number of probabilities, then force upon them a personal continuity drawn from the well of man's root assumptions—your current assumptions," he said, meaning not his, although he understood them to perfection.

"In practical terms, root assumptions replace the inner awareness of one's spiritual source from where anything is possible, though in physical life, too, anything is possible. But as your perceptive mechanisms are not tuned toward this realization, and your ideas do not allow for it, you do not see how this can be."

"Do Stalkers see it? I mean, haven't they tuned their perceptive mechanisms toward accepting any possibility?"

"They have, and this takes them beyond the leading edge of the mass consciousness," he replied. "To be touching it is considered genius, to build on it is to be ahead of your time, but to leave it behind is considered lunacy. Now, as a mass consciousness man agrees to these assumptions at the most basic level of understanding. This is to say that up is not sideways even when it is viewed with a turned head; there is always an agreement beforehand on which direction is the base. Man also agrees to various translations of vocal sounds, calls them language, and immediately agrees that it's only a symbolic tool that represents, most accurately, the current expressions of the inner self who is uttering them. But these words are not the experience. They are the basis of assumptions about experiences in a two dimensional reality."

"Two dimensions?"

"You create a two dimensional reality of length and height, and are then forced by the nature of survival itself to experience, thereby creating the third dimension of depth."

As I gave this statement some thought, Phillip explained, "In physical life, an object sits in a tree. It is black and it caws. The object, by its own movement, demonstrates to the observer that there is life. The observer, compiling the input of his or her perceptual mechanisms into coherency and continuity—or logic—can still choose to think it is an inanimate object with electronic couplings, or he can move to a different point to view and examine the object to determine if it is what it seems. This movement is experience. By way of the experience providing a different point of view, the observer has provided depth to the object they could not have perceived in any other way. Having done this once as a child, one needs only to hear the caw to assume the rest—though now there is no contact—no animation attributed to the source. It is assumed. As all children learn to assume the same thing, it becomes a root assumption of their existence. This is the basis of not having to fall from great heights to see if they are as painful as falling from lower heights. One fall usually does it."

"Got it—I mean, I understand."

"Events and Time are strung together in the same manner—by assumption and agreement. So deep, as the experience of physical life, becomes a root assumption. This applies to all things in your system. You find the depth of a friend's character and learn to trust, which is an assumption based on your experience with him or her. In actuality, one is trusting in what one cannot see or touch, derived from their private perceptions of previous experiences. Do you see?"

"Yes."

"Is not the following of spiritual practices the same—trusting in what you cannot see, yet experience bears out the truth?"

"It is, but it's often not deemed reasonable to have faith in—in very much."

"Saa-ra's portion will lead you beyond reasoning to specifically experience how focus, as faith, creates worlds. You shall see."

"I don't doubt it."

"I meant that literally—you will see how projected energy shapes events."

"Cool."

"At the level of creation, this mass consciousness also agrees on a timeframe and a distance representation, which is a psychological adjustment to a decrease in their vibratory speed. Each timeframe has its own speed and an historical momentum of cultural influences that constitute the modality of that time."

"Bonnie familiarized me with that idea."

"Now you can use it as a psychological backdrop for all that you experience here," he said, with a slim grin.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You may."

"What's the difference between understanding and awareness? I meant to ask Bonnie, but..." I shrugged a 'when you've got the author, why ask the messenger?' movement.

"For now, it is enough to say that you can experience pure understanding as a grand deposit of knowledge drawn from a simultaneous thought. In its essence, this understanding is restricted by language, and possibilities you do not yet allow for. In other words, the limited view of the self that you believe yourself to be is present in the event. Awareness excludes you, and so it excludes the barriers of the unthought-of, or the dismissed. It is also simultaneous and encompassing, but if you sense your presence, it is as a distant observer—a manifestation of the perspective of your entire Self—my perspective. There is no judgment, no emotion, and no kind of investment. The awareness IS, just as you Are."

"So far so good," I said.

"This IS-ness encompasses multiple concepts which, as before, are altered when manifest in the slowness of physical reality. For example, the relationship between instinct and your inner awareness of your immortality is maintained by a balancing mechanism that translates the validity of life into the awareness of purpose. It, too, is an unavoidable knowledge programmed into the cells. In effect, this is how one comes to their knowledge, and to recognize it as such as their lessons present it to them. Without such programming, the individual has no basis from which to translate physically related experiences."

"Like common cultural assumptions provide a basis for behaving in a particular way?"

"Yes, and part of the knowledge inherent in the entity before they translate into physicality is that of immortality. However, when it is slowed to the speed of physical life it is read as instinct, which is the awareness of purpose."

"Ahhhhh."

"This inter-conductive memory also stores the knowledge that a specific purpose is achieved through survival of the focus until such a time as one's challenges have been faced. Knowledge of the entities projected return home, as a death, is stored in this same way."

"Why do so many people fear it?"

"Through social programming they are mistranslating the knowledge. They often use it not as a motivation to learn a meticulously designed lesson for a given lifetime, but as a reason they do not have to learn because they see no point. Their cellular programming has been overshadowed by the intense focus of physical life."

"I think there's a contradiction in there, but I can't put my finger on it."

"Mankind often translates this inner knowledge of death as fear, as their link with us is weak, and so their understanding of instinct itself is often misconstrued by placing false value on the importance of a single lifetime. In doing so, there may appear to be a paradox between the knowledge of surviving forever while fearing death as an end."

"That unravels my quandary. Thanks."

"There are no paradoxes in any universe that are not fabricated through incorrect assumptions: Saa-ra's portion may present such fabrications for you to unravel, and in the doing understand the subject in its entirety. It is the design of her teaching method." He carried on without pause, as Bonnie often did. "The inter-conductive memory between the source entity and the physical body brings with it the inherent understanding of evolution at its most profound levels, beyond word description. It knows conceptual realities such as time, and so the importance of choosing specific times to enter into a quest. In this way, instinct affects one's day-to-day decision making processes, as it relentlessly urges one to recognize that a moment once past is irretrievable. Therefore, one should make the best use of it. Ending the focus—dying, is as much a part of instinct as is the will to survive, for there is an equally valid time to die as there is to be born."

"Makes sense; when you're finished what you came to do, why not die?"

"Your familiarity with death makes this easier to see, with the correction that dying always serves a purpose."

"Nothing wasted... got it."

"This programming also recognizes that immortality, as it is understood at this level and not as mankind thinks of it, is achievable only through experience and specifically the treatment of experience in responsible and efficient ways. To die before one's purpose is fulfilled may or may not be through an irresponsible act, but it is never efficient to have to repeat one's lessons. Immortal awareness, therefore, brings with it the responsibility of the moment, not the irresponsibility of having all the time in the world."

"Understood." And I did in that moment. ⁽¹⁴⁾

"It follows that the sense of immortality brings with it an indefinable push to achieve - it is the natural state of all things to achieve - and so it is the knowledge behind natural aggression, not violence as you so often view nature. This natural drive to achieve is too often mistranslated, and in your time intentionally used to conform the masses to highly inefficient goals—harmful goals, by those whose quest for power belies their insanity."

"Bonnie has—that is, Saa-ra's portion," I corrected myself, "has taken me down that road, but this is great stuff for our screenplay... where everything literally begins."

"It is not a disservice to call her by the name she uses in your time."

"Okay. Thanks."

"The cellular programming of immortality awareness is the impetus of a blade of grass pushing through a concrete sidewalk, though as viewed by a fearful man is seen as damaging. Were you to eliminate fear from your motives for only one moment of your unique time, you would see clearly, as a revelation, that aggression-violence is the means of achievement of all things. But that it is destructive only through the eyes of fear."

"We've been talking about that a lot."

"As all things have determined their own quest, when to begin and when to end them, the violent interaction between man and nature, and nature and all species, are part of their agreements to further each other's quest, be this as the food for another or as the survivor. With this understanding, you would realize that the silent knowledge of your immortality could manifest as it was originally intended to act before, by adding fear to your choices of free will, you altered your perceptions. You would recognize that your instincts and your knowledge of your true timeless existence find purpose and application in an apparently limited time frame, through listening to the echoes of your heart. Your heart, which is what you feel at the core of your being when you know yourself, will always tell you the knowledge of the ages, and so what is necessary to be done. Your mind, which holds the ideas of its unique time, will tell you how to apply what you know. Acted upon together, they create a life of acts of heart. This is the most powerful of experiences. You will encounter this lesson shortly."

I knew better than to ask him how this would be. Instead, I said, "I have a basic question: doesn't an experience, any experience, have to be recognized for what it is to be of any use? I mean, what if a child doesn't become aware of their inherent power to create their reality, because they are in the care of those who don't share that belief? More than that," my mouth ran on as the actual point of asking this question emerged, "understanding the true nature of our actions isn't simple. Bonnie is spending a lot of time on that, and I'm trying to get it." I shrugged a "but" to indicate that I was falling short.

"Those who are unaware of their true power have chosen that path to discover the validity of faith in another way. There is always a reason. Those who otherwise remained tethered to the social conformations of their time and place do not, as of yet, have the energy to embrace a new way of thinking. But they will. The Universe is pro-active, never more so than at this time of convergence when a centuries-long lesson may be faced in one life."

"Were we always like this? You know, stupid."

"At another time we will speak of our explorations of your development."

"Mine or mankind's?"

"We will deal with both, for it is your quest to reveal such knowledge."

"You're sending me back now?"

"It is time for school."

I woke up with this phrase, in my mother's voice, cycling in my mind.

()I began having teaching dreams before I met Bonnie, but I had no context within which to take them as anything other than stories I made up. Shortly after I met her some of these dreams recurred, and began to make more sense within the contexts she was providing regardless of my initial reluctance to accept any of her metaphysical ideas. They also helped to keep me going in the face her absurd claims...*

One series of dreams had me awaken in a wild field of foot-high uncultivated grasses near an undersized industrial harbor. Fixed cranes alongside railway tracks, with grain silos across from them, dotted the shoreline; the ships at the jetty were like the smaller Great Lakes carriers.

The weather was always moderate—shirt sleeve stuff—with scattered clouds and a slight breeze that carried the moistened scent of coal soot from the single funnel of a ship at idle. Oriented in this way, I wandered toward the loading docks until a man about my age approached and directed me to follow him.

The dream seemed to be about keeping my focus on the entirety of the scene, for every time I looked away to glimpse my surroundings he disappeared, leaving me standing alone wondering where I should go. Although I met others along the way, all seemingly caught in the same circumstance, our expressions conveyed that we were of no help to one another. My feeling was that I needed to hold my focus while going into the unknown, and that I was not alone.

Feel free to insert this dream a few times anywhere you desire in this work.

(**) When I later asked Bonnie about the split perception of here and there, she said I was in the lessons of Four— a Kabala designation that vibrated to mystery. Those engaged in the four challenge, she said, are seldom known by anyone, even themselves. It is blossoming destiny and wisdom born of trial and it encompasses the unusual, such as double man / double woman experiences she would explain later. The overt evidence of this, she said, was that I saw myself in my dreams. Less obvious indications were signs for her own lessons, such as the woman with the double stroller, the elderly couple, exactly \$20, and the panhandler humming the Trooper song, "Two for the Show."

(***) When I awakened, the idea of "achieving" immortality was not at all clear.

Chapter 19

Greed

I arrived at Bonnie's house the next morning excited to tell her about my dream, but she greeted me with a tearfully warm smile, and a hot cup of coffee on the table. Lipstick on the rim of a second cup told me that Bonnie's coffee was barely touched, as we sat in her two-place kitchen nook. Sliding her cup aside, while I sipped from mine, she told me what had happened.

As usual on weekend mornings, she was pouring a second cup of coffee while having a chat with Kha-lib, and he asked her if she needed it. She said she did not, but she wanted it. Kha-lib asked her why this was, to which she replied with the same reasons any of us would—habit, and the desire to more quickly awaken to the light of day. Kha-lib said she was greedy.

Baffled, Bonnie said there was ample coffee, no schedule delayed, or any act of neglect caused by her having another cup. It was more or less a day in which she could catch up on menial, but necessary tasks.

I was baffled, as well, which wasn't nearly as unsettling as it used to be: to anyone who knew her, Bonnie was anything but greedy. All of her resources had always gone toward her son and daughter first, and from personal experience she regularly chose to buy me (and others) coffee and a pastry ahead of buying anything for herself. If she was a collector of anything, it was ideas.

Bonnie said, "He told me that any practice of want over need was a practice of greed, and that quantity, availability, timing, and the lack of demands of others had nothing to do with it. These are the reasons we use to camouflage the true nature of our actions."

"I don't take things other people need." I said, beginning my defense.

"Perceiving a victim is not a requirement of greed, it is a consequence that doesn't have to be apparent in the moment." She stood up and took her nearly full coffee to the sink. Pouring it down the drain, she said, "The world thinks greed refers to grasping excess. You should think of it as energy spent on the unnecessary when there are only so many moments in a lifetime, and

only so much space you really need." She nodded at the cup in my hand: she knew I always had at least one cup before I came over.

I brought it to the sink.

Taking it from my playfully reluctant grasp, she said, "Do the math and you'll see that greedy people also end up throwing something away to make room for their other self-interests." She drained my cup and added it to the dishes she was washing. "The same principle can be applied to cruelty, now that I think about it."

"How so?"

"Define cruelty."

"Taking pleasure in harming something," I said innocently.

"Did you take pleasure in cheating on your wife?" she said casually, rinsing cutlery.

"Of course not. I... I mean, I didn't intentionally create pain for my pleasure," I stuttered.

"Think again; that is precisely what you did. It just wasn't your focus in the moment."

"I was winging it, like most idiots."

Bonnie turned to face me. "If I'm hearing you correctly," she said blandly, leaning against the counter, "hoping you wouldn't get caught in your excess made it a no harm, no foul event, and when you did get caught taking more than you needed, a random act of your penis reduced the transgression to what—an unplanned indiscretion?"

"Yes," I said, stoically.

"The harm you are overlooking came when she learned that you took her trust and stuck it inside someone else. As for winging it, you clipped the wings we all need to fly with someone else—fidelity to shared beliefs."

The allusion was not lost on me: salivating as if I was eating wasabi on rye, I meekly said, "So was I greedy or cruel?"

"Yes," she said. "Let's call Jenny and have lunch at the Greek Palace... on me," she added belatedly.

Off guard, and hearing a literal cheap shot, I peevishly said, "Thanks, but I'm good for it. Ed cut me a check for a thousand before he left."

We picked up Jenny, and on the way to the restaurant for no apparent reason both of the women said they were happy to pay my way; I insisted on stopping at a cash machine. By insisted, I mean that I was driving Bonnie's car so I ignored them.

As I turned into a tight space in front of the bank, I discovered too late that the city was modifying the sidewalk for wheelchair access; concrete forms and assorted construction debris extended eighteen inches from the curb.

Still tired from climbing Cypress, I was pondering whether to leave Bonnie's car partially exposed to traffic when we all noticed an elderly man shuffle to an awkward stop nearby. His walker had become stuck in a crevice between the old cement and the wooden curb form.

In the instant of thinking that I should get out and help him, Bonnie, channeling Kha-lib in his distinctive accent, said, "Are you not going to help him?"

With flagrant emphasis, I said, "I was just going to do that!" Feeling foolish, I leapt out of the car to offer the man a hand, nearly losing Bonnie's door to oncoming traffic in the process. The fellow beamed without inhibition at my risky rush to his aid.

Holding him steady with one hand, I pulled his walker out of the crevice. He thanked me with a brief nod, then without complaint began an in-depth explanation of his plight: recently released from a hospital after a hip operation, he was taking his daily walk of therapy. Looking at

the excavation debris on the other side of the road, he said, "I need help going around all of that, as well."

I held nearly his full weight, which wasn't much, while he gingerly stepped off the sidewalk to road level. Making our way past Bonnie's car and across the construction zone at a snail's pace, he continued his monologue like a child revealing a secret so precious that I thought we'd have to prick our fingers to seal a vow of silence before we parted ways...

"My wife doesn't know how far I go," he said, conspiratorially. "She thinks I'm taking sun in front of our apartment, so my rapid recovery is an act of God to her." He looked sideways and winked up at me. "I haven't told her about the help I've been giving God. She'd be frightened I might fall, which is why she isn't with me now."

His conniving charm might have suggested that his chuckles were of triumph, had his eyes not misted in appreciation for the love of a woman who had shared his life for fifty-one years, come October fifteenth.

When I finally let him go, he thanked me and joked that he would have to find another route home, one also out of sight of his apartment window. He chuckled one last time for me, though I dare say not for the last time on a day that he refused to measure a few painful inches at a time. If someone else was lucky, I thought as I trotted back, he would go home the same way.

I used the bank machine and returned to the car.

Barely seated, with my door still ajar, Kha-lib blandly said, "How do you feel?"

"It was great to meet such a gentle man," I said as I put the key into the ignition.

"Do you regret helping him?"

"Of course not," I said, turning to face Bonnie in the back seat.

"Did he mind you helping him?" Kha-lib said.

"Hell no," I said, chuckling. "It was a social occasion for him. He told me about his convalesc—"

"There are times when one needs help," Kha-lib cut me off. "If that man had acted as you have been behaving, he would have been embarrassed and slighted you. This would have robbed you of your joy in helping him, while cheating himself out reliving the memories that sustain him. This is what you do when others offer you their knowledge, friendship, and generosity."

"But I can cover my end today," I said confused.

"That man could have chosen to sit in the sun."

We drove the short distance to the restaurant in silence.

Reaching our usual table at the front window, Bonnie said, under her breath, "Just get over it," as the co-owner, Helena, raised her hand in greeting.

"A large carafe of house red," I said curtly, erasing her warm smile as she was about to greet us from the kitchen doorway.

We took our seats and engaged in small talk until Bonnie made a humorous comment. Jenny laughed from her gut, as was her way, while I chuckled loudly in competition with raised voices at another table. Seizing the opportunity, Bonnie raised her brow, and with a subtle nod said, "That man is stalking himself into realizing how self-importance drives people away."

"How is he doing that?" I dutifully said.

"Helena was not impressed by the customer's attitude, so she hasn't been rushing to his every beck and call. This caused him to be more abrupt about insignificant matters, such as asking to have his water glass filled after he had taken only a sip or two. Based on his date's cringing, I doubt that she is contemplating a lifetime with a man who somehow thinks his purchasing power translates into personal power over a young, Greek woman. She probably

knows that imposing a social contract on anyone would translate into imposing one on everyone."

The fun in watching this scene unfold, Bonnie subsequently noted, was that we knew Helena was a personality powerhouse, regularly attested to by her hulking husband's immediate obedience whenever he somehow faltered in his duties as cook. In a musing manner, Bonnie offered that Helena was usually the epitome of decorum in an honestly affable way, and that only a lightning strike or her husband could change that.

Having not seen either dare appear during dinner, I said that regularly running upstairs to help her mother take care of Helena's infant daughter was probably taking its toll on her today.

"I don't think so—a mother knows the look. Helena comes back refreshed from those visits. It was the infant in the restaurant that made her crazy."

"That guy really was a pain in the ass," I chortled.

"No more than I'm sure she's handled many times."

"So what's her problem?"

"Your lightening strike from across the room hit her in the heart."

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Jenny, you, and I enjoyed a growing friendship with her until you effectively stated that you are a customer, and she is your waitress. In that moment, she understood that the considerable time you spent chatting about sailing in Greece, and oohing over her child, whom she regularly brings to us, was a sham. It was all about you."

Perplexed, I said, "We are customers, and she is our waitress."

"Which matters how?" Bonnie's stare opened my mind, and in a dampening moment I understood that I had imposed a social contract on Helena. I did not bother to assess whether I based it on gender or job, or because she was an immigrant. I had presumed I was her superior and unwittingly treated Helena like an indentured servant, not an equal who happened to work in the service industry.

"Shit, I didn't mean it that way. I'm going to straighten things out." I said, sliding my chair out.

Bonnie stopped me with a tap on my hand. "Don't bother. She won't be fooled a second time."

I started to protest, but it lost momentum in my throat: I was embarrassed, and confused that I felt sad; losing a waitress was hardly catastrophic.

"It doesn't take much to lose a great deal," Bonnie said.

My thoughts raced in search of a more meaningful loss, and I thought I found it. "I've ruined your relationship with her."

"That's not your concern," Bonnie said in an offhanded manner. "That's between us."

I knew that such statements were not concluding remarks, but that they were aimed at having me discover what my concern should be; I didn't have far to look. With a queasy feeling, I mentally tallied the number of women I had treated like my servant, before dismissing them. The count was not remotely complete before it struck me that I was slated to be crushed by a relationship when these events came back to me.

"No, it doesn't take much," I said.

When dinner was over and Helena brought the bill, I complimented the meal, which she accepted graciously. I next told Bonnie and Jenny that I would be grateful if they would allow me to pay for all of us.

Bonnie shot me her sketch artist's look, then with a breath of resignation I did not understand, she slid the tab over to me.

"It's not a contrivance about being cheap," I said.

"No it's not," Bonnie agreed, but sadly.

She drove us back to her house, where I declined a coffee and went home to brood over what more I had done incorrectly.

Chapter 20

Loyalty

Minutes after I arrived, Ed phoned from Winnipeg to tell me that, after one heroic measure resuscitation over which Paul Koenig was thoroughly pissed, he died again, this time for good. I left a message with Bonnie's daughter that I was going out of town, and the next morning I flew to Winnipeg at a cost of about \$750.

We buried Paul and returned to Vancouver a few days later, having said all that could be said to my second family.

The next day, Bonnie and I settled in her upstairs living room where our conversation soon touched on Paul's annoyance at being 'brought back'. Shortly afterwards, I found myself criticizing Ed's lack of interest in esoteric matters, considering his personal experiences and background exposure to it. The fervor with which I presented my views surprised me.

Bonnie was equally surprised at my lack of loyalty to such a good friend, and she wondered aloud if this was how I spoke of her behind her back. Shocked that she could think there was meanness in my observations, I said that it was because of my loyalty that I wanted him to continue learning.

"You want him to learn for selfish reasons," she said. "You need someone to agree with you when you take your stands for ignorance."

"Selfish? I spent nearly all I had going there."

"That was entirely self-indulgent."

"Ya—a party," I scoffed, then forgetting who I was talking to, "You have no way of knowing this, but when we first became friends and I told Ed about my father dying, he said he couldn't imagine what it would be like to lose his dad. I promised then that I would be there for him when that time came in his life, and I was," I said, missing only the adolescent foot stomp for emphasis.

"Our death practices ritualize morbidity," she said calmly. "You should have recognized at least this much by now, because you know that no one actually dies, and everyone chooses their moment to move on. Our cultural indulgences in grief have burdened the earth with near impenetrable boxes filled with toxic remains rendering plots useless as other than memorials to our self-worth. Our rituals are religious contrivances that gouge the pockets of the living by exploiting their feelings of guilt and remorse."

"Ya, I get that—but I kept my promise."

"It was a promise that could only serve to stand you in a good light." With a shake of her head, she said, "You should be forever grateful that you have a friend who can tolerate you, let alone love you."

"Tolerate?"

"That you live under the graces of a giving friend, then have the audacity to bad mouth him when he doesn't do what you think he should do, is example enough of your misguided sense of

loyalty. That you think so highly of yourself that your presence was required at his father's funeral is incredible, and your inconsideration monumental."

"In-con-sid-er-ation?" I sputtered.

"You were self-importantly spending his money under the guise of practicing generosity days before you placed a further financial burden on him, at a time when he had burdens enough. Is he not faced with keeping you in money again, probably at the expense of getting away in his time of need?"

My stomach fell to my knees, and I said I had to leave. The day was already too full for me. "I'll see you when you're ready."

I had no idea how I was going to face Ed when I got home. I felt that I must, but as neither he nor I ever apologized for our lives to anyone, let alone to each other, I had no idea where to begin. Then I realized he didn't see things the way Bonnie had explained them. It took me two years to deliver my apology.

Chapter 21

Nantucket Sleigh Ride

Two days later, Bonnie could still see the accumulative self-pity and sadness within me, but she did not interfere with me grieving over multiple circumstances. I was attentive, did not interject my version of humor, and for lack of a better word was generally uninspired in my relatively uncluttered thinking. I also noticed, but did not comment on, her subdued demeanor.

After hours of observing my sterile mood through her own, over late afternoon coffee Nolan's Bonnie said, "Your Assemblage Point is becoming accustomed to a new position. We need to push it, now that it's on the move."

"Go ahead," I said, expecting to be smacked by a comment about fixing my Assemblage Point in wallowing.

"Not here," she said.

We drove to her house in a delicate silence: Bonnie looked like she was 'working' as a welcome calm came over me.

Without consciously focusing in this way, her lessons about my personal experiences and the beliefs and behaviors they gave rise to began lining up to mankind's four core personalities, and three basic flawed habits. Her "essence" lessons on entitlement, generosity, greed, cruelty, and bigotry, found hovering spots from which skeletal strings dangled to form structures, like chemical formulae. I recognized these as elements of mankind's misery, but their connectivity—or bonding stimuli—was not apparent.

As we pulled into her driveway, these complex patterns of behavior faded into the scents and sounds of summer's song by the ocean, and I understood as an observation that my grief and self-pity had also been put in their place. I felt empty—not as a heavy loss, but lighter—in preparation for filling the space newly available.

Bonnie had often said, "Talking ruins it," when I was having unusual experiences, so I remained silent as we entered the house, poured two glasses of lemonade, and settled in the living room. She stretched out on the couch, and I sank into the overstuffed chair with that f'n green pillow behind my back.

Taking a small sip, around the rim of her glass Bonnie said, "I've often told you not to be concerned, because things will fall into place when it's time. Now is that time... define fear."

As I had hoped, the mild light-headedness that sometimes accompanied heightened awareness was again in play, and trusting it allowed me to answer without hesitation.

"It is a natural emotion that's meant to be used as positive impetus, but when our self-image becomes involved all bets are off; the camouflage of reasoning allows us to hide the true nature of what we might do from ourselves."

"Its manifestations?"

"You can't be angry unless you're afraid; fear turned inward is depression, outward is rage, lingering creates confusion, craving it creates apprehension, wallowing becomes obsession, and adjusting to it makes poor choices seem reasonable under the circumstance. In the modality of our times," I grinned, "we are less the originators of it than we are targets."

"Does it make sense that you went back to warfare to reclaim the losses your self-image interpreted as cowardice in El Salvador?" she said without inflection.

"Perfect sense," I replied blandly.

"Does it make sense that you went back because you fit in there, and not here?"

"Also a perfect fit."

"Does it make sense that most combatants glimpsed the true nature of courage?"

"I don't... shit—" I said, caught off guard by this new idea. "That might be a huge part of what secretly silences them when they come home," I said as an epiphany.

"Set aside your personal places of concern; where is fear for warrior societies?"

With another of my secrets spoken as if I was reading washing instructions, and Salvador, Beirut, and Argentina out of play, my Hunter's landscape was clear: words flowed like arrows, without caveat or consideration.

"Subtly and contagiously, fear covers the entire spectrum of their lives. From digesting their first parental threats, as a way to live, to their last plea for forgiveness as they die, they are told what to think and why to think it. In between, they are continually made wary by innocuous commercials about potentially deadly symptoms, and weather reports sponsored by cancer protection creams, and allergy medicines sparing us from the hazards of our natural world. We can't see how our indoctrinations have us accepting illogical circumstances by way of a fine weave of illogical expectations, followed by participatory exclusion," I said surprising myself...

"Meaning?"

"By design, governments make it difficult to do anything against their desires. There's only the appearance of outreach in the publications they use to inform us, because it's a three-step process to just contact the right person, assuming you can read advertisements posted in tiny fonts designed like death notices that our eyes naturally ignore."

"Good catch."

"Not sure it was mine," I said, taking a deep breath, but not to ponder: "Our vigilance has no borders. Our days are filled with so many fabricated concerns that we are unable to focus beyond them. To cope, some people camouflage their angst in faux acts of selflessness, deep bottles, or retail therapy, while others overtly maintain the continuity of fear by beating their wives, kids, and dogs. A warrior nation's history is haunted by endless bureaucratically contrived dares they have taken, and subsequently conjured into memorials to the imitation courage they required to justify the horrors their institutions paid homage to, for later use. If they, or we, try to break the cycle, we face losing our jobs and friends... our fit in the continuity of our culture is lost."

Surprised at my lucidity, but not indulging in it this one time, I easily pictured how the underlying elements of fear had caused entire cultures to confuse what they wanted with what they thought was necessary. Then they took what they were told they were entitled to, or had to defend—especially rights and freedom—which is precisely what they were destroying. I knew

all of this because substituting piety for patriotism equaled me: these were my behavioral bonding strands.

"We are blind to how recklessly irresponsible we can be. Shit..." I whispered.

"Go with it all the way. It's time," she said softly.

"My world view is a consequence of all of these things."

"Deeper," she said quietly.

I knew exactly what she wanted.

"When I came back from the wars, everything and nothing had changed. My friends looked ahead, I looked around corners. Girlfriends heard birds singing, I was listening for them to go quiet. I couldn't walk in a park unless it was on paved walkways. Strangers speaking in the corner of the bar were talking about me. I saw people ducking into doorways, not shopping."

"Crush it down."

"Without fear, generosity of spirit shines through in all of us. We are wired to act properly. It's our quest."

"And with fear?"

"You can't appreciate a thing. At best, you can only pay it the lip service of a second-hand conviction."

"How do you know that in this moment?"

"I don't appreciate a thing you've ever done for me," I said surprisingly, but unapologetically. It just was.

"You said we were wired to act properly, does this mean we are inherently good?"

"It means we want to be."

"The distinction?"

"Lies in that action, not the intention."

"Other personal manifestations of fear that may apply everywhere?"

I felt a surge in my thoughts, as if I was surfing a Boston Whaler down a sweeping swell, leaving me hanging onto the gunwales of outdated beliefs as the truth dragged me into its depths.

"Go with it," Bonnie prompted me, which I did lest I lose contact with the elements of the vast Stalker's understanding the word fear would forever after trigger in my thoughts.

"If an act of generosity requires acknowledgement, it's a bribe; if you're annoyed at personal probing, you're hiding a secret about yourself from yourself, which is what makes your sincerity seem real to you. Deviousness inexorably aligns with only your goals, regardless of how cleverly your distractions construct an easier future for others, and pettiness is always about insecurity. We've covered cruelty."

"Hold that garden of thought in your mind." Bonnie allowed me half a second before she said, "You saw the end and you became it, because there was no other way for you to recognize the elements and progression of self-destruction. You now intimately know how and why good people can do remarkably stupid things."

"I've been working at it..."

"Of course." Her gesture waived my comment aside. "You still have too much concern stored in this room. Let's sit in the sun."

"I'm not sure I should move," I said blandly. My ears had begun buzzing, my focus had become shallow, and I had to think about moving my legs.

"You have no choice," Bonnie said, helping me up.

Shuffling outside to her aluminum deck chairs, I offhandedly said, "This is great stuff for our screenplay. I've had a teaching dream that will work, as well."

Bonnie lined me up with the chair, and with a nudge allowed gravity to seat me. Leaning low on the armrests, to look directly into my eyes, she said, "There is no screenplay."

"Pardon me?"

"You don't need that incentive to carry on." She moved to her chair and sat next to me. "That was your old life. We're not writing it." She gazed out over the water.

I was thoroughly confused, a grave anomaly in my current state of mind, as she said, "She also asked me to destroy my book."

"But you've finished it."

"It has served its purpose for me."

"Did you do it?"

"Of course."

"Then you have nothing left," I said blankly.

"I have everything, as do you," she said, looking at me as if I was out of my mind... which I was, but in a good way.

"What am I supposed to do now?" I said ambiguously, as the world became a curiously crisper place.

"The answer is about to come to you," Bonnie said, quietly.

I watched as the water, then the entire vista, began to ride a subtle rhythm with a pleasant precision.

"I haven't a clue where to focus," I said feeling as if I had inhaled a cubic yard of nitrous oxide in preparation for dental work.

"I'll get you started," a hollow voice beside me said. "When you defeat your personality, pure understandings become the assumptions behind your every action. This is the point at which you become." She said nothing more.

Feeling the strongest urge to face her, I turned and said, "Become what?" and my intriguing world froze: Bonnie was glowing translucently, her features vague within a crystalline shimmer out of which came the word, "Whole."

In that moment, I knew that her integration process to become one with Saa-ra's intentions was well underway: I saw her as an inseparable aspect of everything, but infinitely more powerful than anything, because uncountable lifetimes of self-stalking were the stuff of her glow. I closed my eyes against the vastness of the abstraction she had become within my first pure moment of suspended disbelief... a trap door opened beneath my expanding awareness plunging me between atrocious cataclysms and splendid achievements.

Looking between these choices—I knew they were choices—I understood that my energetic vision of Bonnie had stopped my internal dialogue, and the bridge of reason I had stood on all my life had collapsed. Everything the world of average people had told me to believe began to disintegrate, as elements of "the" Stalker's assumption that Bonnie had been leading me to embrace coalesced with elegant fluidity...

I saw energy and knew that the earth was alive, inconceivably wondrous, and that we were guests: a pulsing stream of energy emerged from the shimmering forest of Stanley Park. As it transitioned into a human form, it absorbed a secondary energy of a personality that embraced dimensional root assumptions, mass translations of iconic symbols, and adopted reason as the filter that allowed it to explore the metaphors of its new existence. Masterful and mandatory, they were illusions all.

The structure became transparent.

Beneath all of its indoctrinations, I saw a fine weave of specialized expectations and focused uncertainties upon which we nurtured our cultures. Between these tentacles lay the meticulously shaped silences that had delicately directed me to believe only what others had made apparent—insisted upon, while other options were hushed. I understood perfectly how the gaps in my continuity of reason had been hijacked, and my conscience compromised by a relentless pressure to conform to the subtleties of insidious commands: I knew that I had never made a deliberate decision, because they could only be made from outside of the conformity of here, where self-interest was integral to all of my interpretations. They had to be made from where my fall was taking me... from there, where the concept of "self" was irrelevant.

My first real decision was at hand: I was no longer a man having an acute spiritual experience. I was a spirit engaging the cores of being human. I always had been.

"Fuck me," slipped out from between lips that felt like mine.

"No thanks," a voice replied.

The unexpected wit refocused me, and in flash-focus I glimpsed why Stalkers might have twice used the word Dreamer to define opposite conditions of human behavior... it wasn't reasonable. They had a sense of humor.

They needed it to exist in such an ironic circumstance, where to fall through the cracks of custom, and break the artificial continuity of reason, was to banish the source of our unpublished fears to the world of delusion. But people had to be ready for that journey, and what made so many of us ready was being badly broken. It was our rule.

A sense of fulfillment washed through me—not completion—more like Act 1, because I was one of the broken.

To my left, the image of a black bird gliding into an upright stance resolved into an elderly version of me watching his life play back in metaphor. His stance was solid, but not defiant; there was extraordinary depth to the weathered eyes that had excommunicated the wraith who had stolen people's light until they saw him for what he was.

As a simultaneous thought, I knew he had embraced his journey and mastered the cornerstones of personal evolution in the physical arena: moving his Assemblage Point had freed him from his conditioning, allowing him to embrace his Minimal Chances, and distil his personality into essential beliefs. His Conditional Death—the destruction of these beliefs—had opened the floodgates to unimaginable knowledge. His aura exuded mystery, and beckoned challenge. He couldn't get enough. His heart was full. His spirit soared.

He was whole.

The vision melted into a massive, golden-brown bear placidly lumbering into the translucent forest across from me: wisdom was following the path of providence that power impeccably designed with every stride... irresistibly, my focus was pulled to the decision on my right.

A frail version of me was wasting away in an alcoholic haze, communicating by obscene codes familiar only to those who had been present at the inception of his torments: he had become a reflection of his experiences, not a product of their assessment. So immersed in self was he that no offer of help could penetrate its depths. He had continued to abuse himself, and his increasingly tiny world, to such a degree that his recovery had passed the point of change. Only his death would stem the damage. It was nearby; rheumy eyes pleaded for this mercy. His heart was broken—the spirit voiceless.

He was empty.

Myriad manifestations of the devastations that had felled him swirled into a timeless view where they were transformed into enlightened explorations by those who had not fallen, for all of

those who had. The cycle was complete. Nothing was wasted. The free-will design of our inevitable recovery stunned me with its immaculate efficiency.

In this peculiar moment of... pending, I knew that I was ignorant beyond expression, and yet I felt wise because my view embraced the duality of a reasonable man losing his mind to a pure understanding: a piercing humility washed through me... I was *seeing* what emissaries simply know as root assumptions about mankind's every condition, attribute, and foible. There were no words to express the awesome scope of instantaneous perception and comprehension available within the cognition of the Stalker. It is the view of Spirit looking upon us, from among us. With little more than a few words, or an ultra-comprehensive glance, they will know the sons and daughters of affluence and poverty, and see which became generous and which miserly. The wizened cautious will not stand out as much as the idiotically certain, but the merchants of death and mega-manufacturers of treachery will easily be seen slithering through the public's trust. They will recognize the manipulators of commerce trading on empty promises at artificial premiums, by the steel and glass high-chairs from which they complacently gaze down upon their prey.

Our violations of other species will be an unspeakable torment to them, and now to me, as I claimed as my own knowledge how mankind had reasoned idiocy into a way of life. We were barely touching the trailing edge of rationality. We were functionally insane.

Triggered into action, my ever-vigilant ego searched for a personal exemption, and the accumulated fears I had just so intimately identified manufactured a vague anomaly in my journey: Bonnie's personality was a necessary ruse, but not because her story was too fantastic to be embraced by a rational person. In reality, she was manipulating my crappy assumptions to align me to the catalytic momentum of a Universal intervention—an unthinking force that did precisely what it was told, according to the nature of acts I had barely begun to grasp.

More than this, I knew that Phillip could not intervene, complacency was not possible, and I could not subvert or pervert the space I shared with everyone and everything, because the unseen hand that guided me knew all there was to know about me.

A bolt of terror seized my chest. I knew what she was up to...

The elastics of my conditioned life accelerated me away from a future of cowering in the presence of a teaching emissary, lest she impeccably decide that I was no longer the hunter of knowledge, but its prey. There was no reason why she couldn't relearn How to Teach to the point of taking my life, while making her ready to teach the real emissaries. She had said as much—three times. In her terms, this would be an impeccably impressive evolutionary lesson about me learning how to learn. I was expendable, still and again.

As the most lucid moment of my life became fixed in an elite position of awareness, my Assemblage Point returned me to the fog of a cumbersome world with my *seeing* experience intact, but only the tailings of my fear-fuelled realization lingered; my focus on "self" had sabotaged the bridge back to reason.

At a complete loss for what to do, I tittered as if from embarrassment at my recent utterance... whenever that was.

Bonnie continued to gaze placidly across the water.

"This journey of m-mine," I cleared my throat, "it was designed so that I would be the last person on the face of the earth to believe you, and then that I'd have no choice, wasn't it?"

"Not quite the last person." She turned to face me. "You do understand that it could be no other way?"

"I do now."

Turning away, she casually said, "Did you see?"

"I did, so I know why you couldn't explain it. I also know where I am, in your terms."

Leaning away to imply disbelief, she said, "And that has not shaken you?"

"It suited my expectations."

Bonnie examined my expression for mockery and cynicism. Seeing neither, she pursed her lips, sitting silently. If I didn't know better, I would have thought she was holding back tears.

The silence stretched.

Finally, I said, "There was something scary at the end."

"You must have focused on yourself—on your doubt and suspicion."

"I guess. I mean, I'm feeling stranded somehow. Maybe threatened is a better word."

"There is no going back to being ignorant, and you don't know enough to act independently," she said succinctly.

Bonnie chirped a sudden sentiment, and quickly sniffled the moment into an awkward breath. She did not explain her apparent flash of emotion. Had I eliminated self from the moment, I may have pieced together the underlying nature of our exchange, as in retrospect I believe Bonnie had: My failure to be moved by a profound awareness meant I was still a part of its contents. This circumstance flew in the face of the long-established effects of experiencing this awareness, which was a pivotal point of transition away from one's reasoned views. Somehow, I had *seen* and still clung to the crumbling bridge of reason.

As it was, I guessed that her chirp came from an appreciation for Spirit having thrown me into the deep end with her, now that we were both alone. Kind of.

Epilogue

Zzzz... I was standing inside a log cabin of modern construction, when I became aware that I was dreaming. A man was sitting at a writing desk with his back to me; he closed the book he was reading as I approached, turned sideways, and said, "Look."

I knew that I had met him countless times, and that I was important to him: I trusted him implicitly, but felt little else.

I followed his gaze.

On the far wall were two projections. In one, Bonnie was weeping silently in the darkness of her bedroom. In the other, I was sleeping on my futon.

I wished I didn't drool.

"It has been an excellent start," the man said with satisfaction. "You have seen the ways in which you are a cheap, petty, devious, greedy, cruel, unappreciative, dangerous, and piously egocentric bigot. All you are missing is the recognition, and acceptance, that if you were you patient and wealthy you would be a despot masquerading as an affable man. You have met many such people."

"You seem pleased about it."

"It was your design. The line is remarkably thin when you can't assess the true nature of an event, is it not?"

"I don't know what it is about doing that; my brain cramps at the mention of assessing essences. I know this means I'm nuts, but..."

"We will deal with that aspect of your training in your dreaming lessons. The point is that you represent the many who struggle through reason to express their hearts; it is beyond their grasp how poorly they can behave. Now you know what this is like, and you can free yourself because you can recognize fear in its infancy and dismiss it."

The man pointed toward Bonnie, as she settled into a dream state. "Yesterday, she learned that you will enter the third core of your training on perpetual guard, and afraid of what she might say, because on the best of nights you will go to bed baffled to the bone."

"And on the worst?"

"That is up to you. She is not without empathy for your plight, for she has endured your lessons as well as her own," he pointed at Bonnie, "and has now wept the last of her personal concern for you. She will no longer barter with the truth. None of us do, not with anyone, not ever. It will be the way things are in her waking world, and a lesson you cannot avoid now that you have begun losing the human form." He glanced my way. "She will pursue your freedom with unwavering intent."

"She bartered? I know something happened... with Josh?"

"She will tell you when it is time."

"I hear that a lot from you guys. Who are you, by the way?"

"Another portion of you, a personality that is now part of you, knew me as Joshua. This inner knowledge will sustain you for a while longer, and rise when it is time." He nodded toward the images. "We will also show you to yourself directly, when it is required, and offer what help we can without interfering with your chosen path of progression."

I followed his gaze as the images swirled gently into a single depiction of Bonnie and me driving in a small red car. A road sign passed through the passenger side window.

Salida, 3 kilómetros.

I awakened thinking pleasant thoughts about my time in Spain, but they were fouled by a sense of apprehension; I remembered most of my dream, just not why I should be on edge about it. I got up and steeled myself for another verbal beating while showering, flippantly concluding, as I dried myself, that the worst that could happen was what—maybe dying? Been there, done that. I had the T-shirt.

I cackled: somehow, it wasn't as funny as it once was.

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